HOUSING AND HOUSEHOLD INSTABILITY: A RESEARCH NOTE

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Abstract: Previous research attempting to estimate the effects of residential mobility typically overlooks other consequential changes within households that may be coincident with moving. Drawing on novel data of renting households in Milwaukee, this paper establishes the frequency at which residential or *housing instability* is accompanied by *household instability*: changes in the composition of adults living under the same roof. We find that most moves are accompanied by household instability and that households with young children are significantly more likely to experience household instability. These findings imply that researchers attempting to isolate the effects of residential mobility, especially for children, should account for the possible influence of household change.

Keywords: Residential mobility, Household instability, Children

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Introduction

Heightened residential mobility among poor families in particular, and Americans more generally, has prompted researchers to investigate the effects of moving. A substantial body of research has linked residential mobility to an unsettlingly wide variety of adverse conditions, especially among children and adolescents. Researchers have reported that adolescents who recently moved are more likely to engage in risky behavior, such as premarital sex (South et al. 2005; Stack 1994) or violence (Haynie and South 2005; Sharkey and Sampson 2010), and underperform in school (McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Rumberger and Larson 1998). Health problems, too, do not appear immune to the effects of residential instability. In a review of the literature, Jelleyman and Spencer (2008) report that residential mobility has been associated with emotional problems, teenage pregnancy, illicit drug use, depression, and reduced continuity of care.

If it is true that residential mobility brings about a host of negative consequences, especially for children and adolescents, then the implications for research and policy are clear: residential instability should be considered a driver of social inequality and health disparities and policymakers should consider initiatives designed to promote residential stability. However, recent evidence suggests that the effects of residential mobility may be relatively minor or even nonexistent after accounting for preexisting differences (Pribesh and Downey 1999; Porter and Vogel 2013) or unobserved hererogeneity (Perkins 2013).

Family changes often bring about residential changes. Researchers long have observed that moves are commonly prompted by marriage, the birth of a child, or divorce (Rossi 1980 [1955]; Mollborn et al. 2012; South et al. 1998). Yet attempts to isolate the causal effects of

residential mobility have not sufficiently documented the extent to which moves regularly coincide with other consequential life events or changes. Because the research on residential mobility focuses primarily on its effects on children and adolescents and long has emphasized how moving may weaken familial bonds, which in turn may be harmful to young people (Coleman 1988), it is particularly important to observe the frequency at which residential or housing instability is accompanied by family or household instability. Because instabilities may cluster in time, documenting the extent to which residential instability is accompanied by other forms of instability can inform future efforts to estimate the effects of moving and improve our understanding of how residential mobility may or may not drive social and health disparities.

This paper exploits a new dataset of renting households in Milwaukee to document the frequency at which residential or housing instability is accompanied by household instability (changes in the composition of adults living under the same roof). We find that over half of Milwaukee renters who experienced a recent residential relocation also experienced a change in household composition. We also explain household instability among movers through multivariate analysis, finding that renters who live with young children are significantly more likely to experience household instability alongside residential mobility. These findings imply that researchers attempting to isolate the effects of residential mobility, especially for children, should account for the possible influence of household change.

Data and Methods

Data

This paper draws on the *Milwaukee Area Renters Study* (MARS), an original survey of 1,086 tenants in Milwaukee's private housing sector. The sample was limited to people who were

living in rental housing and who had not owned a home in the two years prior to being interviewed. English and Spanish surveys with over 250 unique items were administered in-person at tenants' places of residence in 2009, 2010, and 2011. MARS employed a multi-stage stratified probability sample of renting households, selected from high- and low-poverty census blocks. Households were stratified at the block level by race and ethnicity and by poverty level. When a block or block segment was selected into the sample, interviewers attempted to visit every household in the selected area. After data collection, the sample was weighted to facilitate estimates generalizable to Milwaukee's rental population. MARS has a response rate of 83.4%. For more information on MARS, see (*author*).

Measuring Housing and Household Instability

Housing Instability. The centerpiece of the MARS questionnaire was a housing roster that collected a two-year residential history from each respondent. To do so, interviewers employed a memory prop, a two-year calendar, to help respondents recall important events and features of their residential experience. Respondents were asked to list all the places they "lived or stayed for at least a month," including other people's houses, shelters, and correctional facilities. This approach allowed us to capture all moves respondents undertook in the two years prior to being interviewed.

Household Instability. Given the rise of family complexity in the United States, observing only the traditional triumvirate of marriage, birth, and divorce would likely overlook much household instability, especially among the urban poor. For instance, nonmarital births and multiple partner fertility have increased in recent decades (McLanahan 2009; Smock and Greenland 2010). In Wisconsin, the setting of this research, the majority of firstborn children

born outside of wedlock have at least one half-sibling by the age of 10 (Cancian et al. 2011). Furthermore, ethnographic research among poor families has documented their reliance on near strangers or "disposable ties" to make ends meet. Doing so regularly involves adults who have known each other only for a very short time moving in together and pooling resources to pay rent (Desmond 2012*a*).

These considerations lead us to define household instability as any change in the composition of adults living in a household across residences. MARS collected complete adult and children rosters for current and previous residences. Respondents were asked if they presently were living with any "adults over the age of 18" and, if so, to provide their names. Later in the survey, respondents were asked to name which adults, if any, with whom they currently were living also lived with them in any of the previous residences in which they had lived in the last two years. They also were asked if, at any of their previous residences, they lived with additional adults and, if so, to provide information about them.

This way of collecting household roster data allows us to observe any kind of household instability involving changes in adult rosters, such as moving in with cousins or staying temporarily with an acquaintance—the sorts of arrangements typically missed by household surveys. Our method also enables us to observe the degree to which moves are associated with household changes. Unfortunately, however, the MARS data do not allow us to observe the degree to which nonmovers experience household change. For this reason, we focus only on movers. This reduces the sample to 569 households. When analyzing moves in particular, we examine tenants' most recent move, the move that brought them to their current neighborhood. We exclude all moves that occurred prior to two years before being surveyed.

We rely on multiple questions in the MARS instrument to assess whether respondents

experienced household instability. We first determine whether respondents have coresident adults at their current residence and, if so, categorize these coresident adults based on their relationship to the respondent (e.g., spouse/partner, family member, friend, roommate). We then determine whether the respondent lived with the same adults at his or her previous residence. We create a set of variables describing household change based on a respondent's coresident adults across residences. By our definition, respondents who had no coresident adults at either their current or previous residence did not experience household instability. Neither did respondents who resided with the same adults at both their previous and current residence. For respondents who do not currently live with the same adults they did previously, we classify them as having experienced a change in household composition, calculate the net number of coresident adults they gained or lost, and categorize the type of household change they experienced (e.g., relationship dissolution, leaving family, joining friends).

Analytical Statetgy

After documenting and describing household instability among movers, we explain through multivariate analysis who is more likely to experience household instability coincident with a move. Here, our binary outcome measures whether respondents experienced any change in the composition of coresident adults from their previous residence to their current home. Formally,

$$\log\left(\frac{P(y_i=1)}{1-P(y_i=1)}\right) = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 s_i + \alpha_2 c2_i + \alpha_3 c6_i + \alpha_4 c17_i + X'_i\beta \qquad (1)$$

, where y_i is a binary variable set equal to 1 if the respondent experienced any change in household composition and s_i is a binary variable set equal to 1 if the respondent was a single adult at his previous residence. The set of variables indicated by $c2_i$, $c6_i$, and $c17_i$ are binary variables indicating whether the respondent has coresident children under age 2, between ages 2

and 6, or between ages 6 and 17, respectively. Other individual covariates are contained in the vector X'_i .

Our models evaluate the association between household change and a number of important factors. As previous research has found that low-income, less educated, and minority households disproportionatley belong to fragile families (McLanahan 2009; Smock and Greenland 2010), we account for respondents' monthly income, education, and racial or ethnic identity. Because the research on residential mobility is heavily focused on its effects for children and adolescents, we observe respondents' gender, if they have children, and if they had any coresident adults or lived alone at their previous residence. Additionally, since the likelihood of experiencing instabilities of all hues often decreases as one gets older (e.g., Long 1988), we control for age.

Since respondents embedded in local, prosocial and economically stable networks may be less likely to experience household instability (Coleman 1988; Desmond 2012*a*), we examine respondents' social networks. Respondents were handed a half-sheet of paper and asked to write down their close friends and family members who were adults. Respondents were then asked how many of their listed ties (a) had a child before they were 18, (b) receive public assistance, (c) have a criminal record, (d) have had a child removed from their custody, (e) have been evicted, (f) have been to jail or prison, (g) are currently in an abusive relationship, and (h) are currently addicted to drugs. We also asked respondents to provide information about the number of their close friends and family members who (i) owned their own home, (j) graduated from college, (k) had a full-time job, and (l) had a part-time job. The first eight attributes were pooled and averaged, as were the subsequent four. We then combined the two measures using factor loading to measure network disadvantage (see *author*).

Last, unlike most studies on residential mobility, we account for the kind of move that respondents previously experienced. Specifically, we observe if respondents experienced a forced move, which include formal evictions (which are processed through the court), informal evictions (which are not), landlord foreclosures, and housing being condemned. Because forced moves can be deeply disruptive (Desmond 2012*b*) and because households with children are at heightened risk of eviction and other forms of involuntary displacement (Desmond et al. 2013), we observe if respondents forced from their previous residence were more likely to experience a household change. Descriptive statistics are given in Table 1. All descriptive statistics are weighted to represent the rental population of Milwaukee.

<< Table 1 about here >>

Results

Of the 569 respondents in our sample, 321, or 56%, have coresident adults at their current residence. Forty-two percent of black respondents, 60% of white respondents, and 74% of Hispanic respondents report coresident adults. As shown in Table 2, one-third of the respondents in our sample live with a spouse or partner alone (all left-aligned categories are mutually exclusive). Another six percent live with a spouse or partner and another adult. Nine percent of respondents live with adult family members (e.g., parents, adult children, in-laws) and seven percent live with friends or roommates. A greater share of Hispanic respondents than black or white respondents live with a spouse or with family members and a lesser share of Hispanic respondents than white respondents live with a romantic partner to whom they are not married, or with friends or roommates.

<< Table 2 about here >>

Table 3 describes the changes in household composition that respondents experienced

coincident with their moves. In our sample, over half of respondents experienced some change in coresident adults from previous residence to current residence. Fifty-four percent of blacks, 52% of Hispanics and 34% of whites experiencing no change in household composition. Though this aggregate rate is similar for blacks and Hispanics, a greater share of blacks than Hispanics live alone and stay alone and while a greater share of Hispanics than blacks have constant coresident adults across residences.

Table 3 displays mutually exclusive categories of household change. Among the types of changes in household composition we observe across moves, leaving family to live alone is most common, experienced by 15% of our sample. The other most frequent types of changes are leaving friends or roommates to live alone (5%), joining family after living alone (5%), moving in with a spouse or partner after living alone (6%), and living alone after leaving a spouse or partner (5%). A larger share of blacks are than Hispanics or whites leave family to live alone and a smaller share of blacks than whites leave friends or roommates to live alone. More Hispanics than blacks or whites join family after living alone and cohabit with a romantic partner after living alone. More whites than blacks or Hispanics live alone after a relationship dissolution.

<< Table 3 about here >>

What explains household instability among movers? Coefficients from our multivariate models that begin to address this question are presented in Table 4. Model 1 includes three indicator variables for basic respondent and household characteristics: whether the respondent is female, whether the respondent had coresident adults at her previous residence, and whether the respondent has any children. Respondents who had no coresident adults at their previous residence (only adult) have significantly lower odds of experiencing a change in coresident adults than do other respondents. For example, the predicted probability of experiencing

household instability between moves for a woman with children who did not live alone at her previous residence is 73%. It would be 34% if she was the only adult living at her previous residence. Adults who live without other adults tend to continue to do so after relocating.

<< Table 4 about here >>

Model 2 includes variables about coresident children. Coresident children are associated with household change. Model 2 includes three binary variables for coresident children of different ages. The coefficients for these variables suggest that living with very young children (under 2 years old) is associated with much greater odds of experiencing household change (odds ratio 3.14) between moves. Living with school-aged children (between ages 6 and 17), however, is associated with lower odds of experiencing household change.

Model 3 includes the complete run of our covariates. In our full model, the coefficient for living alone at previous residence maintains its direction, significance, and size, as do the coresident children indicator variables. Having very young coresident children is associated with 351% greater odds of experiencing household change while living with school-aged children is associated with 53% lower odds of experiencing household change. Descriptively, the type of household change experienced by households with young children differs from that experienced by households with older children or no children at all. A greater share of respondents with children under age 2 than respondents with older children leave family to live alone (18% versus 11%) and a greater share of respondents with young children than respondents with no children leave family to live with a romantic partner (15% versus 1%). A bigger share of respondents with children between ages 6 and 17 than respondents with younger or no children either live with the same adults as at their previous residence or lived alone in both places (62% of respondents with children ages 6 to 17 versus 10-43% of other respondents). Interestingly,

respondents who experience a forced move were found to have 43% lower odds of experiencing a change in household composition, compared to respondents who did not. This result is mainly attributed to the fact that forced movers are more likely to live alone. Our results were not changed after including flags for missing values for covariates.

Conclusion

Research attempting to estimate the effects of residential mobility on children and adolescents commonly overlooks other changes within households that may be coincident with—and potentially more consequential than—moving. This study has found that, among renters in Milwaukee, household instability often occurs alongside housing instability. In more than half of our sample, a change in adult household composition accompanied a recent move. Black renters were less likely than Hispanics and whites to live with other adults and were more likely to leave family to live alone. Hispanics were more likely than blacks and whites to join family members and to transition from living alone to cohabitation with a romantic partner.

If household instability often accompanies housing instability, then researchers attempting to estimate the effects of the latter should account for the possible influence of the former. This is particularly important if analysts wish to estimate the effects of moving on very young children, since our multivariate analyses found that renters with children under 2 had a significantly heightened likelihood of experiencing household instability alongside housing instability.

Moving can entail considerably more than the move. It often also entails a reconfiguration of one's household environment. This observation opens up possibilities for a potentially revealing line of research investigating which instability is more consequential for

children and adolescents. The focused MARS sample allowed us to explore descriptively the heterogeneity in household instability, but limited our analysis to household instability that is coincident with housing instability, and prevented us from determining which type of instability is more consequential for children and families. Future research drawing on different data could examine which change, housing or household, matters more. Children who at first look fairly stable—e.g., living in the same apartment for five years—may nonetheless live with a large number of different adults over a relatively short time period. Household instability (in the presence or absence of a move) is an understudied topic that may be consequential.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Respondents in Sample

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Experienced Change in Coresident Adults	0.60		0	1
Female	0.65		0	1
Only Adult at Previous Residence	0.27		0	1
Has Children	0.63		0	1
Coresident Child under age 2	0.08		0	1
Coresident Child between 2 and 6	0.18		0	1
Coresident Child between 6 and 17	0.28		0	1
White	0.41		0	1
Black	0.35		0	1
Hispanic	0.16		0	1
Other Race or Ethnicity	0.07		0	1
Age	33	10.6	16	91
Monthly Income ($100s)	17.42	11.31	0	65.25
Education				
Less Than High School	0.13		0	1
High School Diploma	0.40		0	1
Some College	0.27		0	1
Bachelor's Degree or more	0.18		0	1
Network Disadvantage	-0.18	0.9	-2.26	4.8
Forced Move	0.13		0	1

N=569

Table 2. Composition of Current Coresident Adults as a Percent of Respondents

	Total	Black	Hispanic	White
No Coresident Adults	43.8	58.2	26.1	40.0
Spouse Alone	13.5	9.0	23.9	13.2
Spouse plus Other Adult(s)	4.4	1.5	0.0	3.8
Partner Alone	19.7	17.9	19.6	24.7
Partner plus Other Adult(s)	2.1	1.5	2.2	1.3
Family Coresident Adults	8.8	8.0	23.9	5.1
Parent(s) Alone	2.6	1.5	10.9	0.9
Child/Children Alone	2.1	1.0	6.5	1.7
Non-relative Coresident Adults	7.2	4.0	4.3	11.5
Combination Family and Non-Family	0.9	0.5	0.0	0.4
Total N	569	276	107	168

Note: All categories except Parent(s) Alone and Child/Children Alone are mutually exclusive.

Table 3. Typologies of Household Change, by Race/Ethnicity (%)

	Total	Black	Hispanic	White
No Change				
Same Coresident Adults at Both	26.2	23.5	37.0	22.8
Live Alone, Stay Alone	19.6	30.7	14.8	11.2
Change				
Leave Family, Join Family	1.5	2.6	3.7	0.0
Leave Family, Live Alone	14.7	20.9	4.9	15.2
Leave Family, Join Other	3.2	1.3	0.0	6.6
Leave Family, Cohabit	2.3	3.9	2.5	1.0
Leave Other, Join Family	0.4	0.0	1.2	0.0
Leave Other, Live Alone	4.7	0.7	0.0	9.6
Leave Other, Join Other	0.9	1.3	0.0	1.0
Leave Other, Cohabit	1.9	0.0	2.5	3.6
Live Alone, Join Family	4.9	3.3	17.3	2.0
Live Alone, Join Other	1.1	1.3	0.0	1.0
Live Alone, Cohabit	6.0	4.6	12.3	5.1
Relationship Dissolution, Join Family	0.6	0.7	0.0	0.0
Relationship Dissolution, Live Alone	4.9	1.3	3.7	9.1
Relationship Dissolution, Join Other	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0
Other Change	6.8	3.9	0.0	11.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Total N	470	153	81	197

Note: All categories are mutually exclusive.

Table 4. Coefficients from Logistic Models Predicting Change in Coresident Adults

	Model 1 Coefficients	Model 2 Coefficients	Model 3 Coefficients
Female	-0.113	0.001	0.035
	(0.222)	(0.229)	(0.266)
Only Adult at Previous Residence	-1.700***	-1.712***	-1.679***
	(0.193)	(0.188)	(0.202)
Has Children	-0.186	-0.0344	0.547+
	(0.208)	(0.235)	(0.314)
Coresident Children			
Under 2		1.143***	1.256***
		(0.333)	(0.378)
Between 2 and 6		-0.243	-0.649+
		(0.297)	(0.339)
Between 6 and 17		-0.552*	-0.764**
		(0.242)	(0.293)
Monthly Income			0.00816
			(0.0103)
Education			
High School			-0.008
			(0.265)
Some College			0.210
			(0.287)
Bachelor's Degree or More			0.375
			(0.471)
Black			-0.504+
			(0.300)
Hispanic			-0.0220
			(0.438)
Other Race			-0.237
			(0.805)
Age			-0.0205+
			(0.0113)
Network Disadvantage			0.153
			(0.124)
Forced Move			-0.563*
			(0.238)
Constant	1.319***	1.289***	1.920***
	(0.232)	(0.232)	(0.485)
N	531	531	473

Standard errors clustered at the neighborhood (block group) level in parentheses.
+ p<0.10 (two-tailed)
* p<0.05
** p<0.01
*** p<0.001