

Children on the Move

Issue #4

Spring 2005

Residential mobility is an important factor in discussions of child well-being, especially in a region such as Clark County, Nevada, which has experienced phenomenal population growth, soaring housing prices, and a shortage of affordable housing. Residential mobility, defined as “moves within a jurisdiction,” (Schachter, 2004, p. 2) may lead to school mobility. Child advocates and educators are concerned that families may make frequent short-distance residential moves to find affordable housing, resulting in their children having to cross school zones to enroll in a new school. School mobility may, for what ever reason, lead to some disruption in learning (Crowley, 2003). Educators believe it takes children four to six months to adjust academically after a school change (NAEHCY, 2002). This issue brief looks at affordable housing in Clark County and its potential effects on residential and student mobility.

Residential Mobility

Finding suitable housing is often a reason for a residential move. A Minnesota study (The Kids Mobility Project) revealed that students of color, low-income students (those eligible for free meals), and students not living with both parents moved most often, primarily due to family instability and insufficient safe, affordable housing (Family Housing Fund, 1998).

Schafft (2002) found that student transiency disproportionately affected poorer school districts in Upstate New York. School administrators were most likely to cite affordable housing as a pull factor among

low-income movers in disadvantaged districts. One school superintendent stated that:

“The ones that concern me are the families that just drift from rental to rental. We have 2 or 3 families in particular that I’m thinking of that just seem to bounce from one neighboring district to the next. It’s a factor of poverty. They pay rent for a while and then they get evicted and they have to move on and rent somewhere else” (Schafft, 2002, p. 5).

The U.S. Census reports that between 2002 and 2003, 40.1 million residents moved in the U.S. (Schachter, 2004). Among children, the youngest were most likely to have moved. The moving rates for children ages 1-4, 5-9, 10-14, and 15-19 were 21.4, 15.9, 13.2, and 14.2 percents, respectively. The main reason for moves was housing related. Intracounty (short-distance) movers,¹ however, were almost twice as likely to move for housing-related reasons than were intercounty movers (long distance) (63.7 versus 33.6 percent). Intercounty movers were four times as likely to move for work-related reasons than intracounty movers (28.2 versus 6.6 percent). People living in rental-occupied housing were more likely to move than people living in owner-occupied housing (30.1 versus 7.5 percent).

According to the Census Bureau, the mobile rates for Nevada were high in 2000. Of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, Nevada had the highest percentage of recent movers² of owner-occupied housing (17 percent compared to 10.3 percent for the nation) and the second-highest percentage of renter-occupied housing units (51.3 percent compared to

38.8 percent for the nation). These statistics are not surprising considering that about 6,000 to 7,000 people move to Nevada a month and the majority will need a place to live. Often people will rent for a short period until they find a housing unit to buy, then they move.

Student Mobility

The effects of residential mobility on children's and youths' school performance have been well documented in the literature. The Kids Mobility Study Project (Family Housing Fund, 1998) showed that moving affected academic achievement. Students who moved three or more times had reading scores half those of nonmobile students. Heinlein and Shinn (2000) used data from 764 New York students' records to show that mobility before grade three was associated with low school achievement, but had no effect between third and sixth grades. The Metropolitan Housing Coalition (2004) reported that the most mobile movers in Jefferson County, Kentucky, scored lower on a reading exam than nonmovers. Rumberger and Larson (1998), using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey, demonstrated that student mobility decreased the chance of students completing high school. Swanson and Schneider (1999) showed that students' school performance declined when they moved during the later years of high school.

Highly mobile students may experience academic difficulties for various reasons. Biernat and Jax (1999) suggest that poor school attendance, delayed transfer of student records, and disruptions in the classroom caused by students coming and going result in students not knowing lessons, students being incorrectly placed in a classroom or a program, and teachers spending less time on lessons. Research also suggests that the lower academic achievement of high-school age movers may be partially attributed to the movers' loss of social relationships (Pribesh and Downey, 1999).

Not all children, however, may be adversely affected by residential mobility. Tucker, Marx, and Long (1998), using the 1988 National Health Interview Survey, found that children who lived in families where both biological parents were present did not experience poor school performance with residential moves. The same was not true, however, for children who lived in other family structures, such as single-parent families. Rumberger (2003) recommends that mobility studies take into account personal and family problems "to determine whether mobility itself is the cause of subsequent achievement and other problems in schools" (p.1). Similarly, Pribesh and Downey (1999) attributed the declines in school performance between movers and nonmovers to the differences between the two groups before the move. Mobile students tended to have other disadvantages, such as low-income and single-parent households, prior to the move.

Housing Affordability in Clark County, Nevada

Clark County's population rose from 1,578,332 in 2002 to 1,641,529 in 2003 (MRA, 2004). Likewise, the child (17 and under) population grew from 395,109 to 415,271 for the corresponding years (MRA, 2004). From 1990 to 2000 the region's population almost doubled.

Housing prices in Clark County continue to soar, an effect of increases in the cost of building materials, land, and permits; population growth; normal appreciation; and investor speculation. Median new-home prices doubled in the past decade, from \$115,000 in 1994 to \$199,926 in 2004 (MRA, 1995, 2004). From March 2003 to March 2004, the median home price increased by 20 percent. The median home price in June 2004 was \$255,000 (Evenson, 2004). Average apartment rent increased from \$739 a month in early 2000 (Riddel, 2003) to \$747 in the first quarter of 2004 (Evenson, 2004). Median household income, on the other hand, has not increased at the same rate as housing prices. In

1994, the median household income was \$36,357; whereas in 2003 it was \$44,307 (MRA, 1995, 2004).

According to the National Low-Income Housing Coalition, in Clark County, a very low-income household earning 30 percent of the area median income (\$54,700) can only afford a monthly housing cost of no more than \$410 (NLIHC, 2003). This is significantly lower than the fair-market rent of \$856 for a two-bedroom unit in Clark County (NLIHC, 2003).

Data from the 2000 decennial census show that California and Nevada had the most severe housing shortage for extremely low-income households (1-30 percent of area median income [AMI]). Nevada ranked 49th among the states on affordable and available units per 100 extremely poor renter households and per 100 very low income households (31-50% of AMI) (Nelson, 2004).

The number of available rental units in Clark County is decreasing. An article in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* stated that the apartment market in Clark County is shrinking due to conversions of apartments into condominiums to meet the demand for more level-entry homeownership market (Kalil, 2004). Eleven thousand apartments were under conversion as of September 2004. People who have been evicted will have to move (or in some cases purchase their existing apartment), and many would require affordable housing.

Housing affordability has become a problem in Clark County. No longer can residents brag that their city is an inexpensive place in which to live. As rents and home prices increase, in-migration continues, and fewer apartments are available for rental families, low-income families, in particular, may move frequently in search of affordable housing and use creative means to do so.

The Case of One-Month Free Rent

In an 1997 article, an elementary school principal in Clark County was quoted as saying that at her school in one year they had “700 transfers in or out among a student body of just over 900” (Carnes and Lissen, p. 56). She attributed residential mobility of her students to move-in specials offered by apartments. All of the students in her school, which was located close to the Las Vegas Strip, lived in apartments. The students’ families would move from one complex to another to take advantage of one-month free rent. These moves involved crossing school zones, resulting in children frequently changing schools.

Offering move-in incentives appeared to be the norm during the 1990s and early 2000s in Las Vegas, and may have been a contributing factor to the high mobility rates at the Clark County principal’s elementary school. Incentives should not be as prevalent today due to the tight rental market.

To test this supposition, the Center for Business and Economic Research (CBER) at the University of Nevada Las Vegas, telephoned 671 apartment complexes during October and November of 2004 to determine: (1) the number of complexes that currently offer one-month free rent, (2) the frequency of move-outs after move-in specials, and (3) current reasons for not offering a one-month, free-rent move-in incentive.

Fifty-seven (8.9 percent) offer one-month free rent, and 22 (37.9 percent) have renters checking out after one month. Few, only four, say that it occurs often. Almost 18 (n=120) percent offered a one-month rent special a year ago, about twice that of this year. The most-often cited reason for not offering the special this year was the market was good and concessions didn’t have to be made.

The decline in the free-month rent special over the past year suggests that the supply of available apartments has decreased, making housing less affordable, thereby possibly hampering the mobility of families moving from one complex to another in search of free housing for a short duration. Low-income households may, however, continue to move in search of lower rent housing or move to a motel because they can't afford next month's rent.

Transiency in Nevada Schools

The best approximation of student mobility is transiency data. The Nevada Department of Education defines transiency as “the percentage of students who are not enrolled in the school for the entire previous school year. [It] Does not include students if the transfer to another school in the district because of a change in school zoning (Board of School Trustees, 2003-2004).” Nevada’s transiency rate for 2003-2004 was 31.1 percent, down from 37.0 percent in 2002-2003 and 39.0 percent in 2001-02. Rates ranged from a low of 17.4 percent in Lander County to a high of 35.5 percent in Clark County. Refer to the table. Although not shown in the table, Clark County’s transiency rate decreased over the last three years, from 39.0 percent in 2001-2002 to 37.0 percent in 2002-2003 to 35.5 percent in 2003-2004 (Hammond, 2004).³

Recommendations for Increasing Affordable Housing to Prevent Residential Mobility

Providing rental-housing assistance to low-income families and constructing affordable housing can be instrumental in creating residential stability (Crowley, 2003). This is one of the suggestions from a panel of housing authority officials and nonprofit organizations in Las Vegas on 9/27/04. Specifically the panel recommends “increasing federal subsidies for low-income households, establishing inclusionary zoning

requirements for developers and higher density zoning and setting aside parcels from Bureau of Land Management auctions for affordable housing” (Smith, 2004, p. D1).

Transiency Rates by Nevada Counties: 2003-2004

County	Transiency Rate
Nevada	33.1%
Carson	26.0
Churchill	28.7
Clark	35.5
Douglas	19.1
Elko	21.5
Esmeralda	15.8
Eureka	18.4
Humboldt	22.5
Lander	17.4
Lincoln	18.4
Lyon	25.7
Mineral	27.7
Pershing	18.9
Storey	20.9
Washoe	26.5
White Pine	20.7

Source: Nevada Department of Education, *Nevada Report Card*, data query at: <http://www.nevadareportcard.com/profile/transiency.aspx?levelid=A&entityid=00&yearid=03-04>, accessed 9/8/05.

Biernat and Jax (1999) suggest that states issue “an optional voucher that could be used to supplement rent on a year-long lease” (p. 17). The authors believe that conditions would have to be imposed on the state, the parents, and the landlords for this approach to succeed. They also recommend that vouchers be used only if the housing was in a safe area near a good school, the state ensures the housing meets basic standards, parents and landlords meet the conditions of the lease, and the parents send their children to school (Biernat and Jax, 1999).

The Metropolitan Housing Coalition of Louisville, Kentucky, comprised of 163 organizations that advocate for affordable, fair, and decent housing, developed a list of recommendations to combat high student mobility (MCH, 2004). In Louisville, neighborhoods with high student mobility were those that had high rates of families with excessive rent burdens, low homeownership rates, and low median family incomes. The list, although not exhaustive, includes the often-recommended need for affordable housing.

- ❖ “Develop an increased supply of safe, quality, affordable housing in order to create more stability for families;
- ❖ Increase housing subsidies for the lowest income renters (e.g. ensure passage of the National Housing Trust) as a way to promote stable housing for families;
- ❖ Fund schools, through family resource and youth service centers, to provide parents with financial literacy skills and both short- and long-term housing plans;
- ❖ Involve school district staff in planning for major housing development or demolitions within the district; and
- ❖ Adopt a consistent standard within the Louisville metropolitan region to measure student mobility” (MHC, 2004, p.4).

Conclusion

Studies consistently report that a lack of affordable housing is a major contributor to residential mobility. Affordable housing in southern Nevada is lacking. Housing prices have risen steadily since 1994, with prices escalating around 2001 due to rising construction costs, shortage of land, and investor speculation. Families, especially low income and new residents, may move several times to find adequate, affordable housing.

Prior to the housing explosion, anecdotal evidence suggested that low-income families in search of affordable housing were presumed to take advantage of apartment rent specials, moving from one apartment complex to another in search of one-month free rent. This scenario

is not as likely today due to the tight rental-housing market. Short-distance moves, no matter what the reason, can lead to children transferring from one school district into another, which could negatively impact children’s school performance.

Without additional empirical evidence, however, one cannot show a cause-and-effect relationship among move-in apartment specials, residential mobility, and student mobility. One would have to know, for example, where the movers moved to and the reason for their move. This issue brief only suggests there may be a relationship among the variables, and that the housing environment in Clark County may play a factor in the frequency or lack of residential moves. Additional information, such as location of the lowest quartile of apartment rentals, could be useful. As the price of rental units has skyrocketed many financially able earners may be pushing the marginal earners to a smaller supply of affordable apartments that no longer have to offer incentives and are largely geographically isolated in neighborhoods with a tradition of low school performance.

Still, with about 35 percent of Clark County’s student population mobile, some questions need be answered. Are the moves, as Buerkle (1997) categorized them, coping moves (due to one of more factors, such as abuse, poor housing), forced moves (such as, eviction), upward moves (such as, a new job, a better house, upward move, a forced move), or lifestyle moves? What are the characteristics of the movers (race/ethnicity, age, household income, etcetera)? What was the family situation prior to the move, for example, were they dealing with multiple-family stressors? What was the average number of moves per transient? Were the moves intracounty (short-distance moves) or intercounty (long-distance moves)? Currently, the Clark County Department of Education does not collect these data.

Clark County's service-based economy may be a contributing factor to the high transiency rate. Unskilled, low-wage jobs are prevalent in the casino industry. In a local newspaper article, school officials were quoted as saying that parents in their schools who moved often were following jobs (Grove, 1999).

Affordable housing is an often-suggested solution to residential mobility. The media and Clark County public officials have made affordable housing a high-profile issue. Continued discussions may lead to a workable plan.

Endnotes

¹Movers are those who had not lived at the same residence one year earlier at the time of the survey (Schachter, 2004).

²"Recent movers include those who moved in the 15 months prior to the decennial census" (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004, p.1).

³Comparing Clark County School District's transiency rate to other school districts in nearby states was an intent of this issue brief. However, state departments of education that were contacted did not respond to requests for data.

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A special thanks to Dr. Bob McCord, Educational Leadership, College of Education, University of Nevada Las Vegas, for his review of this brief.

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