

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Social Science Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ssresearch

Reconsidering residential mobility: Differential effects on child wellbeing by race and ethnicity

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 11 January 2016

Received in revised form 7 September 2016

Accepted 29 September 2016

Available online xxx

Keywords:

Residential mobility

Child wellbeing

First difference models

Race/ethnicity

ABSTRACT

Residential mobility is a common experience among Americans, especially children. Most previous research finds residential mobility has negative effects on children's educational attainment, delinquency, substance abuse, and physical and mental health. Previous research, however, does not fully explore whether the effect of mobility differs by child race/ethnicity, in part because many of the samples used for these studies were majority white or exclusively non-white or disadvantaged. In addition, previous research rarely fully accounts for factors that predict selection into mobility and that may also be related to the outcome of interest. This study simultaneously addresses both of these limitations by estimating the effect of moving homes on children's emotional and behavioral wellbeing using first difference models and a diverse longitudinal sample from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods. I find that, after controlling for a wide range of individual, caregiver, household and neighborhood characteristics, the effects of moving among African American and Latino children are significantly worse than among white children.

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1. Introduction

Residential mobility is a common experience among Americans. Between 2012 and 2013 approximately 12 percent of the population moved homes (Ihrke, 2014). Scholars have long sought to determine how residential mobility might affect the development and wellbeing of children and adolescents, investigating outcomes such as educational attainment, delinquency, substance abuse, and physical and mental health (Gasper et al., 2010; Hagan et al., 1996; Haveman et al., 1991; Jelleyman and Spencer, 2008; Raviv et al., 1990). Yet studies of the effects of residential mobility on child outcomes have not sufficiently determined whether the effect of moving differs based on characteristics of children, specifically their race and ethnicity. Further, previous research generally does not fully account for underlying characteristics of children and families that may be related to both moving and child outcomes.

In this study, I address both of these limitations while examining the effect of residential mobility on children's emotional and behavioral wellbeing, specifically internalizing behavior and aggression. I use longitudinal data to account for background characteristics and I consider whether certain groups of children are more or less susceptible to the negative effects of a move. My analyses use first difference models to generate estimates of the effects of moving on children's emotional wellbeing and behaviors accounting for time-invariant individual and household characteristics often not controlled in previous research. Previous research establishes an association between residential mobility and emotional and behavioral problems (Gilman

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2016.09.024>

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Please cite this article in press as: Perkins, K.L., Reconsidering residential mobility: Differential effects on child wellbeing by race and ethnicity, Social Science Research (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2016.09.024>

et al., 2003; Jelleyman and Spencer, 2008; Simpson and Fowler, 1994) and experiencing these problems in childhood is linked to longer-term mental health (Rubin et al., 2009). A reassessment of the effect of residential mobility on children's emotional and behavioral wellbeing considering differential effects by race and ethnicity and controlling for additional background characteristics, this study advances our knowledge on the important topic of residential mobility and aims to reconcile conflicting findings from previous research.

Moving is a fundamental social process and one of increasing importance in social science research. A recent study estimating the effect of neighborhood context on individual outcomes demonstrates the benefits that can result from certain types of moves: children who move with their parents to areas with relatively higher levels of intergenerational mobility have better outcomes than if they remained in areas with lower levels of intergenerational mobility (Chetty and Hendren, 2015). This study shows evidence of causal effects of neighborhoods, emphasizes the importance of exposure time to contextual conditions, and discusses heterogeneity by gender and parent income. The study uses moving, however, as its identification strategy for estimating neighborhood effects, so it cannot disentangle disruptions associated with the move from the effects of the changed context in which children live. Moving from a disadvantaged environment to a relatively more advantaged environment may lead to better outcomes for children, but at what cost? It is important to assess whether moves themselves are disruptive, especially for children with other disadvantages; if they are, a child who moves may not garner the benefits that a more advantaged environment could provide.

I examine the effect of residential mobility itself, accounting for individual and family characteristics and neighborhood context, on children's emotional wellbeing and behaviors. I respond to previous research that finds a negative association between residential mobility and child outcomes by employing a fixed effects specification and showing that net of neighborhood characteristics, African American and Latino children are significantly worse off after a move compared to white children. I find no evidence of a negative effect of residential mobility on aggression and internalizing behavior among white children, while I find a significant negative effect of residential mobility on child wellbeing among African American and Latino children. My analytic strategy reduces my concern about omitted variable bias possibly present compared to previous research on residential mobility that uses cross-sectional data. Ultimately, my results provide evidence that the negative effect of residential mobility on child and adolescent emotional and behavioral problems is less definitive and universal than previous research suggests. I use longitudinal data from the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN), a Chicago-based sample of children and adolescents with rich contextual data about the subjects' caregivers, households and neighborhoods. Using three waves of PHDCN data I fit pooled ordinary least squares (OLS) models, replicating results from prior studies, and then first difference models that reduce bias in estimating the effect of mobility compared to previous cross-sectional research. Previous work has largely based its findings on OLS regressions (e.g., Hagan et al., 1996; Ziol-Guest and McKenna, 2014) or logistic regressions (South et al., 2005) without accounting for the potential that different background characteristics or underlying factors of children and families could lead to a spurious association between residential mobility and child outcomes (a recent exception is Haelermans and De Witte, 2015). First difference models do not completely eliminate selection bias, but these analyses reduce concern about omitted variable bias by accounting for background and time-invariant characteristics related to both mobility and children's emotional and behavioral wellbeing.

2. Residential mobility and child wellbeing

Previous research indicates that there is a strong association between the number of moves a child makes and various health outcomes, including increased behavior problems, depression, and increased use of professional psychological help (Gilman et al., 2003; Jelleyman and Spencer, 2008). For example, children between ages 6 and 17 who moved three or more times in their lifetime are 2.3 times more likely to have had emotional and/or behavioral problems and 2.2 times more likely to have received professional psychological help compared to children who had never moved, controlling for demographic characteristics (Simpson and Fowler, 1994). Researchers find both positive (Sanbonmatsu et al., 2011) and negative (Jelleyman and Spencer, 2008) effects of residential mobility on adolescent mental health. This inconsistency is likely a result of the fact that the population and types of moves examined varies across studies. Experimental data from a sample of low-income children and adolescents who are moving from extremely disadvantaged neighborhoods to slightly more advantaged neighborhoods show that moving can be beneficial (Sanbonmatsu et al., 2011). The methods used to assess the effect of residential mobility also vary across studies. Cross-sectional studies are limited in their ability to make causal claims, and often do not distinguish between the effects of single and multiple moves (Jelleyman and Spencer, 2008).

Considering the association between residential mobility and emotional and behavioral health in childhood and adolescence is important as psychological research demonstrates the role of childhood and adolescent experiences as contributors to adult mental health. Individuals who experience depression as children, adolescents or young adults are more likely to have recurring depressive episodes as adults (Klein et al., 1999; Lewinsohn et al., 1994; Steffens et al., 1996). In addition, social withdrawal in childhood is linked to anxiety disorders in adolescence and adulthood (Rubin et al., 2009).

2.1. Isolating the move

The association between residential mobility and mental health outcomes that previous studies find may be confounded with other characteristics of the child's environment. And yet, previous research has largely overlooked the potential contributions of these characteristics to the association between residential mobility and mental health. Much of the previous

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