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Abstract: This study assesses how poverty and residential mobility affect adult persistence and participation in family literacy (FL) programs. Combining data from interviews with a directors and participants from a sample of FL sites in urban, peri-urban and rural settings in Pennsylvania, this study examines: 1) factors shaping participation and persistence for low-income family literacy participants; 2) the role of residential instability in FL program persistence, and; 3) how determinants of persistence vary across urban and rural contexts. While variable in its incidence and impacts across program sites, in many instances poverty-related residential mobility poses substantial challenges to participants in achieving their academic goals, and for FL practitioners in meeting program goals and performance standards. We argue that poverty mobility coupled with particular structural features of community are often more salient to program persistence than features of individual programs and/or participant “motivation.”

Introduction

Residential mobility is generally assumed to be largely a voluntary, opportunity-related, economically rational behavior, undertaken principally as a means of improving individual or household level social and/or economic status (Cadwallader, 1992; Cushing, 1999; Lichter & Costanzo, 1987). However, residential mobility associated with economic distress frequently does not fit these assumptions. The frequent, often short distance residential movement among resource-limited families within, into and across already distressed communities and neighborhoods, may often be unplanned and unpredictable, the consequence of a precipitating crisis or crises, such as family breakup, inability to pay rent, or movement away from unsafe, unaffordable or otherwise unacceptable living conditions (Fitchen, 1992; Schafft 2006). Rather than yielding improved life circumstances (Hango, 2006), it may result in episodes of temporary homelessness and increased insecurity for the households involved (Colton, 2004; Fitchen, 1994; 1995), resulting in significant social and academic dislocation, and profoundly negative effects on learning and academic achievement and attainment (Hartman, 2002; Killeen & Schafft, forthcoming; Pettit, 2004; Pettit & McLanahan, 2003; Rumberger, 2003). This movement may

not be “economically rational” in the sense that it typically does not result in increased economic opportunity. It is, however, *socially* rational insofar as it reflects the reactive survival strategies of disadvantaged families confronted with an array of social and economic stress factors (Bickel & McDonough, 1997; Sherman, 2006).

Despite the increasing recognition of poverty-related residential mobility and its role in both household and community disadvantage (Colton, 2004; Fitchen, 1994, 1995; Foulkes & Newbold, 2005; Schafft, 2005; 2006), several issues are less well understood. First, while residential and academic instability has been shown to have a negative effect on the academic achievement of *children* (Capps & Maxwell, 2002; OPPAGA, 1997; Pribesh & Downey, 1999; Swanson & Schneider, 1999; U.S. General Accounting Office, 1994), only one previous study that we are aware of (Matthews, 1970; Matthews & Thompson, 1972) 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; Beder & Valentine, 1990, Comings et al., 1999; Cross, 1981; Johnstone, & Rivera, 1965; Ponton et al., 2005; Porter, Cuban, & Comings, 2005; Quigley, 1997; Ziegler, Bain, Bell, McCallum, & Brian, 2006).

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; Comings et al. 1999; Ponton et al., 2005; Quigley, 1997; Ziegler et al., 2006).¹ At the same time, this research tends to downplay the role of local social structures and

¹ While recognizing there are “multiple pathways to persistence” (Porter, Cuban, & Comings, 2005) and that adults may use self-directed study to pursue learning outside of a program (Comings, Parella, & Soricone, 1999), we are primarily concerned with the factors that enable or constrain adults’ ability to remain in a given education program until they have met their goals.

community context in limiting and/or enhancing educational participation and persistence (Gorski, 2006; Rank, 2004), situational factors thought to be beyond the control of program personnel (Comings et al., 1999). In particular, scholars note that studies examining how motivation limits or enhances persistence and participation in adult education often fail to take into account the daily lives of FL participants, the community setting, and local opportunity structures available to economically disadvantaged families (Rockhill, 1983; 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 which similarly tends to focus on achievement outcomes and/or individual student characteristics rather than the social, community and economic contexts in which mobility occurs (Killeen & Schafft, forthcoming; Schafft, 2005).

Finally, while numerous studies of academic and residential instability and underachievement have been completed in urban settings (see e.g. Gramlich, Laren, & Sealand, 1992; Ingersoll, Scamman, & Eckerling, 1999; Kerbow, Azcoitia, & Buell, 2003; Nakagawa, Stafford, Fisher, & Matthews, 2002; Petit, 2004), far less is known about how the educational consequences of poverty and mobility may differ across urban, peri-urban and rural settings (Paik, & Phillips, 2002). Yet, structural factors that vary across the urban-rural continuum, including organization of settlements, spatial dispersion of population, differing housing and labor markets, and 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 objective of this study is to examine three interrelated questions:

- 1) What factors appear to significantly shape the educational outcomes (e.g., educational participation, persistence, and attainment) for low-income FL program participants?;
- 2) To what extent does residential instability affect participant educational outcomes and persistence?, and;
- 3) How do these factors differ across rural and urban contexts?

While previous research has demonstrated negative educational and social outcomes of poverty and residential mobility on children (see, e.g. Killeen & Schafft's forthcoming review of research in this area), no analogous work has been completed examining participation and persistence in adult education 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, 1995; Lichter, McLaughlin, & Cornwell, 1995; Schafft, 2006), as well as by research on persistence in family literacy adult education (Beder, 1991; Comings, Parella, & Soricone, 1999; Derrick, 2002; Ponton, Derrick, & Carr, 2005).

Methods and Data Sources

We focus on family literacy participants because of the paucity of research on residential mobility and persistence in these programs, and because of the documented relationship between poverty, housing insecurity and residential mobility (Fitchen 1992; 1994; 1995; Foulkes & Newbold, 2005; Schafft 2005; 2006). In 2004-05 the median income for family literacy participants in Pennsylvania was \$7,500; 65 percent received public assistance and 70 percent had household incomes below the poverty level for a family of two (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2006). Families participating in Pennsylvania FL programs therefore experience a high incidence of poverty and hence are likely to encounter the social and economic stressors that frequently lead to or result from residential instability. Of the 58 family literacy programs in

Pennsylvania (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2004), we conducted interviews at 20 sites, selecting programs to achieve maximum variation (Patton, 1990) across geographic region and the rural-urban continuum.

We first assembled a comprehensive database of family literacy program sites, the population(s) they serve, and their geographic location. We excluded programs that exclusively serve immigrant/ESL or drug and alcohol rehabilitation clients since because of the factors associated with these specific populations that might affect persistence outcomes (e.g. movement associated with migrant labor, or placement in drug rehabilitation programs). Using a stratified random sample, we selected 20 sites in which to conduct interviews with program personnel. We randomly selected seven sites in nonmetropolitan counties, six sites in micropolitan counties, and seven sites in metropolitan counties.² We further ensured geographic representativeness by selecting sites across each of the five regions of Pennsylvania as defined by Pennsylvania Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education (ABLE): the Northwest, Central-Northeast, Southwest, South-Central, and Southeast (including Philadelphia). Across these 20 sites, we completed 21 semi-structured interviews (11 by phone and 10 conducted on site) with 30 personnel, including directors, coordinators, educators and case managers. Twenty-eight interviewees were women and two were men. Most practitioners lived near the program site and were deeply knowledgeable about the community context and the life circumstances of the participants. Indeed, many were local to the area. No programs we contacted declined to participate in the study.

² 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 on commuting patterns. All counties not metropolitan or micropolitan are nonmetropolitan.

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 non-metropolitan counties are predominantly White. Accordingly, the FL programs in metropolitan and micropolitan counties tended to serve more racially diverse families than those in rural counties.

The interviews explored the perspectives of directors and educators regarding key factors influencing program persistence and educational attainment among their clients, the relationship between program persistence and residential mobility, and the ways that area-specific community characteristics (e.g. labor market structures, housing costs and availability, public transportation) may or may not influence program persistence and residential instability. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts coded for key themes including rurality, determinants of persistence and/or dropout, residential mobility, poverty, housing insecurity, and emergent themes such as participant motivation.

Subsequent to completing interviews with program personnel across the 20 sites, we purposefully selected three sites where practitioners reported (a) that participants moved frequently, and (b) that residential movement negatively affected program persistence among adult learners. The sites were based, respectively, in a metropolitan, a micropolitan, and a non-metropolitan county. They were further located in the Northwest, Central, and Northeast parts of the state. Due to the small size of the programs, we were able to interview between 50 and 100 percent of each program's total student population. In all we conducted interviews with 17 FL participants (16 face-to-face and one by telephone).

Table 1 (below) describes participants' demographic characteristics. The average participant age was 30, while the youngest was 20 and the oldest was 44. Of all 17 participants,

only one was male. Participants had completed between 8th and 11th grade; three had obtained their GED through their respective FL programs and one was awaiting the test results.

Participants estimated their monthly household income to be \$80 (single mother of three) to \$6,500 (married couple with four children at home), with a median of \$1,300.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Family Literacy Participants

Gender	Race/ethnicity	Age	Marital status	Biological children	Highest grade completed ³
16 women 1 man	12 White 2 African-American 1 Latina 1 multi-racial 1 foreign-born	20 to 44 (avg.= 30.4)	Single (n=8) (6 in a relationship; 2 not in a relationship) Married (n=6) Divorced, in relationship (n=2) Separated (n=1)	1 to 5 (avg.=2.8)	8 th to GED (avg.=10.0)

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

While we did not provide financial compensation for the FL directors and other personnel we interviewed for the study, FL program participants received \$50 for completing the interview.

³ The average highest grade completed *prior* to obtaining the GED was 9.5.

Participant interviews lasted between 45 minutes and two hours.⁴ Following the protocol used with the program personnel interviews, we recorded the participant interviews, transcribing them verbatim, coupling the transcriptions with field note summaries we wrote up within 24 hours of each conversation. We analyzed the participant interviews by recording the number and distance of residential moves and coding the reasons for moving from one residence to another, as well as the deterrents to and supports for persistence.

Results

Directors of FL programs, unless they are home-based programs, typically do not maintain comprehensive information about participant residential change. However, practitioners have considerable anecdotal knowledge about participant living circumstances and the frequency with which participants change addresses. In response to the question, “how common is it for families in your program to change their address?” personnel in 12 of the 20 programs (60 percent) reported that participants were somewhat or highly mobile. At these sites, practitioners estimated that the typical participant moved once a year or more. For example, at one rural site, the coordinator related that about one quarter of the 91 postcards she sent to the program’s recent GED graduates were returned as undeliverable, while another coordinator, whose program is located in a rural part of a metropolitan county, stated that participants are constantly “bouncing around” in search of better housing. Table 2 (below) shows the incidence of mobility across the 20 program sites by metropolitan status and also according to the extent that coordinators identified mobility as having a pronounced effect on persistence.

⁴ The length of the interview was principally dependent upon the degree of residential instability of the FL participant and their degree of talkativeness.

Table 2. Incidence of Mobility across FL Program Sites by Metro Status, and Mobility Effects on Persistence

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

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, program directors based in micropolitan counties reported the most mobile student populations. Of the six programs in micropolitan counties, five (83 percent) reported higher frequency of mobility, compared to three of seven (43 percent) metropolitan counties and four of seven (57 percent) nonmetro counties. As well, programs in rural communities (in metropolitan, micropolitan, and nonmetro 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 people moved to their community or county to live closer to relatives housed in nearby prisons.

Importantly, practitioners noted several gender-related factors that increased residential instability for women participants. Some women moved—often to temporary housing—to

escape an emotionally or physically abusive partner.⁵ Additionally, women often moved to follow a boyfriend or when they began or ended a new relationship. In many ways their economic survival and ability to afford rent 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." Another coordinator described a pattern of "serial monogamy" among participants, meaning that "you are monogamous with one person for as long as you are with that person." She explained, "A lot times with some of our families that involves moving in or moving out. A lot of the change in moving tends to be around those relationships." Similarly, a third practitioner related, "I have heard some of the younger girls talk about moving because of relationships and then they failed and they have come back to be with their family." Another FL 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, we counted yesterday and we were going through this again with questions and we counted that she had moved and 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 not, was abusive to her. The housing conditions were I would say probably filthy because there was 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. She bought the trailer for \$50. That didn't work. So then she had to find another housing and she may have moved . . . 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. But she then moved back with the abusive person who had moved somewhere else. And a, a female and then she lived there for a while. And then she was living between places and now she's moved out of to another community but not in (the city limits) proper because she doesn't like (city name) and the crime that was here. But she did took the test three times and the GED was passed on the third try. And so she did graduate.

⁵ 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 find another place to live.

These accounts suggest the ways in which women's residential instability is exacerbated both by poverty and 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 childcare, limits women's ability to obtain and retain employment.

Effects of Residential Mobility and Program Persistence and Educational Progress

In five of the 20 programs (25 percent), practitioners reported that participants were somewhat or highly mobile *and* that residential mobility was a deterrent to persistence. In urban areas, the availability of 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 could pose significant difficulties for participants. The following examples from the three high-mobility sites illustrate 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 from nearby urban areas to the county to buy or rent what they were told was inexpensive housing. Due to the complicated financial scams of developers, realtors, and appraisers (currently subject to numerous lawsuits), thousands of families have gone into foreclosure and lost their savings. 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 is one of the main reasons participants leave the program. The coordinator explained:

[They leave the program] because of changes in economics or they move, you know, 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 here....[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. Moving from one community [housing development] to another community is almost as bad as moving from a state to another state....You know, it's really, as I say, picking yourself up and starting all over again. A different school, different post office, different everything, different phone system....It's long distance to call seven miles away. One of my students lives in [a town], three miles away, it's long distance. They just don't jive. So it's a big difference. If they can't afford long distance they can't even call some of their former friends because it's long distance even just a few miles away. It really affects their lives. They don't want to move, many of them, but they have no choice. They have to get out.

This account reveals how residential instability results, in this case, from fraudulent lending practices, landlords who do not maintain property, and similar factors. As well, the geographically remote location of housing developments, their distance from essential services, and the limited availability of public transportation make it very difficult for participants to attend classes after they have moved. For instance, participants may not be able to afford long distance calls to the friends who used to drive them to class.

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

The coordinator went on to describe how moving affects participants' educational progress:

Oh, it just, it stops everything. I mean, what's going on with the move has taken over and like I said, they're going to have to go back and refresh. They've always seemed to have forgotten something you know....A lot of our population would be in that intermediate or beginning ABE [adult basic education] functioning level [approximately second to sixth or seventh grade level in reading and math]. These folks can't afford a month's break. They really can't.

The home-based structure of this program magnified the effects of moving on persistence, since participants did not want to schedule a visit until their new home was in order and other aspects of their lives had stabilized. Further, this account reveals how moving interferes with both attendance and learning, especially for parents who struggle with reading and math. FL programs in Pennsylvania must meet state performance standards for retention and 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 will clearly have a more difficult time meeting these standards and thus ensuring stable program funding.

A final example from a program in a non-metropolitan county demonstrates how moving alters participants' social support networks, which in turn limits their ability to attend classes and take the GED test. The county has very limited public transportation, and the bus schedules make it difficult for students to attend classes. Consequently, most students get a ride to class. 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. 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. A lot of times when they move they pack up and move....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 means that participants can no longer rely on their contacts to give them a ride to class or to take the GED test. Further, moving may entail enrolling children in a new school, further compounding the stress of dislocation.

Residential Mobility and Determinants of Persistence: The Experience of Participants

While some participants in the three sites where we conducted interviews had been residentially stable over the 5 years prior to the interviews, 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 one respondent had lived in the same residence continually over the 5 year period, while one participant had lived in a total of 15 different residences.

Table 3 (below) summarizes the moves made, subclassified by distance and shows that over 80 percent of all moves were less than 100 miles, with over 50 percent of moves 15 miles or less. 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 the 78 moves made by the participants we interviewed, fully 24 were accounted for by housing "pushes," families forced to move because of

unacceptable or unsafe housing, eviction or housing loss, unaffordability or the 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 3 of the moves were clearly job related “pulls” (e.g. job transfers and moves to be closer to employment).

Table 3. 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

Because of the nature of many of these moves, residential change often comes quickly and may be unexpected. Resources to make a move may be limited, including finances and transportation. Conversely, the opportunity costs of moving longer distances – including the financial costs of moving coupled with the loss of local knowledge resources and local family and friendship networks – may be too high. As a participant enrolled in a nonmetropolitan FL site told us, “Yeah. Oh yeah. I, I won’t move out of the area just because of that reason. I’m very close with my family.”⁶

Instead, the participants we spoke with often relied heavily on local family and friendship social networks to secure new housing, in addition to other forms of support, including

⁶ This participant had nonetheless moved 7 times in the last 5 years, almost all back and forth within or between neighboring towns.

transportation and child care. Especially for single mothers with limited economic resources, extended family members often provide a critical social safety net. 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.

Another participant told us,

The person I was living with before got evicted and I didn't want to live in town or anything so I called...[my stepmother] called me up and said hey come stay with me until you get your own place. I was very thankful for that.

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 short distance moves can result in interruptions of several weeks while a family gets settled into a new residence and/or resolves the situation or conflict that was the initial catalyst for the residential change. That is, when moves are understood in the broader social and economic context in which they are made, i.e. often under social and/or economic duress, the move itself can be understood as one more compounding factor that constrains the time, energy and opportunity that adult earners have to devote to the FL program.

Participants' childhood residential histories and accounts of their reasons for dropping out of school also reveal a great deal about the kinds of socio-economic insecurities limiting both their social and residential stability as well as their educational achievement and attainment as youth. As one participant put it, "A lot of crap happens in a person's life sometimes that can hold them back."

Many, but not all, of the 17 participants moved frequently as children, which in some cases involved changing schools. Several, like Serena⁷, a 31 year-old mother of four, reported having difficulty becoming socially integrated and making friends at their new schools, or were held back because the school system curricula and academic schedules did not coincide, factors which contributed to their decision to drop out. By the time she was 18, Serena's family had moved eight times, in each case from one state to another 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 year in school. You know, that's why I dropped out of school. All the moving around from school to school is really hard...so I kind of like was just in limbo all the time. 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...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, you know, insistent on leaving the kids in school now.

Overall, most FL participants attributed dropping out to a set of 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 (see Horsman, 2000).

Participants' discussion of who or what has helped them or made it difficult to stay in adult education and FL programs reveal how individual, institutional (programmatic), and situational factors converge to influence persistence. When discussing deterrents to persistence learners most often identified characteristics of previous programs (e.g., ineffective teachers) and situational factors such as pregnancy and the stresses of being a single mother, juggling too many

⁷ All names used are pseudonyms.

demands and responsibilities (e.g., working, parenting, dealing with court system to regain child custody, pursuing own education), 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, lives in a rural part of a metropolitan county, approximately 30 miles from a small city. She has 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. Tara, 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.

Tara's experiences demonstrate the precarious nature of housing arrangements for families in poverty, and how contingent they are on stable employment. As well, her story suggests how difficult it is for participants to focus on educational matters when their living conditions are fragile and uncertain.

Renee, a 44 year-old woman in the same 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 with approximately 50 to 60 units, most in noticeably ill 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

Residential mobility is one of a constellation of factors undermining persistence in FL programs, particularly as it interacts with other factors such as lack of childcare, intermittent employment, limited access to social services, and health problems to influence persistence. Research shows that in the case of K-12 public education, transiency is one of the most proximate, tangible issues connected to academic outcomes and administrative challenges for school districts, but the underlying causal factors are poverty, economic insecurity, and housing insecurity (Schafft, 2005; 2006). The same holds true for FL programs in which residential instability is one element among an array of situational factors undermining the ability of participants to stay within a FL program and meet their educational attainment goals.

The saliency of residential mobility as a persistence-shaping event varies from site to site (see, e.g. Table 2). 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 non-metro communities located relatively close to cities. Factors that appear to be

especially related to high levels of 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. Programs are held accountable for meeting performance standards, yet factors that influence persistence (e.g., residential instability) are largely beyond their control, and much of it depends on the communities where they happen to be located.

While this research is grounded within educational research literature, it is fundamentally interdisciplinary, drawing from fields including sociology and rural sociology, demography and geography. Furthermore, our intention through this analysis is to provide a counterpoint to research on persistence in adult education that focuses chiefly on individualist, programmatic, or institutional factors such as personal motivation, self-efficacy, program quality, or curricular content (see e.g. Bandura, 1986; Beder, 1991; Comings et al., 1999; Quigley, 1997), and instead more fundamentally explore the role of local social structures and community contexts in limiting and/or enhancing educational participation and achievement, including 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 relationship among these factors. Given the clear relationship between educational attainment and socioeconomic outcomes, there are important policy implications in better understanding the determinants of program non-persistence and how non-persistence may be linked to structural

and individual-level factors. A vital contribution of this study is to examine how structural factors such as differential access to housing, employment and social services across rural and urban areas affect household stability and persistence in adult education programs, a topic that previous studies have largely ignored or overlooked.

First, it is clear that location matters: Geographic variation and community characteristics influence participants' socio-economic well-being, residential stability, and, in some cases, persistence. It is important for policy makers, practitioners, and scholars to understand how spatial factors influence program participants' residential and educational trajectories. 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 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 children in the same school. Practitioners in several sites reported that the state has removed children from parents 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 to the state. Thirdly, FL programs might consider working more closely with housing advocacy organizations, since poor housing conditions are one of the main reasons people move from one location to another.

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, discussing the factors the participant can and cannot control, and so forth. 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, namely, affordable housing, affordable child care, affordable health care, public transportation systems, and living wages. These social supports will increase the stability of poor families' employment and housing and provide the means necessary 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 outcomes to some degree, we argue that to seek primary causal explanations for persistence along those dimensions overlooks how larger structural forces limit life chances for poor families. Beyond that, however, we also believe this approach implicitly lays the blame for diminished educational attainment at the feet of the FL program and/or the individual participant. This, we believe, is highly problematic for coming to a fuller understanding of FL program outcomes and, in a larger sense, the social and economic realities faced by America's poor families.

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