



Cities, Regions, and Schools: A Report to the Brookings Institution Metropolitan Policy Program

Housing, Transportation, and Schools

Executive Summary

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Introduction

This policy brief explores the many dimensions along which educational opportunities are impacted by issues related to housing and transportation, and discusses several strategies for addressing these issues. It is low-income, minority communities who are disproportionately affected by a lack of housing and transportation options, a situation that serves to stifle educational opportunities. To better understand the situation, this brief seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How do housing instability, poverty concentration, and poor access to quality affordable housing (housing choice) and transportation contribute to the quality of schools and student outcomes?
2. What are the strategies we can use to address these problems?

Background

The current state of housing segregation and poverty concentration is largely a result of a stream of federal housing and transportation policies. These policies have perpetuated redlining, which prohibited African-Americans from obtaining homes in the suburbs and relegating them to homes with decreasing values in the inner cities. Other policies consolidated public housing and displaced thousands of poor, mostly black people as part of Urban Renewal and highway expansion in the 1950s. In addition, the courts enforced racial covenants, which barred blacks and other minorities from certain neighborhoods until the Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional in 1948. The sorting of housing by race and income, therefore, is no coincidence, but largely the effect of explicit policies to exclude some people and concentrate them in the cities.

Issues Affecting Schools and Learning

Lack of Affordable Housing

According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition, nearly one-third of households in this country had housing problems; low-income people, who comprise one-quarter of the population, represent two-thirds of those with housing problems.ⁱ The fact that children are over-represented in low income households, for whom the lack of affordable housing is most pronounced, makes it clear that the lack of affordable housing is not just a housing problem, but an educational one as well. From 1997-2002, 150,000 publicly subsidized units were taken off the market.ⁱⁱ The affordable housing which does exist is predominantly located in central-city, low-income, minority neighborhoods. It is established that “residents of affordable housing are much more likely to live in disadvantaged neighborhoods than other US residents are,”ⁱⁱⁱ a pattern which exacerbates concentrated poverty.

Low-income families struggling with housing affordability often end up in housing that is overcrowded or of poor quality. Children living in overcrowded homes are more liable to deal with increased family tensions, and those living in poor quality homes are more prone to poor health conditions.^{iv} These are all problems that children bring to the classroom, problems that both stunt their own learning and disrupt the learning of other students. Further, in many metropolitan areas, the lack of affordable housing has weakened the bond between teachers and communities as teachers find themselves priced out of the communities that they work in.^v

Economic Segregation

Concentrated poverty—and concentrated affluence—in neighborhoods results in de facto segregation in schools. The resulting poverty concentration in schools “is consistently related to lower performance on every education outcome measured.”^{vi} In fact, nationally, “a middle-class school is twenty-four times more likely to be consistently high performing than a high-poverty school.”^{vii}

The reasons for this are hard to pinpoint, but economic segregation “is correlated with in-school factors that impact an individual’s achievement level,” including the economic background of the

student's peers, the economic resources available to the school, teacher quality, access to health care and proper nutrition, and the presence of gangs and crime.^{viii} These conditions translate into a student body with higher needs, though the schools usually lack sufficient resources to deal with these extra challenges.^{ix} These students' additional needs also take a toll on teachers, whose performance may suffer as a result.^x

On the other hand, studies show that attending middle-class schools results in increased opportunity for low-income students. Not only do low-income students who attend middle-class schools perform higher,^{xi} they are also "exposed to a higher set of educational expectations and career options,"^{xii} social and democratic benefits, increased perspective, higher levels of reasoning, and more meaningful interactions.^{xiii} They also get the benefit of middle-class parents with the resources, time, and education to advocate for their children.^{xiv}

Forced Mobility

Scarce affordable housing options, lack of jobs, unstable income streams, and family disruptions can lead to unanticipated or undesirable residential changes. The effects of forced mobility are borne disproportionately by low-income families.^{xv} Children of such low-income families experience some of the greatest negative effects, including poor educational outcomes.^{xvi} The Government Accountability Office reported in 1994 that one in six third-graders have attended three different schools.^{xvii} A 2002 study of children in Chicago public elementary schools reported that only 38 percent of students examined had attended the same school during the same school year.^{xviii} Average achievement scores of schools with many mobile students are significantly lower than those schools with a more stable student base.^{xix} Older students are also affected by residential changes. A University of Chicago study found that both residential and educational mobility are strongly correlated with early high school dropout rates.

Transportation Inequity

Low-income, central city families are less likely to possess the means to transport their children to schools in neighborhoods other than their own. This is an issue in the growing number of school choice programs across the nation. Many studies have acknowledged that school choice programs that do not provide free transportation to low-income children are not providing a real choice and risk further alienating the most at-risk children in poorly performing schools.^{xx} However, offering free transportation for school choice programs can often be costly and logistically challenging, since voucher students are often very far from their school of choice, and their routes do not always coincide with regular school bus routes.^{xxi} Transportation is becoming an even greater challenge as neighborhoods confront low-density, sprawl development, consolidating school districts, and rising fuel costs.

Strategies to Address These Issues

Housing Choice Vouchers

A number of studies suggest that "tenant-based subsidies that help low-income families move from high- to lower-poverty areas improve their well-being and life chances, particularly those of their children."^{xxii} Current statistics on the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher program, as well as evidence from the Gautreaux program in Chicago and the Moving to Opportunity program, demonstrate that participants do in fact use the vouchers to move to neighborhoods with smaller concentrations of poverty and minorities.

There is also evidence that relates the Gautreaux program directly to student achievement. Suburban movers, specifically, initially had difficulties adjusting, but after a few years in the suburbs, their grades and school performance "were the same as those of city movers." Suburban movers also "had smaller classes, higher satisfaction with teachers and courses, and better attitudes about school than

city movers.”^{xxiii} Several years later, students who had moved to the suburbs had much lower drop-out rates than city movers, equivalent grades (suggesting higher achievement, given the greater expectations in the suburban schools), and higher college track and enrollment rates, particularly in four-year colleges.^{xxiv}

The Section 8 program, however, faces some critical barriers to the goal of de-concentrating poverty. These include the difficulty for low-income tenants to search for housing in more affluent areas, the lack of participation on the part of landlords because of discrimination and because the “fair market rent” set by HUD may be too low, and the desire of tenants to live in familiar settings. The Gautreaux program, which relocated low-income urban residents to the suburbs and to other neighborhoods, has had some long-term success, on the other hand. Families currently live in areas with lower poverty, lower crime, lower concentrations of minorities, and higher incomes than their origin neighborhoods.^{xxv} The program also had relatively low visibility and therefore reduced backlash and stigma.^{xxvi} While the experimental Moving to Opportunity (MTO) program’s results were also mixed, families generally moved to communities that were “more advantaged than those from which they originated.”^{xxvii} Economic conditions were improved, and poverty rates were lower, in the placement communities.^{xxviii}

Inclusionary Zoning

Inclusionary zoning ordinances require builders to include a certain amount of housing for low- and moderate-income households. This strategy is a market-based solution to integrate neighborhoods, and consequently, integrate schools.^{xxix} Today, especially in growing metropolitan areas characterized by skyrocketing home prices and limited resources for publicly supported affordable housing, inclusionary zoning has become a popular tool.^{xxx} One of the first and most successful programs was implemented in Montgomery County, Maryland. In Montgomery, 80% of the residents of the affordable units were minority; further, studies have shown that the households represented a variety of income levels.^{xxxi} Inclusionary zoning in New Jersey did not result in racial desegregation, and it appeared to benefit mostly moderate incomes rather than low incomes.^{xxxii} However, this result contrasts with New Jersey, where inclusionary zoning was implemented after the Mount Laurel court decisions.

One drawback of inclusionary zoning is that it is generally more economically and politically feasible to build moderate income rather than low and very-low income housing, decreasing inclusionary zoning’s ability to truly impact economic segregation.^{xxxiii} In addition, there have been no studies measuring the impact of inclusionary zoning on education, and only a few on its impact on community desegregation.

The Developer Model

The Developer Model strategy focuses on schools as part of a comprehensive approach to revitalizing blighted neighborhoods. The goal of this model is to de-concentrate poverty and promote economic integration through mixed-income communities. Private and non-profit developers try to attract middle-class families by improving schools and housing, while also trying to retain existing, low-income residents by creating superior, affordable housing options. Funding for these communities is drawn from many sources, including HOPE VI grants,^{xxxiv} private investments, and local housing authorities.

An example of the Developer Model is Centennial Place in Atlanta, Georgia. A joint venture between private developers and the Atlanta Housing Authority,^{xxxv} The project began as a revitalization of the nation’s oldest housing projects. Centennial Place is a mixed-income community, of which 40 percent is designated for public housing, 20 percent is selected for tax credit families, and the remainder for market-rate units.^{xxxvi} The hallmark of the community is Centennial Place Elementary School. Developers formed an agreement with the local board of education to replace the old elementary school. Local partnerships were integral to the reconstruction, as resources were supplied by the Atlanta-based

Coca-Cola Company. In 2005, almost half of the students exceeded state standards in reading, and 20 percent exceeded standards in math, making the school one of the top performers in the state.^{xxxvii}

Not all communities benefit from revitalization efforts. In Chicago, gentrification efforts coupled with school reform pushed out low-income, minority families.^{xxxviii} Other problems exist regarding the extent to which new mixed-income communities can sustain a stock of good, affordable homes while the quality of education rises. A related concern is the retention of previous residents in newly renovated housing sites.

School Choice Programs with Transportation

A critical part of creating an equitable school choice program is ensuring free transportation to schools outside a student's immediate neighborhood. One example of a public school choice program that is actively seeking new, innovative ways to provide school choice with transportation is Miami-Dade County Public School (MDCPS). MDCPS is a large, geographically-dispersed, metropolitan school district that has struggled with racial and economic segregation. A study published in 2002 found that there was still a high degree of residential and school segregation in the district.^{xxxix} In 2001, the district implemented a voluntary desegregation program called "I Choose" with a federal grant from the Voluntary Public School Choice Program.^{xl} In order to minimize costs and maximize the number of students taking advantage of choice opportunities, the district was divided into "choice zones," each containing approximately four high schools, six to twelve middle schools, and nine to sixteen elementary schools.^{xli} Transportation is provided to schools within a student's "choice zone," limiting the distances traveled. The program also uses a new computerized routing system to track buses more closely and allocate resources more efficiently.^{xlii}

Providing transportation does not single-handedly lead to equitable school choice programs. Other issues such as parental education, access to information, and protections for non-choosers need to be addressed in order to create equitable school choice. Also, rising fuel costs and increasing sprawl development will likely continue to increase the cost of school transportation, limiting the number of districts that can effectively offer free transportation.

Conclusions

It is clear from the discussion that efforts to improve educational outcomes for low-income, minority communities must include efforts to improve housing and transportation opportunities. However, few studies have examined the effects of interventions such as inclusionary housing, housing vouchers, developer models or changes in transportation provision for school choice programs. In conclusion, we find that:

- *These strategies are not one-size-fits-all approaches.* Inclusionary zoning works well when there is a very strong housing market and developers are willing to provide affordable units. Developer models necessitate a lead developer who can pull together the funding and community support for a school-based project. Transportation solutions depend largely on the layout and infrastructure of a given community.
- *The effectiveness of these strategies depends on the specific parameters of the program or development.* Inclusionary zoning's effect on alleviating concentrated poverty in schools will be limited if its provision does not mandate housing for low-income households. The highlighted school choice program's ability to provide low-income, minority students with real choices depends on how many quality choices those student have within their regional subdivision. Likewise, housing choice voucher programs will be more effective in dispersing poverty if they include counseling and target participants to low-poverty neighborhoods.

- *There is a lack of evidence regarding the effectiveness of these strategies.* These programs need to be carefully evaluated to determine whether or not they lead to positive school outcomes for students, particularly low-income students.

Endnotes

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ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

^{iv} *ibid*

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^{ix} Kirwan, p.8.

^x Wake County, p.1.

^{xi} Kirwan, p.7; Wake County, p.3.

^{xii} Orfield 2004, p.24; Orfield 2005, p.16.

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^{xiv} Orfield 2005, pp.9-10.

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^{xxv} De Luca, p.31.

^{xxvi} Rosenbaum, p.246.

^{xxvii} Johnson, p.12.

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^{xxxiv} The HOPE VI program was created in the 1980s to redevelop decaying public housing projects and to help residents become homeowners.

^{xxxv} Centennial Place was the first HOPE VI site.

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