



Student mobility and school dropout [☆]

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Abstract

Although several studies have linked adolescent residential and school mobility to an increased risk of dropping out of school, the reasons for this association have not been examined thoroughly. Using data from approximately 8500 respondents to the first two waves of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (*Add Health*), we explore the ability of several domains of adolescent life—parent–child relationships, peer networks, academic performance, school attachment, and psychological well-being—to account for the higher rate of school dropout among mobile than non-mobile adolescents. Characteristics of adolescents' peer networks, particularly students' centrality in those networks and the academic performance of their friends, emerge as the most important mediators of the mobility-dropout association. We also find an increased risk of dropping out among both

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mobile and non-mobile students attending schools with high rates of student mobility, which appears partially attributable to lower levels of school attachment and weaker academic performance in high-mobility schools.

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1. Introduction

Perhaps no single event in the adolescent life course more strongly determines later social and economic success than dropping out of school (Jencks et al., 1972; Winship and Korenman, 1999). Among the many risk factors for educational failure in U.S. secondary schools are frequent residential mobility and the school changes that often accompany those geographic relocations (Kerbow, 1996). Although some of the differences in educational performance between mobile and non-mobile children are a function of preexisting differences such as race/ethnicity, family socioeconomic status, and family structure (Alexander et al., 1996; Pettit and McLanahan, 2003), a growing body of research reports significant negative effects of student mobility (i.e., changing schools) on a range of compromised educational outcomes, including diminished academic performance (Ingersoll et al., 1989), high rates of school dropout (Astone and McLanahan, 1994; Crowder and South, 2003; McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Straits, 1987; Swanson and Schneider, 1999; Teachman et al., 1996), and ultimately lower levels of educational attainment during young adulthood (Hagan et al., 1996; Haveman et al., 1991). The detrimental impact of mobility extends to more general emotional and behavioral problems both in and out of school (DeWit, 1998; Pittman and Bowen, 1994; Simpson and Fowler, 1994; Tucker et al., 1998; Wood et al., 1993). In a somewhat similar fashion, research also shows that changing schools is often associated with reduced academic performance and school completion, social competence, and self-esteem (Rumberger and Larson, 1998; Seidman et al., 1996; Simmons et al., 1991).

Drawing on two waves of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (*Add Health*), this analysis examines the effects of student mobility on the risk of dropping out of school. We go beyond prior work in this area in two main ways. First, we attempt to identify some of the characteristics and behaviors that explain why mobile students are more likely than non-mobile students to drop out of school. We consider several categories of potentially mediating factors that tap students' relationships with their parents, their schools, and their peers. Second, we examine whether the level of mobility in the school as a whole (i.e., the percentage of students who are relatively new to their school) influences dropout risks, even among non-mobile students. While such "contextual" effects of student mobility have been posited (Entwisle et al., 1997; Lash and Kirkpatrick, 1990), studies of the effect of school-level characteristics (e.g., student–teacher ratios, average levels of student achievement, racial and socioeconomic composition) on dropout propensities have generally ignored the possible impact of school-level mobility (McNeal, 1997; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger and Thomas, 2000).

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