

Michigan Public Policy Initiative

Spotlight

on Applied Research

Families on the Move

In the United States about one out of every six families moves each year [1], double the rate of Great Britain, Germany, and Japan, and triple that of Belgium and Ireland. By the time children reach the age of two in the United States, half of them will have moved at least once [2; 3]. One out of every six third graders has attended at least three different schools since starting first grade [4]. Some children, particularly those from two-parent, upper/middle class professional families, adjust smoothly to frequent moves. However, for other children frequent school changes are associated with lower levels of educational achievement and negative social outcomes.

This Michigan Public Policy Initiative Brief discusses

- What is mobility
- Why families move
- Who are the highly mobile children
- How families and schools are affected
- Policy options and practical suggestion

What is mobility?

High mobility

When examining mobility and the impact on children, frequency of moves is a key factor. For our purposes, high or frequent mobility is defined as 6-8 moves during a student's school years [3; 5].

Types of mobility

Most moves are local [6]. There are two types of mobility: inter-city mobility, which occurs when families move into or out of a city and intra-city mobility, which occurs when families move within the same city [7]. Even though children from both poor and advantaged families move frequently, it is important to take note of where families are moving. Limited-income families tend to move within districts and within city school systems, while high-income families tend to move out of city school districts [8].

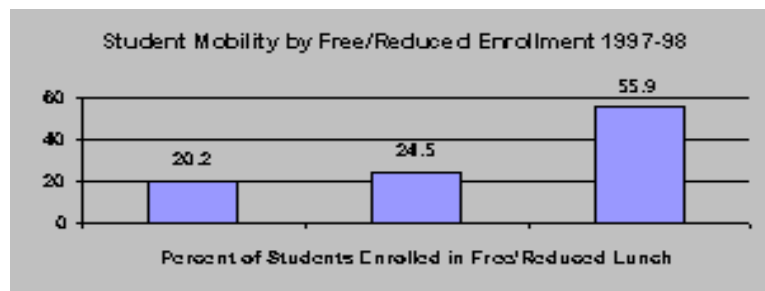


Why do families move?

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| Upward mobility | For some families, moving is by choice and represents advancement in the job market, increased salaries and the opportunity to move into better neighborhoods [9]. |
| Downward mobility | For other families, moving is by necessity. The U.S. job market is extremely transient in nature, constantly changing, downsizing, or outsourcing. For families affected by these changes, a move may represent a downward path into poorer, less safe neighborhoods, lower ranked schools, and fewer community supports and services [10]. |
| Poverty, shortage of affordable housing, eviction | Renters move approximately three times more often than homeowners [6]. In particular, limited-income single parent families who have trouble obtaining steady employment tend to have high mobility rates [2]. A cascading effect may begin with a reduction in income due to a loss of employment [2] or divorce [11]. These factors combined with a shortage of affordable housing [10; 12] can result in eviction. |
| Family changes: Divorce, remarriage | Children who move because of divorce are likely to move to less advantaged neighborhoods, and children whose parent remarries tend to move into more advantaged neighborhoods [11]. |
| Homelessness | Estimates suggest that there are nearly three-quarters of a million homeless children and youth [13; 14], and perhaps 10 to 30 percent of homeless children, are not attending school [13; 14]. Homeless children may represent the population at greatest risk of school failure [13; 14]. Other disadvantaged children, those with disabilities, and children of migrant families tend to have well-established and defined educational support programs that homeless children may not [13; 14]. |

Who are the highly mobile children?

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| Native American, African American, Hispanic, and migrant children | Members of minority groups have higher mobility rates than non-Hispanic whites [6]. Districts with 25% or more minority enrollment have mobility rates twice that of districts with less than 10% minority enrollment [15]. These high mobility rates among ethnic and racial minorities may be due in part to low rates of homeownership [6] and disproportionate rates of minorities who are low income [4]. |
| Maltreated children | Children who have experienced some form of abuse and/or neglect move twice as often as non-maltreated children [16]. |
| Children from limited-income families | Limited-income appears to be directly linked to high rates of mobility. Students from districts with greater than 50% of students enrolled in free and reduced lunch programs are more likely to experience high mobility rates [15]. Families that are poor move 50-100% more frequently than families that are not and children with family incomes below \$10,000 are three times more likely to have changed schools compared to families with annual incomes \$25,000 or above [3; 4]. |



Children from high-income families

Although the negative impact of mobility tends to be less significant with higher levels of income and home ownership, children from affluent, professional two-parent homes also tend to move frequently [17].

Children from military families

There are over 1 million children in military families, with about half in the age group 6-14. Military families move an average of every three years. Even if help with adjustments to moving is available, children are still affected by the disruption of a move.

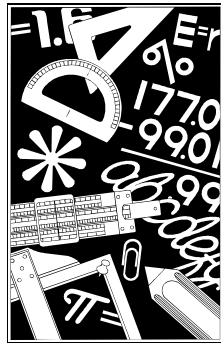
Children from single parent and step families

Children who move frequently are particularly likely to live in single parent families [2; 18]. Children from single parent and step families are far more likely to have changed schools than children from biological, two parent families [19].

How does high mobility affect children?

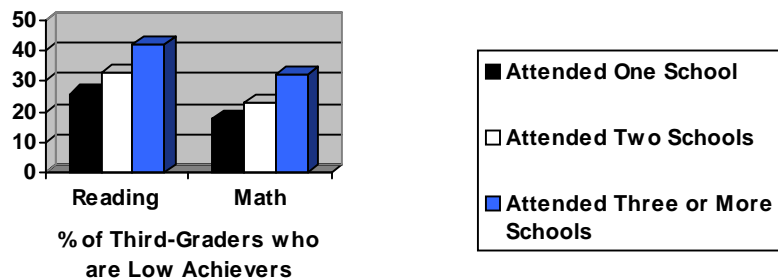
Changing schools can be very stressful for children. Moves can be difficult because often times children have to adjust to a new neighborhood, new school, new teachers, and new classmates [20]. Comparisons of highly mobile school children and children who have never changed schools show many differences.*

Academic achievement challenges



Children who change schools frequently face many challenges academically. They need to adjust to a new school building, new teachers, and new friends, and they need to try to make sense out of the discrepancy between what they were learning at the old school and what is being taught at the new school. These "gaps" in education are particularly clear in math and reading where highly mobile student are more likely to end up below grade level [4; 21]. High mobility is associated with overall lower student achievement, particularly when students are from limited-income families [8; 22; 23].

Children Who Have Changed Schools Frequently Are More Likely To Be Low Achievers in Reading and Math



U. S. General Accounting Office. (1994). *Elementary school children: Many change schools frequently, harming their education* (GAO/HEHS-94-45). Gaithersburg, MD: Author.

*Use caution in interpretation:

Many of these effects are attributable to moving, but they may also result from the fact that children who are already performing poorly are more likely to move [24]. The relation between mobility and other factors may be more complex than it first appears. Families who move frequently are quite likely to be poor and to be single parent families, both significant risk factors for school achievement. Nevertheless, moving should be considered an additional risk factor in children's lives.

- Repeating a grade** More moves during the elementary years put children at greater risk for grade retention [3; 24]. Specifically, third-graders who have changed schools frequently are more than twice as likely to repeat a grade compared with children who have never changed schools [4].
- Problem behavior** Children from families who move frequently are more likely to experience behavioral, emotional, and/or social problems than children who never or seldom move [3; 18]. These behavioral problems may emerge in the form of increased school suspensions, expulsions, school skipping, or extensive tardiness [25].
- Dropping out of school** The number of school changes is related to dropping out of school [26]. Children who move more frequently, even during the later years- ages 11 to 16- are less likely to graduate from high school [27; 28].
- Social and health consequences** Teachers' reports suggest that highly mobile children are more than twice as likely to have nutrition, health or hygiene problems compared to children who have never moved [4].
- Depression** Among adolescents, moving to a new neighborhood and changing schools are considered negative life events that may result in higher levels of depression [29].
- Special education** Children who move frequently are more likely to be placed in special education classes [24].

Factors that lower the risk

- High level income** For children of employees of Fortune 500 companies, moving has little impact on their school adjustment, social skills, behavior, physical health, or self-confidence [17]. When large companies need to move their employees, they provide support for the families—for example, paying for the moving expenses and providing paid leave time during the move. This type of support system helps to ease the moving process for the family and tends to cushion the adjustment period for these children.
- Two parent families** Mobile children who live with both biological parents have shown no significant difference in school performance from children who do not move [5].
- Child's prior adjustment** A child's prior adjustment before a move is the best predictor of that child's adjustment after the move [17]. Adjustment can include personal characteristics of a child, such as temperament, disposition, and behavioral and cognitive skills. It can also include environmental factors, such as the level of social support from parents and the community [25]. In other words, well-adjusted children may be little affected by a move.

Factors that raise the risk

- More than one stressful life event** Children who move and have two or more stressful life events have shown lower academic achievement, self-esteem and self-concept than children who move and do not have other stressful life events [21]. Multiple stresses may affect a child's ability to manage the demands of new surroundings. Even for two-parent affluent families, multiple negative life stressors affect the adjustment of children who move. For example, the stresses of divorce or parental job loss may compound the effects of moving [10]. Other stressful life events can include parental separation, remarriage, poverty, poor family health, and death [23].

Loss of social support for the parents

In moving, parents may experience a loss of family, friends and community social support [5; 30; 31]. With all the normal stressors of moving and possibly starting a new job, the loss of these support networks can make it difficult for parents—especially single parents—to continue to provide the kind of support for their children that they may have offered in the past.

Loss of social support for the children

When children move, they also experience the loss of their friends, neighbors, teachers and other supportive people who have been a part of their world. Loss of these social relations seems to particularly account for declines in school performance [23]. For some children, school is a major source of stability in their lives, and as such moving represents a major loss of social support. Frequent moves for limited-income children may put them at greater risk for being recruited into gangs that offer friendship and safety.

Gaps in curriculum

A single move can result in a loss of the continuity of a child's education. For those children who have moved multiple times, the disruption of their education is even greater, especially in terms of curriculum [32; 33]. There is no national curriculum and very few school districts have uniform curricula from school to school.

Number of moves

The number of moves and when they occur makes a difference on the impact of mobility [34]. Children who have changed schools four or more times by the eighth grade are much more likely not to graduate from high school. This is the case for all income groups [4]. Even in two parent families, more than eight moves are associated with poorer school performance [5].

Parental influences

Mother's attitude and approach

Children tend to adopt their mother's attitude and view towards moving. The mother's well-being and how she adjusts to the new situation predicts a child's attitude towards what is happening with the family [17]. Moves are particularly detrimental in families with mothers who do not openly communicate with their children [35].

Father's well being

The better quality of life and higher self-esteem fathers have, the better adjusted their mobile children are [17]. On the other hand, frequent moving has greater negative effects in families where fathers do not spend time with their children [35].

How does high mobility impact schools?

In schools with high mobility rates, it is not uncommon to have a third of the children enter after the start of the school year and another third withdraw before the end [4]. This kind of mobility has a significant impact upon schools at every level. Schools with high mobility rates tend to slow their curricular pace down beginning from grade one [32]. This slower curricular pace creates major educational gaps in highly mobile schools thus impacting grade-level achievement rates of students.

Disruption of classroom instruction

Often a teacher does not know about the arrival of a new student until the student appears in the classroom doorway with the secretary. The teacher has to stop teaching, locate basic items such as a desk, school supplies, and work materials, and then begin to integrate the newcomer into an already established class [36].

Effects on peers Mobility may affect the achievement level of children who do not move because they experience the instability of highly mobile schools [37], although this is arguable [38]. Students in highly mobile schools may receive instruction and content that is approximately a year behind those students in more stable schools [32]. The child who does not move also experiences the loss of friendship and support of friends who move away [39].

Special education needs, assessments, and placement challenges With delays in receiving student records, getting students placed in the appropriate classroom and at the right levels in math and reading is difficult. While waiting for student records to arrive, some students in need of special educational services go without these services [33].

Paperwork, finances, and test scores Principals, teachers, and clerical staff all are involved in processing additional paperwork associated with mobile students. In some cases there is the cost of testing or retesting students. With new students arriving just before standardizing tests are taken, schools' test scores include students that they have not yet taught [33].

What can policymakers do?

Stabilize housing

Promote home ownership Home ownership could play a major role in reducing family mobility for the poor. Federal subsidies for mortgage repayment, instead of rent, could be considered in which the family puts in resources, time, and maintenance for the property. This could contribute significantly toward breaking the cycle of homelessness and frequent mobility [12; 40]. Ownership of a home would also open up tax benefits now not available to the poor [12; 40].

Increase benefit income Entitlement-benefit income is one of the most important variables associated with moving from homelessness into stable housing [40]. Particularly for single parent families, it may be necessary to choose between putting food on the table or paying the mortgage or rent on time [10]. Delays in the paying of rent, mortgage, and utilities result in many low income parents having to move to poorer housing.

Pay rent subsidies directly to landlords Subsidized housing is another important variable associated with moving families from homelessness to stabilized housing [40]. Rent subsidies paid directly to landlords may prevent families from spending rent money on other things and being evicted for non-payment of rent.

Change zoning laws and build more affordable housing In many locales zoning restricts the building of low-income rental housing. Mixed-income, multi-family developments may allow affordable housing that stabilizes children's lives [10].

Offer Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) An IDA is a type of savings and investment account for the poor that often includes matching money. These savings accounts help low-income families accumulate assets towards a first home, education, or starting a business. This type of asset-building tool may economically empower some families to move out of poverty and provide greater stability for their children [12]. As a result of the 1996 Welfare Reform Act, states have begun to offer IDAs with TANF dollars [41].

Promote financial literacy

Limited-income families can benefit from consumer counseling and home ownership education that helps with the purchase of a home and maintaining mortgage payments as well protecting their credit.

Help children in school settings

Make sure that all children who are eligible for Title 1 services have access to them

Title 1 is a federal program that provides educational and support services through distribution of funds to states and localities to serve low-achieving children in high-poverty schools. Many mobile children may already be eligible for Title 1 services, in areas such as low achievement in math and reading, but are not receiving them [4].

Expand focus of Migrant Education Program

This federal program helps provide migrant children with educational, medical, and social services. This program could be extended to include highly mobile non-migrant children [42].

Adopt timely and comparable student record systems

California has piloted an electronic record transfer system (ExPRESS) for all children. An electronic transfer system has also been established for migrant students called the Migrant Student Transfer System (MSTS). The electronic transfer of student records could greatly shorten the time between the student arriving at the school and the arrival of their records. This type of system may also produce a savings to schools by limiting unnecessary retesting and reimmunization, as well as cutting down on the cost of record transfers [4; 33; 42].

Adopt common curriculum

The proposal of a common curriculum at the national level has been controversial. However, some individual school districts have adopted a common curriculum. Children who move from school to school but remain within such a district have an easier transition. Further, some national organizations such as the National Association of Teachers of Mathematics have developed curriculum standards. Adopting a common curriculum or establishing curriculum alignment may help close the instructional gap that exists for highly mobile students [36].

Make parent and school connection a priority

The linkage between the home and school is crucial, especially the need for a connection between parents and teachers. School policy should support these links.

What can parents, schools and communities do?

Suggestions for parents

Prepare children in advance of moving

Talk about the move ahead of time with children, including a discussion of why. It is better for children to hear about the move directly from their parents, rather than finding out from a neighbor or overhearing a phone conversation. Family meetings to discuss moving may allow children to share their feelings. It may be easier if families are open and honest about moving, the implications of moving, and the challenges the family faces. Children will probably gradually get used to the idea of moving. Books about moving may help children make sense of their feelings [43]. A list of relevant readings is provided at the end of this publication.

Involve children in planning and packing

Make the move a family experience. Labeling boxes, or for younger children decorating them, can help give a sense of involvement and control [43]. Having children choose their favorite toys and belongings and pack them in a special box may help give a sense of security. Allowing children to leave out one favorite possession to keep with them during the moving process may help them feel comforted. Including children in the hunt for housing and allowing them to give their advice and input will also give a sense of involvement and ownership in the moving process.

Say goodbye to the house, friends

For some children the simple ritual of saying goodbye to the house may help in dealing with the loss of something that has been very familiar to them. Exchanging pictures or gifts with friends may be helpful [43]. It may also be helpful to encourage and allow children to call, write, or visit old friends. It may be important for children to know that they can keep their friends even from a distance.

Make the move an adventure

Make moving a fun and exciting experience for kids. Encouraging children to draw pictures, play games, and sing songs about the move and during the move may ease their anxieties. Checking out the neighborhood before and after the move and allowing children to find local parks and playgrounds may be beneficial. Allowing children to meet their neighbors and seek out children in the neighborhood may ease the adjustment period. It may be helpful to discuss with children that moving can be an opportunity to meet new people and live in different neighborhoods.

Unpack child's room first and reestablish routines

Younger children often find comfort and safety in sameness and routines that do not change. Unpacking the child's room first can help establish a room that will bring some familiarity to the child. It may be helpful to establish routines immediately by getting children enrolled in school and childcare, assigning chores, and establishing bedtimes [43].

Role model during the transition period

Listen to the needs and desires of children during the move. Stress levels and anxiety may be high during the transition period and attending to children's needs can reduce stress. Moving can be emotionally, physically, and financially draining. If possible, it may be beneficial for a parent to take some time off of work after a move to ease the adjustment period. During this time, modeling appropriate ways of expressing frustration, stress, and anxiety can help children learn how to better cope with the adjustment. It may be helpful for parents to let their children hear them talk about their feelings in a positive or constructive way.

Suggestions for schools

Gather information about family relocation

Information about relocation and reasons for moves can help provide insight into the overall family situation. Schools can take into consideration frequent moves as a possible risk factor. Referring mobile families to support services early on could help make the transition easier [44; 45].

Use multi-age classrooms and year-round schedules

Some schools have used multi-age classrooms as a means for helping transient students to catch up on the material and skills they have missed, instead of automatically holding children back a grade. Also, starting cycles of classes at different times of the year would allow students who arrive after school has started a better opportunity of fitting in than if the whole school starts in September [33].

Have flexible attendance and bussing policies

In urban areas, a lot of transience can occur within a school district. Adopting policies that allow students who move to finish out the year in the school they began may be helpful. To help accomplish this, districts may have to assist in transporting children to their original schools [33].

Make new children and families feel welcome

Creating a welcoming and supportive environment can go a long way in making a student's transition into a new school much easier. Orientation programs for new students and families can include such things as introductions to staff and teachers and a tour of the new school [46]. Providing parent education programs and handbooks may help acquaint parents to the community and school and may provide information on relevant community resources. New students can develop a social link through the use of an assigned student "buddy" to sit next to the new student in class and at lunch [47; 48].

Make use of mobility specialists

Some school districts employ a mobility specialist who works with highly mobile children and their teachers. Other schools assign this responsibility to a counselor or social worker. Schools can also to utilize the support of teacher aides, adult volunteers, and school social workers to connect with mobile families and students and help ease the transition.

Offer information to parents

Providing programs and handbooks may help acquaint parents to the community and school and may provide information on relevant community resources.

Provide collaborative support groups and services

The use of support groups can provide orientation and support services to new students and their parents at the same time [46]. These services may involve collaboration between schools and other family agencies. Providing support services and offering connections to community agencies may help children and families adjust to the neighborhood and encourage stability. Healthy Start, a full service school in California, has found that offering social services to children and families through school connections has reduced family mobility [49].

Provide teacher in-services

Providing in-services to teachers in highly mobile districts may help to educate teachers on the impact of mobility for students and schools. In-services can also provide opportunity for teachers to brainstorm about possible strategies for incorporating new students into the classroom.

Suggestions for communities

Welcome new people into the neighborhood

Moving, whether by opportunity or force of circumstances, is stressful. Neighborhood groups created to welcome new people can help the family to become familiar with the community and its resources.

Have a support group for new families

A support group for parents could help them re-establish a social network and assist in creating a sense of community. Involving parents in a school support group has been useful [46], and neighborhoods may be able to do something similar.

Enhance support services for families

Communities can help low-income families not have to choose among buying food, paying the rent and utilities, or obtaining medical care [50], for example, by creating food pantries. This may stabilize families and deter mobility.

Provide coordinating services for homeless families

The McKinney Homeless Assistance Act provides grants to school districts for direct educational services, such as tutoring and remedial services, to homeless children. Some communities have also used the funds for after-school programs, homework clubs and transportation for homeless children [44]. This may stabilize families and deter further mobility.

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Children's books about moving

A New Boy in Kindergarten (J. B. Moncure)
Dear Phoebe (S. Alexander)
I Don't Live Here! (P. Conrad)
I'm Moving (M. W. Hickman)
I'm Not Moving! (P. Jones)
It's Your Move: Picking Up, Packing Up and Settling In (Linda Bourke)
Ladybug Magazine (B. Granstrom & M. Manning)
Let's Talk About Moving to a New Place (Diana Star Helmer)
Maggie and the Goodbye Gift (S. Milrod & J. Milrod)
Mitchell is Moving (M. W. Sharmat)
Moving (Fred Rogers)
Moving (W. Watson)
Moving Day (T. Tobias)
Moving Days (Marc Harshman)

Moving Molly (S. Hughes)
My Friend William Moved Away (M. W. Hickman)
The Berenstein Bears' Moving Day (S. & J. Berenstein)
The Monster in the Third Dresser Drawer and Other Stories About Adam Joshua (Janice Lee Smith)
The New Kid (Susan Hood)
The Sleeping Porch (Karen Ackerman)
We Are Best Friends (Ailiki)
We Are Moving (R. Biale)
We Just Moved (Stephen Krensky)
What You Know First (Patricia MacLachlan)
Who Will Be My Friends? (Syd Hoff)
Why Do We Have to Move? (Cynthia MacGregor)

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