
A Family View of Mobility Among Low-Income Children

by Karla Buerkle and Sandra L. Christenson

Moving is a highly personal experience for a family. Different families experience residential mobility in many different ways, but across all situations it is often the children who are most lastingly affected. And if these children come from low-income families—in which nearly one-quarter of school-age children are affected by mobility each year—the effects are too likely to be ignored. Low-income families in transition are often dealing with other family stresses, they have comparatively limited support from significant others, and they are an under-represented population in general. It is vital, however, to listen to their voices in order for communities to better understand what mobility means to low-income families, how it affects their children, and how researchers and public policymakers can better address it.

The Kids Mobility Project was initiated in 1996 by a group of planners and researchers to explore residential mobility and its impact on students in the Minneapolis public schools, where about one in every five students experiences mobility. Some common results of frequent moves had already been suspected, such as students falling behind academically, losing their social support systems, and acting out in response to the stress and their feelings of loss, but the goal of this project was to provide sound information to be used in creating policies and programs that will help to stabilize the lives of these children.

The project coordinated three separate studies. One was a quantitative analysis of the relationship between mobility and student achievement for a sample of Minneapolis Public Schools students, and another was a wide-ranging review of research on student mobility. The researchers found that the greater the number of moves, the lower the average reading score for students in the study, and that mobility negatively affects attendance, which, in turn, is a strong predictor of performance. These



findings were common to other studies on the subject, nationally and internationally.

Our study, the final component of the Kids Mobility Project, turned to the mobile families themselves in order to find answers to many of the questions that quantitative analysis cannot address. Why do families move? Do they have a choice? Do they recognize that frequent moves affect children's performance in school? We hoped that the point of view of the parents would give us a much more complete picture of the impact that mobility has on the lives of their children.

We asked one hundred families, through both questionnaires and in-depth, personal interviews, about their mobility-related experiences. They were solicited through the Welcome Center of the Minneapolis Public Schools, which registers all incoming elementary and middle school students as well as transfers within the district, and each chosen family had at least one child in the first through the sixth grade. Seventy-seven of these families were considered mobile, meaning that they had moved at least three times in the last year and a half, and twenty-three were non-mobile, meaning that they had changed neither residences nor schools during the same time period. This sample is not necessarily representative of families in the district, but to ensure that families from differing situa-



tions were adequately represented, the mobile group was composed of three subgroups: twenty-five new-to-the-area families who had changed residences and schools, thirty metro-area families who had changed residences and schools, and twenty-two metro-area families who had changed residences but not schools. We found mobile families significantly more likely than non-mobile families to be young, poor, and non-white.

Interviews were carried out over the course of six months, and each was conducted in one sitting ranging from thirty to ninety minutes, depending on the amount of information shared. All interviews were conducted by the first author and took place either in the family's home, in one of two public school sites, or in the Welcome Center. Families were provided a small monetary payment for their time, and the children were given toys to play with and a book to keep. At the end of the interview, families gave permission to access their children's achievement scores and attendance records from school files and to ask their child's teacher to fill out a brief psychological/social competence rating scale.

The Findings

The information provided by the schools revealed that achievement scores for the students in our study were low overall, but, despite the potentially confounding influence of income on achievement, we found that students

who had not changed schools in the preceding year and a half had higher math scores than children who had. Also, students in the former group were generally rated by their teachers as more competent in a range of psychological skills including relaxing, playing, and handling separation and independence. Those children who had changed neither school nor residence showed the most positive indicators in both the achievement and the psychological areas, and, perhaps most importantly given the quantitative studies mentioned above, these non-mobile children had better attendance than their mobile counterparts. These findings strongly suggest that mobility negatively influences school performance.

But the parents of these children gave us a revealing look at how and why this mobility occurs. They shared honest and riveting stories of their experiences and the lives of their children, and their willingness to open up and trust that their stories will make a difference is evidence of a connection not easily or often made. Many indicated that they rarely were given the chance to tell their stories, and perhaps the comfortable setting of the interviews encouraged their openness. When asked directly about the effects of moving on their children, many parents reported that they had seen problems with behavior, emotions, self-esteem, and friendships that they attributed to the stress of frequent moves. In their own words:



I want stability for my child. I could see the change and how it was bad for her when we... changed schools; it messed up her education and friendships.

It's really a hassle when you don't have enough money for moving, let alone bus fare. Don't know where your kid is going to go, don't know the neighborhoods, don't know if you're coming or going.

Overall, the responses of the interviewed families highlight four main findings.

■ **Limited housing options.** Families described continual struggles with finding decent, affordable, and safe housing. Consider the response of one young mobile parent:

I've been looking for a place for five months—landlords won't call me back, I just sit and wait by the phone. The few places I've seen have been dumps and unfit to live in. It's really bothering me that I can't find a place, every place looks trashy. I don't want to live in a place like that. I have Section 8, but the deadline is coming up and I can't find a decent place. What should I do?

The close relationship between mobility and limited quality housing options for low-income families was clear. Moves were often spurred by families judging their living situations as intolerable, and the frequency of family moves was increased by the pattern of finding temporary living quarters “until something better comes along.” Another parent showed exasperation:

I was trying for so long to find a place of my own. I don't like this place or area, but was forced to take this house just to have a place to stay. There's crowding problems, but I don't feel I have a choice. We just move from one dump to another.

Those interviewed told of being on subsidized housing waiting lists for years, and then having such limited and low-quality options that they lost their eligibility because they could not find something adequate.

I can't afford housing in a decent neighborhood—rent is going higher and higher to keep out danger, violence, drugs. We need more affordable housing in decent areas.

In some cases, families in high-risk situations with their own personal struggles find themselves caught in a cycle of not being able to qualify for or afford decent housing after having an eviction or unlawful detainer on their record. Families tell of being at the mercy of landlords who require cash deposits to get in and do not keep the places up to standard. These findings suggest a need for additional subsidized housing options of better quality and improved quality control, particularly in the form of landlord monitoring. In addition, the need to increase investment in and ownership of housing for these families is also apparent. As one interviewee commented, “There are problems with people (in subsidized housing) tearing places up, so distrust for everyone is there.”

■ **Different types of mobility.** Families moved for many different reasons, indicating the existence of different types of mobility and increasing the complexity of its meaning in people's lives. All families, including those in the non-mobile comparison group, were asked about their most recent move. Their moves can be categorized into four types: coping, forced, upward, and lifestyle (Figure 1).

Eighty of the one hundred families interviewed described their most recent move negatively, as either coping or forced mobility, over which they had little choice. They told of tension in family interactions, strain on adults to provide family stability and on children to adapt, and stress for those dealing with losses in support and challenges to their identity. Accompanying forced

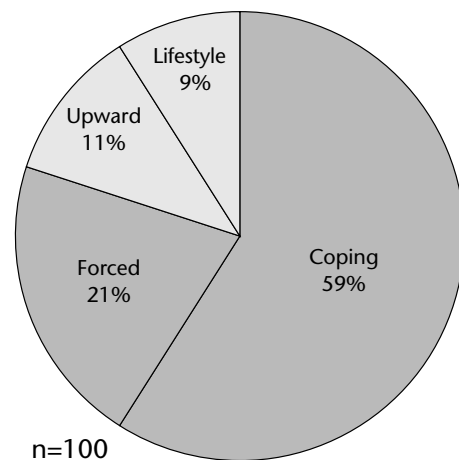


Figure 1. Types of Mobility Experienced by Interviewed Families

mobility, in particular, was a sense of hopelessness about ever having the financial resources to escape the cycle of moving that is spurred by poor housing and unsafe environments. Mobility was most often viewed negatively by families in these situations; they described it as synonymous with stress and as an additional risk factor in their lives.

Coping mobility refers to moves that are made to avoid substandard housing, dangerous neighborhoods, or struggles with drugs and other addictions. The fifty-nine of our interviewed families who moved to cope most often chose to do so, but they had little control because their moves were dictated by circumstances.

I saw mobility as a way to escape from bad relationships and try a new life. I had stress and misery brought on by my moving—all I wanted to do was come home and stay stable.

Summed up by one twenty-four-year-old mother with the phrase “you gotta do what you gotta do,” mobility for a majority of families was a way to cope with unsatisfactory living conditions, to increase perceptions of safety, to escape stressful family situations and unhealthy environments for children, or to make one step forward in order to, in the words of a thirty-eight-year-old mother, “get where you want to be [and] improve things for you and your family.”

I always moved to cope with awful conditions of houses and problems with slumlords. The things I had to do at that time... I had to accept it, had no choice.

If you gotta move, you gotta move. Ain't no way to get around it if you want something better.

Forced mobility is often due to evictions, condemned housing, inability to pay rent, housing destroyed by fire, or being faced with imminent danger. The twenty-one families who were forced to move simply had no choice. They tell of a series of crisis situations:

For me, moving was always tied with drugs and not having any money to pay the rent, then going to a shelter. Now that I'm clean, I'm going to stay put, give my kids a place to stay. I hope we can make it.

We were forced to move because of dangerous situations that the landlord did nothing about. I was there for five years, and it was decent at first. I had to move to stay safe.

In these negative circumstances, moving could accurately be viewed as a proxy for underlying instability, as both coping and forced mobility frequently occur with other life stressors.

We didn't have a place to live; we were homeless for almost a year because of escaping my husband's drinking. Plus we never had money to pay the rent.

Those families faced with coping or forced mobility seemed to expect that frequent moves (and the accompanying stress) would continue because they saw the circumstances that dictated the necessity of moving as unlikely to change.

Twenty families, on the other hand, described their mobility positively, as either upward or lifestyle. For them, moving was a means of improving themselves and the future of their children, a chance for a new start, and an exciting, skill-building opportunity to discover diverse people and places. These kinds of mobility were often associated with positive emotions, independence, and optimism about control over mobility-related decisions and their effects on family members. When parents felt they had made such a move in their living situation, their responses reflected hopefulness for “a blessed new start” or pride in their ability to “do what we needed to do.” Although few of these parents saw mobility as completely separate from stress and adjustment difficulties, several focused only on the excitement of a new location, a feeling of control, and they emphasized the moves as helping them and their children gain skills in adapting to change.

Upward mobility, reported by eleven of the families interviewed, is moving to improve oneself or one's family. It is often associated with optimism and control, and it is spurred by such things as being nearer to job opportunities and seeking a comparatively nicer, safer area or home.

Moving now, when we're financially secure and could be planful, is so much better. This move is full of opportunity.

These families spoke of changing their lives for the better, and they saw mobility as progress.



Past moves made me wiser. I realized I could stop renting and start trying to do something promising for my family. I'm more responsible and am buying a house.

Lifestyle mobility refers to a pattern of moving. These families, only nine of those interviewed, reported moving “just because.” They like change, they want different experiences, and they are excited by a move. They also tend to minimize any negative effects of mobility on themselves or their children.

Moving is exciting, although it stretches you. As long as kids get in school quick, it's okay.

I like to move. I'm always on the go, seeing new people and places.

These families describe mobility as a choice, albeit one in which they may or may not exercise complete control:

If I don't like it, I'll leave anyway, even though I'm sick and tired of moving. I move mainly to find different atmospheres. I like changes. I'll move after a while, every year or two. Kids like something new, although adjusting to new schools is difficult sometimes.

The type of mobility a family experiences, and whether it is characterized as positive and negative, seems to depend on the circumstances of the move, the family's fit into the new environment, their perceptions of control and choice, the occurrence of other stressors in conjunction with the move, and the availability of support and resources.

■ **The positive aspects of mobility.** The third finding, closely related to the second, is that moving is not always pejorative; rather, mobility must be viewed in context. Most families describe moving as stressful, yet many families also describe positive aspects that are rarely seen in the existing literature on mobility. Mobility helps them to escape negative situations and improve their lives, or mobility is a lifestyle choice.

I got my kids away from drugs and crime. Now I have a positive outlook on life.

I moved to better myself and my kids. We don't have to worry about the past... this is a new beginning, a blessed new start.

Learning to adjust to new neighborhoods and different people has been good. It helps me now, in learning to adjust to changes in general.

Most literature describes mobility as (at least temporarily) negative, and, fairly often, a discrete life event. While some researchers have found benefits in moving for some families, such as those in the military, who have resources and support during the transition, it is less common to find literature describing its positive role in the lives of low-income families. A more positive, non-pejorative view of residential mobility was seen among the families in this study, as some interviewees described moving as making a choice for a better life, investing in themselves and their children, and discovering new and exciting opportunities.

■ **The correlation with other life stressors.** The fourth major finding is that it is difficult to isolate the effects of mobility from other adversities. We found that highly mobile families reported a significant number of stressful life events happening concurrently, more than did non-mobile families. Ninety percent of the mobile families had experienced at least one family-change event in the previous year, with over half reporting a personal issue such as chemical dependency, death of a relative or friend, or legal problems. When mobility occurs for families living in high-risk situations, it is often so mixed up with various problematic issues that it becomes nearly impossible to sort out its impact on outcome variables. Families describe this condition when they tell of the circumstances surrounding mobility.

It's been very stressful. I lost my job, had court problems, then my new place wasn't ready 'til the middle of the month even though it was promised to be [through a subsidized housing program]. But I still had to move on the first of the month, so I had to stay with a friend for two weeks and put my stuff in storage.

Families' reports of additional stressors were used in conjunction with qualitative information gained during interviews to rate their overall stability, continuity, and consistency/predictability. Summary ratings were then completed following each interview (Figure 2). Stability was gauged here as the degree to which the family members, schools attended, and place of residence remained the same over time, continuity consisted of maintaining opportunities for community involvement and fitting comfortably into new environments, and consistency/predictability was judged as providing structure and clear expectations for children, particularly in adjusting to the changes brought on by moving. Significantly lower ratings across all three variables were given for a majority of mobile families, illustrating the disruptive effect that mobility, when combined with other stressful life events, has had in the lives of the families interviewed. Thus, although the event of a move may not be a strong, single predictor of family instability, perhaps mobility, at least when characterized as coping or forced, can be viewed as a marker for family problems.

The evidence shows that low-income mobile families report not only more stressors but lower levels of social support overall. Children often experience loss as a result of moving, particularly the loss of friends and a social network at a time in their lives when

peer relationships are extremely important. Adults are affected in a similar way, since support from significant others in the lives of people in transition is often limited and is directly related to a loss of social support networks. For highly mobile families, disconnection with the local community was frequently tied to perceptions of danger in their neighborhoods, and many believed that there is no use making connections when their life experiences suggest that they will only have to move again. Families new to the metro area felt particularly vulnerable, while those who moved within the area felt somewhat more connected, finding some support in schools, churches, or professional agencies. These realities highlight the need for additional resources and strategies for building support networks in the lives of mobile families.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

In the interest of building resources to strengthen our support of children and families dealing with residential mobility and school change, this study makes it clear that mobility must be understood in context. From a phenomenological point of view, it is diverse and complex, influenced by many factors, and the tendency to oversimplify must be avoided.

While our findings reinforce the evidence that families with the highest risk of forced mobility are those living in high-risk neighborhoods, receiving public assistance, or being headed by poorly educated individuals, and while our subjects vividly described the negative effects of frequent moves, this study challenges the assumption of a direct and explicitly negative relationship between mobility and effects on children and families. We suggest instead that future research examine the impact

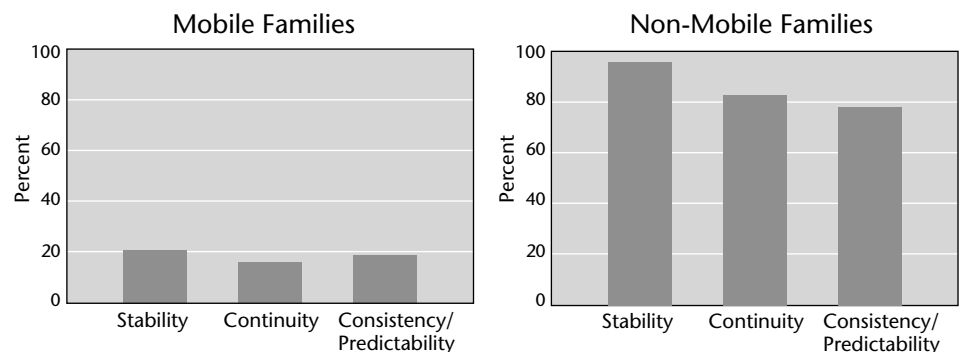


Figure 2. Percentage of Mobile and Non-Mobile Families Rated "Moderate to High" in Three Categories

of mobility within a multidimensional framework (Figure 3). This framework could differentiate among the following elements: type of mobility (residential or school), reason for mobility (including a positive or negative characterization), time dimensions (recency, frequency, seasonality, period of moves, rate of moves), distance (notably within or outside of a school district), person-environment fit (similarities or differences between two places), and attitude toward moves. Researchers also must begin to ask questions differently; instead of working with a traditional research question such as “What is the effect of mobility on student achievement?,” for example, we might better ask “Which aspects of mobility affect student achievement?”

In the area of public policy, the need for additional, better-quality housing options in safer neighborhoods for low-income families was strongly stated by a majority of the mobile families in this study. The inadequacy of the current supply is evidenced by descriptions of applicants waiting years for subsidized housing, despite eligibility. Also, findings regarding the primarily negative consequences of school change invite a revisiting of the question of neighborhood/community schools and rigid attendance lines. There are strong arguments on either side of these issues already being debated in school districts, but one goal that is beyond debate is improving children’s attendance. Its strong and direct relationship to

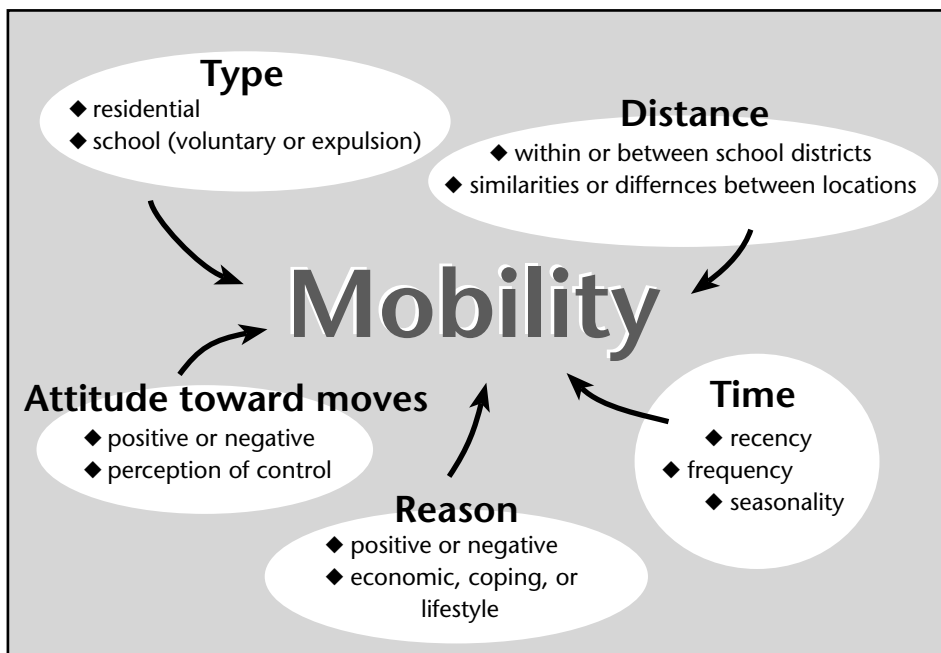


achievement is clear.

Finally, the results of this study have some very practical implications as well. Perhaps most important to those of us working with mobile children and families, the findings present a challenge to our beliefs and assumptions about mobility—a challenge to think less negatively about the families who move. Attitudes and beliefs are frequently cited as important in a family’s ability to cope with stress, and our goal should be not simply to reduce mobility but to improve children’s stability and the outlook of struggling families by making the circumstances surrounding a move as positive and smooth as possible.

Families adjusting to a residence or

school change need more support. A focus on the competencies and life skills necessary for success across environments, and for resiliency in the face of adversity, may best serve children struggling with instability. Understanding which resources are most effective for this effort and what kinds of support mobile families desire from the institutions they turn to for help allows us to better focus on the promotion of the children’s well-being. Our opportunities to enhance the capabilities of mobile families are the best avenue to our goal of promoting children’s academic, behavioral, and social competence across environments. With this focus, we will all be better able to fulfill our role as facilitators of life success.



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Figure 3. Multi-dimensional Aspects of Mobility