

**Poverty, Residential Mobility and Student Transiency
Within a Rural New York School District**

by

Kai A. Schafft

DRAFT

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Kai Schafft is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Education Policy Studies and Co-Director of the *Center on Rural Education and Communities* at the Penn State. He can be contacted at kas45@psu.edu. This research was supported in part through a Hatch grant from the Cornell University Agricultural Experiment Station as well as through support from the Children, Youth and Families Consortium, and the Center on Rural Education and Communities at Penn State.

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Introduction

Residential mobility is often thought to be voluntary, largely opportunity-related, and a primary means for families to improve their economic well-being and/or living circumstances (Cushing 1999). That is, perceived opportunities at migration destinations – an employment change, improved quality of life, a better school district, or other destination attributes – shape the residential change decision-making. Residential movement is therefore often understood as an investment in one's human capital, with movers gravitating towards areas yielding the highest return on that investment (Lichter and Costanzo 1987; Massey 1990). Conversely, by this thinking as an area increases in its levels of economic distress, its out-migration is expected to rise, and its in-migration is expected to decrease (Cadwallader 1992).

However, residential mobility of households experiencing economic distress often does not fit these models. Frequent, often short distance residential movement among resource-limited families within, into and across already distressed communities, may be largely unplanned and unpredictable (Aron and Fitchen 1996; Fitchen 1992). Rather than yielding improved life circumstances, it may result in episodes of temporary homelessness and increased insecurity for the households involved (Fitchen 1994; 1995).

Residential instability therefore often only deepens the social instability that precipitated the movement in the first place. For children this movement may be especially disruptive because of broken social ties and interrupted academic experiences, compounding already unstable home environments. Community institutions are not immune. Schools in particular face numerous administrative and institutional challenges as enrollments change over the course of the school year and high-need, high-cost students cycle in and out, sometimes several times over the course of a given year (Rumberger 2003; USGAO 1994).

This paper focuses on a school district case study in which district level enrollment change data were gathered, and interviews were conducted with low income parents of mobile children in order to obtain 5-year histories of residential and school change. Primarily through an analysis of interview data, this paper's goal is to articulate the causes and precipitating factors leading to and shaping residential mobility and school change among poor families, an area that has received little attention in the research literature to this point. In exploring the relationship between residential change and school change, this paper discusses the consequences for children and families and concludes with a set of observations about student transiency in the context of the No Child Left Behind Act, and recommendations for schools and school districts.

Exploring the Connection Between Residential Mobility and Rural Disadvantage

Localized high frequency mobility has often been overlooked within the scholarship on the interrelationships between residential mobility, rural poverty and community disadvantage. First, residential mobility has often been conceptualized as a process that tends to produce socioeconomic equilibrium across geographic areas. From this perspective, residential mobility has been understood primarily as a response to economic opportunity at migration destinations, with spatial concentrations of poverty explained away as lags in the adjustment process between labor and capital, exacerbated by the inability or unwillingness of non-movers to relocate (Nord et al. 1995). Second, the data most appropriate for examining high-frequency, localized mobility are not readily available because the numbers of movers and the distances of most moves are too small in scale to be adequately assessed using conventional demographic data (Fitchen 1994).

In the United States, the study of the relationship between residential mobility and the well-being of rural people and places has tended to focus on migration *between* metro and nonmetro areas, and the selectivity of these migrant streams rather than more *in situ* residential movement. For example, research examining the selectivity of both rural-to-urban and urban-to-rural migration streams find that, as compared to non-migrants, migrants in general are younger, better educated and of higher occupational status (Lichter et al. 1979; 1995). However, rural-to-urban migrants are younger, more highly educated and have higher occupational status than their urban-to-rural counterparts, and in addition, the urban-to-rural migration stream is “disproportionately comprised of the jobless, as well as the poor and the near-poor” (1995:241), findings similar to those of Voss and Fuguitt (1991) and Nord et al. (1995).

In sum, as Cushing and Rogers explain in their study of migration and persistent poverty in Central Appalachia,

“Those most likely to migrate out of declining and distressed areas are the young, the well educated, and the affluent individuals. In cases of severe stress and decline, *those that remain will disproportionately be those who are immobile, and therefore stuck in poverty with little choice but to muddle through.* High psychic costs and unaffordable financial costs of moving, lack of information about alternatives, obsolescence of job skills (structural unemployment), and often age substantially reduce mobility for those individuals” (1996: 33, italics added).

But what about “those that remain”? Are they truly immobile? Although there has been relatively little research of poverty-related localized residential mobility within rural areas, these studies have nonetheless suggested not only the prevalence of this type of residential mobility, but also how this movement may function as both a consequence *and* determinant of rural disadvantage.

Fitchen’s work in rural upstate New York as well as other rural regions in the United States (1992; 1994; 1995) noted that among many rural low income families on the edge

of homelessness, high frequency, short-distance moves were spurred by shortages of affordable housing for poor households, as well as a range of poverty-related social and economic stressors. In addition to having negative impacts on childhood education as well as on schools faced with unpredictable enrollments, her work also noted that frequent moves may substantially “undermine the effectiveness of various adult programs on education, personal development, and employment training that are intended to help break the cycle of poverty” (1994: 435).

Schools are among the primary community institutions affected by household transiency because of the often pronounced student mobility that results (Capps and Maxwell 2002; Foulkes 2002; USGAO 1994; Rumberger 2003; Schafft forthcoming). Research strongly suggests that frequent student movement not only may have significantly negative consequences for mobile students because of academic and social disruption, but may also have negative effects on non-mobile students in schools with high levels of student movement (Bruno and Isken 1996; Rumberger et al. 1999). Schools themselves face challenges in the areas of classroom administration, as well as in district level planning and budgeting. Smaller rural school systems are likely to be disproportionately even *less* able to address the needs of disadvantaged, mobile students due to the more limited fiscal, administrative and institutional resources at their disposal.

A recent study by the author examined the student mobility in nearly 300, mostly rural, upstate New York school districts. The research found a wide variance in the levels of student mobility experienced by surveyed districts, ranging from almost no turnover to over 40 percent annual student turnover.¹ However, the most disadvantaged communities were disproportionately affected. Indeed, the mean rate of student transiency in the poorer districts was found to be about twice that of wealthier districts (8.8 vs. 15 percent). Districts reported that poor and high-need students were most likely to be high-frequency movers and that much of the movement appeared to be confined to a several-district area shuffling back and forth. Districts also reported being negatively affected by the high costs associated with high-need, highly mobile students, as well as by the unpredictability of the movement that complicated planning and budgeting processes. Furthermore, school district administrators also expressed strong concern that their schools may be negatively affected by the effect of low-achieving mobile students on school testing assessments (Schafft forthcoming).

While these findings emphasized the different types of challenges posed to *rural* school districts because of disproportionately limited resources within both schools and communities, the findings were at the same time largely consistent with the existing literature demonstrating the negative impacts of student transiency on schools and in particular limited resource schools, and also in suggesting the consequences for children and families (Bruno and Isken 1996; Petit 2004; Swanson and Schneider 1999). However, similarly it was not able to explore the patterns, causes and consequences of

¹ Turnover is calculated as the number of unscheduled student enrollments into a district plus the number of unscheduled student withdrawals as a percentage of that district’s total enrollment for the year. Hence, a turnover rate of 30 percent indicates that for every 10 students enrolled, approximately 3 made an unscheduled entrance or exit over the course of the academic year.

mobility from the perspective of the movers themselves. This paper attempts to help fill these gaps.

Lamar: A Community in Decline

The village of Lamar is like many of the small rural communities situated along the Erie Canal corridor in upstate New York. Once prosperous, at its peak Lamar was a thriving community and center of commerce with a trolley, several hotels, a downtown full of stores, four fire departments and even an opera house. Now however, its downtown shows the evidence of long term economic decline, with empty storefronts and decaying buildings, the result of agricultural decline and industry shutdown. In recent years, problems thought to be more typical of urban areas, including prostitution, crack houses and violent crime, have become increasingly common.

The village has gradually lost population over the years, shrinking from nearly 4,200 people in 1980 to about 3,700 in 2000. Along with this decline in population has come changes in housing stock including the conversion of previously single-family owner-occupied housing into multi-unit rental housing. A local resident, discussing to what this change had meant for the community, stated,

I'm concerned that especially recently we've had a number of local industries close down. That means that more of our parents are out of work, so that's going to lower the economic status even more. Another company took over (a local plant) so a lot of parents have lost their jobs. One of the major industries in the area closed down where a lot of our parents were employed. Historically we were a middle class to upper middle class community. There had been more of an even distribution, and I think our economic base has gone down. That's because the wealthier members of our community have moved on and the economic conditions of the people who have stayed have gone down. I think that we are not attracting the middle to upper class folks to the area that we used to.

The school district is roughly contiguous with the Lamar township, with an enrollment of slightly over 1,000, although along with the population, that number has been steadily declining as well by about 50 students per year. For a number of years the district has been aware of both the changing demographics of its student population, and the increasing mobility. About 46 percent of all students in the district are eligible for the free or reduced price lunch program. Classified by the New York State Department of Education as a "high need rural district" the rates of means-eligible lunch program participation had steadily increased² and increasing percentages of special needs students were also observed.

² In 1997-98 the rate of FRPL-eligibility was about 25 percent.

An informal report produced by the middle school/high school guidance office noted that the grade 7-12 population was “increasingly transient” and that during the period from September 1 to December 13, an average of 1.6 students per school day entered or left. Sixty-eight percent had moved two or more times in the preceding four years and students with four or more moves were not uncommon. Seventy percent of the mobile students during this time period came from one-parent or not-with-parent families. Almost half of the mobile students needed support services, either through special education or other forms of remediation, including Academic Intervention Services. The report concluded by noting, “We are often dealing with students whose family circumstances are not ideal, e.g., students often live with one or no parents. Given that, one suspects that socioeconomic status (SES), the best single predictor of academic success, may be a huge factor. The District is being challenged by an increasingly mobile/transient population, whose overall needs are greater than the general student population. Under these circumstances the duties of record-keeping for various offices (guidance, attendance, nurse) has become increasingly burdensome and time-consuming.”

Methods and Data

During the 2003-04 academic year, the district maintained a centralized database recording all unscheduled entrances and exits, origins and destinations of mobile students, as well as academic and sociodemographic information on entering and exiting students. During that same time, 22 interviews were conducted with low income mobile parents in order to compile 5-year histories of household residence and child school attendance. The purpose was to gather school enrollment change data directly from parents, examine the relationship between residential change and unscheduled school change, and lastly determine the causal factors leading to residential and/or school change.

Interviews were arranged through the school district. Economic status of students was determined by eligibility for the federal free and reduced price lunch program (FRPL). During academic year 2003-2004, each time a FRPL eligible student made an unscheduled enrollment into the district, a letter was sent to the parent or guardian requesting an interview. The letters explained the purpose of the research and offered a \$50 compensation for the parent’s time. A toll free telephone number to the researcher was provided to the parent to arrange for an interview at a time and place of their choosing. The majority of interviews were arranged by parent call-backs using the toll-free number, although several interviews were arranged directly through administrators at each of the three districts.

The children in the families interviewed made up about 30 percent of the FRPL eligible children who entered Lamar during the academic year. Comparing the families who were interviewed with those who did not respond to the request, interviewed families were higher percentage white (70 percent vs. 44 percent).³ Children who live in families with

³ The district’s students are about 17 percent black, 5 percent Hispanic and the remainder white.

incomes 130 percent or less of the poverty line or less are eligible for the federal free lunch program. Those children who come from families with incomes of greater than 130 percent of the poverty line but 185 percent or less of the poverty line are eligible for reduced price lunch. Eighty-four percent of the children from interviewed families were eligible for free lunch, while 92 percent of the children from families who declined to be interviewed were eligible.

Eighty-six percent of the respondents were female. With the exception of 2 interviews with custodial grandparents, all interviews were conducted with parents of the children in question. The average age of respondents was 35. The average number of children was 3, with 2 of those children school-aged. Sixteen of the 22 parents interviewed were, for all intents and purposes, single parents -- either divorced, separated, widowed or never married. Of the 6 married respondents, 2 were custodial grandparents.

Six of the 22 respondents were not able to provide income information. Of the 16 who did provide this information, only 4 had incomes above the poverty line, while 2 had incomes between 75 and 100 percent of the poverty line, 6 had incomes between 50 and 75 percent of the poverty line, and 4 respondents had incomes less than 50 percent of the poverty line.

Interviews were semi-structured, although utilized a detailed protocol to obtain comprehensive data on all residential moves, and all school changes for each child. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and 2 ½ hours with most interviews lasting about 1 hour. About half of the interviews were completed at the respondent's home, 35 percent were conducted on the school grounds, and 15 percent were conducted at other meeting places including restaurants, libraries and other public meeting places. Interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the respondent. In total the 22 interviews represent the families of 61 children, 51 of which were school-aged at the time the interviews were conducted. Narratives were written up shortly after each interview and the recordings were selectively transcribed. Data were analyzed using both SPSS and NUD*IST.

Overview of Student Mobility Patterns within the Lamar District

Between July 2003 and June 2004, Lamar District had 156 students enter the district and 148 students exit for a total of 304 enrollment changes, for a turnover rate of approximately 29 percent. The data show Lamar had disproportionately needy students cycling through the district. In AY 2003-04 15.1 percent of Lamar students overall were classified as special education students, whereas 17.4 percent of mobile students were CSE classified. Similarly, 46 percent of Lamar students overall were eligible for free or reduced priced school lunches, while among mobile students, 53.9 percent were eligible. In addition, entering students were of higher need than the exiting students. About 62 percent of entering students were FRPL-eligible but only 45.3 percent of *exiting* students were FRPL-eligible.

Figure 1 (below) shows the total number of students entering and exiting by month, indicating two peak periods of movement. The first is at the beginning of the school year during August and September, with a second, less pronounced peak during mid winter.

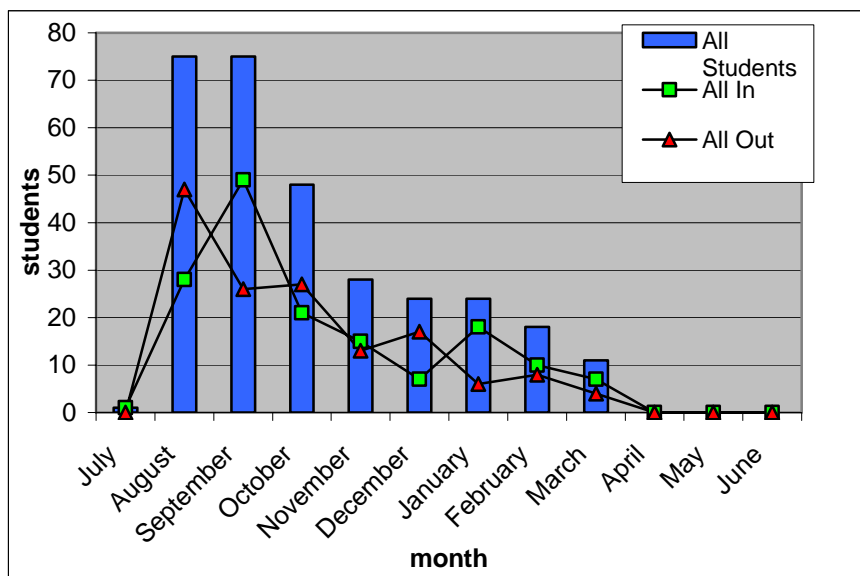


Figure 1: Total Enters and Exits by Month Compared to Total Student Turnover

During most of the year the number of students entering and leaving the district is roughly equivalent with the exceptions of September in which there were nearly twice as many students enrolling in the district (49) as there were withdrawing from the district (26), and January when there were three times as many students entering (18) as withdrawing (6).

Figure 2 (below) examines the total student entrances and exits by grade level. Unscheduled kindergarten entrances are not counted in this analysis until October, so late-entering kindergarteners do not factor into these data. Grade levels were grouped into three roughly equal groups by size of total enrollment: grades K through 4, 5 through 8 and 9 through 12. No particular patterns emerge examining mobility levels by grade. That is, mobility appears more or less evenly distributed across all grades. However, at the individual grade level, turnover varied from a low of 8.8 percent in kindergarten to a high of 51.4 percent in 2nd grade.

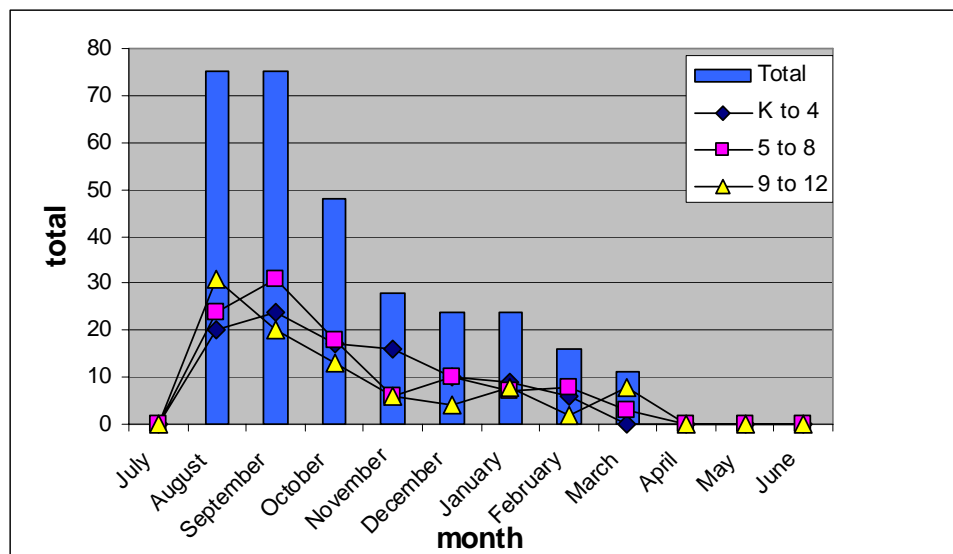


Figure 2. Mobility by Grade Level

About 77 percent of Lamar's unscheduled entering students transferred from another upstate district, while about 54 percent of its unscheduled exiting students transferred out to another upstate district (see Table 1 below). Other than transfers between districts upstate, the next largest group of mobile students transferred districts across state lines. Students transferred interstate into Lamar mainly from Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, Florida and Pennsylvania. Unscheduled exiting students crossing state lines relocated to Maryland, Virginia, Illinois, Puerto Rico, Florida, Minnesota, Ohio, Massachusetts and Michigan.

Table 1. Origins and Destinations of Mobile Lamar Students

	Lamar Entrances		Lamar Exits	
	raw	pct	raw	pct
Upstate	120	76.9	80	54.1
Downstate	0	0	1	.7
Out of State	13	8.3	17	11.5
Private School	5	3.2	3	2.0
Home School	4	2.6	2	1.4
Dropout/Re-enroll	0	0	21	14.2
Unknown	14	9.0	24	16.2
TOTAL	156	100.0	148	100.0

Interstate movement tended to be disproportionately comprised of wealthier students. About 11.5 percent of non-FRPL eligible students made interstate transfers, while only 8.5 percent of FRPL-eligible students made interstate transfers. In total, students made

unscheduled transfers between Lamar and 41 upstate districts, with 35 districts sending students to Lamar and 22 districts receiving students from Lamar. Despite the number of sending and receiving districts, over 50 percent of the interdistrict movement was contained within county boundaries. Using GIS to calculate district centroids and the distances between Lamar and the sending and receiving districts, the median distance of inter-district moves both in and out of Lamar was only 11 miles.

Mobility of Interviewed Families

Examining the 5-year period of time prior to the interviews, in total these 22 families had moved 109 times. It should be noted that families were not selected for interviews on the basis of any evidence of high-frequency mobility. The sole criteria for targeting parents for inclusion in the study were simply that their child(ren) be eligible for the income-qualified free or reduced price lunch program, and that their child(ren) have entered the district after the start of the school year, regardless of whether that school change was the result of a residential change or some other factor.

Nonetheless, the interview data strongly suggest how highly mobile this population is. Only one respondent had remained in the same residence for the 5 years preceding the interview. For most respondents however, frequent residential change was the rule rather than the exception. On average, respondents lived in 6 residences over the 5-year period, with several respondents reporting having lived in 10 or more places (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Variability in Residential Stability Over 5 Year Among Interviewed Parents

In total the children within these households made 166 school changes over the 5 year period preceding the interview, 92 percent of which (152) were directly a consequence of household residential change. In other words, based on the interview data, residential change appears to be the overwhelming factor resulting in school enrollment change. However, even though residential mobility was the main driving force behind school change, 38 percent of residential changes did *not* result in a school change, principally because residential relocation was made *within* the boundaries of the school district. Hence, these data also suggest the extent to which administratively-collected enrollment change data – even data that show high levels of turnover – may significantly underestimate the true volume of residential mobility.

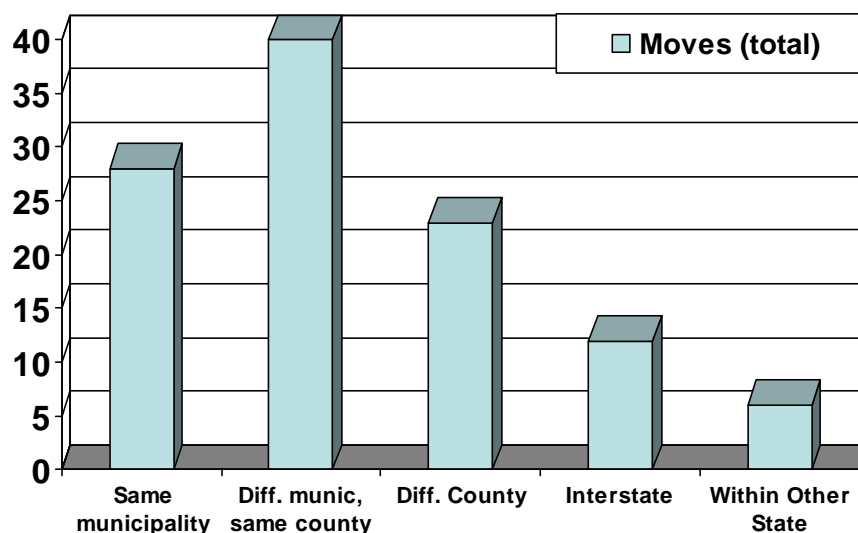


Figure 4. Geography of Residential Movement Among Respondents

Fully 91 of these 109 moves were made within New York State. Of these moves, 28 moves were made within the same municipality, and 40 moves were to a different municipality within the same county (see Figure 4, above). Among the residential moves made within New York, the median distance moved was 15 miles, the mean distance 19 miles. In this respect the interview data are fully consistent with the findings from earlier statewide analysis of enrollment change data suggesting the highly localized nature of most movement.

Social, Demographic and Economic Characteristics of Respondents

Families frequently depended upon a range of social services in addition to the school lunch program (see Table 2, below). Families most frequently depended upon Medicaid

and food stamps in addition to housing and energy assistance, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Security Income (SSI). The Women Infants and Children program (WIC), and the Head Start program are available to families with children 5 years old and younger. Even Start is available to children 7 years old and younger. Nine of the 22 families had children 7 or younger. Among nine families, 5 participated in WIC, and 5 participated in Head Start or Even Start. Slightly less than one-quarter of households did not receive aid from any income-eligible social assistance program, while nearly 50percent relied on a bundling of support from 3 or more programs.

Table 2. Family Participation in Additional Income-Eligible Social Service Programs

Program	Number	Pct.
Medicaid	15	68.2
Food Stamps	14	63.6
Housing Assistance	7	31.8
Energy Assistance	6	27.3
TANF	6	27.3
SSI	4	18.2
TOTAL	22	100.00

For many of the parents interviewed, these extra social supports were vital for being able to access key resources the family needed. At the same time many expressed strong ambivalence about receiving assistance, both because of their reluctance to receive “handouts” as well as because of the layers of bureaucracy and paperwork involved in accessing these services.

...no, I don't have a job (laughs). I am trying to get food stamps, though, and Medicaid for my kids. I'm out looking for work. I refuse to get on welfare. There is no reason for me to get on welfare when I'm capable to work. I am not doin' it. That's just eatin' tax money that I don't need to be doin'...

They expect me to jump through hoops and I don't jump through hoops for nobody. I don't care who it is. I have a place to stay, my kids eat, they're warm at night. That is what matters to me. I will not jump through hoops for people that want to be in your business, and stuff like that. My business is my business and if I want you to know it, I'll tell you, and if not...

Of the 22 respondents, 5 were employed at the time of the interview, 3 full-time, and 2 part-time. An additional 8 respondents lived in a household with another adult wage earner, while 9 households had no adult employed at the time of the interview. Several respondents were unemployed as a consequence of disabilities, frequently work-related. Others had been laid off as a consequence of plant shutdowns and/or firm downsizing.

When I was working for Flextronic I considered myself middle class. I made OK money and I was surviving. Now I'm below poverty and I don't like it. I'm trying to raise a child as a single parent and it's hard. It's real hard. When you need help, nobody's there. When you don't need it, it's all there.

Nearly all respondents relied upon a series of low-skilled and unskilled work, principally service industry work, including clerical work, cashiering, food service employment and semi-skilled health care, such as employment as a certified nursing assistant, often in residential care environments.

Many respondents expressed an intense willingness to work, but were not able to find employment for which they were qualified.

I like (where I live now) because it's close to town and I can walk, but there's no work. It's a big issue. Now that I have (my daughter) in Head Start I'm going nuts being in this house. I have applied just about every possible place you can to get a job in this town and it just seems like it's more of a "who you know" type basis. My husband's traveling back and forth (for work) which costs about 50 dollars a week in gas, and that starts adding up.

There's no work. It's not anything that schools can do to fix it. There are a lot of people in these small towns on social services. And it's not that they choose to be. It's not that they're lazy people. It's just that there's no work.

Consistently, parents spoke about the difficulty of securing stable work and securing enough income to provide for their families.

Causes of Family Residential Change

For each of the residential moves identified over the 5-year period, the interviewed parent was asked to explain why they changed residence. Of the 109 moves documented, there were only five for which respondents were not able to provide or remember specific reasons for the move. For each of the 104 remaining moves, the primary or most proximate reason for the residential move was identified⁴, and then classified as either a "push" or a "pull." These factors were then further categorized as being primarily economic in nature, social in nature or housing-related. Although respondents often identified several reasons for moving, frequently both pushes and pulls, there was nearly always one overwhelming precipitating factor that resulted in residential relocation, a factor absent of which, the move would likely not have occurred.

⁴ While often there were multiple factors that resulted in a residential move, the proximate reason was determined by examining the transcript data and, in light of multiple factors, determining the one factor that, absent, would most likely have meant that the residential change would not have taken place at the reported time and under the reported circumstances. In nearly every case this proximate cause was relatively clear to determine.

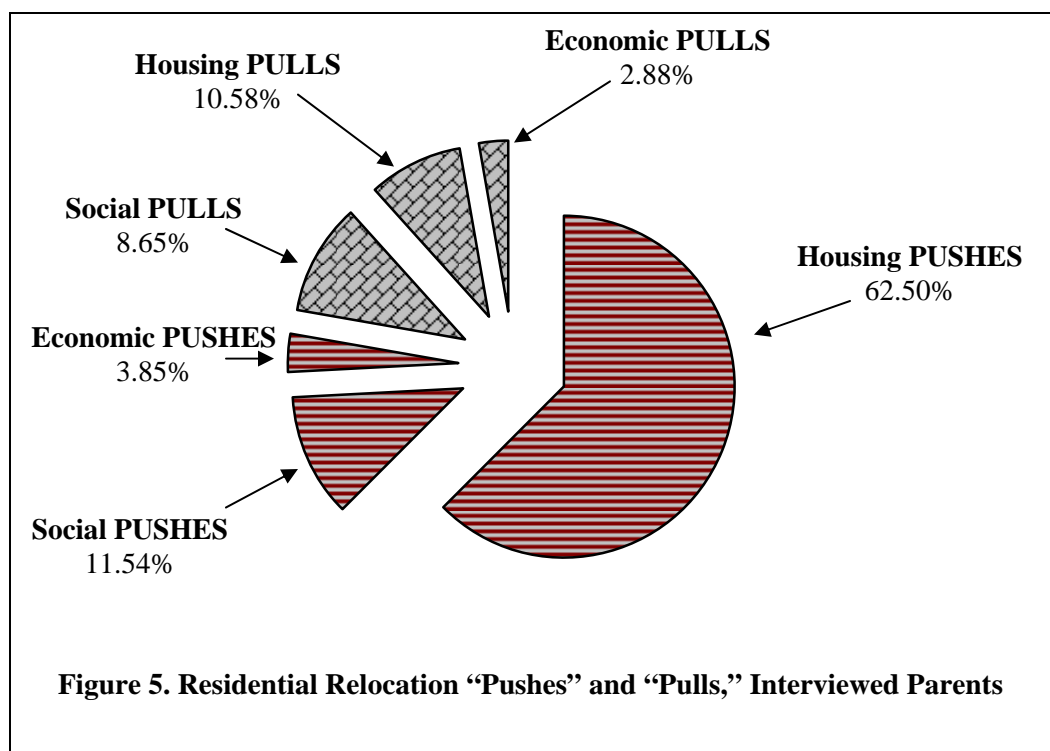


Figure 5 (above) shows the breakdown of push and pull factors resulting in family residential relocation. Two things are immediately apparent. First, “pushes” make up nearly 78 percent of the factors resulting in a move. Second, housing-related reasons account for over 73 percent of residential moves, with housing *pushes* resulting in over 60 percent of moves. While most often residential relocation is thought to be voluntary and opportunity related, for these families, movement was most frequently a direct consequence of the inability to attain safe, adequate and affordable housing.

Housing

Table 3 (below) examines housing-related push and pull factors resulting in relocation. These data emphasize the non-volitional character of these moves. Housing “pushes” are nearly 6 times as common as housing pulls. Eviction, leaving a “doubling up” situation in which the family is temporarily sharing a residence with a friend or family member, and leaving temporary housing provided by the Department of Social Services top the list, making up almost 50 percent of housing pushes.

Table 3. Housing Push and Pull Factors in Residential Change

<u>Housing PUSH</u>	#	%	<u>Housing PULL</u>	#	%
Eviction	12	11.5	Better housing oppty	8	7.7
Leaving doubling-up	10	9.6	Bought home	3	2.9
Leaving temporary DSS housing	10	9.6			
House sold/landlord stopped renting	7	7.6			
Bad housing conditions	6	5.8			
Too expensive	5	4.8			
Bad neighborhood/area	5	4.8			
Too small/crowded	4	3.8			
Problems with landlord	4	3.8			
Building condemned	2	1.9			
<i>Housing Push, Total:</i>	65	62.5	<i>Housing Pull, Total:</i>	11	10.6

Often these types of moves are directly interrelated. A parent and child may face eviction, lose housing and then be put up at a motel for several weeks by DSS. They then move in temporarily with another family member until more permanent housing can be found. These stop-gap housing situations are not only stressful for the families involved, but also almost inevitably lead to more movement.

I am at my daughter's temporarily, believe me, and I stress the word temporarily. I mean, It's more stressful to me than my (last residence). I mean, I'm more stressed now. Watching 3 kids all the time, and these kids are wild. I mean, ASAP. Any kind of money to get an apartment and I am gone.

Several parents who had to change residences due to eviction were evicted not because they had failed to pay the rent on time, but because the landlord/property owner had not paid the mortgage payment and the bank foreclosed on the property, resulting in a sheriff's eviction for the tenants. One respondent reported that this had happened to his family twice in a row.

We knew (the house) was going to be foreclosed on, but (the landlord) said that it was going to happen in March. We thought we had till March to find a new place but the sheriff came around and said 'you have to get out!' We were like 'you're kidding!' The sheriff said no. We had like ten days to get out. We had to get out by December 19th, and it was like, 'I've got two little kids running around and you want me to get out by December 19th? You're kidding!' But they weren't kidding. We had paid the rent. I mean, I was working and my mom was working, but the guy had not paid in like six months. And he lived out of state so it's not like they could even do anything to him. He owned it and then he moved out of state because his job moved. We were in a very tight situation.

We knew (about the foreclosure). We should have done something earlier, but we thought we had more time than what we had. We thought the foreclosure would take longer – but you should never doubt how long a foreclosure takes!”

These circumstances can put families and children in often untenable circumstances.

It came down to the wire. We looked at some awful places. One place we got up there and there was black junk coming out from underneath the refrigerator. The floor was all sticky. There were cockroaches and the lady (from DSS) told me, “you’ve been at the motel for three weeks and I’m giving you until the weekend. You have to find something by Monday or you have to take this place.” There was glass broken. It was gross. And there were bare wires. I said “you’re going to take us from one place, one junk heap and put us into another one?” I said “No.”

In these situations parents have to choose the best of limited and often unacceptable options making further movement all but inevitable.

Social and Economic Reasons for Residential Moves

Even though economic insecurity is at the root of chronic residential movement among low income families, ironically economic push and pull factors make up the smallest percentage of factors resulting in family movement. Three moves were made as a consequence of job loss and 1 simply because of limited economic opportunities at the place of residence. Only three moves were made because of perceived economic opportunity at the place of destination (see Table 4, below).

Table 4. Economic and Social Push and Pull Factors in Residential Change

<u>Economic PUSH</u>	#	%	<u>Economic PULL</u>	#	%
Lost job	3	2.9	Job opportunity	3	2.9
Not earning enough	1	1.0			
<i>Economic Push, Total:</i>	4	3.8	<i>Economic Pull, Total:</i>	3	2.9
<u>Social PUSH</u>			<u>Social PULL</u>		
Breakup of relationship	5	4.8	Child care/family responsibilities	4	3.8
Domestic violence	5	4.8	Move (back) in with partner	3	2.9
Drug abuse in home	1	1.0	Good school district	1	1.0
incarceration	1	1.0	Move closer to family	1	1.0
<i>Social Push, Total:</i>	12	11.5	<i>Social Pull, Total:</i>	9	8.7

While the residential movement of most respondents was confined within New York State, often within a 1 or 2 county area, interstate moves were made as well. These moves were often made for economic reasons – both because of the perceived lack of economic opportunities in New York as well as potential job opportunities elsewhere. Even so, respondents making interstate moves often found themselves quickly returning to New York. Of those respondents who reported moving out of New York and returning, the average amount of time spent out of state was less than 9 months, and often only 2 or 3 months.

Social pushes were more prevalent than social pulls with domestic violence and relationship breakup for most moves. Social pulls were frequently family related, and only 1 move out of the 104 was specifically due to the attractiveness of a school district. Although school personnel often cite marriage and/or relationship breakup and recombination as a reason for residential relocation among highly mobile families and, hence, school change for the children concerned, among the respondents interviewed, these reasons accounted for a total of only 5 moves.

Parents' Perceptions of the Effects of Moving on their Children

Clear relationships have been established between educational attainment, and economic stability in later life. Census data, for instance, show the average earning for adults who never completed high school to be \$18,900 as compared to \$25,900 for high school graduates and \$45,400 for college graduates. Additionally, these earnings inequalities have also steadily increased over the past 25 years (Day and Newburger 2002). It is not surprising to see, therefore, the limited educational attainment of most respondents, two thirds of whom lack a high school diploma. Nor is it surprising that many of the interviewed parents spoke anecdotally about their own childhoods in which they too were highly mobile. “I know what it is like being 13-years-old moving from one town to another and going into a school where you absolutely know nobody,” one mother stated. “You don’t even know the school. And I didn’t want my kids going through that. I didn’t.”

At the same time, as discussed earlier, the vast majority of this residential and school change was not voluntary, but rather was the forced consequence of unwanted and unintended social and economic stressors necessitating the movement.

One thing I don’t like is to change kids from school to school because kids get friends and it means a lot. If we didn’t have to move we never would have done it. I don’t think it’s a good thing for kids I really don’t.

Some literature suggests that school officials counsel parents on the negative social and academic effects of children changing schools, and strongly advise parents to keep their children within the school at least until the end of the academic year, if possible. However, these interviews suggest that parents often don’t have the flexibility to remain

within the school district, and secondly that they are *already* aware of the negative effects of school change on their children.

Nearly all respondents expressed genuine concern for the academic achievement of their children and very much wanted them to be successful in school and in later life. At the same time, parents often expressed real ambivalence about the public school system and its ability to provide adequate services for their children. In part this is amplified by the parents' own experiences as children and their own disrupted academic experiences. Parents want to work closely with teachers and school administrators, but many expressed feeling adversarial relationships between themselves and the school, or simply feeling as though the school was ignoring their needs, not taking them seriously or making little visible effort to reach out.

I just think the biggest thing the school can do is better communication. I just seen a lot of times where it's not good communication...Like here, um, in (another district) they would call me...If they had any problems with any of the kids, or if they were staring to fail or something, they would call me...um, work with me to work with the child, find out which one it was and what course of action we need to take and how to follow up with it... Here, you know, all I am getting is a paper home from the school. I don't get the phone calls. If there is a problem, then I have to take the time to call them, figure out who I am going to talk to, where my calls are gonna go, and what's goin' on...It (personal communication) actually does better for you than a piece of paper.

When parents were asked to describe instances in which they felt schools had adequately met the needs of their children, overwhelmingly what they pointed to were instances in which they felt the school – be it through the teachers, the principal, the guidance staff, or the superintendent – had made consistent efforts to reach out to the parents and communicate with them about the successes and problems experienced by their children. On the other hand, parents had the most *negative* impressions of a school when they felt that such communication was discouraged, and when teachers and/or school administrators were unresponsive to parents concerns.

Conclusions

While chronically mobile students may make up a minority of the student population among New York's rural school districts, they are a population that has generally escaped the focused attention of schools and community leaders. In part this is because little has been done to document the extent and patterns of student and family mobility. This work is a first step towards attempting this documentation both through the collection and analysis of school enrollment data as well as through interviews with low income mobile families.

The lack of attention paid to these students is also likely due to the fact that they don't fit into easy categories for children in need. While many people may associate highly mobile children in rural school settings with migrant populations, the most mobile among

rural New York districts are *not* necessarily migrant students. Among the 11 districts participating in the study the highest percentage of migrant students among students entering and exiting in AY 2003-04 was three percent, and most districts reported no migrant students entering or exiting whatsoever.

This may be due to misidentification. Most often migrant families are thought of as making primarily interstate moves, while in fact the legal migration-defining boundary for a migrant student is a school district. As outlined in the No Child Left Behind Act, a “migratory child” is one who has in the preceding 36 months moved from one school district to another⁵ in order to obtain or accompany an parent who is moving to obtain temporary or seasonal work in agriculture or fisheries. Regardless, only a small minority of the mobile students in this study could officially be classified as migrant students.

Similarly, mobile students are often not thought of as homeless given that homelessness is most often associated with *urban* contexts. Mobile students and their families in rural areas often do not fit the stereotypes associated with homelessness. Homelessness is less visible in rural areas and it frequently entails a range of housing insecure circumstances including more or less temporary living arrangements in inadequate and/or unsafe housing, and “doubling up” with friends or relatives. However, the federal definition of what constitutes homelessness among students clearly covers a wide range of circumstances experienced by the families at the center of this study.

According to the Title X, Part C, Section 725(2) of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, the term “homeless children and youth”

(A) means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence...;
and

(B) includes –

(i) children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to a loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;

(ii) children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings...

⁵ See Title I, Part C, Section 1309 of the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* for definitions of migrant students. Some states are comprised of one school district. In this case the migration-defining boundary is an administrative area within the school district. A child is also considered “migratory” if s/he lives in a school district of more than 15,000 square miles and migrates a distance of 20 miles or more because of a fishing activity. Neither of these circumstances apply to New York State, however.

(iii) children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and

(iv) migratory children who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).

The parents interviewed for this study described a number of situations in which their child could be officially classified as homeless.

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act mandates that every local education agency (i.e. school district) designate a liaison for homeless children and youth. The liaison serves as a key contact between homeless students and the families on the one hand and school personnel and community service providers on the other. In the broadest sense, the liaison's responsibility is to ensure that homeless children and youth have the same opportunities for academic success as their non-homeless peers. More specifically, according to the New York State Education Department, local liaisons must ensure that:

- “Homeless children and youth are identified by school personnel and through coordination activities with other entities and agencies;
- Homeless students enroll in, and have full and equal opportunity to succeed in, the schools of the LEA⁶;
- Homeless children and youth receive educational services for which they are eligible, including Head Start, Even Start, and preschool programs administered by the LEA, and referrals to health, mental health, dental, and other appropriate services;
- Parents or guardians of homeless children and youth are informed of educational and related opportunities available to their children, and are provided with meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children;
- Parents and guardians and unaccompanied youth are fully informed of all transportation services, including transportation to and from the school of origin, and are assisted in accessing transportation services;
- Enrollment disputes are mediated in accordance with the requirements of the McKinney-Vento Act; and
- Public notice of the educational rights of homeless students is disseminated to locations where children and youth receive services under the Act.

In meeting these responsibilities, local liaisons will assist homeless children and youth with activities such as the following:

- Enrolling in school and accessing school services;
- Obtaining immunizations or medical records;
- Informing parents, school personnel, service providers and advocates of homeless children and youth of the duties of the liaison;

⁶ “LEA” refers to the Local Education Agency, or in this case, school district.

- Working with school staff to make sure that homeless children and youth are immediately enrolled in school pending resolution of disputes that might arise over school enrollment or placement;
- Helping to coordinate transportation services for homeless children and youth; and
- Collaborating and coordinating with State Coordinators for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth and community and school personnel responsible for providing education and related support services to homeless children and youth” (Evans-Tranumm 2004, pages 8-9).

Clearly, the local liaisons play vital roles in ensuring that students have equal educational access. In the case of districts with high mobility, liaisons have a particular role to play not only in ensuring that at-risk students have equal educational access and information about and access to a range of services, but also ensuring that transportation services are provided that might reduce the *academic* transiency of residentially mobile homeless children.

If a child becomes homeless and relocates outside the school district, the student is entitled to remain in the district of origin for the duration of the homelessness, with transportation arranged for and provided by the school district as long as the transportation is not in excess of 50 miles each way⁷.

And yet, only one parent interviewed for this study related the efforts made by a school district to retain his child by arranging out of district transportation after they had been made homeless through a foreclosure. This happened only after several weeks in which the parent drove the child back and forth to the school district, as he was not aware of the legal provisions requiring districts to provide educational stability for homeless students. At the same time, the district was likely not aware of the family’s circumstances until several weeks after the fact, and with the exception of several families who had to depend upon DSS placement in temporary housing, none of these interviewed parents self-identified their circumstances as “homelessness.”

Parents are rarely aware of these rights guaranteed to their children, and districts often may be in *non-compliance* with these regulations because they are either not fully aware of the circumstances of the child, or the specifics of the law. Regardless, school districts must develop protocols to ensure that mobile students who meet the criteria to be categorized as homeless are accorded the rights guaranteed them and are provided with the opportunity to remain within the school district despite the uncertainty of their housing circumstances. Clearly, and especially in rural areas, more information is needed within schools and the broader communities not only about the services to which homeless children and families are entitled, but also *who* is entitled and under which circumstances.

⁷ See Tranumm 2004 for further details on transportation provisions, accessed on line at: http://nysteachs.sricbores.org/ed_rights/index.htm

Recommendations

The evidence from this study and others strongly suggest that many if not most of the root causes of student transiency originate not necessarily within the school, but rather are linked to the broader, societal problems of poverty, lack of access to living wage jobs, and lack of affordable, adequate housing (Fitchen 1995; Bruno & Isken 1996; Capps and Maxwell 2002). Compounding the problem, schools that often experience the greatest degree of mobility are those that have the *least* resources at their disposal (Schafft forthcoming). Because of this, federal and state policy makers need to develop clear understandings of the many ways in which poverty and educational underachievement intersect. Clearly, access to affordable, decent housing is not only a means toward residential stability, but also increased chances of academic success and social integration of children from low-income families. Similarly, from the standpoint of schools and school districts struggling to achieve Adequate Yearly Progress within a high-stakes testing environment, steps must be considered so that schools do not find themselves penalized for underachieving, mobile students.

Despite the deeper, structural roots of poverty-driven mobility, schools are nonetheless faced by these challenges that will very likely be long term. There are steps that schools can take to better work with mobile students and their families.

Creating an Inclusive School Environment

One of the main experiences of chronically mobile students is that of social and academic dislocation. A recent Pittsburgh study found that when mobility is standardized with the equivalent harm done by classroom absence, the results of a move in year one were found to be equal to being absent 32 days in the second year and 14 days in the third year (Dunn, Kadane & Garrow 2003). Family moves fundamentally disrupt the routines and relationships that provide coherence to a child's daily experiences, both social and academic (Wood et al. 1993).

Because of this, schools should make efforts to create welcoming and inclusive environments for newly entering students. This may include creating student volunteer "buddy" programs, and established mentoring and orientation protocols. New students should be provided ample opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities, particularly through direct invitation. Welcoming informational packets for both new students and parents can be created, and in general schools should work to establish a range of procedures and activities that integrate new students both socially and academically into their new environments as quickly as possible (Paik and Philips; Popp et al. 2003).

Particular attention should be given to ways in which school personnel might be more responsive to parents of mobile children. The parents interviewed for this study

consistently spoke glowingly of districts in which they felt listened to and in which they felt teachers and other school personnel made extra efforts to establish open lines of communication. On the other hand, they spoke bitterly of schools in which they felt dismissed, ignored or excluded. This speaks to the need for ongoing training and professional development of staff around the particular needs and circumstances of mobile students and their families.

Professional Development and Training of Staff

Particularly because of the difficulty in identifying homeless students, the definitional grey areas (perhaps more so an issue for rural districts) and the need to link with other social service agencies, regular professional development and staff training around issues of poverty, transiency and homelessness are needed. General awareness training should be provided to all staff regarding the needs and circumstances of highly mobile children and families. Districts should work closely with state homeless education coordinators to ensure that staff understand the legal provisions of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, the educational rights of students in homeless situations and the responsibilities of school districts and other local service providing organizations. Education around these issues does not end with school personnel however, but should extend to school board members, parents and the community more broadly. Again, as noted above this would assist in working more productively and sensitively with parents of mobile students who may have had negative experiences in their past interactions with school personnel. Regular training and professional development would also better enable school staff to identify families in need of services, and alert the appropriate personnel so that needed referrals or outreach can take place.

Making Data-Driven Decisions

Districts are often aware of mobile students transferring in and out, but are not as aware of the specific demographics or categories of mobile students (e.g. “migrant,” “homeless” or other group), how patterns of mobility may change over time, over the course of the academic year, or across grade levels. By better identifying and understanding these patterns, districts would be able to more effectively allocate district resources, targeting student populations most at risk. Maintaining an ongoing database of student movement also would aid in better understanding the geographic areas within which most movement is confined, and therefore provide information that could be used upon which to base inter-district coordination.

Strategic Coordination with other School Districts and Agencies

One of the key findings of this work is the highly localized nature of most student movement. In many cases 50 percent or more of in-state student movement was confined to a handful of adjacent or neighboring districts. Because of this many districts have

clear opportunities to establish strategic partnerships with nearby districts that share mobile students. In many cases this coordination could be facilitated by the BOCES unit or units within which the districts are located. This would aid in the speedy and efficient transfer of student records and therefore the efficient academic placement of new students as well as the provision of additional social support services. Districts would also be well advised to build and maintain a strong web of partnerships with local, county and regional social service agencies particularly because of the *geographic* scope of student and family mobility as well as the fact that the issues affecting many mobile families are beyond the scope of what schools alone are able to address.

Student transiency represents a significant range of issues for many rural families and rural schools. Although largely hidden from view, it is both a consequence of and a contributing factor to a broader and long term community disadvantage. Schools are on the front line and can play a vital role in both identifying these issues and developing strategic responses that will ultimately affect not only the well-being of mobile students and their families, but of the schools themselves and the communities they serve.

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