Residential mobility of single mothers in the Indianapolis’ Mid-North area neighborhoods: An exploratory study of chronic moving

RESEARCH STUDY

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Executive Summary/Key Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore the pattern and causes of frequent household mobility among students living in female-headed households within the Mid-North neighborhoods in Indianapolis, Indiana. The study shows that mobility is occurring within the Mid-North and adjacent neighborhoods. Primary factors contributing to mobility within the neighborhoods include financial difficulties like lack of housing affordability, loss of stable employment, foreclosure and eviction, or the high cost of rent were major reasons for mobility. The overarching goal is to gain better insight and understanding of these phenomena within the study area in order to assist housing agencies and education-related institutions with programming and/or fund development to decrease residential and student mobility.

Residential related student mobility impacts not only students who change schools but also classrooms that must adjust to a changing student enrollment. Teachers struggle to balance the introduction of the new student while maintaining the education level of the entire classroom. Similarly, classes were not taught consistently across schools, even within districts, such that students faced further change when they were placed in a misaligned course (i.e. - being in Algebra II when knowledge is at an Algebra I level). For students who transfer without a record or transcript, class placements can take weeks to months to perfect, creating more lost time. For instance, a recent study of Indianapolis Public Schools conducted by TEACHPlus indicated that high student mobility is often cited as the main reason teachers need to be moved around so much in the district. Additionally, other studies (Nelson, et. al (1996) and Wilson (1990)) report that many of the movers were households on public assistance and that many of the households were headed by single women.

Most commonly, school changes were initiated by families and typically involve a change of residence due to voluntary or involuntary reasons. Voluntary reasons were due to changes initiated by the student or the family. Examples of voluntary reasons include job promotion, desire for a better school environment or access to resources (i.e., transfer to a magnet school or career academy), and accountability or opportunity transfers. Involuntary reasons were changes initiated by the school or school district or circumstances, such as redistricting, homelessness, or changes to familial status (i.e., divorce, death, or incarceration). A widespread problem facing American schools is residential-related student mobility. This phenomenon can be harmful to child and adolescent development. A study by the National Research Council examined the impact of mobility on the academic achievement of young children ages 3 to 8. The study found that children most affected by mobility could vary depending on the child's age and stage of development as

well as family circumstances, for instance, stress, violence and disruptions of family support. Other studies have documented the impacts of mobility on student’s psychological well-being, noting that mobility not only impacts students who change schools but also the classrooms and schools who must deal with the mobile students.  

### Summary of Key Findings

#### Push/Pull Factors Contributing to Mobility

Overall, study participants identified both voluntary and involuntary reasons for mobility. Voluntary reasons included wanting a new or better home or apartment, school boundary changes, and desire to keep children in sports. Involuntary reasons such as financial difficulties (42%) were identified a major reason why single mothers moved residences. These financial constraints include lack of housing affordability, loss of stable employment, foreclosure and eviction, or the high cost of rent were major reasons for mobility.

*Please Note: For this study, we examine the pattern and causes of frequent household mobility among students living in female-headed households within the Mid-North (Crown Hill, Highland Vicinity, Historic Meridian, Mapleton Fall Creek, Meridian Highland, and Watson McCord neighborhoods) and adjacent neighborhoods at the zip code level (46202, 46205, 46208, 46218).*

#### Length/Frequency of Moves: Typology of Female-Headed Households

Of the female-headed householders who had responded:

- Twenty-seven percent (27%) were “Recent Movers”: Female-headed households who were new to the neighborhood and had *changed residences three or more times* in the last two years.

- Twenty-seven percent (27%) were “Short-term Stayers”: Female-headed households who had *changed residences three or more times* in the last two years and had also changed schools within the neighborhood/city.

- Twenty-seven percent (27%) were “Medium-term Stayers”: Female-headed households who had changed residences and schools less than three times.

- Forty-seven percent (47%) were “Long-term Stayers”: Female-headed households that had changed residences less than three times in the past two years, but whose children were able to stay in the same schools.
Housing Mobility Direction (Upward, Downward, or Horizontal), Choice, and Location

Most respondents moved vertically upward (58.3%). Study participants’ upward mobility was due to either homeownership or transitioning away from homelessness. Of those who moved upward, 20% became homeowners. In comparison, 25% incurred Reversed Transfers (Vertically Downward), while 16.7% experienced Horizontal moves in mobility. Most reverse transfers were a result of evictions, foreclosures, and homelessness. Reverse transfers or downward mobility were from homes to apartments, townhomes, or shelters. Other transfers included moving from multi-family dwellings to temporary shelters or staying with friends and family. From those who made horizontal transfers, the bulk remained renters and transitioned from the same housing type. Approximately 58% of respondents indicated a likelihood (i.e., somewhat to very likely) to move away in the next 12 months, of which 42% specified a desire for homeownership.

Overall, 58% of moves from a location occurred within the Mid-North neighborhood (i.e. zip codes 46202, 46205, 46208, and 46218). Four percent (4%) moved from outside the study area neighborhoods but within the city of Indianapolis boundary. In comparison, 38% of study participants moved from outside the city boundary.

In contrast, most moves to a location occurred within the Mid-North and nearby neighborhoods. In their recent move(s), a large proportion of respondents were either moving to or stayed within zip codes 46205 and 46208. The remaining proportion of respondent’s moves to a location were in Lawrence (zip code 46226) or Fountain Square areas (zip code 46203).

Factors That Hinder Stability and Upward Mobility (Homeownership) For Female-Headed Households

Income, employment, and affordable housing options were identified by female-headed households as common barriers to economic and residential stability. Most respondents identified financial issues/concerns related to affordability, debt, lack of down payment, credit rating, associated costs, and lack of time and childcare to attend homeownership programs as key factors. Moreover, eighty-percent (80%) responded it would be difficult to obtain a mortgage. For example, many respondents have annual household incomes of $34,999 or less and (54.2%) cannot afford HUD’s definition of fair market rate rent for housing ($792/month). One respondent replied, “I am living solely on child support of $399 per month with four children. My senior had to buy their own cap and gown.” Also, from their observations, educators, and school administrators identified housing (72%) and financial difficulties (83%) as primary reasons students were moving. According to the literature, single mothers were far more vulnerable when it comes to poverty than were other family structures. Many single mothers are young and have had out of wedlock births, which often interrupts their schooling or employment. Thus, they are at a greater financial disability.

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Academic Performance: Mobile Students who are Economically Disadvantaged Versus Mobile Students who are Economically Stable

Both parents and educators agreed, in general; frequent mobility may negatively impact a child/students’ academic performance and attendance. Despite income, 79% of female-headed households strongly agreed or agree that constant moving can have an adverse impact on their child’s academic performance while 71% agree or strongly agree that it may negatively affect their child’s school attendance. Of female-headed households with median household incomes less than $34,999, 71% either strongly agree or agree that constant moving may have a negative impact on a child’s academic performance. In comparison, of female-headed households having median household incomes more than $35,000, only 8% strongly agree or agree that always moving may have a negative impact on a child’s academic performance. However, there appears to be a contradiction with parent’s reaction to the consequences of frequent mobility on their children. For instance, when asked specifically about their children, the number and reason for school transfers, and whether frequent school transfers affected their child’s academic performance in school, 48% responded “No.” Also, when specifically asked whether frequent moving affected their child’s school performance, 58% responded “No.”

Moreover, many school administrators and teachers surveyed believe constant mobility adversely affects academic foundation and basic skills (50%), social abilities (53%), emotional health (53%), and overall behavior (44%) of children who experience high levels of mobility. Also, school staff and faculty also noted mobility does not always result negatively. There are possible positive impacts, specifically if a child’s school experience has been poor or difficult. Therefore, the transfer or move to a new school with a better social and teaching environment or resources may positively impact the child’s learning experience.

Recommendations

Student mobility is a common phenomenon in the U.S. School system. This phenomenon is complex in its causes and consequences and can pose both positive and negative outcomes for students, families, educational institutions, and communities. As a result, recommendations for addressing the issue are difficult to formulate. Most research tends to tackle involuntary student mobility from one standpoint or approach. For instance, Nelson examines student mobility and poverty. While Rumberger, et.al, analyzed academic and psychological effects of student mobility.9 However, this research and others like it, identify multiple involuntary reasons as primary causes of mobility, leading to instability. The study attempts comprehensively to address the issue of mobility for single mothers.

A modest response is to make recommendations which promote residential stability, reduce excessive and preventable mobility, and promote positive aspects of mobility. To adequately address the issue of mobility a comprehensive stance should be taken. A holistic approach to address issues of residential-related student mobility should consider all facets of the necessities of families and to help build family economic security. These typically focus on needs related to housing, hunger, health, education, and employment. Recommendations should build upon existing community assets and Mid-North area quality of life planning efforts taking into consideration local assets, building on the skills of residents and the power of local

associations, as well as the supportive functions of local institutions within the study area neighborhoods. Such recommendations can be addressed to all relevant stakeholders: students and parents; school officials; and the vast number of faith-based organizations; non-profits; as well as private and public sector stakeholders. For example, there are currently over 100 service-based non-profits, faith-based and community-based organizations with the study area. These organizations provide a wide variety of services and programs, ranging from crisis support to education and literacy. In addition, the area also is near major institutional anchors, such as Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library, Ivy Tech Community College, IU Health, The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, and Sagamore Institute for Public Policy. It is recommended that Indianapolis Public Schools partner with these key organizational assets to build a collaborative to provide a network of resources to single mothers who may be at risk or who are currently experiencing incidences of high mobility due to involuntary circumstances. The following recommendations were developed using a combination of research participants input, case study research, and literature reviews.

**HOUSING:** The lack of housing affordability, quality housing and neighborhood, foreclosure and eviction, or the high cost of rent were major reasons for mobility.

To help resolve these issues, it is recommended that community partners should consider:

- Developing and/or strengthening partnerships with homeless services provided throughout the city and region to offer programs and/or resources for Indianapolis Public Schools (IPS) families in need.

- Building upon existing quality of life plan and Great Places 2020 strategies to develop and enhance partnerships with housing agencies, community development corporations, and developers to connect IPS parents with resources related to credit counseling, financial education, foreclosure prevention, housing affordability, homeownership, rental assistance, re-housing, and substandard housing.

- Continuing to evaluate and implement transportation options for parents and students to improve access to and from schools, employment opportunities, and resources.

- Working with public entities, faith-based organizations and social service related non-profits, private businesses, and foundations to provide “Gap Financing/Filling” resources/programs for families who do not meet low-income thresholds to receive assistance for living expenses.

**HUNGER:** Many parents identified financial instability and lack of resources as a barrier and cause of frequent mobility. Additionally, many educators and school administrator observed financial difficulties of the families as the leading cause of high mobility among students they encounter daily.

One immediate implication of financial loss and instability is poverty and hunger. Many female-headed households (83%) indicated a household income of less than $35,000 annually. This income

level is well below the median household income of Indianapolis ($42,076) and the state of Indiana ($48,737). Of these households, 46% moved one to two times within the past two years. Based on the literature, mobility in students emerges with a pattern of poverty, including hunger.

To help address this immediate effect of hunger, community partners should consider:

- Building upon existing on-site food pantry programs in schools.
- Developing larger scale collaborations with the neighborhood and faith-based organizations who provide resources, in the form of food, clothing, and temporary assistance.
- Collaborating with area food co-op’s and other entities focused on increasing the presence of healthy food distribution activities.
- Building upon existing quality of life plan and Great Places 2020 strategies, such as, improving access to healthy foods and integrating cooking and food preparation instruction into programs at Mid-North area businesses, schools, churches, and community gardens.
- Providing parents with easily accessible links to resources, such as area food pantry’s or the state’s new Mapping Indiana’s Compassion on-line resource of non-profits. Per the Indiana Family and Social Service Agency (FSSA) an estimated 50% of clients’ access resources via smartphone browsers, while approximately 70% do so online.

**HEALTH (SOCIAL WELL-BEING/MENTAL HEALTH):** Educators and school administrators indicated that based on their observations of students with frequent mobility the following factors are negatively impacted: social skills, emotional health, and behavior. In addition, educators and school administration identified disruptions to classroom dynamics and the ability to bridge gaps in academic, social, and emotional needs of students as stresses placed on them classroom because of frequent mobility.

To address adverse impacts on student’s social, emotional, and behavioral health and well-being, it is recommended that community partners:

- Work with families, students, Parent Involvement Educators (PIES), and community-based social service organizations to foster family-to-family connections for mutual support and strengthen parents’ connection to the school.
- Incorporate a high level of post-program monitoring to help students transition and which integrates teachers to provide student’s a face to face connection during the school day.
- Provide on-going professional development of counselors for a better connection with new students.
- Partner new students with a “Buddy.”

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13 US Census Bureau. [2010-2014 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates](http://www.census.gov/)
- Provide parents with easily accessible links to resources, such as the state’s new Mapping Indiana’s Compassion on-line resource of non-profits.

EDUCATION: Both parents and educators agreed in general that frequent mobility may negatively impact a child’s/students’ academic performance and attendance. Moreover, many school administrators and teachers surveyed believe frequent mobility adversely affects the academic foundation and basic skills of children who experience high levels of mobility. Educators and school administration identified student safety, management of student materials and records, communication with the family/parents, disruptions to classroom dynamics, and the ability to bridge gaps in academic, social, and emotional needs of students as stresses placed on them and their classroom because of frequent mobility.

Forty-eight (48%) specified that the school administration had implemented interventions to address the student mobility issue. Educators and school administrators found much of the strategies applied to be ineffective (42%). These strategies include offering transportation to homeless children, providing tutoring and parent/child programs. Yet these efforts are deemed ineffective, largely due to communication and relationship building (or lack thereof) between the school and parents. However, it was noted that magnet schools do not have large-scale mobility-related issues as other non-magnet program schools do.

To tackle academic performance issues related to frequent mobility, community partners should consider:

- Educating parents on the negative academic, social, emotional, and behavioral impacts to frequent moving of residences and/or transferring of schools.
- Providing on-going professional development for counselors to assist with developing and implementing strategies for a better connection with new students.
- Having students complete a questionnaire that is given to teachers to familiarize faculty with new students – aiding in curriculum development.
- Attempting to help students build a connection with the school by developing a New Student Support Group for new students to learn about school opportunities and/or organized bonding trips for new students and existing students.
- Providing greater flexibility in school choice and/or incorporate positive components of choice schools, such as magnet schools, in lower performing schools. Parents and students are less likely to change schools once they’re in their preferred location.
- Empowering families to make responsible decisions about their student’s education by providing adequate and timely resources on school performance ratings.
- Partnering with institutions of higher education and adult career centers to provide certification and workforce development programs to parents.
- Building upon existing strategies identified in the quality of life and Great Places 2020 plans, such as, transforming low-performing schools into quality schools, strengthening and expanding youth programs at the Martin Luther King Community Center, establishing a Center for Working Families, increasing quality of, and access to, early childhood education opportunities, and improving high
school graduation rates and post-secondary participation through the Mid-North Promise Program.\textsuperscript{17}

**EMPLOYMENT/WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT:** In this study, 71% of the respondents were never married with children 18 years or younger. Moreover, 75\% percent of female-headed households responded to not having any college degree or certification. Of those households, 34\% were either unemployed or working part-time.

Furthermore, educators and school administrators identified financial difficulties (83\%) and employment (50\%) as major or minor reasons for frequent mobility among students they are in contact with on a day-to-day basis.

To confront employment issues related to frequent mobility, community partners should consider:

- Developing a partnership with private businesses or coops, such as Launch Fishers to provide workforce training and job placement in high-tech jobs for parents and high school students.
- Building upon existing strategies identified in the quality of life and Great Places 2020 plans, such as providing affordable outcome-based after-school programs for working families, career coaching, and educational assistance to the unemployed.\textsuperscript{18}
- Partnering with institutions of higher education and adult career centers to provide certification and workforce development programs to parents.
- Continuing to evaluate and implement transportation options for parents and students to improve access to and from schools, employment opportunities, and resources.
- Providing parents with easily accessible links to resources, such as Indiana WorkOne organizations or the state’s new Mapping Indiana’s Compassion on-line resource of non-profits.
