



Residential mobility and dynamic neighborhood change during the transition to adulthood



Noli Brazil^{a,*}, William A.V. Clark^b

^a Department of Human Ecology, University of California, Davis, Hart Hall, Davis, CA 95616, United States

^b Department of Geography, University of California Los Angeles, 1255 Bunche Hall, Los Angeles, CA 90024, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Residential mobility
Poverty
Neighborhood
Transition to adulthood

ABSTRACT

This article examines the neighborhood attainment outcomes of individuals transitioning out of adolescence and into adulthood. Given the dynamic nature of this period, we may expect significant upward and downward changes in young adult residential environments relative to the adolescent neighborhood. Using U.S. data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, we examined movement across matrices of neighborhood poverty and quality. While, as expected, there is stickiness on the diagonal, that is movement which extends inequality, we found large groups of young adults making upward and downward moves, particularly Hispanics. The study points to life course events related to human capital, income and household formation as important factors shaping significant movement up and down the neighborhood poverty and quality distributions.

1. Introduction

The transition from adolescence to adulthood represents the most dynamic period in the life course. It is during this period that significant life course events such as leaving the parental home, post-secondary educational attainment, full-time employment, marriage, and parenthood first occur (Bernard, Bell, & Charles-Edwards, 2014). These events either represent or coincide with important socioeconomic status developments in which individuals are accruing education, skills, assets and debts, which may induce dramatic changes in life opportunities and life course trajectories (Furstenberg, 2008). Moreover, experiences during the transition to adulthood have become more heterogeneous and less temporally ordered, partially due to the evolving educational and occupational expectations that have lengthened the transition period (Bruckner & Mayer, 2005; Shanahan 2000).

The dynamism of this period is also reflected in its high rates of residential mobility. Furthermore, it is during this period that individuals are first confronted with the task of making residential choices on their own, a decision that was governed by parents and caretakers during childhood and the teenage years. The interaction of significant life course events, the accumulation of assets and debts, high mobility rates, and the freedom to make residential decisions may lead to dramatic shifts in residential environments relative to the adolescent neighborhood. This may be particularly true for millennial young adults, who are the most open to change of any generation, which

includes interracial dating, reception to immigrants and nontraditional family arrangements (Taylor & Keeter, 2010). This open-mindedness may lead to unconventional choices in neighborhood environments.

The importance of the transition to adulthood period has not been lost on residential mobility research. Numerous studies have examined the probabilities of residential mobility, move distance, and the interaction between mobility and certain life course events during this period (Coulter, Van Ham, & Feijten, 2011; Garasky, 2002; Jang & Snyder, 2015; Warner & Sharp, 2016). However, few studies have examined young adult neighborhood attainment outcomes after residential moves, an important area of research given increasing evidence showing associations between neighborhood context, in particular movement in and out of disadvantaged environments, and individual well-being including health and socioeconomic status (Brazil & Clark, 2017; Lippert, 2016; South & Crowder, 1997; South, Crowder, & Chavez, 2005).

Prior social scientific research on neighborhood attainment in other periods of the life course has demonstrated resilient disadvantage in the neighborhood environments of poor and minority households. Specifically, studies have found that minorities are less likely than whites to move, and when they do relocate, they are less likely to transition to lower poverty neighborhoods (Sharkey, 2012; South et al., 2005). However, these studies focus on periods of the life course when residential mobility is low, lifestyle changes are less likely, and disadvantage may be more entrenched. Moreover, most studies rely on

* Corresponding author at: Department of Human Ecology, University of California, Davis, Hart Hall, Davis, CA 95616, United States.
E-mail address: nbrazil@usc.edu (N. Brazil).

average place outcomes, which are often reported as mean percent poverty or racial composition. This methodological choice hides significant movement across the neighborhood attainment distribution and combines quite different residential outcomes that potentially obscure potential dynamism in the locational attainment of young adults.

In this study, we follow a nationally representative sample of U.S. adolescents in young adulthood and track changes in their neighborhood environments after residential moves. We move away from averages and focus on significant moves up and down the neighborhood poverty and quality distributions to highlight the dynamism in residential environments that exists during this important period of demographic change. We also demonstrate the importance of life course events related to human capital, income and family formation in shaping the residential trajectories of young adults.

2. Background and previous research

2.1. *The transition to adulthood as a period of dynamic change*

Residential mobility rates in the United States outside the ages of 18 to 34 are relatively low (Benetsky, Burd, & Rapino, 2015). Households with school-aged children have lower rates of mobility because of strong attachments to place, homeownership, and a desire to minimize changes to child developmental contexts (Anderson, Leventhal, Newman, & Dup  r  , 2014; Geist & McManus, 2008; South & Crowder, 1997). The mobility of minority families is further constrained by limited socioeconomic resources, with non-mobile white children experiencing greater improvements in neighborhood socioeconomic status relative to minority children (Timberlake, 2009).

For the families that do move, several studies have documented strong consistency in their neighborhood environments. For example, Quillian (2003) found re-entries back into poor neighborhoods were common, especially among African-American, low-income, and female-headed family households. Low-income and minority families in particular are constrained in their neighborhood choices by limited resources (South & Crowder, 1998). An analysis of the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) program, a U.S. government initiative to test whether providing vouchers and special counseling improve the outcomes for households who move from inner-city neighborhoods, found no statistically significant differences in the socioeconomic and racial characteristics of mover and non-mover neighborhoods, particularly amongst African-Americans (Clark, 2005). Studies of retirees and other adult populations have found similar continuity in neighborhood environments after residential moves (Sharkey, 2008; South & Crowder, 1997).

Unlike in childhood, adolescence and older adulthood, the transition to adulthood has greater potential for non-trivial changes in the neighborhood environment because of the dynamic nature of this period. The life-course perspective offers an orienting framework for understanding this dynamism. Following the seminal works of Elder (1985, 1998), the life course is a series of interdependent pathways that individuals go through as they age. The life course transitions that characterize these pathways are not independent events, but are often intertwined, and have consequences for short- and long-term life course trajectories. Life course scholars studying the transition to adulthood emphasize the need to re-conceptualize this period from one following a linear or orderly trajectory to one with many divergent pathways conditioned on choices, constraints and unexpected events (Lei & South, 2016; Shanahan, 2000). The duration of and experiences in the transition to adulthood has become increasingly heterogeneous, as many young people now face multiple pathways in parental home leaving, educational attainment, marriage, home-ownership, and parenthood, leading to longer delays in transitioning to full adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Lei & South, 2016). This heterogeneity leads to varying speeds and intensities for socioeconomic attainment and the accrual of resources and debts. As individuals leave the parental home, attend and complete

school, get married, and have children, they accumulate education and skills for the work force, as well as financial assets and debts that extend into older adulthood.

The interaction of major life course transitions during the transition to adulthood often signify potentially radical changes in lifestyle and behavior including spending habits, risk taking, financial investment, and health behavior (Lareau & Weininger, 2008; Schulenberg & Maggs, 2002; Zaleski & Schiaffino, 2000). Moreover, the accumulation of advantages and disadvantages affects future opportunities and resources. An examination of status change during the transition to adulthood has revealed large groups of young adults experiencing significant shifts in socioeconomic status (Lui, Chung, Wallace, & Aneshensel, 2014). These significant changes include downward status moves for individuals coming from advantaged parental households and upward status moves for individuals with low income, low educational attainment parents.

Dramatic shifts in neighborhood environment may be a by-product of the dynamism occurring in the transition to adulthood period. Specifically, significant changes in neighborhood quality and poverty likely accompany the dramatic shifts in socioeconomic status documented by Lui and her colleagues and, more broadly, the lifestyle and behavioral changes and accumulation of resources and debt that characterize the period. Of the various triggers of residential mobility examined by the literature, life course transitions are amongst the strongest predictors – in other words, individuals experiencing a life course event often also migrate (Bernard et al., 2014; Clark, 2013; Lee, Oropesa, & Kanan, 1994; Rossi, 1980). Life-course transitions that accompany migration into better neighborhoods may be key signals of upward social mobility or “turning points” that provide individuals with the opportunity to alter their life course trajectories (Elder, 1998; Laub & Sampson, 1993). Alternatively, life course migrations into worse neighborhoods may indicate negative shocks that further entrench individuals in disadvantaged areas. In a study of young adults in the United States, Warner and Sharp (2016) found that certain life course events during young adulthood led to short and long-term residential stability. Individuals entering homeownership experienced immediate long-term residential stability, whereas individuals entering marriage took time to search for their ideal residential environments, which may indicate transitions into and out of different neighborhood environments before settling on a suitable dwelling. Unexpected disruptive events such as divorce and unemployment led to increased instability in both the short and long term, indicating that individuals going through these events may experience dramatic shifts in their neighborhood environments as they attempt to gain a secure foothold on their personal and financial resources (Clark, 2016).

2.2. *Life course transitions and neighborhood change*

The life course transitions that typically occur during the transition to adulthood can be broadly classified under the categories of human capital, income and household formation. The life course event that typically occurs first is entrance into either the labor market or higher education (Bernard et al., 2014). Individuals moving to attend college immediately after adolescence are often more advantaged than their non-college-going or college-going, but living-at-home peers, even after controlling for high school achievement (Hoxby & Avery, 2013; Mulder & Clark, 2002). Therefore, they are also likely to be living in higher quality neighborhoods with lower poverty rates during adolescence and thus would enter poorer areas. In contrast, individuals working directly after high school rather than pursuing a college degree often come from more socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods; thus, they may be making lateral or upward moves in neighborhood attainment.

Mobility linked to household formation may lead to shorter move distances, particularly for minorities who require family, cultural and peer resources to compensate for socioeconomic disadvantages, and thus to less change in neighborhood environments (Mulder & Cooke,

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