

The Role of Violence in a Decision to Move

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Neighborhood violence is a major factor in a family's decision to move to a new location using a housing voucher.

As research from Harvard's Raj Chetty and Nathaniel Hendren has made clear, neighborhood conditions matter to individuals' well-being.¹ Children whose families reside in well-off communities (where there are lower rates of income inequality, and violent crime; plus better schools and more two-parent households) experience more upward mobility than peers living in places that lack such characteristics. Yet researchers and policymakers have little understanding about how neighborhood qualities such as high rates of violent crime interact with families' pursuit of economic mobility.

The Importance of Safety

Although scholars have only recently established a causal link between neighborhoods and outcomes, a longstanding research tradition has emphasized how access to quality neighborhoods is unequal and particularly out of reach for many minority and low-income families.²

Many researchers have focused on the factors that prevent relocation to higher-quality neighborhoods, but few have investigated the factors motivating a family's decision to leave or remain and whether the family perceives those decisions as voluntary or involuntary. An analysis of evidence that families perceive violence as a major factor in residential decision making suggests that neighborhood violence may also compromise economic mobility.

Beginning in the 1990s, federal low-income housing policies increasingly prioritized facilitating movement out of concentrated poverty by offering vouchers to subsidize the cost of housing. Researchers assumed that people would be motivated to use the vouchers to move to higher-rent neighborhoods that offered improved educational or job opportunities. However, surveys conducted with participants suggested other motivations, particularly concerns about safety. Only 2 percent listed employment concerns ("to get a job" or "to be near my job"), whereas an astounding 53 percent wanted to move because they feared crime. Given such results, the policy assumption about participants' motivation did not give safety its due role in decision making.

In a meta-analysis of interviews with households across the

country that sought to make residential moves through housing-mobility programs, we assessed participants' descriptions of their decision making.³ They describe how safety threats to themselves and their children in three settings (block level, neighborhood, and school) influenced their decision to move.

Even our basic understanding of Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggests that people are motivated to meet their fundamental need for safety and security before they can attend to economic or educational advancement. The need for protection from violence is all the more pronounced for the most frequent participants of housing programs—women and their dependent children.

Unsafe Buildings and Neighborhoods

Interviews collected from housing-voucher participants nationwide illustrate the multidimensional ways high-crime neighborhoods threaten participants' safety needs. The interviews were conducted with participants seeking to move out of public-housing projects or to relocate from private housing.

Across the country and across programs, voucher participants expressed a concern about their personal safety in and around their housing units, detailing multiple threats. Frequently, women cited a fear that they would be victimized in their homes by neighborhood gun violence. A woman in Newport News, Virginia, said, "When I went to bed, there was the sound of gunfire." An Atlanta participant recounted, "There have been a lot of times [in prevoucher housing] I felt like [the gunfire] was so close I didn't get up, I just rolled on out."

In addition to gun violence, participants cited other safety concerns. For example, a Chicago woman said that her prevoucher housing involved "constant gangbanging, constant drug selling, constant police harassment." Women also recounted fearing sexual assault. Another Chicago woman wanted to move because "when I first got in the projects, the guys—I would be with my kids—they would ... harass me on the elevator." For women, such experiences often generated fear for their personal safety, motivating them to find new places to live.

In addition to expressing safety fears in and around their housing units, women described concerns about being victimized in the larger neighborhood. One woman noted the high rates of murder and drug abuse in her Atlanta neighborhood. "Somebody is always getting killed. In fact, three have been killed this year." A Boston

participant said, “When you go outside, you don’t know what’s flying around the corner. ... It was like living in prison.”

Although participants expressed worry about their personal safety, those with dependent children were even more vocal and articulate about their alarm. Many parents described the threats to their children’s safety encountered in their housing units or apartment complexes. Common spaces such as elevators and hallways were seen as especially sinister for children. “I don’t want to live around this. I don’t want to subject my kids to all of this stuff, and I certainly do not want to be getting on the elevator with people who I knew could actually take somebody’s life.”

Participants also discussed how threats to children’s safety in the broader neighborhood—where someone might suddenly start shooting—motivated them to move. “I was afraid to let them out much,” said one. “You never know when somebody start shooting.” Another participant also wanted to move out of concern for her kids: “They can’t grow up normally in an atmosphere of fear.”

Unsafe Schools

Safety, not educational quality, dominated concerns in the school context, too. Participants explained that their motivation to change schools related mainly to school safety. A Baltimore participant explained that her girlfriend’s son got killed in the “bad school.”⁴ Most parents emphasized perceived safety and convenience as indicators of a “good” school, rather than reliable evidence on achievement or academic supports (such as small class sizes, strong counseling, and tutoring). Such parents placed a high priority on ensuring their children’s safety, even if that meant staying at the school in the original neighborhood.⁵

An examination of how families seek information or guidance about good schools reveals that discussions focused on identifying safer schools, not ones more academically rigorous. One participant claimed that the “only thing” she disliked about a school was that there were “always riots; they always started fires. ... My concern was my child’s safety. ... We need more security.”

Although school safety may not have been the participants’ only concern, it was the most pressing one. Another mother, in Baltimore, detailed a traumatic experience her son had in seventh grade: “One boy threatened to kill him, you know, it was terrible. Threatened to kill him over a soda, ’cause Robby brought a soda and

the boy wanted to drink his soda, and Robby told him no.” When schools are environments where parents need to worry about safety, concerns regarding educational quality take a back seat.

The meta-analysis of such personal accounts suggests that participants sought to satisfy the need to be safe before attending to other criteria. As one explained, the most important factor was escaping her threatening environment—access to her place of employment was relatively unimportant. “I don’t care about being close to work,” she reported. “I just want to be away from [here].”

An Underappreciated Determinant

We interpret these results to mean that conditions of violence experienced by participants living in high-crime neighborhoods significantly drive the decision to make a residential move through a housing-mobility program. Whereas previous research has focused on households’ decisions about where to move, these narratives suggest that participants perceive little choice about moving.

For more secure households, the decision to move is a voluntary one, often timed to coincide with important milestones, such as when children reach school age. For residents of high-crime areas, the decision to move may not be voluntary.

Participants frequently perceive violence—near their homes, in their neighborhoods, and at their schools—as a threat to their lives and their children’s lives. When violence pushes participants out of their current residences, they may not be leaving because the time is right for their families or because they have thoughtfully considered other unit and neighborhood factors.

Economists have shown a causal link between lower levels of neighborhood violence and upward mobility. The experiences of the families living in unsafe conditions may illustrate how crime is not only an undesirable feature but also one that compromises decision making. Thus neighborhood violence works on two levels—as a threat to people’s immediate well-being and as a disrupter of pursuits that might lead to economic mobility.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Raj Chetty and Nathaniel Hendren, “The Effects of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility: Childhood Exposure Effects and County-Level Estimates” (working paper, Equality of Opportunity Project, Cambridge, Massachusetts, May 2015), http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/images/nbhds_exec_summary.pdf.
- ² William J. Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987).
- ³ Erin M. Graves, “Rooms for Improvement: A Qualitative Meta-analysis of the Housing Choice Voucher Program” (Community Development Discussion Paper no. 2015-1, Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, 2015), <http://www.bostonfed.org/commdev/pcadp/2015/cddp1501.htm>.
- ⁴ Stefanie DeLuca et al., “Gautreaux Mothers and Their Children: An Update,” *Housing Policy Debate* 20, no. 1 (2010): 7–25.
- ⁵ Xavier de Souza Briggs, Jennifer Comey, and Gretchen Weismann, “Struggling to Stay out of High-Poverty Neighborhoods: Housing Choice and Locations in Moving to Opportunity’s First Decade,” *Housing Policy Debate* 20, no. 3 (2010): 383–427.



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Safety for their children is a major reason people accept housing vouchers that allow them to move.