

# ***Commentary:*** **MTO's Contribution to a Virtuous Cycle of Policy Experimentation and Learning**

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When the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) for Fair Housing demonstration<sup>1</sup> began in the mid-1990s, policymakers at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) were newly aware of the terrible damage inflicted on families and children living in severely distressed neighborhoods and the role federal housing policy played in concentrating and isolating poor (mostly minority) families in these neighborhoods. Findings from the Chicago Gautreaux experiment suggest that helping families escape from deeply poor neighborhoods and move to neighborhoods of opportunity might dramatically improve their well-being and life chances. At the time, however, few people (whether policymakers, practitioners, or scholars) saw HUD as a source of policy innovation or rigorous experimentation, and federal housing policy was an afterthought in most discussions about antipoverty strategies and welfare reform (Briggs, Popkin, and Goering, 2010).

Because reliable answers about what works in public policy are hard to find, labeling experiments like MTO as either “successes” or “failures” is tempting. Did the demonstration prove that using housing vouchers to relocate poor minority families works? If not, did it fail? In fact, MTO succeeded in ways no one anticipated when it was launched, generating valuable lessons and raising new questions about the effects of neighborhood distress and the potential role of assisted housing mobility. Findings to date have spurred successive rounds of policy innovation and research that test new hypotheses about how, where, and for whom neighborhoods matter and how both housing

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<sup>1</sup> HUD randomly assigned residents of public and assisted housing projects who volunteered for the MTO demonstration to one of three groups. The experimental group received housing vouchers that, for the first year, families could use only in low-poverty neighborhoods, along with mobility counseling and search assistance. The Section 8 group received traditional housing vouchers that families could immediately use in any neighborhood. The control group continued to receive housing subsidies in the original development. Researchers have tracked MTO participants systematically over the intervening years to support analysis of long-term economic, educational, and health outcomes.

mobility and neighborhood revitalization can improve outcomes for families and kids. In addition, MTO has dramatically raised the profile of HUD (and federally subsidized housing) as an important contributor to both innovation and learning in the world of antipoverty policy.

## Unexpected Improvements in Health and Mental Health

The initial hypotheses about the potential benefits of assisted housing mobility did not anticipate health improvements. The earliest exploratory studies of MTO families suggested, however, that moving out of dangerous and chaotic environments (and into better quality housing in safer neighborhoods) might yield important health and mental health benefits (see, for example, Goering and Feins, 2003). MTO researchers responded by focusing more quantitative and qualitative attention on these outcomes and the processes driving them, thereby enriching a growing body of evidence from other fields about the damaging effects of trauma and stress on children’s physical, emotional, and intellectual development. MTO findings have also triggered related investigations of the health effects of neighborhood crime and violence, in particular the possibility that girls suffer from “sexually corrosive” neighborhood environments (Popkin, Leventhal, and Weissman, 2010).

The significance of health outcomes in MTO research (see Sanbonmatsu et al., 2011)—combined with other research on the costly spillover effects of chronic illnesses like obesity, diabetes, asthma, and depression—has already influenced policy and practice. This research has heightened awareness among housing policymakers and practitioners about health risks facing the families they serve. Both HUD and public housing agencies have begun giving much greater attention to the physical and mental health of public and assisted housing residents, partnering with health-service providers to improve healthcare access and targeting conditions in housing units, properties, and neighborhoods that may undermine residents’ health.<sup>2</sup>

## Disappointing Results for Education and Employment

MTO teaches that, although many high-poverty neighborhoods lack both good schools and proximity to good jobs, moving to a low-poverty neighborhood does not guarantee that children will attend high-performing schools or that their parents will gain access to secure, well-paying jobs. The absence of measurable gains in education or employment for MTO participants has led researchers to dig deeper into both issues, including qualitative investigation of the factors underlying families’ school choices and spatial analysis of the distribution of low-skilled job opportunities in the five MTO metropolitan areas (Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles). These findings have prompted mobility programs across the country to supplement their counseling and support services to more explicitly help families connect to good schools and stable employment.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, HUD’s Choice Neighborhoods grant program, which provides funding to redevelop distressed public and assisted housing developments and the neighborhoods surrounding them, explicitly targets improved physical and mental health as priority outcomes. See [http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/press/press\\_releases\\_media\\_advisories/2012/HUDNo.12-006](http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/press/press_releases_media_advisories/2012/HUDNo.12-006).

A core assumption underlying the MTO demonstration was that children in families in the experimental group would attend dramatically better schools than those serving their original neighborhoods. As discussed further in the next section, however, most of the families in the experimental group stayed in the same school district, so their children did not experience dramatic improvements in school quality. Roughly 7 of 10 MTO families sent their children to their assigned schools, whether in the immediate neighborhood or in some larger, administratively defined attendance zone. For others, informed choices proved difficult. Some parents were unaware of the options available in their new neighborhoods, in part because most relied on limited information resources, such as word-of-mouth referrals from relatives and friends. In addition, many parents emphasized order, discipline, and convenience as indicators of a “good” school more than evidence of academic supports and achievement. Not surprisingly, because they were fleeing some of the nation’s most unsafe neighborhoods and schools, these parents placed the highest priority on en-suring that their children would be safe at school—even if this meant staying at the school in the original neighborhood (Briggs et al., 2008).

Just as MTO did not automatically yield better public school assignments, most new locations did not offer better access to jobs, despite their lower poverty rates and dramatically improved safety. In fact, geographic analysis suggests that MTO families in Los Angeles and Chicago moved to neighborhoods that were no closer to low-skilled job opportunities than were the neighborhoods they left behind (Cove, Turner, and Briggs, 2008). Ethnographic research highlights the tremendous struggles MTO families faced in trying to line up a secure, three-way spatial match: access to affordable child care (often provided by relatives or friends), a house or apartment that stayed affordable, and a reasonably secure job. This struggle often led to instability, difficult commutes, and frequent moves and job changes, and these challenges were particularly daunting for parents facing multiple barriers not directly affected by location, such as disabling physical or emotional illness or limited skills.

## **MTO Intervention Fell Short of Its Vision**

One possible reason that MTO gains were limited to health outcomes is that the special mobility assistance provided by the demonstration did not enable families to gain and sustain access to high-opportunity neighborhoods. Families in the experimental group moved to better quality housing and safer neighborhoods than their counterparts in the control group, but few of these families spent more than a year or two in low-poverty or high-opportunity neighborhoods. By the end of the demonstration period, differences in exposure to high-opportunity neighborhoods were quite modest across the three randomized groups. For example, families in the experimental group spent, on average, only 22 percent of the time between random assignment and the final impacts evaluation living in neighborhoods of very low poverty and unemployment compared with 9 percent for their counterparts in the control group. Families in the experimental group lived in predominantly White neighborhoods only 9 percent of that time compared with 5 percent for the control group (Turner et al., 2011). In other words, MTO did not produce the dramatic improvements in neighborhood environment (or school quality) its designers envisioned and had almost no desegregative effect.

What happened to the experimental group families after their initial moves to low-poverty neighborhoods? Why did the mobility assistance they received not result in longer exposure to high-opportunity neighborhoods? Analyzing mobility trajectories shows both that MTO participants were quite mobile and that some of the neighborhoods to which they moved changed over the course of the decade, mostly becoming poorer and more predominantly minority. Families who moved to high-opportunity neighborhoods at the outset followed one of four distinct patterns over the subsequent decade: (1) roughly one in four sustained their residence in high-opportunity neighborhoods throughout the period, (2) about one-third immediately lost access and never regained it, (3) about 20 percent immediately lost access but subsequently regained and sustained it, and (4) about 20 percent maintained access to high-opportunity neighborhoods for more than 1 year but lost access later (Turner et al., 2011).

Other research found that families left high-opportunity neighborhoods because they experienced problems with their lease or their landlord, were dissatisfied with how their housing was maintained, or wanted a bigger or better quality apartment. During the housing boom that occurred during the early to middle years of the 2000s, families faced additional stressors, such as units being sold and rehabbed, rented for more than the voucher program rent ceiling, or removed from the voucher program altogether (Briggs, Comey, and Weissman, 2010). Many families who made initial moves to safe, opportunity-rich neighborhoods were unprepared for the competition in the new, “hot” housing market: rents skyrocketed, landlords would not accept the vouchers, and extensive savings were required for security deposits, first and last months’ rent, and other credit requirements.

## What’s Next for Policy, Practice, and Research?

Neighborhood change alone cannot overcome the problems of poverty, but it would be a mistake to conclude from MTO’s results that neighborhoods are irrelevant to employment or school success, that helping families relocate to opportunity-rich communities—and stay there—has no effect on these domains, or that implementing a program that yields more dramatic changes in neighborhood outcomes is infeasible. MTO’s findings strongly establish the importance and benefit to families of escaping from severely distressed and dangerous neighborhoods.

Moving forward, policymakers can draw on MTO findings to develop *place-conscious* strategies that both improve the neighborhoods in which poor people currently live and simultaneously open up wider opportunities for them to move to neighborhoods offering greater opportunities (Pastor and Turner, 2010). In my view, MTO argues for next steps that include—

- Investing more (and more effectively) to restore the safety, stability, and vitality of inner-city neighborhoods so the families who choose to remain there can thrive.
- Encouraging rental property owners in safe, well-resourced communities to participate in the voucher program and informing voucher recipients about the full range of locational options available.
- Expanding the supply of moderate-cost rental housing in healthy, well-functioning neighborhoods (particularly neighborhoods that offer both safety and good schools).
- Helping families *stay* in new, opportunity-rich communities after they make initial moves.

Housing and neighborhood policymakers still have much to learn from MTO. Although the demonstration may not have produced all its expected results, it offers a gold mine of information about the challenges facing low-income families, their patterns of residential mobility, and the possible effects of changing neighborhood conditions on their immediate well-being and longer term life chances. These data can be a resource for innumerable investigations, cutting across policy domains to explore current issues in housing, neighborhoods, health, employment, education, crime, and social networks. In particular, researchers will be able to use these data to dig deeper into the question of whether the MTO families who spent more time in better neighborhoods enjoyed better outcomes and to explore what neighborhood characteristics are associated with what outcome gains and for what kinds of people.

Today—in part because of its investment in the MTO demonstration—HUD has gained respect as a source of policy innovation and rigorous hypothesis testing. Distinguished scholars from many disciplines are investigating interactions between neighborhood environment and individual well-being, and local practitioners are drawing on research evidence to refine and strengthen programs that help poor families make good choices about where to live—implementing a next generation of innovative models and hypotheses for researchers to test. I consider that success.

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## Author

Margery Austin Turner is Vice President for Research at the Urban Institute.

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## **Additional Reading**

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