The Creating Moves to Opportunity (CMTO) project is an ongoing collaboration between academic researchers and public housing authorities (PHAs), with guidance, advice, and support provided by J-PAL North America, MDRC, non-profit housing practitioners, housing advocates, foundations, and government partners. This brief summarizes the motivation and aims of the project as well as preliminary ideas for introducing and evaluating interventions to “create moves to opportunity.”

**Motivation**

Among advanced nations, the United States has one of the lowest rates of upward income mobility, which is driven by extremely low rates of upward mobility in our most economically and racially segregated cities. A wave of emerging research provides new evidence that growing up in a high-poverty neighborhood has a negative effect on a number of important life outcomes, including earnings, education, and health, and prevents children who grow up in these neighborhoods from advancing economically. Conversely, helping families move to lower-poverty neighborhoods improves long-term outcomes for their children, thereby promoting upward mobility.

Studying more than five million families who move across counties in the U.S., Chetty and Hendren (2017a) find that every year a child spends growing up in a better neighborhood improves their outcomes in adulthood, including earnings and college attendance.

Similarly, long-term analysis of the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) experiment by Chetty, Hendren, and Katz (2016) finds that young children (under age 13) whose families were randomly provided vouchers to move from high-poverty housing projects to lower-poverty neighborhoods earned substantially more in adulthood, were more likely to attend college, attended higher-quality colleges on average, and were less likely to become single parents.

**Aim of the Creating Moves to Opportunity Project**

The importance of place for upward economic mobility suggests at least two types of policy approaches: 1) improve low-opportunity neighborhoods, and 2) help families with young children move to high-opportunity neighborhoods.

The researchers and PHAs involved in the project recognize the importance of improving America’s most disadvantaged neighborhoods and undertaking place-based approaches to improve economic mobility. In related work, Chetty and Hendren (2017b) aim to characterize the common features of high-opportunity neighborhoods. Their existing research finds that within a given commuting zone, counties that have higher rates of upward mobility tend to have the following five characteristics: less segregation by income and race, lower levels of income inequality, larger share of two-parent households, lower rates of violent crime, and better school quality. They are working to extend their analysis of place effects to the census tract and zip code level, and plan to partner with sociologists to conduct mixed-methods research to shed light on the key mechanisms driving upward mobility at the local level. The PHAs involved in the study share this commitment to place-based policy approaches.

To learn more about the CMTO project, please contact CMTO project manager Kristen Watkins at kwatkins@mit.edu.
The aim of the CMTO project, in contrast, is to focus on the second approach, by developing and evaluating potential interventions to facilitate long-lasting moves to opportunity through the Housing Choice Voucher program, particularly for families with younger children. Although the U.S. spends $20 billion annually on the Housing Choice Voucher program, 80 percent of vouchers are used in moderate- or high-poverty neighborhoods. If approaches can be developed to improve how families interact with the Housing Choice Voucher program, there is serious potential to help young children living in poverty move to better neighborhoods and improve their long-run educational and labor market outcomes.

CMTO aims to develop and evaluate potential interventions to facilitate long-lasting moves to opportunity through the Housing Choice Voucher program, particularly for families with younger children.

**POTENTIAL INTERVENTIONS**

A central aspect of the CMTO project is the collaborative development of interventions between academic researchers and PHA representatives. At the first CMTO conference in December 2015, participants identified four broad categories of potential interventions: improved information quality in the housing search process, comprehensive mobility services, removing barriers and providing incentives for landlords and tenants, and project-based vouchers in high-opportunity neighborhoods. Below are preliminary summaries of potential interventions in each category.

1) **Improving Information Quality in the Housing Search Process**

Voucher recipients may not move to high-opportunity neighborhoods because they are unable to access reliable information about housing in these neighborhoods. For example, the two largest providers of housing listings for voucher recipients, GoSection8 and SocialServe, overwhelmingly do not show any neighborhood characteristics or information on school quality. Ideas for an information intervention include adding neighborhood quality information onto housing listings, defaulting search results to sort by neighborhood quality, and using text message alerts to notify families when listings in opportunity neighborhoods become available. For informational approaches to be effective, there must be an adequate supply of listings in high-opportunity neighborhoods.

2) **Providing Comprehensive Mobility Services**

Comprehensive mobility services, such as intensive pre-move counseling, can help families navigate the complexities of moving to an opportunity neighborhood. At the March 2016 working group meeting, presenters from three non-profit agencies discussed the services they provide to help families move to opportunity areas. This category focuses on ways for PHAs, on their own or in partnership with non-profits, to provide similar programs. Programs might include intensive pre-move counseling and search assistance, post-move counseling, or connections to other service providers.

3) **Removing Barriers and Providing Incentives to Landlords and Tenants**

Financial incentives could encourage tenants to move to better neighborhoods without overly restricting choice. Short-term incentives, such as security deposit assistance, can help overcome upfront barriers. Long-term incentives, such as subsidies for opportunity neighborhoods, could substantially change where families choose to locate.

Incentives and barrier removals for landlords could also make them more likely to accept housing choice vouchers. Financial incentives, such as property damage insurance, could help increase the appeal of renting to voucher-holders. Landlords may also be more willing to participate in the voucher program if bureaucratic hassles, such as inspections requirements, could be eased.

4) **Removing Apartment Search Frictions through Project-Based Vouchers**

Increasing the stock of project-based units in opportunity areas can facilitate moves to opportunity by creating guaranteed access to those neighborhoods, eliminating landlord screening challenges and ensuring the long-term existence of affordable housing in high opportunity areas. However, allocating vouchers in this way eliminates families’ choice around both neighborhood and unit, and the impacts of this constraint, particularly on persistence in an opportunity area, should be explored. Research in this category will aim to better understand households’ preferences when offered a choice of project-based vouchers or tenant-based vouchers, and study the persistence of moves to project-based units in opportunity areas.
CURRENT RESEARCH

Seattle-King County CMTO Demonstration Project

The Seattle Housing Authority and King County Housing Authority are taking part in the Seattle-King County CMTO demonstration project to test several of the intervention ideas from the initial CMTO conference. The first phase of research will involve providing multiple incentives to both voucher recipients and landlords. Housing choice voucher recipients will be offered rental broker assistance, marketability counseling, and flexible financial assistance to help cover moving expenses if the family elects to conduct their housing search in a high-opportunity neighborhood. Participating landlords will be offered incentives to lease to voucher holders, which may include an insurance fund for damages or an expedited lease-up and inspection process. A second phase of research will further refine which aspects of mobility support have the greatest potential for helping families move. Through this research, the team also plans to explore the impact of historical place-based policies to better identify potential place-based interventions.

Informing and Nudging Families to Opportunity

In partnership with GoSection8, the largest rental listing website for housing units available to voucher holders, this research will test several interventions, including piloting and evaluating systematic outreach to landlords to increase the number of listed units, testing how introducing information on neighborhood quality impacts demand for listings on the web and mobile sites, and creating a text message alert system to notify families when listings in opportunity areas become available. This research is focused on the first category of interventions, and will be conducted by randomly selecting users of the GoSection8 platform and partnering with several PHAs to do outreach to landlords.

OUTCOMES AND MEASURING SUCCESS

Researchers and PHAs will continue to collaborate to identify additional opportunities to design and implement interventions, and study them through randomized evaluations. For all interventions, the goal is the same: help families, particularly those with younger children, move to and persist in opportunity neighborhoods.

MTO studied the short-, medium-, and long-term impacts of being offered a housing voucher and moving to a better neighborhood. The primary purpose of this project is not to repeat MTO, but to understand how to facilitate moves to better neighborhoods. As such, the two primary outcomes of interest to the research team are 1) the number of moves to opportunity neighborhoods made by families, particularly those with younger children, and 2) how long families persist in those neighborhoods.

To measure these outcomes, it is important to clearly define opportunity neighborhoods. For this project, de-identified tax data will be used to develop outcome-based measures of opportunity neighborhoods. Opportunity neighborhoods are those that produce good outcomes for children, as measured by increases in lifetime earnings. The research team has demarcated opportunity areas at the county level and is working to zoom in to the zip code and census tract level. By identifying neighborhood characteristics that are associated with long-term earnings increases, they will be able to generate forecasts of opportunity measures using existing data. These forecasts will be used to define opportunity neighborhoods in the interventions and can also be used to conduct formal cost-benefit analyses after the evaluation, by comparing the cost of the intervention to the predicted increase in adult earnings as the result of a move.

Through the research conducted as part of CMTO, there will be the potential to track additional outcomes as well. There may be interest in seeing whether positive results from MTO replicate in a new experiment, including reductions in obesity and diabetes, improvements in mental health, and changes in happiness and perceived safety. The eventual impacts on child outcomes and family economic well-being are also of interest. The study and consent process will be designed to allow for tracking of other outcomes.
This map shows predicted neighborhood exposure effects at the commuting zone (CZ) level for children born between 1980–86 who grew up in the 1980’s and 1990’s. As part of the CMTO project, researchers will zoom in to the zip code and census tract level and generate forecasts of neighborhood exposure effects for children growing up today.

PHI WORKING GROUP MEMBERS

As of July 2017, the following PHAs have signed a letter of intent to indicate the agency’s commitment to the effort:

• Atlanta Housing Authority
• Cambridge Housing Authority
• Charlotte Housing Authority
• Housing Authority of Cook County
• Dallas Housing Authority
• District of Columbia Housing Authority
• Fresno Housing Authority
• Houston Housing Authority
• Keene Housing
• King County Housing Authority
• Louisville Metro Housing Authority
• Minneapolis Public Housing Authority
• New York City Housing Preservation & Development
• HomeForward (Portland, OR)
• Housing Authority of the County of San Bernardino
• San Diego Housing Commission
• Seattle Housing Authority
• Tacoma Housing Authority

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