

## Frequent Residential Mobility and Young Children's Well-Being

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### Overview

*Families change residence for all sorts of reasons, both positive and negative—a new job, the addition or subtraction of family members (for example, the birth of a child, a young person's departure for college, the dissolution of adult relationships, or the desire to be closer to friends or extended family). However, family moves inevitably disrupt some family routines, and can be a source of stress to both parents and children. For school-age children, a move may also be accompanied by a change in school—another important setting for children's development.*

*Moves vary not only in their motivation, but along other important dimensions, such as distance and frequency.<sup>1</sup> However, in general, children (particularly younger children) benefit from stability in their relationships and in the settings (family, neighborhood, school or child care) they spend time in, and react negatively to turbulence in those.<sup>2</sup> Thus, it is reasonable to consider whether frequent moves are harmful to children.*

*In this study, Child Trends examined a fairly select group—children younger than six who have experienced five or more moves (who we term “frequent movers”)—using nationally representative data from the 2007 National Survey of Children's Health. Our aims were to understand some of the particular demographic characteristics of this group of frequent movers, as well as to see whether they were more likely to have poor physical and/or mental health than similar children who did not experience frequent moves. We found that only a small percentage of young children experience frequent moves, but that over-represented in this group are children in poor families, children in households with no fully employed adult, children in single-parent households, and children who are mixed-race or Hispanic. Once we account for these factors, we found no obvious harm to well-being associated with frequent moving. However, this group of children may be vulnerable due to its greater exposure to multiple sources of risk.*

### Moving: A Good Thing? A Bad Thing?

Moving is a normative experience for U.S. children, and many experience multiple moves. According to Current Population Survey (CPS) data, in 2011 more than nine million children (ages 1-17; about 13 percent) changed residence; however, 70 percent of these were moves within a single county. The CPS reports on several categories of “reason for move”; with regard to movers younger than 16, “housing-related” factors accounted for moving in nearly half of all cases (49 percent); “family-related” reasons accounted for 28 percent; “employment-related,” for 18 percent, and “other,” for six percent.<sup>3</sup>

Previous research indicates that children who move frequently are disproportionately in families that are poor and in single-parent households.<sup>4</sup> Child poverty rates have climbed sharply in recent years,<sup>5</sup> as has the percentage of births that are to single mothers.<sup>6</sup> A significant feature of the recent economic downturn was a housing crisis (still continuing for many), marked by record rates of foreclosures,<sup>7</sup> and

increases in homelessness among school-aged children.<sup>8</sup> All of these factors might be expected to lead to increased mobility. To examine the implications of high mobility, Child Trends used data from the 2007 National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH), which includes information on numbers of residential moves, as well as many other aspects of child and family well-being, to examine the prevalence of moving among families with young children, and to analyze the links between children's frequent moves, and several dimensions of well-being. Studies of residential mobility differ in the thresholds they use to define "many" or "frequent" moves. Here we used five or more times ever in the child's lifetime.

In prior research, some effects (primarily negative) on well-being associated with residential moves have been found for both young children and adolescents. Young children may have considerable vulnerability to frequent moves because of their rapid development in multiple domains (physiological, cognitive, affective) characteristic of this period, as well as because of their dependence on parents' own abilities to cope with stressful events. Prior research also suggests that the cumulative effects of moving may be particularly important, and that other forms of turbulence that often accompany mobility, such as family disruption, may be important. However, longitudinal data on such risk factors are relatively rare in the research literature.<sup>9</sup>

For preschool-aged children, evidence overall for effects of residential mobility is not strong. One study<sup>10</sup> reports that experiencing three or more moves during the first five years of life is associated with both internalizing and externalizing behavior problems. However, these effects were limited to poor and near-poor children. The only association between residential instability and children's cognitive abilities was limited to higher-income children, among whom a strong positive association with picture-vocabulary scores was found.

Of course, residential moves may be driven by, or result in, positive changes in family circumstances. Thus, families may move to escape hazardous living situations, seek better schools, or to take a new job which offers expanded opportunity. Even aside from such "strategic" or pro-active residential changes, the experience of moving may offer children developmentally positive challenges in adapting to new circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

Another conceptualization of residential instability is as a neighborhood-level variable—for example, the percentage of residents who moved within the past year. While fewer studies have adopted this approach, findings are mostly suggestive of negative effects for child well-being.<sup>12</sup>

## **Findings**

Just under half (48 percent) of children younger than six had ever moved, but only 2.4 percent had moved five or more times. Thirty-five percent had moved once or twice, and 10 percent had moved three or four times.

Consistent with previous studies on this topic, we found the likelihood of children's experiencing multiple moves to be associated with a number of demographic characteristics.

- Children in poor families (those with incomes below the federal poverty level (FPL) were more than four times as likely to have experienced five or more moves as were children in families with incomes twice or more than FPL (5.5 and 1.2 percent, respectively). Young children in families with incomes between 100 and 199 percent of FPL were more than twice as likely (3.0 percent) to experience frequent moves as those in more affluent families.

- Young children living in households where no adult was employed for 50 of the past 52 weeks were twice as likely to be frequent movers as their counterparts in households without adult unemployment (3.7 and 1.8 percent, respectively).
- Mother's educational attainment was also associated with the frequency of children's moving, though less strongly than was family income. Children whose mothers had no more than a high school education were twice as likely to be frequent movers (3.7 percent) as those with mothers who had completed college education (1.8 percent).
- Frequent moves were nearly five times as prevalent among children not living with two biological or adoptive parents as they were among their counterparts with either two biological or adoptive parents (6.1 and 1.3 percent, respectively).
- By race/ethnicity, multiracial children were the most likely to experience five-plus moves (4.8 percent), followed by Hispanic children (3.5 percent), African-Americans (2.9 percent), "other" (2.0 percent), and whites (1.5 percent) (differences are significant between Hispanics and African-Americans, and between Hispanics and whites, but not between African-Americans and whites).
- There was a significant, but substantively small, gender difference, with girls more likely than boys to experience five-plus moves (2.7 and 2.1 percent, respectively).

We tested whether young children who experienced five or more moves differed from their counterparts without such frequent moves, on two parent-reported well-being measures: a global rating of the child's health, and whether the child had received treatment or counseling from a mental health professional within the past 12 months. Prior to adjusting for the greater disadvantages of children experiencing frequent moves, frequent moving was significantly associated with poorer health, and with greater likelihood of mental health treatment, compared with children without frequent moves. However, using multivariate analysis, we controlled for the associations between frequent moves and a number of demographic variables (noted above). Net of these controls, there were no significant effects associated with ever moving five or more times, for either of the well-being measures.

We further examined whether frequent moving might be associated with changes in the frequency of positive family interactions, such as family members' reading to children, singing songs or telling stories to children, or taking children on outings in the community. Once again, prior to adjusting for the greater disadvantages experienced by children in families that move frequently, we found that children with frequent moves were significantly less likely than those without frequent moves to have gone on family outings four or more days in the past week, and to have had family members tell stories or sing songs to them on every day of the past week; the frequency of family members' reading to children did not differ between frequent movers and non-frequent movers. However, there was no significant association of frequent moves with any of the family-child interaction measures, once the control variables were accounted for.

## **Discussion**

The experience of frequent moves in early childhood is not common overall, but particular demographic groups of children are much more likely to do so than others. For example, Hispanic children represented 22 percent of the total sample, but accounted for 34 percent of the frequent movers. Children in poor families made up 43 percent of the frequent-mover group, although they comprised 18 percent of the total sample. Children not living with two biological or adoptive parents (again, about 22 percent of the total sample) comprised 58 percent of the frequent movers.

Taken as a whole, the findings suggest that residential mobility (even frequent mobility), by itself is associated with few effects, either positive or negative, on child well-being, once other characteristics of the child and his or her family are taken into account. Incidentally, we also examined whether children whose parents reported they had never moved, looked markedly different on well-being outcomes than those who had experienced one or moves; they did not. The reasons that families move and whether the move represents a positive or negative change may matter more than the fact of mobility per se.

## **Conclusion**

As noted, residential moves are a common experience in the U.S. Given that a variety of circumstances, both positive and negative, underlie families' decisions to move, it may not be surprising that this form of turbulence is not clearly associated with well-being outcomes. These data, however, predate the period of the Great Recession, which was accompanied by widespread disruptions in the security of families' housing arrangements, leading, in some cases, to involuntary moves, including "doubling up" with relatives, sacrifices in housing quality, and even homelessness. Thus, an examination of the mobility issue within this changed and more negative context might yield results different from those found here. Further, we examined a limited set of well-being measures. Thus, the analysis may not have picked up on some important aspects of the child's experience. Data from the 2011 NSCH will allow researchers to examine a number of aspects of well-being that may have been affected by the events of the intervening years, including the severe economic downturn.

On the other hand, we were able statistically to control for a number of child and family characteristics known to be associated with the likelihood of frequent moves and not consistently disentangled in previous studies of this topic. Our results suggest that, in fact, residential moves may be a marker or "proxy" for other family characteristics—in particular the challenges associated with poverty and single parenthood. Thus, frequent residential mobility may be a flag for identifying potentially vulnerable families. However, researchers, advocates, and policymakers should be cautious in making assumptions about the supposed positive, or negative, effects of moving, net of other important individual-, family-, and community-level factors.

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<sup>2</sup>Moore, K. A., Vandivere, S., and Ehrle, J. (2000). Turbulence and child well-being. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

<sup>3</sup>U.S. Census Bureau. (2011). Current Population Survey, 2011 Annual Social and Economic Supplement. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/hhes/migration/data/cps/cps2011.html>

<sup>4</sup>Jellyman & Spencer, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup>Child Trends. (2011). Children in poverty. Child Trends DataBank. Retrieved from <http://www.childtrendsdata-bank.org/?q=node/221>

<sup>6</sup>Child Trends. (2010). Births to unmarried women. Child Trends DataBank. Retrieved from <http://www.childtrendsdata-bank.org/?q=node/196>

<sup>7</sup>RealtyTrac. (2009). Foreclosure activity hits record high in third quarter. Retrieved from <http://www.realtytrac.com/foreclosure/foreclosure-rates.html>

<sup>8</sup>First Focus, and the National Association for the Education of Homeless Youth. (2010). A critical moment: Child & youth homelessness in our nation's schools. Authors. Retrieved from [http://www.naehcy.org/dl/crit\\_mom.pdf](http://www.naehcy.org/dl/crit_mom.pdf)

<sup>9</sup>Moore, K. A., Vandivere, S., Kinukawa, A., and Ling, T. (2009). Creating a longitudinal indicator: An exploratory analysis of turbulence. *Child Indicators Research*, 2, 5-32.

<sup>10</sup>Ziol-Guest, K. M. and McKenna, C. (2009). Early childhood residential instability and school readiness: Evidence from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. New York: Institute for Children and Poverty.

<sup>11</sup>Rumberger, R. W. (2003). The causes and consequences of student mobility. *Journal of Negro Education*, 72(1), 6-21.

<sup>12</sup>For example, Ernst, J. S. (2001). Community-level factors and child maltreatment in a suburban county. *Social Work Research*, 25(3), 133-142; Peterson, R. D., Krivo, L. J., & Harris, M. A. (2000). Disadvantage and neighborhood violent crime: Do local institutions matter? *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 37(1), 31-63; Xue, Y., Leventhal, T., Brooks-Gunn, J., & Earls, F. J. (2005). Neighborhood residence and mental health problems of 5- to 11-year olds. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 62(5), 554-563.

## DATA SOURCE AND DEFINITIONS

### 2007 NATIONAL SURVEY OF CHILDREN'S HEALTH (NSCH 2007)

The NSCH, sponsored by the U.S. Maternal and Child Health Bureau, is a telephone survey designed to yield samples representative of the nation and each of the states. Although the primary focus of the survey is health, it includes measures of a number of child well-being constructs and of the developmental contexts of family, school, and neighborhood. A parent is the reporter on a single focal child. The data for the present study come from the 2007 NSCH. The question on residential mobility is: "How many times has [child's name] ever moved to a new address?"

All items on the NSCH rely on parent report and, in addition, the question about residential moves involves retrospective recall, which may introduce reliability concerns. However, NSCH-based estimates of mobility track reasonably well with estimates from the Census Bureau. Moreover, parents' reports in any case represent their subjective experience, which may in this instance be as important as strict accuracy; and we further addressed this potential bias by restricting our analyses to the youngest children. In addition to lacking information about the reasons for moving, this dataset does not provide information on the distance of moves; it seems reasonable to expect that the effects of a long-distance move may be more profound than a move within a single neighborhood or town.

### VARIABLES USED IN THE ANALYSIS

For the multivariate analysis we included as controls the child's gender, single year of age, and race/ethnicity; the mother's education level, family structure, employment status of household adults, and family income. Because of small numbers in some racial/ethnic categories, we included in the analysis only white, Hispanic, African-American, multiracial, and "other" designations. Mother's educational attainment was coded as "high school only, or less," "some college," or "at least a four-year college degree." Family structure was coded as either "two biological/adoptive parents," or "some other arrangement." Employment status was assessed by asking the parent whether there were any adults in the household who were employed for 50 of the past 52 weeks. Family income was coded using multiples of the federal poverty level (FPL): below FPL, 100-199 of FPL, and 200 percent or more of FPL.

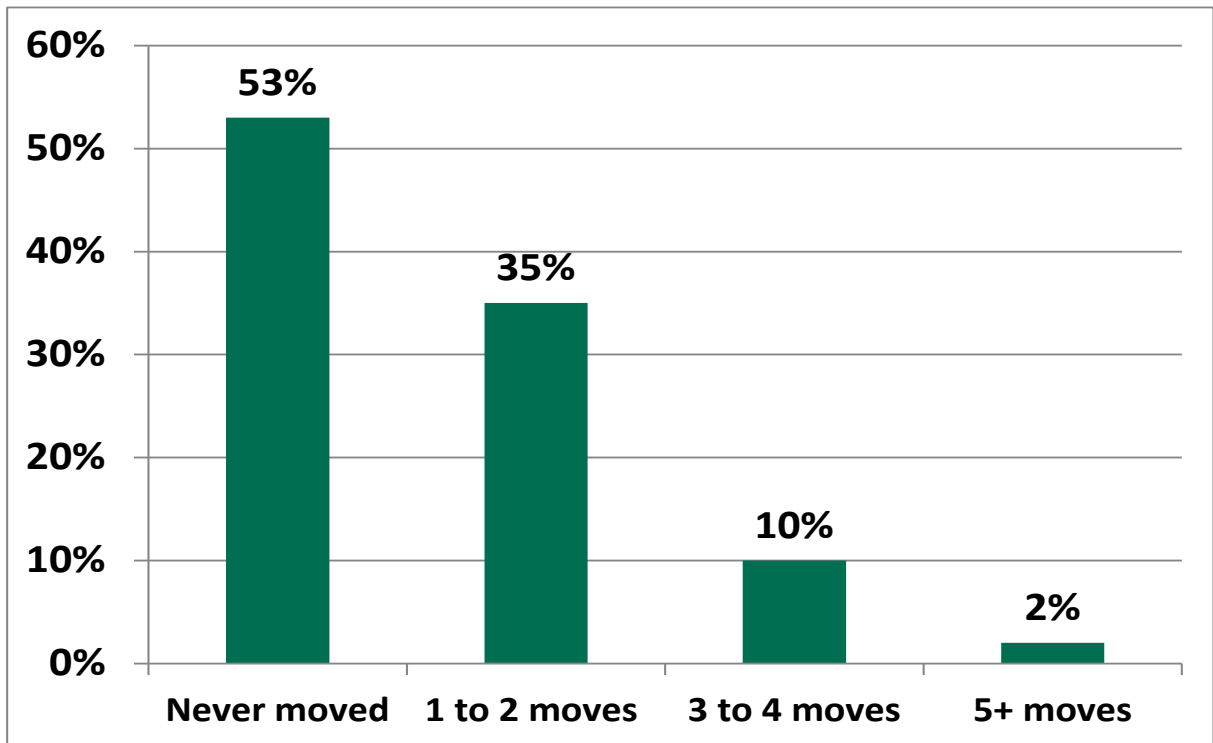
We used logistic regression to assess the association of frequent moves with child well-being, net of a number of other child- and family-level variables. The well-being variables we could examine for the youngest age group (birth to 5 years) were limited. They included the parent's global rating of the child's physical health (coded as "excellent" or "very good" versus "good," "fair," or "poor"), and the parent's report of whether the child received treatment/counseling from a mental health professional in the past 12 months. We also included three measures of parent-child interaction, in order to examine whether frequent moves might disrupt some aspects of positive parenting. Those items were: family members' reading to the child, family members' telling stories or singing songs to the child, and family members' taking the child on outings (such as to a park, library, zoo, shopping, church, etc.). Cut-offs for these measures were based on the distribution of scores; specifically, dichotomous breaks were used which placed 50 percent or more of the scores at the "optimal" end of the distribution. For frequency of family members' reading to the child, and, for telling stories or singing songs, the cutoff was six or fewer days in the past week; for family outings, the cutoff was three or fewer days in the past week.

**Table 1. Percentage of Young Children (Younger than 6 years) Experiencing 5+ Residential Moves, by Selected Demographic Characteristics, 2007**

<b>Race/Hispanic Origin</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
White Non-Hispanic	1.5
Black Non-Hispanic	2.9
Hispanic	3.5
Multi-racial	4.8
<b>Maternal Education</b>	
Less than High School	3.7
High School	3.1
More than High School	1.8
<b>Family Income as a Percentage of Federal Poverty Level</b>	
> 100%	5.5
100-199%	3.5
200+%	1.2
<b>Family Structure</b>	
Single-parent Household	6.1
Two-parent Household	1.3
<b>Sex</b>	
Male	2.1
Female	2.7



**Figure 1. Percentage of Children, Ages 0-5, by Number of Lifetime Residential Moves (2007)**





**Figure 2. Percentages of Children, Ages 0-5, Who Have Experienced Five or More Residential Moves: Total, and By Selected Categories (2007)**

