

RUNNING HEAD: RESIDENTIAL MOBILITY

The Roles of Instability and Housing in Low-Income Families' Residential Mobility

ABSTRACT

A substantial body of literature negatively associates residential mobility with parental and child functioning and family well-being, but extant research has yet to illuminate a comprehensive picture of the antecedents and correlates of family moves. Using longitudinal survey data on low-income families from the *Three City Study* (N = 2,393), multilevel Poisson regression analyses examined the factors associated with family residential mobility across the domains of family characteristics, family instability, and housing and neighborhood contexts. Results revealed contributions of family instability and housing contexts to residential mobility, with a higher rate of residential moves associated with experiences of intimate partner violence, marital transitions, and job transitions, as well as with living in private-market rentals and poor quality housing. Implications for research and policy are discussed.

KEYWORDS: Poverty; Housing; Low-Income Families

The recent housing market crisis, in which 3 million families are estimated to have lost their housing (Isaacs, 2012), has brought renewed attention to the issue of family residential mobility. Prior work demonstrates that children whose families frequently move experience heightened socio-emotional and adjustment problems, lower educational attainment, and more health problems in comparison to their more residentially stable peers (Crowley, 2003; Pribesh & Downey, 1999; Simpson & Fowler, 1994; Ziol-Guest & McKenna, 2013). Moreover, empirical evidence suggests that residential mobility interferes with parents' abilities to meet family needs and can undermine family relationships (Busacker & Kasehagen, 2012; Stoneman et al., 1999). Residential mobility is especially common among low-income families, with poor families twice as likely to move as more advantaged families (Schacter, 2004). Hence, understanding issues related to low-income families' residential mobility is crucial.

Much of the extant research exploring antecedents and correlates of family residential moves focuses on one of three sets of factors: family characteristics, family instability, or housing and neighborhood conditions. Surprisingly, limited research on low-income families' residential moves attempts to integrate these bodies of literature and explore a range of factors that better capture the complexities of families' lives. Hence, the present study aims to illuminate a comprehensive picture of residential mobility by exploring the roles of family characteristics; interpersonal, economic, and family instability; and housing and neighborhood contexts in the frequency with which low-income families move.

Residential Mobility and Low-Income Families

Researchers and policy makers have long been interested in understanding why families move, with initial interest in this topic signified by Rossi's (1956) seminal book exploring correlates of moves among families living in Philadelphia and the influence of residential

mobility on local social policies. Since the publication of this book, much empirical research on mobility and migration has explored the social and economic circumstances that function as triggers or “push” and “pull” factors, meaning the circumstances that provide the impetus for families to move from one home or geographic region to another (Arango, 2000). Attempts to understand the issue of family residential mobility at the population level in the United States emerged with the 1998 Current Population Survey when the U.S. Census Bureau began to ask families why they elected to move, with results yielding the first national data on residential mobility (Schacter, 2001). In this survey, families endorsed reasons related to housing, family, work, or other circumstances that motivated their moves, and also distinguished between residential mobility (short-distance moves) and migration (long-distance moves). Examples of reasons included moving to own a home or to obtain a better apartment (housing-related reasons), to coincide with a change in marital status (family-related reasons), to be closer to work or to look for a new job (work-related reasons), or for a change of climate (other reasons). Descriptive reports from 1999-2000 Current Population Report revealed that housing situations motivated 46% of family moves, where as 27% of moves were related to family issues, 17% related to employment changes, and 10% attributed to other reasons (Schacter, 2001).

Despite the diversity of reasons that families identify as prompting residential moves, much of the literature on mobility has been limited to identifying demographic characteristics of mobile households. Indeed, research on mobility from the field of economics draws on discrete or rational choice theoretical models (Bruch & Mare, 2012; Dieleman, 2001), in which family goals and decisions related to mobility are premised on the utility of moving (Foster, 2002), which assumes that a residential move in accordance with a family’s preferences will maximize family well-being. This assumption reflects the idea that a family’s mobility-related decisions

are motivated by the family's characteristics, such as having too many children to comfortably live in a small unit, which provokes dissatisfaction with a housing situation and leads to the decision to find an alternative living environment (Dieleman, 2001).

Unfortunately, this body of literature overlooks the possibility that such models may be less applicable for low-income families who face greater constraints on housing choices and preferences than more advantaged families (Authors; Newman, 2008), and whose mobility-related decisions may be influenced more by proximal and distal factors than by family traits (Bruch & Mare, 2012). Extant research on residential mobility among low-income families shows some evidence that poor families move more frequently for family and housing reasons and less frequently for work-related reasons (Schacter, 2001), which suggests that a range of proximal and distal factors in low-income families' lives should not be overlooked in the study of residential mobility (Clark & Onaka, 1983; Dieleman, 2001). In short, a major limitation of the literature is the failure to elucidate a comprehensive picture of the factors associated with residential mobility among low-income families that appropriately captures the intersecting nature of families' complex familial, housing, and community contexts.

Family Characteristics. Demographic characteristics of households that are associated with heightened mobility have been a primary focus of the residential mobility literature. The most widely studied characteristics associated with mobility have been motivated by research on the life course theory, which suggests that parental age and family structure characteristics are indelibly tied to mobility-related decisions (Clark & Onaka, 1983). These studies consistently reveal that young families, particularly young mothers, move more frequently than older families (Phinney, 2009; South & Crowder, 1993). Married mothers move less often than cohabiting, single or divorced mothers (Phinney, 2009; Simpson & Fowler, 1994; South & Crowder, 1998b),

and families with more children are less likely to move (Long, 1972; South & Crowder, 1993, 1998a, 1998b). Research has found mixed associations between the race/ethnicity of the household and mobility, with some studies indicating that single African American mothers were both less and more likely to move in comparison to White families (South & Crowder, 1993, 1998c; Teater, 2009). Human capital characteristics have also been linked to mobility, with low-income, low-educated, and under- or unemployed families moving more frequently than their more advantaged counterparts (Cutts et al., 2011; Phinney, Danziger, Pollack & Seefeldt, 2009; Schacter, 2001; Simpson & Fowler, 1994). Finally, residential mobility has been ascribed to the city of residence due in part to local housing stock, conditions, and policies (Strassman, 2000).

Although past studies show converging evidence of family characteristics associated with mobility across a diversity of samples and decades, a major limitation is that these studies neither sufficiently address the time-varying nature of family characteristics nor comprehensively explore context-based factors associated with mobility. Among the studies focused on linking family characteristics with residential mobility, most research has treated such traits as time invariant. For instance, static measures of maternal marital status, number of children, and employment status have all been associated with the propensity to move or frequency of moves (Cutts et al., 2011; Long, 1972; Phinney et al., 2009; Schacter, 2001; Simpson & Fowler, 1994; South & Crowder, 1993, 1998a, 1998b), but these characteristics may actually shift over time in ways that serve as the impetus for moving. Some studies have accounted for a single change in marital status over time (Clark & Huang 2005; South, Crowder & Trent, 1998) but only a handful have examined the time-varying nature of multiple family characteristics (Clark & Lediwith, 2005; Clark & Withers, 2007). One potential explanation for this may be the interest in identifying the characteristics of families that are most predictive of a single move from one

home or geographic area to another, with a more limited focus on numerous repeated moves that families might experience (for exceptions see Clark & Withers, 2007; Cutts et al., 2011; Phinney, 2009; Simpson & Fowler, 1994). In order to understand the extent of residential mobility among low-income families, it is necessary not only to consider the time-varying nature of family characteristics but also to more fully account for experiences of family instability and the conditions of broader housing and neighborhood contexts that are subject to change over time.

Interpersonal, Economic and Family Instability. Low-income families experience a range of complex situations that may provide the impetus or opportunity for one or more residential moves. A notable amount of research on fertility and residential mobility has been conducted by Clark and colleagues whose pooled cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses showed that the birth of a child is correlated with a family's propensity to move (Clark & Onaka, 1983; Clark & Huang, 2003). Similarly, 22% of pregnant women in an epidemiological sample moved in anticipation of the birth of a child (Miller, Siffel & Correa, 2010). Given the high rate of unintended pregnancies, unplanned births, and non-marital births among low-income women (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Finer & Zolna, 2011), fertility may be an important antecedent of family residential moves. Similarly, research with both economically diverse and low-income samples find that marital or cohabiting transitions are associated with increased odds of moving and higher rates of mobility for families with children (Clark & Huang, 2003; South et al., 1998). Other research has associated residential mobility with relationship issues within partnerships, such as experiencing domestic or intimate partner violence (IPV). Across diverse samples of women, experiences of IPV increased the odds of housing instability, including residential moves and homelessness (Baker et al., 2010; Pavao et al., 2007; Phinney et al., 2007). In a

sample of low-income women, those who experienced IPV moved significantly more frequently than women who did not have similar experiences (Phinney, 2009).

Alternatively, research from economics argues that employment and residential mobility decisions are made in tandem as a series of dynamic decisions (Miron, 2004; Van Ommeren et al., 2004). Findings from nationally representative data show that a loss of work hours was associated with a higher likelihood of changing residences, but families who either had fewer resources or lived in areas with high unemployment were less likely to move after a loss of work hours (Yeung & Hofferth, 1998). Although results from the U.S. Census showed that low-income families were less likely to move for work-related reasons (Schacter, 2001), results from research with low-income samples indicate that both shifts into and out of employment are linked with higher rates of residential mobility (Phinney, 2009; South & Crowder, 1998c).

In short, a host of research demonstrates the range of complex situations that low-income families experience regarding fertility, marital transitions, intimate partner violence, and job transitions, reflecting instability across multiple domains of life that may have important consequences for residential mobility (Clark & Onaka, 1983; Geist & McManus, 2008). Nevertheless, the majority of these studies do not consider the dynamic nature of these experiences and how they may independently contribute to family mobility.

Housing and Neighborhood Contexts. In addition to various spheres of family instability, the extant research suggests that multiple housing characteristics, including cost burden, type, structural quality, and neighborhood safety, are also important predictors of residential mobility, especially among low-income families. Housing cost burden, meaning the proportion of family income spent on rent, mortgage, and utilities has increased dramatically over the past decade for low-income families as the availability of affordable units has decreased (Herbert & Belsky,

2006; Joint Center for Housing Studies, 2005), which may partially explain estimates that 2.3 million people moved to obtain more affordable housing at the turn of the 21st century (Crowley, 2003). For example, one recent study found that low-income families were more likely to move when their rental payments increased (Teater, 2009). The type of housing families live in may also affect their proclivity to move, with homeownership and receipt of housing assistance linked to lower rates of residential mobility (Wood, Turnham & Mills, 2008; Turner & Popkin, 2010). Although rates of homeownership among low-income families increased between 1990 and 2005 (Savage, 2009) and homeownership is generally associated with lower rates of mobility (South & Crowder, 1993, 1998a, 1998b), nearly 40% of low-income homeowners abandon ownership within five years of the purchase of a home (Herbert & Belsky, 2006), suggesting that low-income homeownership may not result in lower rates of residential mobility. Additionally, the physical quality or adequacy of a unit, which includes structural characteristics, working utilities, and health or safety hazards (Newman, 2008), might also influence mobility. Housing problems of this sort are particularly common among low-income families, with 83% of poor families facing at least one housing problem in 2005 (Holupka & Newman, 2011). Yet few studies examine relations between housing quality and rates of family residential mobility, with studies in this arena referring broadly to a family's subjective satisfaction with the home (Earheart & Weber, 1996). Related research explores associations between neighborhood characteristics and family residential mobility finding that rates of violent crime are consistently related to greater mobility of residents over time (Boggess & Hipp, 2010; Hipp, Tita & Greenbaum, 2009). General dissatisfaction with the neighborhood, the perception of the neighborhood as not "close-knit," and neighborhood turnover were also predictive of residential mobility among diverse samples drawn from multiple U.S. cities (Clark & Ledwith, 2006; Lee, Oropesa & Kanan, 1994).

Although dissatisfaction or challenges with housing costs, housing quality, or community quality are predictive of residential moves (Schacter, 2001) and low-income families face high levels of these experiences (Holupka & Newman, 2011), it is unclear how strongly linked housing and neighborhood conditions and residential mobility are among low-income families who may have limited resources to identify and access improved contexts.

Intersections Between Personal Characteristics, Family Instability, Housing and Neighborhood Contexts, and Residential Mobility

A major limitation of the extant literature seeking to understand family residential mobility is the failure to account for a diversity of potential correlates and antecedents, which raises concerns about omitted variable bias in the literature to date (Duncan, Magnuson, & Ludwig, 2004). The lack of attention to these issues is surprising given not only the intersections within different types of instability and within various housing characteristics, but also the links between these contexts in the lives of low-income families. Numerous studies have found that domains of instability overlap or co-occur (Guzzo, 2006), with converging evidence showing links between fertility events, marital transitions, experiences of IPV, and job transitions (Adams et al., 2012; Crowne et al., 2011; Joshi, Quane & Cherlin, 2009; Kalil, Ziol-Guest & Epstein, 2010; Wu & Pollard, 2000). Similarly regarding the co-occurrence of housing and neighborhood characteristics, Authors identified four profiles of broad housing contexts in which cost burden, structural quality, housing type, neighborhood disorder, and residential mobility clustered into unique patterns, suggesting that housing and neighborhood characteristics co-occur. Other research has begun to identify intersections between domains of instability, housing and neighborhood contexts, and residential mobility, which show links between mobility, housing type, and cost for women who leave IPV situations (Ponic et al., 2011) and the instability of

intimate unions and family residences in disordered communities (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Pinchevsky & Wright, 2012). In short, findings from these studies suggest that these contexts of families' lives are intricately linked, and hence, a comprehensive understanding of residential mobility requires moving beyond the study of family characteristics and elucidating associations between these broader contexts and changes in family residences.

Present Study

Ascertaining a longitudinal picture of family residential mobility is a crucial task considering not only the implications of mobility on children (Adam, 2004) but also the public investments allocated toward helping low-income families attain residential stability (Currie, 2006). Hence, the present study aims to assess the roles of family characteristics, family instability, and housing and neighborhood conditions in low-income families' rates of residential moves across a six-year period. It was hypothesized that experiences of family instability, unaffordable housing costs, poor quality homes, private market rentals, and neighborhood disorder would be associated with higher rates of residential mobility. It was also hypothesized that family instability and housing and neighborhood conditions, in comparison to family characteristics, would more consistently explain heightened residential mobility. By delineating the relative importance of a range of antecedents and correlates of family residential mobility, the present study will extend the current literature and help to identify policy levers and points of programmatic intervention that may assist in benefiting low-income families and children.

METHOD

Participants

Data for the present study were drawn from the *Three City Study*, a longitudinal multi-method study of approximately 2,400 low-income families and children in Boston, Chicago, and

San Antonio (Winston et al., 1999). Households were screened for eligibility using a stratified random sampling procedure in moderate-poverty (> 20% poverty) and high-poverty (>40% poverty) neighborhoods, selecting families with incomes of less than 200% of the federal poverty line, at least one child aged 0 to 4 years or 10 to 14 years, and a female caregiver. One focal child and the child's primary female caregiver (90% of whom were biological mothers of the focal child, henceforth referred to as "mothers") were selected as participants. Approximately 40,000 households were screened in 1999 when the study began, with a 90% screening rate and an 83% interview completion rate among eligible families, which yielded an overall response rate of 74% ($N = 2,393$). The sample was re-interviewed in 2000-2001, with an 88% retention rate of wave 1, and again in 2005, with an 80% retention rate of wave 1. At each survey wave, mothers participated in a two-hour in-home interview in English or Spanish with audio computer assisted self-interviewing (ACASI) to increase validity of reports on sensitive topics.

Measures

Residential mobility. Mothers reported at waves 2 and 3 how many times they had moved since the prior wave of data collection. Moves were characterized as a count variable.

Family instability. Four domains of instability (e.g., fertility, marital transitions, intimate partner violence, and employment transitions) were assessed at waves 2 and 3, capturing experiences since the prior wave or in the year prior to data collection. *Fertility* was coded as a dichotomous indicator if mothers reported becoming pregnant or giving birth since the prior wave. *Marital transitions* were computed using mothers' retrospective reports of the start and end dates of all marital and cohabitating relationships (defined as sexual relationships that lasted at least one month and involved sharing a household), reported at wave 3. From these data, marital transition count variables were created at waves 2 and 3 capturing all marriage and

cohabitation entrances and exits since the prior wave. *Intimate partner violence* was assessed using physical violence items from the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979). Thirteen items asked whether mothers had been threatened, shoved, slapped, among other incidents, by an intimate partner in the prior 12 months. Each item was coded dichotomously to indicate at least one experience of domestic violence, with an overall dichotomous indicator capturing any experiences of domestic violence in the prior 12 months. Finally, *job transitions* were computed using mothers' retrospective reports of the start and end dates of primary jobs worked in the 12 months prior to each wave of data collection. These data were used to create a count of the number of primary jobs that mothers worked in the prior year. Mothers only reported on sequential (non-overlapping) primary jobs lasting two months or more, thus potentially undercounting very short-term and unstable employment experiences.

Housing and neighborhood characteristics. Characteristics of mothers' housing and neighborhood contexts were assessed at waves 1 and 2 through mother reports and interviewer observations. *Housing problems* were measured using an index of eight mother-report items and four interviewer-observed items, each of which was coded as a binary variable indicating the presence of substandard housing (Coley, Leventhal, Lynch, & Kull, 2013). Mother-report items captured structural and environmental deficiencies like peeling paint, exposed wires, and non-working heater or stove. Interviewer-observed items were drawn from the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (Bradley & Caldwell, 1979) and captured internal and external deficiencies like dark or monotonous spaces and lack of cleanliness. *Housing cost burden* was assessed as a proportion of total housing costs, including rent/mortgage and utilities, to total household income (capped at 100%), each reported by mothers. *Housing type* was comprised of three categories, delineating government-assisted housing (i.e, receipt of public or voucher-based

housing), private-market rental, and owned home, with private-market rental as the omitted group. Mothers also reported on seven items to assess *neighborhood disorder* by rating neighborhood problems like abandoned houses and burglaries or thefts on a scale ranging from 1 = *not a problem* to 3 = *a big problem* (Elliott et al., 1996). Items were averaged to create a scale of neighborhood disorder ($\alpha_{1-2} = .86$ to $.88$).

Demographic characteristics. A host of maternal, family, and community characteristics were assessed, including family life cycles and family resources, as well as characteristics associated with housing discrimination and local housing policies that might impose constraints or opportunities for residential moves, with time-varying variables measured at wave 1 and 2. Maternal age and age at first birth were coded continuously in years. Childhood domestic violence was coded dichotomously to indicate whether mothers reported experiencing physical or sexual abuse prior to age 18. Maternal race was coded with a categorical variable for Hispanic, Black, or White/other, with Hispanic as the omitted group. Maternal human capital characteristics included educational attainment measured using an ordinal variable ranging from 1 = *less than high school* to 9 = *professional degree*, and a dichotomous indicator for employment which assessed whether mothers were currently working for pay. Family structure variables included a continuous variable for the number of minors, a dichotomous indicator for the presence of non-parental adults in the household, and a categorical variable for marital status indicating whether mothers were single, cohabiting, or married, with single as the omitted group. Finally, in order to capture effects of local housing policies and housing stock, city fixed-effects were included for Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio with San Antonio as the omitted group.

Analytic Approach

Analyses aimed to explore the role of family characteristics, domains of instability, and housing and neighborhood conditions as predictors of mothers' residential mobility across three waves of longitudinal time series data. Goals of these analyses were to prospectively predict residential mobility using prior family characteristics, family instability, and housing and neighborhood conditions, and to exploit the existence of multiple waves of data. Thus, we pooled the waves and estimated a two level Poisson regression model (with observations nested within individuals) in MPlus 6.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010) that accounted for non-independence of observations. Pooling cross-sectional data has the advantage of increased sample size and improved estimation reliability but also raises a number of statistical concerns such as autocorrelation, heteroskedasticity and heterogeneity (Worrall, 2008). A null model found a significant random effect for the wave of data collection, $B = 0.83$, $SE = 0.93$, $p < .01$, suggesting the need to account for the non-independence of observations nested within people. Hence, our final models included a random effect of wave in addition to a fixed effect of wave, potentially reflecting the different time-lag between waves, as well as time-varying and time-invariant family characteristics, instability factors, and housing/neighborhood characteristics as predictors of residential mobility. Time-varying factors were lagged, that is, drawn from the wave at the beginning of the residential mobility period (housing problems, housing cost, subsidized or owned housing, neighborhood disorder, maternal age and marital status, number of minors, other adults in household, household income, maternal education and employment) or measured retrospectively to capture a period overlapping with the residential mobility period (fertility, marital transitions, employment transitions, relationship violence). Time-invariant variables (race/ethnicity, age at first birth, childhood abuse, city of residence) were drawn from wave 1. In

order to account for the clustered sampling frame of the *Three City Study*, analyses were stratified by city, which adjusts the standard errors from potential overestimation when there are not enough groups to model separately using random effects (Asparouhov, 2005; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002).

Prior to conducting multivariate analyses we explored the presence of missing data. The analytic sample contained a moderate level of missing data with 18% of cases missing data on moves between the waves and up to 27% of cases missing information on housing, instability, and demographic covariates. Missing data were imputed using the bootstrapped-based Expectation Maximization Bayesian (EMB) algorithm in R to create 20 imputed datasets (Honaker & King, 2010). All analyses were conducted using probability weights to adjust for the sampling frame and differential response and thus allow for inferences to a population of low-income mothers living in low-income neighborhoods in Boston, Chicago and San Antonio.

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

Table 1 presents a descriptive picture of demographics, housing contexts, and family instability for the stacked analytic sample. More than half, 53%, of mothers were Hispanic, 40% were Black, and 6% were White or other. Mothers were on average 33 years old, with an average age at first birth of 20 years. Nearly 60% of mothers were single with a third married and 9% cohabiting. Approximately 35% of families had other non-parental adults living in the home, and families contained on average 2.63 children under the age of 18 ($SD = 1.41$). Forty percent of mothers had experienced either physical or sexual abuse as a child. On average, mothers had attained a high school degree, and nearly half of the sample had been employed in the past week. Families were equally divided among Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio.

Approximately two thirds of the families in this economically disadvantaged sample changed residences over a six-year period. On average across the two time periods, families moved slightly less than one time ($M = 0.74$, $SD = 1.11$), with nearly 30% of families moving once and 18% of families moving two or more times. Families lived in a diverse range of housing contexts, paying an average of 36% of their income toward housing costs, above the standard housing cost burden level of 30% (Turner & Kingsley, 2008). Approximately half of families received housing assistance, one third lived in private rentals, and one fifth owned their homes. Within these contexts, families experienced on average 1.51 structural housing problems ($SD = 1.43$). Across the waves, 14% of mothers experienced the birth of a child or became pregnant, and 26% experienced domestic violence perpetrated by an intimate partner. Furthermore, mothers on average worked slightly less than one job ($M = 0.75$, $SD = 0.54$) and generally experienced infrequent marital transitions ($M = 0.32$, $SD = 0.47$).

Antecedents and Correlates of Family Residential Mobility

Family characteristics. Results for the multilevel Poisson regression analysis are shown in Table 2, including incident rate ratios (IRRs), or exponentiated coefficients, and standard errors. Among the demographic characteristics associated with family residential mobility, higher maternal age and higher age at first birth quite modestly decreased the rate of moves over time, with a small 1% decrease in mobility for each additional year in maternal age and age at first birth. Childhood abuse was associated with a 17% increase in residential mobility. Finally, city of residence predicted family residential mobility with families in Boston experiencing 60% lower rates and families in Chicago experiencing 50% lower rates of residential moves in comparison to families in San Antonio. In contrast, neither maternal race, family structure, nor family human capital characteristics were associated with rates of residential mobility.

Family instability factors. Family instability factors were also salient to families' residential mobility, with marital transitions, employment transitions, and experiences of domestic violence contributing to higher rates of residential moves over time. Each additional marital transition was associated with a 12% increase in rates of residential mobility. Similarly, each additional primary job was associated with a 17% increase in the rate of moves. Relatedly, mothers who experienced domestic violence perpetrated by an intimate partner experienced a 20% greater rate of mobility than mothers who did not experience domestic violence. In contrast to prior work, mothers' reports of becoming pregnant or giving birth were not associated with residential mobility over time.

Housing and neighborhood conditions. In regard to the housing characteristics, structural quality and housing type were the most salient predictors of family residential mobility across six years. Higher housing problems were positively associated with residential moves, with each additional housing problem predicting a modest 7% increase in the rate of residential moves. In comparison to families who lived in private market rentals, families who lived in assisted housing experienced a 13% decrease in the number of residential moves, and families who lived in owned homes experienced a 32% decrease in the number of residential moves. Neither housing cost burden nor neighborhood disorder was associated with family residential mobility.

DISCUSSION

Understanding the antecedents and correlates of family residential mobility is a complex task, particularly among low-income families who frequently experience challenging housing conditions and pervasive instability in their social and economic situations that interfere with the maintainability of their homes. Using multilevel longitudinal regression analyses, we assessed the relative importance of family characteristics as well as the interpersonal, economic, housing,

and community contexts that are related to rates of family residential mobility among a representative sample of low-income families living in three cities. By including not only static traits of households but also dynamic gauges of family instability and indicators of broader home and community conditions, this study was able to move beyond the rational choice model of residential mobility that characterizes much of the extant literature on mobility, responding to claims concerning the questionable appropriateness of such model assumptions for low-income families (Bruch & Mare, 2012). Examination of these variables in a multilevel longitudinal model that accounted for changes over time within individuals affords the opportunity to illuminate a more comprehensive picture of the antecedents and correlates of low-income families' rates of residential mobility across a six-year period.

Consistent Links with Family Instability Factors

Results indicated that instability across domains of family functioning and composition, particularly maternal relationship and job transitions, played an integral role in explaining the frequency of family moves. Indeed, marital transitions, experiences of intimate partner violence, and job transitions were each uniquely associated with a heightened rate of mobility, expanding upon prior literature linking either a single marital transition (Clark & Huang 2005; South et al., 1998) or experiences across domains of instability (Clark & Ledwith, 2005; Clark & Withers, 2007) with heightened mobility. Considering that marital transitions, intimate partner violence, and job transitions may be particularly stressful for family members and that such experiences may occur suddenly, either from fortuitous opportunities or inauspicious circumstances, these experiences may serve as either push or pull factors affecting residential mobility (Arango, 2000). Indeed, decades of ethnographic and qualitative research validate the existence of such processes across diverse samples of low-income mothers. In the case of both marital and job

transitions, families may elect to move if mothers find a new partner who contributes to the household or a new job that increases the household income, but families may also be forced to move suddenly if mothers lose a job or the financial contributions of an intimate partner after a breakup (Cross-Barnett, Cherlin & Burton, 2009; Edin & Lein, 1997), both of which may result in the family having to seek a new residence with little luxury of considering residential preferences and choices. Similarly, experiencing violence perpetrated by an intimate partner may create a situation in which mothers and their children need to seek an emergency change of residence (Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Lawson Clark, Burton & Flippen, 2011). There were surprisingly no links between fertility and residential mobility, which may be attributable to the fact that disadvantaged families often lack the resources to obtain larger units that better accommodate the household. Despite this, these results provide support for the argument that understanding residential mobility among low-income families requires consideration of numerous realms of family life that include economic and interpersonal domains.

Mixed Results for Housing and Neighborhood Contexts

Housing conditions also played an important role in rates of family residential mobility, but results across indicators of broader contextual conditions were mixed. Specifically, higher levels of housing problems were associated with a higher rate of moves over time, and living in assisted or owned homes in comparison to private rentals was associated with lower rates of residential moves. The link between housing problems and residential mobility expands prior literature that has focused broadly on dissatisfaction with a unit without quantifying specific issues with the unit (Earheart & Weber, 1996). One explanation for this link may be parents' concerns about their children's exposure to environmental and safety hazards, such as exposed wires and peeling paint, which have negative implications for child development (Evans, 2006)

and consequently, may motivate families to find a new residence. Also in line with hypotheses was the finding that families living in private market rentals had higher rates of mobility than families who received government housing assistance or who owned their homes. Private rentals have less oversight and fewer regulations than assisted housing and afford less control over home contexts to families than homeownership (Turner & Kingsley, 2008), ultimately offering few protections for mobile low-income families.

Given that much of the literature on residential mobility attributes moves to unaffordable housing and living in unsafe neighborhoods, it was surprising that neither housing cost burden nor neighborhood disorder were related to the rate of mobility among this low-income sample. Other research with the *Three City Study* sample has found that higher housing costs are generally associated with owned housing and with higher quality housing in this sample (Authors). Together, these results suggest that housing quality and type may take precedence over housing costs in predicting families' residential mobility. An alternative explanation specific to families living in government assisted housing may be that the variance in mobility explained by housing cost burden might overlap with variance explained by job or marital transitions, with a resultant sudden increase or decrease in household income leading to increases in rental payments, which may motivate families to change residences (Teater, 2009). Similarly, despite well-documented links between neighborhood conditions and residential mobility (Bogges & Hipp, 2010; Clark & Ledwith, 2006; Hipp et al., 2009; Lee et al., 1994), the null associations in this sample may be attributed to the sampling frame that selected families from highly disadvantaged neighborhoods (Winston, 2005). Although many low-income families participating in mobility programs like Moving to Opportunity discussed a desire to leave their disordered neighborhoods (Popkin, Leventhal & Weismann, 2010), convincing families to

voluntarily move to new neighborhoods proved challenging (Gennetian, Sanbonmatsu, & Ludwig, 2011). One possibility may be that families in this sample relied on the social capital and social support networks within their neighborhoods (Briggs, 1997) and, consequently, may not have perceived neighborhood disorder as a concern of such urgency to warrant moving, especially given a lack of resources to move and other pressing issues families face like non-working utilities or experiences of domestic violence.

Limited Role of Family Characteristics

Overall, family characteristics showed limited associations with rates of residential mobility, but maternal characteristics and early experiences, as well as city of residence were related to the rate of family moves across time. In line with studies employing the life course theory, maternal age and age at first birth were significantly related to mobility (Clark & Onaka, 1983). The only additional demographic factor making a notable contribution to explaining rates of residential mobility was city of residence, serving as a proxy for local housing policy and stock. Unfortunately, the *Three City Study* did not contain enough cities to directly model differences in city-level policies or housing contexts such as rental vacancies, housing costs, or assisted housing waiting lists that may affect low-income families' residential mobility.

Overall, results from this study suggest that family characteristics have only a limited role in explaining rates of residential mobility among a sample of low-income families. These findings suggest that rates of mobility cannot be explained simply by the preferences inherent to families who can be characterized by their race/ethnic group membership, levels of educational attainment, or household structure. Rather, it is important to account for the various circumstances, situations, and broader contexts that may be related to residential mobility by capturing some of the constraints faced by low-income families on economic decisions like

changing residences. Furthermore, results from this study found little evidence that families' baseline characteristics mattered for mobility, meaning the static measures of marital status and employment, with the richer measures of marital and job transitions better predicting the frequency of family moves. These results highlight the importance of considering the dynamic nature of families' lives.

Limitations and Future Directions

Of course, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research. Although we employed multilevel modeling that addresses changes in families over time, we could draw on only three waves of data collection and utilized only two data points per family resulting from the use of lagged housing and family characteristic variables. Despite these constraints, this study yielded important findings about the relations between the complexities of families' lives and their residential mobility, which suggests that future research should continue to use more rigorous methods for exploring complex problems like family residential mobility, particularly focusing on change within individuals over time and clearly-defined context effects (Teachman & Crowder, 2002), such as the role of city-specific policy contexts. We were also unable to tease apart issues of directionality, so it is possible that experiences of family instability occurred in response to residential moves, rather than as a result of moves, which was the underlying logic guiding our analysis. Although much of the body of evidence on residential mobility finds that such experiences predict family moves, other studies identify residential mobility as a precursor to experiencing IPV (Li et al., 2010), entering an intimate union (Guzzo, 2006) and finding a new job (Clark & Withers, 1998). Hence, future studies should explore rich survey and ethnographic data that will help to more clearly link the timing and directionality of experiences related to instability with residential moves. Finally, it is essential to note that we were unable to

assess the voluntary or involuntary nature of family moves due to constraints of the data.

Phinney (2009) identified a range of demographic differences when comparing a sample of low-income women who moved voluntarily in comparison to those who moved involuntarily due to eviction, homelessness or doubling up. Hence, family instability and housing characteristics may also be differentially associated with the likelihood of voluntarily or involuntarily moving. We also note that data in this study were collected in a particular historical time and for a particular sample, inhibiting generalizations to other contexts and groups. The recent economic recession and housing market collapse, for example, altered both economic and social resources as well as the housing options for many American families.

Policy Implications and Conclusion

The precursors and antecedents of family residential mobility identified in this study highlight a number of policy implications. Namely, policy and program development around residential mobility needs to take into account the complexity of low-income families' lives that influence their mobility. For example, some local housing authorities have transitional housing assistance for women experiencing domestic violence but numerous logistical issues with these programs should be addressed in future policy revisions (see Baker et al., 2010). Policies targeting domestic violence and job promotion might be improved by working to increase the availability of safe and affordable housing near job centers (Baker et al., 2010; Cervaro, 1989). Likewise, housing policy should explore better ways to address increases in assisted housing rental costs so that mothers, who are often the leaseholders (Lawson Clark et al., 2011), are not penalized and forced to move when a new intimate partner joins the household. In regard to housing and neighborhood issues, prior experimental research on mobility suggests that residential mobility is amenable to policy intervention (Clark, 2005), but studies on

housing/neighborhood mobility programs and housing voucher programs demonstrate the challenges of both persuading families to move out of unfavorable homes and neighborhoods and motivating families to stay in improved homes and neighborhoods (Gennetian et al., 2010; Wood et al., 2008). One approach to addressing this problem is to establish better standards and systems of oversight for landlords, property managers, and government agencies that will maintain the quality of homes in families' original neighborhoods and reduce the chances that families will have to move in response to a housing emergency.

In closing, results of this study draw attention to the importance of looking beyond family characteristics and preferences and considering the role of interpersonal, economic, family, housing and community contexts when attempting to understand residential mobility among low-income families. By using multilevel models and employing rich data on experiences of instability and housing and neighborhood problems, this study was able to delineate the unique contributions of a range of family experiences and circumstances to the frequency of residential moves. Ultimately, findings suggest that family transitions related to intimate relationships, domestic violence, and employment as well as housing problems and type, play important roles in pushing or pulling families into changing residences.

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Table 1. *Weighted Sample Demographic Characteristics (N = 2,393)*

	M/%	(SD)
Number of Moves	0.74	(1.11)
Family Instability		
Fertility	0.14	
Job Transitions	0.75	(0.54)
Marital Transitions	0.32	(0.47)
Domestic Violence	0.26	
Housing Characteristics		
Housing Problems	1.51	(1.43)
Housing Cost Burden	0.36	(0.28)
Assisted Housing	0.48	
Private Rental Housing	0.30	
Owned Housing	0.22	
Neighborhood Disorder	0.58	(0.22)
Family Demographics		
White	0.06	
Black	0.40	
Hispanic	0.53	
Maternal Age	33.71	(9.71)
Single	0.58	
Cohabiting	0.09	
Married	0.33	
Minors	2.63	(1.41)
Other Adults	0.35	
Childhood DV	0.40	
Age at First Birth	19.96	(4.28)
Household Income	1520.76	(1065.10)
Education	3.91	(2.15)
Employment	0.49	
Boston	0.33	
Chicago	0.33	
San Antonio	0.33	

Note. Data are stacked across waves with individual cases contributing two data points to descriptive analyses

Table 2. Multilevel Poisson Regression Results Predicting Number of Residential Moves

	Number of Moves	
	IRR	(SE)
Family Instability		
Fertility	1.04	(0.06)
Marital Transitions	1.12	(0.03)**
Employment Transitions	1.17	(0.05)**
Domestic Violence	1.20	(0.05)**
Housing Characteristics		
Housing Problems	1.07	(0.02)**
Housing Cost Burden	1.07	(0.11)
Assisted Housing	0.87	(0.06)*
Owned Housing	0.68	(0.10)**
Neighborhood Disorder	1.21	(0.13)
Family Demographics		
White/Other	0.70	(0.47)
Black	0.85	(0.24)
Maternal Age	0.99	(0.00)**
Cohabiting	1.11	(0.08)
Married	1.02	(0.07)
Minors	1.02	(0.02)
Childhood DV	1.17	(0.05)**
Age at First Birth	0.99	(0.01)*
Other Adults	1.09	(0.05)+
Household Income	1.00	(0.00)
Education	0.99	(0.01)
Employment	0.98	(0.06)
Boston	0.20	(0.31)**
Chicago	0.50	(0.27)**
Wave	1.78	(0.08)**
Intercept	0.27	(0.27)**

Note. + $p < 0.1$ * $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$