



# POLICY BRIEF

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## The Need for a National Housing Mobility Infrastructure,

*by Philip Tegeler, Poverty & Race Research Action Council*

In a recent landmark study, Harvard professor Raj Chetty and his colleagues found substantial increases in adult incomes and long-term educational attainments for children who move to and grow up in lower-poverty communities, especially when children stay in these neighborhoods for a substantial period of time.<sup>1</sup> This research builds on studies that had already found substantial health benefits for women and girls who move to low-poverty neighborhoods,<sup>2</sup> and it confirms decades of educational research demonstrating strong short- and long-term educational benefits for low-income children who attend racially and economically integrated schools.<sup>3</sup> As one *New York Times* columnist wrote of the new Harvard study, "Their findings are clear: The earlier a family moved to a good neighborhood, the better the children's long-run outcomes."<sup>4</sup>

Each year, in America's segregated metropolitan areas, we are losing a precious opportunity to help low-income families move into communities that will help their children thrive. The Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program, our largest low-income housing program (serving 2.3 million households), in theory gives families the potential to move to low-poverty areas with good schools, but our research and experience shows that without housing mobility counseling, it is very difficult for families to access these opportunities. Housing mobility involves recruiting landlords to take part in high-opportunity areas, educating low-income families about their true range of housing choices, directing assistance to families in finding apartments, and post-move counseling to help families realize and retain the benefits of living in their new communities.

Without housing mobility counseling, and the public housing agency reforms that accompany it, we consistently see highly segregated programs that place poor children with the greatest need in neighborhoods and schools that are least likely to help them succeed. Giving these families a real chance to "move to opportunity" should be a high priority, alongside ongoing neighborhood revitalization efforts. But in 2015, there are only three significant mobility programs operating in the United States—in Dallas, Baltimore, and Chicago—and a handful of smaller programs.<sup>5</sup>

In a recent article in PRRAC's *Poverty & Race*, Elizabeth Julian laid out a bold vision for a national nonprofit technical assistance and financing organization to develop and assist housing mobility programs in more highly segregated metropolitan areas across the country.<sup>6</sup> The proposal for "Mobility Works America" is patterned directly after the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation, which was chartered by Congress in 1978 and is now doing business as "NeighborWorks America," providing assistance to more than 240 Community Development Corporations across the country.

This proposal calls for both government and philanthropic funding of a new congressionally chartered national nonprofit to provide funding, training, standards, and technical assistance to a network of new and existing housing mobility programs across the country. The Mobility Works board could include representatives from the departments of Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, and Education, as well as from national civil rights organizations.

This bold vision has the potential to finally take housing mobility to scale across a wider range of highly segregated metropolitan areas to help low-income families with children make voluntary moves out of high-poverty, segregated neighborhoods and into neighborhoods and school districts where their children can thrive.

**Philip Tegeler** is the president and executive director of the Poverty and Race Research Action Council.

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**The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the University of Chicago.**

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<sup>1</sup> R. Chetty, N. Hendren, and L. Katz, "The Effects of Exposure to Better Neighborhoods on Children: New Evidence from the Moving to Opportunity Experiment" (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University and National Bureau of Economic Research, 2015), [http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/images/mto\\_paper.pdf](http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/images/mto_paper.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Jens Ludwig et al., "Neighborhoods, Obesity, and Diabetes: A Randomized Social Experiment," *New England Journal of Medicine*, 365(16)(October 2011): 1509-19; see generally National Bureau of Economic Research, *Moving to Opportunity*, at <http://www.nber.org/mtopublic>.

<sup>3</sup> For a summary of this social science literature, see Roslyn Arlin Mickelson, "Research Brief No. 5: School Integration and K-12 Educational Outcomes: A Quick Synthesis of Social Science Evidence" (Washington, DC: National Coalition on School Diversity, March 2015), <http://schooldiversity.org/pdf/DiversityResearchBriefNo5.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Justin Wolfers, "Why the New Research on Mobility Matters: An Economist's View," *The Upshot*, *New York Times*, May 4, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> See Poverty and Race Research Action Council, "Housing Mobility Programs in the U.S." (Washington, DC: PRRAC, 2015), [www.prrac.org/pdf/HousingMobilityProgramsInTheUS2015.pdf](http://www.prrac.org/pdf/HousingMobilityProgramsInTheUS2015.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth K. Julian, "Mobility Works America," *Poverty & Race*, July-August 2015.