Neighborhood and Gender Effects on Family Processes: Results From the Moving to Opportunity Program*

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Abstract: Data from the New York City Moving to Opportunity 3-year follow-up were used to examine neighborhood and gender effects on adolescents’ family processes. Low-income, minority families in public housing in high-poverty neighborhoods were assigned randomly to (a) move to private housing in low-poverty neighborhoods only, (b) move to private housing in neighborhoods of their choice, or (c) stay in place. Family processes, assessed by parent reports and interviewer observations, were compared for those who relocated and those who stayed in place. Parents in the low-poverty group were observed to be harsher toward their daughters than parents in the high-poverty group. In adolescence, residential relocation may be difficult for mother-daughter relations and require additional services to ease the transition.

Key Words: adolescence, communities, gender, parent-child relations, poverty, social policy.

The social contexts in which families are embedded are thought to affect the nature of relationships among family members (Teachman & Crowder, 2002). For families with adolescent children, the communities where they live are one such context that may impact their interaction patterns (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999; Jencks & Mayer, 1990). Neighborhoods may play a role by organizing opportunities for social interactions and activities. However, families continue to be the dominant force in adolescents’ lives (Steinberg, 2001). Thus, how community and family contexts intersect has important implications for relations among family members. Both of these influences—family and neighborhood—may vary by gender during adolescence, when gender differences become pronounced (Galambos, 2004).

The focus of the present study is on this complex intersection. Specifically, we consider how neighborhood socioeconomic status (SES) and gender independently and jointly affect parent-child interactions. To address these issues, we use 3-year follow-up data from a residential mobility experiment in which low-income, minority families living in public housing in high-poverty urban neighborhoods were assigned to (a) move to private housing in low-poverty neighborhoods, (b) move to private housing in neighborhoods of their choice, or (c) stay in place.

Literature Review

Neighborhood Socioeconomic Effects on Adolescents’ Family Processes

Our theoretical understanding of how neighborhood SES, particularly concentrated poverty, is...
associated with adolescents’ family processes draws heavily from reviews and analysis of neighborhood studies by Jencks and Mayer (1990) and Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2000), economic resource perspectives (Haveman & Wolfe, 1994), literature on family stress and economic hardship and unemployment (Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994; McLoyd, 1990), and work on social organization theory ( Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). The institutional resources model highlights resources available in the community, such as parks, libraries, and youth programs (Jencks & Mayer; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Poor neighborhoods are likely to have fewer resources for families to draw upon for their children than more affluent neighborhoods, which may undermine parents’ efforts to provide developmentally enriching experiences for their children. The relationships and ties model focuses on the association between neighborhood poverty and parent well-being that, in turn, may be associated with parenting behavior. Specifically, living in a poor and dangerous neighborhood may exacerbate parental stress and lead to more negative parenting (Simons et al., 2002).

The final model, collective efficacy and norms, points to community social processes as most pertinent. Neighborhood socioeconomic conditions, notably poverty, are associated with the extent of community social organization. Socially organized neighborhoods provide a sense of cohesion and trust among community members as well as shared values regarding behavior (Sampson et al., 1997). On average, higher income neighborhoods are more socially organized and may provide more optimal contexts for adolescent child rearing if they minimize community-level threats to youth such as crime, violence, disorder, gangs, and access to illegal substances (cf., Luthar, 2003). Taken together, these theoretical models reveal that neighborhood poverty is likely to be associated with a range of family processes relevant to adolescents—warmth, harshness, monitoring, and routines (Bradley et al., 2000; Steinberg, 2001).

Affective ties between parents and children are often characterized along two dimensions—warmth and harshness (Baumrind, 1972; Conger et al., 1994). Parental warmth entails emotional responsivity and support displayed by parents toward children. Parental harshness involves critical and unresponsive behavior toward children and may include the use of physical punishment. Researchers have typically argued that parental warmth does not change as a function of neighborhood advantage but that harsh and punitive parenting is affected adversely by neighborhood disadvantage (Furstenberg, 1993). Harsh parenting is hypothesized to be exacerbated by the stressful conditions of raising a family in a poor neighborhood that may lack adequate resources and have low community organization and resultant crime and violence (Earls, McGuire, & Shay, 1994; Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, & Duncan, 1994).

Supervision and monitoring include the extent to which parents oversee and regulate their children’s activities, typically with the goal of minimizing youths’ engagement in problem and health-compromising behaviors (Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984). Ethnographers, in particular, have argued that living in impoverished and dangerous neighborhoods may necessitate the use of more controlling parenting practices than living in more affluent neighborhoods because of parents’ efforts to protect their children from negative neighborhood influences, especially unconventional peers (Furstenberg, 1993; Jarrett, 1999). It is also likely that lack of community institutional resources, such as youth programs, may increase parents’ efforts to monitor their youths’ whereabouts.

Finally, family routines provide structure to children’s lives and form the foundations of their daily activities (Boyce, Jensen, James, & Peacock, 1983; Bradley, 2002). Routines relevant to adolescents include regular mealtimes, homework schedules, curfews, and the like. Poor neighborhoods that lack social organization may not be conducive to the provision of routines if they are characterized by physical and social disorder (Wilson, 1987). Moreover, if neighborhood poverty compromises parental functioning, parents may be less capable of providing routines for their children in poor neighborhoods.

Based on extant research, we expect that parents assigned to move to low-poverty neighborhoods will display less harsh behavior than parents assigned to remain in high-poverty neighborhoods. No treatment group differences are anticipated for parental warmth. We hypothesize that parents assigned to move to low-poverty neighborhoods will use less restrictive monitoring practices compared with parents assigned to stay in high-poverty neighborhoods. Finally, parents assigned to move to low-poverty neighborhoods are anticipated to provide more routines for children than parents assigned to remain in high-poverty neighborhoods.
Our expectations regarding program effects on family processes for youth whose families were assigned to move to neighborhoods of their choice are restricted for several reasons. First, these families moved to neighborhoods that were still relatively disadvantaged (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a). Second, residential mobility is associated with disruptions in access to resources and social networks, which may have short-term negative consequences on family well-being (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). However, escaping the stressful conditions of living in public housing in extremely poor neighborhoods and associated factors, such as gangs, violence, and few resources, may confer some benefits, even if families are only able to relocate to marginally more advantaged neighborhoods. Thus, we expect that parents assigned to move to neighborhoods of their choice will display less harsh parenting compared with parents assigned to remain in high-poverty neighborhoods, but no differences in warmth are anticipated. Program effects on monitoring or routines are not expected.

Gender Differences in Adolescents’ Family Processes
The more general developmental literature suggests that adolescents’ family processes may be moderated by child gender. The biological, cognitive, emotional, and social changes that occur during adolescence are thought to solidify existing as well as emerging gender differences in behavior (Galambos, 2004). This “gender intensification hypothesis” points to the onset of puberty, in particular, as increasing socialization pressures to conform to gender specific roles (Hill & Lynch, 1983). Much of this research has focused on the family as the primary socializing agent (e.g., Lytton & Romney, 1991; McHale, Crouter, & Whiteman, 2003). However, a major critique of this work has been that it is based largely on European American samples of middle-income adolescents (Galambos).

African American and Latino families are more likely than European American families to reside in poor, segregated urban neighborhoods that may be marked by crime and violence (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994; Massey & Denton, 1993). These contextual challenges may amplify differential socialization by child gender as parents’ efforts to protect their daughters from potentially harmful neighborhood influences are enhanced, whereas boys’ exposure to these negative influences are increased. In turn, families may be a more proximal influence for girls as a by-product of restricted access to neighborhoods (compared with boys). Thus, we hypothesize that Moving to Opportunity (MTO) parents, all of whom are low income and minority, will provide greater monitoring and routines to adolescent girls than boys. However, no gender differences in warmth or harshness are expected.

Gender Differences in Neighborhood Socioeconomic Effects
The existing neighborhood research provides some indirect support for the notion that gender differences in neighborhood SES effects may arise, at least in part, from family socialization practices. In our previous work with this MTO sample, gender differences in program effects were seen following relocation from high- to low-poverty neighborhoods, with effects more pronounced for boys than girls (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a, 2004). These findings are consistent with the nonexperimental neighborhood literature, indicating that neighborhood income/SES effects on adolescent outcomes may be stronger for boys than girls (see Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000, for review). However, almost no empirical studies have directly examined whether parents provide less regulation of boys’ activities relative to girls,’ resulting in boys’ greater susceptibility to neighborhood influences (Ensminger, Lamkin, & Jacobson, 1996).

Based on this past work as well as the literature on gender differences, we hypothesize that moving from high- to low-poverty neighborhoods may differentially impact family processes for boys and girls. We anticipate that expected program effects on monitoring and routines will be more pronounced for girls than boys, with parents assigned to move to low-poverty neighborhoods providing less monitoring and more routines for girls than respective parents who were assigned to stay in high-poverty neighborhoods. However, no gender differences in the hypothesized program effect on parental harshness were anticipated, nor were differential program effects expected for parental warmth. In contrast, among adolescents assigned to move to neighborhoods of their families’ choice, parenting of girls is not likely to be altered after the move as a result of continued neighborhood disadvantage. Thus, no gender differences in program effects are anticipated for this group.
Methods

Design and Description of the MTO for Fair Housing Demonstration

The MTO program is a randomized housing relocation demonstration sponsored by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in five urban sites (Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City) (Feins, Holin, & Phipps, 1996; Goering et al., 1999). Families that resided in public housing or received project-based assistance under the Section 8 program and who had at least one child less than 18 years of age were eligible to participate. The Section 8 program allocates vouchers for rent subsidies to purchase program-approved housing in the private market. Participants were recruited from housing projects located in census tracts with poverty rates in excess of 40%, as measured by the 1990 U.S. Census (Goering, Teodoro, & Carnevale, 1996). When compared with families in public housing who did not volunteer for the MTO program, families that signed up for the MTO program appear to be more disadvantaged than their public housing counterparts who did not volunteer for MTO (Goering et al., 1999).

A randomized controlled design was used such that families that volunteered for the program were assigned to one of three conditions: (a) the experimental or treatment group that received Section 8 housing vouchers and special assistance to move only to low-poverty neighborhoods (census tracts with less than 10% poor residents according to the 1990 U.S. Census; Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental group), (b) the comparison group that received Section 8 housing vouchers under the regular program, which contained no geographic restrictions on neighborhood poverty rates or special assistance (Traditional Voucher Comparison group), or (c) the control group that did not receive vouchers or special assistance but continued to receive project-based support (In-Place Control group). The special assistance received by Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental families was provided by local nonprofit organizations and generally entailed assisting families with finding housing and overcoming obstacles to obtaining housing in low-poverty neighborhoods, as well as working with landlords unfamiliar with the Section 8 program or renting to families from public housing.

Baseline interviews were conducted from 1994 to 1999—prior to random assignment and relocation of movers—with the one adult family member who identified as the head of household. During this structured interview with the household head, primarily demographic information was obtained. Different teams of researchers were contracted by HUD to conduct site-specific follow-up evaluations (Goering & Feins, 2003).

From a policy standpoint, the primary goal of the MTO program was to promote low-income families’ economic self-sufficiency by moving them from neighborhoods of highly concentrated poverty to more affluent communities with new and better job opportunities (Goering & Feins, 2003). Thus, primary targets of the program were adults’ welfare receipt, employment, and earnings. Although parenting was not a focus of the MTO program, it may be influenced by the program through a variety of mechanisms beyond employment opportunities in new neighborhoods as outlined in the Introduction.

From a research perspective, the randomized design of MTO provided a relatively unbiased assessment of “neighborhood effects” because a large source of selection is controlled by random assignment of families to neighborhoods of varying levels of poverty (Duncan, Connell, & Klebanov, 1997).

New York City MTO Evaluation

This study reports on a follow-up evaluation of the New York City MTO site (N = 794). The goal of this evaluation was to go beyond considering just the effects of moving on economic outcomes and to look more broadly at child and family well-being (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003b). Between 1994 and 1997, families in the New York City MTO were recruited from 14 targeted housing projects located in 12 census tracts, with an average poverty rate of 47% (Goering et al., 1996). Approximately 3 years after baseline interviews were completed, detailed in-home interviews were conducted with parents and up to two randomly selected children per household. In total, 550 families were interviewed as part of this follow-up evaluation between 1998 and 2000, for a 69% response rate. New York City families that participated in the follow-up did not significantly differ from nonparticipants on a range of baseline parent and family sociodemographic characteristics, and retention was comparable across the three conditions (Leventhal & Brooks-
Gunn, 2004). This study focuses exclusively on the 303 families at follow-up with 386 adolescent children \((n = 144, \text{Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental group}; n = 136, \text{Traditional Voucher Comparison group}; \text{and } n = 106, \text{In-Place Control group})\). On average, the children were 14.25 years old \((SD = 2.02; \text{range } 11.04–18.50)\), and 50% were boys.

For the current subsample, 35% of families in the two voucher groups used their randomly assigned vouchers to move to new neighborhoods \((33\% \text{ and } 37\% \text{ for Low-Poverty Experimental and Traditional Voucher Comparison groups, respectively})\). This take-up rate was higher than HUD's expected rate of 25%. The 35% take-up rate indicates that most families in the two voucher groups did not move and remained in their original high-poverty neighborhoods in public housing. Families that took up the treatment were somewhat more socioeconomically disadvantaged than those that did not take-up the treatment (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003b).

**Sample Description**

Among participating families, randomization yielded comparable treatment, comparison, and control groups. At baseline, parents, on average, were 37.43 years of age \((SD = 8.28)\) and approximately two thirds had a high school degree or graduate equivalency diploma. The sample was divided evenly between African Americans and Latinos. Mothers were interviewed in almost all households \((93\%)\), and a large majority of these households were headed by unmarried parents \((88\%)\). Twenty-seven percent of parents were employed at baseline, and 70% of families received welfare. On average, there were 2.67 \((SD = 1.32)\) children per household. When asked their primary reason for wanting to move from their current neighborhood, 45% of parents cited the desire to get away from drugs and gangs.

As reported elsewhere, at follow-up, we found significant group differences in neighborhood economic and social characteristics, assessed at the census tract level (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a, 2004). According to 1990 U.S. Census measures, Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental families lived in neighborhoods with significantly fewer poor residents than In-Place Control families \((M = 34%, SD = 20\% \text{ as compared to } M = 45%, SD = 12\%, \text{respectively})\). Compared with Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental families, In-Place Control families’ neighborhoods had, on average, a significantly higher percentage of Latino residents \((M = 41%, SD = 25\% \text{ as compared to } M = 51%, SD = 20\%, \text{respectively})\) and a significantly lower percentage of White residents \((M = 12%, SD = 21\% \text{ as compared to } M = 6%, SD = 16\%, \text{respectively})\), but did not significantly differ with respect to the percentage of Black residents \((M = 45%, SD = 25\% \text{ compared to } M = 41%, SD = 21\%, \text{respectively})\).

An important point to keep in mind is that the treatment group comparisons provided include Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental families that moved within the program as well as those that chose not to move and remained in public housing in the baseline neighborhoods. When comparing the neighborhoods of Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental movers and nonmovers, the average poverty rate for Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental movers was 16\% \((SD = 17)\) compared with 47\% \((SD = 8)\) for Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental nonmovers.

At follow-up, Traditional Voucher Comparison families also lived in neighborhoods with fewer poor residents than In-Place Control families \((M = 41\%, SD = 14\% \text{ compared to } M = 45\%, SD = 12\%, \text{respectively})\); however, their neighborhoods did not significantly differ in racial ethnic/composition. When comparing the neighborhoods of Traditional Voucher Comparison movers and nonmovers, the poverty rates were 30\% \((SD = 16)\) and 47\% \((SD = 9)\), respectively.

**Measures**

All measures were obtained during in-home, follow-up interviews with families, with the exception of baseline parent and family characteristics. Parents were interviewed separately from their children, and trained field staff conducted all interviews and assessments.

**Child characteristics.** Child characteristics assessed were sex \((0 = \text{female}; 1 = \text{male})\) and age in years.

**Baseline parent and family characteristics.** To improve the precision of our estimates of program effects, all analyses covaried for parent and family characteristics reported during baseline interviews that may be associated with our outcomes of interest. These characteristics included parent education \((\leq \text{high school education} = 0, \text{high school graduate or higher} = 1)\), age, race/ethnicity \((\text{Latino} = 0; \text{African American} = 1)\), employment status \((\text{unemployed} = 0; \text{employed} = 1)\), marital status
Routines (tions among subscales were small (average completing homework'' for Routines. The correla-
and ''how often the parent checks to make sure child's close friends parent knows'' for Monitoring the two parent-report scales entail the ''number of 
during the visit'' for Harshness. Sample items for warmth'' for Warmth and "child at least 2 times during the visit'' for Warmth and "parent scolded, derogated, or criticized child at least 2 times during the visit'' for Warmth.

Subscales were selected based on methodological work, conceptual relevance to adolescents, and their reliability and validity across diverse racial/ethnic and SES groups (Leventhal et al., 2004). These multi-item subscales include Parental Warmth (α = .83; M = 0.50, SD = 0.31), Parental Harshness (α = .75; M = 0.04, SD = 0.14), Parental Monitoring (α = .55; M = 0.18, SD = 0.49), and Family Routines (α = .60; M = −0.12, SD = 0.46) (see also Linver et al., 2004). The first two subscales are observational, and sample items include "parent spontaneously praised child at least 2 times during the visit" for Warmth and "parent scolded, derogated, or criticized child during the visit" for Harshness. Sample items for the two parent-report scales entail the "number of child's close friends parent knows" for Monitoring and "how often the parent checks to make sure child completed homework" for Routines. The correlations among subscales were small (average r ≤ .14) and consistent with other HOME studies (Bradley et al., 2000; Linver et al.).

Results

Program Main Effects on Family Processes
The primary goal of this study was to examine MTO relocation–oriented program effects on family processes. Thus, the focus of all analyses was comparisons between (a) the Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental group and In-Place Controls and (b) the Traditional Voucher Comparison group and In-Place Controls. For each outcome, the first set of analyses evaluated treatment group comparisons. These analyses provide estimates of program effects based on treatment (randomization) status, regardless of whether children’s families used their vouchers to move. Such analyses are often referred to as intention-to-treat program effects because they evaluate treatment group differences between the group the program intended to treat (based on random assignment and not take-up) and the control group that was not treated. However, it is possible to estimate treatment group comparisons taking into account the fact that not all families took up the treatment. Such analyses are referred to as treatment-on-treated program effects (Angrist, Imbens, & Rubin, 1996; Katz, Kling, & Liebman, 2001). Certain analytic strategies, as employed in this study, yield relatively unbiased estimates of program effects among those who were treated or moved because estimates include the full treatment group and are not restricted to treatment compliers only. Together, intention-to-treat and treatment-on-treated comparisons provide a range within which the true program effect likely lies; the intention-to-treat comparisons can be thought of as lower bound estimates of program effects, whereas the treatment-on-treated comparisons can be thought of as upper bound estimates of program effects.

For the intention-to-treat comparisons, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression was utilized. The treatment-on-treated comparisons were estimated using two-stage least squares regression and necessi-
tated estimating separate models for each voucher group. Comparable modeling strategies were used for both sets of analyses. In addition to respective treatment status, models controlled for child sex and age and baseline parent and family characteristics.
Robust standard errors were used to adjust for clustering of siblings within households.

Table 1 presents a summary of group comparisons on the family processes. For comparative purposes, all outcomes were converted to z-scores ($M = 0, SD = 1$). For each mover group, the first model presents the intention-to-treat program effect and the second column presents the treatment-on-treated program effect.

**Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental group.** According to the intention-to-treat analysis presented in Model 1, Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental parents were observed by interviewers to be significantly harsher toward their children than In-Place Control parents. The respective treatment-on-treated effect (Model 2) was only marginally significant. No significant program effects were found for any of the other family processes.

**Traditional Voucher Comparison group.** For Traditional Voucher Comparison families, no program main effects were found for any of the family processes.

**Gender Main Effects on Family Processes**

For comparability with the treatment analyses, we employed OLS regressions models for the full sample to examine gender differences in the family processes. These models were identical to those used for the intention-to-treat analyses and covaried for baseline characteristics and treatment group status. Results indicated that parents reported providing significantly more routines for girls than for boys ($\beta = -0.25 \pm 0.10$, $p < .01$). No gender differences were found for the other family processes.

**Gender Differences in Program Effects on Family Processes**

The final set of analyses examined whether the MTO program differentially affected family processes by child gender. For both sets of treatment comparisons, we included a gender by respective treatment group interaction term in the model for each family process (see Table 1).

**Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental group.** For the intention-to-treat comparisons, the Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental group by gender interaction was nonsignificant for Parental Harshness (Model 1), but the interaction term was significant for the treatment-on-treated analyses (Model 2). Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental parents were significantly harsher toward their daughters than respective

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**Table 1. Summary of Standardized Regression Coefficients (robust standard errors) for MTO Program Effects on Family Processes\textsuperscript{a} at Follow-Up by Child Sex**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parenting Outcome</th>
<th>Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental Group\textsuperscript{b}</th>
<th>Traditional Voucher Comparison Group\textsuperscript{b}</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1 (intent-to-treat)</td>
<td>Model 2 (treatment-on-treated)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Warmth</td>
<td>0.17 (0.16)</td>
<td>0.55 (0.52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.25 (0.27)</td>
<td>-0.68 (1.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Harshness</td>
<td>0.34* (0.16)</td>
<td>1.09 (0.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.40 (0.28)</td>
<td>-2.56* (1.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental Monitoring</td>
<td>0.13 (0.14)</td>
<td>0.38 (0.39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.25 (0.23)</td>
<td>0.00 (0.84)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Routines</td>
<td>0.15 (0.15)</td>
<td>0.42 (0.43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.29 (0.25)</td>
<td>-0.25 (0.87)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textit{Note.} Models adjust for child age and baseline parental characteristics including race/ethnicity, age, education, employment status, marital status, and number of children in household, and apply weights by date of random assignment because assignment ratio for the three groups changed throughout randomization period. Missing baseline characteristics were imputed to the mean of nonmissing sample. Robust standard errors adjust for multisibling households.

\textsuperscript{a}Family process measures are standardized ($M = 0, SD = 1$). \textsuperscript{b}Significantly different from In-Place Controls. \textsuperscript{c}Number of adolescents. Tx = respective treatment group. \textsuperscript{*}p < .05.
In-Place Control parents (predicted $M = 0.40$ vs. predicted $M = -0.22$, respectively); however, parents in the Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental and In-Place Control groups were observed to be equally harsh toward their sons (predicted $M = -0.07$ vs. predicted $M = 0.00$, respectively). The Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental group by gender interaction term was nonsignificant for the other family processes.

**Traditional Voucher Comparison group.** For Warmth, the Traditional Voucher Comparison group by gender interaction was marginally significant for the intention-to-treat analysis only. Traditional Voucher Comparison parents were observed to be less warm toward their daughters than In-Place Control parents ($M = -0.28$ vs. $M = 0.00$, respectively); however, no program effects were seen for boys ($M = 0.04$ vs. $M = -0.02$, for Traditional Voucher Comparison and In-Place Control, respectively). The Traditional Voucher Comparison group by gender interaction term was not significant for the other family processes.

### Discussion

This study sought to examine whether the opportunity to move out of public housing in high-poverty neighborhoods into private housing in less poor neighborhoods had any short-term impacts on low-income, minority adolescents’ family processes. Additional analyses examined gender differences in family processes and whether program effects on family processes, in turn, were moderated by gender. Overall, the results obtained were counter to our expectations across these three areas.

With respect to program main effects, we hypothesized that Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental parents would be less harsh, provide less monitoring, and have more routines than In-Place Control parents. To the contrary, Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental parents were observed to be harsher toward their children (notably daughters) than In-Place Control parents; no other program effects were found. These findings were surprising given the rather extensive ethnographic literature about raising youth in high-risk settings and its impact on parenting that guided our hypotheses (e.g., Furstenberg, 1993; Jarrett, 1999). One explanation for the higher levels of harsh parenting exhibited by Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental parents relative to In-Place Controls is that moving may result in the disturbance of existing social networks used for support and assistance with child-rearing functions, leading to harsher parenting. An underlying assumption of our original hypothesis regarding Harshness was that any disruptive effects associated with moving would be offset by the potential benefits of low-poverty neighborhoods (e.g., safety, resources). Clearly, this situation did not appear to be the case.

In terms of gender main effects on family processes, we anticipated that parents would provide more monitoring and routines for girls than for boys. Only our expectation regarding Routine was met. We know of no other studies that have examined gender differences in family routines of low-income, minority adolescents; yet, our findings are in line with previous research indicating that parents exert greater socialization pressures on girls than on boys, especially during adolescence (Hagan, Simpson, & Gillis, 1987).

Finally, we explored whether the impact of moving from high- to low-poverty neighborhoods on family processes varied by adolescent gender. Counter to expectations, Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental parents did not monitor their daughters less or provide more routines for them than In-Place Control parents. In contrast, we did not anticipate any gender differences in program effects for Harshness, but we found that Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental parents were observed to be harsher toward their daughters than In-Place Control girls’ parents. Girls’ parent-child relations may be more susceptible to neighborhood influences than boys’ because families may be a more proximal context for girls, especially during adolescence with the intensification of gender role socialization (Hill & Lynch, 1983; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Related work indicates that parent-child relations during adolescence may be more conflictual for girls than boys (Conger & Ge, 1999; Smetana & Gaines, 1999). If adolescent girls’ parent-child relations are more strained than boys, they also may be more vulnerable to any disruptive effects associated with moving. The disruption of parents’ social networks may have had several negative ramifications on mother-daughter relations, in particular. Mothers may have relied on their daughters more for social support, placing additional pressures on the relationship. Less familiarity with the parents of their
daughters’ friends may have possessed new challenges for parents trying to protect their daughters. Finally, similar to other antipoverty programs, girls may have been forced to assume greater household and family responsibilities, leading to tension between parents and their daughters (Bos et al., 1999).

Because we hypothesized that gender differences in Monitoring, in particular, might arise in part from neighborhood conditions and because no program or gender effects on Monitoring were found, the absence of a significant effect for Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental girls is not entirely surprising. As noted, disrupted parents’ networks may have contributed to Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental parents not granting their daughters greater freedom than In-Place Control parents. However, it is possible that the measure used to examine Monitoring did not adequately capture this parenting dimension (Stattin & Kerr, 2000).

We had few expectations regarding program effects for Traditional Voucher Comparison families. We hypothesized that Traditional Voucher Comparison parents might be less harsh toward their children compared with In-Place Control parents; however, no significant program effect emerged. We did find some suggestion of potential gender differences in program effects. Compared with In-Place Control families with girls, Traditional Voucher Comparison parents were observed to be less warm toward their daughters, although this finding was only marginally significant and inconsistent across analyses. Our interpretation of the negative program effect for girls is similar to that for the Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental group—due in large part to the disruptive effects of moving and less so to neighborhood effects.

The general lack of anticipated findings may be because of several program implementation issues. First, although the take-up rate was higher than expected, most families in the Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental group did not take the opportunity to move (approximately 65%). If all, or even a large majority, of these families moved, we may have seen more substantial program effects. Although the comparison of intention-to-treat and treated-on-treated analyses partially addresses this issue, our power to detect significant effects is still limited by the small number of movers. Second, Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental families moved to neighborhoods that were less poor and less dangerous than their original neighborhoods; however, they were clearly not in middle-class neighborhoods and most were still in urban areas (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a). To achieve the anticipated program effect, families may need to relocate to more suburban areas and much safer neighborhoods. The nonexperimental literature suggests that larger differences in neighborhood conditions may be necessary to obtain sizeable neighborhood effects (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Finally, as reported elsewhere, the schools that Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental children were attending were comparable to In-Place Control children’s schools (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2004). As such, Low-Poverty Voucher Experimental parents may not have altered their behavior because negative perceptions of schools and peers likely remained unchanged.

Conceptually, it is possible that the theoretical models used to guide our expectations about neighborhood SES effects on family processes were misspecified; however, it is also likely that the implementation issues surrounding MTO undercut the underlying assumptions of these models. Specifically, we expected that greater institutional resources would be available to support parents in their efforts to raise their children. Because Low-Poverty Voucher families were in relatively close proximity to their old neighborhoods (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003b), they may have relied on existing resources rather than seeking out new ones. Alternatively, low-poverty neighborhoods may have few resources for low-income families because services may be inaccessible or unaffordable (Popkin, Harris, & Cunningham, 2002). Our second model focused on reductions in parental stress that might lead to improved parenting. Although parental stress was reduced as a result of moving out of extremely disadvantaged neighborhoods (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003b), families’ economic circumstances remained unaltered by moving to low-poverty neighborhoods. Thus, parental economic stress at the family level may have been exacerbated by residence in low-poverty neighborhoods because of few supports. Finally, we hypothesized that family processes may change because of community social processes. Yet, improvements in neighborhood social organization and resultant threats such as crime and violence were likely not sufficient to bring about alterations in family processes because families remained in urban neighborhoods, often in the midst of economic downturn.
In summary, to our knowledge this study is one of the first to use experimental data to examine neighborhood effects on family processes. Overall, the MTO program had minimal effects on family processes in the short term. Moving out of public housing in high-poverty neighborhoods into low-poverty neighborhoods had negative effects on one aspect of girls’ family lives—parental harshness—and no effects on boys. These findings have several implications for policy and practice. First, programs such as MTO that do not explicitly target parenting are not likely to alter family processes. The potential mechanisms through which parenting was hypothesized to be affected by the MTO program may be too indirect (program implementation problems aside), given the likely small effect sizes on parenting. In general, the most efficacious parenting interventions are both theory based and relatively intensive, working directly with parents and children to foster effective parenting (e.g., Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992).

Our findings indicate that such efforts should be targeted toward parents with adolescent girls. It may be that socialization pressures for gender conformity place additional stresses on these relations. Thus, in the case of MTO, support services that dealt with transition issues could have been provided to mothers and daughters following relocation. Two particular areas of potential focus include (a) the disruption of social networks and integration into new neighborhoods and (b) renegotiation and stabilization of parent-child relations after the move. Such services were not a part of MTO, which did not focus on parents’ needs or family life more generally but should be provided as part of future mobility efforts to deal with the unique challenges these mobility programs place on family relations. Follow-up support services may be necessary beyond the initial move-in period to work with families as new issues arise during the first few years of transition.

It is also likely that altering family poverty along with neighborhood poverty may be instrumental for affecting family well-being. Many of the challenges faced by poor families remain, even in the context of more advantaged neighborhood surroundings. Moreover, the effect of family income on child, parent, and family outcomes are substantially greater than those of neighborhood income (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). This pattern of findings indicates that directly targeting the former is likely to have a greater impact on parent-child relations than the latter, as was the case in MTO.

Finally, policies that focus on improving communities rather than relocating families out of distressed communities have the potential to benefit many more families than a program such as MTO can serve. In addition, such efforts would overcome some of the obstacles encountered by the program (Goetz, 2003), in particular, the disruption of social networks. By providing local economic, social, and educational opportunities, family and neighborhood poverty and their associated conditions could be addressed simultaneously.

References


