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# A Synthesis of MTO Research on Self-Sufficiency, Safety and Health, and Behavior and Delinquency

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**G**iven the evidence of a strong association between residential neighborhoods and the well-being of its residents, the recent and striking increase in concentrated poverty in American inner cities has potentially disconcerting implications. Residential location may greatly shape access to opportunities because of factors associated with either neighborhood wealth (quality of schools, access to labor markets, safety, and more efficient social institutions) or with social capital and peer effects. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Moving to Opportunity (MTO) demonstration project provides a unique opportunity to measure the causal effects of neighborhood characteristics on outcomes for low-income families. The project helps families move from high-poverty neighborhoods to low-poverty neighborhoods through a random lottery (see sidebar on page 6 for a description of the MTO project)

Below we offer an overview of some of the early findings on economic self-sufficiency, youth delinquency and behavior problems, safety, and adult and child health. MTO is underway in five cities: Baltimore, Los Angeles, Boston, New York, and Chicago. Although there is no clear, significant impact of moving from a high- to a low-poverty neighborhood on economic self-sufficiency, there are significant and positive effects on child and parent health, as well as on child behavior and youth delinquency and on safety and exposure to violence.

## Economic Self-Sufficiency

Measuring the impact of residential neighborhoods on economic self-sufficiency, or more specifically, on welfare receipt and employment of low-income families, was among the main concerns of the MTO demonstration program. With the number of people living in poverty in the United States nearly doubling from 1970 to 1990, from 4.1 to 8 million people (Jargowsky, 1997), and with the continued decline of the inner city, MTO brought with it the hope that moving low-income families from high-poverty to low-poverty neighborhoods might increase employment accessibility and lessen dependence on welfare. Moving to a lower-poverty neighborhood can mean not only being closer to suburban job market opportunities, but also gaining exposure to

greater social capital, including access to middle-class role models and community norms that might be less supportive of welfare and more supportive of work. A move, however, may also be counterproductive, at least initially, given that it can greatly disrupt the informal mechanisms and social networks through which people obtain job referrals and access to informal child care—at least until social networks in the new neighborhood are established (Kain, 1968). Research on the experience of Chicago families in the Gautreaux housing mobility program suggests that moves to suburban locations may increase employment rates (Rosenbaum, 1995). To date, however, there is no conclusive evidence on the effect of neighborhood characteristics on economic self-sufficiency among low-income families. Although MTO has the potential to answer this question, short-run economic outcomes for welfare, employment, and income have not been consistent across sites, where research was headed by different researchers using different methods.

## Welfare Receipt

Research from MTO-Baltimore shows that providing families the chance to relocate to very low-poverty neighborhoods (the experimental group) reduces the rate of welfare use by a little more than 6 percentage points, on average, or about 15% of the control group's welfare receipt rate. Further, this difference increases over time. Providing families with Section 8 vouchers but without a constraint on where they can relocate (the Section 8 group) seems to have little impact on welfare use after the first six quarters following random assignment.

In the MTO-Boston site, there was a sharp drop over time in welfare receipt, from 73% in 1994 (before random assignment) to 40% in 1998. However, there was no statistically significant difference in the control, Section 8, and experimental groups two years after random assignment.

In New York, the overall level of welfare participation did not differ significantly across the three groups at a three-year follow-up study. However, there were differences in welfare participation when families originally enrolled in MTO, and when assessing the change in welfare participation, there was a substantially larger reduction for the Section 8 comparison group.

## Employment and Income

MTO-Boston research shows that employment increased dramatically over time, from 19% in 1994 to 49% in 1998. Again, there were no meaningful differences across groups

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two years after random assignment, a result that is also consistent with outcomes in Baltimore, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Only the preliminary data from the MTO-New York site found that experimental and Section 8 mothers who were unemployed at baseline were about 10% more likely than mothers in the control group to have found a job at the time of the follow-up study.

Although MTO-Los Angeles finds no significant employment effects, it does provide some modest evidence of an increase in weekly earnings and hours worked for mover families, as opposed to controls. There was no clear evidence of a meaningful difference in earnings across the three MTO groups in the Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, or New York sites. Preliminary MTO-New York data, however, suggest that the experimental group has significantly higher per person household incomes than the control group.

### ***Welfare-to-Work Transitions***

The large changes in economic self-sufficiency over time yet the small and often insignificant differences among MTO groups suggest that broader forces, such as welfare reform and the tightness of local labor markets, might have been more important determinants of short-term economic outcomes than residential location. Even at sites where outcomes might suggest that neighborhoods affect some aspects of self-sufficiency in the short run (such as in Baltimore and New York), further research is needed to examine which neighborhood factors mediate such change. Results from Baltimore, for instance, suggest that most of the 15% difference in the rate of welfare use between the experimental and control groups might be explained by the higher rate at which people in the former are able to move from welfare into work. The specific channels through which lower-poverty neighborhoods have a positive and differential impact on welfare-to-work transitions, however, are not yet well understood. Change here could have easily been mediated by improved social capital, by proximity to labor markets, or simply by improved access to transportation or more effective government institutions.

### **Safety and Health**

By providing more desirable housing conditions (better heating and air quality and less crowding, fewer dust mites, cockroaches, mice, and rats), greater safety, and less exposure to violence, relocating from a high- to a low-poverty neighborhood has the potential to improve the mental and physical health of children and parents—a result that is confirmed in MTO research studies. Medical research suggests that exposure to violence may indeed be a channel through which neighborhoods affect child and adult health and behavior. Exposure to violence affects levels of stress (and potentially parenting behaviors and prevalence of asthma) as well as patterns of child behavior, such as difficulty concen-

trating because of fatigue resulting from sleep disturbances, fear of being alone, or an increased aggressiveness (Groves et al., 1993). Living in the inner city is also associated with other detrimental health outcomes, such as high rates of accidents and injuries among children (Quinlan, 1996).

### ***Safety***

Safety was one of the main reasons why Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York families wanted to move away from their high-poverty neighborhoods. Strong evidence of increased safety, reduced victimization, and exposure to violence across all the MTO sites can thus be considered one of the main successes of the MTO program. Prior to moving, 48% of all Boston household heads reported feeling unsafe or very unsafe. At the follow-up study, this level fell to 39% in the control group and to 24% among the experimental group. Postprogram victimization in Boston also fell dramatically for both the experimental and the Section 8 groups, reaching 12% of households at the follow-up study compared with 26% among the control group. Although there was a 50% reduction in exposure to violence in the New York MTO—consistent with outcomes in Boston—the difference across the three different groups was not statistically significant.

### ***Parent Health***

Responses of Boston household heads to self-reported health questions constitute some of the most striking results of the MTO program. In terms of overall health, 58% of the control group indicated that their general health was “good or better,” while 69% of the experimental group and 76% of the Section 8 group reported better or good health. The significant rise in reports of peacefulness and calmness among experimental and Section 8 parents, compared with the control group, indicates that a change in mental health and positive affect was at least, in part, responsible for the large and positive impact on general physical health.

Similar results were found in the New York MTO study, where an improvement in the overall health of experimental parents, compared with controls, was closely linked to a dramatic improvement in their emotional well-being, as evident by a sharp decline in parental depressive and anxious behavior. This finding did not hold for the New York Section 8 group.

### ***Child Health***

Boston MTO data confirmed what fieldwork had suggested: the move to lower-poverty neighborhoods—which might provide safer places in which children can play, less exposure to acute levels of stress, and improved housing conditions—is associated with a decrease in non-sport-related injuries among children, as well as a decline in the prevalence of asthma attacks. The prevalence of injuries among

the Boston experimental group, which include falls, fights, and dangerous external factors, such as needles or glass, declined 74% relative to the control group. Fewer environmental irritants and lower levels of stress are likely reasons for the lowered probability of an asthma attack; attacks requiring medical attention fell by 65% among the experimental group compared with the control. New York data also show improved health among children in the experimental group, and mental health was also improved by moving.

### Delinquency and Behavior Problems

There are many ways that neighborhood characteristics can influence youths' decision to engage in crime and delinquency. Community resources, adult influence, as well as peers may

affect choices (Jencks and Mayer, 1990). Behavior may be guided by the *contagion effect*, whereby the benefit of engaging in a certain activity increases with the proportion of one's peers who also engage in that activity. Among the factors that give rise to this effect are the stigma and the physical externality effect, by which the negative image of engaging in delinquent behavior diminishes as more people engage in it, and by which an increase in delinquency rates reduces one's chances of getting caught and arrested. Behavior may also be shaped by adults, who can influence youth by becoming role models, law enforcers, and guarantors of public order (Wilson, 1987; Borjas, 1995). In addition, enriched community resources and access to the recreational activities, improved schools, and better labor market opportunities often associated with more affluent neighborhoods may significantly reduce the actual and perceived returns on delinquent behavior and enhance the perceived benefits of education.

These factors suggest that a move from high-poverty to low-poverty neighborhoods, by strengthening human capital, may in fact diminish youth problem behavior—a result that is, for the most part, confirmed by the Boston, New York, and Baltimore data. However, the mechanisms through which this reduction takes place require further research.

### Behavior Problems

According to data from MTO-Boston, the prevalence of behavior problems among boys (ages 8–14) in the experimental group was 9 percentage points (or 27%) lower than the average for the control group. This result is based on an index of seven external behavior problems (child has trouble getting along with teachers, is disobedient at home, is disobedient at school, hangs out with troublemakers, bullies others, is unable to sit still, and is depressed). The Boston results also indicate a decline in behavior problems among girls, but the decline was statistically insignificant. The gender gap may be due to the fact that girls in families that moved reduced their social contact with other children in their new neighborhoods by 30%.

Preliminary results from MTO-New York also find some evidence of fewer problem behaviors among children ages 8–18. Namely, fewer children reported feeling unhappy, sad, or depressed and fewer reported arguing a lot. There were no significant differences between the MTO groups for other behaviors, such as drinking alcohol or smoking cigarettes, although the reported prevalence of these behaviors was low, so even sizable effects are unlikely to be statistically significant given the available sample sizes.

### Arrests

The prevalence and incidence of arrests for violent crimes for experimental group teenagers at the time of the follow-up study in Baltimore were significantly lower than in the

## MTO Studies Cited in this Article

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### BOSTON:

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### CHICAGO:

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### NEW YORK:

Leventhal, Tama, and Jeanne Brooks-Gunn. (March 1, 2000). Moving to Opportunity: What about the kids? available at [www.wws.princeton.edu/~kling/mto/ny.htm](http://www.wws.princeton.edu/~kling/mto/ny.htm)

Please note: Each of these articles can also be accessed through: [www.mtoresearch.org](http://www.mtoresearch.org)

## MTO PROGRAM DESIGN

The MTO program, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), was implemented in five large cities with populations of at least 400,000 in metropolitan areas of at least 1.5 million people.

Participant eligibility was limited to very low-income families with children who lived in public housing or Section 8 project-based housing located in central city neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty.

Eligible participants in the MTO demonstration were randomly assigned to three groups:

- the experimental group receives Section 8 rental certificates or vouchers to be used only in low-poverty areas (census tracts with less than 10% of the population below the poverty line in 1989); in addition, they receive counseling and assistance in finding a private unit to lease;
- the Section 8 comparison group receives regular Section 8 rental certificates or vouchers (geographically unrestricted) and the typical briefings and assistance from the public housing authority; and
- the control group continues to receive their current project-based assistance.

The demonstration is designed to answer two important questions about the role and effectiveness of assisted housing mobility:

- What are the impacts of mobility counseling on families' location choices and on their housing and neighborhood conditions?
- What are the impacts of neighborhood conditions on the employment, income, education, and social well-being of MTO families?

The participants in the MTO program volunteered to participate. Thus, the results of the MTO study cannot be generalized to the larger population; the qualities that led them to volunteer may also affect their outcomes. However, because of the random assignment of the volunteers into one of the three groups, the characteristics of the members of each group will, on average, be the same. Hence, the MTO program makes it possible to isolate the effects on various outcomes of MTO versus standard Section 8 vouchers and public housing. Outcomes for all three groups will be systematically monitored and evaluated over a 10-year period.

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U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, April 1996.

Available online <http://www.wws.princeton.edu/~kling/mto/background.htm>

control group, and the incidence of arrests in the Section 8 group was also marginally lower (and statistically significant). The drop in violent crime arrests was accompanied by an increase in property crime arrests in the experimental group, although the property crime effect appears to be short-term and does not persist beyond three years after random assignment. Because these results were obtained from state juvenile arrest data, and because lower-poverty neighborhoods are likely to have greater law enforcement and victims are more likely to report less serious crimes, the results are likely to overestimate increases in youth involvement in crime and to underestimate any reduction in crime in the experimental group. Preliminary findings from Boston and Baltimore suggest that families are more likely to move via the MTO program if they know their children are at risk for criminal involvement. This self-selection may also attenuate the delinquency reduction results.

### Conclusion

Although preliminary MTO results are inconclusive on the impact on economic self-sufficiency of moving to lower-poverty neighborhoods, the data consistently suggest that such a transition is associated with significant improvements in safety, child and parent physical and mental health, as well as youth delinquency and behavior problem. The short-term impacts of MTO presented above are important in their own right, and also provide intriguing hypotheses for future research on long-term effects and on the mechanism through which the impacts of neighborhoods may occur. ■

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