Housing Policy and Family Well-Being

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How I Know: Families

- 15 yrs, 500+ families, 3000+ hrs, 3 cities

- Residential biographies, mobility histories, family dynamics, finances, landlords, children’s schooling, substance use, health, mental health, friendships, employment, religion, aspirations

- Housing searches, churches, community meetings
The Stakes Are High

- Growing up in a neighborhood of concentrated disadvantage reduces the verbal cognitive score of African-American children, equivalent to missing 1 year of schooling

- The negative effects of living in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty accrue over time and can have devastating consequences for their odds of graduating from high school
Escaping Concentrated Poverty Matters

- Improved mental health for women
- Reduction in extreme obesity
- Decreased levels of diabetes
- Increased levels of happiness
- Increased housing quality and safety
- Reduction in neighborhood poverty
- Increase in access to higher quality schooling
That was the worst experience that I ever experienced, living in an environment which made you feel trapped, caged, and worthless, just stuck into the atmosphere of absolutely no progress. It was a whole little community of pure dissatisfaction in everything. No one encouraged no one.—Tammy

[But] that’s one of the things that allowed me to continue to use drugs, ‘cause I was always looking at people that was worse than me, instead of looking at people that were better, that were doing better than me.—Rachel
I could see grass, and I could see trees and birds and squirrels. But [in the housing project], it wasn’t nothing like that.... I had moved from night to day. The [project] was not clean... And you know what, it gets better. It’s gonna get better.—Niecy

So moving up here, it’s a whole different atmosphere, the greenery, you living in a high-rise, you got a lot [of] cement. And there’s something to that effect in the psychology..., the hardness you get from all that concrete. The greenery, it softens you. It’s just so beautiful and peaceful, the space, the open space. You got more space. –Amy
Policy and Market Obstacles to Housing Opportunity

- Fair Market Rents
- Source of Income Discrimination
- Time limits on vouchers
- Limited vouchers
- Lack of housing counseling
- Landlord practices
Most residential mobility among poor minority families is reactive. Poor quality housing stock, landlords, family conflicts, neighborhood violence, housing policy regulations. Moving under duress circumscribes neighborhood choice. Results in repeated relocation to high poverty, segregated neighborhoods.
Baltimore Thompson Program

- 1995 class action lawsuit
  - Housing desegregation remedy

- Current and former public housing families

- Voucher to move to a census tract that is
  - < 10% Poverty
  - < 30% African-American
  - < 5% sub housing
How Program Works

- Pre-Move Counseling
  - Credit counseling, family needs referrals
  - Move readiness preparation for private market
  - Suburban neighborhood tours & education about housing

- Landlord Outreach in Suburban Neighborhoods

- Post-Placement Counseling
  - Multiple visits within first year
  - Second Move Counseling

- Counseling on School Choices in New Neighborhoods
  - Parents are shown how schools compare across neighborhoods
  - Staff work with parents to negotiate new school settings
Community Development

- Getting it right is critical
- Devaluing black communities
- Reality, politics, opportunity structure
- HUD’s current agenda

- Empirical scrutiny
  - Sandtown-Winchester—70 million+ spent
  - Aspen Institute has three volumes on ‘challenges’
  - But we stand to learn as much from these about what matters
Conclusions

- Need to preserve various options to provide housing in safe neighborhoods of opportunity.

- Mobility programs are one option that gives families resources and choices they would not otherwise have.

- Encourage policies that present options for families to learn about, access and experience an array of communities and neighbors.
  - Empirically demonstrated to improve the general well being of most (even some) of our cities’ families and children.