

The Nature and Consequences of Residential Mobility in Early Childhood

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Background and Significance

Although researchers have identified primarily negative consequences from residential mobility on children's outcomes in the K-12 school years, there is a paucity of published research about the incidence and consequences of residential mobility before children enter school. Yet these early years are known to have substantial impacts on children's long term success, and gaps in children's readiness for school emerge even before kindergarten (Rippeyoung, 2009; Burkham & Lee, 2002). Research has increasingly pointed to the importance of the early years for healthy cognitive, socio-emotional, behavioral, and physical development, and the brain development that occurs during early childhood provides a foundation for school readiness and success (Fox & Rutter, 2010). Yet it is unknown if and how residential stability influences this development. Specifically, we are not aware of any peer-reviewed publications that examine the relationship between housing mobility and early childhood care arrangements.¹

At the elementary and secondary school level, residential mobility is typically associated with negative outcomes such as increased rates of dropping out, antisocial behavior, decreased academic performance, and a loss of social relationships (for dropping out, see NRCIM, 2010; for academic performance, see Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004; for antisocial behavior, see Simpson & Fowler, 1994; for social relationships see Pribesh & Downey, 1999). The impacts of residential mobility may be greater for children in their youngest years; as they begin to spend more time with caregivers other than their parents (whether in home-based or center-based child care and early education programs), healthy development can depend upon building stable relationships with nonparental caregivers. A lack of residential stability during these years has the potential to disrupt the formation of supportive relationships and may hinder the ability to participate in early childhood programs.

Further, residential mobility rates are also heightened among poor families nationally. Families in poverty were more than twice as likely as families who earn at least 150% of poverty to have moved within the last year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). School mobility, which is often but not always caused by residential mobility, is also heightened among poor students; whereas 25 percent of all Texas elementary school students who never qualified for a subsidized lunch moved schools once over a three year period, 40 percent of those who ever qualified for a subsidized lunch did (Hanushek, Kain, & Rivkin, 2004).

Using longitudinal survey data collected from families of a nationally representative sample of children born in 2001, this paper examines the incidence and nature of residential moves in early childhood. We examine the frequency, timing, and distance (inter- vs. intra-neighborhood). We test whether residential moves are associated with the type, quality, and stability of early care and education children receive. Unlike K-12 public schools, early childhood learning providers are not obligated to admit mid-year movers, resulting in potentially longer interruptions of care for young children. We test the hypothesis that repeated mobility, in particular, disrupts the type and continuity of care provision, with potentially negative consequences for young children's behavioral and academic outcomes as they enter kindergarten. We also test for conditional relationship between mobility and housing type (owner-occupied, government

¹ Ziol-Guest and McKenna (2009) have published a working paper in which they examine residential mobility during early childhood and school readiness using Fragile Families data, but the analysis poses methodological concerns which we attempt to address using ECLS-B data.

subsidized rental, or unsubsidized rental), with the hypothesis that subsidized renters are less likely to move than their subsidized counterparts with similar incomes. Finally, controlling for family characteristics and children's lagged performance measures, we test whether residential moves in early childhood affect children's cognitive, social, emotional, or physical development.

Data

To examine these questions, we use restricted-use data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), a longitudinal survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) that began with a nationally representative sample of 14,000 children born in 2001. Data on the children and their families have been collected at regular intervals and data are currently available for the interviews at 9 months (2001-02), 2 years (2003-04), 4 years (2005-06), and at kindergarten entry (either fall 2006 or fall of 2007). At each interview, data was collected from the child's parent(s) about various aspects of family background and parent activities, as well as their child's development. In addition, information was collected from children's child care providers and teachers about the child's development and direct assessments were also performed for children's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Starting with the interview at age 2, information was collected on the quality of the home- or center-based care setting for children in regular nonparental care.

Most important for our purposes, the ECLS-B collected information about residential mobility. In three waves of parental interviews (2003-2004, 2005-2006, and either 2006 or 2007), ECLS-B interviewers collected information about whether the family moved since the last survey, how many times the family moved, and how long the family has lived in the current neighborhood. Interviewers also collected information about parents' perceptions of their neighborhood and the number of relatives in the area. These questions allow us to distinguish inter- from intra-neighborhood moves as well as the frequency and timing of moves for children.

Methods

We first conduct a descriptive analysis to examine the number, timing, and characteristics of moves among families in the ECLS-B. We answer how prevalent were residential moves during children's early years in 2001-2006, how common were moves at different stages (during infancy, the toddler period, or the preschool years), and what types of moves were made in terms of distance, repetition, or changes in neighborhood features (as perceived by parents). Moving beyond aggregate statistics, we examine whether these features differ by the income bracket of parents, by primary language, family structure, immigrant status, and by housing tenure type. These results allow us to compare whether mobility patterns during early childhood differ from published mobility patterns for children during their K-12 years.

We next examine how the use of non-parental early care and education arrangements varies with patterns of residential mobility. We consider the care setting (e.g., home- and center-based care arrangements), the type of care giver (e.g., relative, child care center, Head Start, other preschool program), and the quality of the care setting (based on the observed quality measures). Our hypothesis is that more mobile families are less likely to rely on formal center-based programs such as child care centers, Head Start, or preschool programs which may be less likely to accept mid-year movers. We also expect more mobile families to rely on lower quality care arrangements, even within a given setting. High mobility may also reduce access to subsidized programs for qualifying low-income families. We consider whether any bivariate relationships between care arrangements and mobility can be explained by observed child or family characteristics.

Finally, we employ a regression framework to examine how the incidence, number, or timing of moves affect various dimensions of child development, including children's academic and behavioral readiness for kindergarten. Depending on the year of data used, the models control for a rich set of family background characteristics, children's own prior developmental measures, or child fixed effects along with time-varying child characteristics. Although these analyses do not definitively identify causal impacts of residential mobility, the extensive controls available in ECLS-B enable us to provide suggestive findings about the impacts of residential moves on children's early outcomes that can form the basis for follow-on research.

One of the challenges inherent to examining residential mobility is that movers have a higher likelihood of dropping out from a longitudinal sample due to the challenges of tracking their moves. To address this data issue, we also report the extent of sample attrition and how it varies with child and family characteristics that are associated with high mobility. We then explore approaches to reweighting the data to account for such attrition using a richer set of observed background characteristics than would be incorporated into the panel weights provided with later waves of the ECLS-B.

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