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## "LIVING HERE HAS CHANGED MY WHOLE PERSPECTIVE": HOW ESCAPING INNER-CITY POVERTY SHAPES NEIGHBORHOOD AND HOUSING CHOICE

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### **Abstract**

*Research on the housing choice voucher program and housing mobility interventions shows that even with assistance, it is difficult for poor minority families to relocate to, and remain in, low-poverty neighborhoods. Scholars suggest that both structural forces and individual preferences help explain these residential patterns. However, less attention is paid to where preferences come from, and how they respond to policies and social structure to shape residential decisionmaking. In this paper, we use data from fieldwork with 110 participants in the Baltimore Mobility Program (BMP), an assisted mobility voucher program, to demonstrate how residential preferences can shift over time as a function of living in higher opportunity neighborhoods. Since 2003, BMP has helped over 2,000 low-income African American families move from high-poverty, highly segregated neighborhoods in Baltimore City to low-poverty, racially mixed neighborhoods throughout the Baltimore region. Along with intensive counseling and unique program administration, these new neighborhood contexts helped many women to shift what we term residential choice frameworks: the criteria that families use to assess housing and neighborhoods. Parents who participated in the mobility program raised their expectations for what neighborhoods, homes, and schools can provide for their children and themselves. Parents report new preferences for the "quiet" of suburban locations, and strong consideration of school quality and neighborhood diversity when thinking about where to live. Our findings suggest that housing policies should employ counseling to ensure relocation to and sustained residence in low-poverty communities. Our work also underscores how social structure, experience, and policy opportunities influence preferences, and how these preferences, in turn, affect policy outcomes. © 2014 by the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Persistent residential segregation by race and income is an enduring feature of America's urban areas, and it can be detrimental for the development and well-being of the children and families who live in racially isolated neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Aber 1997; Newman, 2008; Sampson, 2012). Despite high rates of residential relocation, low-income African American families who reside in high-poverty communities rarely escape them, and are more likely to remain in such neighborhoods than their nonblack counterparts, even accounting for differences in income (Logan, Stults, & Farley, 2004; Quillian, 2012; Sampson & Sharkey, 2008). In theory, recent federal housing policy has the potential to expand the geography of opportunity for these families, and

specific policies, such as the Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCVP) have partially adopted the goal of deconcentrating poverty.<sup>1</sup>

However, studies of the housing voucher program show that, despite the deep rental subsidies and lack of geographical restrictions, low-income minority families rarely leverage the program to relocate to neighborhoods of higher socioeconomic opportunity (Devine et al., 2003; Feins & Patterson, 2005; Galvez, 2011). This is also true for families in some assisted housing mobility programs, where in addition to vouchers, they receive counseling about neighborhood choice and are required to lease-up in low-poverty neighborhoods (Boyd et al., 2010; Clampet-Lundquist & Massey, 2008). Despite the promising findings for Chicago's Gautreaux program (DeLuca et al., 2010), more recent mobility programs have come under scrutiny for their failure to promote tenure in low-poverty neighborhoods. For example, in the years following their initial move, most of the experimental group families in the Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) Moving to Opportunity (MTO) program returned to higher poverty communities, as did many of the families in Chicago's second Gautreaux program (Boyd et al., 2010; Orr et al., 2003).<sup>2</sup>

Some scholars argue that this is evidence that housing policy cannot intervene to trump preferences for familiar neighborhoods or proximity to same race neighbors and kin (Clark, 2005, 2008; Cook & Wing, 2012; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 1997). Findings from a recent Baltimore housing intervention provide a different story, however. Since 2003, the Baltimore Mobility Program (BMP) has facilitated the moves of over 2,000 families from high-poverty, mostly African-American neighborhoods, to low-poverty, mostly white neighborhoods in the counties surrounding Baltimore City.<sup>3</sup> Between one and eight years postmove, over two-thirds of these families are still living in integrated, low-poverty communities (DeLuca & Rosenblatt, 2009). Why are these outcomes so different from MTO, Gautreaux II, and the conventional voucher program? We show that exposure to radically different neighborhood contexts along with counseling shifted program participants'

<sup>1</sup> While the arc of federal housing policy has shifted away from supply-side unit construction, and more toward programs that emphasize mixed-income developments and tenant-based choice, we want to make clear two important points. First, there are very different kinds of voucher programs. The families who used vouchers to move out of public housing during the Housing Opportunities for People Everywhere (HOPE VI) demolitions did so involuntarily and without explicit counseling about where to live. The Moving to Opportunity experiment was, in contrast, a voluntary assisted mobility program, but the experimental group families were required to move to areas on the basis of poverty rate, not racial composition, and received counseling before their first move only. The Baltimore Mobility Program we discuss in this paper is also a voluntary assisted voucher program, but it helps families move to neighborhoods that are low poverty and mostly non-African American. Also, extensive counseling is provided before the first move and within the 24 months after relocation, and it is available for any "second" moves families need to make after their initial lease-up. Second, the motivation behind any of the Department of Housing and Urban Development's (HUD) subsidized housing programs is complex, politically contingent, and not necessarily in service of any one goal, including the goal of geographic choice or mobility (Bonastia, 2008; Fitts, 1978; Goetz, 2012).

Turner identifies 54 assisted mobility programs operating in 33 metropolitan areas as of 1998 working alongside or in partnership with the Section 8/Housing Choice Voucher program (HCVP; Turner, 1998). The Quality Housing and Work Responsibility Act (QHWRA) enacted by congress in 1998 also explicitly adopted the goal of deconcentrating poverty in part through the provision of voucher programs to displaced residents of public housing projects. HUD handbooks for public housing authorities identify spatial mobility as a goal of the HCVP and the Section 8 program, and HUD has evaluated PHAs according to whether their beneficiaries lease-up in neighborhoods with below average poverty (HUD, 2007, 2008, as cited in McClure, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Scholars who tracked a randomly drawn sample of Gautreaux II participants found that 53 percent of those that successfully leased-up made a secondary move (as of 2005—three years after the start of the program) and that 81 percent of those secondary movers ended up in nonopportunity neighborhoods (42 percent of all movers; Boyd et al., 2010).

<sup>3</sup> As a point of comparison, more families have successfully leased-up with the BMP ( $N = 2,054$ ) than in all of the MTO cities combined ( $N = 1,676$ ) (Orr et al., 2003).

preferences in ways that increased the likelihood that they would stay in high-opportunity neighborhoods. In fact, some parents told us that initially they would have preferred to use their vouchers in city neighborhoods, rather than moving to unfamiliar suburban neighborhoods. As we describe below, some of the same respondents told us that after having lived in more advantaged neighborhoods, they changed their minds and wanted to stay.

Through fieldwork and interviews with 110 participants in the BMP, we show that with the aid of intensive pre- and postmove counseling, the program helped families lease-up and remain in low-poverty, mixed race communities, and it exposed them to neighborhood contexts that, on many dimensions, were more beneficial for their children's educational and social opportunities than their original communities. This counseling, as well as sustained exposure to low-poverty neighborhoods, led many women to shift what we term residential choice frameworks: the criteria and rationale families use to evaluate trade-offs in housing and neighborhood options, and to assess the relative costs and benefits of different environments for their children. After participating in the BMP, families raised their expectations for neighborhood resources; they showed new appreciation for schools, neighborhood "quiet," and racial and ethnic diversity. Moreover, families demonstrated that they were willing to make difficult trade-offs—engaging new choice frameworks and shifting past priorities—to stay in these communities and benefit from the access to the socioeconomic resources they provide.

## BACKGROUND RESEARCH

Decades of research document that living in racially isolated, poor, and crime-ridden neighborhoods hinders the development and well-being of children and families (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Aber, 1997; Carr & Kutty, 2008; Ellen & Turner, 2001; Sampson, 2012; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002; Sharkey, 2013; Wilson, [1987] 2012). One aim of federal housing policy over the last two decades has been to deconcentrate such disadvantage by equipping low-income renters with vouchers to be used in the private housing market, through special mobility programs and, increasingly, through the regular HCVP (Galster, 2008).<sup>4</sup> Yet, HCVP recipients rarely use their vouchers to move to low-poverty neighborhoods (Devine et al., 2003; Feins & Patterson, 2005). Similarly, evaluations of HUD's MTO program showed that less than 25 percent of families in the experimental group, who were given housing vouchers and counseling and successfully leased-up in low-poverty neighborhoods, were still living in such communities four to seven years later (Orr et al., 2003; Sanbonmatsu et al., 2011). Research on a large sample of Gautreaux II movers showed that approximately 81 percent of second movers ended up back in nonopportunity areas (Boyd et al., 2010).

Researchers generally advance two kinds of explanations for the low lease-up rates and limited tenure in low-poverty areas seen among MTO, Gautreaux II, and HCVP participants: structural constraints and individual preferences. Supply-side constraints, such as racial and source of income discrimination by landlords, as well as lack of access to public transportation, limit the residential attainment of low-income families and mobility program participants (Boyd et al., 2010; Briggs, Popkin, & Goering, 2010; Rosenblatt & DeLuca, 2012; Yinger, 1995). Paired-tester studies continue to show that minorities are told about and shown fewer rental units than whites (Turner et al., 2013; Wienk et al., 1979). Moreover, housing markets

<sup>4</sup> Again, while poverty deconcentration was not part of the original goal of the Section 8 program, since the 1990s it has become more of an implicit and explicit goal for HUD (McClure, 2008, 2010).

and zoning practices hamper moves outside of poor inner-city tracts, since there are fewer affordable rental units in lower poverty neighborhoods (Briggs, Popkin, & Goering, 2010; Schuetz, 2009; Schwartz et al., 2012). Finally, aspects of housing policies—such as voucher time limits and portability restrictions—make it difficult for poor households (particularly low-income African Americans) to move to, or stay in, low-poverty or racially mixed neighborhoods (DeLuca, Garboden, & Rosenblatt, 2013; Greenlee, 2011).

In other research, preferences are invoked to account for residential attainment and racial segregation (Bobo & Zubrinsky, 1996; Clark, 1991; Emerson, Chai, & Yancey, 2001; Harris, 1999; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 1997). Some scholars hypothesize that the preferences of low-income minority (typically African American) families to live in predominantly same-race neighborhoods or near kin drive their residential decisions, and that these processes explain the disappointing results observed in voucher programs (Clark, 1991, 2008; Cook & Wing, 2012; Patterson, 1997; Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 1997). However, the empirical data on revealed preferences tell a different story. While whites report having grown more tolerant of living in mixed-race areas, they nonetheless prefer mostly white neighborhoods. By contrast, African Americans say they prefer more integrated neighborhoods with 50/50 (or mixed) racial composition (Bobo & Zubrinsky, 1996; Charles, 2005; Ellen, 2001; Farley, Fielding, & Krysan, 1997; Farley et al., 1978). In fact, blacks demonstrate the lowest levels of *mutual in-group preference* of all racial groups, and it seems that white avoidance of black neighborhoods is a stronger determinant of residential patterns than black preferences (Charles, 2003, 2005; Emerson, Chai, & Yancey, 2001; Bobo & Zubrinsky, 1996).

While analytically helpful, conceptualizing residential attainment as a matter of structural barriers and individual preferences invokes a false dichotomy. As suggested by Bobo and Zubrinsky (1996), observed patterns of residential segregation are not solely the aggregate result of individuals' unrestrained preferences about where to live (Schelling, 1971), nor are they completely determined by social forces (Briggs, Comey, & Weismann, 2010; Bruch & Mare, 2006). However, research on residential decisionmaking is less developed than that on neighborhood attainment, and often assumes families make calculated decisions using widely recognized criteria about the costs of housing and the benefits of neighborhood characteristics and amenities (Cadwallader, 1992; Clark & Flowerdew, 1982; Speare, Goldstein, & Frey, 1975; Shlay, 1985). Little research examines which preferences or world-views actually drive the housing choices of low-income minority families and the trade-offs they make when their preferences must be reconciled with structural constraints (Briggs, Comey, & Weismann, 2010). In order to improve housing policies to reduce concentrated poverty and segregation, we must understand how structure and preferences interact, and how preferences develop.<sup>5</sup> Social scientists have long engaged in debates about the causes of urban poverty, but recently Quane and Wilson (2012, p. 2977) argue that we should focus more specifically on “how individual agency engages with the restricted range of social and structural constraints in socially isolated inner-city neighborhoods.”<sup>6</sup> It is helpful to think about how

<sup>5</sup> Specifically, Bowles (1998, p. 75) argues that “if preferences are affected by the policies or institutional arrangements we study, we can neither accurately predict nor coherently evaluate the likely consequences of new policies or institutions without taking account of preference endogeneity.”

<sup>6</sup> We are not the first to examine how the behavior of low-income families seems puzzling in light of the trade-offs and consequences these behaviors have for their relative success in mainstream institutions. Classic sociological studies have shown that, rather than evidence of deviance, the behavioral norms and modes of action employed by families living in the ghetto are often strategic and adaptive responses to environments of racial isolation and economic constraint (Anderson, 1999; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Hannerz, 1969; Venkatesh, 2006).

families' experiences in the "restricted range" of neighborhoods shape their neighborhood choice behavior and the evaluative criteria they use when deciding where to live, and therefore how, if a policy intervention expanded this range of neighborhoods, these choice frameworks might change.

For the low-income minority families who are the beneficiaries of housing programs, their perceptions of housing and their strategies for maximizing their housing options are significantly shaped by years living in public housing, concentrated poverty, and racial isolation (Hannerz, 1969; Wilson, 2009, [1987] 2012; Young, 2004). These experiences introduce specific concerns and criteria into the choice frameworks from which residential and other preferences are derived and lead families to value strategies that allow them to get by in such contexts. In contrast to longstanding debates about neighborhood preferences, scholars have found that poor families tend to value *housing* units over *neighborhood* quality, because they spend much of their time in the home in order to "keep to themselves" and avoid violence (Boyd et al., 2010; DeLuca, Wood, & Rosenblatt, 2011; Furstenberg et al., 1999; Rosenblatt & DeLuca, 2012; Wood, 2012). In other words, the assumption that families choose neighborhoods in the first place may be mistaken. Recent studies provide suggestive evidence that families are more focused on the relative quality of housing units rather than the relative quality of neighborhoods in the metropolitan area; in other words, choosing among a menu of neighborhoods is an enterprise most families never engage in to begin with. This happens in part because families lack a tangible sense of how widely neighborhoods can vary, but also because they have learned to navigate the streets effectively to stay safe, to speak to only certain neighbors, and to value "being known" (Anderson, 1999; Rosenblatt, Edin, & Zhu, in press; Sharkey, 2006; Young, 2004). Families in ghetto neighborhoods have learned how to survive there, and some discount the relative importance of neighborhood quality in light of their street smarts and long tenure in the neighborhood.

For example, when some of the MTO and Gautreaux II families who moved to low-poverty neighborhoods (with vouchers and program assistance) were forced to leave their homes by landlords or poor housing unit quality, or did so to accommodate bigger families, they faced considerable trade-offs. The more expensive but smaller units in suburban areas lost out when compared to the less costly, larger units with more bedrooms available in greater supply back in the city. Despite recognizing that lower poverty neighborhoods were beneficial, some of the MTO families felt that the space was important for raising their children, and some who were still employed in city locations found that proximity to work was necessary to save time and lower gas costs (Briggs, Comey, & Weismann, 2010; Boyd et al., 2010; Rosenblatt & DeLuca, 2012). The logic and strategies voucher holders had previously used to survive in high poverty, racially isolated places shaped their perception of the trade-offs involved in moving back, even after living in a low-poverty neighborhood.

Among poor families, including those in MTO, past experience in underperforming schools in high-poverty areas also shaped the logic of school choice. Such experiences led parents to prioritize perceived school safety and familiarity, potentially at the expense of choices that might have provided more academic enrichment (Briggs et al., 2008; DeLuca & Rosenblatt, 2010; Rhodes & DeLuca, in press).<sup>7</sup> When

<sup>7</sup> Similar ideas have been discussed for decades in the school desegregation literature. Gewirtz (1986) describes the difficulty inherent in the choice-based plans used by some school districts to comply with desegregation orders, since black families were unlikely to choose unfamiliar white schools for fear of reprisal. Indeed, *freedom of choice* school desegregation plans placed the burden of change on families who faced very real threats of hostility. Other research shows that students who have attended schools dominated by racial and ethnic minorities often view mixed or predominantly white environments as hostile (Braddock, 1980; Trent, 1991; Wells & Crain, 1994).



considering school choice, poor parents are faced with trade-offs about proximity to work, the location of childcare, and concerns about the dangers of sending their children into new, unfamiliar schools (Briggs et al., 2008). Unlike middle-class families, poor parents rarely consider schools as part of their residential decisions, especially when residential moves are unpredictable and finding affordable housing close to work and childcare is already such a challenge (Rhodes & DeLuca, in press). Even when families make affirmative efforts to send their children to schools that they perceive as relatively good, families still may not maximize opportunities to send their children to the most academically enriching schools (Briggs et al., 2008; Condliffe, Boyd, & DeLuca, in press; Rhodes & DeLuca, in press).

In this paper, we explore how preferences about neighborhoods and housing were shaped by an intensive housing mobility program that radically changed families' neighborhood contexts. Just as experiences of ghetto poverty shape the calculus and strategies that families use to find housing, a policy that moves families *out* of concentrated disadvantage can help modify those strategies. We describe what happens to the residential preferences of these same families when, through a supportive housing intervention, they experience radically different neighborhoods, with better schools, higher quality housing, and less crime, for sustained periods of time. We find that participation in the BMP shifted family preferences in favor of school quality, neighborhood quiet, and racial diversity. BMP achieved these results, apparently more effectively than other mobility programs, because of programmatic and counseling support, and also because it enabled families to live for at least one year in truly resource-rich, high-opportunity neighborhoods.<sup>8</sup>

### Residential Choice Frameworks

In this paper, we refer to the preferences, evaluative criteria, and associated *mental maps* that families consider when thinking about where to live—and especially when making trade-offs among perceived goods—as residential choice frameworks. Residential choice frameworks consist of general and abstract preferences that may be relatively enduring, such as the desire for a safe and high-quality home in a good neighborhood; they also include more specific criteria that people rank and weight when evaluating various attributes of housing, neighborhoods, and spatial location while seeking a home.

Evaluative criteria may include the qualities of community or place destinations as well as the qualities of housing units and possibly also local schools. As opposed to lists of hypothetical preferences identifiable through surveys, we seek to understand how specific evaluative criteria enter into the choicemaking process and get prioritized. While families may list preferences in the abstract, what matters most for where they end up are their priorities and the specific trade-offs they make when faced with constrained resources. These are the attributes they look for, assess, and weigh against each other while they make decisions. For example, families could desire both a large housing unit to reduce conflict among their teenage children and a safer neighborhood, but cannot afford both. This might lead parents to trade

<sup>8</sup> The criteria used by BMP to identify opportunity neighborhoods—further defined below—matters, since BMP employed both racial and income composition criteria in identifying target census tracts where participants would be eligible to live. This means that BMP likely resulted in relocation to higher opportunity neighborhoods and regions as compared to both MTO (which did not consider racial composition in defining opportunity areas) and Gautreaux II (which had a neighborhood poverty rate target of 23.9 percent or less, as opposed to 10 percent or less required by BMP; see also Boyd et al., 2010; Clampet-Lundquist & Massey, 2008).

on safety in a less expensive neighborhood where they can rent a larger apartment (Wood, 2012).

Experiences in and exposure to alternative units and neighborhoods provide content for the evaluative criteria people use to assess potential residential units, by generating awareness of the benefits to specific attributes of homes and places.<sup>9</sup> Many families have not experienced the full menu of neighborhood and school options and thus have not had the chance to incorporate criteria such as school enrichment opportunities or average school test scores into their choice frameworks. Direct experience may also lead families not only to consider new criteria of evaluation, such as the attributes of homes or neighborhoods, but also to potentially rank or prioritize those attributes differently.<sup>10</sup>

Exposure to alternatives also establishes comfort with certain environments and can expand the range of places within families' mental maps, or places in which they will realistically consider living (Adams, 1969; Johnston, 1972). Families have told us that in the past they never considered certain neighborhoods because they did not know anything about them—in other words, these areas were not part of their choice frameworks. Choice frameworks thus importantly include blind spots (Krysan & Bader, 2009) on cognitive maps of potential residential locations—places that may be unfamiliar, or expected to be so hostile or inhospitable that respondents never even think of them as viable places to live (Krysan & Bader, 2009; Sharkey, 2012). In this paper, we show that these residential decisionmaking frameworks and processes can be changed as a function of the intensive counseling of the BMP, and also as a function of residence in low-poverty communities.

#### THE INTERVENTION: BALTIMORE'S MOBILITY PROGRAM

The BMP arose as part of the remedy in a class action desegregation lawsuit. In 1995, a class of plaintiffs sued HUD and the Housing Authority of Baltimore City (HABC) for failure to provide public housing residents equal access to integrated, nonpoor neighborhoods across the metropolitan region (*Thompson et al. v. HUD et al.*, #95-309-D. MD). Plaintiff complaints highlighted a long history of discrimination in public housing siting practices within Baltimore. The court approved a partial settlement in 1996 (in ruling on a later phase of the case, the court in a 2005 opinion held that HUD, but not HABC, was liable for violating the Fair Housing Act). One part of the 1996 partial consent decree called for the provision of housing vouchers that would provide rental assistance to members of the plaintiff class and other qualified applicants. Program architects built an innovative program that has established new best practices in eliminating programmatic barriers to geographic mobility found in other programs, such as HCVP. For example, BMP is regionally administered and dispenses with traditional portability rules that make it difficult

<sup>9</sup> There may be features of choice frameworks that are broadly held despite differences in of race, class, or past experience, such as the socially recognized value of owning a home. Distinctively American norms or *master frames* (Snow & Benford, 1992), such as the allure of the single-family home and the prize of home ownership (Jackson, 1985; Shlay, 1985; Wood, 2012), may be widely shared, even if not universally attainable. But beyond broadly shared views, residential choice frameworks can be idiosyncratic or patterned by group membership and experience. The literature on racial residential preferences, for example, suggests that blacks, whites, and Latinos use different choice frameworks; one implication is that low tolerance by whites for black neighbors as well as neighborhood *blind spots* (Krysan & Bader, 2009) may perpetuate racial segregation.

<sup>10</sup> We build on Druckman and Lupia (2000) who argue that experience constructs the set of objects and attributes that are ranked and evaluated in the exercise of preferences, and thus, "preferences are neither stable nor invariant" (2000, p.12). If distinctions in attributes are not made, they cannot be ranked or evaluated and thus do not even enter into choicemaking or preference expression.

to lease-up in a wide variety of geographic areas (see Greenlee, 2011). The program also utilizes a higher payment standard (rent allowed up to 120 percent of the Fair Market Rent [FMR]) that helps families afford to rent in high-opportunity areas and removes financial incentives for leasing-up in low-priced inner city areas. Through the assistance of a local foundation, the program also provides security deposit assistance. These aspects of program administration are critically important components that allow for the voucher to be used in neighborhoods of higher socioeconomic opportunity.

Eligible class members include former and current family public housing residents, anyone on the waiting list for public housing, and anyone on the waiting list for Section 8/HCVF assistance through August 2002, and special priority has been given to families displaced by the demolition of family public housing projects. The decree rules that vouchers must be used in census tracts that are low poverty and racially mixed. As applied, this means that the initial use of the vouchers is targeted to census tracts where no more than 10 percent of households are below the poverty line, where no more than 30 percent of the residents are African American, and where no more than 5 percent of households receive public assistance. Voucher recipients are required to live in such low-poverty, racially integrated tracts for a minimum of a year, after which they are allowed to move to any area of their choice and still retain their voucher. In other words, families can move after a year into a nonopportunity tract and still retain their voucher assistance. Importantly, the voucher is regionally administered within the Baltimore metropolitan area, allowing families to use the voucher to move between cities and counties without having to navigate the complicated barriers of traditional portability arrangements that require the transfer of the voucher from one agency to another when a family crosses jurisdictional lines. The voucher can be used within the broader Baltimore region including Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Howard County, Carroll County, Harford County, Anne Arundel County, and Queen Anne's County.

Since 2003, Metropolitan Baltimore Quadel (MBQ), a private contractor, has been administering the ongoing BMP program. Potential program participants undergo a process verifying their eligibility (their income and residence in public housing or standing on the waiting list) and undergo background checks (similar to what would be required for a HCVF voucher). After this, participants are required to attend a series of workshops and counseling sessions in which they are prepared for moves to counties and provided with skills and coaching in negotiating with landlords, maintaining their households, and budgeting. Participants are provided with a copy of their credit report and shown how to make progress to clear outstanding debts, so that they will pass landlord credit checks and save for a portion of the security deposit. They also must show that they have a steady stream of income (either from employment or social assistance) to pay for their portion of rent and utilities. They are also given guidelines for the neighborhoods in which they can lease housing. Program administrators also conduct inspections to ensure that respondents end up in high-quality housing, and avoid leasing units on block faces or in rows with vacant or abandoned homes.

### Counseling<sup>11</sup>

In addition to exposure to radically different kinds of neighborhoods, an intensive counseling process helps participants shift their thinking by providing information

<sup>11</sup> These programmatic details have been gathered through extensive conversations with the director and staff of MBQ, as well as observations we conducted during multiple counseling and voucher-briefing workshops during the summer of 2012.



about new neighborhoods, including community-based resources and amenities such as good schools, and safety. Household heads eligible for vouchers participate in large group briefings and workshops, as well as one-on-one counseling sessions. Counselors and workshop facilitators encourage program applicants to think about the benefits that living in higher opportunity areas can bring to their children and families. Through detailed PowerPoint presentations and motivational talks, they highlight gains in safety and school quality, as well as the quality of the homes and the quiet neighborhoods that participants can enjoy with their new moves. Facilitators show pictures of suburban neighborhoods and tell stories of former inner-city residents who have embraced county living; they also invite families to visualize their lives in quiet, safe suburban neighborhoods with high-quality schools.

Counselors also provide tours of suburban neighborhoods and show families available rental housing. Moreover, the program works to recruit willing landlords, and through a partnership with a local foundation, helps participants with a portion of their security deposits. Upon successful completion of the training and application process, program participants are provided with vouchers (rental subsidies that cover a portion of their rent, based on income) and allowed to lease-up in a unit of their choosing in census tracts that meet the program criteria (<10 percent poor; <30 percent African American; <5 percent subsidized renters). Some respondents rely heavily on the counselors to pinpoint available units, while others find units mostly on their own, and call the counselors to make sure the unit is in an allowable tract. Counselors also do postlease-up home visits over the subsequent 24 months, and they counsel program participants, who are considering moving after their original BMP lease-up, to help participants remain in high-opportunity neighborhoods.<sup>12</sup> Additional initiatives help support families once they have moved to new areas. There is a program to help participants purchase cars, and in 2008, counselors were also trained to inform families about the quality of the schools in the suburban neighborhoods, and compare them to those in their original city neighborhoods.

As of 2012, 2,055 families have moved with the special housing vouchers provided by the settlement.<sup>13</sup> In stark contrast to findings from MTO, Gautreaux II, and the HCVP, but in line with the long-term findings from the original Gautreaux program BMP participants have used vouchers to move to radically different contexts from where they began (Boyd et al., 2010; DeLuca & Rosenbaum, 2003; Keels et al., 2005; Pashup et al., 2005). Respondents moved from neighborhoods that were, on average, 80 percent black and 33 percent poor, to neighborhoods that were 21 percent black and 8 percent poor. More than two-thirds of these families were still living in low-poverty and racially mixed neighborhoods between one and eight years later (Rosenblatt & DeLuca, 2012).<sup>14</sup> In other words, gains in access to opportunity neighborhoods resulting from BMP appear to be relatively durable, even after subsequent relocation. This is especially noteworthy, considering that families are only required to stay in

<sup>12</sup> *Second-move counseling* began in 2008 to assist families considering a move out of their original BMP units.

<sup>13</sup> The final settlement was handed down in November 2012, which provides for the issuance of an additional 2,600 vouchers as well as additional funding to support current voucher holders.

<sup>14</sup> As of 2012, 64 percent of the BMP movers were in low-poverty (<10 percent poor) neighborhoods. However, more than half of the families who moved with the program stayed in their original neighborhood even after the one-year mark. Among the families that moved after their original placement, 74 percent were still living in low-poverty neighborhoods between one and eight years later (see DeLuca & Rosenblatt, 2009). In this respect, families' experiences parallel those who moved through the Gautreaux program in Chicago (DeLuca & Rosenbaum, 2003), but differ significantly from the residential outcomes of the families in the MTO program (Orr et al., 2003).

low-poverty, nonsegregated neighborhoods for one year; after this time, they can move to any neighborhood they choose.<sup>15</sup>

## DATA AND METHODS

In order to understand how changing neighborhoods shapes the residential decisionmaking process, we use data from 110 qualitative interviews with a sample of BMP participants and applicants.<sup>16</sup> Eighty-eight of these families were actively using voucher assistance provided by BMP at the time of the interview and had successfully leased-up with the program in a qualifying tract, although some may have subsequently moved. The qualitative sample was drawn from administrative data containing demographic and contact information for the full sample of BMP participants ( $n = 2,055$ ) obtained through an agreement with MBQ (the program administrator). The qualitative sample was selected randomly from within strata that identified the county of first program move (Baltimore City, Baltimore County, Harford County, Howard County, Carroll County) and the timing of the move (recent moves from 2008 to 2012 vs. early movers from 2003 to 2007). We also recruited 22 families deemed eligible for the program, but who had only attended the initial BMP briefing. To generate this sample, we randomly selected one-fifth of the participants attending one of three initial briefing sessions, which averaged over 30 participants per session. These households had not yet obtained or moved with BMP vouchers—we refer to these as “not-yet-moved” families. Qualitatively, the not-yet-moved sample provides a comparison group, similar to the active movers, by virtue of plaintiff class membership and motivation to sign up for and attend a briefing, but they have yet to experience the counseling and relocation to a higher opportunity neighborhood. Only families with at least one child between the ages of 10 and 18 were selected for the qualitative study.

As intended, this sampling design yielded heterogeneity in the longer-term residential trajectories of these families—trajectories that we reconstructed using interview and administrative data. Among the 88 movers we interviewed, 63 percent moved with the program to a suburban county and then either stayed at the same address, moved to another address in the same county, or moved to another suburban county; 19 percent moved to a suburban county with the program and returned to the city; and 6 percent were *boomerang* cases who moved to the suburbs, went back to the city, and left again for the county (often to return to better schools).<sup>17</sup>

Table 1 shows characteristics of the movers in the qualitative sample. All of the household heads interviewed were African-American females, except for two African-American males. Most had three or more children and received at least some form of federal assistance (most often Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits). About half were employed and approximately two-thirds had completed high school, a General Educational Development (GED) equivalent, or a nursing certification.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Gautreaux II and MTO had the requirement to remain in targeted opportunity neighborhoods for at least one year, though each program defined opportunity neighborhoods using different indicators.

<sup>16</sup> This is out of a target sample of 134 families, for a participation rate of 82 percent.

<sup>17</sup> The remaining cases included families who originally leased-up in low-poverty areas in the city, when, in the early years of the program, these areas were deemed eligible (7 percent); families who did not have their own homes, but were doubled up with relatives who were living in the county at the time (5 percent). These proportions are not representative of the distributions of residential trajectories for the full administrative sample.

<sup>18</sup> This table does not include data on not-yet-moved families because we could not validate data from interviews with administrative data (since these families had just signed up for the program). However,

**Table 1.** Characteristics of qualitative sample of “movers” (families using BMP voucher).

	Mover	N
Average age of household head	35.8	88
Number of kids in family		88
No kids	0	
One to two kids	29.5%	
Three or more kids	70.5%	
Gender of household head		88
Female	98.9%	
Male	1.1%	
Race of household head		88
African American	100	
Average family annual income	\$21,099	86
Receiving federal assistance		86
SSI	26.7%	
SNAP	89.5%	
TANF	31.4%	
Unemployment	7.0%	
Employment status		88
Employed	47.7%	
Unemployed <sup>a</sup>	52.3%	
Level education		83
Less than HS degree	14.5%	
HS degree or GED <sup>b</sup>	66.3%	
Some college	15.7%	
College degree	3.6%	

Notes: Total number of cases (N) used to calculate percentages vary due to missing data.

<sup>a</sup>Unemployed includes one retired respondent.

<sup>b</sup>HS degree or GED includes those with nursing certifications while college degree includes those with nursing degrees.

From June to November 2012, we conducted semistructured, in-depth qualitative interviews and observations with the household head. Interviews lasted, on average, two hours and ranged from 90 minutes to four hours; almost all interviews were conducted at the respondents’ current place of residence, except for five interviews done in public venues such as McDonalds when respondents preferred to talk outside the home. Respondents were offered a \$50 stipend for participating. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and transcripts were coded with MAXQDA.

All interviews opened with the invitation to “tell us the story of your life,” and as the interview progressed, we asked about family history, schooling, employment, and children. In lieu of a baseline survey, we gathered detailed residential histories and retrospectively collected information about all units respondents inhabited both before and after applying for BMP. We asked respondents to tell us about every move they made since they first moved out of their parents’ home, including the reasons why they left one housing unit and how they ended up in the next one. We gathered the details of every housing search, including information about homes not rented but desired. We employed extensive follow-up questioning and used a

this subsample was also all African American and female, with the exception of one male. The interviews show that the not-yet-moved families are similar to the movers with respect to employment, assistance, educational attainment, and family size.

housing history chart that we filled out with respondents to help record all of the details. Similar to life-history research that relies on *temporal references*, such as calendars or grids, we found that respondents seemed to peg their memories about their residential experiences to other life events and transitions (Berney & Blane, 1997; Freedman et al., 1988). We asked questions about all of these events—family history, the births of all children, school information, all jobs, and any significant romantic partners. We also employed neutral questioning strategies to ensure respondents felt comfortable sharing sensitive personal information and evaluating neighborhoods.<sup>19</sup>

Our qualitative approach was designed to uncover variation in evaluations of housing and neighborhoods, and to solicit descriptions of residential attainment processes and program experiences. In contrast with surveys, in-depth qualitative data, along with residential histories, allows renters to explain how they make trade-offs, which criteria they report using when seeking housing, and the experiences that shape their housing searches. Surveys and vignette studies (e.g., Emerson, Chai, & Yancey, 2001; Farley et al., 1994) may more systematically reveal preferences in the abstract, but our work describes how preferences interact with experiences and constraints, given the reality of difficult trade-offs facing voucher holders. Qualitative data uncover the social processes and mechanisms behind residential attainment, and how these change after program participation and exposure to new environments. These processes are described below, and include instances where respondents watched their children's learning improve as a result of greater teacher attention, or the growing comfort they experienced with the quiet of suburban neighborhoods.

While the BMP families were not randomly assigned to their neighborhoods, the intervention did introduce a significant source of exogeneity in residential choices, because the BMP *was the only available source of rental assistance to low-income families in Baltimore at the time of our study*. The regular HCVP waitlists were closed as of 2003 (except for disabled applicants), so families in need of housing turned to the BMP as a way to get assistance. In a prior period, they could possibly have gotten a conventional housing voucher to be used anywhere; instead, the families who qualified for the BMP and wanted to receive a voucher also had to comply with the requirement that they move to a low-poverty, nonminority tract. Most of these families had no experience with the surrounding suburbs and admitted to considerable hesitation during the early stages of the counseling process (as evidenced in the discussion below of not-yet-moved families). We believe that, while not equivalent to a random assignment treatment, the BMP introduced variation into the neighborhood contexts of these families that was less likely to have occurred if they had moved with a conventional voucher. In addition, families were only required to lease-up for one year in low-poverty, racially mixed communities. Any moves made after the one-year period reveal, in part, preferences for these neighborhoods.

<sup>19</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing out that there are some challenges to retrospective interview data. Responses may be reinterpreted in light of current experiences, and therefore some respondents may have exaggerated the changes resulting from their relocation with the Baltimore program (see also Mason, 2004; Reissman, 2008). However, dissonance theory suggests that respondents would attempt to "maintain a coherent self-image" and thus would be more likely to describe attitudes that are consistent with current thinking and would "under-report actual change rates" (Jaspers, Lubbers, & de Graag, 2009, p. 289) Therefore, the changes families report in their thinking about residential priorities could be considered even more striking.

## RESULTS

We begin by describing how counseling prepares families for living in new kinds of neighborhoods, helps families find units in target neighborhoods, and supports families in staying in high-opportunity neighborhoods. We then describe changes in the way families think about residential decisionmaking with examples from three different domains: school, comfort with neighborhood atmosphere, and neighborhood racial and ethnic diversity. The sections on neighborhood atmosphere and social context show how new environments change what is comfortable to respondents in ways that also potentially improve mental health, shape future residential decisions and attainment, and lead respondents' children to experience cultural and racial diversity. Finally, we include a section showing how not-yet-moved respondents described their current and future potential residential locations, and how they anticipated moves to county neighborhoods through BMP.

### Counseling and Workshops

As described above, potential voucher recipients are required to participate in workshops and one-on-one counseling sessions. As part of our fieldwork, all members of the research team attended at least one introductory briefing, and some also attended additional workshops. The counseling process broadened the choice set of voucher holders by highlighting the benefits of high-opportunity neighborhoods and helping participants to imagine themselves living—and thriving—in unfamiliar places. Workshops and counseling sessions introduced criteria with which to evaluate city versus county living. Tasha, a 31-year-old mother of three living in Howard County, described the process for us:<sup>20</sup>

They [counselors] let me know that I would have to move into a county. They were trying to get you out of that city, rowdy, noisy, they try to put you somewhere where you can get tranquility somewhere, and that you can get a peace of mind, somewhere where your kids have better opportunities at the schools, and everything like that.

Counselors began the sessions by asking participants to imagine their dream homes from the inside out, and told stories of past participants who were “just like them” to encourage potential movers to think in new ways about the significance of residential location. Candace, a 32-year-old woman with one son, told us how the program worked:

[It gets]you out of those types of crowded neighborhoods and put you somewhere so you can have a fair shot just like everybody else who . . . move[s] in these neighborhoods for a reason—for a better schools; for peace and quiet . . . they don't want their children exposed to—drugs and stuff—so we get those opportunities.

When families were ready to move, counselors helped them include a new neighborhood as part of their comfort zone by connecting them to the neighborhood's local resources, such as libraries, schools, and grocery stores. Tasha explained this to us:

I just take my hat off to the MBQ [program administrator] because they don't put you somewhere and just leave you stranded, leave you vulnerable, not letting you know what's

<sup>20</sup> All respondent names used in this paper are pseudonyms that respondents were asked to choose at the beginning of the interview. We also use pseudonyms for all place names and street names with the exception of county names. Other identifying details of respondents are removed or changed (such as respondents' work places).



going on with your neighborhood and your surroundings and the schools. They let you know everything you pretty much need to know before they even put you in the house; before they even let you sign on the dotted line of the lease.

This is an example of the intensive counseling provided by the BMP program, which goes beyond finding units to helping families grow accustomed to their new contexts. Initial counseling and second-move counseling also encouraged families to value county resources and reinforced families' original reasons for wanting to move. Monique, a 33-year-old mother of two, described how counseling influenced the difficult trade-offs she made about where to live. A few years after moving to Anne Arundel County, Monique's mother became sick, and she considered moving back to the city. Her counselor, Mr. Jones, reminded her that her "whole reason for joining BMP was to get away from that school and to move so my kids can go to a better school . . . my whole reason for moving out here was to benefit my child." Indeed, she reported that, since leaving the city, her son Chris's grades had improved and he was no longer getting into trouble—he had also learned to play saxophone. Monique heeded Mr. Jones' advice and decided to stay in her son's school zone.

### When Preferences Change

While counseling provided respondents with information to evaluate county neighborhoods, direct experience allowed families to see the benefits for themselves. Our fieldwork and interviews suggest profound differences in the way many of the parents in the BMP thought about where they live now, where they want to live in the future, and where they never want to move again. A striking response we heard from some of the parents who left the city was their insistence *never* to go back, a potentially surprising response considering that most (70 percent) of the BMP participants had spent their entire adult lives in Baltimore City. Danny, who moved to suburban Baltimore County seven years ago with her five children, said that she "would not go back to the city if somebody gave me a house for free." Tina, who used her voucher to move within a specific part of Harford County for her second BMP home, was adamant, when asked by her kids if she ever wants to go back to the city: "I'm not coming beyond those boundaries unless I'm forced to by teeth pulling to go." Columbia resident Dion said that she "hates going back to the city, it's depressing," and Monica, who also moved to Columbia, said "[I] wouldn't move from this home until Alex [her four-year-old son] is basically out of school . . . when they think of their childhood, this is the house . . . this is the neighborhood I want them to remember." Even after the death of her grandmother and pressure to help her family, Shelley, a 48-year-old mother of four, stayed outside of the city boundary because "it's not the atmosphere for my kids."

Avoiding the city is one thing, but do parents report thinking differently about where to live, and do they assess their housing and neighborhood choices with new criteria? In our sample of suburban-county movers, 60 percent reported what we consider to be changes in their residential choice frameworks. In this tally, we include participants who talked very *explicitly* about making decisions differently after their participation in the program; those who reported (often despite pressure from family and transportation woes) *staying* in the neighborhood to which they moved with BMP because they appreciated the amenities of the area, such as shopping centers, or the schools; and cases where parents remarked strongly that the neighborhoods they experienced through the program made them *think differently* about

what kinds of places they wanted to live, who they could be, and what their kids deserve.<sup>21</sup>

Some of the mothers with whom we spoke were very specific about how they made housing decisions after their first BMP relocation. Yolanda, who first moved with the program in 2004, told us that before she moved, “[I] would be looking for the price” and now, “by them being up by their school, I was looking for a house in this area—[her current zip code]—only.” Alias, a mother of two who learned about BMP while living in a shelter in the city, remarked that, when making a second move with the program in Howard County, “I wanted to stay within [this specific] zip code because of the school.” After Hope lost her job and wanted to save some money, she left her first apartment in Howard County and returned to Baltimore City with her daughter, Nisha. However, she turned right back around and returned to Howard County again when Nisha started getting into fights. Hope explained, “the schools wasn’t as good . . . when I moved her back to the city . . . stay out here? I can’t do this . . . I’m going back to the county.” Five of the women in our sample described similar boomerang trajectories after temporarily leaving the county for a city return only to realize they wanted to be *back* in a county. Thirty-three-year-old mother of three, April, described an even more specific and graduated change in how she assessed neighborhood quality after moving to a low-poverty area in southeast Baltimore County, and then making an additional move further north in the county:

A decent neighborhood is just mediocre. To me this is a great neighborhood. I’m very satisfied here. I like it. Dundalk [first move neighborhood], that was like you know how you’re getting off the step and you buy your first car? Your first car is not the best car. It’s the car that you just got into, what you could just afford. I don’t know, say my first car was a Honda Civic. So you just go. So when I moved from the city to that transition to the county, I was like okay, I like this. But now I found something ten times better.

While such specific accounts of neighborhood and school quality emerged from the interviews, evidence of an even more general, and possibly deeper, shift in perspective emerged among some of the county movers. A few of the women talked about how neighborhood environment affects the way they view themselves and their life possibilities. Mila, a 28-year-old mother of two sons, described wanting a different life for her children because “living in the ghetto . . . if this is all you see, this is all you know, everybody else is doing the same thing, so it kind of makes you feel like okay well this is the way it’s supposed to be.” Tiffany, a Georgia native and mother of two sons, said that when she first moved to Howard County she was anxious that she and her children would not “fit in,” with the new neighbors, but instead found that “they made you change who you was . . . and make you feel like you was a better person.” Similarly, Miss Smith, a mother of three, said that when “you move into an area that has so much more, it pushes you to get where they at. I want to have so much more like they had . . . what you’re around is what you are . . . because some people just comfortable with nothing in life. I’m not.” Tracey, who moved her family to Baltimore County, told us that “it feels good to be able to walk out your door and you don’t see nobody standing on your corner, piles of trash.” While her friends joked with her about why she did not come back to the

<sup>21</sup> In addition to the 60 percent of “changers,” another 26 percent were less specific about criteria or subsequent decisions, but evaluated county neighborhoods and schools as far better than those in the city. The remaining 15 percent reported that they either liked the city and the county equally well, preferred the city, or had a negative experience in the county. Of the cases we identify as having negative evaluations of the county ( $n = 13$ ), all but one case (who experienced racism in her new community) attributed it to the distance from work or family, or difficulty with not having transportation—not the neighborhoods themselves or the residents.

city more often, she explained that “I don’t forget where I came from, but I think I have grown more since I moved out here . . . you just appreciate the different living arrangement and I appreciate being out here.”

In a particularly detailed account, Tina, who lives in Harford County now, connected her move away from the city to a change in how she handled alcohol when coping with stress. When she was living in the city, Tina drank to excess around her children. “Because I was so adapted to the city I was drinking . . . but when I moved out here it just changed a lot . . . now I barely even touch a drink,” she said. Instead, she talked about a different daily routine:

I just go to work, come home and pay the bills and have fun with my children . . . I think the atmosphere that I was in, the friends that I had, they wasn’t no help to me because when I needed a shoulder to cry on . . . it was like let’s go take a drink . . . but the people I work with [here], but when I see them it’s “let’s go to work” not “let’s go take a drink.”

### School Preferences

One of the clearest examples of how BMP respondents added new evaluative criteria to their residential choice frameworks concerned children’s schools. For many in our sample, experiences in the suburban county schools appear to have raised respondents’ expectations for what schools and teachers should provide for their children. Of the families who described changes in residential preferences and evaluation, 82 percent mentioned schools as one of the primary reasons they stayed in the county or have since sought other housing nearby or in similar low-poverty areas. New schools may be among the most important benefits of BMP because school districts in the counties surrounding Baltimore City have lower rates of poverty and higher test scores than Baltimore City schools (DeLuca & Rosenblatt, 2011). For some respondents, only after these consequential experiences in suburban schools, did education and the link between neighborhood location and school zone become key criteria of consideration for subsequent residential decisions. Previous research suggests that, among low-income minority families, school-quality considerations almost never drive residential location, in part because of the many pressing demands these families already juggle, and in part because housing decisions are often made under unpredictable and involuntary conditions (DeLuca & Rosenblatt, 2010; Rhodes & DeLuca, in press). An influx of rental income may be necessary to access higher opportunity neighborhoods, but it is not always sufficient for parents to incorporate educational quality into their specific residential choices. Several respondents revealed that school was not a primary consideration for their first BMP move, but later, after experience living in counties, school zone became a priority.

Candace’s story offers an example of how education and concern for school zone entered into her choice framework as a result of her family’s relocation with the mobility program. As Candace told us her family history and described all of her previous residential moves, it became clear that, even though she viewed herself as a devoted and caring mother, school quality and catchment area were not factors that she had previously considered when determining where to rent a home. Candace was raised in a public housing project in Baltimore City, and her first home on her own as an adult was in the same development. Although a conflict with a neighbor, who provoked a fight and threatened her physical safety, compelled her to seek alternative housing and apply for the Baltimore program, she did not want to leave her old neighborhood and liked living close to her mother. Candace always felt slightly out of place living in “the projects” but had developed coping strategies to stay out of trouble, such as keeping to herself, and told us, “I was comfortable; I was close to my mom so I kind of like dismissed it [the initial offer of a voucher] like, ‘I’m alright here. I know how to keep to myself.’”

Upon receiving a voucher, Candace knew she had to move to a county neighborhood, but she was reluctant to make that change because of transportation concerns. She wanted to live in a unit with easy access to the light rail and one that was close to shopping, while still being able to travel to visit her mother in the city. She was also juggling various financial and practical concerns, and worried about living in a house where she had to pay extra for water, or having to do the yard work herself. Candace eventually located a unit in Anne Arundel County, in part because she had been taken on a tour of the area during which program counselors showed her the housing complex and informed her that units were available. When describing the factors that she considered when looking for housing through the BMP program she admitted, “I didn’t think about school . . . I thought about travel because I was like, ‘What about if I want to go see my mom?’ The Light Rail is . . . [nearby] and the bus runs across the street from the Wal-Mart—there’s a Wal-Mart over there.’”

When we met her, Candace had been living for three years in her new unit. She explained that she was determined to stay in her current home and neighborhood because she felt that her son was thriving in his current middle school. She told stories of how the teachers gave him individualized attention and positive feedback that has helped him improve his reading. The school also gave him outlets to develop his interest in art. She was somewhat dissatisfied with her apartment unit because it was small and had one bathroom, but she planned to stay in the neighborhood primarily for her son’s school. Now that Candace has seen how differently her son has been learning in a higher performing school, school zone is a key factor shaping her decision *not* to move away from her current unit and neighborhood. Candace herself has even done some training programs and taken classes at community colleges.

Mary, who had previously bounced between housing shelters and transitional housing programs in Baltimore City, moved to Howard County three years ago using a BMP voucher. Unlike Candace, Mary had education and school zone at the forefront of her mind at the time of her first BMP move, as she watched her middle-school-aged sons consistently make the honor roll at their city school and respond well to her added involvement in their homework. The relief provided by the voucher granted Mary the liberty to consider where her children might attend school—something that was too difficult before, when she was in an emergency mindset, trying to put a roof over her children’s heads. However, the BMP experience helped Mary prioritize school quality, and her experience in Howard County bolstered her consideration of school characteristics as part of her longer-term residential choice framework.

This is clearly illustrated in her housing search activities *following* her initial BMP placement. Mary was forced to leave her original BMP unit when her landlord decided to sell. Having seen her sons excel in a Howard County middle school, she was determined to remain in the neighborhood to keep them enrolled in their schools. Although she disliked the unit, because of its old “broken up” cabinets and “holes in the wall,” Mary made a second move to a nearby apartment complex for the sake of the school zone. She told us, “[I] hated this house, but I didn’t want to take the boys out of the school that they were in so I moved here . . . because I didn’t want to change them from another school, and I like the school that they’re in.”

Mary is now planning another move and hopes to even buy a home. Though she was feeling pressure from her extended family to move back to Baltimore City, and realized she could get more “bang for her buck” within the city (see Wood, 2012), she was even more determined to find a house that would allow her sons to stay in the local high school. Mary also cared a lot about unit quality and wanted to leave her current unit because she found the landlord unresponsive and unwilling to make repairs. Nevertheless, for Mary, school zone now clearly ranks first in importance, followed closely by unit quality and landlord responsiveness.

Lola also began to see school choice in a different way after watching her children thrive in Harford County schools. However, like almost all of the mothers we talked to, she balanced her newly heightened expectations about school with other competing needs and demands, such as proximity to work, and she has decided to move from Harford County to Baltimore County in order to be closer to work. Lola was in the process of going through her second program move when we met her, packing the family belongings in preparation. Prior to joining the BMP program, she had lived with her mom after fleeing an abusive spouse, and had only ever lived in neighborhoods in Baltimore City, having been raised in public housing. She originally did not want to leave the city where she has a very supportive and tightly knit extended family. However, the move to Harford County allowed Lola and her three children to find what she described as a “fresh start.” Lola’s primary concern, upon receiving her voucher, was to get more distance from her abusive husband and secure a place of her own. She also chose the unit in Harford County in part because it had everything she had dreamed of: it was a single-family house with a yard, a pool, and rooms for her three children.<sup>22</sup>

Upon moving, Lola immediately saw a transformation in her children and was struck by how much they liked going to school—a far cry from their attitudes about their previous school in the city. She described what it was like when her 12-year-old, Max, started school in the county:

He was happy to go to school, he was excited; came home to do his homework; wasn’t getting in no trouble; *cried* to go to school . . . Everything was great—the school— everything was great when we moved here. The move was just like a breakthrough for everybody; a change for everybody.

For Lola, heightened school expectations lead her to prioritize school zone in addition to her desire to live closer to her job. Lola decided to move closer to her job in Baltimore County, largely because she found the commute too onerous. However, she balanced this choice with newfound determination to keep her kids out of Baltimore City schools. The city-county line was now a clear boundary in her residential choice framework. Lola explained that, while she would like to move “closer to her job” in the city, she will not do it, because the city “school system . . . sucks, and since we’ve been here I notice that my kids actually love going to school.” Two years of living in Harford County have almost rewritten Lola’s geographic preferences. She says she will “never” move back to the city, in part because she has heightened expectations about schools.

### Quiet Neighborhoods and New Comfort Zones

Although the new suburban neighborhoods differed substantially by race and class from the original communities, mothers described becoming more familiar and comfortable in their new environments—a process that took time.<sup>23</sup> Almost universally, they used the term *quiet* to describe the most salient difference in pre- versus post-BMP neighborhoods. When we asked mothers to clarify this term, varied responses suggested that this newfound peace and quiet is similar to the relief from urban violence discussed by the mothers in the MTO program, who experienced significant improvements in mental health (Boyd et al., 2010; Kling et al., 2004; Ludwig et al., 2012; Turney, Kissane & Edin, 2013). As 57-year-old Marie recounted:

<sup>22</sup> Fortunately, in some of the more affluent suburban counties where the BMP counselors recruited landlords, families do not have to make trade-offs between unit and neighborhood quality.

<sup>23</sup> See Rosenbaum, DeLuca, and Tuck (2005) for similar stories from Gautreaux participants.



When we first moved they didn't like it because it was so quiet . . . and then one of [the children] woke up and said, "we slept good. We don't hear the ambulance, we don't hear police cars, we don't hear nothing." And I said, "I know." You get to sleep, don't have to jump up every time you hear . . . pop, pop, BANG, BANG, BANG!

Miss Smith, who lived in Howard County with her son, voiced this comfort in another way, and told us, "My leash has grown longer. It used to be real tight . . . I feel comfortable with my neighborhood, so I allow him [my son] to go certain places now that I wouldn't never allowed him to go [before]."

Some mothers mentioned feeling trepidation, when they first signed up for the program, about moving into new suburban areas with the BMP. Tasha, introduced above, lived in a low-rise housing project in Baltimore City her whole life, prior to moving to Harford County. She felt fear prior to her move, "Because by me living somewhere, one place for so many, three decades, I was really fairly just used to that." She told us it was quite a "step" to move from the place she'd lived her whole life to "something that I never been around or exposed to, I got kind of scared . . . if I don't fully be able to make it out there, you know I knew I didn't have my mom." However, after consulting her pastor, she took the leap and recounts, "I am so happy that I did it." Tasha described finding a new sense of "peace" in her environment, especially now that she had a backyard and privacy. She explained, "I love the transformation." Tasha's story suggests that even after a lifetime in the same poor neighborhood, and despite initial misgivings, a supported change in environment can broaden perspective and preferences.

Of course, expanding one's comfort zone was not a straightforward or easy process for everyone: Several mothers described missing the sociability of the city, or discussed feeling lonely or separate from social circles in both their current and previous communities. Yet, many respondents described eventually seeing themselves as no longer just a "city girl," suggesting that their behaviors, expectations, and sensibilities broadened and shifted along with the exposure to new places.<sup>24</sup> Vicki, who currently lives in Baltimore City with her four children, described hating the county when she first moved with the BMP. However, she told us that she may now actually prefer the county to the city, though she still thinks of herself at least partly as a city girl.<sup>25</sup> Vicki described her initial move to the Baltimore County as "torture at first, being all the way away from all of my friends and family and just being out there with nobody I knew. I was miserable actually . . . but I got a job and I wind up getting out of the funk." Like others, Vicki grew accustomed to the quiet and privacy of her county home. She described being happy that she could still visit "this loud city" with friends and family, but she was glad to "be able to go back home [to the county] where it's quiet." Vicki also said that being in the county forced her to become more "independent" from her own parents, and it also motivated her to learn how to drive and obtain her driver's license.

Lissa's story also demonstrates how residential experiences in the county can shift respondents' sense of what is familiar or comfortable. Lissa has come to think of herself as "more of a county girl" as opposed to a "city girl." While she has grown comfortable in the neighborhoods of Howard and Baltimore County, she has still struggled at times with a sense of isolation that she has found living there, and told us

<sup>24</sup> See also Rosenbaum, DeLuca, and Tuck (2005) and Rosenbaum, Reynolds, and DeLuca (2002).

<sup>25</sup> Hannerz (1969) emphasizes that there is significant heterogeneity in the types of people who live in ghetto communities, and considerable overlap in lifestyles and acquaintances even between the *mainstreamers* (who are like many of the movers in our study) who desire "less rowdy" places and the *street families* who rarely move up and out (pp. 38–53).

You have to understand I came from the projects to the suburbs. At one time I was kind of going crazy, but knew that it was the best thing for me, so I knew that I had to deal with it and get used to it. You know, I kind of wish that I was raised there, born and raised there . . . County girls are used to the peacefulness, the quietness, the isolation, whereas the city girls are used to getting up . . . What I mean by that is you had corner stores . . . It's a difference like no other. *But, I'm a city girl but I'm also a county girl now* . . . [emphasis added].

Lissa's moving trajectory reflects her broadening choice frameworks, and the complexities of negotiating past connections and experience with newfound benefits. When she first joined the program, she moved to Columbia, which she described for us "It was so beautiful. It was so peaceful. I could look out my window, and I would see beautiful greenery. That's what I wanted. And my daughter loved her school. She got involved with school. It was just great." However, after three years living in Columbia, she missed Baltimore City and moved back to a crime-ridden neighborhood—a decision she considered "a mistake" by the time of our interview. Lissa soon discovered that she hated living in such an area with in Baltimore City and described coming home to yellow police tape in front of her door one day after someone had been killed in front of her house. This led her to seek a unit in Baltimore County after only six months spent living back in Baltimore City. She explained that living in Baltimore County after her short return to the city made her feel "back on the right track." On county living, she said, "I'm in my comfort zone. I'm comfortable here . . . I [have] my peace back."

Lissa's residential history also shows that, previously, she prioritized "convenience" of location and proximity to her work in the city when looking for a housing unit. She explained that, when she first was offered her voucher through BMP, "I'm not going to lie; I was trying to stay in the city because it was convenient to work and stuff [friends and family]." She still viewed the long commute to and from work as a "downside" of living in Baltimore County; however, now that she has developed a "taste of the tranquility of living in the county," she no longer makes convenience of location her top priority when weighing housing options.

Initially, Rhonda, a mother of two teenage sons, expected to hate living in the suburbs, but after a year, she grew more accustomed to many qualities of county life, especially the "quiet" of her neighborhood. Like many respondents in our sample, Rhonda had a history of frequent and disruptive moving. Upon joining BMP and moving to Howard County, however, she has shown remarkable residential stability. Hers is a case in which changes in what is comfortable—and finally finding a comfort zone—altered her residential choice framework. The results are evident in her decision to *stay* in one place rather than move. Originally, Rhonda told us that she "was a little worried because I was so used to the city. I was a little scared, like man, we out here," and that she thought to herself, "I can't wait til this year is up" so that she could take her voucher and move where she wanted (since the program's location conditions expire after the first year's lease is finished). Although she missed being able to easily visit friends and live in familiar surroundings, she surprised herself by staying in the county. She told us, "here it is almost seven years later. I mean, I couldn't ask for a better place to be."

Rhonda was somewhat dissatisfied with the size of her apartment and the fact that she had to share one bathroom with her two teenage sons. Nevertheless, she stayed in the neighborhood, as she explained, in large part because of the schools. She also had a newfound appreciation for the "quiet" and "versatility" of her current neighborhood. She felt like she now had a choice about whether or not to be surrounded by people, social activity, noise, and "partying" in the city, but did not want that around her where "you gotta live it." She said she could also sleep better living in her suburban neighborhood than when she lived in Baltimore City.

Tasha also shared stories about what “quiet” meant to her in contrast to all of the noise and activity she experienced all hours of the day and night when she lived in city housing projects. Since she is no longer constantly worrying about managing her environment, she feels like she can focus more on some of her life goals, such as education:

And I’m ready to try to get myself back into some type of, like I said some type of program and things, and I’m more focused here. Because living there [in public housing] I was like on track, off-track, on track, off-track because it is so much that was going on around me . . . I was so much more focused on praying to get out of there, that I really couldn’t focus on too much else. Of course I’m focusing on my kids, but for the things that I wanted to do for myself, I couldn’t stay focused. So now I’m somewhere where it’s peace and quiet, and now I can stay more focused.

Tasha described what she terms a “transformation” as a result of the move to Harford County, where she has a backyard, greenery, quiet, and space outside of her home to enjoy (see Turney, Kissane, & Edin, 2013). She contrasted this with growing up in the city housing projects:

I had to basically barricade myself in my home . . . I couldn’t go sit out my backyard because I didn’t have one . . . I’m not going to sit on my front porch cause you had so much going on in front of you, that I choose not to want to see. So it’s just like it was like I was in a jail, but not in a jail. I didn’t have bars I could still come and go as I please, but I still felt like I was in jail. So that was the difference.

Tasha had cultivated coping strategies to navigate her previous high-crime neighborhood. However, moving to Harford County helped her realize that she could live in a neighborhood where sitting outside was not only safe, but conducive to life goals.

Mary Jones grew up in an East Baltimore public housing project and then lived in a series of units with assistance from a regular Section 8 voucher. All of the units she lived in with rental assistance from Section 8 were located in city neighborhoods. She had repeated problems with landlords and poor housing conditions, as well as frustrations with neighborhood safety, which led to repeated moves. However, the familiarity of the city remained a draw, even after joining the BMP program, and Mary Jones went back to the city often after her BMP move to the suburbs. Living in the county she wondered, “What am I supposed to do out here?” She explained, “All my life still was going on in the city so I was going back and forth, staying at my sister’s [and] burning gas.” Eventually, these trips became less frequent as she developed a routine and learned to “make use of my resources here.” Now, when her family asks, “You coming to the city today?” she says, “No, I’ll see you all another time.”

Mary Jones said she sees many benefits of county living for her children’s well-being in contrast to city living, where “it’s loud . . . from the sunup to the sundown.” She described the shift in her thinking that was catalyzed by her move: “I came to Howard County and never looked back. I mean and I am not ashamed of where I come from, but living here has changed my whole perspective on the opportunities that my kids have.”

BMP participants have discovered new comfort zones, broadened their residential choice frameworks, and reprioritized specific qualities of homes and places. Such changes can come into play in subsequent residential moves, or in efforts *not* to move. Escaping the violence and chaos of city neighborhoods has given mothers a chance to focus less on avoiding danger and more on reaping community benefits for their families. Neighborhood quiet may also be linked to the significant gains in mental health that other scholars of residential mobility programs have highlighted (Kling et al., 2004; Turney, Kissane, & Edin, 2013).

### New Expectations for Diversity

During interviews, BMP participants also revealed that living in more integrated neighborhoods has led them to better appreciate neighborhood racial and ethnic diversity (Boyd et al., 2010, for similar results in Gautreaux II). For instance, Rhonda, introduced above, explained that the exposure to ethnic and racial diversity she had while living in integrated neighborhoods had reshaped her thinking about where she would like to live in the future. This sensibility had also trickled down to her son. When asked to describe the places to which she would consider moving after having lived in Howard County, Rhonda responded that she would look for a place with different cultures or races—in her words, a place that is “versatile”:

I want versatile ... and my kids do too ... My son has told me that ... when my youngest son, we talk about colleges, he said, “Well, you know, everybody pushing me to go to Morgan,” he said, “But I wanna go somewhere where it’s versatile. I wanna go somewhere where there’s different [races].” Because that’s what he’s used to now.

After mentioning her appreciation for the schools and the quiet of her suburban neighborhood, Rhonda described exposure to diversity as what has kept her there the past seven years. At her job at the local Wendy’s, she has come into contact with a diverse community; she contrasted this with the racially segregated neighborhoods of Baltimore City. She was effusive about the diversity when we spoke with her, telling us what she liked in her area:

We have Filipinos. We have black people. We have Indians. We have white people. You know, in the city there’s white people and stuff like that, but you don’t have everybody in that one community like that, that talks to each other ... in the city, you don’t see that ... It’s like [only] one group of people, always, everywhere you go. Out here, it really gives you a chance to see people in different lights and learn more about different cultures.

Rhonda’s children also “love” it, and she added

we’ve grown a lot just being out here ... seeing the different way I’m living ... My kids never really was around different types of people until we moved out here. It’s like they fell right in. This has been a good experience, and I’ve learned a lot.

Brittney, another mother of two teenage sons, had a more varied experience with BMP. She moved from a place in Baltimore City (where she was staying with family) to Baltimore County through the program. She explained to us that “Baltimore County helped us learn how to deal with diversity and different cultures.” Brittney’s newfound appreciation for diversity was also shared by her younger son: “Randall, he likes the diversity. He likes being in schools with different [races].” Brittney’s family was terminated from the program when a boyfriend was caught at her home with drugs. Randall had to return to a mostly black school that also had a lot more fighting than his school in Howard County—and he told his mother he wanted to leave. Later, the family was reinstated into the program and Randall returned to a more racially mixed school. Brittney felt that, when her sons were at a school with a mix of races, as opposed to an all-black school, “it’s just a better [experience] ... they can see things differently. And, instead of being closed-minded about certain things, they can be more open-minded to other people.”

Despite the BMP experience, Brittney still leaned on strategies she had developed during a difficult upbringing in Baltimore City, when she effectively raised herself and her younger siblings because her mother was addicted to drugs. Brittney told us, “if I had to live in a bad neighborhood, [I] wouldn’t let it affect me and how we live inside our house. I still ... teach them the same rules, the same values, the same responsibilities, and they have the same respect ... versus ... all the negativity

that's outside the door." Nevertheless, she acknowledged that living in the county has led her to raise her expectations of her sons' schools and environments: "It's just being out here just opened my eyes to bigger and better things . . . Such as there's more opportunity for my kids, like as far as sports, as far as with the school."

### **A Counterfactual? The Not-Yet-Moved Families**

In the absence of random assignment, it is difficult to know the extent to which the BMP shaped participants' preferences, or whether successful movers already had residential choice frameworks that made them more likely to move to the counties in the first place. Although the within-person residential histories of the movers are compelling on their own, interviews with not-yet-moved families—a comparison group that qualified for BMP, but had only started the preparation process—lend insight into the views of participants *prior* to full program uptake.<sup>26</sup> While most not-yet-moved respondents were positive about the prospect of moving to county neighborhoods and anticipated benefits for their families, a majority also expressed some concern with going "so far" away from Baltimore City and losing proximity to jobs and family as well as the "convenience" of city living. By contrast, as indicated above, we found stronger positive evaluations of county neighborhoods and more specific mentions of positive attributes of county environments among those families who had already moved.

As has been shown in other studies of mobility programs, not-yet-moved respondents were eager to embrace a better life in the county and to leave behind violence (Briggs, Popkin, & Goering, 2010; Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2000). Sherry, for example, lives in a low-rise public housing project with her two middle-school-aged children and has removed all of her furniture from the ground floor of her unit because she is afraid of stray bullets. She told us, "I just want to get out of this environment . . . I don't feel like it's safe at all . . . I just want to make a change for me and my children." Potential movers echoed sentiments similar to Loredz, a mother of four who lives in a low-rise project in Baltimore City, who told us that counties, "will probably be better, probably be quieter, and [I] don't got to worry about all these instances of drama." However, in talking through their entire residential histories, it is clear that most not-yet-moved families have never actively considered nor sought housing in any county neighborhoods prior to applying for a BMP voucher.

The majority of the not-yet-moved respondents voiced concern about distance and lack of familiarity with suburbs. For example, Keisha, a 32-year-old mother of three, living in a large house in northeast Baltimore City, explained, "I never lived in the county so I couldn't even tell you how a county is . . . I just know you need a car to do anything." Similarly, Cory, a 49-year-old certified nursing assistant living near a low-rise public housing project in Baltimore City with her daughter and young granddaughter responded

I don't even know my way around up there (in Baltimore County). Those houses are beautiful, but I'm not going to let them stick me in the woods, I'm a city person . . . I need transportation so I can't go too far. I've got to think about all of that.

When asked about where he might like to live once he receives a voucher, John, who lives in a high rise owned by Baltimore Housing Authority, responded "Just something reasonable, close, near somewhere familiar. Not too far away from

<sup>26</sup> One can think of this group as a *staggered control group* (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). In theory, these families might also move with the program in the near future.



family, not too far away from work.” Voicing particularly strong resistance, Keisha said that if she moves to a county

my home will be there, but every weekend I will be gone . . . because I don't know nobody, I don't know the neighborhood, the only place I'm going to know is the walk out my door to catch the first bus.

Tracy, a woman in her late forties who lives with a sister and her sister's extended family in Baltimore City, explained, “I'm not going in that county with no vehicle . . . I want to be close to the job.”

Unsurprisingly, most of the not-yet-moved mothers said they care about good “environments” for their kids, and several had chosen homes in part because of access to what they perceived as “good schools” (Rhodes & DeLuca, in press). However, the specific attributes nonmovers looked for in schools were quite different than those mentioned by families who have relocated with the BMP. Movers remarked on the importance of individualized attention, access to resources such as musical instruments and well-provisioned science laboratories, teacher communication, and lack of fighting. These criteria were less frequently mentioned as indicators of good schools among the not-yet-moved families, and these families never mentioned a desire for diversity as a reason why they had chosen to move, either to past residences or their current address.

Unfamiliarity and lack of resources relegated families to neighborhoods they could afford, but might not prefer. Yet, families also expressed confidence in their ability to discount the influence of neighborhoods and schools they saw as less than ideal. Jane, a 32-year-old mother of two children who worked part time as a hair stylist, explained

I always was raised you live inside, not outside, so what went on outside really didn't bother me. It bothered me as far as being a parent, don't misunderstand, but I run my household how I want to run my household.

It makes sense that families would have restricted their prior residential searches to areas with which they were already familiar—even places with problems. Importantly, these were “known” troubles respondents had strategies to manage. Dior, a 22-year-old with two young children, described trying to find a “better environment” for her kids while staying in a very familiar part of the city:

I'm so used to what I know, everything was over there. I knew all of them little spots . . . [to live]. So, I chose to move into Western Apartments . . . It wasn't . . . a best place to live. But, it was mine, it was my safe haven . . . you stay out of trouble, you don't have no trouble.

In contrast with the sample of movers, the not-yet-movers' stories showed relatively low neighborhood and school expectations, as well as a tendency to discount the problems of neighborhood safety.

## DISCUSSION

The stories the BMP participants shared with us strongly suggest that this housing intervention has helped to reconfigure the residential choice frameworks of the families who received counseling and used their housing vouchers to move to low-poverty, mixed-race neighborhoods. Living in these opportunity-rich neighborhoods raised their expectations for what neighborhoods, homes, and schools can provide. These experiences brought new criteria, such as school quality, neighborhood tranquility, and ethnic diversity into consideration when thinking about where to live and whether to stay in some neighborhoods versus others, even when difficult trade-offs arose. The program also appears to have helped erase some of the

blind spots (Krysan & Bader, 2009) held by respondents when it came to mixed race or predominantly white suburban locations—an important step toward the broader goal of expanding access to safe and resource-rich neighborhoods for low-income African-American families. When asked to evaluate lists of neighborhoods in the greater Baltimore region (something we also did with prop lists during interviews), BMP participants indicated that they had increased the number of places with which they were familiar and in which they were willing to live as a result of their program participation. In doing so, the program provided families with more options for where they could live; the years that families spent living in safer, more affluent communities also provided the concrete motivation to secure housing in opportunity-rich neighborhoods in the future.

Our findings raise several questions for future research, and we acknowledge both the strengths and limitations of our data and research design. One advantage to our methodological approach—inductive analyses of residential histories and in-depth interviews—is that it uncovered rich variation in respondents' reported views about neighborhoods and housing. Perhaps even more importantly, residential histories revealed variation *within* individuals—reflecting reported change over time—in the criteria of evaluation that respondents said they used to assess housing options.

However, questions remain about the potential causes of the variation we observed, which our data do not allow us to definitively address. Our work raises an important set of questions about selection bias: which kinds of families are likely to move to higher opportunity areas using housing vouchers provided through mobility programs or the traditional HCVP, and which families will modify their long-term residential choice frameworks as a result of policy opportunities?<sup>27</sup> It is important to note, however, that the families we studied were not necessarily predisposed to move to suburban counties. Most of these families had no experience with the surrounding suburbs, and they admitted to considerable hesitation during the early stages of the counseling process. The families who signed up for the program also reflect, to an extent, the broader pool of assisted renters in Baltimore because the BMP was the only available source of rental assistance to low-income families in Baltimore at the time (since regular HCVP waitlists were closed as of 2003). Therefore, some of the women we interviewed did not want to live in suburban neighborhoods, but were desperate for housing and signed up for the program expecting to move after a year, while others were primarily positive about the prospects of moving to new areas despite their lack of familiarity with target neighborhoods. This bolsters our inference that program participation, while not a truly exogenous policy shock, had a meaningful impact on respondents' residential experiences and choice frameworks.<sup>28</sup>

Of course, there is still the chance that individual- and family-level factors may have also played a role in neighborhood selection, and our research design makes it

<sup>27</sup> The data used for this paper include interviews with successful movers (as well as not-yet-moved families), but not families who signed up for the program and never got far enough to receive the voucher. The program does not maintain up-to-date contact information for families who have dropped out of the program, and therefore, we did not have a reliable way to find them. However, the majority of the unsuccessful applicants are not program dropouts necessarily, but rather families who are in the pipeline for the program; that is, they are somewhere between a briefing and voucher receipt, and because of work schedules, family difficulties, or other issues, they have not completed the program requirements necessary to get the voucher. Because families vary so significantly in the amount of time since they first signed up for the program, and thus how long they have been inactive nonmovers, we thought it better to create a comparison group from scratch that would capture the whole process of going through the program, and shed light on why some families are successful and some are not.

<sup>28</sup> The program allows respondents to relocate *anywhere* after one year. The extent to which respondents remain in county neighborhoods is likely at least partly linked to shifted residential choice frameworks (see DeLuca & Rosenblatt, 2009).

difficult to parse program versus nonprogram impacts. Nevertheless, respondents' reports of interactions with counselors and the briefings that were held, as well as the reported shifts in the ways they thought about homes and neighborhoods over time, suggest that both the counseling and the new neighborhoods they experienced help explain subsequent residential decisions.

While we have focused on the choice frameworks of voucher participants, we hope that future scholarship will also attend to the choice frameworks of dominant groups, such as white middle class families. Indeed, structural limitations as well as the preferences of dominant groups may play the strongest role in perpetuating segregation. Future research should explore the types of interventions that could modify the residential choice frameworks of white middle class families so that they too might prefer more diverse communities. These dynamics are a critical part of the solution, as research has shown that the residential decisions and preferences of whites, especially to avoid black areas, are among the most important determinants of racial segregation (Bobo & Zubrinsky, 1996; Ellen, 2001).

### Policy Implications

Some have deemed past mobility efforts as failures, in part because it was thought that residential mobility policies were at odds with, and could not trump, long held preferences (e.g., Clark, 2008). However, our findings suggest that some mobility programs might not have had a strong enough treatment or offered enough supports to participants (Rosenbaum & Zuberi, 2010). Recent research on the long-term success of affordable housing programs provides additional evidence that some policy designs may be effective for promoting residence in high-opportunity communities while also conferring benefits to children and adults (Massey et al., 2013; Schwartz, 2010).<sup>29</sup>

We speculate that the BMP was so transformative in part because of how radically different BMP destination neighborhoods, and their regional contexts, were from origin neighborhoods. BMP participants were required to lease-up in very low-poverty census tracts (<10 percent poor, which is a high standard compared to Gautreaux II, which set a poverty limit of 23.9 percent). The BMP also used race in addition to tract-level poverty and subsidized housing assistance as proxies for high-opportunity neighborhoods, in contrast with the poverty-only criterion that MTO used. The racial criterion is important because, historically, predominantly African-American neighborhoods have been more vulnerable to economic decline than other areas, and because the schools in nonsegregated neighborhoods are higher quality, on average (Clampet-Lundquist & Massey, 2008; Massey & Denton, 1993). Moreover, a higher poverty threshold in Gautreaux II and a lack of a racial criterion in MTO meant that families in these programs often moved to tracts surrounded by other nonopportunity tracts that were less resource rich than the communities families moved to with BMP (Pashup et al., 2005; Rosenblatt & DeLuca, 2012).<sup>30</sup> BMP enabled exposure to place-based opportunity that is unrivaled even in other recent special mobility programs (but similar to the original Chicago Gautreaux program);

<sup>29</sup> We focus in this paper on how a voucher-based intervention alters families' preferences for housing, neighborhood, and school quality and discuss the implications of these improved settings. However, we do not conduct a cost-benefit analysis of the housing choice voucher program, or examine how an intervention such as the BMP might change the cost to benefit ratio for housing vouchers. For a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis of the conventional program, see Carlson et al. (2011).

<sup>30</sup> This is significant given research showing that the broader spatial and regional context surrounding neighborhoods, as well as the characteristics of individual neighborhoods themselves, can influence social processes and family outcomes (Massey & Denton, 1993; Sampson, 2012).

the striking contrast between origin and destination neighborhoods likely shaped the changes in choice frameworks described above. One policy lesson then, as other scholars have noted, is that it matters *how* opportunity neighborhoods are defined (Briggs & Turner, 2006).

Counseling was also crucial for the access to and tenure in such high-opportunity neighborhoods. The more extensive pre- and postmove counseling makes BMP stand out as compared to both MTO and Gautreaux II (Boyd, 2008; Boyd et al., 2010). Boyd et al. (2010) identify a relatively weak implementation of the Gautreaux II counseling program, which might explain the low lease-up rate of 36 percent. Weak counseling may have also made Gautreaux II participants more likely to end up in poorer quality units with less responsive landlords—two problems that most often motivated second moves away from opportunity.<sup>31</sup> Choice-based policies, such as school choice programs or housing voucher programs (Briggs, Comey, & Weismann, 2010; Briggs, Popkin, & Goering, 2010), can open opportunities for families stuck in disadvantaged neighborhoods and schools. But additional supports and resources, such as counseling and changes to *choice architecture*, may be necessary to introduce new logics of choice and thus help families maximize policy opportunities (Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). Our findings here, as well as evaluations of MTO, suggest that investment in both pre- and postmove counseling leads to positive returns in both lease-up rates as well as longer-term residence in opportunity neighborhoods (Briggs & Turner, 2006; Feins, McInnis, & Popkin, 1997; O’Neil, 2009).

Finally, the Baltimore program also included administrative features not present in the conventional voucher program, which helped families leverage their vouchers in low-poverty neighborhoods. The program included higher payment standards for the vouchers, as well as regional administration. Even *with* a housing voucher, many low-income renters cannot afford to live in middle-class neighborhoods, where unassisted renters often pay more than the metropolitan area determined FMR. The BMP provided payments up to 120 percent of area FMR to allow access to some of these more expensive suburban communities. Regional administration of the voucher means that families do not have to apply to multiple housing authorities with different offices and application procedures. In addition, families received assistance with security deposits that can also be more costly in the more affluent neighborhoods.

It is also important to note that the preferences of the BMP participants were not uniform, and not all of the families preferred city neighborhoods before they signed up for the program. While some of the participants were hesitant about moving to suburban areas, many participants were eager to leave their neighborhoods and the city. There were others who knew that they wanted a change, but were agnostic about where to go. In fact, most mobility programs are oversubscribed, despite the geographic requirements (Rubinowitz & Rosenbaum, 2000). It should also be emphasized, however, that while we focus our attention in this paper to the residential decisionmaking and preferences of low-income families, some of the most important barriers to geographic mobility and choice do *not* have to do with respondents’ preferences. Rather, as many studies have shown, supply-side barriers, such as limited high-quality affordable rentals, landlord discrimination against voucher holders, and administrative problems within housing programs themselves hinder

<sup>31</sup> Gautreaux II failed to promote lasting tenure in higher opportunity areas for several reasons. First, it had relatively low lease-up rates—only 200 of the 549 eligible households who started the process successfully leased up (36 percent). A qualitative study, which tracked moving trajectories, suggests that even among those who successfully leased-up, gains in neighborhood quality did not last: 53 percent of the qualitative sample moved after initial relocation, and of those movers, 81 percent went to nonopportunity areas (Boyd et al., 2010).

the opportunities even for those receiving crucial financial assistance (Boyd et al., 2010; Briggs, Popkin & Goering, 2010; Rosenblatt & DeLuca, 2012; Yinger, 1995).

While focused primarily on the residential outcomes of low-income minority voucher holders, our findings have broader implications for children and families. If these neighborhood experiences change the way parents make subsequent decisions about housing and schools, such housing policies might promote more than just residential stability in nonpoor neighborhoods. Over the long term, these sustained experiences in low-poverty neighborhoods could reduce the exposure of children to neighborhood violence and allow them access to higher quality schools, thus increasing academic performance (Sampson, Sharkey, & Raudenbush, 2008; Schwartz, 2010; Sharkey, 2010).<sup>32</sup> Buffering parents from the psychological stress of high-poverty and high-crime neighborhoods could also result in gains in mental and physical health (Kling et al., 2004; Ludwig et al., 2012; Turney, Kissane, & Edin, 2013), which could increase self-efficacy and the ability to take advantage of educational and employment opportunities. In this Baltimore case, a housing program catalyzed more than the immediate escape from high-poverty neighborhoods: sustained exposure to higher quality neighborhoods and schools reshaped how families thought about the trade-offs to living in these communities and school zones. Policy interventions such as the BMP therefore have a kind of multiplier effect, since such an intervention can alter future housing decisions and increase the likelihood of remaining in opportunity-rich social contexts.

Finally, we hope that our work will encourage more attention to the complexities and origins of preferences in policy development and evaluation research. Our findings underscore how structure and preferences interact with each other. In situations of limited policy uptake, or apparent policy failure, it is all too easy to blame individuals or overstate the durability of preexisting preferences. The field of economics has seen a shift in thinking about preferences as formed in response to market situations (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1984; Simon, 2000), and other social sciences have for some time recognized that families adapt to constraints (Bourdieu, 1984; Clark, 2007; Wilson & Quane, 2012). Understanding the complex dynamics of endogenous preference formation, choice, and social institutions is especially important for designing policies and evaluating their successes and failures (Bowles, 1998; Sunstein, 1991; Thaler & Sunstein, 2008). As Sunstein argues, “because preferences are shifting and endogenous . . . a democracy that treats all preferences as fixed will lose important opportunities for welfare gains” (1991, p.10). Our work suggests that the most effective policies will take into account the structural inequalities that shape preferences, and devise creative strategies to support policy beneficiaries as they take advantage of new opportunities to improve their lives.

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<sup>32</sup> Recent work has shown that MTO did have more pronounced effects on schooling outcomes in Baltimore and Chicago than in the other study sites, possibly because the neighborhoods and schools in these cities are even more violent and disadvantaged than the baseline neighborhoods in other cities (Burdick-Will et al., 2010).



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