

Housing Mobility Programs & Opportunities: A Research Road Map to Inform Policies Around Housing, Neighborhoods, & Families

Background

Congress has appropriated \$50 million for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to support a new [Housing Choice Voucher \(HCV\) Mobility Demonstration Program](#) aimed at enabling families with young children to move to lower-poverty areas. The program will make funding available in Spring 2021 to [nine public housing agencies](#) to provide housing vouchers and mobility services to help families move to areas that offer increased opportunities for economic advancement and test these strategies in a randomized trial.

The new demonstration program follows several previous and ongoing housing mobility programs, including HUD's [Moving To Opportunity \(MTO\)](#), [Creating Moves To Opportunity \(CMTO\)](#), [Two-Generation Demonstration \(2Gen\)](#), and others.

These demonstrations stem from growing evidence that moves to lower poverty neighborhoods can significantly improve childrens' life trajectories. Nonetheless, some major knowledge gaps remain in our understanding of housing mobility programs.

A Research Road Map

By helping families with low incomes live in safe, low-poverty neighborhoods, the new HUD demonstration program has the potential to help address historic patterns of segregation and increase families' upward mobility. Beyond this, the research could inform a broad range of public policies and deepen scientific understanding of whether and how moving to neighborhoods that offer a richer set of opportunities for economic mobility impacts the lives of children and families.

In late 2020, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation invited leaders in the housing, health, education, and economic development fields to discuss the value and limitations of previous research on housing mobility and develop a Research Road Map. Through pre-meeting interviews, field-specific roundtables, and a cross-disciplinary convening, these experts considered how HUD's new voucher mobility program could be used as a platform for additional research, beyond the Congressionally mandated evaluation, and fill knowledge gaps.

To expand the knowledge base, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Institute for Health and Social Policy based at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, and a network of experts released a report to guide supplementary housing mobility research. The Research Road Map highlights the following priority areas that could add knowledge and nuance to existing research on housing voucher mobility programs:

- **The role of school, neighborhood and jurisdiction characteristics in shaping effects of mobility programs**, including which features of neighborhoods and schools make it more or less likely that different types of children and families will be able to move to opportunity neighborhoods and achieve positive outcomes.
- **Diversity in program participants' enrollment, experiences, and outcomes**, including which families are more likely to enroll, who is more likely to move to neighborhoods that offer more opportunities, and who appears to achieve the most positive economic, educational, health, and other outcomes as a result of those moves. A wide range of intermediate and long-term health outcomes were recommended including, for example, cognitive and emotional development, health care use and access, pregnancy-related outcomes, and specific health conditions such as asthma and obesity. Experts suggest collecting and analyzing robust baseline data on individual and family factors is an important first step.
- **Housing mobility components, policies, and practices that affect families' ability to successfully move**, including public housing authorities' practices regarding family outreach, recruitment and engagement, the composition and types of mobility services and supports, landlord outreach and recruitment, and the broader policy environment.

Advancing Housing Mobility Research

The experts also recommend measuring and tracking more outcomes than previous studies have done, emphasizing the importance of studying **children’s educational, health, and well-being** outcomes, and **adults’ health** outcomes over time.

They also believe the research should:

- Involve residents in research design, data interpretation, and dissemination of findings.
- Center the role of racial inequities, racism, and racial/ economic segregation in shaping families’ expectations, choices, constraints, decisions, and outcomes.
- Unpack the relative impact and value of different mobility services and track multiple intermediate and long-term outcomes related to children’s and parents’ health, well-being, and community connectedness.
- Use mixed methods—surveys, qualitative and ethnographic studies, and cross-sector, cross-agency data linkages—to capture the perspectives, attitudes, experiences, outcomes, and practices of families, landlords, and public housing authorities, both within the housing voucher mobility program and in neighborhoods and schools.

The Research Road Map’s goal is to generate ideas and discussion about *supplemental* research but not to interfere with the integrity of the existing mobility demonstration program or its evaluation. Any supplemental research should avoid undue burden on residents, public housing authority staff, and others (e.g., HUD staff and researchers) who may already be participating in the program evaluation.

You can read the full Research Road Map report and recommendations [here](#).



Institute for Health and Social Policy



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