

Social Disparities in Residential Mobility and Children's Outcomes in Early and Middle Childhood.

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Introduction and aim of the study

Studies of residential mobility over the life course have documented that individuals tend to be more mobile when they have young children. These moves are often motivated by the need of larger housing or the desire to raise children in more suitable local areas. At the same time, however, increasingly unstable employment careers and rising rates of couples' instability have also become important triggers of residential mobility for parents with young children.

Given the high rate of residential mobility of families with young children, and the importance of early life experiences for later outcomes, it is crucial to understand the implications of moving home for children development. Recent studies framed within the ecological perspective of human development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) emphasise the importance of multiple social contexts (family, peers, school, neighbourhood) for children development and view residential moves as disruptive events that can trigger (or result from) other changes in children's lives (Anderson et al 2014; Coley and Kull 2016; Fomby and Molborn 2017; Molborn et al 2018). Such '*ecological*' instability has the potential to shape children outcomes. A large body of research has shown that children who stay in the same home tend to have better behavioural and emotional health and educational achievement than their more mobile counterparts (Jelleyman and Spencer 2008; Leventhal and Newman 2010; Ziol Guest and Mc Kenna 2014). However, a dichotomization of mobility experiences (movers versus non-movers) may have limited power to detect associations between mobility and child functioning, suggesting the importance of approaches that take into account the frequency, the timing and the motivations of residential moves, as well as their interactions with shifts in other life contexts. Further, not all moves and families are equal. Whereas more advantaged families will often make intentional moves to better housing or to gain access to better local services, more disadvantaged families are more at risk of unplanned moves and of a deterioration of their life contexts. Families might also differ in the (social, financial and emotional) resources they have to cope with the stress associated with a move and with the repercussions it can have on their children.

This study contributes to knowledge by investigating the relationship between residential mobility and children outcomes using longitudinal data collected throughout early and middle childhood. It takes a developmental approach and investigates the relationship separately across the two developmental stages, while also recognizing the cumulative effects of early childhood experiences on middle childhood outcomes. It acknowledges that not all moves are equal and distinguishes them *a)* based on self-reported reasons for moving; and *b)* based on changes in housing and local areas characteristics between the start and end of each developmental period. Lastly, it accounts for social disparities between movers and non-movers; and within movers, in the frequency, timing and type of their moves. And it explores whether the relationship between residential mobility and children's outcomes vary depending on parents' social background.

Data and methods

The study uses data from Growing Up in Scotland, a longitudinal study following the lives of children born in Scotland in 2004-05 and focuses on their experiences up to age 10. Specifically, it observes patterns of residential mobility between Sweep 1 (Age 10 months) and Sweep 5 (Age 5), and then between Sweep 5 and Sweep 8 (Age 10). The core explanatory variables distinguish children according to whether and how many times they have moved within each of these two periods, thus accounting for both frequency and timing of moves. Another specification of the explanatory variable takes into account the reason for moving, focusing in particular on education-related moves, and moves due to changes in family structure. A further set of explanatory variables compares the characteristics of children's housing and local area of residence at the beginning and end of each period, providing measures of upward/downward residential mobility. Two separate sets of OLS regression models are used to assess the relationship between each mobility indicator and children's outcomes at the end of each period (at age 5, and then at age 10). Cognitive development is measured using the BAS test of verbal skills at age 5 and the WIAT test of listening abilities at age 10; the measure of socio-emotional and behavioural problems is based on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire at age 5 and 10. The statistical models control for a range of socio-economic and demographic variables that may confound the relationship between residential mobility and children's outcomes, and account for both selection and interaction effects by family social background.

Preliminary findings

Moving home is a common experience among children from the GUS sample: half of them moved home at least once during the first 10 years of their lives. Preliminary findings suggest that residential mobility is negatively associated with children's cognitive outcomes, and more so with the presence of socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties. The majority of moves take place before children start primary school, although there is also a significant proportion moving home during primary school. The association between residential mobility and children's outcomes is evident in both early and middle childhood; however moving during primary school seems more detrimental for children's behaviour. Not all moves are equal. For example, moves motivated by the wish to access better schooling seem to be associated with better cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes in early childhood. Some of the observed effects can be explained by differences in the socio-economic composition of movers and non-movers. Children from more advantaged background are more likely to move only once and their move seem motivated by the desire to improve housing, neighbourhood and access to good schooling. Children from more disadvantaged background move more frequently, often to worse housing and in response to critical family events, such as parental separation.

Concluding remarks

The study sheds light on how residential moves of families with young children in Scotland vary in their frequency, timing, motives and destinations depending on parents' social background, and to what extent these differences impact on child development. The findings raise concerns for the implications of residential mobility at younger ages at a time the position of young families in the housing market has weakened (Lupton 2016) and more face the risk of downward mobility.

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