Socio-spatial Mobility and Neighborhood Outcomes in America: Is the Opportunity Matrix Closing?

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Abstract

Households choose places from a hierarchy of options defined by social, economic and environmental contexts and these choices are conditioned by economic contexts and family status. While we know a good deal about the choice processes we know somewhat less about the spatial outcomes of these decisions. Recent research has begun to fill that gap and in this paper I extend that research by using data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics to construct matrices of socio-spatial movement across neighborhoods and to consider the relationship of community in-flows and out-flows and the probability moving above and below the diagonal of the matrix (neighborhood origins). The research shows that there is substantial movement across the matrix of opportunities defined by an index of socio economic advantage. Economic resources and social status improve an individual's chance of moving up the socio-spatial hierarchy as expected. There is little evidence of substantial polarization across decile (neighborhood) movements.

Extended Abstract

Introduction and aims

There is growing interest in the nature of social mobility especially intergenerational social mobility and specifically with how to interrupt the transmission of disadvantage from one generation to another. How do we ensure that whatever an individual's background that they have an equal chance of reaching a higher income bracket, getting a job they want, and from the perspective of this study achieving the spatial mobility that goes with social mobility. In policy contexts in the UK, drawing on the notions of social mobility, there is an argument that a fluid society (the ability to move up the social ladder) is probably a better society with greater opportunities and fewer barriers to success. In the context of this study, what places do households choose, and how much opportunity is there in the choices that we see in the matrix of moves across neighborhoods and communities defined by socio-economic status?

Exploring the ideas of opportunities in the neighborhood matrix the research in this paper examines the extent and nature of socio-spatial movement

across communities in the US. Specifically the paper examines the sorting in the flow matrix of population moves across neighborhoods scaled by an index of neighborhood socio-economic status and uses the mobility data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics to examine the actual moves between neighborhoods grouped into deciles of advantage and disadvantage. The paper asks three questions of the mobility data - (a) how much overall movement is there across the matrix of communities, (b) how much upwards and downwards movement is there in the overall interchanges which occur, and (c) which households make gains and which households lose in the mobility process. The paper unpacks the flow matrices by income, education and occupation to examine the role of these variables in creating differential flow patterns across neighborhoods and communities.

Previous research and data

There is a growing literature which has considered movement across a matrix of neighborhoods though the tendency has been to focus more on movement across different ethnic contexts than different socio economic contexts. There have been modest attempts to examine the movements between a full range of neighborhoods defined in socio economic terms (Bolt et al., 2008; Clark and Rivers, 2012). Recently, a New Zealand study of movement across a set of neighborhoods found that the degree of upward mobility achieved is negatively affected by the level of deprivation at the neighborhood of origin. Even after controlling for the attributes of movers, the more deprived the neighborhood of origin, the lower the degree of upward mobility for movers from those disadvantaged neighborhoods (Clark and Morrison, 2012). In the British context Clark et al (2012) have shown the structure of the housing market is an important factor in the nature of movement through the structure of communities.

In the US context those studies which have taken up the issue of community and neighborhood mobility have tended to focus primarily on movement into and out of low income communities and primarily on ethnicity. Quillian (2003) shows that non-poor blacks are more likely than poor blacks to choose predominantly white residential neighbourhoods when they move. The process of moving on or being "trapped", in poor neighborhoods is clearly related to resources. Education, employment and training have the potential to stimulate mobility out of deprived areas. To the extent that they are successful, 'those who get on, get out' and this lowers rather than raises the average level of deprivation in the area being assisted (Cheshire, et al. 2003). Several studies have demonstrated empirically the influence of income and socio-economic status on movements in and out of deprived neighborhoods (South, Crowder and Chavez. 2005; South Pais and Crowder, 2011, Bolt, van Kempen et al. (2008). And, as Schaake et al (2009) point out, people with higher income are more likely to move out of neighborhoods through a sorting process which reinforces the concentrations of the have and have-nots into selected neighborhoods

This research uses data from the PSID for the period 1999-2009, a period of considerable economic stress and housing adjustment. Using the two yearly data from the PSID the questions which emerge from the review of the literature will be examined with the survey waves for 1999… 2009. The central variable of interest is the paired changes in the residential locations in each of the pairs of years. In the present study the mobility measures and variables are drawn from the primary respondent representing the household. I use measures of "whether changed residence" and measures of housing and household characteristics to measure the associations with changing location and changing decile of advantage/disadvantage status. The advantage/disadvantage index is constructed with 2000 census data when there was greater and more reliable census tract data than is available for later years (It is necessary to use averaged data from HCS).

Preliminary analyses

Data on the aggregate flows across the deciles of disadvantage are included as a preliminary demonstration of the direction of the research (Table 1).

	Least		Advantage Status Destination decile						Most		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Total
1	613	199	97	80	66	42	29	22	21	11	1180
2	173	538	154	105	76	62	61	38	52	28	1287
3	69	136	433	123	94	76	71	73	57	45	1177
4	67	84	104	447	113	82	100	58	69	51	1175
5	34	69	60	106	441	92	92	80	77	52	1103
6	30	69	62	84	82	336	86	71	80	61	961
7	20	30	65	67	68	83	343	97	64	84	921
8	12	26	36	58	50	75	99	324	77	68	825
9	8	22	36	47	53	66	65	80	265	96	738
10	8	21	24	27	34	31	52	59	79	338	673
Total	1034	1194	1071	1144	1077	945	998	902	841	834	10040

(Origin decile — row labels)

The diagonal cell values (conditional row values) represent the degree of stability exhibited by movers in their choice of neighborhood (in decile terms). They represent the probability that someone who changes their address in the survey interval will remain within the same socio-economic band implied by the disadvantage index value. The focus therefore is purely on mobility across the deciles of deprivation and not across geography per se.

I emphasize three points. One, the most likely outcome when someone changes address is that they remain within the same decile (regardless of where they move geographically). Two, when one does move to another neighborhood the chances of doing so declines the further away the destination is in disadvantage terms. Three, the probability of staying with the least advantaged communities is somewhat less than maintaining residence in the most advantaged communities.

Origin decile	Least 1	2	3	4	Advantage Status Destination decile 5	6	7	8	9	Most 10	Total
1	.5195	.1686	.0822	.0678	.0559	.0356	.0246	.0186	.0178	.0093	1180
2	.1344	.4180	.1197	.0816	.0591	.0482	.0474	.0295	.0404	.0218	1287
3	.0586	.1155	.3679	.1045	.0799	.0646	.0603	.0620	.0484	.0382	1177
4	.0570	.0715	.0885	.3804	.0962	.0698	.0851	.0494	.0587	.0434	1175
5	.0308	.0626	.0544	.0961	.3998	.0834	.0834	.0725	.0698	.0471	1103
6	.0312	.0718	.0645	.0874	.0853	.3496	.0895	.0739	.0832	.0635	961
7	.0217	.0326	.0706	.0727	.0738	.0901	.3724	.1053	.0695	.0912	921
8	.0145	.0315	.0436	.0703	.0606	.0909	.1200	.3927	.0933	.0824	825
9	.0108	.0298	.0488	.0637	.0718	.0894	.0881	.1084	.3591	.1301	738
10	.0119	.0312	.0357	.0401	.0505	.0461	.0773	.0877	.1174	.5022	673
Total	1034	1194	1071	1144	1077	945	998	902	841	834	10040

Observations

Every day people move – they relocate from rental housing to become owners, to be near jobs, to access better schools and to improve their neighborhoods. Matrices of mobility across communities are useful ways of capturing the amount of movement and of the extent of social fluidity in our communities. We see from this analysis that where you are is likely where you will be. There is long term resilience in the structure of flows within and across communities. At the same time there is considerable upward movement and with this analysis we are able to measure just how much movement there is within the system, and whether or not there is overall advantage in the movement, and whether the flows are creating concentrations of disadvantage and advantage. Extensions to the analysis examine the role of age, income, and status on the probability of moving above and below the diagonal (constant change) and in particular how the probability of a move across destinations is modified by wealth and resources.

The issues raised in this analysis are relevant for the larger policy issue of how we respond to initiatives to overcome poverty and disadvantage more generally. Do we focus on places – a place based approach – or on people? The "place prosperity vs people prosperity" debate is continuing (Bolton, 1992), nor is there any resolution to how to address the continuing concentration of poverty populations. What is relevant is that we continue to probe the structure of the clustering of disadvantage populations and by contrast the behavior and clustering of advantaged populations. For Cheshire the lack of any strong evidence for neighborhood affects suggest that we proceed with caution in any policy that is simply place based. By implication as has been argued elsewhere (Clark, 2012) it might be more useful to focus on education as a solution to inequality rather than on welfare subsidies either to people or places.

Preliminary References

Clark, W.A.V. and Rivers, N. (2013) "Community Choice in Large Cities: Selectivity and Ethnic Sorting Across Neighborhoods." In *Understanding Neighbourhood Dynamics: New Insights for Neighbourhood Effects Research*, edited by Maarten Van Ham, David Manley, Nick. Bailey, Ludi. Simpson, and Duncan Maclennan. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer: 253-277

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