

WHAT KINDS OF NEIGHBORHOODS CHANGE LIVES? THE CHICAGO GAUTREUX HOUSING PROGRAM AND RECENT MOBILITY PROGRAMS

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Neighborhood effects on the lives of families and children have long been an important topic of research, and communities are currently also a relevant topic for public policy. Theoretically, neighborhoods are important contexts for socialization and development as well as places where we see structures of inequality and opportunity in action. Neighborhoods are also significant because they are closely tied to schooling opportunities, given the zoning of public schools. The possibility of choosing different schools, including schools in different neighborhoods, is intended to be a central piece of the No Child Left Behind legislation,¹ and federal courts have recently considered whether to mandate racial or socioeconomic integration in housing and school settings.² Neighborhoods have also become the focus of many recent policy discussions. Residential mobility and housing policy garnered national attention after the hurricane disaster in New Orleans, and HOPE VI demolitions are leading to the relocation of inner city families all over the country.³

Despite years of research on these topics, it is hard to know for sure if neighborhoods can be used as policy levers to improve youth and family well-being. This is due in large part to two related issues. First, despite relatively high levels of residential mobility in the United States, we see little variation in the types of communities low-income minority families inhabit. Often, poor families are trapped in dangerous neighborhoods, and their children are trapped in poor schools.⁴ Therefore, we do not get the chance to observe how a *different*

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1. No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. No. 107-110, 15 Stat. 1425 (2002) (codified as amended primarily in scattered sections of 20 U.S.C.).

2. *Parents Involved in Cmty. Schs. v. Seattle Sch. Dist. No. 1*, 127 S. Ct. 2738 (2007); *Thompson v. U.S. Dep't of Hous. & Urban Dev.*, 348 F. Supp. 2d 398 (D. Md. 2005).

3. SUSAN J. POPKIN ET AL., *A DECADE OF HOPE VI: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND POLICY CHALLENGES* (2004), http://www.urban.org/uploadedpdf/411002_HOPEVI.pdf.

4. See DOUGLAS S. MASSEY & NANCY A. DENTON, *AMERICAN APARTHEID: SEGREGATION AND THE MAKING OF THE UNDERCLASS* (1993); Scott J. South & Kyle D. Crowder, *Escaping Distressed Neighborhoods: Individual, Community, and Metropolitan Influences*, 102 AM. J. SOC.

environment might affect their life chances. Second, families choose neighborhoods, and the characteristics of families that lead them to choose certain neighborhoods are also likely to affect family and child well-being. This leads to the selection problem (endogeneity), which plagues our attempts to recover causal estimates of environmental effects. There have been some opportunities, however, to study what happens when parents and children experience moderate to radical changes in their neighborhood or schooling environments. Residential mobility programs, where poor families relocate to opportunity-rich communities via housing vouchers, provide one way we can begin to separate the effects of family background and neighborhood conditions. In this Paper, we review one particularly important mobility plan—Chicago’s *Gautreaux* program, examine a decade of research following the fortunes of the families who moved as a part of this intervention, and briefly consider some subsequent programs.

I. THE *GAUTREAUX* PROGRAM

As a result of a 1976 Supreme Court decision,⁵ the *Gautreaux* program allowed low-income black public housing residents in Chicago to receive Section 8 housing certificates (or vouchers) and move to private-sector apartments either in mostly white suburbs or within the city.⁶ Between 1976 and 1998, over 7000 families participated, and over half moved to suburban communities.⁷ Because of its design, the *Gautreaux* program presents an unusual opportunity: It allows us to examine whether individual outcomes change when low-income black families move to safer neighborhoods with better labor markets and higher quality schools.

Gautreaux participants circumvented the typical barriers to living in suburbs, not by their jobs, personal finances, or values, but by their acceptance into the program and their quasi-random assignment to the suburbs.⁸ The program provided housing subsidy vouchers and housing support services, but not employment or transportation assistance.⁹ Unlike the usual case of working-class blacks living in working-class suburbs, *Gautreaux* permitted low-income blacks to live in middle- and upper-income white suburbs.¹⁰ Participants moved to more than 115 suburbs throughout the six counties surrounding Chicago.¹¹ Suburbs

1040 (1997); Scott J. South & Glenn D. Deane, *Race and Residential Mobility: Individual Determinants and Structural Constraints*, 72 SOC. FORCES 147 (1993).

5. *Hills v. Gautreaux*, 425 U.S. 284 (1976).

6. *Id.* at 304-05.

7. MASSEY & DENTON, *supra* note 4, at 191.

8. Stefanie DeLuca & James E. Rosenbaum, *If Low-Income Blacks Are Given a Chance to Live in White Neighborhoods, Will They Stay? Examining Mobility Patterns in a Quasi-Experimental Program with Administrative Data*, 14 HOUSING POL’Y DEBATE 305, 307 (2003).

9. *Id.*

10. *Id.*

11. *Id.*

with a population that was more than 30% black were excluded by the consent decree, and a few very high rent suburbs were excluded by the funding limitations of Section 8 certificates.¹²

II. EARLY FINDINGS

Early research on *Gautreaux* showed large and significant relationships between placement neighborhoods and subsequent gains in employment and education. A study of 330 *Gautreaux* mothers in the early 1990s “found that suburban movers had higher employment than city movers,” but not higher earnings, and the employment difference was especially large for adults who were unemployed prior to the move.¹³ Another study found that, as young adults, *Gautreaux* children who moved to the suburbs were more likely than city movers to graduate from high school, attend college, attend four-year versus two-year colleges, and (if they were not in college) to be employed and to have jobs with better pay and with benefits.¹⁴ These differences were very large.

Analyses indicated that children moving to suburbs were just as likely to interact with neighbors as city movers, but the suburb movers interacted with white children while city movers interacted mostly with black children.¹⁵ The program seems to have been effective at integrating low-income black children into middle-class white suburbs. Although suburban schools were often far ahead of city schools in terms of curriculum level, mothers reported that suburban teachers often extended extra efforts to help their children catch up with the class.¹⁶ Initial concerns that these children would not be accepted were unsupported by the evidence.¹⁷

III. RECENT RESEARCH

To improve upon the design and data quality of the earlier work, more recent research used administrative data to locate recent addresses for a 50% random sample of *Gautreaux* movers who had relocated before 1990, as well as track residential and economic outcomes for mothers.¹⁸ In that study, multiple census measures helped to characterize neighborhoods, and regression models included a more comprehensive accounting for preprogram characteristics. The use of administrative records permitted us to locate 1504 of 1507 families,¹⁹ and we found that 66% of suburban families remained in the suburbs an average of

12. *Id.*

13. *Id.* at 307-08.

14. *Id.*

15. James E. Rosenbaum, *Changing the Geography of Opportunity by Expanding Residential Choice: Lessons from the Gautreaux Program*, 6 HOUSING POL’Y DEBATE 231, 248 (1995).

16. *See id.* at 240.

17. *See id.* at 246.

18. DeLuca & Rosenbaum, *supra* note 8, at 315.

19. *Id.* at 317.

fifteen years after placement.²⁰ After premove individual and neighborhood attributes were controlled, the racial composition of placement neighborhoods predicted racial composition of current neighborhoods.²¹ Later analyses of this data showed that mothers continued to live in areas with much lower poverty rates and higher household incomes.²²

Individual level economic outcomes, such as welfare receipt, employment, and earnings, were also influenced by the income and racial characteristics of placement neighborhoods. Women who moved to racially mixed or predominantly white neighborhoods with higher levels of socioeconomic resources did better than their counterparts in areas with low resources and high levels of black residents.²³ Research on the children of the original *Gautreaux* families has demonstrated that the neighborhoods where they resided in the late 1990s were substantially more integrated than their overwhelmingly minority origin neighborhoods.²⁴ However, relocating to lower poverty, more integrated areas had a mixed effect on the delinquent behaviors and arrest rates of boys versus girls. Suburban boys were much less likely to become involved in the criminal justice system, while girls who moved to the suburbs were more likely to be convicted for criminal offenses.²⁵

IV. HOW DID *GAUTREAUX* “WORK”?

The findings described above focus on the advances made in recent quantitative work. We employed techniques to approximate the assessment of *Gautreaux* as a “treatment”—a social intervention with effects we might measure with statistical corrections and design comparisons. The stories *Gautreaux* participants tell about their experiences can contribute greatly to our understanding. The long-term family outcomes we observed appear to be significantly linked to the mobility program and the characteristics of the placement neighborhoods. However, administrative data cannot tell us *how* these outcomes occurred or the mechanisms through which neighborhoods have their impact. This is a problem common to neighborhood research, and one that makes improving mobility programs especially difficult. However, in several

20. *Id.* at 318.

21. *Id.* at 316.

22. See Micere Keels et al., *Fifteen Years Later: Can Residential Mobility Programs Provide a Long-Term Escape from Neighborhood Segregation, Crime, and Poverty?*, 42 *DEMOGRAPHY* 51 (2005) [hereinafter Keels et al., *Fifteen Years Later*].

23. Ruby Mendenhall et al., *Neighborhood Resources, Racial Segregation, and Economic Mobility: Results from the Gautreaux Program*, 35 *SOC. SCI. RES.* 892, 914 (2006).

24. See Micere Keels, *Effects of Participation in a Residential Mobility Program on Children’s Long-Term Residential Attainment: Escape from Neighborhood Segregation, Poverty and Crime* (Working Paper, 2007) [hereinafter Keels, *Residential Attainment*].

25. Micere Keels, *Second-Generation Effects of Chicago’s Gautreaux Residential Mobility Program on Children’s Participation in Crime* 36-37 (Working Paper, 2007) [hereinafter Keels, *Second-Generation Effects*].

qualitative studies,²⁶ we analyzed interviews with mothers who described how these neighborhoods helped improve their lives and the lives of their children. Was it a matter of just increasing access to better resources, or was it necessary to interact with neighbors to obtain the full benefit of these new resources?

We analyzed interviews with nearly 150 *Gautreaux* mothers and found that after the move they described a new a sense of efficacy and control over their lives and that the major changes in their environments helped them to see that they had the ability to make improvements in their lives.²⁷ Certain features of the new suburban neighborhoods changed their perception of what was possible. Specifically, the women reported that they felt better about having an address in the suburbs and not having to put down a public housing address on job applications.²⁸ Other women noted that by moving to areas with more white residents, they and their children got to know more white people, and racial stereotypes were debunked. One child whose only exposure to white people were those she saw on television reported that after moving, she discovered that not all whites looked like television actors.²⁹

Social interactions with whites allowed some of these women to feel that they had more social and cultural know-how and feel much less intimidated by future contexts in which they might have to interact with whites.³⁰ Additionally, working through some of the initial difficulties of the transitions to the suburbs allowed these women to realize that they could handle manageable challenges along the way to better jobs and more schooling. In comparison, the drugs or gang violence in their old city neighborhoods seemed to be forces too big for them to control and therefore permanent impediments to the advancements they were trying to make in their lives.³¹ These findings suggest to us that one's repertoire of capabilities can vary depending on the type of neighborhood in which one lives and works.

Many of the mothers we interviewed also noted that they had to change their way of behaving to comply with the social norms of the new neighborhoods.³² Several women noted initial difficulties in adjusting to suburban norms, which were unfamiliar and intolerant of some of their prior behaviors.³³ These mothers, who had lived all their lives in housing projects where these norms did not exist,

26. See James E. Rosenbaum et al., *How Do Places Matter? The Geography of Opportunity, Self-Efficacy and a Look Inside the Black Box of Residential Mobility*, 17 HOUSING STUD. 71 (2002) [hereinafter Rosenbaum et al., *How Do Places Matter?*]; James Rosenbaum et al., *New Capabilities in New Places: Low-Income Black Families in Suburbia*, in THE GEOGRAPHY OF OPPORTUNITY: RACE AND HOUSING CHOICE IN METROPOLITAN AMERICA 150 (Xavier de Souza Briggs ed., 2005) [hereinafter Rosenbaum et al., *New Capabilities in New Places*].

27. Rosenbaum et al., *How Do Places Matter?*, *supra* note 26, at 76.

28. *Id.* at 77.

29. *Id.* at 78.

30. *Id.* at 77-78.

31. *Id.* at 76.

32. Rosenbaum et al., *New Capabilities in New Places*, *supra* note 26, at 159-63.

33. *Id.*

saw benefits to complying with these expectations, and they decided to adopt them.³⁴ Ironically, some of these normative constraints, such as low tolerance for drugs and parties, were liberating because the trade-off was community safety.³⁵ This meant that mothers did not have to spend all their time watching their children, and these norms allowed mothers to give their children more freedom.³⁶

Similarly, mothers reported social responsiveness from their neighbors. They received the benefits of reciprocal relations related to child care and neighbors' general concern and watchfulness in promoting the safety of their children, their property, and themselves.³⁷ They were also given favors in terms of transportation and some acts of charity.³⁸ It is remarkable that these new residents, who generally differed in race and class from their neighbors, were awarded this collective generosity, and the interviews suggest that it may have been conditional on their showing a willingness to abide by community norms.³⁹

Most important, the new suburban social contexts provided a form of capital that enhanced people's capabilities. Some mothers reported that they could count on neighbors if a child misbehaved or seemed at risk of getting into trouble, if a child was sick and could not attend school, or if there was some threat to their children, their apartments, or themselves.⁴⁰ This was not just interpersonal support; it was systemic, and enabled these mothers to take actions and make commitments that otherwise would be difficult or risky.⁴¹ For instance, some mothers reported a willingness to take jobs because they could count on a neighbor to watch their child in case they were late getting home from work.⁴² It is through some of these mechanisms—some social, some psychological—that we believe some *Gautreaux* families were able to permanently escape the contexts and consequences of segregated poverty and unsafe inner-city neighborhoods.

More recent interviews with *Gautreaux* mothers suggest that some aspects of the city-suburban divide were also important for shaping how the placement community affected their children's behavior.⁴³

[C]ity movers placed in both moderate and low poverty neighborhood [sic] found that, although their immediate neighborhood was safe, the larger community to which their children had easy access, continued to be dangerous. In comparison, children of families placed in the suburbs had relatively little direct neighborhood exposure to drugs and illegal

34. *Id.*

35. *Id.*

36. *Id.*

37. *Id.* at 172.

38. *Id.* at 172-73.

39. *Id.*

40. *Id.* at 173.

41. *Id.*

42. *Id.* at 169-70.

43. See Keels, *Second-Generation Effects*, *supra* note 25.

activities and attended higher performing public schools with greater financial and teacher resources.⁴⁴

Interviews revealed that affluent suburban neighborhoods also had “substantially fewer opportunities for involvement in delinquent criminal activities” and gangs.⁴⁵

V. WAS *GAUTREUX* A SOCIAL EXPERIMENT?

Methodologically, we often rely on observational data and regression analyses to provide estimates of the “effect” of neighborhood contexts and interventions. These approaches have their weaknesses; it is complicated, if not impossible, to infer causal effects when we know that there are unobservable characteristics of families that lead not only to their selection of neighborhood, but also to the outcomes of interest. As a result, there has been an increased push to employ experimental designs to assign social and economic “treatments,” be they neighborhoods, school programs, or income subsidies.

Along these lines, the *Gautreaux* program resembled a quasi-experiment. Although the program was not designed as an experiment and families were not formally randomly assigned to conditions, aspects of the program administration break the link between family preferences and neighborhood placement. In principle, participants had choices about where they moved. In practice, qualifying rental units were secured by rental agents working for the *Gautreaux* program and offered to families according to their position on a waiting list, regardless of their locational preference. Although participants could refuse an offer, few did so because they were unlikely to ever get another. As a result, participants’ preferences for placement neighborhoods had relatively little to do with where they ended up moving, providing a degree of exogenous variability in neighborhood placement that undergirds *Gautreaux* research. Few significant differences were found between suburban and city movers’ individual characteristics, but premove neighborhood attributes show small, but statistically significant, differences on two of nine comparisons. This may indicate selection bias, although random assignment studies by the HUD-sponsored Moving to Opportunity (“MTO”) also find some substantial differences.⁴⁶ It is not clear whether the observed premove differences explain much of the outcome difference. For instance, while suburban movers came from *slightly* lower-poverty tracts than city movers (poverty rate of 40.6% versus 43.8%), they moved to census tracts with *dramatically* lower poverty rates (5.0% versus 27.3%).⁴⁷ While small (three percentage points) differences in initial neighborhoods may account for a portion of the outcome differences, it is hard

44. *Id.* at 37.

45. *Id.*

46. See Lawrence F. Katz, *Boston Site Findings: The Early Impacts of Moving to Opportunity*, in CHOOSING A BETTER LIFE?: EVALUATING THE MOVING TO OPPORTUNITY SCIENCE EXPERIMENT 182-83 (John Goering & Judith D. Feins eds., 2003).

47. See DeLuca & Rosenbaum, *supra* note 8.

to dismiss the possible influence of the vast differences in placement neighborhoods. Current papers have discussed these issues at length and examine multiple neighborhood level indicators, detailed preprogram neighborhood differences, and intergenerational effects.⁴⁸

In contrast, MTO was an experiment with the random assignment of low-income families to three conditions: an experimental group (who moved to low-poverty census tracts), an open-choice Housing Voucher group, and a “no move” control group. MTO was developed to formally test the *Gautreaux* findings with more rigorous design and pre/post move data collection.

Unfortunately, while MTO was a stronger study, it was a weaker “neighborhood change treatment” in some respects. The *Gautreaux* program moved nearly all families more than ten miles away from their original neighborhood (an average of twenty-five miles) to radically different labor markets. Eighty-eight percent of children from the *Gautreaux* program attended schools with above-average achievement and nearly all were too far away to interact with prior friends. They made new friends in the suburbs because they could not easily interact with their old friends in the housing projects.

In contrast, MTO moved nearly all families short distances (less than ten miles), mostly in the city. Few children attended schools with above-average achievement (10%), and many children continued interacting with old friends. In addition, MTO occurred in the hot labor market of the late 1990s, and large numbers of families in the control group moved out of high-rise housing projects through the federal Hope VI program. Therefore, the control group was experiencing unusual benefits and atypical circumstances which pose an unusually high standard of comparison so that the results may not generalize to more ordinary times.

While early *Gautreaux* analyses showed that suburban children attended much better schools and enjoyed improvements in educational outcomes relative to the city movers, the MTO program did not have such an effect on educational outcomes. Compared to the control group, the MTO treatment group showed no difference in test scores, school dropout rates, or self-reported measures of school engagement an average five years after random assignment.⁴⁹ This was due in part to the fact that many MTO experimental families sent their children to schools in the same school district (often the same schools), and even when they changed schools, the new schools were not much better than the original schools.⁵⁰

While *Gautreaux* was associated with gains in mothers’ employment, the

48. See *id.*; Stefanie DeLuca et al., *Gautreaux Mothers and Their Children: An Update*, 19 HOUSING POL’Y DEBATE (forthcoming 2008); Keels et al., *Fifteen Years Later*, *supra* note 22; Keels, *Residential Attainment*, *supra* note 24; Keels, *Second-Generation Effects*, *supra* note 25; Mendenhall et al., *supra* note 23.

49. Lisa Sanbonmatsu et al., *Neighborhoods and Academic Achievement: Results from Moving to Opportunity Experiment 27* (Nat’l Bureau of Econ. Research, Working Paper No. W11909, 2006), available at http://www.nber.org/~kling/mto/mto_ed.pdf.

50. *Id.* at 30-31.

MTO treatment group showed no impact compared with the control group—both groups showed large gains of comparable magnitude.⁵¹ However, MTO outcomes were measured in the late 1990s, during a strong labor market and strong welfare reform, so, although MTO found no difference between groups, it found an extraordinary 100% employment gain for the control group. One possible interpretation is that virtually everyone who could work was doing so, and residential moves had no additional effect.

Despite the shorter moves and less change in social environment, both *Gautreaux* and MTO found large effects on mothers' and children's feelings of safety. MTO also showed significant reductions in depression and obesity among mothers and daughters (but no difference for sons). *Gautreaux* studied neither of these outcomes.

When comparing the two programs, it is crucial to understand the nature of the comparisons that are being made. Although social scientists have been concerned with learning about the likely benefits of certain kinds of neighborhood moves, what policy makers need to know is how a family fares when a program offers them the opportunity to move to a lower-poverty or less segregated neighborhood relative to what would have happened to that family had it not been given that opportunity. *Gautreaux* research studies can only compare subgroups of families that moved in conjunction with the program and experienced variation in neighborhood contexts. There is no comparison group of similar families who did not move as part of the program. MTO's evaluation design is much stronger because it tracked the fortunes of a randomly assigned control group of families who expressed interest in the program, but, owing to the luck of the draw, were not assigned to the move (although some managed to move on their own). At the same time, however, unlike MTO, *Gautreaux* can inform us about what happens when families move long distances to radically different neighborhoods, moves which changed their social context in terms of racial integration, poverty, school quality, labor market strength, and safety. While studies from both programs indicate how powerful the effects of residential moves can be for some families, the differences in findings indicate the importance of program design features, historical context influences, and concurrent policy effects. For example, alternative forms of mobility, such as those under the involuntary conditions of HOPE VI, may have different results.

Currently, we have the chance to further examine some of these questions and the continued viability of mobility programs. Researchers are planning a ten-year follow up to MTO to see whether some of the early improvements have more substantial long-term benefits. For example, the reduction in stress among the MTO movers might translate over time into stable employment prospects and better outcomes for their children. In Baltimore, the second author is following families who are moving as part of a partial desegregation remedy to a court case filed in 1995—a case very similar to *Gautreaux*. In *Thompson v. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development*,⁵² a federal judge found the

51. DeLuca & Rosenbaum, *supra* note 8, at 314.

52. 348 F. Supp. 2d 398 (D. Md. 2005).

Department of Housing and Urban Development responsible for violating fair housing laws by not looking beyond city limits for ways to house poor families and awarded two thousand vouchers to be used in low poverty, less segregated neighborhoods in the Baltimore region.⁵³ At the moment, over one thousand former public housing families have successfully relocated to safer, more opportunity rich communities. There are also extensive multi-partner efforts in place to help connect these families to employment and education resources in their new communities. For example, the Baltimore Regional Housing Coalition (“BRHC”) is trying to expand a city-based job-counseling program to include suburban employers and a subset of the *Thompson* movers. Another program, funded by the Abell Foundation and the Baltimore Housing Authority, provides cars and low cost financing for *Thompson* families working in the suburbs. Additionally, the BRHC is proposing a way for housing counselors to assess families’ health needs and help them develop a plan for improvement. Time will tell whether these new programs and evaluations will make the implications of housing mobility programs clearer.

Many policy reforms have tried to improve individuals’ education or employability while they remain in the same poor schools or labor markets, but these reforms have often failed. Such policies may be fighting an uphill battle as long as families remain in the same social contexts and opportunity structures. In contrast, *Gautreaux* findings suggest that housing policy is one possible lever to assist poor families, moving them into much better neighborhoods with much better schools and labor markets. The initial gains in neighborhood quality that many of the *Gautreaux* families achieved persisted for at least one to two decades. The *Gautreaux* findings suggest that it is possible for low-income black families to make permanent escapes from neighborhoods with concentrated racial segregation, crime, and poverty and that these moves are associated with large significant gains in education, employment, and racially integrated friendships, particularly for children. However, as the MTO findings suggest, there is much that we still need to learn about what kinds of moves are required to make major changes in outcomes, and, like MTO, strong research designs will be needed to remove alternative interpretations.

53. *Id.* at 463-64.