Institute for Policy Research
Northwestern University
Working Paper Series

WP-09-01

"Does Changing Neighborhoods Change Lives? The Chicago Gautreaux Housing Program and Recent Mobility Programs"

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Abstract

Policy reforms try to improve education or employment while individuals remain in the same locations—these reforms often fail. Such policies may be fighting an uphill battle as long as individuals live in the same social contexts. Findings from Chicago's Gautreaux Program suggest that residential mobility is a possible lever. By moving into more advantaged neighborhoods, with higher quality schools and better labor markets, mothers had improved employment and children had access to better educational settings and jobs. However, a subsequent mobility program (MTO) was conducted with a randomized field trial and child and family outcomes were more mixed We speculate about what kinds of moves and social settings are required in order to effect improved economic and social outcomes.

Over the past few decades, researchers have become increasingly interested in the effects of neighborhood context on the lives of families and young people, and communities have become even more relevant in light of recent public policy developments. 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. This connection is underscored by recent federal court cases that have considered whether to mandate racial or socioeconomic integration in housing and school settings (*Thompson v. HUD*, *Meredith*, and *Parents* cases). Residential mobility and housing policy have also garnered national attention after the hurricane disaster in New Orleans, and HOPE VI demolitions are prompting concerns about where families relocate after their housing projects are demolished.

Despite years of research on the connection between neighborhood characteristics and family and child outcomes, 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 (South & Deane, 1993; South & Crowder, 1997; Massey & Denton, 1993). Therefore, we don't get the chance to observe how a *different* 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. However, there have been some opportunities 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-and examine a decade of research following the fortunes of the families who moved as a part of this intervention, and briefly consider Gautreaux in the context of some subsequent programs.

The Gautreaux Program

As a result of a 1976 Supreme Court decision, the Gautreaux program allowed low-income black public housing residents in Chicago to receive Section 8 housing vouchers and move to private-sector apartments either in mostly-white suburbs or within the city. Between 1976 and 1998, over 7,000 families participated, and over half moved to suburban communities. 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, finances, or values, but by acceptance into the program and quasi-random assignment to the suburbs. The program provided housing subsidy vouchers and housing support services, but not employment or transportation assistance. 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. Participants moved to more than 115 suburbs throughout the six counties surrounding Chicago. Suburbs with a population that was more than 30 percent black were

excluded by the consent decree. A few very high-rent suburbs were excluded by funding limitations of Section 8 certificates.

In the 1970s, the national housing voucher experiment showed if given vouchers, poor people choose familiar areas, segregated areas similar to the ones they left (Cronin & Rasmussen, 1981). To ensure that families gained access to opportunity rich communities, Chicago's Gautreaux program provided real estate staff to locate apartments in appropriate neighborhoods, and housing counselors deeply committed to promoting racial integration to advise families about the benefits of moves into mostly white middle-class suburbs. As we shall see, these housing support services were crucial components of the program that cannot be overlooked.

Early Findings

Early research on Gautreaux had shown 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 (Rosenbaum, 1995). 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 colleges (vs. two-year colleges), and if they were not in college, to be employed and to have jobs with better pay and with benefits (Rosenbaum, 1995). These differences were very large (see Appendix).

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. 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. Initial concerns that these children would not be accepted were unsupported by the evidence.

Recent Research

To improve the design and data quality of the earlier work, recent research accounted for more pre-program characteristics and used administrative data to locate recent addresses for a random sample of 1500 Gautreaux movers, as well as track residential and economic outcomes for mothers and children. Gautreaux was indeed successful in helping public- housing families relocate to safer, more integrated neighborhoods (Keels, et al, 2005). These families came from very poor neighborhoods, with census-tract poverty rates averaging forty to sixty percent, or three to five times the national poverty rate. Through the program, the suburb-movers moved to neighborhoods that were five percent poor. By the late 1990s, fifteen to twenty years after relocating, these families often moved, but they live in neighborhoods with seven percent poverty rates (DeLuca & Rosenbaum, 2003, p. 323). *Gautreaux* also achieved striking success in moving low-income black families into more racially integrated neighborhoods (ibid.). The origin communities were 83 percent black, while the program placed suburb movers in communities that averaged 28 percent black (most of the suburban moves were to communities that were more than ninety percent white). While some Gautreaux families later moved to neighborhoods that contained more blacks, suburban movers were living in areas that were about

36 percent black (ibid.). These levels were less than half of what they had been in the origin neighborhoods.

Parental 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 mostly black, low socioeconomic status neighborhoods received welfare 7% longer, on average, than women placed in any other neighborhoods; women placed with few (0-10%) versus many (61-100%) black neighbors had employment rates that were six percentage points higher and earned $2,200 more annually than women placed in less affluent areas (Mendenhall, et al, 2006).

Another striking finding is that there seems be a "second generation" of Gautreaux effects. Research on the children of the *Gautreaux* families has demonstrated that the neighborhoods where they resided in the late 1990s as adults were substantially more integrated than their overwhelmingly minority origin neighborhoods (Keels, 2008a). With most Gautreaux children still too young for a reliable assessment of career successes, Keels (2008b) used administrative data on criminal justice system involvement to examine arrests and convictions for the young adults. Males placed in suburban locations experienced significantly lower odds of being arrested or convicted of a drug offense compared with males placed within Chicago; specifically, there was a 42% drop in the odds of being arrested and a 52% drop in the odds of being convicted for a drug offense for suburban movers relative to city movers. Surprisingly, females placed into mostly white suburban neighborhoods had approximately three times the likelihood of being convicted of a drug, theft, or violent offense compared to females placed within Chicago.

How Did Gautreaux "Work"?

The findings described above focus on recent quantitative work. However, the stories Gautreaux participants tell about their experiences can also 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 qualitative studies (Rosenbaum, Reynolds & DeLuca, 2002; Rosenbaum, DeLuca & Tuck, 2005), 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 150 Gautreaux mothers and found that after the move, they described a new sense of self efficacy and that the major changes in their environments helped them to see that they had the ability to make improvements in their lives. Certain features of the new suburban neighborhoods changed their perception of what was possible. Specifically, the women reported that they felt better about having a suburban address, and not having to put down a public housing address on job applications. 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 TV reported that after moving, she discovered that not all whites looked like TV actors.

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. 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. These findings suggest that one's repertoire of capabilities can vary depending on the type of neighborhood one lives in.

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. Several women noted initial difficulties in adjusting to suburban norms, which were unfamiliar and intolerant of some of their prior behaviors. These mothers, who have lived all their lives in housing projects where these norms did not exist, saw benefits to complying with these expectations, and they decided to adopt them. For example, some of the women told us that they were less likely to go out at night or have parties in their yards, and that they were careful to monitor their sons' behaviors and not let them play music too loudly outside. One mother mentioned that she felt the need to keep her lawn free of any trash, so that she could prove that she was a good housekeeper to her neighbors. Ironically, some normative constraints were seen as liberating, such as the way low tolerance for drugs and parties improved community safety. 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.

Similarly, mothers reported social responsiveness from their neighbors. They received the benefits of reciprocal relations related to child care and neighbor concern and watchfulness, which promoted the safety of their children, their property, and themselves. They were also

given favors in terms of transportation and some acts of charity. 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.

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 their child misbehaved or seemed at risk of getting into trouble, if their child was sick and couldn't attend school, or if there was some threat to their children, apartments, or themselves. 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. 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. It is through some of these mechanisms-some social, some psychological-that we believe some Gautreaux families were able to permanently escape the 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 (Keels, 2008b; Mendenhall, 2004). City movers placed in both moderate- and low-poverty neighborhoods 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 placed in the suburbs had less neighborhood exposure to drugs and illegal activities and attended higher-performing public schools with greater financial and teacher resources. Interviews revealed that affluent suburban neighborhoods also had substantially fewer

opportunities for involvement in delinquent criminal activities and gangs.

Was Gautreaux 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 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," such as neighborhoods, school programs, or income subsidies.

Along these lines, the Gautreaux program resembled a quasi-experiment (Shadish, Cook & Campbell, 2002). Although the program was not designed as an experiment and families were not formally assigned at random to different neighborhood 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, since 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 pre-move 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 (Goering & Feins, 2003, Table 7.1).

It is not clear whether the observed pre-move 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 percent vs. 43.8 percent), they moved to census tracts with *dramatically* lower poverty rates (5.3 percent vs. 27.3 percent; DeLuca & Rosenbaum 2003). While small (3 percentage points) differences in initial neighborhoods may account for a portion of the outcome differences, it is hard 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 (DeLuca & Rosenbaum, 2003; Keels, et al, 2005; Mendenhall, DeLuca & Duncan, 2006; DeLuca, et al, 2009; Keels, 2008a and 2008b).

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.

Comparing Gautreaux and MTO

Unfortunately, while MTO was a stronger study, it was a weaker "neighborhood change treatment" (see Table 1). While the Gautreaux program moved nearly all families more than ten miles away from their original neighborhood (an average of 25 miles for the suburban movers), only 10% of MTO's treatment group moved ten miles or more. While Gautreaux procedures discouraged low-income enclaves within tracts, MTO did not. While virtually 100% of Gautreaux experimental-group children (suburb movers) attended different school districts, only

20% of the MTO experimental group did. While 88% of Gautreaux suburb movers attended schools with above-average achievement, only 10% of MTO experimental group did.

The Gautreaux experimental group (suburb movers) moved to radically different labor markets, where nearly all children attended schools with above-average achievement and were too far away to interact with their old friends in the housing projects. The shorter MTO moves created fewer barriers for children to maintain contact with old friends in the housing projects.

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 Interim Impacts study showed virtually no gains in academic performance or school engagement for the children from the experimental group (Sanbonmatsu, et al, 2006), likely explained by the minimal increases in school quality. Indeed, only 20% of the experimental group changed school districts (Orr, et al, 2003).

Unlike Gautreaux which found gains in mothers' employment, the MTO treatment and control groups both showed large gains of comparable magnitude. 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 percent 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 for that reason. Large numbers of families in the control group had also moved out of high-rise housing projects (and other poor neighborhoods) through the federal HOPE VI program. Therefore, the control group was experiencing unusual benefits and atypical circumstances which made it hard to see how the experimental group might have fared during a period with fewer factors affecting the control group.

Despite the shorter moves and less change in social environment, both Gautreaux and MTO vastly improved 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) (Kling, Liebman & Katz, 2007). Gautreaux studied neither of these outcomes.[1]

Policy Implications

Currently, we have the chance to further examine another strong program with a strong counseling component. 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 the *Thompson* case, a federal judge found the U.S. 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 for use in high opportunity neighborhoods in the Baltimore region. With the help of housing counselors and fair-housing lawyers, these "Thompson" families are relocating from public-housing projects to low-poverty, non-segregated neighborhoods all around the Baltimore metropolitan area. The research has begun to examine the kinds of moves and school choices that families make when given much stronger counseling (DeLuca & Rosenblatt, 2008). Research will also examine the impact of other services to help connect these families to employment and education resources. Yet it is noteworthy that while Gautreaux had extensive pre-move counseling and real estate staff assistance, the program provided minimal assistance of any kind after the move. Whether additional childcare, job training, educational, transportation, and other support services have benefits if families are placed in very low poverty areas with strong labor markets and good schools is really not known.

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, by 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 15 years. 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. Gautreaux shows that the same families who struggled in housing projects, terrible schools and poor labor markets demonstrated higher school achievement and better employment outcomes if they moved far from their old neighbors into areas with good schools and strong labor markets than highly similar families who remained in the same environment. Some of these outcomes ones that were extremely rare in the city sample: attending four-year colleges and having white friends. If these findings generalize, they suggest that radical changes of environment lead to radically better outcomes. MTO found that a much weaker program had significant benefits for safety, physical health and mental health.

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Table 1: Program design elements in MTO & Gautreaux

	MTO	Gautreaux*
Moving Distance		
Moves less than 10 miles	84%	10%
Neighborhood Placements		
(Census tract attributes)		
Placement average percent poverty (movers only)	12.4%	5.3%.
Placement over 40% black areas	38%	5%
Micro-neighborhoods		
Procedures to prevent enclaves?	No	Yes
Created enclaves?	Yes?	No
Social Contexts		
Schools		
School district change?	20%	~100%
Schools above-average test scores	10%	88%
Labor Markets		
Change labor market?	No?	Yes?
Labor market comparison	strong-->strong	weak-->strong
Social Interactions		
Contact with former peers?	Often?	Rare?
Safety Improvements	Yes	Yes
Duration		
Retention rate in placement neighborhoods**	56% after 4-7 yrs	66% after 15+ yrs

*These figures include the families who relocated to suburban communities outside of the city of Chicago. See DeLuca and Rosenbaum (2003) for a more detailed analysis of all Gautreaux program moves.

**For MTO, this means that the neighborhood at the follow up survey was less than 10% poor; for Gautreaux, it means that the neighborhoods at last follow up were less than 30% African American. Note, however, that Gautreaux has a much longer follow up period.

? indicates best estimate from qualitative or administrative data, the rest is based on systematic evidence.

APPENDIX:

Table A. Percent of Respondents Employed Post-move by Pre-move Employment for City and Suburban Movers[a]

	City	Suburb
Employed Pre-Move		
Employed Post-Move	64.6%	73.6%
	[65]	[144]
Unemployed Pre-Move		
Employed Post-Move	30.2%	46.2%
	(43)	(80)
Total Employed Post-Move	50.9%	63.8%*
	(108)	(224)

[a]Numbers in parentheses are group n's.

*Indicates Chi-square significant at the .05 level.

Table B. City and Suburban Comparison on Wages and Hours Worked

	Pre-Move Mean	Post-Move Mean	t	p
City Movers				
Post-move earners				
(N=55)				
Hourly wages	$5.04	$6.20	6.52	0.00
Hours/Week	33.27	31.92	-0.60	0.55
Suburban Movers				
Post-move earners				
(N=143)				
Hourly wages	$4.96	$6.00	6.50	0.00
Hours/Week	33.62	33.39	-0.60	0.55

Table C. Youths' Education and Job Outcomes: City-Suburban Comparison

	City	Suburb	Sig.[a]
Drop-out of school	20%	5%	*
College track	24%	40%	**
Attend college	21%	54%	***
Attend four-year college	4%	27%	**
Employed full-time (if not in college)	41%	75%	****
Pay under $3.50/hour	43%	9%	****
Pay over $6.50/hour	5%	21%	****
Job benefits	23%	55%	****

[a]Significance of chi-square or t-test: *p<.10, **p<.05, ***p<.025, ****p<.005.

[1] Another program, "Gautreaux II" was run by the agency that ran Gautreaux, but, by the late 1990's, the agency had different staff and a different philosophy, and the program had a very different design. Unlike Gautreaux, but like MTO, Gautreaux II had weak counseling, no real estate location staff, it relied on participants to find their own housing, it let families live in high-poverty neighborhoods, as long as the larger census tract met program criteria. Unlike Gautreaux, but like MTO, children could continue attending the same school system and even the same schools, and adults often remained in the same labor market. For all practical purposes, Gautreaux II was designed to replicate MTO, not Gautreaux.