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## Coming and going: Explaining the effects of residential and school mobility on adolescent delinquency

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### ABSTRACT

Over the past half century, a large body of theoretical and empirical work in sociology and other social sciences has emphasized the negative consequences of mobility for human development in general, and youth outcomes in particular. In criminology, decades of research have documented a link between residential mobility and crime at both the macro and micro levels. At the micro level, mobility is associated with delinquency, substance use, and other deviant behaviors among adolescents. However, it is possible that the relationship between mobility and delinquency may be due to selection on pre-existing differences between mobile and non-mobile youth in their propensity for delinquency, and prior studies have not adequately addressed this issue. Specifically, the families that are most likely to move are also the most disadvantaged and may be characterized by dynamics and processes that are conducive to the development of delinquency and problem behavior in their children. This study uses data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 to assess the impact of residential and school mobility between the ages of 12 and 17 on delinquency and substance use. Random effects models control for selection on both observed and unobserved differences. Results show that mobility and delinquency are indeed spuriously related. Implications for future research on mobility and outcomes are discussed.

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Residential mobility and its consequences for human development have captured the attention of social scientists for more than a half century. However, opinions have cycled about whether residential mobility has positive or negative implications for the life course. While residential mobility had been historically considered a natural consequence of social mobility and increased economic opportunity (Kopf, 1977), by the early 20th century, mobility was seen as indicative of a character flaw—the inability to maintain social relationships in one's community. Research on social ecology in Chicago prompted concerns that residential transience was contributing to problems of urban decay, as studies noted associations between residential mobility and mental hospital admissions, juvenile delinquency, and crime in city neighborhoods (Faris and Dunham, 1939; Henry and Short, 1954; Shaw and McKay, 1942). With government funding aimed at “curing mobility”, Peter Rossi carried out a groundbreaking study in Philadelphia that overturned that common belief that mobile families are “pathological” and suggested that families move instead because of changing needs at different points in the life cycle, which lead to a need for “housing adjustment” (Rossi, 1955). Rossi showed that people moved to bigger homes and better neighborhoods as part of the broad pattern of upward economic mobility in the post World War II era. This was consistent with

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Blau and Duncan's (1967) idea that a dimension of social mobility is social "motility": residential mobility can be seen as a status attainment strategy on the part of parents to enhance their life chances and those of their children by acquiring better housing and social contexts such as communities and schools.

However, as Hagan et al. (1996) note, the structural and cultural changes that accompanied the 1970s ushered in a renewed concern about the *harmful* effects of moving—especially for children. While earlier work suggested that moves reflected moving "up" the socioeconomic ladder, demographic research on family transitions began to show that mobility rates are also higher among children of divorced families or stepfamilies (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Speare et al., 1975) and scholars began to widely document the effects of family instability and divorce on the outcomes of children (Amato, 2000; Morrison and Coiro, 1999; Wu, 1996; Wu and Martinson, 1993). Around the same time, in his seminal paper on social capital theory, Coleman (1988b) suggested that geographic mobility was a strong predictor of high school dropout because moving broke the ties that provided intergenerational closure. Parallel developments in criminology during those years had also been documenting links between residential mobility and crime and delinquency at the individual and community levels (Crutchfield et al., 1982). Unsurprisingly, these compelling research traditions led to an explosion of empirical work on residential mobility and child and youth outcomes from the late 1980s through the present. Most of the attention has focused on how moving affects important aspects of youth development, especially problem behaviors like high school dropout, delinquency, drug use, suicide, violence, and social adjustment. Almost all of this work shows negative associations between residential mobility and youth outcomes (Adam and Chase-Lansdale, 2002; Astone and McLanahan, 1994; DeWit, 1998; Haynie and South, 2005; Hoffmann and Johnson, 1998; Wood et al., 1993).

However, most of this research has also been limited in several ways. First, most studies have only measured the consequences of residential mobility and not also the consequences of *school* changes that may occur when a family moves (or school changes that may occur independent of a residential change). It is possible that school changes are more closely related to changes in adolescent behavior than moving houses, given that youth have to adjust to new teachers, peers and curricular expectations, all of which are likely to affect an adolescent's emotional, social, and cognitive worlds (Kerbow, 1996; Rumberger and Larson, 1998). Second, most research has worked under the assumption that mobility is uniformly *bad* for young people, and has rarely considered whether it is not moving (or switching schools) per se that leads to negative educational or behavioral outcomes, but rather the *underlying reasons why the mobility occurred in the first place*.

This second limitation is the most serious because it calls into question the theoretical and empirical consensus in the literature that mobility is harmful to youth. Since youth do not move randomly, there may be important differences between mobile and non-mobile youth which account for the observed relationship between mobility and academic and behavioral outcomes. In other words, youth who move frequently come from families who are different from the families of non-mobile youth, and those underlying differences might explain the deleterious effects of mobility commonly found in the literature. For example, the motivations for moving, such as divorce, job change, or eviction, might represent family dynamics that are important for youth development. These might include the quality of parental relationships, caregiver mental health, families' ability to manage resources, or other characteristics related to family stability. Whether adolescents transition successfully into a new neighborhood or school depends in part on their relationships with parents and other family transitions (Crowder and Teachman, 2004; Hagan et al., 1996).

Therefore, youth who move may already be performing worse academically, less involved in school activities, at a higher risk of dropping out, and more involved in a variety of delinquent and problem behaviors. In fact, delinquency may even be a cause rather than a consequence of school mobility, as schools use zero tolerance policies to "push out" students with a history of suspensions and disciplinary problems. In these cases, any observed relationship between mobility and delinquency may be spurious rather than the causal effect of moving. We believe that prior research has not done an adequate job of examining whether mobile youth are selected into both mobility and problem behaviors. We are not the first, however, to raise the possibility that important selection effects may be driving the association between mobility and youth outcomes. Astone and McLanahan (1994) note that residential mobility may be a proxy for unobserved variables, such as personal instability, which may account for the observed association of mobility with educational outcomes. Pribesh and Downey (1999) found that preexisting differences accounted for 90% of the difference in test scores between movers and non-movers. From this, they conclude that "Movers perform less well in school than non-movers in large part because the *kinds of families* that tend to move are also likely to have other disadvantages" (531).

In this paper, we examine the relationship between residential and school mobility and youth outcomes that have received a great deal of attention in the criminology and life course literature: delinquent behaviors and substance use. Using seven waves from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), we examine whether residential and school mobility have criminogenic effects, or whether both mobility and delinquency are related to unobserved pre-move differences in family and individual risk factors. We accomplish this in two ways. First, we include a wide array of controls designed to capture preexisting demographic, academic, and behavioral differences between mobile and non-mobile youth that might also be related to delinquency and problem behavior. Second, recognizing that the family dynamics and processes or personal characteristics that might lead to mobility and delinquency are difficult or impossible to measure, we employ panel data models that control for unmeasured selectivity. We believe that this strategy represents a more rigorous attempt to adjudicate between causal and selection hypotheses about the effects of mobility than we have seen in previous work.

Understanding whether residential mobility or family and individual differences triggers adolescent delinquency is significant. On the one hand, parents often decide to move in an effort to improve family conditions, especially if a job opportunity arises. However, if such mobility leads to significant problem behavior in their children, parents might want to

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