

**Beyond 'Free Market Choice':
Understanding Residential Mobility
from the Perspective of Low-Income
Families**

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Motivation

- Unequal sorting into social contexts
 - Unequal geography of opportunity has costs for poor families
- Mechanisms behind 'place based' stratification
- Policy Implications for Housing Programs
 - Traditional "Hard Unit" Housing Projects being demolished
 - Housing Choice Voucher Program serves 2.2 million families
- How do poor minority families respond to the low income rental market?

Potential vs. Performance

- 30% of Affordable housing is in low poverty areas
 - 26% of HCV live in these neighborhoods
- HCV are better off than PH families and poor unassisted renters, but...
 - All Renters
 - **Race differences**
 - City-suburb differences

Why Are Voucher Families Concentrated in Poor, Segregated Areas?

- Cost and Fair Market Rent Limits
 - Some low poverty areas are off limits
- Discrimination
- Preferences for social network proximity and racial composition drive neighborhood choices
- Families' choose to move & choose neighborhoods
 - Families make fully informed choices & choose from full set of known options

Talk to Families!

Low income African American parents
w/children <18

- 2009-2012 Interviews, Home visits, phone calls
- Mobile, AL and Baltimore, MD (N=140)
 - Section 8 shopping, Community meetings, Church
- Sampling on neighborhood poverty and segregation, housing type heterogeneity
 - Public Housing, Voucher Holders, Project Based, Unassisted Renters
- Institutional Context of Housing Policy
 - Program structure, practices, and incentives

Where do Voucher Holders Live?

Table 1. Neighborhood Poverty Rates by Race of Voucher Recipient, Mobile

	Voucher Holders			Center City		Suburbs	
Tract Poverty Rate	All	Black	White	Black	White	Black	White
< 10%	5.9%	4.1%	6.0%	4.9%	12.5%	1.2%	1.7%
10-20%	18.2%	15.2%	38.5%	13.4%	25.0%	21.5%	47.6%
20-30%	22.8%	23.0%	34.8%	18.5%	15.5%	38.6%	47.8%
30-40%	28.9%	31.2%	14.8%	37.0%	34.8%	10.8%	1.3%
40% or higher	24.2%	26.6%	5.8%	26.2%	12.1%	27.9%	1.6%

Note: The population of voucher holders is predominantly African American

Sources: 2007 Picture of Subsidized Households, 2005-2009 ACS

Reactive Mobility

- HUD Practices and Regulations
 - HOPEVI
 - Section 8 regulations (time limits, inspections, closed waiting lists)
 - Families are terrified about losing their vouchers
- Unit Failure
 - Fires, vermin, floods, weather
 - Section 8 and Private Units
- Landlord Practices
 - Bad upkeep, selling, 'patching' instead of fixing
- Family Instability
 - Romantic breakup
 - Domestic violence, sexual abuse, substance use

“Time was Running Out”

- Miss Jones: I had ten to fifteen days [left] to find a place from Sumac Drive, or my voucher was going to expire...I was running out of time. So the last place that I had come to was 139 Locust Avenue. And the landlord was supposedly nice, give you an opportunity to move in, less deposit, you know. But it should have been a flag. A hundred dollar deposit? Red flag. So I took him up on it because I knew I had to get somewhere; if I didn't I was going to lose out on my voucher all together.

Inspections

When you find a house, you give them the address, they'll put a hold on your voucher while they do their inspection and stuff. If it fails inspection then they'll lift your voucher again and let you go for another house, up until that timeframe runs out. My timeframe ran out and I couldn't find a house that would pass inspection.

(Really? So how many houses did you look at?)

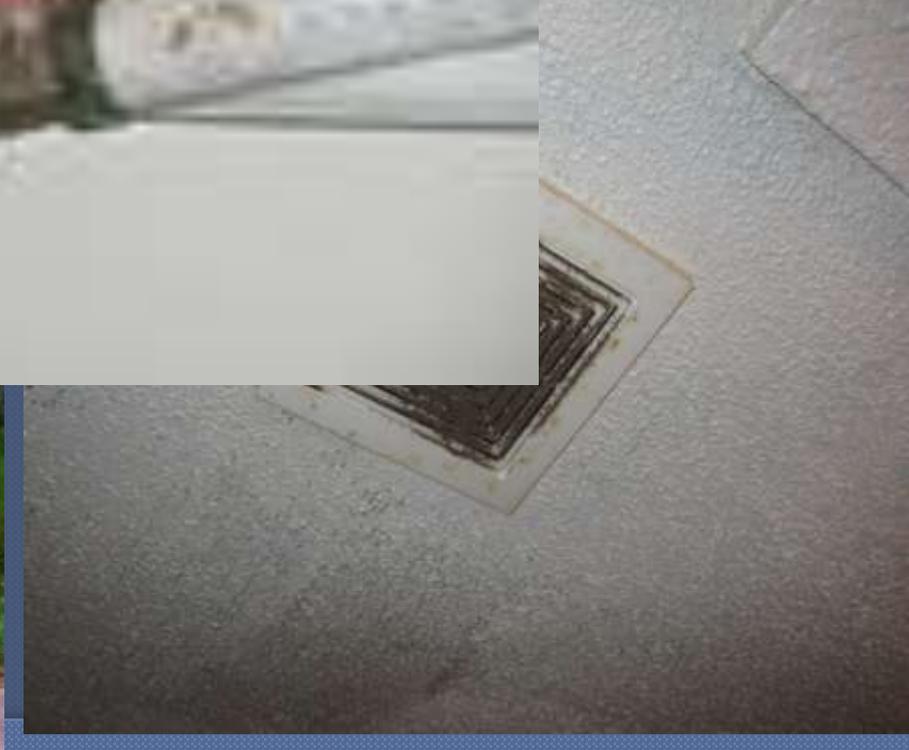
Oh, about 20...they inspected them and none of them passed for different reasons.

Reactive Moves

That house was only a six-month stay as well. Because they had to come out and re-inspect. ..Where you couldn't turn the stove all the way off. Cause if you did, the pilot would go out. Not only that, you have your bathroom, the toilets, everything just leaking around. And it just was a house that should have never passed.

(But you had to take it?)

I HAD to take it because I only had ten days left on my voucher...the landlord wouldn't come and make the repairs that he had promised...They came out and they did another inspection, and they found that it should have never passed again, and I would have to move.



Reactive Mobility Shapes Neighborhood Selection

I moved from Bass Drive to Orange Grove...And that was an okay move. It wasn't a safe move. It wasn't somewhere I wanted to be. But it was better than not being anywhere. [Better than] living on the street.

When my house caught on fire, we stayed with my girlfriend around the corner and me and her were going to the corner store and I saw the guy fixing it up.

(Was this the only unit you looked at?)

Yeah. I was so ready to get my own place again and it was nice when he fixed it up.

Using Social Networks

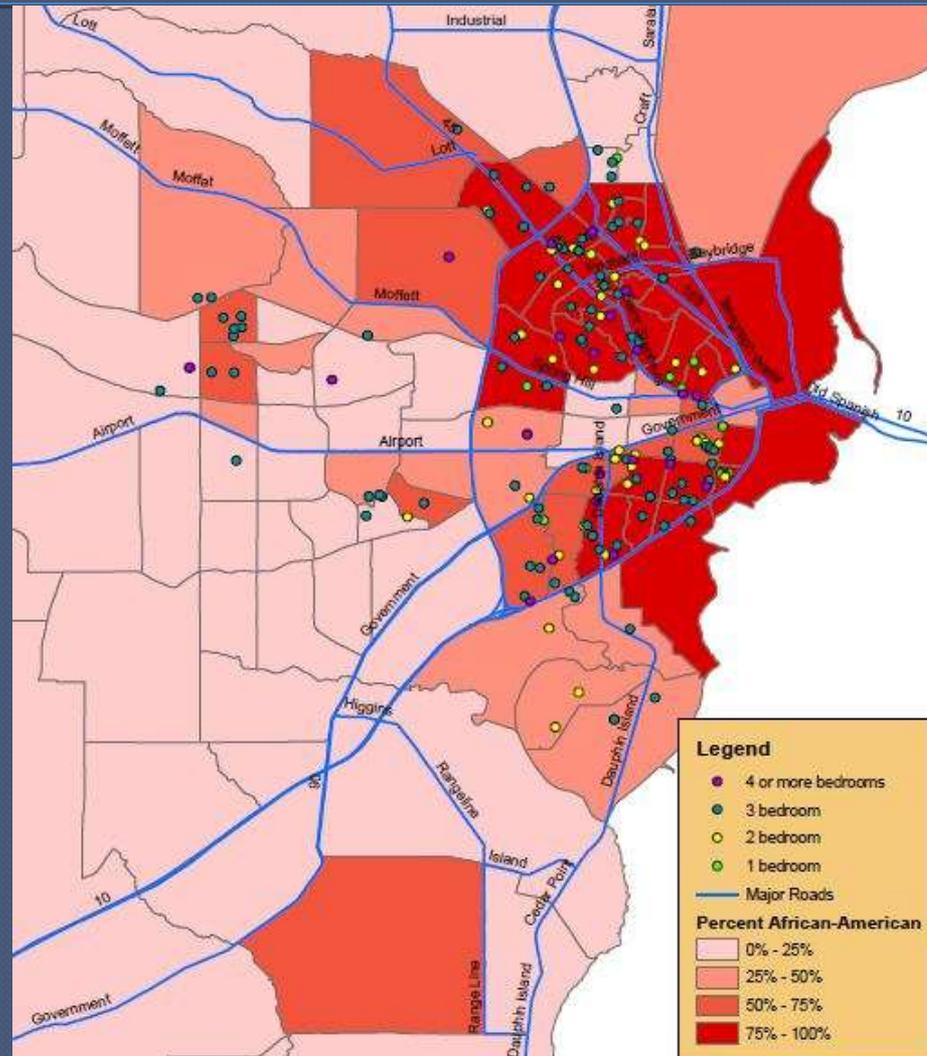
This one was actually an emergency move when the ceiling caved in so we didn't look. It was just like my boyfriend's dad was like, "Hey, your ceiling caved in," and "Won't you come up here?" and that was it.

I don't have to live close to my mother but...it just so happened that it was a house close to her.

(So, some do need to move closer to family members and others need distance. How about you?)

Probably distance...cus I don't like being bothered with family and friends I don't like. When I'm home I like to be home. I mean I keep saying the same thing over and over. I feel more comfortable in my house and my home is my home and it's not a really. I don't want to see people every day I don't want people knockin' on my door everyday. Stuff like that.

“The List”



Trade-Offs: Neighborhood Quality and Housing Cost

I: Why would you move?

R: More room, that's the only reason because I love the area, I love the people, which I don't know too many of them out here besides the ones that I work with. So that's all the good part. I would love to stay in this community right here, but it's hard to get a three-bedroom out here in this area.

...

I thought about renting [in the private market] at first but I knew for a fact, anywhere I would have inquired big enough to hold me and my family would have run me at least 700 dollars a month or more.

Housing Search: Dwelling Unit vs. Neighborhood

- I still would rather have the house. You are in a freer environment. You are at least not subjected to other people's habits and dealing with them even if it is not a great neighborhood.
- I want a section 8 house because I want my own house. For my kids, I can put stuff out there in the yard to play with. You can't even put a pool out here. You can't put nothing out here. And you can't let your children go on the playground, because that's a sex field. That's all that is.

Housing Search: “Telescoping”

- For the most part, this block seems to be kind of quiet. Now, the blocks up the street...when you get on up those blocks up there, that's when you get a lot of drug activity and stuff like that. It's like, when you leave this block, you go into a whole another somethin'.
- Yeah, and they fight up in the next block, I mean big, huge fights where the police come and mace people...you probably would hear the ambulance or the police around here, you might hear it every night or whatever. But this is about the quietest the block is, this block right here is nice, don't get me wrong. I wouldn't change the block I live on for the world, this is a nice block. But these surrounding blocks is a mess. And my kids never wanna stay on this street, they always somewhere else...And I keeps them in the house and they be so mad. I find everything to keep them in the house.

Housing Search:

“We Don’t Live Outside”

- I love my little place, but I don’t like the environment and I tell my children. They all be hollering, “When we going to move?” It’s not where you live, it’s how you live. You know, we don’t live outside, we live in here.... People raise their children different from the way I raise mine, you know. ‘Cause we live in the project, that don’t mean we have to act like the project and stuff like that.

Housing Search

- **Section 8 List in Mobile**
 - 191 properties
 - Many already leased
 - Only 7 in low poverty areas
- **Housing “Search” Replaced by Social Networks**
 - Referrals to land/slumlords from family and friends
 - Very little ranking, weighing of pros and cons
- **Families Choose Units, Not Neighborhoods**
- **Strategies for Negotiating Neighborhoods**
 - Neighborhood as Block Face, “Telescoping”
 - Strategic Retreat
 - “We Don’t live Outside, We Live in Here”

Institutional Barriers to Mobility

- Section Eight Management Assessment Program (SEMAP)
 - 155 point scale
 - 10-15 points for Deconcentration/Desegregation Efforts
 - Lease-up rates vs. moves to low poverty or integrated tracts
- Portability
 - Different Jurisdictions, Different PHAs
- Fair Market Rent (FMR)
 - Voucher amount linked to 40th percentile rent in Metropolitan Area
- No National Source of Income Discrimination Law

Conclusions

- Reconsidering “Choice”: most residential mobility among poor minority families is Reactive
 - Circumscribes neighborhood choice
 - Families use social networks to find housing, often in other poor or segregated areas
 - Results in repeated relocation to high poverty/seg. Areas
- Aspects of housing policy create instability and churning
 - The PHA ‘list’ channels families into poor segregated neighborhoods
 - Failed inspections and landlord responses
 - Housing search w limited time and limited information creates ‘pinball’ effect for families back and forth between units in high poverty areas
- Families expect little & adopt strategies which largely accept the inevitability and universality of danger
 - Housing Unit Matters More than Neighborhood (FMR Matters)
 - Fall back on strategies to negotiate neighborhoods with higher levels of violence and crime (block face)
- Racial preferences, kin ties, school quality, neighborhood amenities are virtually never mentioned as motivating factors for neighborhood choice

Implications

- To understand the promise of social programs, we need to understand “Choice”:
 - How poor families function and respond to policies
- Aspects of housing policy directly contribute to problems
 - Search time (60 days), Official Wait Lists, Portability
 - FMR, SEMAP, SOI
- Public Housing transformation → Section 8 Ghettos?
 - Critical to understand rental housing
 - Segregation and sorting processes

Works Forthcoming and in Progress

- Rosenblatt, Peter and Stefanie DeLuca. Forthcoming, 2012. "We Don't Live Outside, We Live in Here': Residential Mobility Decisions of Low-income Families." *City & Community*.
- DeLuca, Stefanie, Philip Garboden and Peter Rosenblatt. Forthcoming, 2013. "Maintaining Segregation: How Housing Policies Shape the Residential Trajectories of Low Income Minority Families." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Special Volume, Rethinking Urban Disadvantage: The Role of Systems, Institutions, and Organizations (Mario Small and Scott Allard, Eds.).
- DeLuca, Stefanie, Holly Wood, and Peter Rosenblatt. 2011. "Why poor people move (and where they go): Residential mobility, selection, and stratification."