

Barriers to opportunity

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Xavier de Souza Briggs

How much does your neighborhood determine your life chances? Sociologist and urban planner Xavier de Souza Briggs recently completed a 20-year social experiment on ghetto poverty that asked: If people in high-poverty, high-risk areas of the inner city moved to low-poverty areas, would their lives change for the better?

The findings revealed that while many study participants "successfully"

escaped dangerous and stressful neighborhoods at first, most did not escape income poverty, and many ended up living back in high-poverty areas after a few years. Briggs and his collaborators wanted to know why.

The experiment was conducted in five U.S. metro areas: Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York. While the experiment showed that it was possible to dramatically improve quality of life for the poor, helping them escape poverty was another matter. "Many of us underestimated the barriers to employment, for example, for this highly disadvantaged group, and how small a difference relocation alone would make," says Briggs, an associate professor of urban studies and planning.

"Severely disadvantaged people are often information-poor, lacking job networks and networking skills," he adds. "For one thing, they lack essential information about which job training opportunities are most likely to pay off. People throughout America, especially the poor, are constantly marketed to with ads that promise jobs that won't exist for them."

Low-income families face other complex challenges as well. "When people are juggling on the bottom of the ladder, they don't need access to just a job," Briggs says. "They need an affordable apartment and affordable [child care](#). Most of these families are headed by single mothers, who are at much greater risk of persistent poverty than other types of households," he says of the findings detailed in his book, "Moving to Opportunity: The Story of an American Experiment to Fight Ghetto Poverty."

The barriers were the greatest in sprawling Los Angeles, Briggs says. "The physical distances are so enormous, and many jobs are not accessible by public transportation. We spent time with moms who were getting up at 4 a.m. and driving 25 miles in one direction to leave their

kids with a family member, and then 30 miles in another direction to work at a job where they might be put on a different shift, on a moment's notice. The job itself was insecure, volatile, and poorly compensated. Lining up housing, work, and child care, and keeping them aligned, was immensely difficult."

On the upside were dramatic changes in safety and security, particularly for young girls. They fared better overall in these new neighborhoods, escaping the predatory climate of their old [neighborhoods](#). And parents in the study saw major reductions in anxiety and depression, and improvements in mental health, likely because of increased security and "freedom from fear."

"I would love to have seen impacts on economic opportunity," Briggs says. "We thought that moving might affect access to useful networks of people who were employed and had better information, or that being physically closer to certain kinds of jobs might make a difference. But as it turned out, those changes did not develop. And what's more, the families' footholds in safer areas were insecure, because of the scarcity of affordable rental housing in these markets."

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