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Multiple Moves Found Harmful to Poor Young Children

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Early Childhood Housing Instability and School Readiness

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Poor children who move three or more times before they turn 5 have more behavior problems than their peers, according to a new study by researchers at Cornell University and the National Employment Law Project. The study is published in the journal *Child Development*.

Moving is a fairly common experience for American families; in 2002, 6.5 percent of all children had been living in their current home for less than six months. Among low-income children, that number rose to 10 percent. In addition, in 2002, 13 percent of families above poverty moved once, but 24 percent of families below poverty moved. Research has shown that frequent moves are related to a range of behavioral, emotional, and school problems for adolescents.

Using national data on 2,810 children from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal, representative study of children born in 20 large U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000, researchers sought to determine how frequent moves relate to children's readiness for school. Parents were interviewed shortly after the birth of their children, then again by phone when the children were 1, 3, and 5; in-home assessments were done when the children were 3 and 5. The study also looked at the children's language and literacy outcomes, as well as behavior problems reported by mothers.

The study found that 23 percent of the children had never moved, 48 percent had moved once or twice, and 29 percent had moved three or more times. Among children who moved three or more times before age 5, nearly half (44 percent) were poor; poverty was defined based on the official federal threshold. Moving three or more times was not related to the children's language and literacy outcomes.

But children who moved three or more times had more attention problems, anxiousness or depression, and aggressiveness or hyperactivity at age 5 than those who had never moved or those who had moved once or twice. These increases in behavior problems occurred only among poor children, the study found, suggesting that frequent moves early in life are most disruptive for the most disadvantaged children.

"The United States is still recovering from the great recession, which has taken a major toll on the housing market," notes Kathleen Ziol-Guest, postdoctoral associate at Cornell University, who led the study. "As housing markets have collapsed across communities, highly mobile low-income families have moved in search of work and less expensive housing.

“The findings in this study suggest that the housing crisis and its accompanying increase in mobility likely will have negative effects on young children, especially poor children.”

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Summarized from *Child Development*, Volume 85, Issue 1. Early Childhood Housing Instability and School Readiness by Ziol-Guest, KM (Cornell University) and McKenna, CC (National Employment Law Project).
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