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Poverty, Residential Mobility, and Persistence across Urban and Rural Family Literacy Programs in Pennsylvania¹

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Key Findings

This study examined how poverty and residential mobility influence low-income adults' persistence in family literacy programs in Pennsylvania. Twelve out of 20 program directors reported that learners typically moved at least once a year. In five of these high-mobility programs moving was reported to significantly hinder persistence. Geographic location and the availability of inexpensive and subsidized housing increased mobility. The 17 learners we interviewed moved 78 times in the previous five years, for an average of once per year. One-half of the moves were within 15 miles, yet even short distance moves often delayed progress and disrupted program participation. Although residential mobility did not hinder persistence in all programs, it is part of a constellation of poverty-related problems (e.g., poor health, lack of child care and transportation) that pose challenges for learners to attend classes regularly and meet their educational goals.

Key Implications

Adult educators have typically tried to improve persistence by changing adult learners' attitudes (e.g. increasing motivation) or the program itself. However, situational factors and community conditions such as lack of affordable housing and well-paying jobs substantially limit the life chances and educational progress of poor and working-class families. To enhance families' residential stability and persistence, programs should help participants access housing assistance services, develop a plan with learners to pursue self-study and minimize disruption following a move, work with school teachers to help children adjust after a school change, coordinate with housing advocacy organizations, and advocate for affordable housing and other policies that benefit poor and working-class families.

Introduction

While we often think of residential mobility as voluntary and opportunity-related, the movement of families experiencing social and economic distress is often unplanned and unpredictable because it reflects the survival strategies of disadvantaged families when faced with unforeseen crises. Research suggests that residential mobility impedes the social and academic well-being of children. Previous studies also show that K-12 public schools are affected through the high turnover of low-performing students with multiple social and academic needs. However, there is no research on the relationship between poverty-related mobility and adult basic education, including GED, ESL, and family literacy programs (the focus of this study). State and federally funded family literacy programs provide integrated, intergenerational education for parents and children, typically combining early childhood education, adult education, and parenting education.

For the purposes of this study, persistence refers to the length of time an adult remains active in an educational program, which may include brief periods of "stopping out." Adult education scholars typically identify three kinds of factors influencing persistence:

- situational (learners' life circumstances),
- institutional (programmatic factors), and

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- dispositional (learners' personal experiences and attitudes) (Comings et al., 1999; Cross, 1981; Quigley, 1997).

Studies of persistence tend to focus on individual-level factors, such as participant attitudes and motivation, or program characteristics such as curricular content and program design. Situational factors such as lack of childcare or transportation are often considered less influential or beyond practitioners' control (Darkenwald & Merriam, 1982). In short, this research tends to downplay the ways that factors such as local wages, unemployment, transportation systems, affordable housing, and residential mobility may support or undermine persistence.

The absence of research on structural determinants of persistence, including residential mobility, is notable given the economic status of most family literacy participants. The median family income for family literacy participants in Pennsylvania in 2004-05, for example, was only \$7,500. Sixty-five percent received public assistance and 70 percent had incomes below the poverty level for a family of two. Eighty-nine percent of family literacy participants in Pennsylvania are women, most often single mothers.

This research brief is based on a study that examined how poverty-related residential mobility affects the persistence of adults in family literacy programs, specifically, how moving and other stressors associated with poverty may interfere with learners' ability to stay in these programs and meet their goals.

In this study we investigated three interrelated questions:

1. Which factors significantly shape the persistence of low-income family literacy participants?
2. How does residential instability affect participants' persistence?
3. How do these factors differ across rural and urban contexts?

Research Methods

Of the 58 family literacy programs in Pennsylvania, we selected 20 sites using a stratified random sample based on region of

the state and location within metropolitan, micropolitan and nonmetropolitan counties.² Seven sites were selected in non-metropolitan counties, six sites in micropolitan counties, and seven sites in metropolitan counties. We excluded programs that exclusively served immigrant/ESL or drug and alcohol rehabilitation clients because of characteristics specific to these populations that we believed would uniquely affect persistence in family literacy programs.

A total of 21 interviews were conducted with 30 personnel from the 20 program sites. We asked directors and educators about the primary influences on program persistence and educational attainment for program participants, the relationship between program persistence and residential mobility, and the effects of area-specific community characteristics (e.g., transportation, housing, jobs, social services) on program persistence and residential instability.

We then purposefully selected three sites where directors reported that (a) program participants moved frequently and (b) residential moves negatively affected adult learner persistence. Of these sites, one was located in a metropolitan county, one in a micropolitan county, and one in a non-metropolitan county. We then conducted interviews with 17 family literacy participants (16 women and one man aged 21 to 44) across the three sites, recording five-year retrospective histories of residential movement and family literacy program participation. Adult learners had completed between 8th and 11th grade; three had recently obtained their GED and one was awaiting test results. Of the 17 adult learners interviewed, 13 were white (including one immigrant from Eastern Europe), two were African American, one was Latina, and one was multiracial. Reported monthly household wage income ranged from \$80 (single mother of three) to \$6,500 (married couple with four children), with a median of \$1,300.

Findings

Participants in these family literacy programs tended to move frequently. Personnel at 12 in 20 programs reported that participants typically moved at least once a year (see Table 1). Program directors based in micropolitan counties and those in rural communities located near a larger town or major metropolitan area reported the most mobile student populations. In these areas the availability of inexpensive and subsidized housing appeared to contribute to more residential movement.

Table 1. Incidence of Mobility across Family Literacy Program Sites by Metro Status, and Mobility Effects on Persistence

		Residential Mobility	
		Lower (n=8)	Higher (n=12)
Effect on persistence	None	Metro: 3	Metro: 1
	—	Micro: 1	Micro: 4
	Little	Nonmetro: 3	Nonmetro: 2
	(n=14)	Total: 7	Total: 7
	Some	Metro: 1	Metro: 2
	—	Micro: 0	Micro: 1
A lot	Nonmetro: 0	Nonmetro: 2	
(n=6)	Total: 1	Total: 5	

In places with greater availability of public transportation (for example in urban locations) practitioners reported that moving had a smaller effect on persistence, mainly because learners could still take the bus or drive to class after moving. Even more than location across urban and rural areas, the characteristics of local communities, such as labor and housing markets, amenities, and social services, played unique roles in shaping persistence outcomes. Another site experienced significant in-movement of poor and working-class families escaping crime and urban poverty only to encounter fraudulent lending practices and limited regulation of housing rentals that contributed to frequent residential moves.

Residential Mobility and Persistence: A Home-Based Program Director’s Perspective

“Oh my gosh, sometimes it’s an absolute disaster. You know, especially if they moved far. They can never find their books [that we’ve given them]...They can’t find any of the toys that have been borrowed; they can’t find any of that stuff...And it really is difficult to get them focused back in. Our home visits are every week. They last an hour and a half to two hours long...Let’s say you move today, the beginning of June, till you let us back in it’s going to be three or four weeks ‘cause no one ever wants us back in there when they’re still unpacking. They don’t want us there. And by the time that month has passed, you find many times you’re going to have to go back and review what you were working on in May...And without that constant practice it’s sort of like you’re starting all over again. You know? And initially the kids are really [glad] that we’re back...But it’s really difficult to get the parents focused again. You just feel like you’ve really lost some grip on them. You really do. And that’s assuming that after they’ve moved that they want to continue.”

Another site based in a geographically remote area experienced participant movement across a few relatively nearby rural communities. But even so, this often resulted in temporary dropouts due to learners’ difficulties with transportation and the general upheaval following a move.

Residential Mobility and Determinants of Persistence: The Experience of Participants

Collectively, the participants we interviewed had moved 78 times over the previous five years, averaging one move per year. Of the 78 moves, 24 were accounted for by housing “pushes”—families forced to move because of unacceptable or unsafe housing, eviction or housing loss, unaffordability, or movement away from overcrowded housing situations, particularly involving “doubling up” with friends or extended family members. Another 13 moves were “pushes” of another sort due to the movement away from social conflict, unsafe or crime-ridden areas, and/or domestic violence. Only three of the moves were clearly job related “pulls” such as job transfers and moves to be closer to employment.

Table 2. Distance of Participant Moves

Distance Moved	# of Moves	Percent of Total
<5 miles	24	30.8
5-15 miles	16	20.5
16-30 miles	8	10.3
31-100 miles	16	20.5
>100 miles	14	18.0
TOTAL:	78	100.0

Over 50 percent of moves were 15 miles or less in distance (see Table 2). This was often because participants relied heavily on local family and friendship social networks to secure new housing. Extended family members often provided a critical social safety net. Nevertheless, this was not always enough to ensure persistence in family literacy programs. Even short distance moves caused interruptions of several weeks as a family settled into a new residence and/or resolved the situation or conflict that was the initial catalyst for the residential change.

According to learners, persistence was also deterred by characteristics of previous programs—like ineffective teachers—and situational factors such as pregnancy and the stresses of being a single mother, juggling too many demands and responsibilities, mental and physical health problems for learners or their chil-

dren, irregular or demanding work schedules, and the difficulty of arranging reliable transportation and child care. Women also mentioned unsupportive friends, relatives, or male partners.

Residential Mobility and Persistence: A Participant's Perspective

Tara had moved five times in the five years prior to the interview, with four moves taking place during a six-month period after her boyfriend was laid off and she was fired from her job. She, her boyfriend, and their daughter lived in a camper and several other locations until they could find adequate housing. Prior to these events she had regularly attended her family literacy program:

"I felt like a yo-yo, you know, and just moving around and I didn't know if I was going to be able to stay in the program because I didn't know if I was going to be [living] where I was...I didn't know if I should [go back to class] or not because what if I have to move in another month or two or then miss more. I didn't want that to happen. So finally we found a trailer that was cheap and this is where I am now."

Conclusions

Residential mobility is one of a constellation of factors undermining persistence in family literacy programs, especially as it interacts with other poverty-related problems such as lack of child-care, intermittent employment, limited access to social services, and health problems. Although characteristics of family literacy programs and participants do influence whether adult learners will stay in a given program, we cannot ignore the importance of structural forces in limiting the life chances and educational progress for poor families. By disregarding local social structures and community contexts, the family literacy program and/or participant are blamed for circumstances beyond their control. Instead, we need to understand how structural factors such as access to affordable housing, well-paying jobs, and social services in rural and urban areas affect both household stability and persistence in adult education programs.

Structural factors and community context profoundly shape adult learners' ability to attend classes regularly and make progress toward their educational goals—above and beyond learners' attitudes and program characteristics. This realization can help us develop a fuller understanding of persistence in family literacy and other types of adult education and, in a larger sense, the social and economic realities faced by America's poor families.

Recommendations

Adult educators and other program staff can take the following actions to enhance learners' residential stability and, in turn, their program persistence.

- Refer participants to social support services such as housing and energy assistance;
- Before a participant moves, work with them to develop a plan to engage in self-study and to minimize disruptions in program participation;
- If the move involves a school or pre-school change for learners' children, work with teachers and school staff to help with adjustment to the new school;
- Work closely with housing advocacy organizations, as poor housing conditions are one of the primary reasons people move from one location to another;
- Advocate for local, state, and federal policies that benefit poor and working-class families, including affordable housing, child care, and health care, viable public transportation, and living wage ordinances.

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² The U.S. Census Bureau defines a metropolitan county as one which "contains a core urban area of 50,000 or more population," whereas a micropolitan county "contains an urban core of at least 10,000 (but less than 50,000) population." Nonmetropolitan counties have no urban cluster larger than 10,000. See <http://www.census.gov/population/www/estimates/metroarea.html>