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

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how poverty and residential mobility affect adult persistence and participation in family literacy (FL) programs. Combining data from interviews with directors and participants from a sample of FL sites in Pennsylvania, this study examines (a) the perceptions of practitioners and adult learners regarding the role of residential instability in shaping FL program persistence for low-income adults, and (b) how determinants of persistence may vary across urban and rural contexts. We argue that poverty mobility coupled with particular structural features of community is often more salient to program persistence than are features of individual programs and/or participant "motivation."

INTRODUCTION

Residential mobility is generally assumed to be economically rational behavior, undertaken principally as a means of improving individual- or household-level social and/or economic status (Cadwallader, 1992; Cushing, 1999; Lichter and Costanzo, 1987). However, the frequent, often short-distance residential movement among resource-limited families within, into, and across already distressed communities and neighborhoods is often unplanned and unpredictable, the consequence of a precipitating crisis such as family breakup, inability to pay rent, or movement away from unsafe, unaffordable, or otherwise unacceptable living conditions (Fitchen, 1994; Schafft, 2006). Recent research

indicates that about 14% of all U.S. households spend over 50% of income on housing costs. Severe housing-cost burdens affect nearly half of low-income households, a percentage that appears to be increasing. Nonetheless, federal housing assistance supports only about a quarter of eligible low-income renters and virtually no homeowners (Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, 2007, 2008). These trends only underscore the structural forces deepening housing insecurity for poor families in the United States.

Therefore, rather than improving life circumstances, residential movement for economically stressed families may actually *increase* social and academic dislocation, causing profoundly negative effects on learning and academic achievement and attainment (Hanushek, Kain, and Rivkin, 2004; Hartman, 2002). Hence, this movement may not be economically rational in that it typically does not result in increased economic opportunity. It is, however, *socially* rational insofar as it reflects the reactive survival strategies of families confronted with an array of social and economic stress factors (Sherman, 2006).

Despite the increasing recognition of poverty-related residential mobility and its role in both household and community disadvantage (Colton, 2004; Fitchen, 1994; Foulkes and Newbold, 2005; Schafft, 2006), several issues are less well understood. First, while residential instability and the academic disruption that results have been shown

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to have a negative effect on the academic achievement of children (Killeen and Schafft, 2008), we are aware of only one previous study (Matthews and Thompson, 1972) that has examined the effects of residential mobility on participation in adult education, and none has examined these issues in family literacy programs—despite the volume of literature exploring determinants of participation and persistence (see e.g., Beder, 1990, 1991; Comings, 2007; Cross, 1981; Porter, Cuban, and Comings, 2005; Quigley, 1997).

Second, research on persistence in adult education tends to focus primarily on the institutional characteristics of particular programs and/or the dispositional factors of adult learners themselves (Cross, 1981) such as level of participant motivation or self-efficacy (see e.g., Beder, 1991; Ponton, Derrick, and Carr, 2005; Quigley, 1997; Ziegler, Bain, Bell, McCallum, and Brian, 2006). At the same time, this research tends to downplay the role of class, local social structures, and community context in limiting and/or enhancing educational participation and persistence (Nesbit, 2006; Sandlin, 2003). These situational factors are thought to be largely beyond the control of program personnel (Quigley, 1997). When situational factors such as inflexible work schedules or health problems are discussed, they are often treated as randomly occurring personal problems rather than social problems that disproportionately affect poor families. Some scholars (e.g., Porter et al., 2005; Quigley 1997, 2006) explore ways programs can provide child care, transportation, and other vital services to support low-income participants. Nevertheless, situational factors or life circumstances are typically considered less influential (Darkenwald and Merriam, 1982).

Individualistic and programmatic explanations of adult learner persistence are consistent with the motivational and human capital theories underlying mainstream adult education policy and practice. In particular, scholars note that studies examining motivation as a primary determinant of participation and persistence (e.g., Cross, 1981) falsely assume that people are autonomous individuals who can fully control their life circumstances. They fail to take into account participants' daily lives, community settings, and the local opportunity structures available to economically disadvantaged families (Ahl, 2006; Wikelund, 1993). In this respect, research on adult persistence within family literacy (FL) programs largely parallels the literature on public school student mobility and academic outcomes that

similarly tends to focus on achievement outcomes and/or individual student characteristics rather than the social, community, and economic contexts in which mobility occurs. (For a notable exception, see Cuban, 2003.)

Finally, although numerous studies of academic and residential instability and underachievement have been completed in urban settings (see e.g., Ingersoll, Scamman, and Eckerling, 1999; Kerbow, Azcoitia, and Buell, 2003; Nakagawa, Stafford, Fisher, and Matthews, 2002), far less is known about how the educational consequences of poverty and mobility may differ across urban, peri-urban, and rural settings (Paik and Phillips, 2002). Yet structural factors that vary across the urban-rural continuum (e.g., organization of settlements, spatial dispersion of population, differing housing and labor markets, access to social services and public transportation) may significantly affect residential instability, program access, and ultimately, program persistence.

Utilizing data from interviews with a sample of FL program personnel and participants located across the urban-rural continuum in Pennsylvania, the authors examined the perceptions of practitioners and adult learners regarding the influence of residential mobility on learner persistence. We also explored how determinants of persistence (including residential mobility) vary across urban and rural contexts. While recognizing that there are multiple "pathways to persistence" (Porter et al., 2005, p.3) and that adults may use self-directed study to pursue learning outside of a program, we were primarily concerned with the factors that enable or constrain adults' ability to remain in education programs until they have met their goals.

Though previous research has demonstrated negative educational and social outcomes of poverty and residential mobility on children, no analogous work has been completed examining participation and persistence in adult education or FL programs. The research questions at the center of this study therefore integrate and are informed by literature on residential mobility, poverty, and student transiency (Colton, 2004; Fitchen, 1994; Lichter, McLaughlin, and Cornwell, 1995; Schafft, 2006) as well as by research on persistence in family literacy and adult education (Beder, 1991; Derrick, 2002; Ponton et al., 2005). In drawing from these different research literatures, our study considers adult learners' life circumstances and the geographic and social features of communities as key determinants of persistence and, more broadly, of educational mobility and social stratification.

METHODS

In 2004–05 the median income for Pennsylvania FL participants was \$7,500; 65% received public assistance and 70% had household incomes below the poverty level for a family of two (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2006). Because these families experienced a high incidence of poverty, they were likely to have encountered the social and economic stressors that frequently led to or resulted from residential instability. This was an exploratory study, so we began by conducting key informant interviews with program personnel at 20 sites of the 58 FL programs in Pennsylvania, selecting programs to achieve maximum variation (Patton, 1990) across geographic region and the rural-urban continuum. We first assembled a database of FL program sites, the populations they served, and their geographic locations. We excluded programs that exclusively served ESL or drug and alcohol rehabilitation clients because the factors associated with these populations were likely to affect persistence and mobility in unique ways (e.g., movement associated with migrant labor, placement in drug rehabilitation programs). Using a stratified random sample, we selected seven sites in nonmetropolitan counties, six in micropolitan counties, and seven in metropolitan counties.¹ We ensured geographic representativeness by selecting sites across the Northwest, Central-Northeast, Southwest, South-Central, and Southeast (including Philadelphia) regions.

We conducted 21 semistructured interviews (11 by phone and 10 on site) with 30 directors, coordinators, educators, or case managers (28 women and 2 men). Most practitioners lived near their program sites and were deeply knowledgeable about the community context and participants' life circumstances. The 20 FL programs were contracted to serve between 10 and 100 families, with an average of approximately 23. In Pennsylvania, U.S.-born racial/ethnic minorities are concentrated mainly in metropolitan counties, whereas nonmetropolitan counties are predominantly White. Accordingly, there was more racial diversity in FL programs in metropolitan and micropolitan counties than in programs in rural counties.

While recognizing that adults may pursue self-study outside of a program (Porter et al., 2005), we were chiefly interested in exploring how poverty and residential instability affected adults' ability to remain in FL programs, which might include periods of "stopping out." Thus, interviews explored (a) practitioners' perspectives regarding

key factors influencing learners' persistence and educational attainment, (b) the relationship between persistence and residential mobility, and (c) the ways area-specific community characteristics (e.g., labor market structures, housing costs and availability, public transportation) may or may not influence persistence and residential instability. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. We used content analysis (Patton, 1990) to code transcripts, using categories such as rurality, determinants of persistence and dropout, residential mobility, poverty, and housing insecurity, while also coding emergent themes such as participant motivation.

After completing the interviews, we purposefully selected three sites where practitioners reported that (a) participants moved frequently, and (b) residential mobility negatively affected learners' persistence. The site locations spanned the urban-rural continuum (metropolitan, micropolitan, nonmetropolitan) and geographic region (Northwest, Central, Northeast). Due to the small sizes of the programs, we were able to interview between 50% and 100% of each program's student population. In all, we interviewed 17 participants (16 face to face and 1 by telephone). The participants we did not interview were unable to schedule meetings during our site visits. Program coordinators were unable to identify any systematic differences between the participants we interviewed and those we were unable to interview in terms of overall program persistence, residential mobility, and/or sociodemographic characteristics. FL participants received \$50 for completing the interview. Following the protocol used with the program personnel, we recorded the participant interviews, transcribed them verbatim, and coupled the transcriptions with field note summaries written within 24 hours of the interviews. We also recorded the number and distance of residential moves as well as the reasons for moving from one residence to another.

The participants we interviewed varied in age from 20 to 44 (average was 30) and had 1 to 5 children (average was 2.8). The gender distribution—16 women and 1 man—reflects the feminization of family literacy programs. In the group we interviewed, 12 were White, 4 were racial/ethnic minorities, and 1 was an immigrant. Participants had completed grade 8 to grade 11 (average was grade 10); 3 obtained GED credentials through their respective FL programs, and 1 was awaiting GED test results. Monthly household income varied from \$80 (single mother of 3) to \$6,500 (married couple with 4 children at home). The median income was \$1,300.

In two programs, we met participants in a private area at the program site; in a third, home-based program, we met in learners' homes. After asking participants about their current economic and living situations, we used life event calendars (Axinn, Pearce, and Ghimire, 1999) to collect five-year residential and educational histories of participants and their children. We asked about the ways residential instability affected their persistence in adult education programs and schools, respectively, and the ways that features of the rural or urban setting and community context might have mediated these experiences. These focal areas enabled us to examine participation in FL programs in relation to other aspects of participants' lives, including economic and residential instability.

RESULTS

Directors of non-home-based FL programs typically do not maintain comprehensive information about participant residential change. However, practitioners have considerable knowledge about participants' living circumstances and the frequency of their changes in address. In response to the question "How common is it for families in your program to change their addresses?" personnel in 12 of the 20 programs (60%) reported that participants were somewhat or highly mobile. At these sites, practitioners estimated that the typical participant moved once per year or more. For example, the coordinator of one rural site said that about one quarter of the 91 postcards she sent to the program's recent GED graduates was returned as undeliverable. The coordinator of another program located in a rural part of a metropolitan county stated that participants are constantly "bouncing around" in search of better housing. Table 1 shows the incidence of mobility across the 20 sites by metropolitan status and also according to the extent that coordinators identified mobility as having a pronounced effect on persistence.

Residential Mobility and Determinants of Persistence: The Perspective of Practitioners

Practitioners' descriptions of their communities suggest that several contextual factors increased the incidence of residential mobility. First, professionals based in micropolitan counties reported the most mobile student populations. Of the 6 programs in micropolitan counties, 5 (83%) reported higher frequency of mobility, compared to 3 of 7 (43%) in metropolitan counties and 4 of 7 (57%) in nonmetropolitan counties. Also, programs in rural

Table 1

Practitioner Perceptions of Mobility Incidence across Family Literacy Program Sites by Metro Status, and Effect of Mobility on Learner Persistence

		Perceived incidence of residential mobility	
		Lower (n = 8)	Higher (n = 12)
Perceived effect on persistence	Lesser effect (n=14)	Metro: 3 Micro: 1 Nonmetro: 3 Total: 7	Metro: 1 Micro: 4 Nonmetro: 2 Total: 7
	Greater effect (n=6)	Metro: 1 Micro: 0 Nonmetro: 0 Total: 1	Metro: 2 Micro: 1 Nonmetro: 2 Total: 5

communities (whether in metropolitan, micropolitan, or nonmetropolitan counties) tended to have more mobile participants if they were located near a larger town or major metropolitan area such as Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, or New York City. In higher mobility sites, practitioners also reported a higher availability of inexpensive and subsidized housing, which made it easier for people to move to and within the area. One practitioner additionally noted that some people moved to a community or county to live closer to incarcerated relatives in nearby prisons.

Importantly, practitioners noted several gender-related factors that increased residential instability for women. Some women moved—often to temporary housing—to escape an emotionally or physically abusive partner. One coordinator reported the opposite situation: a woman could not leave an abusive relationship because she owned her house but had no income and could not afford to live anywhere else. Additionally, practitioners reported that women often moved to follow a boyfriend or when they began or ended a relationship. According to practitioners, women's economic survival and ability to pay rent largely depended on having a male partner. As one coordinator put it, "They really couldn't maybe function or survive on their own and they go from relationship to relationship looking for that support and stability." A director from a metropolitan county described the following situation with an adult participant:

One of my clients had been living with a significant other and we just counted yesterday...[that] since she enrolled she had moved six times. She moved out [from her partner's residence] because he was somewhat abusive to her. She moved with a friend and

the friend was abusive to her. The housing conditions were I would say probably filthy because there [were] lice involved and she complained about how bad it was. And she moved into an apartment that she couldn't afford. Then she thought she could buy a trailer for \$50 so she did that....That didn't work. So then she had to find another housing and...that might be a seventh move because she may have moved back with the guy for a short period of time and we didn't know that.

In total, these accounts illustrate how women's residential instability is exacerbated both by poverty and by gender inequality, manifested in higher levels of female poverty (especially for female-headed households), lower wages vis-à-vis men, and primary responsibility for childrearing, which, coupled with the lack of affordable child care, limits women's ability to obtain and retain employment.

Effects of Residential Mobility on Persistence and Educational Progress

In 5 of the 20 programs practitioners reported that participants were somewhat or highly mobile and that residential mobility deterred persistence. In urban areas, public transportation appeared to mitigate the effects of moving on persistence. In other words, a participant who moved within the city area could still use public transportation to attend classes, although it might take more time. In rural sites, transportation posed significant difficulties for participants. The following examples from the three high-mobility sites illustrate some of the ways residential movement disrupts FL participants' class attendance and educational progress.

The first program is located in a micropolitan county within a two-hour drive of a major urban area. Within the last decade, thousands of people (predominantly U.S.-born minority and immigrant working-class families) have moved to the county from nearby urban areas to buy or rent what they were told was inexpensive housing. There is a recent history of predatory lending in this county, coupled with lax zoning and inspection regulations (currently subject to numerous lawsuits). Consequently, thousands of families have gone into foreclosure and/or have found themselves with substandard, shabbily constructed housing. The coordinator reported that

program participants—many of whom live in gated housing developments with other urban migrants—move frequently. Indeed, along with economic crises and health problems, moving was one of the main reasons participants left the program. The coordinator explained:

[They leave the program] because of changes in economics or they move [to] these HUD houses. They may not renew the lease or some people lose them and they have to be moved and then they can't get [to class]....[Moving] just causes them to leave....It disrupts their whole life because the children have to move schools, they have to start all over again, they don't know where the stores are. It really affects their whole life....They don't want to move, many of them, but they have no choice. They have to get out.

Additionally, the geographically remote location of housing developments, their distance from essential support services, and limited public transportation made it very difficult for participants to attend classes after moving.

The second site is a home-based program in a nonmetropolitan county. (In home-based programs, staff visit and provide educational services for parents and children in their homes rather than in a center.) In this program, proximity to a small city in another state and a major Pennsylvania urban area appeared to increase participants' residential mobility. When asked how moving affects participants' ability to continue in the program, the coordinator responded:

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....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 [the month before]....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.

A final example from a program in a nonmetropolitan county demonstrates how moving can alter a participant's social support network, limiting ability to attend classes and take the GED test. Since the county had very limited public transportation, and bus schedules made it difficult for students to attend classes, most students got rides. The coordinators described the case of a student who needed only 10 points to pass the math portion of the GED test. To prepare for the test, she planned to attend the program's intensive studies class. However,

Her mother said, "You can't live with me anymore." She went to live with a friend who lived out wherever. She could not get back to get to class. [addressing her co-worker:] How many people do not take their GED test because they can't get a ride? They had to move from the day they registered to the day the test was. Well [a male student] was the same way last year. He moved in between a three week class....You can't get a ride. Just this one time. Just for the test. Well, we have it in two day sessions, but we have people who have to reschedule because they can't get a ride to get here for the test. Really, between scheduling the test and the test, they have moved. The buses don't run in the evening. We only have one day-time test....Think about it: If you have children and you have to get them enrolled in school and you have all of these other things going on, you going back to class is very, very bottom of the line.

In this program, moving often meant that participants could no longer rely on their contacts to give them rides to class or to a GED test site. Further, moving may entail enrolling children in new schools, further compounding the stress of dislocation.

Residential Mobility and Determinants of Persistence: The Experience of Participants

While some participants we interviewed had been residentially stable over the previous five years, in total the 17 participants had made 78 individual moves and had lived in an average of 6 different residences over the five-year period. Only 1 respondent had lived in the same residence over the five-year period, while 1 participant had lived in a total of 15 different residences. Table 2 summarizes the moves made, subclassified by distance, and shows that over 80% of all moves were to locations within 100 miles. Over 50% of them were to locations within 15 miles. The relatively short distance of most moves speaks to the multiple factors leading to a change in residence, the circumstances under which that residential change occurs, and the resources available to poor families. Of participants' collective 78 moves, 24 were due to housing "pushes": Families were forced to move because of unacceptable or unsafe housing, eviction or housing loss, expense, or the need to move away from an overcrowded housing situation, especially one involving "doubling up" with friends or extended family members. Another 13 moves were "pushes" of another sort caused by a desire to move away from social conflict, an unsafe or crime-ridden area, and/or domestic violence. Only 3 of the moves were clearly job related "pulls" (e.g., job transfers and moves to be closer to employment).

Because of the nature of many of these moves, residential change often comes unexpectedly. Resources to make a move, including finances and transportation, may be limited. Conversely, the opportunity costs of moving longer distances—the financial costs of moving, coupled with the loss of local knowledge resources and local family and friendship networks—may be prohibitive. As a participant enrolled in a nonmetropolitan program told us, "Yeah.

Table 2

Distance of Participant Residential Moves

Distance moved	Number of moves	Percent of total
<5 miles	24	30.8
5–15 miles	16	20.5
16–30 miles	8	10.2
31–100 miles	16	20.5
>100 miles	14	18.0
TOTAL:	78	100.0

N=17

Oh yeah. I won't move out of the area just because of that reason. I'm very close with my family." This participant had nonetheless moved seven times in the last five years, almost all back and forth within or between neighboring towns.

Instead, the participants we spoke with relied heavily on local family and friendship networks to secure new housing and other forms of support, including transportation and child care. Extended family members often provide a critical social safety net, especially for single mothers with limited economic resources. This can particularly be the case in rural areas where transportation needs are greater and a variety of services are less available or are unaffordable. As a participant explained,

My family is the kind of family that if you need help, they'll help you. You know what I mean? We help each other. Everybody helps each other. Like if my cousins need a babysitter for their kids they'll ask me to do it. Or if I need a babysitter, you know, vice versa. We help each other.

The relatively short distance of most moves may in fact limit the extent to which residential mobility in and of itself interrupts or terminates participation in FL programs. However, even a short-distance move can result in an interruption of several weeks while a family gets settled into a new residence and/or resolves the situation or conflict that initially prompted the residential change. That is, when moves are placed within the broader social and economic context in which they are made—often under social and/or economic duress—the moves themselves can be understood as additional compounding factors that constrain the time, energy, opportunity, and resources that adult learners can devote to attending FL or adult education classes.

Participants' childhood residential histories and accounts of their reasons for dropping out of school also reveal a great deal about the kinds of socioeconomic insecurities that limit both social and residential stability and educational achievement and attainment in youth. As one participant put it, "A lot of crap happens in a person's life sometimes that can hold them back." Although not part of our interview protocol, 9 of the 17 participants volunteered that they had moved frequently as children,² which in many cases involved changing schools. A few, like Serena,³ a 31-year-old mother of four, reported that they had difficulty becoming socially integrated and making friends at their new schools, or

were held back because the old and new schools' curricula and academic schedules did not coincide. These factors contributed to their decisions to drop out. By the time she was 18, Serena's family had moved eight times, in each case between states and in several instances across the country. Serena described how these changes affected her schooling and her decision to drop out after eighth grade:

That affected my whole view on school. You know, that's why I dropped out of school. All the moving around from school to school is really hard because when you're not somewhere—I mean, I didn't know my roots so I kind of like was just in limbo all the time. Meet new people. Going to one school and nobody likes you because you're the new girl and, oh man, I went through that so many different times. And I just lost interest. You know, I got defiant, I got really bad so it really messed me up....Like, it doesn't allow you to have friends because you're always moving. And what are the odds of you staying in touch when them when they live halfway across the map, you know. So yeah...it wasn't good. It wasn't good at all. I think that's why I'm so insistent on leaving the kids in school now.

Although some blamed themselves for dropping out, most FL participants attributed it to factors associated with poverty and/or gender inequality, such as school changes, pregnancy, physical and mental health problems, family caretaking responsibilities, family crises, and trauma and dislocation resulting from sexual abuse.

Participants' discussion of who or what has helped them or made it difficult to stay in adult education and FL programs reveals how individual, institutional, and situational factors converge to influence persistence. When discussing deterrents to persistence (cf. Comings, 2007), learners most often identified characteristics of previous programs (particularly ineffective teachers) and situational factors such as pregnancy, the stresses of being a single mother, juggling too many demands and responsibilities (e.g., working, parenting, dealing with court system to regain child custody, attending classes), mental and physical health, irregular or demanding work schedules, the difficulty of arranging reliable transportation, and finally, disruption resulting from housing problems and residential moves.

In a few cases, women mentioned unsupportive friends or male partners.

Several examples illustrate how residential instability and housing conditions can undermine program participation and progress toward educational goals such as passing the GED. Tara, a 33-year-old woman, lived in a rural part of a metropolitan county. She moved frequently as a child because she was sexually abused by her father; she attributed her learning difficulties largely to these events. Tara had moved five times in the last five years; however, four of these moves took 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. Reflecting on this period in her life, Tara stated:

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 [family literacy] 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.

Renee, a 44-year-old woman in the same home-based program as Tara, lives in an area that another program participant called the town's "ghetto" or "rural inner city." Renee's Section 8 apartment is located in a neighborhood dominated by aging, one-story, barracks-type cinder block buildings, each with 50 to 60 units, most in noticeably poor repair. Renee explained why she stopped scheduling home visits for about two months in 2006:

We moved [from a town about 15 miles away]. It was so much. Well, I was sick. [My boyfriend] was sick. You know, the heat had broke down. All winter long. The furnace kept breaking down and we were staying up all night and getting up every two hours. So we slept down here [on the first floor]....And I get headaches really bad and I have medication for that.

During this time, they heated the apartment by the oven, keeping it on all night. Her boyfriend's infant son also

became sick. Renee commented, "We had people running in and out and trying to get the furnace going and stuff.... I can't work on something when you have other people tapping over you. It's distracting."

CONCLUSIONS

This study suggests that residential mobility is one of a constellation of factors that undermine persistence in FL programs, particularly as it interacts with other poverty-related factors such as lack of child care, intermittent employment, limited access to social services, and health problems. For K-12 school districts, research shows that transience is one of the most proximate, tangible issues connected to academic outcomes and administrative challenges, but the underlying causal factors are poverty and economic and housing insecurity (Schafft, 2006). The same holds true for FL programs. Residential instability is one element among an array of situational factors undermining the ability of participants to stay in programs and attain their educational goals.

The salience of residential mobility as a persistence-shaping event varies from site to site (see e.g., Table 1). Some sites experience substantially more mobility among their participants than other sites. High-mobility sites tend to be located in rural communities within metropolitan counties or in nonmetropolitan communities located relatively close to cities. Factors that appear to be closely related to high mobility and consequent program instability include the availability of inexpensive housing and subsidized housing, influx of people moving to be closer to incarcerated relatives, and proximity to larger metropolitan centers of population. The effect of residential instability on FL persistence within urban areas is mitigated by availability of public transportation.

FL programs in Pennsylvania must meet state performance standards for retention and for learning gains on standardized tests, among other measures, and nationally all adult education programs report similar measures through the National Reporting Service. Programs with highly mobile student populations are likely to have a more difficult time meeting these standards and thus ensuring stable program funding. However, although programs are held accountable for meeting performance standards, the factors that influence persistence (e.g., residential instability) are largely beyond the control of program staff. Rather, persistence appears to depend in

large part on the communities where programs happen to be located.

Our analysis provides a counterpoint to research on persistence that focuses chiefly on individualistic, programmatic, or institutional factors such as personal motivation, self-efficacy, program quality, or curricular content (see e.g., Beder, 1991; Quigley, 1997). Instead, our study underscores the roles of local social structures and community contexts in limiting and/or enhancing educational participation and achievement. These structures and contexts include the spatial organization of population and settlements, economic dislocations caused by shifts in rural and urban labor markets, limited transportation access, the structure of housing markets, and access to social services. The continual rise in poverty rates, economic inequality, housing costs, and racial and class disparities in educational achievement necessitate a deeper understanding of the relationships among these factors. Given the clear relationship between educational attainment and socioeconomic outcomes, there are important policy implications in better understanding the determinants of nonpersistence (i.e., permanently dropping out of an adult education program) and how nonpersistence may be linked to structural and/or individual-level factors.

First, it is clear that location matters: Geographic variation and community characteristics influence participants' socioeconomic well-being, residential stability, and, in some cases, their program persistence. Policy makers, practitioners, and scholars should consider how spatial factors influence participants' residential and educational trajectories—above and beyond personal or programmatic characteristics. Secondly, program personnel should seek to connect participants to housing assistance, energy assistance, and other vital forms of social support. To their credit, many FL and ABE programs already do this. Such actions enhance participants' stability, increasing their ability to focus on their own education, to increase the intensity and duration of their program participation, and to keep their children in the

same school. Practitioners in several sites reported that state agencies have removed children from their families due to inadequate housing conditions. By connecting participants with various forms of housing assistance, practitioners can decrease the likelihood that parents will lose custody of their children. Third, FL programs should consider coordinating efforts with housing advocacy organizations given that one of the main reasons people move from one location to another is poor housing conditions.

If program personnel know a participant is going to move, they can work together to develop a plan to minimize disruption in program participation, for example by making arrangements for self-study and discussing the factors learners can and cannot control. If the move involves a school change for the participant's child(ren), practitioners can work with teachers and other school staff to help the child(ren) adjust to the new school environment. Finally, scholars, policy makers, and practitioners can advocate for local, state, and federal policies that benefit poor and working-class families. Such policies include living wages, enhanced public transportation, and affordable housing, child care, and health care. These social supports will increase the stability of poor families' employment and housing and will provide families with the means to enroll and stay in FL programs, should they so choose.

In sum, while the characteristics of particular FL programs and of particular adults within those programs may well affect persistence to some degree, we argue that to seek primary causal explanations for persistence along those lines overlooks how larger structural forces limit life chances for poor families. Beyond that, however, we also believe that this approach implicitly lays the blame for disrupted education at the feet of FL programs and/or individual participants. This, we believe, is highly problematic. To come to a fuller understanding of FL and ABE outcomes and, in a larger sense, of the social and economic realities faced by America's poor families, we need to acknowledge the broader social contexts shaping program persistence.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Metropolitan, micropolitan and nonmetropolitan designations refer to county-level statistical areas defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB). Metropolitan areas are counties that have at least one urbanized area of 50,000 or more inhabitants. Micropolitan areas are counties with an urbanized area of less than 50,000 but at least 10,000 inhabitants. Surrounding counties may also be designated as metropolitan or micropolitan, depending upon commuting patterns. All counties not metropolitan or micropolitan are nonmetropolitan.

² Four participants reported having residentially stable childhoods. In the other four interviews there was no information provided about early residential stability.

³ All names used are pseudonyms.

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