

Supporting Neighborhood Opportunity in Massachusetts

A study of housing mobility
program outcomes

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Dear Reader,

The Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (formerly known as DHCD) developed the Supporting Neighborhood Opportunity in Massachusetts (SNO Mass) program to offer families with vouchers more choice when deciding where to live. In theory, households with federal Housing Choice Vouchers (formerly known as “Section 8” vouchers) can use their voucher in any neighborhood, however, we know that there are a variety of barriers that make it very difficult for families to find housing in certain communities. That is part of why we see large numbers of voucher holders residing in a small number of neighborhoods. Over half (52 percent) of the 17,471 households in EOHLC’s HCV program currently live in just 21 of the 351 municipalities in the Commonwealth. As of 2019, only 8 percent of EOHLC HCV households with children were living in neighborhoods indexed as “High Opportunity” or “Very High Opportunity” by the Child Opportunity Index.

Voucher families face significant barriers to exercising full choice in where they live. These include the acute shortage of affordable rental housing across the state, especially in high-opportunity communities, race-based and voucher-based discrimination by property owners and realtors, and a lack of resources to assist voucher holders in finding suitable housing. The state, through EOHLC, is actively working on addressing these larger systemic issues within the housing market through efforts such as subsidies for affordable housing production, implementation of the MBTA Communities legislation, a Fair Housing Initiative, and increasing the value of state-funded rental assistance vouchers. Meanwhile, EOHLC’s SNO Mass housing mobility program offers an additional, targeted package of supports to families with vouchers who are interested in moving to a high-opportunity neighborhood. We recognize that housing mobility programs are not a “silver bullet” and that a multi-pronged approach – including place-based strategies within the underinvested neighborhoods where many voucher holders reside – is essential for connecting families with low incomes to greater opportunities. However, SNO Mass is an important tool in the Commonwealth’s housing choice toolbox that can make a critical difference in the lives of families who choose to participate.

As of this writing, 125 families (including 270 children) have moved to higher-opportunity neighborhoods as a result of SNO Mass. Interviews with several of these families, as this report will explain, confirmed that moving has had a largely positive impact on parents and children alike. Most participants report they are very pleased with their new home and community and point to specific ways in which their lives and their children’s lives have improved since moving. While these early results are encouraging, more work is needed to ensure that more families (within and beyond the SNO Mass program) are able to move to high-opportunity neighborhoods. EOHLC looks forward to continuing to partner with stakeholders across the Commonwealth to create affordable housing opportunities in all neighborhoods.

We want to give special thanks to Alex Curley and Gretchen Weismann of Mobility Works for leading this valuable SNO Mass study and to Shameeka Brown and Consuelo Perez for helping to conduct the interviews.

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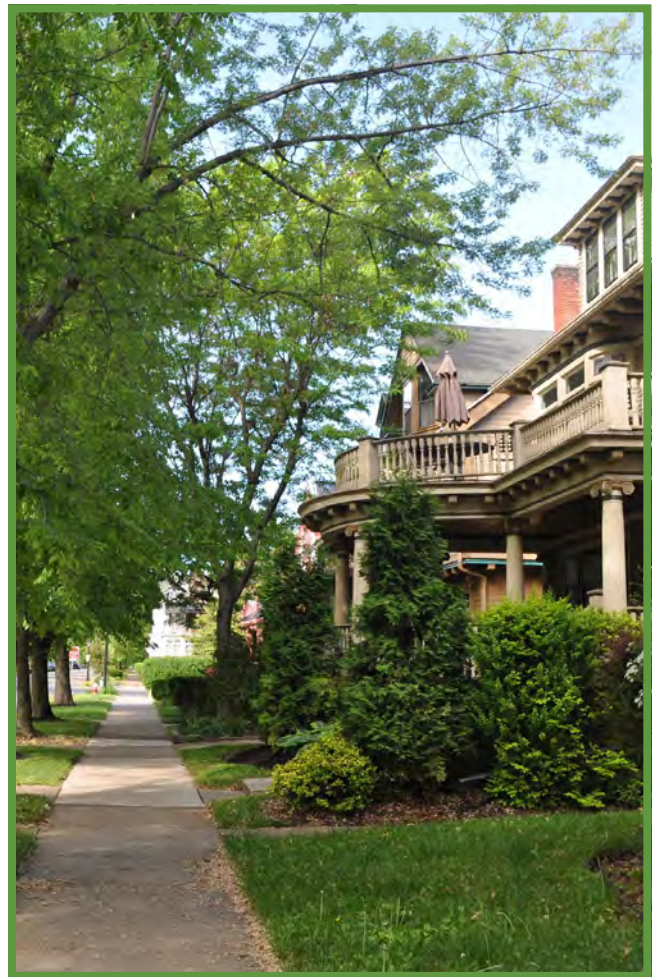
Introduction

The Supporting Neighborhood Opportunity in Massachusetts (SNO Mass) housing mobility program provides housing counseling and financial support to low-income families with vouchers who want to move to a lower poverty area with greater opportunities. Developed and managed by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC, formerly the Department of Housing and Community Development), the program serves families with children who have a rental subsidy through the federal Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCVP).

While the HCV program theoretically allows families to use their vouchers in any community they choose, low-income families with children, especially families of color, have been systematically excluded from “high-opportunity” neighborhoods—communities with strong performing schools, lower crime, well-resourced facilities, and environments that support positive family and child outcomes.¹ In practice, families using vouchers continue to have limited choices, as evidenced by the persistent segregation of voucher holders in communities with few living-wage job opportunities, environmental hazards, high rates of crime, and under-resourced and lower performing schools.

The factors that contribute to this pattern are multifaceted, including discrimination and bias within the rental market and real estate industry that uphold policies and practices that discriminate based on household race and ethnicity, income, and household composition. Additionally, the value of the vouchers established by the HCV program has historically made it difficult for families to afford to rent in well-resourced communities with higher housing costs. Program regulations and administrative requirements in the HCV program can be a disincentive for landlords to rent to voucher holders. While not able to address every obstacle, housing mobility programs like SNO Mass reduce barriers

to access in higher opportunity neighborhoods and increase housing choice. This is accomplished through a combination of administrative changes, such as increases in the value of the voucher, and a range of supports for families, such as information about a wider range of neighborhoods, housing search assistance, and flexible financial assistance. SNO Mass also provides landlord incentives such as an expedited leasing process, a signing bonus and lease renewal bonus, and support with any tenancy issues that might arise during the SNO Mass participant’s tenure.



¹ Curley, A., Graves, E. and Weismann, G. (2019). Barriers and opportunities in the housing voucher program: the importance of race in the housing search process. Federal Reserve Bank Boston Issue Brief 2019-3.

Evidence from Housing Mobility Programs

Recent research has established that children's outcomes in adulthood vary substantially across neighborhoods and that moving to some types of neighborhoods earlier in childhood significantly improves health and earnings potential. Research findings include:

- Every additional year of childhood spent in a better environment improves a child's long-term outcomes.²
- Moving to a lower-poverty neighborhood before the age of 13 increases college attendance and earnings and reduces single parenthood rates. For example, children under 13 whose families received an experimental Moving to Opportunity (MTO) housing voucher and moved to a low-poverty neighborhood earned 31% more as young adults than the control group.³
- It is estimated that moving a child out of public housing to a low-poverty area when young (at age 8, on average) using a rent subsidy like the MTO experimental voucher will increase the child's total lifetime earnings by about \$302,000.⁴
- Moving to lower-poverty areas also greatly improves the mental health, physical health, and subjective well-being of adults as well as family safety.⁵



2 Chetty, R., & Hendren, N. (2017). The Impacts of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility I: Childhood Exposure Effects. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 133(3), 1107—1162. Retrieved from http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/assets/documents/movers_paper1.pdf.

3 Chetty, R., Hendren, N., & Katz, L. F. (2016). The Effects of Exposure to Better Neighborhoods on Children: New Evidence from the Moving to Opportunity Experiment. *American Economic Review*, 106(4), 855—902. Retrieved from https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/lkatz/files/chk_aer_mto_0416.pdf.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

Other studies of housing mobility have focused on and found similar effects, particularly regarding positive impacts on participant physical health and mental health.⁶ In a recent article about the impacts of housing mobility on health outcomes, children with asthma whose families participated in a program that helped them move into low-poverty neighborhoods experienced significant improvements in asthma-related measures, even more than the traditional medications used to treat the disease.⁷ This study provides “evidence suggesting that programs to counter housing discrimination can reduce childhood asthma morbidity.”⁸

Despite the demonstrated advantages of moving to a high-opportunity community, the vast majority of low-income families in the United States—including those with Housing Choice Vouchers—live in low-opportunity neighborhoods. Research also suggests that the concentration of vouchers in a limited number of communities is not because most low-income families prefer to stay in low-opportunity areas; instead, barriers in the housing search process are a central driver of residential segregation by income.⁹

Currently there are 28 mobility programs operating in the U.S., eight of which are part of HUD’s Community Choice Demonstration (2020) to evaluate whether and to what extent housing mobility-related services facilitate moves to opportunity areas.¹⁰ Building off the research on neighborhood effects and housing mobility, SNO Mass is designed to address short-term challenges faced by voucher holders and to improve longer-term child outcomes.

SNO Mass Goals

Program Mission Statement:
SNO Mass supports Housing Choice Voucher families with school-aged children making moves to communities with high-quality schools, parks and open space, and healthy, safe environments. SNO Mass helps families take full advantage of the “choice” embedded in the Housing Choice Voucher Program.

The primary goals for the SNO Mass program are to increase housing choice in the HCV program and help participating families move to and stay in SNO Mass Opportunity Areas by providing the optimal package of housing counseling and supports to voucher holders and property owners that lead to stable, long-term leases. The program is administered by EOHLIC’s Regional Administering Agencies (RAAs), and eligible households include voucher families with children under the age of 18 who are not already living in a high opportunity area.¹¹

6 Gale, R. (2018). Housing mobility and health outcomes. Health Affairs. DOI: 10.1377/hpb20180313.616232

7 True, S. (2023). For Baltimore kids with asthma, moving neighborhoods can help kids more than meds. The Baltimore Banner. Retrieved from: <https://www.thebaltimorebanner.com/community/public-health/baltimore-child-asthma-SA5OVSGJPBDJPB2NE2FNDMTXl/#:~:text=A%20study%20published%20Tuesday%20showed,better%20than%20commonly%20used%20medications.>

8 Pollack, C. E., Roberts, L. C., Peng, R. D., et al. (2023). Association of a Housing Mobility Program with Childhood Asthma Symptoms and Exacerbations. JAMA, 329(19), 1671—1681. doi:10.1001/jama.2023.6488.

9 Bergman, P., Chetty, R., DeLuca, S., Hendren, N., Katz, L., & Palmer, C. (2019, August). Creating Moves to Opportunity: Experimental Evidence on Barriers to Neighborhood Choice (NBER Working Paper No. 26164). Retrieved from <https://opportunityinsights.org/paper/cmto/>

10 Mumphery, D., Johnson, C., Weismann, G., Knudsen B., DeFord, K., Tegeler, P., (2022) Housing Mobility Programs in the U.S. 2022. Poverty Race and Research Action Council (PRRAC). [https://www.prrac.org/Housing Mobility Programs in the U.S. 2022 \(December 2022\) — PRRAC — Connecting Research to Advocacy](https://www.prrac.org/Housing%20Mobility%20Programs%20in%20the%20U.S.%202022%20(December%202022)%20—%20PRRAC%20—%20Connecting%20Research%20to%20Advocacy)

11 Regional Administering Agencies Contact Listing. The Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities. Mass.gov. Retrieved from: <https://www.mass.gov/service-details/regional-administering-agencies-contact-listing>



Between 2019 and 2020, SNO Mass was piloted in two regions: Merrimack Valley and Western Massachusetts. In late 2020, SNO Mass was expanded statewide. The program includes multiple components:

- Individualized one-to-one pre-move and post-move housing mobility counseling.
- Assistance with housing search, including a customized online search tool.
- Community profiles with community resources and demographics.
- Financial assistance for security deposits, moving costs, and post-move expenses (e.g., children's enrichment activities, transportation needs, childcare and summer camp assistance).
- Higher payment standards in certain communities (e.g., Small Area Fair Market Rents).

The program also aims to support landlords that rent to SNO Mass participants through the use of landlord incentives. These include an assigned agency contact person, a signing bonus and a lease renewal bonus, and support to landlords and tenants if challenges arise.

Defining Opportunity Areas

EOHLC has designated certain neighborhoods in Massachusetts as "opportunity areas" using the Child Opportunity Index. The Child Opportunity Index (COI) was developed by DiversityDataKids.org and the Institute for Child, Youth and Family Policy at Brandeis University. The index is a measure of relative opportunity across a geographic area, based on 29 indicators in three domains: education, health and environment, and social and economic.¹² This index of opportunity correlates strongly with the Opportunity Atlas, another commonly used measure in housing mobility programs.¹³

The COI ranks each census tract as "Very Low," "Low," "Moderate," "High" or "Very High" Opportunity based on its composite score. Census tracts that have been designated as "High" or "Very High" Opportunity are considered SNO Mass opportunity areas.

Participant Outcomes in SNO Mass

This report shares important findings about the experiences and early outcomes of participating families who moved to opportunity areas during the first three years of the SNO Mass program (2019-2021). The findings in this report are based primarily on in-depth interviews with SNO Mass participants from different regions of the state.

The interviews with participants focused on experiences and insights about life in their new homes

¹² Census tracts (hereby referred to as "neighborhoods") are ranked as "Very Low," "Low," "Moderate," "High," or "Very High" Opportunity depending on their relative score. For example, the neighborhoods in the bottom 20% are considered "Very Low" Opportunity, while those in the top 20% are considered "Very High" Opportunity. For the purposes of SNO Mass, the top 40% of neighborhoods in the state (i.e. those that ranked as either High or Very High Opportunity) are considered "Opportunity Areas" that SNO Mass Participants can move to.

¹³ See Opportunityatlas.org

and neighborhoods, as well as their perceptions of any positive or negative impacts of their SNO Mass participation, the move, or their new neighborhood on their family's wellbeing. We explored the factors thought to be important for promoting positive adult and child outcomes, such as the quality of the living environment (indoors and outdoors), community safety, education opportunities, parks and open space, social connections, and local services and resources.¹⁴ Finally, we consider the implications of the findings and discuss actionable policy areas that would allow EOHLC to target resources most effectively.

Organization of the Findings

Neighborhood choices

Impressions of neighborhoods and neighbors

Neighborhood use

Social connections

Education

Health

Financial stability

Landlords and property owners

Trade-offs, benefits, and drawbacks

Methods

The mixed method research informing this report includes semi-structured interviews, as well as a review of post-move household survey data and program administrative data to provide context and a test of the qualitative findings.

Thirty-four interviews were conducted with the heads of household in SNO Mass families that made successful moves to opportunity areas ("participants"), representing 52 percent of all families (N=66) that had moved to opportunity areas as part of EOHLC's SNO Mass program as of December 2021. The interview guide included 70 open and closed-ended questions that were developed iteratively with EOHLC staff. Several questions asked participants to think about their children's experience as well as their own (e.g., How do you think your children have adjusted to their neighborhood?). The study used purposeful sampling to identify families that had lived in their SNO Mass neighborhood for at least 6 months, selecting for location to capture the widest distribution of participants across different regions of the state.

Review of SNO Mass post-move survey data included EOHLC's summary level data from surveys conducted with participants between one and six months after they moved. The study also incorporates administrative data from the SNO Mass program (EOHLC provided de-identified data on participant enrollment dates, socio-economic characteristics, etc.).

Recruitment

Outreach and interviews were conducted in three phases between June 2021 and October 2022. Each phase included a new cohort of participants; cohort one included 12 families, cohort two included 13 families, and cohort three included 9 families. Participants were recruited with the assistance of the SNO Mass mobility counselors

¹⁴ Briggs, X. d. S. (1997) Moving up versus moving out: Neighborhood effects in housing mobility programs, *Housing Policy Debate*, 8:1, 195-234, DOI: 10.1080/10511482.1997.9521252

(program staff at each RAA that provide mobility counseling to participants). The counselors shared information about the study to all SNO Mass participants who had lived in their new community for at least 12 months and — for the final group of families who had moved most recently and for whom it was harder to recruit — for at least 6 months. If a participant expressed initial interest, they were contacted directly by one of four researchers to further discuss the study, answer any questions, and schedule an interview. Interviews were conducted over the phone or on Zoom, depending on the participants' preference, and interviews lasted between one and three hours. Four interviews were conducted in Spanish. Interview participants received a \$50 Visa gift card as an appreciation for their time.

Sample

Thirty-four of the fifty-four families (63%) that were willing to participate in all phases completed interviews and are included in this analysis. They represent 7 of EOHLC's 9 RAAs and 23 different cities and towns.

The families identify as White Hispanic (15), White Non-Hispanic (12), African American (6), and Black Hispanic (1). Participants had lived in their SNO Mass neighborhoods for between 6 and 22 months at the time of the interview, with an average

of 13 months. Approximately half the sample had lived in their neighborhood for 12 months or more. There were 71 children under age 18 years old, including 16 children aged 6 and under, 34 children aged 7 to 12, and 31 children aged 13 to 17.

Analysis

Detailed notes taken during the interviews were coded and organized by question and theme, and then reviewed by an alternate researcher (from the interviewer) to identify and compare key data points and illustrate questions. This analysis was completed after each round of interviews and again considering the entire set of notes. EOHLC provided the researchers with summary data from the post-move surveys, along with de-identified demographic and household characteristics for all SNO Mass movers. Between phase one and two, the interview team also analyzed household level administrative data for families with Housing Choice Vouchers to identify similarities and differences with the SNO Mass sample and to verify and strengthen interview findings. In addition to thematic coding, interview notes were analyzed to explore whether and how participant experiences and outcomes varied by factors such as race, number and ages of children, neighborhoods, and property types. This research helped to create a more comprehensive

Table 1: Location of Study Participants by Regional Administering Agency (RAA)

| | Pre-Move | Post-Move |
|--|-----------|-----------|
| Community Teamwork, Inc. (CTI) (Lowell/Lawrence area) | 14 | 11 |
| South Middlesex Opportunity Council, Inc. (SMOC) (Framingham area) | 4 | 9 |
| WayFinders, Inc. (Hampden, Hampshire & Franklin Counties) | 6 | 6 |
| Metro Housing Boston (Metro Boston) | 5 | 5 |
| Neighbor Works Housing Solutions (South Shore) | 2 | 2 |
| Berkshire Housing Development Corp. (Berkshire County) | 1 | 1 |
| RCAP Solutions (Worcester area) | 2 | 0 |
| Total | 34 | 34 |

There were no study participants from two RAAs: Franklin County Regional Housing and Redevelopment Authority (Franklin County) and Housing Assistance Corp. (HAC) (Cape Cod & the Islands).

picture of how SNO Mass, and perhaps other housing mobility programs, can capture positive experiences and outcomes for families.

Structure of report

The findings in this report are divided into nine sections. Following the structure of our interview questions, we report on common themes and patterns that were identified in the interview responses. We highlight places where findings align with other research on housing mobility programs, and present interesting, less common results and questions raised by the findings. We include both positive and more challenging experiences to show where SNO Mass can have a greater impact, while celebrating the many positive program outcomes participants shared during the interviews. We conclude with recommendations for EOHLC and insights for future research.

Limitations

The limitations in this study include the self-selection of families who chose to participate in SNO Mass and may have been more likely to benefit from the program's support. For example, if more families enroll because of concerns about safety in their prior neighborhoods, they may be more likely to benefit from moving to safer areas. We recruited participants who had moved to a SNO Mass area at least 6 months prior to the interviews. We over sampled participants who moved during the pilot phase of the program to ensure we were able to measure early outcomes and to inform SNO Mass design and operations as EOHLC considered the impacts of the program before expanding it statewide. The sample may not be representative of all SNO Mass movers (see Appendix for a comparison of the sample with all SNO Mass participants who moved to opportunity areas but were not interviewed) and results cannot be generalized to EOHLC's HCV voucher population. The study employed four interviewers with different race/ethnicities and life experiences, and notes were coded and reviewed by more than one interviewer, with the intention to minimize the risk of bias as much

as possible. Finally, the study coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic. We adjusted some questions between the three rounds of interviews and directly asked about any impacts that participants felt might have been different "if not for the pandemic," and we report on this aspect when it emerged as an important element of the findings.



Study Findings

Neighborhood Choices

Motivation to Move

Participant descriptions of why they enrolled in SNO Mass reinforced how important the neighborhood environment felt to their family well-being. All but three movers shared details about aspects of their prior neighborhoods that were challenging and/or dangerous. Although some participants identified a specific experience with bullying at their old schools (35%), an incident with a landlord or neighbor (21%), or the condition of a property (15%) as a motivation for moving, nearly all participants described feeling unsafe at times—for themselves and their children—due to crime and violence (88%) in the prior neighborhood. There were no specific cities or towns linked to safety matters; these concerns were uniformly present across the locations participants moved from.

As important as these factors pushing people to move, most participants responded that they also joined SNO Mass based on “pull factors” — to access good schools and “a better life for my children.”¹⁵ Paula, a single mother of a middle school aged boy, moved to a town ten miles from her past neighborhood that she used to drive through on her way to work. She said, “I wanted to get out of what I’m familiar with. I was too comfortable before; you need change. I know people here that are different... This is for my son—he deserves it—and I deserve it. I’m breaking a cycle for my generation.”

“I was thinking about better opportunities for my kids like the flyer said. You know, a chance to have a good area, school, all of what they said about the SNO [Mass] program. It sounded good.”

— Amelia, mother of two children who moved a short distance in miles but between two distinct neighborhoods of Boston.

Neighborhood Choices in SNO Mass

Housing mobility counseling helped SNO Mass participants to identify places with resources and amenities that would benefit their family the most within the higher opportunity areas of the program. Most participants were deliberate about wanting to move away from their current location, and many were happy to explore and move to any place with the qualities they were looking for. One participant declared, “I came for the schools, and I am not disappointed.” Participants’ housing choices also reflect competing interests and needs. Some participants wanted to stay close to their current location but in a neighborhood they felt had more opportunities, and some hoped to live in a place separate from, but still near to family. Nora and her three children found her ideal neighborhood in a town in Middlesex County: “I stuck with this location because it’s close enough to get to my family and everything we need to get to. I [also] liked the location away from my family. The distance was good for me.” Zoe has a 16-year-old daughter that goes to school in the town where her father lives, and she wanted to stay close to him as they

¹⁵ For more on pull and push factors see: Kleit, R., Kang, S., & Scally, C. (2015). Why Do Housing Mobility Programs Fail in Moving Households to Better Neighborhoods? Housing Policy Debate, 26, 1-22. doi:10.1080/10511482.2015.1033440.

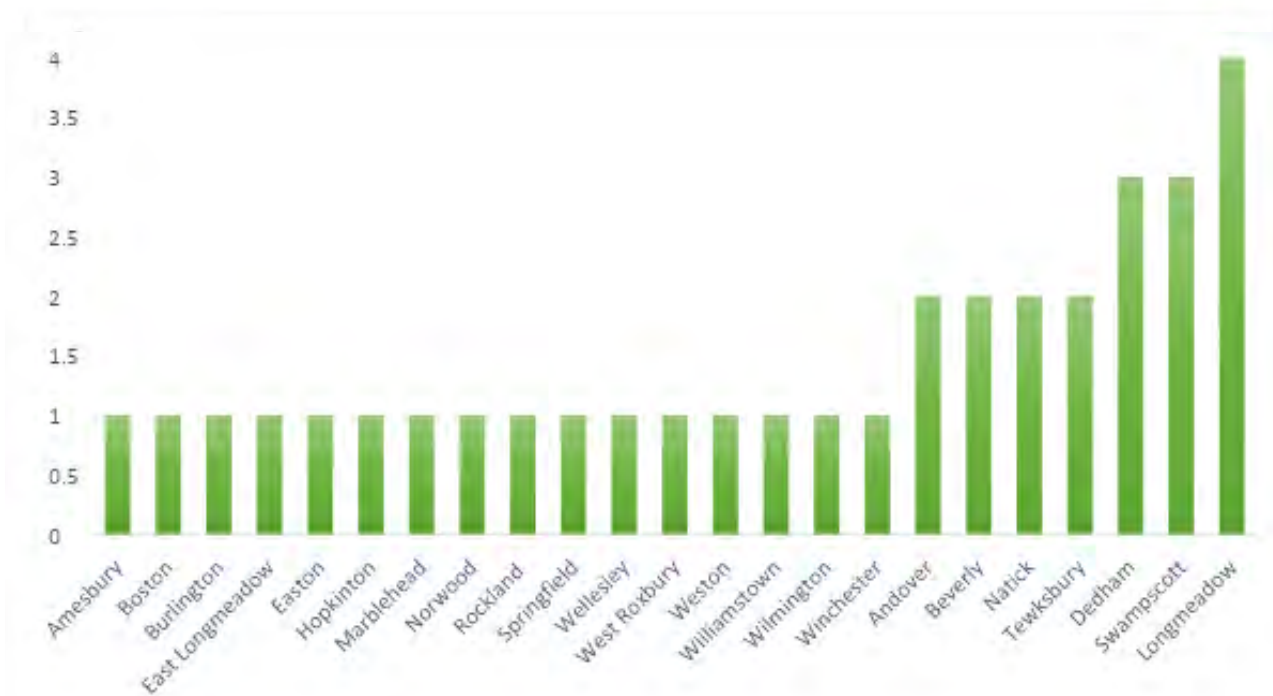
share custody, so her neighborhood choices were tied to this factor. Decisions about where to move were also influenced by competitive local housing markets.

While many participants searched for housing in a wide range of communities, including one-third who searched in areas they had never been to and never heard of prior to enrolling in the program, several participants moved to SNO Mass neighborhoods that were familiar in some way. Participants found new homes in places they drove to or through for work or shopping or where they had visited friends and family. A few participants moved back to a place where one of their family members had lived before, and two participants moved back to a town where they themselves had lived once before. Charlotte from Western Mass explained that she

knew her neighborhood because “my mom used to work around the corner [from my house] for 15 years and I have a brother down the street, around the corner.” Alyssa, who moved to an affluent coastal town, fondly remembered visiting her grandfather’s house there, when she was a child.

Valentina moved only a short distance from her prior town, but her new town has “better schools and less crime.” Plus, she can still walk to “the bodega” in 10 minutes, making this an ideal location — “it’s the house I always dreamed to have.” These responses are consistent with findings in neighborhood research on how small geographic separations can have meaningful impacts.¹⁶

Figure 2: Study Participants’ Post-Move Cities and Towns (N=34)



¹⁶ Massey, D. S., & Tannen, J. (2015). A research note on trends in Black hypersegregation. *Demography*, 52(3), 1025–1034. doi:10.1007/s13524-015-0381-6; Townsley, J., Andres, U.M., & Nowlin, M. (2021). The lasting impacts of segregation and redlining. Retrieved from: <https://www.savi.org/2021/06/24/lasting-impacts-of-segregation/>; Wagner, P. (2004). Redistricting matters: Small changes in the boundary lines mean huge electoral effects. Prison Gerrymandering Project. Retrieved from <https://www.prisonersofthecensus.org/news/2004/07/26/redistrictingmatters/>; Monarrez, T. & Chien, C. (2021). Dividing lines: Racially unequal school boundaries in US public school systems. Urban Institute. Retrieved from: <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/dividing-lines-racially-unequal-school-boundaries-us-public-school-systems>

Figure 3: Opportunity Level of Pre-Move (Inner Circle) and Post-Move (Outer Circle) Locations



Where Participants Moved

The 34 SNO Mass participants in the interview sample moved to 23 different cities and towns across the state. Longmeadow, Dedham, and Swampscott were among the more common locations participants moved to, which in part reflects the location of the SNO Mass pilot in the Merrimack Valley and Western Mass.¹⁷

On average, participants moved a distance of 13 miles (median of 10 miles) with some moving as close as half a mile and some moving as far as 46 miles.¹⁸

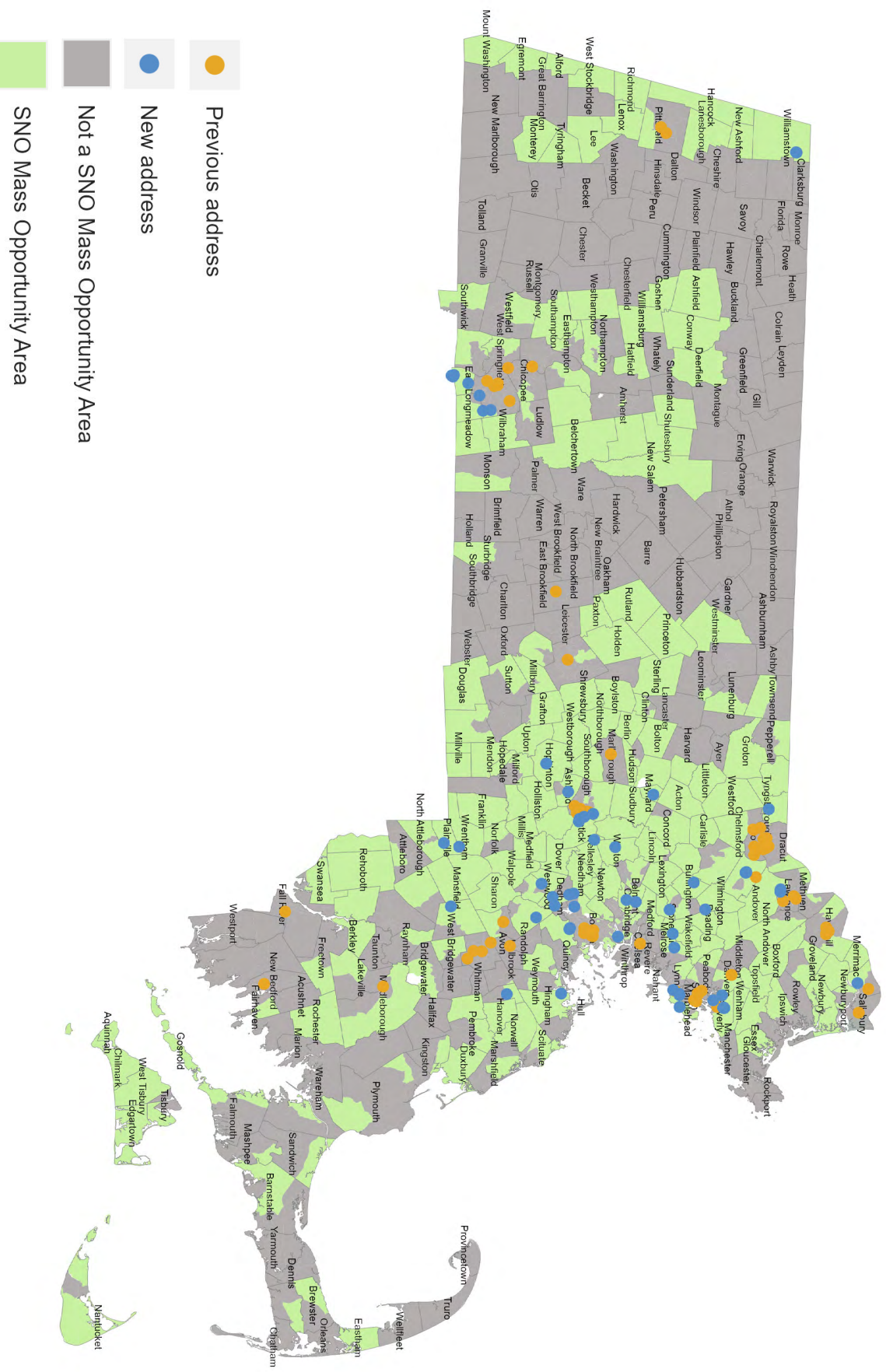
Figure 3 shows more specifically the neighborhood opportunity levels prior to moving (the inner circle) and after moving (the outer circle). Most participants moved from areas that ranked “very low” or “low” to neighborhoods that ranked “high” or “very high.” At the time of the interviews, 91% of the sample lived in “high” or “very high” opportunity neighborhoods.¹⁹

¹⁷ For the first two years (2019 and 2020), SNO Mass was a pilot program and only served families in two of EOHLC’s regional administering areas.

¹⁸ Most families in the study chose to remain in the same regional area. Eight families moved out of their original geographic region (see Appendix 1, table X.) More than one-third (35%) of the sample moved 5 or fewer miles away from their prior neighborhood, 20% moved between 6 and 10 miles away, 15% moved between 11 and 15 miles away, and 30% moved 15 or more miles away.

¹⁹ Areas designated as “High Opportunity” and “Very High Opportunity” changed slightly in 2020 with the release of the COI Version 2.0. Three families moved to an area that had been High opportunity under COI 1.0 but were designated Moderate opportunity under COI 2.0.

Previous and New Location of SNO Mass Participants



Impressions of Neighborhoods and Neighbors

The interview questions invited participants to describe how their neighborhood feels, looks, and functions in their day-to-day life. Our aim was to understand if and how participants' observations of their residential neighborhoods and experiences aligned with the program's goals and selected measures of opportunity.

SNO Mass movers described their neighborhoods as safe, quiet, clean, and peaceful, with good schools and inviting outdoor places where they could spend time with their children. Most participants also said that this depiction of SNO Mass neighborhoods was very different from and a significant improvement on the locations they had moved from.

New neighborhoods were described as vastly different than prior neighborhoods. One of the first questions participants were asked during the interviews was: "How would you describe your current neighborhood to someone who has never been there?" Below are the top themes among participant responses²⁰:

- Nice area (78%)
- Children can spend time outside (76%)
- It's quiet (76%)
- It's safe (67%)
- We can walk around (55%)
- It's peaceful (55%)
- Good schools / better schools (52%)
- Parks nearby (36%)

These positive aspects of new neighborhoods

were repeated throughout the interviews during conversations about use of community space, the safety of new schools, and improvements in health. Participants expressed deep appreciation and relief about being able to access outdoor spaces, and the ability to let their children play outside.

Participants had almost uniformly high praise and enthusiasm for the physical qualities of their neighborhoods. Fernanda described her small New England town with high-ranking schools as "a beautiful place... there are lots of trees, clean air, and lots of sun. It's very quiet, not too big. It's a very clean city, quiet neighborhood, and everyone is nice. You can walk outside." Penelope, who moved to a suburban town with lots of green space in the Metro West part of the state, described her neighborhood as peaceful and laughed, saying: "My only fight is with the spiders."

Neighborhood Diversity

Almost all participants felt that they lived in an inclusive community even when they moved to a place observed to be less diverse racially, ethnically, and/or economically. Participants also acknowledged micro-segregation within their neighborhood by street or building — and these personal and closer contacts seemed more relevant to their experience.

Almost all participants (86%) said that their current neighborhood was "inclusive" when we defined it as a place "where residents of diverse backgrounds are accepted and welcomed." When asked further about the diversity in their new neighborhoods, half of the movers thought their neighborhood was racially diverse, and half thought their community was not racially diverse. In a few cases, perceptions of the same town differed. For example, three of the same SNO Mass towns were identified as "not diverse" or "diverse" depending on the family's experience. When speaking about diversity, participants talked about their immediate neighbors, for example, residents who live in the same two- or

²⁰ These factors were not offered as a list to choose from, and responses were not mutually exclusive. The list represents the first description that came into the participant's mind.

three-family house or apartment complex as them, the neighbors living in the house next door or across the street, and sometimes people living on different streets but in the same neighborhood.

Among those who said their community was diverse was Morgan, who lives on the South Shore and has an upstairs neighbor that also has a voucher. She said, “the neighborhood is more diverse than my [prior neighborhood]. [I have] Indian and Black neighbors, my landlord is Haitian, I am white, my older kids are mixed race, and the schools are more diverse.” Blanca in Western Mass likes how diverse her area is: “there’s white people in the neighborhood and a family with multi-racial kids. There are lots of black people here and there’s lots of BLM (Black Lives Matter) signs here.” Where Blanca lived before, she felt that “people stay with their own kinds. Here, it’s not like that.”

Fernanda was among the participants who thought her neighborhood is not diverse. “There are more white people, but we are the only Hispanic/Latino mixed family. There are a few Black people here, but I can count them with my fingers.” Nora, who loves her “luxury unit” in an apartment complex said, “This [place] is mostly all white, and you can feel it.” Charlotte said, “[my neighborhood is] predominantly Caucasian. More middle class. It’s mixed in here because right up on the other side

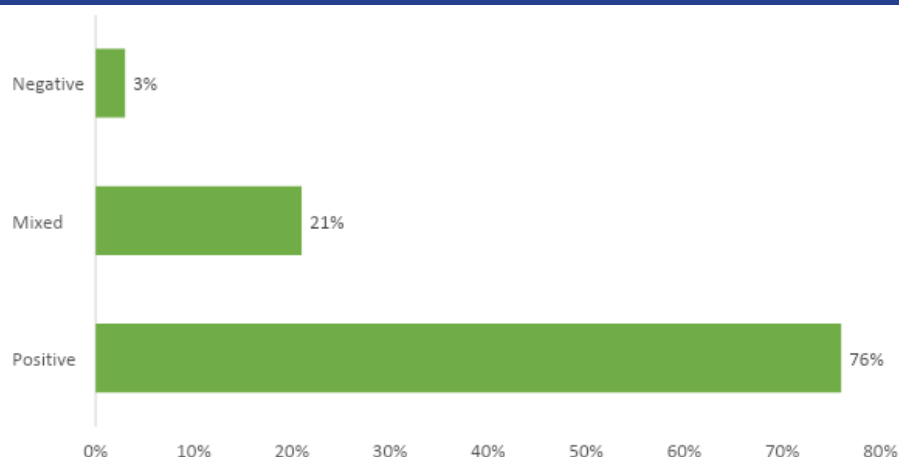
of me is [the city].” While most participants did not explain their ideal neighborhood “mix” in terms of diversity (racial, ethnic, economic), the ones who did were pleased with the economic and racial diversity in their communities.²¹

Neighboring in SNO Mass

Most SNO Mass movers found their new neighbors and community at large to be warm and welcoming.

We asked if participants or their children had met any new people since moving and if anyone specific in the community had helped them to settle in or feel welcomed. We also asked about interactions with neighbors and other community members and coded the responses as positive, negative, or both. Three-quarters of the participants (76%) had only positive interactions to share (for both children and adults in the household), and another 21 percent shared both positive and negative exchanges, primarily with neighbors but also with property owners. Just one participant had *only* negative interactions with neighbors; almost all the participants who had an unpleasant experience also had a favorable one. Further, positive and negative interactions with neighbors occurred across a wide range of SNO Mass cities and towns and in different types of properties (duplexes,

Figure 4: Interactions with Neighbors



21 Havekes, E., Bader, M., & Krysan, M. (2016). Realizing Racial and Ethnic Neighborhood Preferences? Exploring the Mismatches Between What People Want, Where They Search, and Where They Live. *Population Research and Policy Review*, 35, 101–126. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11113-015-9369-6>

apartment buildings, single family homes).

Of the seven households with both positive and negative interactions, three identified as Hispanic/Latinx, two as African American, and two as white, non-Hispanic.

“They know how to greet and be happy.”

— Paula talking about her neighbors

The positive encounters with community members included friendly informal exchanges as well as more engaged efforts to make new neighbors feel comfortable. Participants described frequent “hi and bye waves” in the apartment complex or on the street, and also incidents where a neighbor offered to share toys, an elderly man who brings the trash barrels out for the participant when she forgets, and a neighbor with an adjoining yard who is generous with lawn tools. One participant received multiple gift baskets on her doorstep during the holidays. There were several stories about helpful police officers and welcoming school officials. Klarisa, who lives in a town near Route 495 that is known for its good school system and a high median income, gratefully shared how her neighbor helps her by getting her children off the school bus when she has an emergency and cannot be there.

Common positive attributes offered for SNO Mass neighborhoods included adjectives such as “close-knit” and “family-oriented.” Most participants described neighbors who introduced themselves when they moved in and who were friendly and nice. Fernanda, who moved to a “very white” neighborhood with her multi-generational Latinx family — the “only one on the block” — said “everyone is gentle, friendly with my family.” Part of the enjoyment of the new neighborhoods seemed related to how relaxed they were, and how participants perceived it to be the way a neighborhood should be, in comparison to the chaos or drama with neighbors in prior neighborhoods. Alejandra noted how she feels when she goes back to her prior neighborhood after two years in her SNO



Mass neighborhood: “Here there’s no violence, no fast cars, the kids can ride bikes... When I go to [old neighborhood], I feel kinda weird now. Especially in the neighborhood I was living in, where there were shootings.”

“The neighbors are all friendly to me and the kids. The kids have friends on the street and one family directly across the street are really nice. My kids play with their kids, and the mother helps me out sometimes with getting my kids off the school bus. She didn’t have to, and sometimes she brings me to the grocery store—because I don’t drive.”

— Klarisa, mother of 2 young children

In addition to widespread friendliness and some examples of reciprocal exchange and support, participants felt comfortable in their communities

because neighbors are busily engaged in their own activities. In describing her neighbors, Abagaile said, “I don’t really know about other people’s income. Everyone seems like they work a lot then come home and spend time on weekends and bar-beque and take care of the lawn.” Camila explains her routine in the neighborhood when her grandson is there. He “goes out and plays around at the playground. It’s more quiet here. Everybody’s doing their activities like walking the dog and I go sit at the pond.” Alyssa says her kids can go out “like normal children in the yard” and that children in her neighborhood are skateboarding, riding bikes, and playing in the park. She observes, “Kids here- they are into things. Doing things active.” There were many comments about neighbors keeping up with their yards, waving, and being respectful.

“Right now, I wake up and my front door is open. I feel safe. [Is there security?] No, I am just not feeling suspect of everything. It feels like a home. At 8pm it’s quiet. It’s like a vacation. Everybody respects their neighbors.”

— Maya in Western Mass

Negative community interactions, when they occurred, were either isolated and specific to one person or event or in a few cases constituted a challenging relationship with a neighbor or property owner/management company.

Some types of conflict were primarily about challenges that can be common in rental properties, such as the navigation of shared public space. Isabella’s neighbors in her apartment complex continually complain to property management about the noise her young kids are making — “they are little, they are going to make noise. I am on the 3rd floor so of course you are going to hear them.” A few participants described how neighbors spoke to them about noisy children, their barking

dogs, parking spaces, or asked them to put away belongings or patio furniture on shared porches or lawns. Hilda, whose neighbor across the street is friendly, also has a neighbor in the townhouse next door that makes her want to move to another town because she tells her to “put away” everything she puts out, including a kiddie pool in the yard during the summer and furniture on the shared porch.

In contrast, Morgan’s landlord on the South Shore puts the patio furniture out for her family when it gets warm and keeps up with the house maintenance. She elaborated that he is not like her prior landlord, “This landlord, if I go to him with a problem, he doesn’t tell me too bad you have Section 8 — deal with it” when she has an issue with the unit, meaning he does not use the voucher as an excuse for neglecting maintenance. Charlotte told us that a woman across the street whom she considers a friend lets her know about activities in the neighborhood and gives “updates of what’s going on and what’s available.” She also had an experience with one neighbor who was “constantly calling the landlord on her for a while” but she said after she spoke with him about it, he left her alone.

Participants also shared more subtle and complex interactions when living in a place where people might not “look like you.”

Four participants had had one isolated incident with someone whose behavior towards them felt unfriendly (e.g., staring, giving dirty looks), and three more described feeling that they needed to act in a certain way to avoid being looked down on or out of place, though their actual experiences in the neighborhood had only been positive. Another four participants noted how they expected the community to be “stuck up” or racist but were surprised to find that it was not.

One participant described feeling self-conscious as a renter in a community she perceives as wealthy and white. She chose this location because of encouragement from another Latinx family living in the same duplex who commented on how great the schools were when she was looking to rent the apartment. Their kids are around the same age and

now play together. While she loves the location and the space — a large yard that backs up to a college — she does not feel at home among the other residents. Another participant, Penelope, goes to the pool in her town with her four children, where she says there is “no racism,” but she avoids walking in the downtown area sometimes. She says she probably would not go to church there because “I just feel because I have my Section 8, I am not at their level, financially, I am not in their level,” and “I don’t want to be looked at in a certain way or down on.” She adds that she believes the schools are more diverse than her previous town and that her kids are happy there.

Another participant, Blanca in Western Mass, told us how she felt good, but also a little insecure, when her landlord (who she felt was actively welcoming and helped her settle in), said “It’s nobody’s business that you have Section 8.” She explained how she sensed that if the neighbors knew she was renting, they would “not look at you with good eyes.” She was also so nervous about her barking dog disturbing the neighbors that she didn’t want to let him outside when she moved in. However, “all the negative thoughts in [her] head” disappeared one day when the woman next door complimented her “beautiful” dog and told her not to worry about the barking. Blanca loves living there and has felt accepted by her neighbors. Interestingly, she is one of the few participants that said her neighborhood was not inclusive.

In a more troubling example of bias, someone called the police on Alejandra, a participant who was sitting on a neighborhood bench in a community garden having a sandwich with her autistic son. In that incident, however, the officer that responded was quick to reassure her that it was her neighborhood too and that she had a right to be there; the officer even told her how to get a plot in the community garden. Alejandra shared that prior to moving, she always thought people from the town were stuck up. “But then we moved [here] and people were super friendly and asking questions. Then that [the garden incident] happened.”

However, most of the participants with a negative experience — even those that seemed based on race or ethnicity — continue to feel that their families have adjusted well and explain that they are very happy with many aspects of their neighborhoods.

“Race — I was kind of worried about that, because growing up I thought of these neighborhoods as racist — but everyone was welcoming. There’s a Black Lives Matter sign right across the street and my neighbors are not white.”

— Danika in Western Mass



Almost all participants said that they want to stay in their neighborhood and see themselves living in the area for the next 5–10 years. Of those that did not anticipate staying, it was primarily about plans to purchase a home and expecting that would be unaffordable in their current community.

Neighborhood Use

Neighborhood Integration

The study asked participants to describe how they were getting to know their neighborhood and building new connections to people, places, and organizations. Most families told us that household members were “adjusting well,” with a variety of individuals from different places and institutions playing a role in that adjustment.

Local recreational activities and neighborhood schools are key sites for new social connections for children and their parents.

Positive social interactions helped participants feel comfortable, especially when children spent time in their neighborhood engaged in social and recreational activities. Sixty percent of participants said that their child or children had made friends with someone in the neighborhood with whom they spent out-of-school time. Several families lived in apartment buildings with a pool where the children from the complex played together during the summer. Alejandra, a young mother from Western Mass, talked about her child’s new friends, suggesting the importance she places on these relationships and how she sees them tied into her family’s long-term plans. “Nice thing about here is that my daughter—when she makes friends in elementary—then they’ll go to the same middle and high school. They’ll be together all the way through.”

We also heard how children naturally helped to forge new connections for their parents. When we asked Amelia, a mom with a young son living in a neighborhood of Boston, if there was anything that would make it easier for her to connect to social

groups or activities, she said, “No. I’m not a social bug. I think my son is going to have to get me out of that and say — hey Mummy.” Maya shared how she met her daughter’s friend’s mom when she went to the pool at their apartment complex, and “so, then we [the moms] had dinner.” Another participant, Alyssa, said her middle school daughters like cheerleading, and she sees that as a way for her to make new social connections. After working from home with little adult contact and having the kids in remote learning at home during the pandemic, she is excited to become involved again. She explained that “once the kids are in school [in person], I will meet other parents.”

Building connections is a process of getting to know the community and its resources and having the time to enjoy them.

Several participants indicated that it took longer for them to adjust compared to their children either because they didn’t yet know all that was available or hadn’t ventured out into the community. One participant explained that it had been easy for her children to “just go to school and learn everything” but she had to “search and learn everything in the community and sign up to neighborhood apps.” Most of the participants are working single mothers and many of them explained that they have limited time to get to know new areas as a result. Danika’s response is a common one; she explained that the home health care job she has is hard and she works so much that when she gets home, she is exhausted.

Familiarity with local resources and developing social connections may also take longer than 12–18 months, and access could have been delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic — as schooling took place remotely and recreational and community activities were limited. In the summer of 2021, Jasmine and her four children moved to a suburb west of Boston with lots of restaurants, coffee shops, and parks. While she said that she didn’t know where “everything” was yet, she planned “to get a lot more involved in the city once the pandemic is over.” Zoe is an example of another participant who is still adjusting and wants to get a job and volunteer somewhere as she did at the food

pantry in her last neighborhood. “My plan is to get a job and I also want to volunteer, but I haven’t gotten that far yet. I can work with the elderly.”



The adjustment to new neighborhoods was easiest for younger children but harder for some teenagers. Some teens continued to spend significant time outside of the SNO Mass neighborhood.

While nearly all participants said that they believed their family had adjusted well, the younger school-aged children (13 and under) tended to have an easier time due to friendships they made in the immediate neighborhood or at new local schools. For some of the older children, their existing social ties had stronger roots, making it more challenging to make new relationships in their current neighborhood. Almost half of the older teens in our sample (a total of 14 households had at least one child over age 13) continued to see friends and/or significant

others outside of the neighborhood, and many spent more time in prior neighborhoods rather than in their new (SNO Mass) one. Of the households with children spending most of the time outside of the residential neighborhood, four of six children (67%) did not change schools when they moved.²² Parents’ reasons for keeping children in past schools included the timing of the pandemic and remote schooling, prior placement in a special vocational program or private school, and reluctance to disrupt social connections for children in high school with fewer years of school remaining. The findings do not suggest the direction of influence, but it is likely that spending time outside the neighborhood is both a response to and a reflection of the challenges of adjustment for older children.

Access to Resources and Amenities

The study lends perspective on which community indicators were most important to positive outcomes, and how, by examining participants’ engagement with local resources and considering their ideas on the most impactful experiences. Participants shared their knowledge of what they found available and accessible in their communities, and described how they located these organizations and resources.

Most movers identified their SNO Mass neighborhood as having a lot of amenities and recreational opportunities even if they had not yet accessed them. Having so many activities available, especially in the summer (e.g., town summer recreational programs), was perceived as a great benefit. Most in-neighborhood time was spent at home in the yard, at parks, in recreational places, and in out-of-school time activities for children. Responses suggested that most participants were comfortable exploring the neighborhood’s offerings, and many were looking forward to becoming a part of more groups and activities such as the YMCA or the school’s parent association over time. Although several participants mentioned that some activities came with a fee (e.g., football, town swimming pool), they did not say they were cost prohibitive.

²² While most families changed their children’s schools when they moved to their new community, 31% (10 households in the sample with school age children) had at least one child that did not change schools. In only five households (15% of the total sample) none of the children in the household changed schools.

Some participants were able to use SNO Mass funds to pay for the costs of such activities.²³

Participants found out about their neighborhoods' resources through community members who offered support and information about local activities. Some families received assistance from schools — a guidance counselor, teacher, or principal — and the YMCA helped several families find summer and afterschool programs. Neighbors and landlords were another source of local information for a handful of participants. A couple of participants received invitations to join a community listserv or Facebook group. During their interviews, most participants said that they found what they needed on their own and few had contacted SNO Mass staff after their moves for help with neighborhood acclimation, community information, or resources.

As important as the availability of amenities and accessible community networks and institutions are, the level of interest and engagement with these resources varies.

The opportunities that neighborhoods present might matter in proportion to participation in those opportunities. The duration of neighborhood exposure — the length of time someone has access to place-based opportunities — has been suggested by researchers as a factor that mediates positive neighborhood impacts on household outcomes.²⁴ For example, economic and educational attainment was greater for children who moved when they were younger and thus spent a longer time in higher opportunity areas, as compared to their siblings and a matched control group in the Moving to Opportunity demonstration.²⁵ Asking about how participants engage with their neighborhood provides a view into the ways families spend their time and their reasons for choosing to spend time in particular places -- beyond a list of zip codes.

To understand the role of neighborhood in SNO Mass, we asked about daily routines and where adults and children spent time for different types of activities, including recreation, medical care, work, shopping, afterschool activities, visiting with friends and family, etc. While about 80 percent of participants said that they spent at least 75 percent of their time in their current neighborhood, there was a lot of variation in the degree to which adults and children were also engaged with people and places outside of their current neighborhood.

How participants and their children navigate new neighborhoods and neighbors reflects a fluid and varied use of community activities and institutions.

We coded interview responses about the location, nature, and timing of activities and social interactions to see if there were any patterns in a participant's level or type of engagement in their SNO Mass neighborhood. Some categories of neighborhood "engagement" emerged: considering both adult and child activities, for almost half of all mover households (42%), most activities primarily take place in their SNO Mass neighborhood. In contrast, few households (10%) spend almost all their time in neighborhoods outside of where they live. Nearly half of households (48%) split their time between multiple neighborhoods. Below is a summary of where participants (including children and adults) engaged in a selection of weekly activities.

The interview question reported on below asked participants "can you tell me if you go to any of these types of places in your neighborhood/city/town and/or in a different town/neighborhood?" in response to a list of places/activities. The responses do not necessarily add up to 100% as each participant could engage in each activity

23 SNO Mass participants can receive security deposit assistance and up to \$2,500 for certain pre-move and/or post-move expenses. If participants have SNO Mass funds remaining after moving to their new units, the funds can cover costs associated with recreational activities such as these.

24 Sampson, R. J., Morenoff, J. D., & Gannon-Rowley, T. (2002). Assessing 'Neighborhood Effects': Social Processes and New Directions in Research. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 28, 443–478 ; Leventhal, T., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2000). The neighborhoods they live in: The effects of neighborhood residence upon child and adolescent outcomes. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126, 309–337 ; Chetty, R., Hendren, N., & Katz, L. F. (2016). The Effects of Exposure to Better Neighborhoods on Children: New Evidence from the Moving to Opportunity Experiment. *American Economic Review*, 106(4), 855-902.

25 Ibid

Figure 5: Location of Activities by Neighborhood



in their neighborhood of residence, in another neighborhood, or both.

Participants spent most of their “recreational” time in activities in the SNO Mass neighborhood. As indicated earlier, much of this was centered on children’s interests, including organized sports, leisure time with friends, and school-sponsored activities. Public outdoor spaces (e.g., parks, playgrounds) and apartment complex amenities, especially swimming pools, were the most often cited resources used by participants.

Medical and therapeutic appointments, when noted as an activity, are more often located outside the neighborhood where participants live. Food and clothes shopping were often done outside of the neighborhood at larger stores and malls, though almost all participants also walked or drove to nearby stores. They preferred familiar and bigger food stores for the choices and prices (though some acknowledged lower quality). Melanie said, “I caught myself going back to where I come from— not because I miss anyone or any place — more about food. I know where to get what I want.” As compared to children, adults were more likely to be splitting their time and spending time in “other” neighborhoods socializing with family members, participating in some type of personal care or recreational activity, shopping, or at work.

Social Connections

Personal choice appears to be the driving factor influencing where participants spend their time socializing. Socializing with family — and sometimes friends — continues to take place in multiple different locations, not simply in the neighborhood where participants live. Many participants expressed excitement about hosting family members for barbecues and social events at their home, which often featured private outdoor space that was uncommon or considered unsafe in past locations. While Fernanda’s children go to the park, play sports, and are invited to birthday parties in their SNO Mass neighborhood, she continues to do her socializing in a third neighborhood (i.e. not her current or previous neighborhood) with friends from before her move: “I go to [another town] for my socialization with people my age.” Ruby had one of the farthest moves geographically and socially — she moved from a large city in central Massachusetts to a small exclusive neighborhood in the center of Boston, in part because she didn’t want people (including friends and family) thinking they could come stay with her all the time. She explained, “now, no one comes and visits — I like that. I do all the visiting. I go every Friday and visit and see people. I know more things to do in my old

neighborhood.”

As mentioned, some older teens did continue to visit friends or family in prior neighborhoods, in part because they attended school there, but children were the least likely to be spending time outside their residential neighborhood. Several participants said that they deliberately limited their children’s access to their prior neighborhood because of concerns about safety. Alyssa’s 14-year-old has a cell phone and still communicates with a couple of friends from her old neighborhood, but she does not see them. Alyssa said, “she asked me if she can go to the mall and movies with them but it’s different because we don’t live around there and I don’t want my daughter hanging out on the streets there.” Blanca is hoping to keep her 17-year-old from returning to his old haunts by delaying his driving lessons.



Participants did not think that their level of community engagement was different after their move and did not feel that they had lost important social connections.

Several themes emerged to explain why only two participants said their level of involvement in social and civic activities changed when they moved to new, observably different neighborhoods.²⁶First, as discussed above, participants (adults) continue to spend time with the people that they care about, regardless of where they live. A choice to maintain some social distance in new neighborhoods (even when seeking out activities and local connections

for their children) may be another reason why so few adults said they’d had a significant change in their social networks. A third, and much smaller group of participants, presented as more isolated, perhaps less by choice, though the focus of their energy and their time was spent outside of the SNO Mass neighborhood.

There were only four households, three of whom are Hispanic, who exclusively socialize outside of their SNO Mass neighborhood. Lincoln, who is African American, and the only father we interviewed, moved with his wife and nine- and ten-year-old boys from their old neighborhood to be in a safer place with better schools. He shared: “Honestly, we are mostly still in [prior city]. We just live here. The kids play sports in [prior city], our family and friends are in [prior city] and that area. That’s where we go.” Although he likes their school and met some neighbors and parents from a school field trip he went on, he has not connected with anyone. He says, “I’m friendly and we say hi [to neighbors]. I haven’t met or trusted anyone to open up and try to be friends.”

In conversation, we often heard how a participant’s past experiences influenced the level of caution and pace with which they formed new relationships. Fourteen participants (42%) shared that they deliberately limit their social interactions, often because of past conflict or violence in former neighborhoods. Maria’s story of restricting friendships “because if you go outside [in the previous neighborhood] there was always fighting and problems” is similar to comments made by many of the movers. Soledad described how she minimizes social interactions in anticipation of problems: “I keep to myself because next thing you know there’s an argument with neighbors.” In this context, neighborhoods in which people “keep to themselves” are valued. Participants employed a protective strategy to guard their wellbeing by being cautious with social relationships in their new communities. As a result we might expect to see connections being built, just more slowly, as participants become accustomed to their newfound

²⁶ We asked participants to exclude any Covid-related limitations when we asked about “change in the level of social involvement.”

privacy and peace.

SNO Mass movers are engaged and are participating in their neighborhoods in dynamic ways. While the amount of time that a family spends in the SNO Mass neighborhood may influence the extent to which they can access the resources that the new neighborhood offers, our findings suggest that it is not determinative of the advantages they experience or their enjoyment of the program or place. Participants' responses also illustrate a multifaceted experience with neighborhoods and neighbors rather than a uniform approach. For adults, the level of engagement with neighborhood institutions and organizations did not govern their feelings of belonging in the community or satisfaction with their neighborhood. Limited interactions with neighbors or civic organizations does not mean participants spend little time in the neighborhood, dislike where they live, or fail to experience benefits from living there. As discussed in the following sections of the report, the positive outcomes in health and education described by so many participants applied to adults and children across a wide range of neighborhoods. SNO Mass neighborhoods serve many different purposes. A neighborhood can be just a comfortable and safe place to come home to, a community of familiar supportive people, and/or a location for amenities and activities.



Education

Three-quarters of all participants (76%) said their children changed schools when they moved. Nearly all of those whose children were attending new schools indicated they were happy with the schools, and most said the new schools were better in comparison to their old schools. Interviewees described specific school improvements as they relate to academics, social dynamics, and enrichment opportunities. They shared stories about their children making the honor roll for the first time, receiving the services or extra help they needed, positive social experiences with classmates, and welcoming and safe school environments.

“Everything is better about the school! The teaching is better, the building is better, the food is better!”

—Klarisa, 2 children in elementary school

Better services and accommodations for children with learning challenges and other needs was a common benefit of new schools.

Half (50%) of those whose children changed schools said at least one of their children had learning challenges or other needs, and the new schools were better at addressing these needs in comparison with the previous schools. Some parents anticipated this and had sought out communities that had strong services for their children (e.g., with autism), while others were not fully aware of their children's needs until they were assessed in their new school. Mariella, a mother of three, said her son was not getting the extra help he needed in his prior school and “was bullied and no longer wanted to go to school.” She reported that the new school evaluated her child during the pandemic and now he receives special education services, has made friends at school, and no longer wants to stay home from school.

Many participants also emphasized the significant improvement in communication with teachers and other members of the school community, noting that their concerns were actively considered or addressed. If an issue came up after a child had transferred to a new school, and parents engaged with school staff, they found that their advocacy was recognized. For example, Morgan shared that her son was being picked on by a girl in his class but added “school already dealt with it.” Other parents described how teaching methods or higher academic standards could be jarring at first but were ultimately beneficial for their children.

“My kids are able to learn more here... because of the school system and not being around violence and crime and all that stuff.”

—Blanca, two teenagers, Western Mass

New schools provided safe learning environments and relief from bullying and exposure to drugs and gangs.

Nearly half (46%) of the participants whose children moved schools reported their children were doing much better because they were not being bullied like they were in their prior school. Their children feel safe in their new schools, where bullying “is not tolerated,” as one participant said. For these families, getting their children to a new school with a safe environment for their children was a primary motivating factor for participating in SNO Mass. As Lola said, she signed up for SNO Mass “because it was a promise of safer behavior and safer areas for the children.” Some attributed improvements in their children’s education directly to the safer environment. Hilda explained: “the school in [prior neighborhood] did not feel safe. These schools are much better here. They have helped my son with learning issues, get services, and catch up academically.” Several interviewees described violence and problems with gangs and drugs at their children’s prior schools. Tran, who with

her three teenage children moved two towns away to a school district with strong academic ratings, said “they were glad to leave the old school—my daughter was being threatened to get jumped at school. And my son was being recruited and threatened to join a gang. That school was awful and unsafe, with drugs [and] fighting.”

Children’s Adjustment to New Schools

Most participants reported that their children had adjusted well to their new schools, although some children took longer than others. Penelope shared that one of her children made a smooth adjustment to her new middle school, but it took her other child longer to adjust “because all her friends were at her old school.” Several participants noted that each of their children had different school experiences depending on the child’s needs; one might have a harder or easier transition because of their own challenges, particularly if one child had special needs or was being bullied in the prior school. Paula’s 13-year-old son has learning difficulties and is one of the children who has had a tougher time getting settled into his new school as a result. She meets regularly with the teachers and communicates with the principal there who is “so awesome,” and they are all actively working to support him. Better communication between parents and school personnel in comparison to past schools helped many parents and children to adjust, including Jasmine who has four children including a teenage son with special needs and a 16-year-old daughter with autism. After moving, her daughter was evaluated by the school district and placed in a school for children with special needs that has much more support. Jasmine’s daughter had been assaulted in her prior school and she was relieved that it was so much better in their new district.

“My 17-year-old came from getting Ds and Fs. Old school didn’t care. Horrible. This year he is on the honor roll and involved. He didn’t go out in [prior neighborhood] because it was dangerous. Now on Friday nights he is at football games. Prom is in a month.”

— Morgan, three children, South Shore

Social dynamics: belonging and friendships at school.

Interviewees were asked if they thought their children fit in at their new school, had friends there, and whether they saw any of these friends outside of school. All participants (100%) with children that changed schools and were not remote said that yes, their children fit in and had friends at school. About 58% of the children who changed schools had friends from school whom they saw in the neighborhood outside of school. For the few children for whom fitting in at school was more challenging, parents referred to attachments to friends at former schools, Covid-19 restrictions, and special needs as contributing factors.

One participant shared that her daughter came home excited because the “most popular girl at school said hi to her,” and another described how she knew her daughters liked their school when they begged her to buy gifts for their teachers at the end of the school year. Morgan’s 17-year-old son has seen his grades improve, and he is very sociable since changing schools, and no longer sitting inside playing video games all the time.

“I love the communication between the school and myself that we have—compared to what I’m used to with my children and the struggles that I had in [prior neighborhood]. They keep the parent informed a lot better. You feel like you’re being heard.”

— Jasmine, mother of four children



Not changing schools: Choosing to keep children at the same school after moving.

While most families changed their children’s schools when they moved to their new community, 31% (10 households in the sample with school-aged children) had at least one child that did not change schools. Some of these families (4 households of 10) included teenagers for whom parents felt that changing school in high school would be too disruptive. In these households with older teens, the younger children in the family did change schools. In five households (15%), none of the children in the household changed schools. In these families, children attended charter schools or technical schools where they were doing well. For some, convenience was a factor; they had family in their old community whom they relied on for transportation of their child.

Several parents pointed out that their move occurred during the pandemic, and sometimes this meant a delay in the transition to new schools, with a few parents keeping their children in the prior school while school was taking place remotely. Other parents mentioned how their children really struggled with remote schooling and had a hard time going back to school in person.

Of the five families that planned to keep their children in schools in the prior neighborhood, there are few obvious commonalities beyond being satisfied with their child's current school. Families were from all three cohorts, all parts of the state, had differently aged children, and identified with a mix of races/ethnicities. The outcomes of attending school outside the neighborhood included children being less likely to have friends in the new neighborhood than the overall sample, and they were also less likely to participate in recreational activities there. However, more than half of these families still said they spent more than 75% of their time in their new neighborhood, and they were just as likely to have a positive view of neighbors as families with children enrolled in local schools.

Health

Moving led to extraordinary improvements in health.

Participants were asked to rate three components of their health and their children's health: physical health, emotional well-being, and stress level on a 5-point scale. Then, they were asked how these

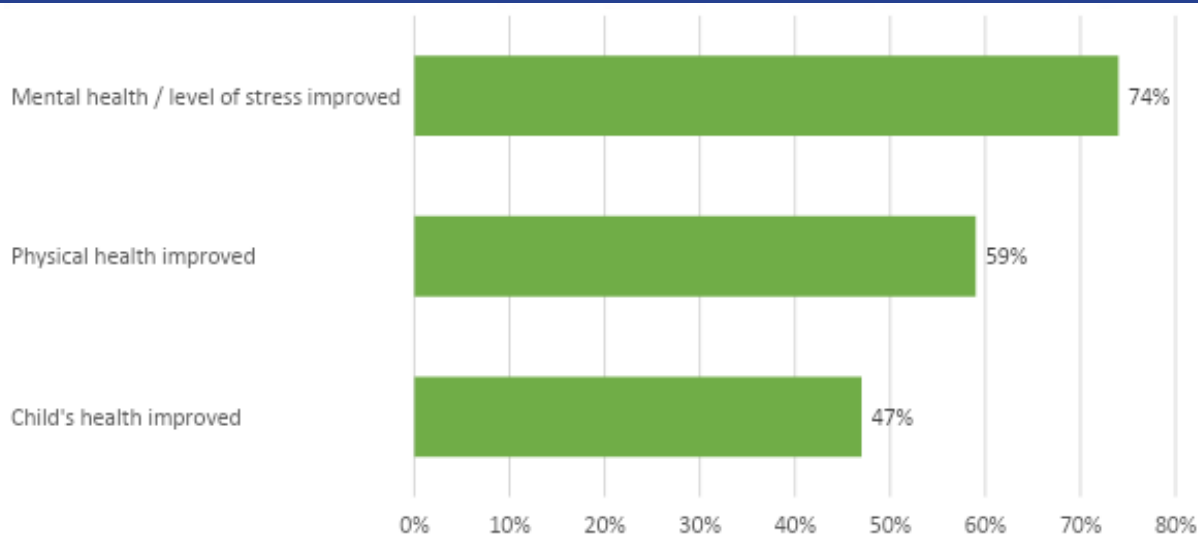
ratings compared to their health prior to their move, and if they said it had changed, they were asked if and how the change had to do with the move, their new neighborhood, and/or their new living conditions. The findings indicate that a substantial proportion of the participants experienced significant improvements in their health as a result of moving with the assistance of SNO Mass to a new community.

Fifty-nine percent of participants indicated their physical health had improved since they moved—and attributed the improvement to the move. Nearly three-quarters of the participants (74%) said their emotional well-being and their level of stress improved due to the move and their new living environments. Further, close to half of the participants (47%) said their children's health improved because of the move.

Just three participants (9%) reported their health had declined as a result of the move. Two indicated this was due to conflicts with their landlord or management company, including one who said she also had a pre-existing health condition that had worsened over time, and one who specified her stress increased due to her higher bills.

Common themes related to health improvements included lower stress, better sleep, safety, peace

Figure 6: Change in Health Attributed to Moving to their Current Neighborhood or Living Environment



and quiet, more exercise and outdoor time, more space, children spending more time outdoors with less supervision, and air quality.

“Over here, you can even see the stars better. They’re closer. One time, there was a shooting star shower.”

— Alejandra, mother of three, age 8 to 19

Having less stress and more peace of mind were the most common ways in which participants described how their health has improved since moving. Feeling safe was a huge factor for many who said they could now let their children outside without constant worry. They have less stress and anxiety because they no longer must be hypervigilant to keep themselves and their children safe. Many participants talked about spending more time outside and feeling healthier. “I can walk around without problems. And it’s quiet. I am happy.” Another participant said, “In [prior town] I couldn’t walk around. Now I can go for a walk and don’t worry. I feel safe and walk a lot more.”

Some comments from participants connected physical health improvements to better mental health and self-care. Alyssa said her physical health improved after moving: “I think because I can physically and mentally take care of myself better. I was having anxiety all the time—mental health can take a toll on my physical health too.” Another participant said her health improved “because where we live, we are in a better space—including mentally. And a better environment makes me happier. It’s a better environment and everything is not so dirty.”

Feeling safe in their new home and neighborhood helped participants sleep sounder. Coretta explained the health benefits she and her children have experienced: “I can sleep now. I used to be up all night due to gunshots. If I go to sleep, what

else is going to happen? I can sleep now and be at peace. And the kids are better now because they can socialize and do things.”

Several participants mentioned improvements to specific health conditions, including asthma, migraines, allergies, and anxiety. Some identified health improvements that resulted from the physical conditions of their units and neighborhoods. Several talked about previously living in units with mold, including one mother of two who said her children’s bedroom in their prior apartment had “mold in the walls.”²⁷ Alejandra’s son used to have recurring eye infections, which have disappeared since they moved 18 months ago. Charlotte, who had lived in her unit for 20 months at the time of the interview, said her health is much better now, including her allergies and anxiety. As she said, “Air quality—the environment—there is a ton of yard space and two enclosed porches. I choose where I want to be. My son as well, he hasn’t had to be on his medication or asthma pump—it’s better air quality.”

Participants who said their child’s health had improved due to the move shared what they thought contributed to these changes. They said their children “feel safer” and “have more freedom” in their new communities. Their children “have more physical activity being outside.”

“The kids are able to be outside and run around and ride bikes—without me saying ‘no’.”

— Abigaile, mother of three boys ages 6 to 10, Western Mass

Several participants felt their children were happier because they have “more running space and like the yard and community.” Blanca, a mother of two teenage sons said: “I notice their stress level has gone down. They feel safer.... They are comfortable at home, comfortable walking outside in the neighborhood by themselves.” Paula’s 13-year-old son’s

27 All Housing Choice Voucher Program (HCV) units must pass a Housing Quality Standards (HQS) inspection on a biennial basis (once every two years) for the owner to receive a rental subsidy. This may have occurred in between inspections.

health is a lot better “because he gets out more and is more active and has more confidence because he’s no longer overweight.” One participant who lives with her teenager and young adult child said she observed improvements in both children’s health because they now have their own rooms and more privacy.

Camila’s experience exemplifies the multitude of benefits that have come to her and her family from moving with SNO Mass. She said her daughter’s health improved and her own emotional well-being was “a lot better” than when she was living in her prior unit because she is less stressed.

The experience of participants in SNO Mass provides support for the findings from other studies of housing mobility programs that show large improvements in health for families that moved to opportunity areas.²⁸

“It’s more peace and quiet. The [old] neighborhood with all the rodents was not good. And my landlord was not good. Now...the neighborhood is good and there’s no rodents, and my landlord is real good. The kids feel a lot safer—because we don’t even lock our door. There’s a big yard out front and, on the side, and out back. We can sit on the porch and relax and not worry about people. They go to the park more.”

— Camila, moved from Boston to nearby suburb with three children



28 Sanbonmatsu, L., Marvakov, D., Potter, C., Yang, W., Adam, E., Congdon, W. J., Duncan, G. J., Gennetian, L. A., Katz, L. F., Kling, J. R., Kessler, R. C., Lindau, S. T., Ludwig, J., & McDade, T. W. (2012). The Long-Term Effects of Moving to Opportunity on Adult Health and Economic Self-Sufficiency. *Cityscape: A Journal of Policy Development and Research*, 14(2), 109. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research.; Pollack CE, Roberts LC, Peng RD et al. 2023. Association of a Housing Mobility Program with Childhood Asthma Symptoms and Exacerbations. *JAMA*. 329 (19), 1671-1681. Doi: 10.1001/jama.2023.6488.

Financial Stability

We asked participants if their financial situation had changed and whether they felt any more or less financially stable since moving. We also asked if they had new bills or higher costs in their new homes and communities. Most participants experienced no change in their financial situation since moving. However, six participants (18%) indicated they were more financially stable now, and four (12%) said they felt less financially stable. New or higher utility bills and higher costs for groceries were the most common expenses participants mentioned.

Eight participants indicated they had new or higher utility bills now, compared to their old unit, but reported their financial stability remained the same. This included Hilda, who moved from the North Shore to the Metro West region of the state, and said she felt the same in terms of financial stability, even though “everything is more expensive here—the lights and the heat.” In addition to utility bills, there were other expenses that some participants perceived as more costly now. Danika shared that she has more costs now, including a water bill, lawn care, and gas for driving. She said “I think it’s just life though. It’s teaching me how to live and take care of my own house.” She was nearing her completion of the 5-year Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program and was motivated and confident that she would purchase a home within five years. Morgan was unique in her experience of saving on gas since she moved closer to “everything” and does not need to drive as much, including for her job, friends, and children’s school.



Interestingly, most who indicated there were greater costs associated with living in their new place still felt financially stable—and some felt they were even more financially stable now. Abigaile said, “I feel more financially stable, even with the new bill for gas and higher costs of groceries.” Similarly, Blanca said she feels more stable, even though she has new bills, including a higher car payment (she purchased a newer car since moving), renter’s insurance, and gas money. Blanca indicated she felt more stable financially “because I’m able to manage money here better and save more here. I don’t know why.” Improvements in mental health and confidence were common themes among participants who reported feeling more financially stable in their new housing and community.

Among the four participants who said they feel less financially stable now, three associated this change with their higher costs of living. Anna said that water is not included in her rent, and the water bill is a burden. She also pays for gas and electricity, and she said it was not clear to her that water was not included in the rent. Two additional participants said they felt unprepared for their new bills, including water and sewer. Soledad explained, “Well, I wish I would have known about the bills like water, gas, electricity. I have never paid a water bill before, and the cost is a little higher than I was expecting.”

“For some reason, where I lived, I worked the same amount of hours and never had extra money. But where I live [now]—I pay water and sewer and electric and rent—I have extra. I was so, so stressed... But now, I have a little extra. I don’t know how. My level of stress is like a zero since I move—it’s way better.”

— Ella, Merrimack Valley

Landlords and Property Owners

SNO Mass provides landlord incentives to encourage property owners to participate in the HCV program, including a streamlined leasing process, a sign-on bonus, and support mediating any housing authority, property, or landlord-tenant issues that might arise after a SNO Mass participant has moved in. Two hoped-for outcomes are positive relationships with property owners and increased residential stability for tenants. We asked participants about their relationship with their landlord and whether it was any different from their relationship with their prior landlord. Overall, participants from a range of cities and towns with a variety of property types were happy with their new landlords. Eight participants (24%) said they had a problem communicating or a strained relationship with their landlord. All other movers indicated they had a good relationship with their new landlord, including six (18%) who said their current landlord is better than their previous landlord.

Residents who had positive experiences with their current landlord or property manager mentioned how responsive landlords were, but some also talked about their landlord's kindness and shared examples of them going out of their way or beyond what was expected. One property owner from a coastal town on the North Shore has been very engaged and responsible. Referring to his support, Alyssa said, "My landlord is really good. He's right over here when something needs doing. A tree fell in the yard, and he paid for a hotel when there was no power." Morgan on the South Shore explained that her new landlord is often at her house to do maintenance: "he does yard work, fixes things he notices that need fixing like the porch or walkway. And in the summertime, he puts the patio set out there for us."

Paula lives in a building operated by a property management company. She commented on the relationship with management and some of the offerings her building has: "I talk with the staff,

and I participate in some of the activities. I like the online portal and community board where residents post things." Zoe, who is pleased with her new housing complex in Central Massachusetts, said property management installed a grab bar in the unit and has been very responsive because "they care about their residents." One participant who lives in a neighborhood with "mostly homeowner housing" said the following about her landlord: "the owner was clear about—no one needs to know your business, that it's not your house." And several others said their landlords made kind gestures to make them feel welcome, including sharing their experience with the local schools, telling neighbors that a nice family was moving in, and helping with the shoveling and yard maintenance.

Like several of the other participants, Esperanza followed her praise for her current landlord with a note of comparison to her old landlord: "There was lots of drugs in [my old] building. You can't let the kids out at night. Police all the time. Rats. Mice. I always told the landlord, and they never did anything."

While most participants reported positive relationships with their landlords, eight (24%) had a complaint or reported having a negative experience with their landlord. These residents most often specified that they had requested repairs that were not addressed or not addressed quickly enough, and a few had conflicts about pet fees or rent and utility calculations that they felt were not accurate and impacted their relationship with the property owner. SNO Mass staff were there to intervene when Nora was having challenges with maintenance issues and paying her water bills. She said the property manager was standoffish, and she called her SNO Mass specialist to act as a third party to try and help maintain her tenancy. Because some participants moved to different types of units, some now interact with a property management company instead of directly with a landlord. Several of these participants, while not having any problems per se, talked about how they have fewer direct encounters with their landlord. One said "here, I don't interact. It's less personable."

Trade-offs, Benefits, and Drawbacks

Drawbacks were the exception.

Towards the end of the interview, participants were asked a question about the overall benefits and drawbacks to their family from living in their new community. While all participants (100%) provided examples of the benefits, just four participants (12%) identified a drawback. The majority (88%) of participants said they could not think of any drawbacks for themselves or their children as a result of moving or living in their SNO Mass neighborhood. The four who identified a drawback included one who drives her children to a school in their former town because her children are doing well there (and the bus costs are too high); one who has utility bills that are outside her budget; one who feels that her neighbors are harassing her; and one whose new neighborhood is farther from a close family member.

Only Isabella, the participant who has had “a lot of complaints from neighbors” because her children — 2 months and 4 years old — “make noise on

the third floor,” is critical of her neighborhood, which she describes as “not all that.” She works in her prior neighborhood and kept her children in a daycare there. Interestingly, when asked about her plans for the next 5–10 years, she said that she would like to stay in her SNO Mass neighborhood and buy a house there.

Conversations also illuminated the trade-offs that some families experienced to participate in the program. Participants from all geographic regions in the state talked about the effort required to find housing in opportunity areas with a competitive rental market. They also shared experiences with housing discrimination that are commonly cited barriers for voucher holders. This was mitigated for many families by the pre-move counseling support from SNO Mass staff and the positive relationships they found with their landlords in new communities. Several participants traded larger apartments in their previous neighborhood for better quality but smaller apartments with private outdoor space. Although it was not identified directly but rather came up intermittently throughout some interviews, perhaps the most challenging exchange for a handful of participants was distance from a familiar and culturally similar network of people, even when the new community was perceived as welcoming and resource-rich.





Participation in SNO Mass was empowering.

Participants came to their new homes and towns with different ideas about what they wanted from the neighborhood. For the families whose neighborhood experience was different than what they expected, it was almost always more positive than they had hoped. As in other housing mobility programs, most families had both a specific “push factor” such as a neighborhood that felt dangerous, as well as the more universal “pull factors,” for example wanting access to better schools and green space. It is not surprising that an increased feeling of safety and calm would be realized during the first 6–24 months in the SNO Mass program.

Many participants talked about increasing confidence and a positive shift in their outlook while living in their SNO Mass neighborhoods. As families began to reflect on their experience, one of the common narratives that emerged was how participants had gained a feeling of empowerment and an expansion in their own capacity. This came from the support and skills gained through the counseling process and learning to feel comfortable in a new environment. With more peace and quiet

in their lives, participants could relax with their children and turn toward their own education or financial goals.

This expansiveness was most evident in conversations about planning for the future. When we asked a question about staying in the same neighborhood for the next five to ten years, almost two-thirds of the participants said that they wanted to become homeowners. However, in looking ahead, participants were also aware their SNO Mass neighborhoods might not be a feasible location to buy property given the high cost of housing in those cities and towns. Paula, who lives with her two children in a town that borders several of Boston’s southwestern neighborhoods, said “I would need to afford it when I purchase a home, so it would be out of here.” Blanca, who is hoping to finish a college degree in psychology, and loves where she lives in Western MA, has been looking at houses for the last two months. She chuckled as she described how SNO Mass helped her to “push myself and my family” and tells us, “Maybe I can buy my house in this neighborhood [because] I always thought it was impossible to move into this neighborhood — but if I made it here, I can probably buy my home here.”

Program Recommendations

We learned that mobility counseling was very important to families, and very different from the standard assistance provided to HCV voucher holders. The aspects of mobility counseling that rose to the top during interviews with SNO Mass participants included helping to identify or clarify unique family needs and goals, responding quickly to any problems, facilitating more positive landlord interactions, and providing support and encouragement when the housing search was hard or long. These findings align with qualitative research from the Creating Moves to Opportunity (CMTO) Program showing the importance of mobility counseling to program outcomes in the Seattle region.²⁹ The relationship built during the SNO Mass pre-move counseling process provides a foundation for trust and support throughout a participant's tenure in the program.³⁰

Mobility programs should include conversations about neighborhood diversity.

Neighborhoods with a range of characteristics and demographic profiles (location, socioeconomic characteristics, size, density, housing types, etc.) were all able to offer resources and benefits that families said were important to their health and wellbeing. Although half of the participants said that their neighborhood or city/town was diverse and 86% said it was inclusive, some families also had a more challenging experience with neighbors or others in the community, and a few expressed feelings of discomfort or isolation and wanted to keep their lives anchored to their prior community. Although it is not necessary in order to enjoy the benefits of SNO Mass neighborhoods, spending time in the neighborhood engaging with others through social and recreational activities can help individuals build

relationships and feel a sense of belonging in their community. When families experience a sense of belonging and establish local connections, they are likely to have stronger support systems that can help them navigate any challenges and trade-offs in their new neighborhoods.

By addressing potential changes in the level of diversity in SNO Mass communities as compared to prior neighborhoods — by race, ethnicity, income, etc. — mobility counseling could help families anticipate and prepare for challenges with acclimation. For example, we observed that a few Hispanic families were more likely to express discomfort or isolation and/or to keep their lives centered in their prior community. As the number of SNO Mass participants increases, there may be opportunities to connect peers with similar interests and/or backgrounds or to connect a new participant with a former participant. Other housing mobility programs have had “virtual block parties” that connect families from different communities to share strategies and resources around adapting to neighborhoods where people might not “look like you.”³¹

Emphasize and develop post-move counseling.

After three years of operation, the number of families moving and staying in their SNO Mass neighborhoods for at least two years is relatively high. Of the 62 families who moved between July 2019 and December 2021 (the population that would have been eligible for this study), 60% are still in the same apartment and 73% are still in a High/Very High Opportunity neighborhood. After a participant moves, SNO Mass offers frequent

29 DeLuca, S., Katz, L.K. & Oppenheimer, S. (2022). When Someone Cares About You, It's Priceless: Reducing Administrative Burdens and Boosting Housing Search Confidence to Increase Opportunity Moves for Voucher Holders. *The Russell Sage Journal of the Social Sciences*.

30 Participants are generally in the SNO Mass program between 2-4 years depending on the length of time that it takes to lease an apartment. Participants can also make a second move with the program and continue to receive program support.

31 The Inclusionary Communities Project (ICP) in the Dallas region has virtual events where participants connect with one another online. Programs in New York State have also held successful post-move events with families in the mobility program “Making Moves” on Long Island.

check-ins, conducts a series of 4 surveys in the first few months, and offers post-move counseling for up to two years. In our study we found that there was significantly less interaction with counselors after moving as compared to the pre-move engagement, likely in part because there are no requirements to do so, and the needs of participants are not as clear or may be evolving in the first few months (in comparison to the pre-move goal of leasing an apartment).

Much of the information about community resources and landlord relations is provided during individualized pre-move counseling and during optional workshops. This material and support should be provided — whether shifted or adapted or repeated — as part of the program’s post-move services.

Interviews point to additional ways that post-move counseling can better serve SNO Mass participants. Settling into a new area can take time, and we heard how many participants were still getting their bearings, were busy working, and planned to explore more of their community resources at a later point. Other residents seemed unaware of the range of services and supports that SNO Mass provides, including potential post-move financial support.³² Some of the information about local community organizations and services provided as part of the housing search process should be shared post-move—once families have had the opportunity to attend to household needs, take a breath, and take in their surroundings. Families may also be more aware of where their own information gaps lie and the types of activities and resources that they could use additional support to find and access (e.g., school sports, daycare options). We recommend that SNO Mass create an expectation that topical workshops or counseling sessions during the post-move phase are crucial if not



³² Post-move surveys conducted by SNO Mass are not included in this study but provide additional information about the types of support needed and challenges that participants have had during the first two years.

required — perhaps by tying additional program funding to engagement — and that they are offered online as well in person.

Although only 24 percent of families experienced any challenges with neighbors or property-related issues, all renters could likely benefit from ongoing proactive assistance to build and maintain positive relationships with landlords and management companies. Many SNO Mass participants have been in the HCV program for a long time (the average length of time participants in our sample had had an HCV voucher was 11 years) and have been great tenants, but issues naturally occur in rental properties for voucher and non-voucher holding tenants alike. SNO Mass counseling can help participants prepare for and manage any conflicts around shared space including noise and use of public space. Developing skills around property management and negotiations with landlords will continue to serve the families over the long term as they transition to other apartments or homeownership. Providing timely post-move support or mediation when necessary and ensuring stable tenancies will help to build trust with property owners who may then be more apt to rent to additional SNO Mass participants. Post-move counseling and workshops could emphasize the importance of nurturing relationships with landlords once individuals have moved into a property.

Improve maintenance and management of properties in the HCV program with data collected through SNO Mass.

So many of the SNO Mass movers spoke about the poor condition of their prior living situation—not only issues with neighborhood safety, for example—but also with the apartments and properties they lived in. This is an interesting finding, given that units have to pass inspections at least once every two years to remain eligible for the HCV program. (It's also worth noting that more than half of the

participants said they had a good relationship with their prior landlord regardless of the property condition.) Highlighting the locations where SNO Mass participants moved from for the RAAs' HCV inspections department could address potential concerns for other voucher holders. SNO Mass counselors could also continue to follow up with participants in post-move surveys to see if the same pattern continues across multiple tenancies and to help target landlord outreach, education, and support.³³



Partnering with Schools to Improve Outcomes

Research on neighborhood effects puts schools at the center of understanding how and why neighborhoods matter for children. Educational outcomes are also of primary interest since many families identify better schools as one of their motivations for moving and a top priority for choosing a particular community. Our participants recognized improved social dynamics for their children as an outcome that was just as important as academics and services such as extracurricular activities.

Children in families that moved from challenging neighborhood environments likely experienced the same relief from stress that their parents did — perhaps even more so. Many participants noted that safer neighborhoods meant more freedom for their children because their children could now play

³³ Although this report has not focused on the housing search process in SNO Mass, it seems worth noting that many participants did experience housing discrimination when searching for apartments in the opportunity neighborhoods. EOHLC has funded a “Fair Housing Initiative” that has brought together 4 fair housing centers across the state and is doing testing, enforcement, public education, etc. <https://www.mafham.org/>. We recommend that EOHLC also consider partnering with Unlock NYC - Home (weunlock.nyc) and other local housing organizations to build a system to identify and report fair housing violations.

outside unsupervised. There was also a disturbingly high number of children who were being bullied in past schools for whom the move improved their social and emotional well-being.

A second positive outcome was the additional support and attention that children, especially those with special needs, were able to receive at new schools. Although SNO Mass cannot address all the complicated factors that influence educational outcomes, this need warrants consideration. SNO Mass can create partnerships with other state-level agencies focused on special education to consider how to best serve voucher families that are part of the mobility program. Partnerships may be especially helpful for establishing a network of support and resources for families moving to different school districts.

A targeted emphasis on supporting better school outcomes is a relatively new area of focus for mobility counseling. Highly ranked school systems are often baked into a program's definition of opportunity neighborhoods. Pre-move counseling provides tips on what to consider when searching for schools and refers families to websites such as Great Schools, which note statistics on school and district achievement and student diversity among other characteristics.³⁴ Understanding which measures of school climate to consider most likely requires training from providers working in this field.³⁵

The National Coalition on School Diversity, a network of practitioners and researchers working to promote school diversity and reduce racial and economic isolation in schools, is developing an "Interdistrict Assessment Tool" that can be an additional tool for families and counselors.³⁶

Overall, because schools are one of the significant "opportunities" in opportunity neighborhoods, one hope for the program is that children will change schools. Our analysis suggests that there may be times when staying in the prior school is a good

choice, such as when children are in a good school already or only have a year or two of high school left.

Support neighborhood stability and retention.

Families became part of their neighborhoods naturally and through their children. In order to maximize their ability to access all resources, SNO Mass should first ensure that families have the counseling and financial support from SNO Mass and other local resources to enroll their children in all available local activities that may be of interest — recreational activities in particular seem to foster friendships and broaden neighborhood investment. This may require additional focus on how housing and mobility services will be coordinated with other types of organizational assistance post-move.

Promote long-term financial stability and economic growth.

Many SNO Mass participants want to become homeowners; for some it was a short-term goal, while for others it was more of a long-term goal. Most indicated they want to stay in their current neighborhood or one like it, but for financial reasons believe they will have to leave to afford a home. SNO Mass should build partnerships with financial planning and first-time home-buyers' programs, as well as consider a special counseling offering for participants interested in homeownership. SNO Mass counselors could connect participants to the Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program, which may be a good next step for SNO Mass participants interested in homeownership. A few participants we interviewed mentioned they were currently in the FSS program and saving for homeownership.

³⁴ School Ratings & Reviews for Public & Private Schools: GreatSchools.

³⁵ See: School Climate Survey Compendium | National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE) ([ed.gov](https://www.ncssle.org/))

³⁶ See: The National Coalition on School Diversity ([school-diversity.org](https://www.school-diversity.org/))

Recommendations from Participants

Toward the end of each interview, we asked participants to name two program improvements they would suggest to SNO Mass program planners. About three-quarters offered suggestions, and the remainder said that it was good or great the way it is. Participants in the third and final interview group were more likely to describe an issue with staff or staff turnover as a challenge, whereas participants in the first group, who were part of the pilot phase of the program, were more likely to identify a problem with knowing what neighborhoods they could search in. The following two broad themes surfaced when discussing how the program could make improvements:

- Improve communication with participants, specifically information about how the housing search process will work in SNO Mass, and increase communication between the housing authority staff and mobility staff during the search process.
- Increase access to and the supply of apartments in opportunity areas that are affordable within the payment standard.

To respond to these suggestions, SNO Mass could consider training and pairing experienced staff from

one RAA with staff at another that is understaffed or faces challenges. This could help increase clarity and set expectations about information that must be provided to households, as well as expectations around staff response time to participant calls or emails. Second, EOHLC could develop a process to share neighborhood information gathered from families that are current participants (e.g., assemble summaries based on movers' experiences) to inform training, to create peer support groups, and to share knowledge gained through the housing search process.

EOHLC might consider increasing the payment standards in some areas and/or expand the focus on SNO Mass neighborhoods (or cities and towns) that have not attracted or not been accessible to families. Some more "moderate opportunity" census tracts may also be considered for the program based on the data shared in surveys and findings of this study. Lastly, more rental housing, especially affordable housing, is needed. It is important to note that high-cost local and regional housing markets across the state continue to be extremely competitive, and EOHLC must keep HCV payment standards within the ranges allowed by HUD. Cities and towns that are opportunity areas across the state must also address the severe shortage of affordable housing in their communities.



Connecting Research on Housing Mobility

An important contribution of this study to the SNO Mass program is understanding if and how participants' observations of their neighborhoods and experiences align with the program's goals and measures of opportunity. Mobility programs typically use census tracts as the unit of analysis to define neighborhood opportunity, even though we know that neighborhoods do not fit neatly into census tract boundaries. Similarly, the measures of "opportunity" that characterize neighborhoods are imperfect and often based on what data is available rather than what families are accessing and say matters most.

In this study, we learned that families continue to cross neighborhood lines, to prior neighborhoods and other locations, and heard about how they engage with people and places where they live, work, attend school, shop, and socialize. The in-depth interviews allowed us to contribute a more precise picture of the neighborhood contexts in which SNO Mass participants are living. Future research might build on the study findings to identify additional or different "opportunity" measures based on these lived experiences. For example, families described very meaningful "passive" benefits from moving and living in a safe, calm environment; these are ones that don't require active engagement but are part of the story about how neighborhoods impact individual outcomes. In another example, socializing in multiple neighborhoods did not diminish the returns of participation in SNO Mass for adults.

New research also suggests how one's neighborhood of residence may, in some cases, be less important than social connections across places.

Raj Chetty et al. describe the significance of economic connectedness—defined as connections to people of higher economic status—as being even more important to longer term economic advancement for lower income individuals than living in neighborhoods with low poverty rates and other community characteristics that have been associated with economic gains for children in mobility programs.³⁷ The research, relying on Facebook friendships as a measure of connection, invites us to think more about the nature — the origin, depth, and sustainability - of these social relationships. When ties that cross class and race are critical to getting ahead as suggested in this and past research on bridging ties,³⁸ the question becomes, is it enough for participants (children especially) to simply live in the communities but remain outsiders to local relationships? Is there something SNO Mass, mobility programs, or another stakeholder organization could do to encourage or foster class- and race-crossing relationships at the local level?

Our findings add to this dialogue by illustrating how and when the social connections of SNO Mass participants crossed neighborhood boundaries and where and why children and adults expanded their social networks. For example, new local schools and recreational activities appear to be an important mechanism linking community to youth development, and new friendships for children came from spending time locally. SNO Mass has been successful in increasing the number of voucher households that move to places with more economically advantaged households. Participants felt connected to their community in different ways, and where participants spent time was guided by personal choice as well as by availability of

37 Chetty, R., Jackson, M.O., Kuchler, T. et al. (2022). Social capital II: determinants of economic connectedness. *Nature*, 608, 122–134. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-022-04997-3>; Reeves, R., & Fall, C. (2022). Seven key takeaways from Chetty's new research on friendship and economic mobility. Brookings Institution. Retrieved from <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/4140916/seven-key-takeaways-from-chettys-new-research-on-friendship-and-economic-mobility/4949051/> CID: 20.500.12592/m212nd.

38 Briggs, X. de Souza. (1998). Brown Kids in White Suburbs: Housing Mobility and the Many Faces of Social Capital. *Housing Policy Debate*, 9(1), 177-221.

opportunities.

A recent article about the impacts of housing mobility on asthma incidence reinforces the findings in this study about the importance placed on the physical environment — it served both as a motivation to move and is linked to SNO Mass participants' explanations of the improvements in physical and mental health for themselves and their children. In Baltimore, children with asthma whose families participated in a program that helped them move into low-poverty neighborhoods "experienced significant improvements in asthma related disease with measures of stress, including social cohesion, neighborhood safety, and urban stress, estimated to mediate between 29% and 35% of the association between moving and asthma exacerbations."³⁹

In late 2020 the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) invited leaders in housing, health, and related fields to help shape a research agenda for programs that could increase residential mobility to lower-poverty neighborhoods.⁴⁰ The findings in this study respond to several focal areas identified in this roadmap such as motivation for moving, agency about moving, need for support, and level of civic engagement in prior and new neighborhoods. The additional interview data collected can serve as a further resource to gain insight about topics of interest to housing mobility researchers and practitioners. For instance, the interviews include rich material on participant housing search, including knowledge, preference, and community selection processes, experience of and responses to housing discrimination, use and value of different aspects of counseling supports and services, and comparisons between prior and current school environments. Future work could also pair the interview data with pre-move assessment data (which was collected for all SNO Mass participants), post-move survey results, and compare findings with HCV administrative data on all current SNO Mass movers as well as to all families in EOHLC's HCV program.

Moreover, while in-depth interviews with participants was a very effective methodology for this study, future research could tap into other methods such as focus groups and Photovoice, an innovative participatory method that engages participants in sharing their experiences through audio recordings, photographs, journaling, and/or video recordings. Talking with SNO Mass participants who did not move to opportunity areas or participants who dropped out of the program may also provide important insights that can inform future program adjustments. Landlords, either those renting to SNO Mass participants or not, could be invited to participate in focus groups to broaden our understanding of their perspective and experience.

It would be informative to conduct an analysis of housing market characteristics, including patterns of racial and economic segregation, neighborhood change, and school quality measures alongside the qualitative observations shared by families in the study. Data about pertinent contextual factors that might mediate outcomes can inform planning for SNO Mass programming and help link EOHLC's findings to developing programs and emerging research in other cities.⁴¹



39 Pollack CE, Roberts LC, Peng RD, et al. (2023). Association of a Housing Mobility Program With Childhood Asthma Symptoms and Exacerbations. *JAMA*. 329(19), 1671–1681. doi:10.1001/jama.2023.6488

40 See: Report of the Housing Mobility Research Road Map Project ([jhu.edu](https://www.jhu.edu))

41 See: Supporting Moves to Opportunity | MDRC; Community Choice Demonstration | [HUD.gov](https://www.hud.gov) / U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)

Conclusion

SNO Mass is successful at helping voucher holder families move to and stay in the program's designated neighborhoods, expanding access to opportunities. The findings from this study highlight the specific opportunities that families gained access to and appreciated in opportunity neighborhoods, especially welcoming outdoor public activities, private yards and green space, better schools, and neighborhood amenities. Participants selected communities that felt safe and stable, and felt that with some adjustment they fit in across places with different levels of economic, racial, and ethnic diversity. Living in SNO Mass neighborhoods was not isolating for most families. A key contribution of this study is the understanding that, for families in SNO Mass, experiencing important neighborhood benefits doesn't always require some "action" beyond just being there.

The study also demonstrated that voucher holders, like many or even most people today, have multiple neighborhoods in their lives and that this does not diminish the benefits of moving to resource-rich communities.

The study also demonstrated that voucher holders, like many or even most people today, have multiple neighborhoods in their lives and that this does not diminish the benefits of moving to resource-rich communities. And related to the above — the findings suggest that moving is also expansive in ways that go beyond greater access to physical places. Participant's impressions and characterization of neighborhoods as more or less racially, ethnically or economically diverse were less influential than more immediate and personal exchanges that made a community seem smaller, comfortable, and close. At the same time, participants explained how moving also made their world larger, by enabling them to move to places which previously seemed

to have almost insurmountable barriers to entry (thereby helping them to realize housing choice) and by increasing the range of places where they spent time. Moving to and living in the SNO Mass neighborhoods appeared to build feelings of personal capacity as if through an expansion of physical and mental space.

The study provides several directions that SNO Mass can pursue to optimize opportunities for families. These include offering comprehensive information about new neighborhoods and local organizations, focusing more on post-move supports, and effectively addressing potential conflicts related to rental properties. The findings suggest that SNO Mass can anticipate and respond to participants' social needs and community expectations, building on the trust and support provided during the pre-move counseling phase and helping to connect participants to local networks once they have had time to settle in. There are also specific areas where the findings can inform policies that leverage the housing stability of participants in SNO Mass. EOHLC may choose to conduct further research on how housing programs can best support educational outcomes and seek out partnerships, especially for families with children with special needs or those at risk of academic or social challenges.

This report offers a contextualized view of SNO Mass participants' experiences moving to a new neighborhood and insights into the impacts of the program on their families. After less than two years, the benefits participants spoke of were profound—reduced stress, improved physical and mental health, feeling safe, feeling at home, better schools —improvements many described as life changing. It will be important to explore how these positive findings hold over time, deepen, or expand.

Appendices

APPENDIX A: Demographic and housing characteristics of study participants and all SNO Mass movers

Table 2: Demographics

| | Interviewed (N=34) | | Not interviewed (N=66) | |
|---|--------------------|------|------------------------|------|
| Gender | | | | |
| Female | 33 | 97% | 64 | 97% |
| Male | 1 | 3% | 2 | 3% |
| Total | 34 | 100% | 66 | 100% |
| Race | | | | |
| Black / African American, alone | 7 | 21% | 19 | 29% |
| White, alone | 27 | 79% | 42 | 64% |
| Two or more races | 0 | 0% | 1 | 2% |
| Indigenous, alone | 0 | 0% | 1 | 2% |
| Other | 0 | 0% | 3 | 5% |
| Total | 34 | 100% | 66 | 100% |
| Hispanic | | | | |
| No | 18 | 53% | 36 | 55% |
| Yes | 16 | 47% | 30 | 46% |
| Total | 34 | 100% | 66 | 100% |
| Race/Ethnicity | | | | |
| Black, Non-Hispanic | 6 | 18% | 17 | 26% |
| White, Non-Hispanic | 12 | 35% | 19 | 29% |
| Black, Hispanic | 1 | 3% | 2 | 3% |
| White, Hispanic | 15 | 44% | 23 | 35% |
| Other, Hispanic | 0 | 0 | 5 | 8% |
| Total | 34 | 100% | 66 | 100% |
| Annual Household Income (monthly x 12) | | | | |
| Range | \$0 to \$66,700 | | \$0 to \$108,600 | |
| Mean | \$27,150 | | \$26,170 | |
| Median | \$26,210 | | \$20,410 | |
| Annual Household Income | | | | |
| Less than \$10,000 | 7 | 21% | 9 | 14% |
| \$10,001 - \$20,000 | 6 | 18% | 24 | 36% |
| \$20,001 - \$40,000 | 12 | 35% | 20 | 30% |
| \$40,001 - \$60,000 | 8 | 24% | 9 | 14% |

| | | | | |
|--|----|------|----|------|
| \$60,001 - \$80,000 | 1 | 3% | 2 | 3% |
| \$80,001 - \$100,000 | 0 | 0% | 2 | 3% |
| Total | 34 | 100% | 66 | 100% |
| | | | | |
| Earned Income | 19 | 56% | 32 | 49% |
| Other Income (e.g., TAFDC, EAEDC, SSI, Social Security, child support) | 22 | 65% | 55 | 83% |

Table 3: Household Characteristics

| | Interviewed (N=34) | | Not interviewed (N=66) | |
|--|--------------------|------|------------------------|------|
| Household Size | | | | |
| Range | 2 to 6 | | 2 to 8 | |
| Mean | 3.6 | | 3.6 | |
| Median | 4.0 | | 3.0 | |
| 2 people | 5 | 15% | 12 | 18% |
| 3 people | 9 | 27% | 23 | 35% |
| 4 people | 16 | 47% | 20 | 30% |
| 5 or more people | 4 | 12% | 11 | 17% |
| Total | 34 | 100% | 66 | 100% |
| | | | | |
| Number of adults in household | | | | |
| Range | 1 to 3 | | 1 to 5 | |
| Mean | 1.5 | | 1.4 | |
| Median | 1.0 | | 1.0 | |
| Number of Households with Children under age 18 | | | | |
| Range | 1 to 4 | | 0 to 6 | |
| Mean | 2.1 | | 2.2 | |
| Median | 2.0 | | 2.0 | |
| Number of Children by Age | | | | |
| Age 6 and under | | | | |
| Range | 0 to 2 | | 0 to 2 | |
| Mean | 0.5 | | 0.5 | |
| Median | 0.0 | | 0.0 | |
| Ages 7 - 12 | | | | |
| Range | 0 to 2 | | 0 to 4 | |
| Mean | 1.0 | | 1.0 | |
| Median | 1.0 | | 1.0 | |
| Ages 13 - 17 | | | | |
| Range | 0 to 3 | | 0 to 4 | |
| Mean | 0.6 | | 0.7 | |
| Median | 0.5 | | 1.0 | |
| Number of Older Youth/Young Adults (18-24) | | | | |
| Range | 0 to 2 | | 0 to 6 | |
| Mean | 2.1 | | 2.2 | |
| Median | 2.0 | | 2.0 | |

Table 4: Housing History and Voucher Characteristics

| | Interviewed (N=34) | | Not interviewed (N=66) | |
|--|--------------------|------|------------------------|------|
| Years with HCV (at the time of the interview) | | | | |
| Range | 2.6 - 23.5 years | | N/A | N/A |
| Mean | 10.9 | | N/A | N/A |
| Median | 9.3 | | N/A | N/A |
| Years at prior address | | | | |
| Range | 0.8 - 22.8 years | | 0.6 to 33.9 years | |
| Mean | 8.8 | | 9.1 | |
| Median | 6.8 | | 6.4 | |
| Original Regional Administering Agency (RAA) | | | | |
| Berkshire | 1 | 3% | 1 | 2% |
| CTI | 14 | 41% | 21 | 32% |
| HAC | 0 | 0% | 1 | 2% |
| Metro | 5 | 15% | 9 | 14% |
| NHS | 2 | 6% | 8 | 12% |
| RCAP | 2 | 6% | 6 | 9% |
| SMOC | 4 | 12% | 18 | 27% |
| Way Finders | 6 | 18% | 2 | 3% |
| Total | 34 | 100% | 66 | 100% |
| Post-Move Regional Administering Agency (RAA) | | | | |
| Berkshire | 1 | 3% | 1 | 2% |
| CTI | 11 | 32% | 19 | 29% |
| HAC | 0 | 0% | 1 | 2% |
| Metro | 5 | 15% | 9 | 14% |
| NHS | 2 | 6% | 1 | 2% |
| RCAP | 0 | 0% | 6 | 9% |
| SMOC | 9 | 27% | 27 | 41% |
| Way Finders | 6 | 18% | 2 | 3% |
| Total | 34 | 100% | 66 | 100% |

| Child Opportunity Index (COI) Ranking for New Neighborhood | | | | |
|---|--------|------|--------|------|
| Very High Opportunity | 15 | 44% | 22 | 33% |
| High Opportunity | 16 | 47% | 43 | 65% |
| Moderate Opportunity ⁴² | 3 | 9% | 1 | 2% |
| Total | 34 | 100% | 66 | 100% |
| | | | | |
| Voucher size (# bedrooms) | | | | |
| Range | 2 to 5 | | 2 to 6 | |
| Mean | 3.0 | | 3.1 | |
| Median | 3.0 | | 3.0 | |

Table 5: Type of home

| | Interviewed (N=34) | | Not Interviewed (N=66) | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|------|-------------------------------|------|
| Type of home | | | | |
| Single-family home | 12 | 35% | 12 | 18% |
| Low-rise building | 10 | 29% | 22 | 33% |
| Semi-detached / townhouse | 7 | 21% | 23 | 35% |
| Duplex | 1 | 3% | 7 | 11% |
| Apartment complex | 2 | 6% | 1 | 2% |
| High-rise | 1 | 3% | 1 | 2% |
| NA | 1 | 3% | 0 | 0% |
| Total | 34 | 100% | 66 | 100% |

⁴² Three of the four families moved to towns that were High Opportunity under COI 1.0 but not COI 2.0, and the fourth family EOHLC made an exception for because the apartment was right on the border of a High Opportunity area and HAC had been having such a difficult time finding units.

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