

# Addressing Residential Instability: Options for Cities and Community Initiatives

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## Abstract

*Recent research based on surveys of low-income neighborhoods in 10 cities, part of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connections initiative, confirms that overall rates of residential mobility in such neighborhoods are high but also shows that the overall rate is made up of very different types of moves with dramatically different implications. Perhaps most important is the finding that a large share of all moves are churning moves—frequent, usually short-distance moves by vulnerable families. Research has shown this kind of mobility to be associated with negative education and health outcomes for young children.*

*After summarizing key findings from the Making Connections initiative, this article reviews policy and programmatic options that might address these outcomes. It finds considerable relevance at the citywide level in new approaches to homelessness prevention being considered. It also identifies actions that can be taken at the community level. The article focuses, in particular, on how the network organizing approach might be mobilized toward this end.*

## Introduction

Researchers have known for some time that the rate of residential mobility among low-income families is high. In 2011, 17.5 percent of households in the lowest income quintile moved compared with only 11.5 percent of the nation's households, on average (Theodos, 2012).

Knowledge of high movement rates among low-income people, however, has not led to consensus regarding what, if anything, policymakers should try to do about mobility. Those who manage community-improvement initiatives typically find the subject disturbing. How are they to build strong social networks and social capital if many residents are likely to soon move away? Others, however, see opportunity in mobility: the possibility of devising policy approaches that result in more families escaping the effects of concentrated poverty.

Surveys conducted in low-income neighborhoods in 10 cities that were a part of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connections initiative, however, offer a fundamentally different understanding (Coulton, Theodos, and Turner, 2012; Coulton, Theodos, and Turner, 2009). Total mobility, in fact, comprises very different types of moves with dramatically different implications, some good and some bad.

The surveys confirm that the mobility rate in distressed neighborhoods is indeed high; 28 percent of families with children move each year. Surprisingly, however, most movers (20 of the 28 percent) do not actually "move away." Rather, they relocate in or near their original neighborhood, remaining "within reach" of the community. The number of cases in which residents actually leave the neighborhood is comparatively small—about 8 percent per year—and it is difficult to argue that either the scale or the nature of that mobility is problematic.

A large share of the shorter moves, however, do represent a problem. This share of moves appears to be a product of residential instability, a *churning* kind of mobility; in many cases, they are moves made by vulnerable families likely to be near the edge of homelessness. To be clear, families in this situation were by no means dominant in any of the Making Connections neighborhoods. Nonetheless, reducing this type of mobility seems to be a challenge that policymakers ought to consider how to address.

The opening sections of this article summarize the basic findings about residential mobility and explain why residential instability is a serious problem. The remainder of the article explores policy and programmatic options. After briefly framing possible policy responses related to positive mobility, the article focuses on how to address residential instability. One section looks at relevant citywide systems, emphasizing approaches that have evolved to deal with homelessness; in particular, it addresses the logic behind the shift from the initial shelter-dominated responses to the concept of homelessness prevention. The final section explores how to address the issue at the neighborhood level in the context of community-based improvement initiatives.

## **Mobility in Low-Income Neighborhoods**

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connections initiative began in 2000 and operated in selected neighborhoods (most often groups of neighborhoods) in 10 cities for most of the decade. The initiative collected survey data in three waves: at the beginning, middle, and end of the 2000 decade, at approximately 3-year intervals. The findings reported in this article are based on first- and second-wave survey data.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Information about the Making Connections initiative and details about the surveys can be found at <http://www.aecf.org/MajorInitiatives/MakingConnections.aspx>. Also see <http://mcstudy.norc.org/>.

As of the 2000 census, the populations of the Making Connections neighborhoods averaged 40,500 per city. Three of the areas—in Hartford, Louisville, and Milwaukee—were in the extreme poverty range (rates of 40 percent or more). Four more areas—in Denver, Oakland, Providence, and San Antonio—were in the high poverty range (rates of 30 to 40 percent). The remaining three areas—in Des Moines, Indianapolis, and White Center, Washington (just south of Seattle)—were in the moderate range (15 to 30 percent), but even these neighborhoods are clearly more distressed than the average neighborhood in metropolitan America.

The 10 neighborhoods also differed from each other notably in racial and ethnic composition. The populations of all were predominantly minority, but only two (in Louisville and Milwaukee) were predominantly African American and one (in San Antonio) was predominantly Hispanic. The others were mixed. In three of the mixed neighborhoods (in Hartford, Oakland, and Providence), the foreign born comprised more than one-half of the population (by contrast with 6 percent or less in Louisville, Indianapolis, and Milwaukee).

Coulton, Theodos, and Turner (2012) analyzed in detail the data on mobility between the first two waves of Making Connections surveys. Exhibit 1 annualizes and presents overall levels of mobility from that analysis.<sup>2</sup> The data indicate that the average household mobility rate (share of households that move per year) was 24 percent over this period, but rates were quite different for different types of households: 28 percent for households with children compared with only 20 percent for childless households (a group that includes many elderly couples and singles who tend to move less frequently, on average, than younger households).

## Exhibit 1

### Household Mobility in Making Connections Sites

	Movers per Year (%)		
	Total	Households Without Children	Households With Children
Average	24	20	28
Denver	24	22	27
Des Moines	21	18	23
Hartford	27	20	30
Indianapolis	26	21	33
Louisville	31	26	40
Oakland	26	27	25
Providence	24	22	25
San Antonio	17	10	23
White Center	20	17	22
Correlation to poverty	0.60	0.23	0.64

Source: Making Connections cross-site surveys, first and second waves

<sup>2</sup> We annualized the data on moves between survey waves assuming a period of exactly 3 years. The actual periods between interviews varied modestly from that number, but those variations were not enough to affect the numbers presented here.

The correlation between mobility rates and poverty rates across sites for households with children was fairly strong (0.64); that is, it was consistent with the CPS data we noted previously showing that lower income households move more often. That correlation was not as strong, however, for childless households (0.23).

Annual mobility rates for households with children varied from a low of 22 percent in White Center to a high of 40 percent in Louisville. The Louisville rate was likely above normal in this period because of the relocation of families from about-to-be-demolished public housing in the HOPE VI Program. The next highest rate was 33 percent, in Indianapolis.

Coulton, Theodos, and Turner (2012) recognized that households decide to move for various reasons; normally, they seek a balance between the positives associated with a new home and neighborhood and the negatives associated with inadequacies they see in their current structure and/or location. Some families move of their own volition to a better place, but some are forced by circumstances to move (for example, because the loss of a job reduces their income) and might have to move to lower quality locations.

Accordingly, the authors conducted a cluster analysis to see if they could identify meaningfully different groups of movers based on characteristics that might affect their mobility decisions and the way the move might improve or worsen their residential situations. This analysis across sites led to the identification of three basic types of movers among families with children.<sup>3</sup>

- **Churning movers.** Households with very low incomes (median \$14,000), mostly renters who had not lived in their unit very long before the most recent move (median 2 years). They generally viewed their neighborhood as unsafe and not good places to raise children. They moved only short distances (median 1.7 miles), benefiting little from the moves in terms of neighborhood amenities and satisfaction. Their moves were most often in response to financial stress or problems with their rental housing arrangements.
- **Nearby attached movers.** Households, also with low incomes (median \$15,000) and moving very short distances (median 1.1 miles), that had lived in their homes much longer before the move (median 7.5 years) and were more likely to be homeowners before moving. They were more involved in neighborhood activities before the move, and the indications are that the moves were because of life-cycle factors rather than a desire to leave their old house or neighborhood. In general, they had positive views of their neighborhood and their new unit after the move.
- **Up-and-out movers.** Households with much higher incomes (median \$28,000) who had not lived in their old house very long (median 3 years) and were the most dissatisfied with their original Making Connections neighborhood. They moved by far the longest distances (median 5.8 miles) and were more satisfied and optimistic about their new neighborhoods, where lower shares of the population were low income and minority and where home prices were high and increasing.

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<sup>3</sup> Appendix C of Coulton, Theodos, and Turner (2009) explains the details of the cluster analysis. The cluster analysis for movers could be conducted only for households with children since only they were tracked and interviewed in the second survey wave.

On an annual basis, 8 percent of families with children made up-and-out moves, 7 percent made nearby attached moves, and 13 percent made churning moves (exhibit 2). Therefore, the up-and-out movers, the only group that normally moves to locations a long distance from the original neighborhood, accounted for only 30 percent of the total moves.

Two groups that typically moved within or near their original neighborhood accounted for the remaining 70 percent. The nature of the moves for these two groups was strikingly different, however. Nearby attached moves (25 percent) appeared to be fairly positive and normal adjustments within the neighborhood; for example, people moving because they want a larger or better apartment. Churning movers (45 percent), however, in general, were negative about their moves. For them, the circumstances suggested mobility caused by vulnerability rather than the seeking of some positive result.

The variations across sites in the shares that made up-and-out moves were not strongly correlated with site poverty rates. As one might expect, correlations with poverty were stronger for the nearby attached and the churning movers.

## Exhibit 2

### Types of Moves, by Households With Children

	Movers per Year (%)			
	All Moves	Up-and-Out	Nearby Attached	Churning
Average	28	8	7	13
Denver	27	10	5	12
Des Moines	23	9	5	9
Hartford	30	9	8	13
Indianapolis	33	10	8	15
Louisville	40	12	11	16
Oakland	25	9	4	12
Providence	25	7	6	12
San Antonio	23	4	7	11
White Center	22	5	5	12
Correlation to poverty	0.64	0.43	0.70	0.53

Source: Making Connections cross-site surveys, first and second waves

## The Challenge of Residential Instability

Although we do not have information on the move histories for the churning movers, given what we know about them, the term *residential instability* would seem to fit their situations. That condition certainly appears problematic. Cunningham, Harwood, and Hall (2009:1) noted a “growing body of evidence showing that residential instability (for example, frequent moves, doubling up, homelessness) is associated with poor academic outcomes among children” and reviewed that literature. In another literature review, Cohen and Wardrip (2011:4) stated that “Hyper-mobility can present special challenges to children’s well-being, both through direct effects on children (for example, the disruption of being uprooted, the difficulty of catching up with classmates at school) and as mediated through their parents (for example, the parents’ preoccupation with the move and the forces behind it could reduce their ability to be supportive to their children).”

Previous research has associated residential instability with a number of negative outcomes, such as educational problems, including low reading scores and low school completion rates. Explanatory factors include disruptions in instruction, excessive absenteeism, and disruption of peer networks (Hango, 2006; Kerbow, Azcoita, and Bell, 1996; Pribesh and Downey, 1999; Rafferty, Shinn, and Weitzman, 2004; Rhodes, 2005; Rumberger, 2003; Tucker, Marx, and Long, 1998).

Other studies have associated it with disruptions in access to healthcare services and other, broader physical and mental health problems (Jelleyman and Spencer, 2008; Pettit, Kingsley, and Coulton, 2003). A host of other negative outcomes range from behavioral problems in adolescence to longer term effects, have also been documented (Hagan, MacMillan, and Wheaton, 1996; Jelleyman and Spencer, 2008; McCoy-Roth, Mackintosh, and Murphey, 2012; Moore, Vandivere, and Ehrle, 2000; Pettit, 2004).

All these factors create stress for the child in what is likely to be an increasingly troubling family environment, and stress itself has negative effects on physical and mental health. One or two moves for a young child, particularly when they result in a better neighborhood, can of course be beneficial. In addition, Hendershot (1989) showed that the right kind of parental support can reduce the negative consequences of high mobility. The evidence overall, however, suggests that reducing family residential instability and hypermobility for children is a policy objective worth seeking.<sup>4</sup>

Two facts about churning movers are important in considering how best to address this issue. First, churning movers were not concentrated in only one or two Making Connections neighborhoods but, rather, were significant in all of them (ranging from 9 percent of all households per year in Des Moines to 16 percent in Louisville). Therefore, residential instability is almost certain to represent a nontrivial issue in all neighborhoods likely to be candidates for community-improvement programs.

Second, although nearly all have low incomes, churning movers appear varied in terms of their probable need for services and support. To demonstrate this point, we compare the representation of families across the different categories of Making Connections mover groups, in terms of their degree of vulnerability, along the following continuum.

- **Most vulnerable.** Low-income households (incomes below 200 percent of the poverty threshold) in which no adult had a full-time job at the time of either the first or the second survey wave (a sign that they are likely to have severe or multiple problems that reduce their capacity).
- **Other vulnerable.** Low-income households in which one or more of the following barriers pertained: (1) the survey respondent lacked a high school degree, (2) the respondent had a permanent disability, or (3) any of the children in the household had poor health or a disability.

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<sup>4</sup> Murphey, Bandy, and Moore (2012) examined outcome indicators for children in the 2007 National Survey of Children's Health who were younger than age 6 and had moved five or more times since birth. They found that "frequent mobility by itself was associated with few effects once other child/family characteristics were taken into account" (Murphey, Bandy, and Moore, 2012: 4). They said that frequent mobility might be a marker for other characteristics (for example, poverty and single-parenthood) that might be the main drivers of bad outcomes for children. This finding suggests that the problems we have been discussing will not be fixed only by reducing hypermobility, but it does not suggest that reducing hypermobility (in conjunction with other forms of family strengthening) does not remain a valid objective. Frequent moves under pressure still create stress for all family members.

- **Other low-income.** Low-income households that do not meet the criteria for the most vulnerable or other vulnerable categories.
- **Higher income.** Households with incomes greater than 200 percent of the poverty threshold.

Exhibit 3 shows distributions of the survey sample across sites and across these groups and categories of movers. Two findings are important. First, household types vary considerably within each of these categories; we find nontrivial numbers of households in each of these groups in every column. Second, however, the distributions are markedly different from each other. The fact that the most vulnerable families account for a notably larger share of churning movers than of any other category is most relevant to this discussion. The most vulnerable and other vulnerable households together account for 46 percent of churning movers compared with 39 percent of all households.

Although we cannot be precise about the numbers, this finding suggests that churning movers are indeed likely to include many *multiproblem families*—families who might require fairly intensive services for a long period of time to become stable. Still, more than one-half of churning movers are in the less troubled categories whose needs for service and support to overcome residential instability might be more modest.

Of interest is that the most vulnerable and other vulnerable groups together also account for a large share (45 percent) of nearby attached movers, but a smaller share (30 percent) of up-and-out movers. By contrast, higher income households account for 29 percent of up-and-out movers but only 8 percent of churning movers. This suggests that, although trying to retain some community ties to up-and-out movers in their new locations may well be worthwhile, their ongoing service needs may be considerably less extensive, on average, than those of the other groups.

### Exhibit 3

Mover Clusters by Vulnerability and Income Status, as of First Wave

2002/03 Status	All Households	Movers (annual)			
		Total	Up-and-Out	Nearby Attached	Churning
All households	100	28	8	7	13
Low-income (< 200% of poverty)					
Most vulnerable	13	15	6	22	18
Other vulnerable	26	25	24	23	28
Other low-income	40	44	42	42	46
Total low-income	80	84	71	86	92
Higher income (> 200% of poverty)	20	16	29	14	8
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Source: Making Connections cross-site surveys, first and second waves

## Residential Mobility Overall—How Should Policymakers Respond?

The complex picture of residential mobility that the Making Connections data paint calls for new ways of thinking about policy. Seeking responses that attempt simply to either expand or diminish mobility overall now seems inappropriate. Distinctly different types of mobility—good and bad—exist, and policymakers should tailor responses to fit the circumstances of each type. In the following review, we note what appear to be appropriate directions for policy in each case, and then, in the rest of the article, we explore policy options for addressing the most troubling case: the residential instability of churning movers.

### Up-and-Out Moves and Nearby Attached Moves

Two types of moves that Coulton, Theodos, and Turner (2012) identified appear largely positive for the families involved. Most up-and-out movers moved to new homes in new neighborhoods, presumably meeting one or more of a number of possible personal objectives; for example, to be near to a new job, to enable their children to attend a better school, or to become homeowners in a neighborhood with higher and rising property values. Nearby attached movers did not move to new neighborhoods, but they found a new housing unit nearby that they felt would be a better fit for them. Both groups, in general, were happy with the results of their moves regarding both housing and neighborhood characteristics.

Is policy intervention related to such movement needed? Perhaps not, in general, but a case exists that, for low-income households, supportive counseling would facilitate positive mobility. The type of counseling that would be relevant would offer advice on how to make sensible choices about mobility options and how to deal effectively with actors in the real estate market. Counseling to help renters who want to become homeowners is well established, but many renters could probably use guidance in navigating the process of moving from one rental unit to another. In both situations, practitioners advocate offering this sort of guidance in conjunction with broader counseling on family financial management and asset building.

Would such counseling expand the share of residents who move to lower poverty neighborhoods; that is, those who make up-and-out moves to what are now often termed *opportunity neighborhoods*? The answer no doubt depends on what the counseling includes. Many living in low-income neighborhoods might limit their choice to neighborhoods with which they are familiar unless provided with exposure to a wider range of places. Cunningham and Sawyer (2005) studied the mobility of households that relocated with housing vouchers as part of Chicago's massive public housing demolition program in the early 2000s. This program offered search assistance and connected interested voucher holders with landlords in low-poverty neighborhoods. The authors found that program enrollees who received mobility services were "significantly more likely to move to opportunity neighborhoods" (Cunningham and Sawyer, 2005:6. They also suggested, however, that much remains to be learned about what makes mobility counseling programs effective.

Considerable debate has surrounded *mobility* versus *neighborhood improvement* approaches to dealing with the problems of concentrated poverty, and this article is not the place to review them



fully.<sup>5</sup> This debate widely recognizes that barriers to full mobility because of racial discrimination and other factors remain enormous and that reducing those barriers must remain a high priority for policy. Consistent with that objective, we find it difficult to fault the idea of providing counseling to help residents of low-income neighborhoods become more informed about the mobility opportunities open to them with a reasonable assessment of their costs and benefits.

## **Churning Moves**

Because of the damage it can do in the short term, however, the other type of mobility we have discussed—the churning move—seems an important case for policy intervention, and we explore that type more fully here. The main purpose of the remainder of this article is to identify and review programmatic approaches to diminishing residential instability and its harmful effects.

First, however, it is necessary to discuss the most obvious solution and why it alone is not sufficient at this point. For the residentially unstable, clearly, the main barrier to securing decent housing on a stable basis is insufficient income. Means-tested programs that offer to pay rent directly, or supplement income to enable the family to do so, are therefore central to the results of all of these efforts. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) housing vouchers, for example, have proven effective at preventing homelessness and rapidly restoring housing to those who do experience homelessness (Khadduri, 2008).

The problem, however, is that HUD assistance programs are woefully underfunded in relation to the need. As of 2005, only 5.5 million (31 percent) of the 18.0 million eligible households with housing problems nationwide actually received HUD assistance (Turner and Kingsley, 2008). The economic recession and housing crisis that have occurred since then have been accompanied by a further reduction in the housing stock available and affordable to the lowest income groups (HUD, 2011), and housing assistance budgets are now tightly constrained. In fact, concerns exist that future budgets for housing assistance might not be sufficient to support as many households as they do now (Rice and Sard, 2012). Although continued pressure to increase the national housing assistance budget is clearly important, it is difficult to be optimistic about much expansion in the near term.

What is the appropriate policy response in this environment? Looking for approaches to helping residentially unstable families that are designed to use available assistance resources (HUD and other) with as much efficiency as possible appears to make sense. A scan of the types of social service and community building programs that now operate in American cities suggested that two areas seem promising in this regard and warranted further exploration in the last two major sections of this article:

- **Homelessness prevention services for families.** Virtually the only programs in the social service sphere whose mandate relates directly to residential instability are those concerned with homelessness. In this section, we note how this field has evolved. As it has shifted emphasis to homelessness prevention, it has prioritized finding more efficient and effective

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<sup>5</sup> Recognition is growing of the benefits of seeing these approaches as complementary rather than in opposition (see, for example, Pastor and Turner, 2010).

forms of service delivery. These forms recognize the importance of varying the nature and level of service to match families' circumstances and seem highly relevant to this inquiry. Although directly comparable descriptive data are not available, what is known about homeless and near-homeless families suggests strong similarities to the churning mover populations in Making Connections neighborhoods (Culhane et al., 2007; Shinn et al., 1998).

- **Community networks: strengthening families and links to service.** Citywide organizations are likely to continue taking on the central roles in homelessness prevention and related services. Such agencies, however, often have a harder time meaningfully connecting with low-income families than do grassroots neighborhood organizations. We focus on one community approach—network organizing—that seems a particularly promising adjunct to city systems in addressing residential instability.

In the next two sections, we review relevant activity in these two areas and consider how to learn more about them to better harness their potential.

## Addressing the Needs of Churning Movers Through Homelessness Prevention Services

To help understand the strategies and programmatic approaches emerging in this area, we begin by briefly reviewing the history of how America's response to homelessness has evolved over the past few decades.

### Initial Responses to Homelessness

For some time after the problem of homelessness emerged and spread in U.S. cities in the 1980s, responses focused on serving those who had lost their housing by expanding emergency shelter capacity, then transitional housing. Most homeless then were adult males, many with chronic problems (for example, substance abuse and mental illness).

The view was widespread that people who experienced homelessness needed to overcome their personal problems before they were ready for permanent housing. Accordingly, many shelter systems were organized in a *continuum of care* approach that, as Culhane, Metraux, and Byrne (2011: 301) noted, “re-creates community based services systems inside the homelessness system, and often functions to extend people’s homeless spells through service rich transitional housing;” programs that can extend periods of homelessness for up to 2 years.

Although single men were dominant among the homeless at the outset, residentially unstable families with children (the group that is the central concern of this article) are now a sizeable and expanding part of the total. In 2008, 30 percent of all people using homeless shelters were members of homeless families (474,000 individuals, approximately 300,000 of whom were children, according to HUD, 2008).

Most who enter the shelter system stay for only a short time, but some subgroups remain for considerably longer periods. Nationwide, the median length of stay for single adults is 18 days. The median is longer for families (30 days), but even most of their stays are quite short; 23 percent leave within 1 week, 76 percent leave within 3 months (Cunningham, 2009; HUD, 2008).

This system grew significantly over the years. HUD (2008) reported that 1.6 million people used homeless shelters in a 1-year period, that 211,000 emergency shelter beds existed nationwide, and that an equal number of beds existed in transitional housing facilities.

Still, as early as the late-1990s, criticisms of this system arose. Shelters were often stressful places to stay even for a short time, and the whole system was expensive. As noted previously, the transitional housing that developed as a part of the homeless system incorporated housing management activities and social services that duplicated other mainstream systems operating in most communities, and, as such, reasonable concerns arose about comparative costs. Interest grew in the idea that preventing homelessness among large groups in this population in the first place might be both far less painful and more cost effective.

Furthermore, University of Pennsylvania research sharply contradicted the view that the homeless were not ready for permanent housing. This research showed that a small subgroup of about 10 percent of single, homeless adults with serious personal problems used 50 percent of shelter services and that the cost of instead providing permanent supportive housing to them initially would be more than offset by savings in public services thereafter (for example, reduced emergency room visits, mental health services, and jail stays; see Culhane, Metraux, and Hadley, 2002; Kuhn and Culhane, 1998). For this population, therefore, preventing homelessness might not be possible, but dealing with it in a much more cost-effective manner by providing permanent housing first does appear possible.

Homeless families are less likely to suffer from the personal and social barriers that affect so many unaccompanied single adults (Burt and Cohen, 1989), but, while perhaps not yielding the same cost-effectiveness advantage, the housing first approach is being widely advocated for them as well, hopefully avoiding longer term entanglement with the shelter system.

### **Addressing Degrees of Residential Instability Through Preventive Services**

In general, homelessness prevention aims to divert households that are either homeless or at risk of homelessness from the shelter system and to expedite rapid exit from that system for those already in it. As early as 2000, the National Alliance to End Homelessness put forward a plan that recognized these themes (Cunningham, 2009). Burt, Pearson, and Montgomery (2005) then developed a comprehensive framing of the approach, emphasizing both efficiency and effectiveness (also see the discussion in Culhane, Metraux, and Byrne, 2011). They suggested the following three levels of prevention.

- **Primary.** Preventing new cases of homelessness and stopping people from ever becoming homeless.
- **Secondary.** Intervening early during the first spell of homelessness to help people leave homelessness and not return.
- **Tertiary.** Providing services to assist those with serious barriers; those who without help would probably remain homeless for a long period of time.

This approach would seem to fit the data on the variety of circumstances among churning movers presented previously. At one end of the spectrum are households with multiple problems that are likely to require considerable support (housing and services) to become stable. At the other end are people with more capacity, whose residential instability, we can reasonably assume, might have been triggered by one-time problems that are probably easier to fix at a lower cost.

Primary prevention efforts to reduce residential churning have been under way in a number of cities for some time (see Burt, Pearson, and Montgomery, 2005; Cunningham, 2009; Shinn, Baumohl, and Hopper, 2001). Approaches include—

- **Mediation with current housing providers.** In some cases, residential stability might be promoted and homelessness avoided at very low cost simply by having an independent party help by talking things over with the landlord or family with whom the at-risk household has been staying and modifying some aspect of their arrangements (at least to secure additional time). One local group that provides this type of service is the Eastside Housing Opportunity Program in St. Paul (Mohr and Mueller, 2008).
- **Cash assistance to cover rent or mortgage arrears.** When mediation alone is unable to do so, a comparatively small amount of one-time cash assistance might cover deficiencies in the near term and avoid evictions; that is, for households that do not need sizeable income support over the long term.
- **Legal services to prevent evictions.** Programs that offer mediation in housing courts after landlords have filed for eviction have also been able to promote residential stability and preserve tenancy. For example, Burt, Pearson, and Montgomery (2007) reported that as a result of such mediation services, 69 percent of the cases filed against families in the Hennepin County, Minnesota housing court were settled without eviction, and the family retained housing.
- **Discharge planning and programs to ameliorate domestic conflicts.** Former prisoners released back into the community and youths aging out of foster care face higher-than-average risk of residential instability leading to homelessness. Domestic conflicts in the family environment also heighten the risk. Programs to identify individuals and families in these situations early, then provide counseling and help in finding affordable housing, could presumably reduce incidence.

It turns out, however, that reliably identifying households that will become homeless ahead of time is much more difficult than might be thought. Of the residentially unstable households that have characteristics that make them seem to be at high risk of homelessness, a very large share somehow manage to avoid it. Thus, providing assistance to all families in a defined risk group would result in spending more than is needed to avoid homelessness. Using data on characteristics and case histories of homeless families in New York, Shinn et al. (1989) defined what seemed to be a reasonable high-risk group and found that serving that group would imply providing assistance to six households for every one that ultimately became homeless.

One response to this problem would be waiting to assist only those who have actually become homeless (see the discussion of secondary treatment in the following paragraph) or those who exhibit clear indications that homelessness is imminent (for example, receiving an eviction notice).

By no means has any study demonstrated, however, that efforts to identify and deal with likely residential instability at an earlier stage cannot be made more effectively. The goal is not only to avoid homelessness but also to put families on a path that leads to self-sufficiency (stability in a broader sense) over time. Doing that would require considerable strengthening of outreach and referral networks. This strengthening could entail beefing up the 311 systems that now exist in many cities and making homelessness prevention a greater priority for established referral networks (for example, churches and community nonprofits) that attempt to connect those in need to appropriate services. It would then require highly efficient targeting of prevention resources. (We discuss the way community networks might help with both referrals and strengthening families directly in the next section.)

Secondary treatment, in a prevention context, emphasizes getting families who appear at the door of the shelter system back into stable housing outside of that system as rapidly as possible. *Rapid rehousing* has in fact become an accepted programmatic theme in many systems nationwide. This approach uses techniques identified previously: negotiating and providing modest cash assistance as needed to enable the family to return on a stable basis to the apartment they have just left. Alternatively, it can mean referrals and help in securing other housing opportunities in the private market (often with subsidies) or in publicly subsidized projects.

The field increasingly recognizes the need for some type of up-front diagnostic function; that is, some way to assess the nature and severity of a family's particular needs and circumstances as a basis for guiding them to an appropriate mix of housing opportunities, services, and supports.<sup>6</sup> Because so many shelter users leave after only a night or two, systems often wait a few days before administering interviews. Regular staff might be able to make these assessments for the more capable among the residentially unstable, but trained case managers will usually be needed to work out a realistic course for the more distressed, multiproblem families.

A prevention approach triggers tertiary treatment in a very different way than in the past. In traditional shelter systems, lengthy stays in the shelter were often the key indicator that initiated a more intensive service regime for a multiproblem individual or family. In the new approach, staff conduct a diagnosis (discussed previously) early, hopefully leading not only to rapid rehousing, but to rapid rehousing linked to a sensible mix of services designed to promote residential stability by addressing the households' specific needs. Housing professionals often assume that the right solution for most multiproblem cases is an apartment in a *supportive housing* development (decent housing with needed services provided on site). The Chicago Family Case Management Demonstration, however, has shown that in many cases the approach can work as well for families with vouchers living in independent apartments with services brought to the property from outside (Popkin et al., 2010; Theodos et al., 2011).

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<sup>6</sup> Theodos et al. (2011) identify and review a number of formal assessment tools that have been developed to try to help practitioners perform this function more effectively and reliably.

## Assessing Directions for Promoting Residential Stability Through Homelessness Prevention Services

Although progress has been uneven, movement away from a shelter-dominated homelessness system and toward a more prevention-oriented approach to promoting residential stability is now evident in a number of cities. Important support for this orientation has come at the federal level. First, HUD's 2008 appropriation included a \$25 million demonstration of the Rapid Re-housing for Families Program. Then, the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act allocated \$1.5 billion for a new Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-housing Program (HPRP) that aims both to prevent individuals and families from becoming homeless and to move those that are already homeless into permanent housing on a stable basis as rapidly as possible. Furthermore, a 2009 reauthorization made important changes to the McKinney-Vento Act in support of prevention; among other things, changing the name of the Emergency Shelter Grants to the Emergency Solutions Grant Program, with more emphasis on prevention and rapid rehousing (as Culhane, Metraux, and Byrne, 2011, have explained).

Very little hard information is yet available on how this shift is working in practice, so this article cannot assess the progress. Substantial new information will likely be available over the coming year, however, as two major federally funded research efforts reach completion. First, Abt Associates is conducting a \$1.25 million evaluation of the Rapid Re-housing for Families Program, involving all 23 grantees in the demonstration. Second, the Urban Institute is conducting the Homelessness Prevention Study, which began in 2010 and entails, among other things, site research on HPRP implementation in 17 communities.

In addition, an evaluation is nearing completion of what is probably the most extensive local implementation of the prevention approach to date: the HomeBase initiative in New York City. HomeBase operates through a network of eight community service providers in designated high-need areas throughout the city. The providers offer an array of prevention-oriented services to households at risk of homelessness, including benefits advocacy, mediation, employment assistance, legal referrals, and financial assistance. The evaluation involved the monitoring of outcomes for approximately 400 eligible households that HomeBase randomly assigned to treatment and control groups.

Also keep in mind that the trend toward prevention could motivate broader systems changes beyond what these initial studies will show. Culhane, Metraux, and Byrne, (2011), in fact, saw the evolution of ideas about a prevention approach leading to a dramatic transformation in the way the United States addresses residential instability and homelessness. This transformation would entail streamlining and revising the operating philosophies of many shelter systems, including the elimination of duplicative services and other functions the shelters now perform that mainstream social service and human development agencies should ideally handle better. Culhane, Metraux, and Byrne, recognize, however, that this transformation will require challenging expansions of capacity and changes of approach for many of those mainstream agencies as well. Trying to fund this vision via federal homelessness subsidies alone would clearly be inappropriate; rather, the mainstream agencies' funds would need to expand to cover the costs of ongoing housing and services for needy

individuals whom the homelessness system hands off to them. Addressing these issues successfully will be difficult unless the nation expands resources targeted at these issues, but this vision seems to suggest a way to more effectively use the resources that are available.

## Community-Based Approaches To Promoting Residential Stability

The previous section addressed an emerging approach to homelessness prevention that would make addressing residential instability one task of an expanded and better integrated social and human development services delivery system. Although the existing literature is not fully clear about which institutions should take on which tasks, it seems to assume central roles for the public bureaucracies (and the nonprofits that work for them) traditionally assigned those responsibilities. In most cities, however, observers know those systems to be strained financially and in other ways. Many factors that have traditionally inhibited integration—factors that perpetuate *silos* have not yet been eliminated.

In this environment, exploring the roles that grassroots neighborhood organizations might play in addressing the mobility issues we have discussed also seems worthwhile. These organizations would not serve as an alternative to the citywide systems but in a collaborative mode, taking on some tasks that might be difficult for public systems to perform and assisting on others in a manner that would enhance overall effectiveness.

Observers often consider community-level groups better suited than public bureaucracies for tasks like strengthening social networks and building social capital in neighborhoods, and these activities might be critical. Many among the churning movers are likely to be socially isolated families who lack confidence, have few trusted friends to help them, and do not know how to access the services they need and opportunity more broadly. Prospects for effectively addressing residential instability might be quite different in a neighborhood where social networks are strong than in one where they are not.

Accordingly, this section first focuses on one advanced approach to achieving these goals: network organizing. We then look at more specific tasks that neighborhood-level groups might take on to address residential mobility issues in this context.

### Lawrence CommunityWorks: A Case Study in Strengthening Informal and Formal Supports for Families at Risk of Residential Instability

The term *community organizing* is most often associated with developing resident leadership and other activities focused on achieving political ends. *Network organizing*, by contrast, gives more priority to basic interpersonal relationships and strengthening family capacity. It refers to the “process of getting involved” and argues that “community building has to build habits of engagement to replace deeply embedded habits of detachment that dominate place” (Traynor, 2008:10).

The work of a Lawrence, Massachusetts community development corporation, Lawrence CommunityWorks (LCW), is an example of this approach. LCW began in an early-1980s struggle to

build affordable housing in the North Common area of Lawrence. LCW's mission is to (1) foster individual and neighborhood empowerment and leadership by organizing residents to develop politically, economically, and socially; (2) produce and preserve safe, decent, and affordable housing for low- and moderate-income families; (3) create programs and facilities that build the educational and economic assets of neighborhood young people, adults, and families; and (4) build a sustained institutional infrastructure for community revitalization through strategic local, regional, and national partnerships.

Since 2000, developing and implementing the principles of network organizing in its community, functioning as a *membership network*, has been one area of focus for LCW. A basic premise of LCW network organizing is that all members have value and assets to contribute, and all members have needs that the activities and programs in the LCW network meet. Participating residents are not treated as clients; they are members who at times gain knowledge and skills and at other times provide mutual assistance to other members, volunteer, or take up a leadership position within the network. As a membership organization, LCW is designed to increase the formal and informal social supports available to participating residents by increasing the flow of information, the opportunity, and the connections that families have with each other. Network organizing, as LCW practices it, focuses on creating the space and opportunity for formal and informal engagement and interaction among member residents (what LCW calls “bumping and sparking”) and building the habits, devices, skills, and awareness that enable members to take constructive action based on the connections they make and knowledge they gain through that “bumping and sparking.”

One strategy for strengthening social networks practiced by LCW is “NeighborCircles,” in which “LCW-trained facilitators convene a group of neighbors in a given area for a series of dinner discussions focused on getting to know each other, identifying common challenges, ... and developing discrete, manageable projects for tackling those challenges” (Traynor and Andors, 2005:5). LCW has assisted more than 500 families using this approach. Another strategy is to house many concurrent activities for people with varied needs and interests in a common space. Most LCW networking functions are based in a former mill building subdivided to house a variety of concurrent activities; for example, a meeting to talk about a proposed zoning change, a sewing club, a Scholastic Assessment Test preparation class for teens, a seminar on managing personal finances, a session to plan a neighborhood cleanup campaign, a job-training course, and so on. The premise is that people engaged in one activity will develop an interest in other activities being offered and get to know a broad range of their neighbors in the process (Traynor and Andors, 2005).

LCW intends its network development strategies to endow members with the connections necessary to give and receive the kind of formal and informal help that enables families to thrive and averts the kinds of crises that can precipitate severe social and economic problems, including residential churning. An added value of these strategies is that LCW designs them to build members' skills and habits to participate in—or recreate—the network environment, even if they choose or are forced to relocate.

LCW has not attempted to establish a full array of programmatic responses to deal directly with the issue of residential instability, but it has put a number of the basic mechanisms in place. The network-organizing approach is designed so that, when confronted with a crisis that might force



them to move—a loss of income (temporary or long term) that prevents them from honoring their lease obligations, a health emergency, an impending eviction for any reason, and so on—LCW member families have the diverse and trusted connections that can enable them to find advice and help. The network can provide some kinds of help directly. Alternatively, friends and staff in the network know who to contact for outside assistance if that is what is required.

### **Specific Community-Based Activities To Address Residential Instability**

LCW is one of a number of neighborhood-level organizations that provide services that might assist residentially unstable families. Based on a review of such work, a list of six activities that community-based groups could take on to more directly address this issue follows. In general, we recognize that the core staff that operate community initiatives in individual neighborhoods are already stretched thin. Nonetheless, large numbers of churning moves are costly to projects that aim to promote stability. Some efforts to reduce the number of moves are likely to prove cost effective.

- **Establish or broaden outreach.** Community groups are likely able to strengthen outreach related to residential instability at a fairly low cost. This activity entails only mounting effective methods to make neighborhood residents aware of the problem and the right people or organizations to contact for further assistance. The organization leading a community-improvement initiative would communicate with residents directly through its own channels (meetings, newsletters, and so on), but it would also engage other neighborhood organizations in the outreach process. Putting schools on the lookout for signs of impending or actual homelessness among their students and having them inform the community organization, so referrals can be handled appropriately, is especially important.
- **Establish or strengthen referral functions.** The most basic approach would be for the lead community organization (after the referral has been made) to proactively link families about to lose their homes to mediators in citywide homelessness prevention systems (services ranging from mediation in pending evictions to help in applying for assisted housing, as discussed previously).

Depending on the initiative, however, this work might be handled internally; that is, one or more internal community staff members might be trained in how to mediate these cases and, in addition to making referrals, handle some direct work themselves. This approach could work easily in an environment like LCW, where residents recognize the existence of trusted channels through which they can talk about problems and get help. Some other existing neighborhood programs already emphasize housing stability in this way. As noted, the Eastside Housing Opportunity Program in St. Paul is one example (Mohr and Mueller, 2008).

- **Establish or strengthen workforce development, financial management, and housing and mobility counseling.** LCW has recognized the potential power of colocating these functions in the recent work of its Family Asset Building department in establishing a Homeownership Center. Others are following similar paths. The Annie E. Casey Foundation has pioneered the development of Centers for Working Families in a number of cities. This approach involves “bundling access to a full range of essential economic supports in a convenient location” (Center for Working Families, 2010:3). The services these centers offer include workforce and career

development; income and work supports; and counseling on financial services, family financial management, and asset building. The services aim to be “seamlessly integrated” so as to more effectively support family economic success overall (Center for Working Families, 2010). The Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) has adopted this approach (now calling them “Financial Opportunity Centers”) and operates 32 of them in Chicago and other cities that are a part of its Building Sustainable Communities initiative (LISC, 2010; <http://www.lisc.org/section/ourwork/sc>). Adding services specifically related to addressing residential instability seems a natural fit, particularly given the importance of housing expenses to families’ financial well-being.

- **Provide affordable housing in the community, with some earmarked for residentially unstable families.** Virtually all comprehensive community initiatives already have programs to expand the supply of affordable housing in their neighborhoods. LCW’s efforts in this regard have been extensive. This function involves expanding housing first options within the community. In this effort, staff might set aside, as vacancies permit, a prescribed number of units in the developments they build or rehabilitate for churning movers from the neighborhood. An example of a community-based program that focuses on providing housing units for the homeless, or near homeless, in an individual neighborhood in this manner is Project H.O.M.E. in Philadelphia (<http://www.projecthome.org/about>).
- **Maintain links and services to outmovers.** As noted, LCW encourages members who move out of the community to remain in the network by keeping them informed about network activities, inviting them to network convenings, and so on. Benefits exist in both directions. The outmovers can continue to contribute ideas, leadership, contacts, and other types of support to the network, and the network is still there for them if they have problems down the line. Other community organizations would do well to adopt this philosophy. Plans to assist more vulnerable residents who might be forced to move outside the community warrant special attention. Efforts might well be needed in these cases to craft handoffs from a set of service providers in the old neighborhood to a new set in the new one.
- **Collaborate with and become stronger advocates for the reform and strengthening of the relevant citywide programs.** Residents of low-income neighborhoods depend on a host of social, human development, and homelessness prevention services that citywide agencies and nonprofits operate. The leaders of individual neighborhood initiatives cannot be expected to deliver such services themselves, yet a significant number of the residents of their communities are likely to require them. For many, these services are key to the reduction of residential instability. Considering their own objectives, community initiatives will likely find it much in their interests to partner with these agencies, facilitate their work in the community, and advocate for actions that will strengthen them overall.

## **Assessing Directions in Community-Based Approaches To Promoting Residential Stability**

Neighborhood improvement initiatives are now under way in many U.S. cities, at probably the most extensive scale in our history (Kubisch et al., 2010). A substantial share of these efforts rely

on some form of community organizing, and the LCW network organizing approach, although still rare, has been initiated in several other locations.<sup>7</sup> Its attractive features lead us to expect its application will spread.

Regardless of the form of organizing, however, our review of the recent literature on community initiatives yielded almost no explicit recognition of the problem of residential instability, let alone plans to address it.<sup>8</sup> This article has presented data, however, suggesting that the problem is likely to be serious in all low-income neighborhoods and pointed out a number of ways grassroots groups could help deal with it, consistent with their missions and without major effects on workloads. Organizations (national and local) responsible for community initiatives should consider adding this issue to their agendas explicitly and to begin experimenting with actions such as we have outlined to diminish residential instability and its effects in their neighborhoods. Foundations should provide funding to national community development intermediaries (such as LISC or Enterprise Community Partners) to document these activities and their results.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the research community has made little progress in formally evaluating programs, like LCW's network organizing, that attempt to strengthen social networks in low-income communities. The reason is that such programs are enormously difficult to evaluate reliably, because they are hardly ever precisely enough defined or controlled in implementation, making it extraordinarily difficult to conduct a randomized trial (see the discussion in Connel et al., 1995). Despite the difficulty, we believe that more empiricism would pay off handsomely at this point.

For LCW, one might survey a random sample of Lawrence residents and compare the circumstances of those who are LCW members with those with similar characteristics who are not. A step down from that would be surveying a random sample of LCW members only, asking in some depth about their experiences with LCW.

## **Conclusion**

The research reviewed in this article presents a view of the dynamics of low-income neighborhoods that contrasts with the conventional wisdom. To be sure, overall mobility rates are ubiquitously high. The implications are mixed, however. One group, those who actually move a long distance, is fairly small. A second group moves for mostly natural reasons (for example, they need a bigger house), but its members often have positive ties to their original neighborhood and choose to move nearby.

A third group, however, represents a more urgent concern. The members of this group also move to locations in or near their original neighborhoods, but most are moving under pressure. They are

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<sup>7</sup> LCW has a Network Organizing Department (NOD) that is responsible for increasing the practice-based learning around network-centric approaches both internally and with community organizations elsewhere. The NOD has so far engaged in training, technical assistance, documentation assistance, and learning exchanges with organizations in two cities—Cleveland and Seattle—and two states—Maryland and Mississippi.

<sup>8</sup> One prominent exception is Project H.O.M.E. in Philadelphia, cited previously (<http://www.projecthome.org/about>). That more is being done along these lines than has been documented is, of course, quite possible.

the churning movers who lack the income or capacity to secure decent housing in a stable manner on their own. Stress and disruption related to their moves are likely to have negative effects on the education and health of their children.

Across social service programs, new approaches being implemented in the name of homelessness prevention, although they warrant more evaluation, seem promisingly effective in addressing this sort of residential instability. These efforts try to catch problems early and assign levels and types of interventions that match the nature and extent of the problems at hand, family by family.

A number of steps also appear to be available to those who operate community initiatives that could help restore residential stability for families in this group. Fortifying social networks within the community (as illustrated by the network-organizing model) seems especially valuable. Doing so would both directly build the capacities of the most vulnerable families and facilitate their connection to needed supports. Other steps more specifically involve supportive actions by the internal staff, actions that seem consistent with the themes of comprehensive community improvement. Others involve forming closer working ties to, and advocating for more support for, citywide programs in homelessness prevention and related services. Again, however, these steps warrant more testing and evaluation.

Some practitioners have viewed residential mobility in distressed neighborhoods as a serious overall threat to community building. This research suggests that it does not have to be. Local stakeholders (citywide and at the community level), however, do need to make explicit efforts to address harmful effects that can occur.

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