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# The Incidence and Impacts of Student Transiency in Upstate New York's Rural School Districts

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*Chronic student mobility, and in particular the mobility of students from low-income backgrounds, poses a serious yet underdocumented problem for rural schools. This article combines analyses of state-level school district data with survey and interview data to examine the patterns of low-income student mobility in upstate New York, and to assess the impacts on, and responses by, schools and other community institutions. The incidence and effects of student mobility are particularly pronounced in smaller, limited-resource districts. School district administrators report significant negative consequences due to the fiscal and administrative costs associated with high-need, highly mobile students. Student transiency not only requires extra administrative resources from teachers, guidance counselors, and other school staff, but the unpredictability of the movement vastly complicates planning and budgeting processes. Results portray a significant, high-need segment of the upstate New York population that is largely unrecognized, untargeted, and both socially and academically at risk.*

Most residential mobility is popularly understood as being both voluntary and largely opportunity-related. That is, people choose to move in order to obtain more desirable or lucrative employment, to improve their quality of life, to enter a better school district, or in some other way take advantage of perceived greater opportunities at migration destinations. Hence, mobility is often understood as an investment in one's human capital, and according to this understanding, people tend to move to areas where the highest "return" on their investment may be realized (Lichter & Costanzo, 1987). However, residential movement and one of its consequences—student transiency—is largely unplanned and unpredictable. Instead of yielding greater opportunity, residential mobility associated with student transiency is both symptomatic of and a causal factor in household insecurity and broader community economic disadvantage.

While there is a growing literature associated with student transiency, this research has tended to focus on transiency within urban settings (Alexander, Entwisle, & Dauber, 1996; Bruno & Isken, 1996; Conniff, 1998; Kerbow, Azcoitia, & Buell, 2003; Lash & Kirkpatrick, 1990) or the relationship between student transiency and academic underachievement (Pribesh & Downey, 1999; Rumberger, Larson, Ream, & Palardy, 1999; Swanson & Schneider, 1999; Tucker, Marx, & Long, 1998; Wood, Halfon, Scarlata, Newacheck, & Nessim, 1993). In contrast, my focus primarily is on nonmetro schools and school districts. In so doing, I emphasize that chronic mobility of low-income students is not simply an urban phenomenon. Second, instead of exploring the connection between transiency and academic underachievement, I am more broadly concerned with the community context within which student transiency occurs. As such, I discuss how communities and community institutions are affected by student transiency and the chronic mobility of low-income households, as well as what this may imply for school reform and public policy.

## Student Transiency and its Consequences for Public Education

While the U.S. is generally a mobile society, some groups are far more likely to make residential changes than others, including renters and people living below the pov-

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erty line. Between March 1999 and March 2000, roughly 16% of the population changed residence. Yet, during that same time, nearly 33% of renters moved, and nearly 28% of people living in households below the poverty level moved (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). One of the effects of this residential change is student mobility, usually defined as the nonroutine and unscheduled transfer of students from one school to another.

A certain amount of student movement is to be expected in any school system. However, some students are disproportionately likely to make multiple moves. Similarly, some schools and school districts are disproportionately likely to experience higher rates of student mobility. Students most likely to be highly mobile tend to come from low income families, inner city areas, migrant or limited English proficiency backgrounds, and/or single-parent families (Branz-Spall, Rosenthal, & Wright, 2003; Rumberger et al., 1999; U.S. General Accounting Office [GAO], 1994; Wood et al., 1993). Consequently, the schools most likely to experience high mobility include those in urban and high-poverty areas (Bruno & Isken, 1996; Capps & Maxwell, 2002; Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, 1996; Rumberger, 2003). However, chronic residential mobility of limited resource families also occurs in many rural areas—places that also may have the least available resources, both economic and political, to address the needs of low income movers (Fitchen, 1994, 1995).

The academic consequences of student transiency have been debated, but most research points to profoundly negative effects (Hartman, 2002; Wright, 1999). The U.S. GAO (1994) found that about 17% of third graders had attended three or more schools since kindergarten and therefore could be considered "highly mobile." Forty-one percent of these highly mobile third graders scored below grade level in reading, and about 31% scored below grade level in math. In comparison, only 26% of stable students (those who attended only one school since kindergarten) tested below grade level in reading and about 16% tested below grade level in math. The study also found that highly mobile third graders were far more likely to repeat a grade than stable students. In their study of four groups of transient students, Ingersoll, Scamman, and Eckerling (1989) also found a strong, uniformly negative relationship between student mobility and academic attainment, particularly in the lower grades. Evidence suggests that transiency also affects school completion: Rumberger and Larson (1998) found that students who changed high schools even once were less than half as likely as more stable students to complete their high school education.[1]

Research also points to the impacts of student transiency on schools themselves. Student transiency can cause significant disruption to classrooms (Conniff, 1998), resulting in slowed curricula and loss of instructional time as a consequence of behavioral problems among new students (Sanderson, 2003). In a study of 21 classes in a single urban elementary school, Lash and Kirkpatrick (1990) found that teachers rarely received advance notice of new student arrivals. In addition to increased administrative and bookkeeping tasks, teachers often needed to re-teach material so that new students could catch up academically. This created classroom management problems as new students learned classroom rules and adapted to new peer groups, but it also affected social cohesion within the classroom. As a second grade teacher explained, "One of the things we want to establish is that we are a group, and if that group keeps crumbling, it's a little harder (to establish) than in stable schools" (Lash & Kirkpatrick, p. 186).

This is consistent with the work of Bruno and Isken (1996), who, in their study of transiency within an inner city school, report that teachers repeatedly described how student movement created extra burdens by increasing the administrative workload and decreasing the regular instructional time. However, more significant was the disruption caused when enrollment change necessitated the reorganization of classrooms (i.e., either merging because of shrinking numbers or splitting because of growing numbers of students), an event that could be expected to occur anywhere from 1 and 5 times at any grade level during any given school year. In sum, student transiency poses serious challenges for schools and school districts and is associated with significant social and academic risk factors.

## Examining Student Transiency in Rural Upstate New York

> The ones that concern me are the families that just drift from rental to rental. We have 2 or 3 families in particular that I'm thinking of that just seem to bounce from one neighboring district to the next. It's a factor of poverty. They pay rent for a while and then they get evicted and they have to move on and rent somewhere else. (Superintendent, northern upstate New York)

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[1]Some researchers have argued that the connection between mobility and academic underachievement is spurious given that high mobility is often associated with other risk factors for underachievement. That is, "the predominant reasons students who perform less well in school than students who do not move is that the two groups differ before any moves occur" including the disproportionate likelihood of mobile students to come from poor, single-parent families with low community attachment (Pribesh & Downey, 1999, p. 531). However, other studies have found that residential relocation has negative impacts on academic performance even after sociodemographic factors are controlled for (e.g., Wood et al., 1993).

Despite its initial economic expansion, upstate New York,[2] a predominantly rural region,[3] has experienced significant and sustained decline in the past several decades due in large part to industrial and economic restructuring. This restructuring has eroded the region's manufacturing base, replacing it with lower-wage service sector work (Kuzniak, 1999; see also Albrecht, Albrecht, & Albrecht, 2000). A study by the Federal Reserve Bank found that if the region were considered an independent state, it would rank 49th in the nation in job growth (Dietz & De Mott, 1999). As a result, upstate New York has undergone a sustained period of diminished labor force attachment (Hirschl, 1999) and dramatically increased levels of income inequality (McNamara & Ranney, 1999). Furthermore, this decline has been uneven in nature, with some upstate areas experiencing significantly more economic distress than others (Kuzniak, 1999).

In order to assess and better understand the effects of chronic residential mobility across this region, I concluded the present study to determine the differences in incidence and impacts of student transiency across districts differentiated by economic status. District economic status was assessed by the Combined Wealth Ratio (CWR), a relative measure of district wealth and income, indexing individual school districts against the state average used to determine annual levels of state aid.[4] By definition, the mean CWR is equal to 1. Districts with CWR values of less than 1 have below average wealth, and those with values greater than one are wealthier than average. Wealth is concentrated downstate, and therefore the mean CWR value for upstate districts tends to be about .7.

There are 504 districts in upstate New York. This study focuses on 136 persistently poor upstate districts and 141 economically advantaged upstate districts. Disadvantaged districts were defined as those districts of the 504 whose CWR values represented the bottom third of the distribution each year between 1991 and 1999; advantaged districts represented the top third of the distribution.[5]

It should be noted that few school administrators in upstate New York consider their districts "wealthy," and many of upstate's "wealthier" districts in fact contain substantial pockets of poverty. Additionally, the use of CWR values to determine a district's relative wealth or need is best considered approximate. A relatively high district CWR may hide pronounced local income inequality or may be distorted by the value of large tracts of publicly-held land (particularly in larger, more sparsely populated districts), as is the case in the Adirondack, Catskill, and New York Watershed regions. However, the CWR measure was used to assess relative economic status because it is calculated annually (hence providing a consistent measure over time) and can provide a relative, consistent measure across districts. Based on field observation, there tends to be often rather stark differences between these two groups of districts, particularly in terms of the numbers of derelict buildings, the noticeable level of economic activity, the type and quality of the housing stock, and overall level of economic activity.

Using data archived by the New York State Education Department, Table 1 shows some of the basic characteristics of disadvantaged and wealthier upstate districts. In addition to the socioeconomic differences, the set of persistently disadvantaged districts tend to be more typically rural, with larger land area and smaller populations. However, about 90% of both disadvantaged and wealthier sets of districts at the focus of this study are classified as rural by the New York State Department of Education.

As shown in Figure 1, there are distinct patterns of wealth and poverty across upstate New York. The disadvantaged districts form a roughly S-shaped swath extending from the northeastern part of the state across the northern Adirondacks, through the St. Lawrence Valley, into the Mohawk Valley and then back westward across the Southern Tier. The wealthier districts are concentrated to the north of New York City, the Adirondack region, and along the metropolitan fringe of Syracuse, Rochester, and Buffalo.

## Method

In January 2002, one-page, mail-back surveys were sent to superintendents of all 277 districts with the request that they either complete the survey or pass it along to the administrator most knowledgeable about student enrollments. Most surveys were completed by superintendents, although other administrators (assistant superintendents, principals, guidance counselors, and nurses) also completed and returned the surveys. Respondents were asked to report their district's previous year's beginning enrollment, the number of new students admitted to the district over that previous year, and the number of students that transferred out of the district, excluding dropouts. Enrollment information was only collected for grades 2-12 to avoid inadvertently measuring the effects of private to public transfers during

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[2]By "upstate," I refer to all of New York state except for Long Island, New York City, and Westchester and Rockland Counties.

[3]Approximately 90% of the districts in this study are classified as nonmetro according to census derived classifications used by the New York State Department of Education.

[4]CWR is calculated by the New York State Education Department as the total local adjusted gross taxpayer income and actual value of taxable real property (property wealth) within a school district, divided by the number of district students. This figure is then taken as a ratio of the total statewide income and property wealth divided by the total number of students across the state. New York State uses CWR in a State Sharing Ratio Calculation to determine the amount of aid to be provided by the state to the district, which may comprise between 0 and 90% of district funding.

[5]At the time this study was initiated, CWR data were not available after 1999. However, more recent examination of 2002 CWR data show that the relative economic status of upstate districts has remained consistent.

Table 1
*Characteristics of Poor and Wealthier Upstate Districts As Compared to All Other Upstate Districts*

| | Upstate District Type | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Disadvantaged[a] | Wealthier[b] | All Others |
| CWR 2001-02 | | | |
| Median, total | .47 | 1.08 | .66 |
| Median, respondents | .47 | 1.14 | - |
| Minimum | .21 | .74 | .38 |
| Maximum | .70 | 6.52 | 2.43 |
| Percent FRPL Participation[c] | | | |
| Median, total | 43 | 22 | 33 |
| Median, respondents | 43 | 23 | - |
| Minimum | 19 | 0 | 2 |
| Maximum | 84 | 71 | 93 |
| K-6 Enrollments, 2001-2002 | | | |
| Median, total | 598 | 1,028 | 788 |
| Median, respondents | 552 | 934 | - |
| Minimum | 105 | 40 | 28 |
| Maximum | 26,214 | 5,657 | 20,888 |
| Population 2000 | | | |
| Median, total | 5,673 | 12,692 | 8,794 |
| Median, respondents | 5,541 | 11,634 | - |
| Minimum | 1,103 | 481 | 687 |
| Maximum | 292,648 | 95,716 | 219,766 |
| Square Miles | | | |
| Median, total | 85 | 56 | 66 |
| Median, respondents | 79 | 55 | - |
| Minimum | 10 | 2 | 2 |
| Maximum | 379 | 602 | 459 |
| *N* | 136 | 141 | 255 |

Source: New York State Education Department Basic Education Data System data.
[a]Defined as upstate school districts with CWR values falling in the bottom third quantile for all upstate school districts, each year, 1991-1999.
[b]Defined as upstate school districts with CWR values falling in the top third quantile for all upstate school districts, each year, 1991-1999.
[c]Free-and-reduced-price lunch program participation.

kindergarten and first grade (Wardwell, 1998). The surveys also gathered basic information on respondent perceptions of the relative socioeconomic status of mobile students, the effects of student mobility on the district, the usual distance of student moves into and out of the district, and the change in student transiency over time. Finally, the survey requested permission for follow-up telephone contact.

Eighty-six surveys were returned from the set of disadvantaged districts for a 63% response rate. Among the wealthier districts, 76 surveys were returned for a 54% response rate.[6] Survey response is indicated in Figure 1. Once the survey administration was complete, follow-up phone interviews with administrators were conducted between March and April of 2002 in 51 of the responding districts, 41 of which were disadvantaged districts. I conducted interviews, which were semistructured and lasted between 20

[6]School district characteristics including size and relative wealth were compared between groups of respondents and nonrespondents. No evidence of response bias was detected.