

TOWARD A CONCEPTUAL MODEL: RESIDENTIAL MOBILITY AMONG LOW-INCOME, INNER-CITY FAMILIES

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Abstract

This paper is based on an in-depth analysis of 71 families with children living in rental housing in a low-income, inner-city neighborhood located in Winnipeg, Canada. The study explored how these families perceived their housing environment, their residential mobility, and the factors that influenced their mobility.

The paper discusses a conceptual model generated from this research. In developing the model, profiles outlining the characteristics of five categories of residents were generated to represent different groups of residents, their relationships to the neighborhood, and their propensity to move. Groups were characterized according to locus of control, connections to work and services consumed, social networks, identification with the neighborhood, anchorage in the neighborhood, and propensity to move.

Introduction

High rates of residential mobility among residents in many low-income, inner-city neighborhoods are common. People in these neighborhoods move frequently for a variety of reasons. Some move in search of better housing conditions. Others move to resolve problems not directly related to housing. When large numbers of people move frequently, both the stability of the neighborhoods and of the families living there are affected. For instance, educators have expressed concerns regarding inner-city children who are "going nowhere" because "they are here today and gone tomorrow" (Martin, 1994, p.1). These highly mobile children change schools frequently, sometimes as often as 20 times before they finish grade six (Martin, 1994). According to educators,

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these children are at risk in terms both of academic achievement and of social development (Kuxhaus, 1992). Attempts by different levels of government to stabilize neighborhoods by improving housing stock often fail to make significant reductions in mobility, suggesting that the focus must extend beyond the physical to incorporate social phenomena as well.

The goals of the research reported here were a) to understand how families living in a low-income, inner-city neighborhood perceived their residential mobility, b) to understand the factors that influenced their mobility, and c) to apply this understanding in developing a conceptual model to explain it. The motivation behind this work was the concern expressed by educators about the effects of high mobility on disadvantaged children.

The study was conducted in West Broadway, an old neighborhood situated on the periphery of downtown Winnipeg, Canada. This area, which had been in decline for some years, is characterized by a substantial number of low-income families with children living in social¹ and private-market rental housing, a consistently high rate of student mobility² at the neighborhood elementary school, and a considerable amount of public investment. General perceptions of the neighborhood by residents and non-residents alike are that it is a transient and dangerous place, an image fueled by sensationalized media reports of crime and violence.

Research Context

What models of mobility are relevant to understanding the perceptions that low-income, inner-city families have about moving frequently? Numerous perspectives on residential mobility have been advanced (Cagle & Deutscher, 1970; Clark & Onaka, 1983; Cook, 1989; Gauthier, 1987; Kennedy, 1984; Long, 1972; Morris, Crull & Winter, 1976; Speare, 1974). Two models frequently adopted by researchers are those developed by Morris and Winter (1975) and Speare (1974).

The housing adjustment model developed by Morris and Winter (1975) suggests that three widely held cultural norms influence residential satisfaction. These are home ownership; a single, detached home; and sufficient space measured in persons per bedroom (Crull, Bode & Morris, 1991; Morris & Winter, 1975; Morris, Crull & Winter, 1976). Morris and associates proposed that families evaluate their housing according to these cultural norms. If it fails to meet their needs, families experience a normative housing deficit; that is, they become dissatisfied, express a desire to move, and then expect to move.

Speare (1974) developed a mobility model based on thresholds of dissatisfaction. He used path analysis to show how exogenous variables including tenure, age of head, and level of crowding affect residential satisfaction, which contributes to a desire to move and to subsequent mobility.

Lee (1978) tested the generalizability of Speare's model of residential mobility on a group of skid-row inhabitants who lacked strong social bonds and were not able to exercise control over their physical and social environments. For this powerless population, Lee concluded that a rational decision-making process did not apply. He sug-

gested that mobility decisions of vulnerable populations should be examined using a model that considers the constraints under which decisions are made. For instance, many disadvantaged families plan only for the short-term, whereas advantaged families often develop long-range plans to guide their decision-making.

An examination of the homeless literature suggests that disadvantaged families who are precariously housed could indeed fit into the homeless category as Rossi (1989) broadly defined it. For instance, an examination of routes to homelessness by Hill (1991) identified several circumstances that might contribute to housing difficulties for disadvantaged families. These include deinstitutionalisation, substance abuse, family violence, and other health-related problems. As Lee (1978) suggested in his study of men on skid row, it may be more appropriate to compare disadvantaged families with the homeless rather than with relatively well-housed middle-class families.

General themes in the literature identify many issues that may affect the housing situations of disadvantaged families (Hill, 1991; Sosin, Piliavin, & Westerfelt, 1990; Watson & Austerberry, 1986; Weitzman, Knickman, & Shinn, 1990). For instance, the effect of the economy on employment, the comprehensiveness of social services, and social norms and ideals that influence the housing market and public policies and programs, all can enhance or limit the resources available to disadvantaged families in search of adequate housing. Furthermore, the role of community-level social networks, either formal or informal, has been identified as influential in the stability of disadvantaged families (Lutig, 1991). Changes in family size and form can also be crucial elements in the housing process. Finally, the relationship between individual psychological factors, such as trauma and stress, and an individual's ability to react to situations and cope, can influence the housing experiences of disadvantaged families (Goodman, Saxe, & Harvey, 1991). Throughout this body of research, a link between family characteristics and their housing situations, and the influence of housing situations on the well-being of families, can be made (Doyle, 1993). To consider a model of mobility for disadvantaged families, it is necessary to better understand their situations; that was the purpose of this study.

Methodology

Theoretical perspective

Our understanding of mobility is shaped by the theoretical perspectives of researchers and by the methods they employ. Much of the research on mobility to date has focused on numerical descriptions and statistical analyses of mobility. There has been less information about the thoughts and feelings of the participants. For instance, Priemus (1986) studied the attempts by individuals to achieve congruency between their housing aspirations and their residential situations. He concluded that in-depth explorations into the residential situations of persons in the weakest housing positions may uncover constraints not recognized through other research methods. Similarly, Gruber and Shelton (1987) suggested that an interpretive understanding of people's percep-

tions of their neighborhoods may provide useful insights beyond knowing whether the neighborhoods provide opportunities, comforts, and amenities.

An interpretive approach, as adopted in this study, focuses on the interpretation and definitions people have of objects and events in their lives and on how those perceptions influence behaviour (Winton, 1995). Data generated in this way represent the subjective reality of a participant's existence (Winton, 1995). With this approach, the goal is not to measure but to understand the meaning of phenomena (Leininger, 1992). According to W.I. Thomas (1928), it is essential in studying people to know just how they define the situations in which they find themselves. As he said, "If men [sic] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (p. 572). From this perspective, behaviour must be understood in relation to the subjective meanings that individuals construct in their daily lives (Chapman & Maclean, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Because people know the world only as they experience it, researchers need to tap into this experience and attempt to understand the meanings that experiences have for people in order to understand their world (Achterberg, 1988; Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Prus, 1990).

Interpretive research typically uses participant-observation or in-depth interviewing as tools to generate data. The outcome produces highly descriptive data, expressive of the thoughts and feelings of the participants. The purpose of interpretive research is not directed toward producing generalizations of findings from large samples of populations using statistical verification but to systematically examine particular phenomena that may be characteristic of particular individuals or groups. As described, a better understanding of the situations of disadvantaged families would facilitate the further development of a mobility model.

Method

Information about the neighborhood and the families living there was generated from custom tabulations of the 1991 census (Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, 1991), interviews with service providers and in-depth interviews with residents. Theoretical or purposive sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Patton, 1990) was used to support the development of a conceptual model by ensuring that participants had a variety of relevant experiences. Interviewing was terminated when the process became saturated; that is, no new information was being generated.

Seventy-one family members acting as primary caregivers for their children³ were interviewed in their homes by a team of five interviewers. Participants who lived in social and private housing were sought. Accessing potential participants, particularly those living in private market housing, was challenging. However, once located, very few declined to participate. Contact was made through service providers, managers and caretakers of housing complexes, referrals by participants and a door-to-door blitz of private dwellings. A short, follow-up interview six months after the initial interview was used to determine whether participants had moved in the interim.

The interviews consisted of guided conversations with participants. The interview schedule included sections on household information, housing history, current housing

information, neighborhood and social networks, general perceptions and aspirations, and demographic information. Written notes were taken during the interviews and transcribed as soon as possible afterwards.

Analysis

During the study, the principal researcher and interviewers met frequently to discuss the data as they were being generated. Patterns identified in the data were used to code transcripts of the interviews. When new patterns emerged, previously coded material was re-examined for the new patterns. As coding progressed, descriptive codes were collected and collapsed into more abstract codes. Gradually, categories were developed and relationships among the categories were identified and developed. As the analysis progressed, a conceptual model consisting of categories of participants and their relationships was developed. This procedure is known as “grounded theorizing, whereby explanation and theory are fashioned directly from the emerging analysis of the data — using what Glaser and Strauss (1967) called the constant comparative method” (Mason, 1996, p.142). Ethnograph, a computer software program for qualitative research, was used to assist with data management.

Outcomes

Characteristics of the Neighborhood

According to 1991 census data, West Broadway had a population of 5,456 persons living in 3,060 households (Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, 1991). The majority (2,140) were non-family households. Of the 920 census families⁴, 585 included children (195 two-parent and 390 single-parent families). It is notable that 94% of dwellings were rented. At the time of the study, the student mobility rate was almost 80%.

Characteristics of Participants in Study

Of the seventy-one participants in this study, all were adult family members providing primary care for their children. Most (50) were less than 35 years of age with limited levels of education. A few (12) had some post-secondary education or university degrees. Most (45) participants depended on social assistance for their income. Others received employment income, pensions, student loans, or unemployment insurance. It must be noted that almost all participants were more mobile and poorer than the general Winnipeg population as indicated by census data (Social Planning Council of Winnipeg, 1991).

The composition of families varied but most (38) were female-led, single-parent families, a few (6) were male-led and others (27) had two adults present. The degree to which the composition of individual families fluctuated was noteworthy. In addition to children being born into some households, adults moved in and out of others, and children frequently moved in and out of public care or between caregivers.

About two-thirds of participants lived in private market housing and one-third in social housing. The physical condition of their housing ranged from adequate⁵ to inad-

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equate. Most social housing was in the adequate range, but private market housing varied considerably. More than half (51) had been at their present address less than one year although three had not moved for more than ten years. A few chronic movers had lived in 15 or 20 places as adults.

Mobility Attitudes and Outcomes

Although most participants would have liked to settle down, three-quarters expected to move again and almost half would have moved immediately if they thought conditions might improve at all. In fact, about one-third did move within six months of the first interview. Of those living in social housing, 11 moved, 16 did not. Among those in the private market, 14 moved, 28 remained, and two could not be traced.

Of all the reasons that participants had for moving, most related to factors that pushed them out of their current housing. These were changes in family composition, physical condition of housing, and landlord and caretaker problems. Only a few were pulled to other housing situations. A few participants expressed concerns about the effects of mobility on their children's academic or social development, and some tried to limit their moves to the summer months. For most participants, however, these concerns were not the basis on which mobility decisions were made.

Conceptual Model

In this section, an emerging model of mobility applicable to low-income, inner-city families is described. The developing model takes the form of "ideal types, that is, patterns or typifications constructed by the analyst out of all the actual cases observed. 'Ideal types' are intended to capture the key features of a given phenomenon without necessarily displaying all the particulars of individual cases" (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p.143). Using this approach, five profiles were constructed to represent different groups of residents, their relationships to the neighbourhood, and their propensity to move.

Resident Profiles

The profiles are identified as transplants, integrated, suspended, transitionals and stepping stones. They were developed according to several criteria. First, was the locus of control, either internal or external; that is, did group members consider themselves or others to be in control of their lives? Would a decision to move be perceived as theirs or others to make? Second, were their connections to work and the services they consumed located in or out of the neighborhood? If these connections were outside the neighborhood, a desire to move closer to them might increase the possibility of moving. Third, were their social networks generally located in or out of the neighborhood? Having social networks outside the neighborhood might encourage moving. Fourth, did they identify with the neighborhood; that is, did they have a sense of belonging in the neighborhood? A sense of belonging could act to reduce the propensity to move. Fifth, were they anchored in the neighborhood; that is, were they established there? Being established in the neighborhood might also act to reduce mobility. Finally, how likely were they to change their place of residence? For instance, those who

perceived moving as a solution to problems might move more frequently than others. Each of these profiles is described in more detail below.

Transplants. This group consisted of five, hardworking members, most of whom had more than one job. They considered their housing satisfactory for their needs and did not plan to move in the immediate future. One member explained their choice of location this way: “The rent is cheap in the area. That reduces stress and so living is more comfortable. There is too much stress if you have to pay rent that is too high.”

These members viewed the neighborhood as outsiders looking in. They considered the area to be full of problems related to poverty and unemployment and, beyond sending their children to school there, seldom participated in the neighborhood. To quote one participant, “We don’t go around the neighborhood too much. Just to work and back.” The social networks of the group were largely outside.

Members of this group had a very strong internal locus of control as suggested by the statement, “We can always adjust and make the best of a situation. You have to live with what you have.” They seemed to live by the philosophy, “You can live in a poor area and not be poor. It’s an attitude how you live.”

Their expectations for the future were optimistic. They expected an increase in their incomes and increased housing options. None of the transplants indicated they would like to move immediately even though two families indicated that their housing was not suitable (one because of the rent, the other because of too-few bedrooms). However, they all planned to move in the future. Six months later, only one had moved. They might be expected to move only if their resources increased substantially.

Integrated. This group consisted of 22 members who seemed to belong in the neighborhood and showed commitment to it. They were generally satisfied with their current housing. As they said, “It’s like home, I grew up here.” Although they knew the problems and dangers in the neighborhood, they did not feel personally threatened by them. They had good safety strategies. For instance, they walked their young children to school and encouraged older ones to walk in groups.

Aside from general comments about the convenience of the neighborhood, this group held other positive views of the area. As one resident said, “Those of us who have been here long know each other and we are a close-knit group.” Another said, “Everyone seems to stick together when there’s a problem.”

Members of this group were familiar with services in the area and made use of them. Several had taken some action regarding social issues within the neighborhood. For instance, they had circulated petitions to prevent the closure of a swimming pool. They had contacted police about children sniffing glue and some even belonged to a neighborhood patrol.

Most members were relatively long-term residents. Many had social networks consisting of family or friends in the area. As one person said, “We have friends here, the kids are in school and making friends, my son has a buddy upstairs.”

People in this group perceived themselves as having some control over their lives and could be described as having an internal locus of control. In the words of one participant, “If you work for it, you can get it.” Members had a variety of coping

strategies that helped to sustain them on low incomes in a "rough neighborhood." As one said, "I've been here so long I know merchants around here. I can run a bill at the store and pay at the end of the month."

Members were looking to the future but their expectations were not very high. They expected that things would change for them but only in small ways. They expressed a certain acceptance of their lifestyle; as one participant said, "Learn to be content with what you have."

Lee and Guest (1983) and Fried (1982) suggest that satisfaction with housing and neighborhoods may involve some level of justification. It seems that this group decided to make the best of the situation. They developed coping mechanisms and made a conscious effort to seek out the most the neighborhood had to offer.

Twelve members of this group thought they would eventually move again; ten did not. Although eight responded positively to the idea of moving right then, most did not act on this impulse. Results after six months indicated that five had moved and 17 remained. This stability could be expected as they were firmly anchored in the neighborhood with work or service connections and strong social networks there.

Suspended. Members of this group of 11 seemed to be suspended like sand particles in a lake. They were easily bumped about by circumstances around them and had either given up on life or were not really conscious of their own troubled states. They were constrained in their ability to articulate their needs and desires.

This group operated on the basis of an external locus of control; that is, their lives seemed to be in the hands of others and they considered themselves at the mercy of the welfare system. As one person said, "You go where they put you." There were pervasive feelings of apathy and hopelessness in this group. Frequent responses were, "I don't care", "Whatever you do, it won't help," and "I don't trust anyone anymore." When asked who was responsible for their situations, they said, "It's not me, that's for sure."

Although their housing was often inadequate, they seldom expressed dissatisfaction with it. Some did not have sufficient energy to complain while others complained in a general sense but did not think there were any solutions to their problems. The level of housekeeping among this group was often quite low. Some housing units were dirty and very untidy.

Most members of this group indicated they moved frequently. According to one, "I don't stay more than three or six months in any place I rent." Another said, "I get tired of staying in one place." The ability to move seemed to be one of the few things they felt they could control. Despite moving, however, their conditions seldom improved. According to one participant, "Often, you just move from one hell-hole to another." The most common reason for moving was related to "people problems" — problems with partners, landlords, or "to get away from people that just bug you."

These members tended to isolate themselves. As they said, "We stay more or less by ourselves" and "Nobody bugs me, and I don't have no friends." Most were not familiar with services in the neighborhood and would not use them anyway. As one person said, "I don't need nothing really." They were not optimistic about the future,

and most expected nothing more than what they presently had. When asked how their lives might be in five years, a typical response was, "Like it is now, I'll still be here."

Three members of this group expected to move and eight did not. However, seven expressed a desire to move immediately if they could. Those who did not wish to move at that time indicated they were too lazy, had just moved, could tolerate it a bit longer or had no energy. Six months later, two persons had moved, seven had stayed, and two could not be traced. Perhaps apathy prevents most from moving. Newman and Duncan (1979) found that many people who reported problems with housing and neighborhoods did not move, perhaps because their circumstances prevented it. This may be the case for members of this group.

Transitionals. This group of 24 included newcomers to the city or neighborhood who had not yet settled in. It also included young single or partnered parents who had not established their bearings in terms of their own lives but were concerned about being good parents. Persons who were dissatisfied with their lives and were trying to take measures to improve their situations also fell into this group. The common link among members was that they were not settled in the neighborhood and they lacked strong social networks.

These members selected their housing in haste or accepted, without question, housing that was made available to them by social service agencies. They did not consider other options or were not able to adequately evaluate their choices. For example, people said, "I didn't look at other places", "I just wanted to grab whatever I could," or "I accepted the first place that came up." This group was highly dissatisfied with their housing and expected a better level of living.

Some members of the group had drug- and alcohol-related problems or unsatisfactory social relationships. They were trying to improve their lifestyles for their own sakes and that of their children. For example, they said, "I've had a support worker help me get over an attitude and gain some self-esteem" or "we've dug our own grave in the past. In time [goal will be met] but not within the year" or "I'm trying hard to make a good life for us." This group tried to be optimistic about the future. For instance, they hoped to "be off assistance and making a decent living." However, they had not implemented concrete plans that would facilitate their achieving these goals.

According to Rapoport (1980), "choice...is an important aspect of perceived environment quality" (p. 121). The issue of choice seems applicable to the transitionals who perceived having very little choice and expressed dissatisfaction with their housing situations. Similarly, Cook (1988) found that people who believed there were few options available were more dissatisfied than others.

Twenty of the transitional group indicated they expected to move, three were ambiguous about moving, and one indicated having just arrived. When asked whether they would like to move right now, 17 answered yes. Results of the second interview indicated that 13 moved and 11 remained. These results could be expected given that they were not well-anchored in the neighborhood, lacked strong connections to work or services consumed, and appeared to have weak social ties.

Stepping Stones. Members of this group of nine were temporary residents in the neighborhood. They were students with long-range plans. They chose to live in the neighborhood because of the low-cost housing, convenient location, and, for some, the opportunity of employment as apartment caretakers. When they completed their education, they planned to leave the neighborhood.

People in this group were generally satisfied with their housing, maintained it as well as they could, and did not plan to move until their education was completed. They were aware of the dangers and problems but were “comfortable for now.” Most had a social support network outside the neighborhood.

These members were optimistic about the future but they were also realistic. Statements by members of this group such as “I’m confident there’s a job out there” and “Finish school, get a job, settle down” suggested that they operated on the basis of an internal locus of control. Although they seemed knowledgeable about the services and activities in the neighborhood, they were generally too busy to participate.

Michelson’s (1980) work on long- and short-range criteria seems relevant to the stepping stones, who were judging the housing and neighborhood based on their expectations of being there only for a short time.

All of the stepping stones indicated they expected to move when they completed their school programs. Three expressed a desire to move immediately. Six said no to this question because they were comfortable until after they finished their schooling. Subsequently, four moved and five did not.

Emerging Model

After developing the profiles, a conceptual model was generated to illustrate how the groups differed in relation to each other and in their propensity to move. This model is shown in Figure 1. The strengths of different characteristics are indicated by the thickness and darkness of the lines. The direction of the relationships is shown by the arrows and chain-linked lines.

The profiles in the model are arranged in order from left to right according to their propensity to move. For instance, members of the transplant group were much less likely to move than were the stepping stones. The greater the distance above the surface of the neighborhood suggests reduced identification with the neighborhood. For instance, members of the transplant group projected themselves out of the neighborhood. Their connections were with persons and places beyond the neighborhood. On the other hand, members of the suspended group had sunk into the neighborhood but were not really attached to it.

Summary and Conclusions

Using an interpretive approach, this study explored how families living in a low-income, inner-city neighborhood perceived their residential mobility. For some, moving was part of a struggle for upward mobility. For others, it was a solution to non-housing problems. On the other hand, some participants found solutions that allowed them to function in the neighborhood, thus reducing their propensity to move. When

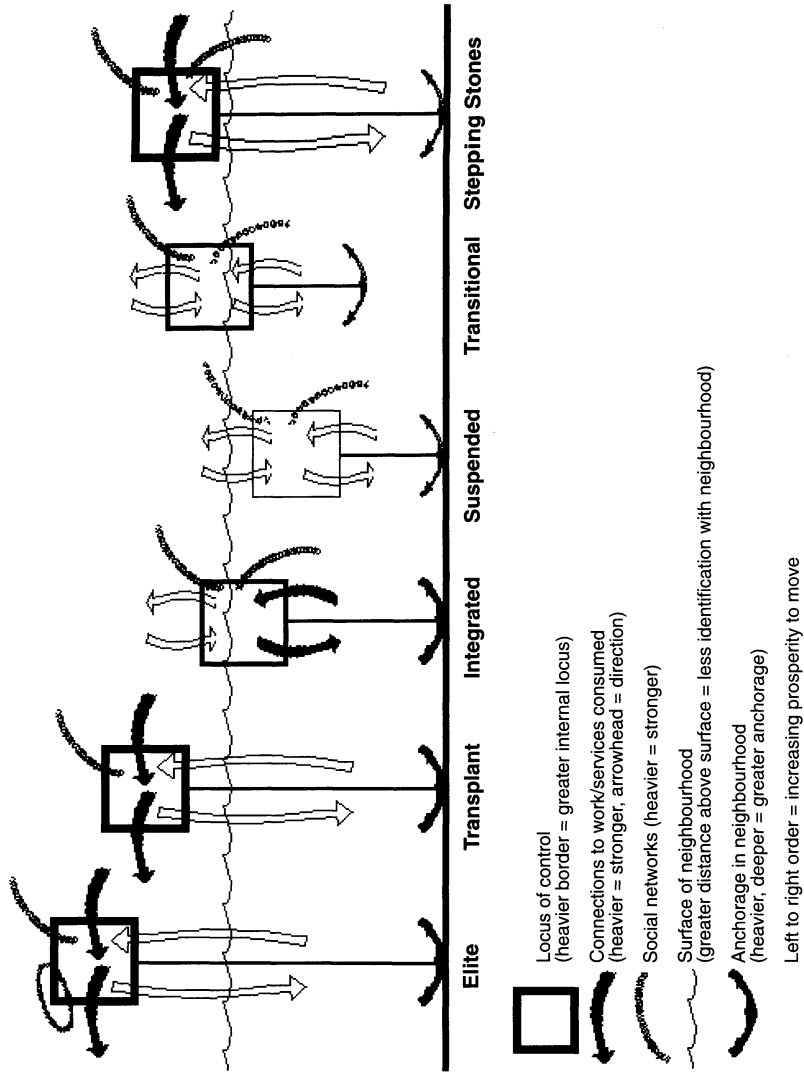


Figure 1. Conceptual model of mobility illustrating profiles of different groups with reference to locus of control, connections to work/services consumed, social networks, identification with neighbourhood, anchorage in neighbourhood and prosperity to move.

residents did move, most were pushed from their housing rather than pulled to alternative housing options.

The conceptual model developed in this study can help to fill the gap in our understanding of mobility among disadvantaged families. It is useful in identifying the characteristics of different groups within the neighborhood and can help to target the needs and resources of each group with the goal of reducing high levels of residential mobility. For instance, the group most at risk is the transitionals. Without specific resources to meet their needs, they are at risk of sinking to the hopelessness of the suspended group. On the other hand, the transplants, the integrated, and the stepping stones need only varying degrees of bridging support to assist them in maintaining or enhancing their positions. Children most at risk are those whose parents belong to the suspended and transitional groups. Specific programs could be developed to assist these children in their development so as to decrease the risks they face.

The question of whether the model can be applied successfully in other neighborhoods cannot be answered without more research. However, there is no reason to suspect that most or all of the profiles would not be present in a neighborhood, in Winnipeg or elsewhere, that had characteristics similar to those of West Broadway. For instance, if another neighborhood offered conditions similar to those identified as desirable by members of the transplant group, there is no reason to assume that they would not be residing there as well. If some of the categories in the model were missing or new ones identified, it would be interesting to determine how the characteristics of the neighborhood might account for those differences.

To stabilize a neighborhood like West Broadway is a big challenge but it could be done if there was the political will to do it. All levels of government have a large investment in this neighborhood and others like it. Stabilizing this and similar neighborhoods requires that policy-makers and service-providers work cooperatively. The best way to protect that investment is by investing in the people who live there and in their children, who are the future.

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Footnotes

¹The term "social housing" encompasses both public housing, which is owned and operated by government, and other types of government-subsidized housing, which may be owned and operated by a co-operative or a non-profit organization.

²Over the last decade, this school has consistently reported one of the highest student mobility rates of all schools in the inner city. At the time of this study, the student mobility rate was 78.8%. The formula for calculating the rate is the ratio of total student transfers in and out to average enrollment of any year stated as a percentage (B.

Quinn, Research Division, Winnipeg School Division #1, personal communication, August 25, 1994).

³In two cases, participants were the primary caregivers for their grandchildren and, in another case, an adult sibling shared care-giving responsibilities with the parent.

⁴A census family is defined by Statistics Canada as a now-married couple with or without never-married children of either or both; a couple living common-law with or without never-married children of either or both; or a lone parent of any marital status with at least one never-married child living in the same dwelling.

⁵Adequacy is one of three criteria used by Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation to determine core housing need. A housing unit is considered adequate if it has plumbing facilities and requires no major repairs. The other two criteria are suitability, which refers to size, and affordability.