

Examining the mental health effects of a housing mobility program by vulnerable subgroups: who may benefit, and who may not, from moves to low-poverty neighborhoods?

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Abstract.

It is an important scientific and policy-relevant question whether certain types of families are better able to benefit from moves to better neighborhoods via housing mobility policies. We therefore tested for subgroup treatment effect differences on psychological distress in the Moving to Opportunity program, a social experiment randomizing low-income families to receive a section 8 voucher to move to low-poverty neighborhoods. We tested effect modification of treatment with mental health among adolescents by household baseline variables, including health/disability, violent-crime victims, and socioeconomic status. We found that female and male adolescents in families with baseline health/developmental problems, and recent victims of violent crime, did not experience beneficial effects of the MTO program (for girls), and experienced harmful effects of the program (for boys). Yet youth from nonvulnerable families experienced beneficial (for girls) or null (for boys) treatment effects. Therefore, in addition to the strong gender effect modification ($p=.001$), household health/victimization status also significantly modified treatment effects ($p<.05$). Socioeconomic status did not significantly modify treatment effects. These results may inform programmatic changes to housing-mobility programs, to offset subgroup vulnerabilities.

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(150 PAA word limit)