REEXAMINING THE MOVING TO OPPORTUNITY STUDY AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO CHANGING THE DISTRIBUTION OF POVERTY AND ETHNIC CONCENTRATION*

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For the past decade and a half, a concerted effort has been undertaken to determine whether policy interventions in residential location can solve the problems of inner-city poverty and racial concentration. Studies based on data from the Gautreaux litigation and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)–sponsored Moving to Opportunity (MTO) program have provided an overall optimistic interpretation of the possibilities of improving inner-city lives via mobility vouchers and counseling. A reanalysis of the data from the MTO program, focusing specifically on African American households, suggests greater caution in the interpretation of the findings from either Gautreaux or the MTO program. No statistically significant difference exists between the percentage of poor or the percentage of African Americans in the current neighborhoods between MTO and Section 8 experimental groups. In some cases, there is no statistically significant difference between those who move with a voucher and those who move without any assistance at all. Although there is some evidence that MTO programs have brought specific gains for individual families, claims for the MTO program as a whole need to be treated with a great deal more caution than they have been to date.

The half-century-long U.S. concern with inner-city poverty and the inner-city concentration of minority populations now focuses on help through individual assistance rather than the construction of either project-based housing or scattered site housing, although sizeable amounts of both still exist in most metropolitan areas. The shift to individual assistance, usually through some form of housing voucher, reflects the increasing concern of the U.S. government to refocus attention on individuals rather than on government intervention via housing demolition and construction. This shift reflects a fundamental change in social thinking on how best to combat poverty and help underprivileged populations.

Within the context of concerns over the potential for a growing urban underclass and the associated concerns with growing poverty concentrations (although the percentage of those in poverty actually declined in the 1990s), interest has increased as to whether inner-city minority households can escape impoverished neighborhoods and whether government assistance can increase those probabilities. In the 1990s, a tentative consensus emerged that enabling low-income families to move from high- to low-poverty neighborhoods had the potential to reduce the levels of income segregation and, as a corollary, the degree of racial separation. The specific rationale for voucher-based programs for poor, inner-city households was to increase access to neighborhoods that would enhance employment and educational opportunities and diminish exposure to crime, violence, and drugs. Certainly, some commentators suggested that these programs benefit individual families and have the potential to deconcentrate poverty (Briggs 1998, 2005). Although the program was not specifically designed to integrate minority populations, the implication of moving to lower-poverty neighborhoods would have gains of living in more racially mixed neighborhoods as well.1

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1. Certainly the tenor of much of the commentary in reports on the Moving to Opportunity program implicitly assumes gains in integration and discusses the issue specifically in the reports.
A specific voucher policy designed to reduce economic residential segregation might also have the effect of increasing opportunities for labor market success. Some research suggested that relocation to suburban area would increase job opportunities for low-income populations, but other studies found high unemployment rates for suburban movers compared with city movers (Rosenbaum 1995). Still others have questioned the role of housing vouchers altogether. Grigsby and Bourassa (2004) argued that the housing choice voucher program is no longer effective as a mechanism for housing assistance. They noted that housing quality has improved substantially and that now only a very small proportion of all the housing stock in the United States is severely inadequate. They concluded that the housing choice voucher program is little more than an income subsidy and should be merged into other aspects of the U.S. federal social safety net.

These questions about the role of housing choice vouchers are at the heart of this paper. There have been other critiques of the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) demonstration program, but this paper examines whether there are overall program gains from the MTO program versus the Section 8 voucher program, or even from no intervention at all. The focus of the paper is the evaluation of a federal program intervention in the mobility process and the outcomes in poverty levels and levels of separation in the cities in the MTO study. This paper also takes a specific spatial focus, which is lacking in other studies of the MTO demonstration program. I do not argue against the view that some families may have benefited from receiving vouchers and mobility counseling. However, I do argue that the advantages of the policy have been emphasized at the expense of a more balanced analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of voucher-based interventions in the residential mobility process.

Specifically, I ask whether the distributions of African American households who move with one kind of assistance versus another (MTO vouchers with counseling, or Section 8 vouchers) are different in the kinds of poverty neighborhoods they enter and the levels of racial mixing they experience initially and in the longer term. I specifically examine whether the proportion of movers who live in lower-poverty and more racially mixed areas is sustained over time. A central focus of the research is to contrast what is sometimes called the “intent-to-treat” sample (all persons in the study) with the “treated” sample (those who participated). The tests in the paper examine whether the distributions of those with vouchers and counseling (treated) are different from those in the baseline sample (intent-to-treat sample), who did not receive assistance. I use the subsample of African American households in this study as the group that is most often targeted with programs to alleviate poverty and to offer integrative opportunities, as argued in several U.S. federal court cases on housing availability. I use Kolmogorov-Smirov (K-S) tests of the difference of distributions to test for significant differences.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON RELOCATING POOR PEOPLE AND THE ROLE OF VOUCHERS

The growing emphasis on geographically dispersing housing-subsidy recipients is based on the assumption that residence in concentrated poverty neighborhoods abets socially dysfunctional behavior—or, more simply, that high-poverty households will fare better outside of poverty neighborhoods (Galster and Zobel 1998). Although there are a number of individual studies of voucher use, the main body of analysis has grown up around data sets that emerged as part of the Gautreaux litigation in Chicago, the Holman litigation in Minneapolis, and from the MTO program. The conclusions are by no means consistent. Although some see positive effects from moving families from poor neighborhoods to less-poor and sometimes suburban neighborhoods (Briggs 2005; Goering 2005; Johnson, Ladd, and Ludwig 2002), others question whether the programs can deliver substantial gains in dispersing poverty (Clark 2005; Varady 2005). In a recent paper, Galster (2007) provided an important distinction between a focus on whether the poor benefit, or whether there is an