

# Moving home in the early years: Family and child outcomes in the UK and US

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This briefing provides a first look at findings comparing the experience of moving home for children under five in two longitudinal studies, one the UK Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) and the other the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFS) from US cities, in the early 2000s.

The research set out to explore how moving home in two contrasting housing policy regimes was associated with the development of pre-school children. Families move home in a variety of circumstances and with a range of outcomes for their housing and location. Researchers compared evidence from both the UK and US to see whether the conditions surrounding moving home, or moving itself, contribute to children's development problems.

This briefing provides information and raises questions for policy on housing and early years.

## Key finding

Moves which are good for the family do not appear to jeopardise child development. Those which are bad tend to occur in circumstances which put stress on children, whether or not their families move.

## Introduction

Early childhood is one of the points in life where people often move home, yet there has been little research on how young children fare in this process. The project offered a new analysis of information on children in the UK and US, to investigate:

- Who moves, how far and how often, and for what reasons?
- Do children of frequent movers fare differently to those whose families move less?
- Are any deficits in child development accounted for by the circumstances that trigger moves or by the type of destination?
- How might policies for young families cushion the effect of the current UK 'housing crisis'?

Moving home can bring better housing, education, or employment opportunities, but there may also be negative health and psychological effects – via stress, disruption of social networks or schooling, downgrading of housing, etc., especially if the moves are frequent. In the existing psychological literature, moving home is recognised as a potentially 'adverse life event' for children as well as adults. The literature concerned with the negative effects of moving is largely North American: one reason for making a careful comparison between the US and UK. Rates of mobility are especially high in the US: nearly one quarter of US children aged 0-4 moved home in the year before the 2000 census, twice the annual rate found in UK. More Americans move, and they do so more frequently.



The US and UK's contrasting policy landscapes mean patterns of housing tenure diverge, though more recent developments in the UK are bringing them closer.

Taking the US and UK as a whole, home ownership is the dominant tenure accounting for around two thirds of households in each country. In the US, renting is predominantly private, although at times subsidised by government agencies. By contrast, in the UK renting has been mainly 'social' – from local councils or not-for-profit housing associations. Comparison of the initial surveys in the two studies showed 68 per cent of MCS families owning their homes, but home ownership among the FFS families in large US cities was much less common (26%). Nevertheless, more of the MCS families were living in social housing (20%) than the 10 per cent of FFS families in 'public housing'. Private renting and other forms of less stable tenure, such as sharing in a bigger household, were together the most common arrangement for the American families (64% in FFS compared to 12% in MCS).

## About the studies

### UK: Millennium Cohort Study

- About 19,000 children born between 2000 and 2001, all UK countries
- Interviews with parent(s) when the child was 9 months, 3, and 5 years (and later)
- Oversample poor & ethnic minority areas
- Using a sample of 14,373 with complete data on outcomes at age 5
- Includes all of the UK, as the city sub-samples are not very different

### US: Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study

- About 5,000 children born between 1998 and 2000 in 20 large US cities
- Interviews with parent(s) at child's birth, and ages 1, 3, and 5 (and later)
- Oversample unmarried mothers
- Using a sample of 2,577 with complete observations on outcomes at 5

Figures from the census of England and Wales help show how in recent years, patterns of housing tenure in the UK have become more similar to the US. In England and Wales in 2001, home ownership among all households with dependent children (of all ages) was (like MCS) 68 per cent, but it fell to 60 per cent in 2011, as did the share of the social housing sector, with the result that private rentals and other insecure tenures doubled to 20 per cent. They reached 25 per cent in London in 2011, but the increase also extended across other regions. This upward trend towards private rental and other insecure tenures continues since 2011.

Children were more likely to move, and move more often, in FFS than in MCS. Two thirds of FFS children moved at least once, and 18 per cent more than three times between birth and age 5. In MCS, between the first survey at 9 months and age five, 40 per cent moved at least once, and only 5 per cent moved more than three times. Moving home was equally likely before and after the children reached age 3 in the FFS study, but more likely in the MCS *before* age 3 (30%) than between age 3 and age 5 (15%). The distances covered by the movers in both studies are also mostly modest. In the MCS, one quarter of home moves involved no more than one kilometre between first and last address, and only one in seven went more than 50 kilometres. The majority of those participating in the MCS cited positive reasons for moving, such as a bigger house, better area or better schools. Negative reasons, such as family break-up, or problems with neighbours, were mentioned much less frequently. Only a very small number – 1 per cent – of MCS families moved due to eviction, problems with a landlord or an inability to pay. Likewise very few MCS moves involved homelessness. This is not surprising given that the time period covered by this investigation (2001-2006) was relatively prosperous, with a much more benign housing market than currently. The questions remain as to whether the current decrease in affordable homes, and in subsidies that might make rents affordable, will increase the proportion of families with young children moving for negative reasons, and to what effect.

Movers in MCS were not asked if the move had been stressful, intended, or regretted. This limits one's understanding of the context of home moves and their effect. Another limitation is that the MCS did not collect information on intentions to move, so it was not possible to study the effects of forced immobility – that is, families who could not move due to lack of affordable or suitable alternative housing.

In recent years, changes to housing policy and the economic climate have led to a decline in affordable housing stock. The impact of the UK 'housing crisis' on young children is a pertinent issue demanding further investigation.

## Findings

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### Who are the movers?

It's impossible to know what would have happened to children of movers had they 'stayed put', or to those who 'stayed put' if they had moved. Rather, researchers looked at children who moved and compared them to children who remained where they were.

The research considered children's outcomes in terms of three scores at age 5: vocabulary and two widely used indicators of behaviour problems, externalising ('acting out') and internalising (withdrawn or anxious). On average, children whose families had moved had less favourable scores, on all three counts, than those who did not. This lends some support to the idea that moving might be putting them at risk. But it would be premature to leap to conclusions before considering who the movers are and the ways in which they may have been at a disadvantage.

One third of movers did not live with both natural parents over the first five years, compared with 18 per cent of the others. All types of partnership transition (splits and reconstitutions) were more common among movers, and may have precipitated moves. Transitions into and out of employment were also more common for parents who moved. Private renters were much more likely to move than those who owned their own home.

The mothers in the families who moved were younger on average, by more than two years, and even when other factors were accounted for, older age itself reduced the chances of moving. The arrival of a new sibling and the absence of any older ones (both more common in the younger, mover families) increased the chances of moving.

Ethnic minority status and being born overseas were not significantly related to the chances of moving, except for the Pakistani and Bangladeshi group who were less mobile. Family income and the education level of the main informant (normally the mother) were positively associated with being a mover. With regard to initial health factors, only maternal depression was associated with a greater chance of moving.

While the US sample of movers had a more consistently disadvantaged family profile, the MCS movers showed a cross-current of both more and less prosperous family circumstances in comparison with more middling stayers.

### Are the poorer development scores of children who moved explained by the associated family events and circumstances?

Generally speaking, they are. Changes to parents' relationship status, employment, or housing tenure were proved to have stronger association with child wellbeing than moving in and of itself. Analysis of the MCS revealed that parents' education, social housing, and some aspects of child health, were key factors related to vocabulary scores and behavioural problems.

Changes to parents' relationship status were particularly important for children's externalising behaviour ('acting out'). Some employment patterns were more important for internalising problems and vocabulary. Parents' income and the mother's age are also significant predictors of children doing well. Mother's poor health and depression were important predictors of both sorts of behaviour problems. It is important to note that all three measures of child development were significantly related to living in social housing, even for families who did not move. This is true even when measured family resources and vulnerabilities are taken into account, and confirms previous research into child development and social housing.

### Are there some types of moves which add to children's difficulties?

Moves which result in going to an address with less space, in a less favoured neighbourhood than before, or in failing to leave the most disadvantaged areas, were associated in some degree with some children's difficulties.

We classified moves by objective indicators of the size of the home and the social composition of the area, (which tally with subjective accounts). The movers themselves were classified into groups. The 'doubly disadvantaged' are those who got a smaller home or moved into a worse neighbourhood or within the most disadvantaged one, with exceptions. These exceptions, labelled 'mixed', are where there were changes in opposite directions: movers achieved a smaller home in a better area, or a bigger home in a poorer area.

One in five of the moves had the 'doubly disadvantaged' outcome, nearly one quarter had a mixed outcome, and over half maintained or improved their home on both counts.

The children with doubly disadvantaged moves showed somewhat more externalising behavioural problems. The vocabulary score of these children in these least advantaged scenarios was also unfavourable, by a small margin.

It is worth noting that harmful effects of moving home might not be manifest at age 5. It is also plausible that some unobserved long-term effects could be positive, if families have moved to get better jobs for the parents, or better schools for the children. There is also the argument that the effect of moving on children depends on how old they were when they moved. Schooling and social networks could be more seriously disrupted once children are of school age. Investigation of the MCS cohort's older siblings has as yet found little strong evidence of behaviour problems from moving during school-age years.

The analysis of data in the FFS survey did not have enough information to establish whether adverse housing outcomes are associated with bad outcomes for children. However, in that study children making multiple moves to disadvantaged areas had poor childhood verbal scores.

## Conclusion

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This briefing examines the factors and effects of families' moving home when they had a child under 5 in two longitudinal surveys, in the UK and US, in the early 2000s.

Moving home was a common life event for children, but for 5 year olds living in the US or UK in the early 2000s, it was not necessarily an 'adverse' one. But in some circumstances – family break-up, job loss, unstable tenancies, moves to smaller homes or worse neighbourhoods – outcomes for children can be negative. Many of these circumstances are more prevalent in the US and are likely to be more common in the UK now than they were a decade ago.

The research confirms that it is the indicators of social disadvantage: low income, low education, poor physical and mental health of the mother, not owning the home and living in disadvantaged areas that have a far stronger association with child development than moving per se.

Moving home is not one dimensional. It has many sources, many outcomes for the household, and many kinds of consequences for individuals. It may be more useful to think of moving home as one possible reaction to stresses, or opportunities, rather than as a simple determinant of family problems.

Though residential mobility does not necessarily equate with undesirable instability, this does not mean that it is never detrimental. Very few of the MCS children's moves in the period 2001-2006 involved homelessness or long distance relocation, and perhaps as many as half the movers remained within reasonably easy reach of their original neighbourhood network. Most of the moves observed in the MCS up to 2006 covered only short distances to gain space and perhaps a better neighbourhood. It would be reasonable for families to want to avoid having to accept a housing set-back, or to do so only as a last resort. The more recent changes to the structure of the housing market in the UK may mean that such undesirable moves are more common than they once were.

## Policy implications

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The decline in home ownership among less prosperous UK families in the decade after the period studied here (2001-2006) is expected to put pressure on child development whether or not the reaction to housing stress involves moving home. A decade on, moving home could prove more detrimental if moves are 'forced', due to housing becoming more unaffordable.

Policies need to enable families to move, to meet their changing needs, without undue stress.

The magnitude of social differences in children's development scores underlines the importance of investments in 'early-years' services for low income families. During the period of the research, early-years' services were being increased, now they are being withdrawn. Investment in 'early years' should not neglect suitable housing for low income families.

Family mobility complicates the task of organisations involved in providing health and education services to the families of young children. This picture of the family dynamics and family circumstances of children whose families move should be useful background for the joining up of services to movers and stayers alike.