

Commentary

These comments relate to the articles in this Cityscape symposium by Basolo, by Skobba and Goetz, and by Oakley, Ruel, and Reid.

False Assumptions About Poverty Dispersal Policies

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The notion of the dispersal of poverty was in some ways an argument about the power of place. Some neighborhoods were places lacking social and economic opportunity. The people in such neighborhoods lived in concentrated poverty. If the problem was poverty concentration, then the answer must be dispersal. As Victoria Basolo (this symposium in *Cityscape*) points out, the policy world came to this answer in the early 1990s with little evidence that dispersal would really reduce poverty for people. At the time, the struggle to understand the causes of poverty was in earnest, as Basolo summarizes, “These arguments concerning the causes of poverty were not merely academic, because the persistence of poverty was a social problem without an effective policy.” Concerns about poor places arose concurrently, especially concerns regarding what to do about dilapidated public housing (National Commission on Severely Distressed Public Housing, 1992).

If poverty reduction for people were our only goal, then we could say that, in fact, poverty dispersal policies such as HOPE VI (or Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere), the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) demonstration, or even the Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCVP) have not been successful in that arena—most studies show that people involved in these programs do not become more economically secure (see the review by Basolo in this symposium). By definition, however, moving people out of public housing and rebuilding it as mixed-income housing does have a poverty reducing impact on place. Policy success in for poor places has occurred, perhaps, at the expense of policy success for poor people.

Nonetheless, policy goals have created and perpetuated a logic model for these programs as reducers of individual and family poverty that rests on four false assumptions that are necessary for success.

1. Moving always creates upward mobility and improves neighborhoods.
2. People living in poverty make housing decisions in a hierarchical manner that considers neighborhood before other concerns.
3. When given a choice, people living in assisted housing will choose to move away from familiar neighborhoods.

4. When given a choice, people living in assisted housing will all understand opportunity the same way, behave in the same way, and make “opportunity” moves.

The three articles that this commentary addresses tear down the assumptions of this program model. Taken together, the articles suggest that our goals are, at best, misguided and, at worst, negligent.

Basolo demonstrates that HCVP moves do not necessarily improve neighborhoods for these families. Although movers nominally did move to places with slightly lower poverty (less than a 1-percent reduction) and did improve the quality of schools for their children, both changes were too minor to indicate noticeable improvements in quality. In short, on average, and controlling for other factors, movers’ neighborhoods are no different from those who do not move, movers are no more likely to be employed, and the schools that movers’ children attend are no better than those of nonmovers’ children. Thus, Basolo concludes, moving did not improve things—or not in any way that we can observe from afar. The already relatively low poverty rates in the areas studied are likely responsible for the lack of neighborhood improvement. The average poverty level in the areas studied was 14.7 percent, much less than the usual 20.0-and-less rate for a low-poverty neighborhood. The study points out that moves are not going to automatically improve neighborhood quality if poverty is already fairly low. In addition, simply moving is not going to overcome the history of racial residential inequality that has produced neighborhood differentials in school quality and employment. These issues are all larger structural issues that are not directly influenced by a move alone. As MTO results suggest, a move with counseling can help move people to what the policy considers better neighborhoods (Briggs, Popkin, & Goering, 2010). The outcomes the policy cares about are not proximate to moving, however. For example, expecting a move—in the absence of a job change—to produce better employment outcomes is a flawed program model. Moves do not always create upward mobility, negating the first of the four assumptions.

From the outside looking in, as Basolo points out, we do not know how families are making decisions. They are meeting their own needs, which are unknown. Kimberly Skobba and Edward G. Goetz suggest these preferences concern relationships rather than place. In fact, previous research suggests what Skobba and Goetz point out: poor families move for reasons having nothing to do with neighborhoods or many of the concerns that policy puts at the forefront. Although some moves that poor households make can be “upward,” resulting in improvements in family circumstances, such as better opportunities for children, less household stress, and increased safety (Buerkle & Christenson, 1999), these households often face involuntary, “forced” moves—such as those moves that occur because of public housing redevelopment, eviction, or foreclosure (Goetz, 2003; Pettit, Comey, & Grosz, 2011)—or they make “coping” moves that are dictated by other negative circumstances beyond their control (Buerkle & Christenson, 1999; Kearns & Smith, 1994; Skelton, 2002). Severely disadvantaged households can experience a combination of economic disadvantage, restricted social and financial opportunities, and general social isolation, and they may live in contexts that are socially and financially unreliable and unpredictable (Steele & Sherman, 1999). Without the ingredients that produce the much more secure lives enjoyed by the relatively wealthy (access to childcare, health care, stable employment, and housing), poor households face a constant series of complex dilemmas and must respond nimbly to shifts in stability and economic shocks. Briggs, Popkin, and Goering (2010: 86) suggested that moves in the MTO program are “moves to security”; that is, the vouchers used in the dispersal program were used to ameliorate

the stresses of their experiences with housing. Skobba and Goetz are eloquent in their reminder of these dynamics. Given these considerations, why would we create a policy based on moving that does not concurrently address the extreme stress and housing instability of households living in poverty? Families are not making decisions in a hierarchical manner that considers neighborhood first, voiding the second assumption. Nor are they considering opportunity as policy conceives it when they move, suggesting the fourth assumption is also false.

The research here also causes some question for the third assumption, the idea that people who are poor or live in assisted housing all think about moves in the same way. The motivation for dispersal programs' intervening in the move process is that if households are not moving to neighborhoods with better opportunities, then something in the process must be preventing higher opportunity moves—a lack of information, a lack of resources, or a lack of transportation. Deirdre Oakley, Erin Ruel, and Lesley Reid suggest that the relocation process is about not only information but also the challenges families and individuals face depending on their personal situations. For people with differing challenges—disabilities, financial strain, or being elderly—relocation can have varied meanings and different outcomes. The differential results along a series of factors bear this reality out. Those who lived in family projects compared with senior projects said they had an easier time with relocation. The longer respondents lived in public housing, the more difficult it was to relocate, but they still had an easier time than those who lived in senior projects—and these differences are large. If a respondent lived in family housing, she was 1.6 times more likely to have easy relocation. For a family housing resident, each additional year in public housing was associated with being 2.4 times more likely to say she had an easy move. If the respondent lived in family housing and had no friends in public housing, she was 3.3 times more likely to have an easy time compared with those who reside in senior housing.

Underlying these observations is that seniors are among the hardest individuals to house, which is not unusual for assisted housing. Furthermore, these results may understate the stress for seniors because the 24 deaths between surveys are not reflected in the results—there is no real way to account for an increased death rate among seniors because of relocation. Nonetheless, the third assumption—that people in assisted housing all behave the same way—is clearly refuted.

In some ways, setting up these assumptions and refuting them is a red herring. It is not unknown in policy circles that the world does not work according to these four assumptions. Nonetheless, the policy continues with the underlying assumption that somehow moving will address problems of structural inequality. Providing choice or opportunities to move will not reduce poverty without concerted attention to overcoming the forces that reproduce inequality; without such supports, policy is putting the burden of changing the very structure of inequality in our society on the backs of the very poor. In a world where inequality is growing, those at the bottom can have very little power to stop structural inequality from perpetuating itself. The lack of positive outcomes suggests that the real issues are structural: the quality of schools that poor children attend, the quality of work, the quality of neighborhoods poor people live in, and the central city-to-outer suburban divide.

What is the purpose of assisted housing policy? A more proximate outcome might be the provision of stable, safe, and affordable housing. Recent thinking considers housing as a platform for other services (see, for example, the Urban Institute's Housing Opportunity and Services Together demonstration program [Popkin et al., 2012]); MDRC's Jobs Plus evaluation, dating from 1999,

included service saturation focused on employment within public housing communities (MDRC, n.d.). If the goal is to improve the schools that poor children attend, then service programs that focus on either schools or getting children connected to good schools would be more effective. Better jobs occur not by relocating but rather by using wraparound services to connect adults with sustainable education programs integrated with the workforce system. With the economy not producing many moderate-paying jobs, targeted efforts are necessary.

Since the 1960s, U.S. housing policy concerning poverty dispersal has been central to creating a diverse and equitable society (Goetz, 2003). The most recent vintage, dating from the early 1990s, has failed to actually reduce family poverty because it is based on a set of false assumptions, thereby producing a lack of attention to the factors that will produce the outcomes desired. Even with appropriate attention (and resources), one could argue that the sorts of skills needed to make these efforts work are not usually found among public housing agencies, which are traditionally dedicated to providing housing rather than human and social services (Kleit & Page, 2012). Although place does matter, attention to place alone is not enough. To make the dream of addressing family poverty a reality, we need to invest in policies based on theories of change, first, that recognize the diversity and fragility of the population concerned; second, wherein the outcomes desired actually can directly result from the program's efforts; and third, that directly and simultaneously deter the reproduction of structural inequality.

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