

# GUEST EDITORIAL: Residential mobility and wellbeing: exploring children's living situations and their implications for housing policy<sup>i</sup>

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Studies of residential mobility may be divided broadly into those that focus on the process of mobility — the decision to move and the process of moving — and those that ask questions about the outcomes of the residential mobility process — what happens after the move? Within studies of outcomes there is growing interest in just how residential change affects child and adolescent wellbeing. A recent symposium grappled with the implications of mobility for families and neighbourhoods with a series of papers on the outcomes of residential change (Guy, 2012). The papers in this special issue focus on similar broad issues of residential mobility, poverty, public policy and family and childhood outcomes of this process.

Overall, the tendency in studies of residential mobility was to assume implicitly, if not explicitly, that mobility was a good thing and it was the way in which households got better housing and nicer surroundings (for a general overview of residential mobility and the housing market, see Clark, 2012). Although initial studies of mobility emphasised choice and opportunity, there was a nagging suspicion that not all moves were good ones, and sometimes moves were not made by choice or did not have positive outcomes. The idea that moves contributed to social mobility was perhaps too optimistic. Moves might mean little more than residential churning with detrimental outcomes for children (Kingsley, Jordan & Traynor, 2012).

A shift in the approach to studying residential mobility began in the 1990s with the recognition of a need for greater attention to the valence of the life course and the events in family life that may prompt home moves (Clark & Dieleman, 1996; Mulder, 1993). This shift in conceptualisation refocused attention on the events in the life course and on what those interested in residential mobility viewed as triggers of mobility. Thus moves were linked to both positive and negative changes within the family, such as partnership formation and dissolution, changing jobs, or becoming unemployed (see, Anderson, Leventhal, Newman & Dupéré, 2014), as well as changes outside of the family, such as housing market booms and busts (Ferreira, Gyourko & Tracy, 2010), and housing policy changes. The housing boom followed by the Great Recession of 2008 was accompanied by both individual- and societal-level changes that impeded or hindered residential moves. And all of this was accompanied by a marked decrease in residential mobility generally. Both in the United States (US) and Europe there has been a significant drop in the probability of moving (Cooke, 2013; Champion & Shuttleworth, 2015), and there are questions about how the decline in mobility options will impact different cohorts and different family compositions, especially the disadvantaged.

Recent studies have centred residential moves within a life course perspective, distinguishing between moves that are generated by both positive

and negative circumstances, moves that result in improved neighbourhood conditions, and moves that improve or harm child wellbeing. The increasing availability of longitudinal data — and especially data from cohort designs — has advanced studies. Many of the earlier studies of residential mobility used cross-sectional data, making it difficult to rule out selection as an explanation for moving home. And, indeed, selection into residential mobility and neighbourhoods is a powerful driver of residential mobility, with individual, family, and societal factors facilitating and constraining home moves and neighbourhood choice. The drive to understand the link between mobility and neighbourhood outcomes, and the even more complex issue of how much the outcome was related to family and other individual changes versus the influences of the neighbourhood itself, has created a substantial literature on neighbourhood effects and their measurement. That said, we still have some way to go before we will really understand just how the neighbourhood impacts the outcomes from moving house and moving neighbourhood.

The increasing availability of longitudinal data has both enhanced and complicated the study of residential mobility. The enhancements are obvious: the ability to follow the same individuals over the course of time in the context of varying social, economic, and policy changes — on the individual, family, and societal levels — has transformed studies of residential mobility. In addition, study design and statistical procedures to study these changes are becoming more sophisticated, allowing for stronger causal inference. The complications are many, not the least of which is the correlation of residential mobility with study attrition. The tendency for those who move home to drop out of longitudinal studies has been well documented. Less well understood, however, are the longer-term implications of dropping out. The availability of panels with longer follow-up periods permits the investigation of these issues.

Four of the papers in this issue address aspects of the dynamics of residential mobility, using data from cohort or panel studies. The fifth considers the policy implications of the reported results. All analyses of residential change have to grapple with missing data and attrition. Thus we set up the special issue by first

addressing just this methodological problem. The paper by Tarek Mostafa considers the consequences of home moves for survey follow-up in the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), a UK birth cohort study of children born in 2000-1 and followed since. Mostafa uses data from the first five interview waves, starting when the child was nine months old, then at ages three, five, seven, and 11. His question is whether residential mobility's effect on attrition is short- or long-term. In what is an extremely positive finding, he shows that, in a large proportion of cases, those who fail to complete an interview due to residential mobility are likely to return in subsequent waves. Thus, in many cases, residential mobility appears to represent a short-term disruption in the study's contact with the household. The results should reassure survey researchers — at least those who keep good tracking records. As Mostafa points out, one of the strong suits of the MCS is its ability — and its resources — to find most respondents over time.

The paper by William Clark utilises data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, a US-based survey initiated in 1968 with a household survey of about 5,000 families. Interviews obtained information on all household members, with most information collected about the household head. An important element of study design is that the PSID followed individuals as they left their original households, permitting the analysis of generations of families and individuals over time. Initially (and until 1997), the PSID respondents were interviewed annually; thereafter the interview has been biennial.

Clark uses this rich dataset to examine a range of life course disruptions that occur in families, including job loss (an economic disruption) and divorce, separation or widowhood (a family disruption) in relation to residential mobility due to housing disruption via eviction, housing repossession and housing demolition. Each of these disruptive events — in family structure and economic circumstances — is generally found among the most vulnerable families: young, poor, home renters, and those of low occupational status. In these populations, the event is likely to be accompanied by a home move and by a move to a less advantaged area. It appears that the combination of difficult life circumstances, stressful events, and moving under duress strikes hardest at

fragile families, those with few resources to cope. The paper also uses data from before and after the Great Recession to show the ways macro-level economic declines contribute to exposure to life course disruptions, especially among the most vulnerable.

Two of the papers specifically address the consequences of residential mobility for young children. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study conducted in the United States, Brenden Beck, Anthony Buttaro and Mary Clare Lennon examine correlates of residential moves among a birth cohort representative of large US cities. Data were collected when children were born and at ages one, three, and five. Beck et al. find high mobility rates, with almost seven in 10 children having moved home by age five. A substantial minority of young children move frequently, with 20% having moved home three or more times. This high rate of mobility is associated with changes in family structure (e.g., separation, acquiring a new live-in partner), paternal incarceration, persistent unemployment, and precarious housing tenures (primarily renting rather than owning). These effects hold with controls for family vulnerabilities (such as poor maternal health) and capabilities (such as education). Moving house at a young age is a normative step in the life course but one that may be enacted under difficult situations.

In addition to stressful family circumstances, financial hardship is associated with frequently moving home. Interestingly, families with higher incomes also tend to move more frequently than those with lower incomes. These results suggest that parsing out the economic circumstances associated with residential moves is important. As Clark shows, moving under duress is much more common among low-income families.

Child outcomes are associated with many of these difficult family circumstances, as well. In fact, Beck et al. find that controlling for these changes within families reduces associations of residential mobility with child verbal skills and behaviour problems (both internalising and externalising) to non-significance. Thus, the impact of moving home on children appears to be due to the circumstances that give rise to the move, rather than moving by itself.

Ludovica Gambaro and Heather Joshi also examine residential moves among children aged five and under. They use data from the MCS, when the child was nine-months, three years, and five years old. Young children in the UK move less frequently than do those in the US, with fewer than half having moved by age five and only 5% moving three or more times. These authors also examine the distance moved, showing that most moves are to areas relatively close to the area of origin. The precursors of moving home are similar to those found in the US: partnership changes and living in rental accommodation. Gambaro and Joshi also looked at overcrowding which was associated with the likelihood of moving home.

Their examination of child outcomes shows similar results to those found in the US. Any negative association of moving with poor verbal skills and behavioural outcomes can be accounted for primarily by changes in partnership and employment even before allowing for a further set of sociodemographic controls. In addition, they separately examine whether the move was to a disadvantaged area, finding that children who moved within such areas showed developmental outcomes no better, if not worse, than those of children who were born into disadvantaged areas.

The final paper, by Ruth Lupton, considers the policy implications of results presented in this issue, with a focus on recent housing and welfare policies in the UK. Lupton makes the point that recent policy changes, since 2010, such as the 'bedroom tax' and caps on overall benefit receipt, create more stress for low-income families than in the first years of the millennium. Policies since the 1980s have reduced housing security for the most disadvantaged, potentially creating a situation similar to that found in the US today, where private market mechanisms dominate housing policy. While the implementation of the bedroom tax has not resulted in mass evictions to date, research finds that families cut back on other expenditures in order to pay rent, creating more financial hardship for those already living on the edge.

Lupton offers a schema for developing policies that (1) encourage 'advantaging' moves (e.g., to better areas, for work, to improve schooling) and (2) discourage 'disadvantaging' moves (e.g., to worse

areas, as a result of eviction, what Clark calls ‘moves under duress’). This approach incorporates many elements of housing policy, such as rent subsidies and low-interest loans to purchase homes, but goes beyond them to incorporate broader policies that implicitly affect housing – those focused on neighbourhood improvement.

There is no question that we are in the midst of new thinking about residential mobility and the implications for families. As overall mobility declines, as housing costs increase, and as affordable housing becomes scarcer in both the US and Europe, it is possible that the old opportunities provided by mobility may no longer temper inequality in the urban mosaic. The continuing inflow of immigrant populations, often with relatively high fertility, may exacerbate the growing inequalities in the housing market. Growing wealth differences are increasingly

reflected in the housing market where families with access to generational transfers are doing well, while immigrant and low-income families are marginalized to less attractive outcomes. Shortages of affordable housing, the need to spend large proportions of income on housing, the resulting financial strain, the threat of eviction and demolition, and the like, may generate considerable stress in families and contribute to the very family problems (especially break-ups, partner changes) that accompany ‘mobility effects’. Seen from this vantage, the policy implication – to increase the supply of affordable housing – becomes clearer and more urgent. Under these conditions, life course perspectives and longitudinal data to assess housing stressors and outcomes are critical tools in residential mobility studies and their role in understanding impacts on children.

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## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> The papers in this special section (with the exception of that by Mostafa) were developed for a symposium at the 2014 Annual Meeting of the Society for Longitudinal and Life Course Studies. This paper draws in part upon Jane Waldfogel's comments as a discussant at the SLLS symposium, for which we are grateful. We thank Brenden Beck, Richard Layte, and Jeylan T. Mortimer for helpful feedback on earlier versions of this paper.