



FRAGILE FAMILIES RESEARCH BRIEF

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The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study changed its name to The Future of Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). Due to the issue date of this document, FFCWS will be referenced by its former name. Any further reference to FFCWS should kindly observe this name change.

Mothers' Residential Mobility Following the Birth of a Child

A large body of research suggests that residential mobility may have negative effects on child wellbeing across multiple domains. Mobility, particularly chronic mobility, may adversely affect children by removing their parents from existing social networks and potential sources of social capital and by increasing maternal stress and disrupting parenting routines. Each of these factors is expected to increase children's behavioral problems and interfere with their cognitive development. Although the short term effects of residential mobility may be negative, the long term consequences may be positive, especially if the family moves to a higher quality neighborhood. Moving to a better neighborhood may provide mothers with improved job opportunities, offer their children better schools, and reduce the external stressors associated with living in a poor neighborhood.

This brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine the frequency and correlates of mothers' and children's residential mobility during the first three years after birth. Whereas past research on mobility has typically focused on school-aged children and adolescents, we focus on families with young children. Moreover, our data contain a large over-sample of children born to unmarried parents and minority parents. Thus, we are able to examine racial-ethnicity and marital status differences in the prevalence and correlates of residential mobility.

Data and Methods

The Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study [see box on back] follows a cohort of roughly 5,000 parents and their children living in twenty large cities throughout the U.S. This brief employs data from the first three waves of interviews, which correspond approximately with the child's birth, and first and third birthdays. At each of the follow-up interviews, mothers were asked to report the number of times they had moved since the previous survey. They also report on their relationship status. The sample for most of the analysis is limited to mothers who were interviewed in the first three waves and who had

data on each of the relevant covariates ($N = 3,913$). For the analysis of change in neighborhood poverty among movers (column 3 of Table 2), the sample is limited to mothers who were interviewed in all three waves, who indicated that they moved between interviews, and who had neighborhood data and data on each of the covariates ($N = 1,653$). Neighborhood poverty is measured as the proportion of people in the census tract who have incomes below the poverty line.

Findings

Table 1 reports the total number of moves the mothers (and children) experienced during the three years following the birth of their child. Only one-third of mothers were residentially stable for all three years. About two-thirds of mothers moved at least once in the three years following the child's birth, with about one-third of mothers moving only once and another third moving two or more times. Roughly 16 percent of mothers moved one or more times *each year* (three or more times in the three year period).

Table 2 examines the patterns of residential mobility in the year following the child's birth for mothers by relationship status and by race-ethnicity. The first column reports the

Table 1. Frequency of Moves Between Birth and Three-Year Interview

Number of moves from birth to age 3	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	1325	34	34
1	1261	32	66
2	698	18	84
3	353	9	93
4	154	4	97
5 or more	122	3	100
Total	3913	100	

proportion of mothers who moved once in the year following the birth of the child and the second column reports the proportion that moved two or more times in that year. Roughly 70 percent of the moves over the three-year follow-up took place in the first year. Thus we focus on these early moves.

As shown in Table 2, thirty-three percent of mothers moved at least one time between birth and one-year and twelve percent of mothers moved two or more times. These numbers vary substantially by mother's relationship status: 54 percent of mothers who were single at birth and at the one-year interview moved at least once, whereas only 29 percent of mothers who were married at both waves moved. Stably cohabiting mothers moved more than married mothers but less than single mothers. Mothers who experienced a relationship transition experienced more moves than stably married or cohabiting mothers – roughly fifty-five percent of mothers who married or started cohabiting with the child's father and mothers who divorced or broke up with the child's father experienced a move. Lastly, mothers who married or moved in with a new partner in the year following the child's birth experienced the most residential mobility. Among this group, about 69 percent moved at least once and 21 percent moved two or more times. Surprisingly, there were not large racial differences in residential mobility. Forty-eight percent of black mothers

moved at least once, compared to 44 percent of Hispanic mothers and 41 percent of white mothers.

When mothers move, are they likely to move to neighborhoods with better or worse living conditions? The last column in Table 2 reports the proportion of mothers who experienced an increase or decrease in neighborhood poverty of ten percentage points or more. As the table indicates, most mothers move into neighborhoods that are similar to their original neighborhoods (more than two-thirds of mothers fall into this group). Among those who experience a change, more mothers move up rather than down in terms of neighborhood quality. This pattern varies slightly by relationship status and race. More than one-quarter of mothers who married or moved in with their child's father in the year following the birth experienced an improvement in neighborhood quality, as measured by the poverty rate. Less than five percent of mothers in this group experienced a decline in quality. Interestingly, about 20 percent of mothers who divorced or moved out of their partner's home also experienced an improvement in their neighborhood conditions, whereas 15 percent experienced a decline. Among mothers who moved in with or married a new partner following the child's birth, 17 percent moved into better neighborhoods and 16 percent moved into worse neighborhoods. White mothers experienced the least amount of change (positive or negative) in neighborhood

Table 2. Proportion of Mothers Moving Between Birth and the One-Year Interview and the Proportion of Movers Who Experienced a Change in Neighborhood Poverty, By Relationship Status and Race-Ethnicity

	Moved X times in year following child's birth		Change in neighborhood poverty among movers ^a
	One	Two or more	
All mothers – average	0.33	0.12	.19/.13
Single (both waves)	0.40	0.14	.20/.15
Cohabiting (both waves)	0.34	0.11	.19/.13
Married (both waves)	0.24	0.05	.14/.10
Single > Cohab/Married Child's Father	0.35	0.21	.29/.04
Cohab/Married > Single	0.36	0.17	.21/.15
Single > Cohab/Married New Partner	0.48	0.21	.17/.16
White	0.31	0.10	.11/.07
Black	0.36	0.12	.24/.16
Hispanic	0.30	0.14	.14/.13
Other race	0.27	0.08	.14/.10
N	3913	3913	1653

^a The first number is the percent of mothers who experienced a decline in neighborhood poverty of 10 percentage points or more. The second number is the percent who experienced an increase in neighborhood poverty of 10 percentage points or more.

poverty when they moved. Nearly one-quarter of black mothers experienced an improvement in neighborhood conditions, whereas about 16 percent moved into worse neighborhoods. Roughly the same proportion of Hispanic mothers moved into better neighborhoods (14 percent) as moved into worse neighborhoods (13 percent). The patterns described above are similar if we look at movement between the one- and three-year waves.

Conclusion

Residential instability is high among mothers in the Fragile Families sample. Roughly two-thirds of mothers moved one or more times in the child's first three years of life and nearly half (45 percent) moved at least once in the child's first year. Mothers who experienced relationship transitions were most likely to move. Moreover, only about one-third of mobile mothers moved to neighborhoods that were significantly different than their previous neighborhoods and among this group, more mothers ended up in neighborhoods that were less poor than in neighborhoods that were poorer.

These results suggest that children – particularly children born to mothers in unstable relationships – are at substantial risk of experiencing a move some time during early childhood, which means that they are at great risk of experiencing some of the consequences associated with moving. Although some mothers who move are able to improve their neighborhood circumstances, for most mothers this is not the case. Over 80 percent of mothers are moving to neighborhoods that are similar or worse than their previous neighborhoods in terms of poverty, which might suggest that, in most cases, mothers' moves are not intentional efforts to improve their child's environment, but rather responses to changes in their own financial or relationship situation and to changes in the rental markets that make it difficult for new mothers to find secure housing. One way of reducing mobility among new mothers may be to increase access to stable and safe affordable housing. A voucher or some other form of subsidized housing may foster stability for a new mother even as her economic situation fluctuates and her relationship status changes.

RECENT WORKING PAPERS

The following comprises a list of the most recent Working Papers authored by the Center for Research on Child Wellbeing (CRCW) faculty and research associates. A complete list of Working Papers is also available for viewing and downloading on the CRCW web site: <http://crcw.princeton.edu/publications/publications.asp>

2007-22-FF: Christopher Wildeman “Parental Incarceration, the Prison Boom, and the Concentration of Childhood Disadvantage”

2007-21-FF: Maureen Waller “Shared Parenting in Disadvantaged Families: Early Contexts, Interpretations, and Implications of Parental Caretaking”

2007-20-FF: Maureen Waller “How Do Disadvantaged Parents View Tensions in their Relationships? Insights for Relationship Longevity among At-Risk Couples”

2007-19-FF: Sarah Meadows “Family Structure and Fathers' Well-Being: Trajectories of Physical and Mental Health”

2007-18-FF: Christine Percheski, Christopher Wildeman “Becoming a Dad:

Employment Trajectories of Married, Cohabiting, and Non-resident Fathers”

2007-17-FF: Sharon Bzostek “Social Fathers and Child Wellbeing: A Research Note”

2007-16-FF: Carey Cooper, Sara McLanahan, Sarah Meadows, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn “Family Structure Transitions and Maternal Parenting Stress”

2007-15-FF: Bill Chiu, Marie Crandall, Karen Sheehan “Risk Factors for Infant Asthma in Susceptible Families”

2007-14-FF: Shirley Liu, Frank Heiland “New Estimates on the Effect of Parental Separation on Child Health”

2007-13-FF: Maren Andrea Jimenez, Xiuhong Helen You, Yolanda C. Padilla, Daniel A. Powers “Language of Interview: Importance for Hispanic Mothers' Self-Rated Health and Reports of Their Children's Health”

2007-12-FF: Laura Hussey “Are Social Welfare Policies ‘Pro-Life’? An Individual Level Analysis of Low Income Women”

2007-11-FF: Marcia Carlson “Trajectories of Couple Relationship Quality after Childbirth: Does Marriage Matter?”

2007-10-FF: Jean Knab, Irwin Garfinkel, Sara McLanahan, Emily Moiduddin, Cynthia Osborne “The Effects of Welfare and Child Support Policies on the Incidence of Marriage Following a Nonmarital Birth”

2007-09-FF: Cynthia Osborne “Is Marriage Protective for All Children? Cumulative Risks at Birth and Subsequent Child Behavior Among Urban Families”

2007-08-FF: Kristin Turney, Kristen Harknett “Neighborhood Socioeconomic Disadvantage, Residential Stability, and Perceptions of Social Support among New Mothers”

2007-07-FF: Lawrence Berger, Marcia Carlson, Sharon Bzostek, Cynthia Osborne “Parenting Practices of Resident Fathers: The Role of Marital and Biological Ties”

2007-06-FF: W. Bradford Wilcox, Edwin Hernandez “Bendito Amor: Religion and Relationships among Married and Unmarried Latinos in Urban America”

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Inside...

This research brief uses data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study to examine mothers' residential mobility in the three years following a child's birth.

For more information about the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, go to <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu> and go to "About Fragile Families" and "Collaborative Studies." To review public and working papers from the Fragile Families Study, go to <http://www.fragilefamilies.princeton.edu/ffpubs.asp>.

A Publication of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University.