Families without Borders: Understanding Child Mobility across Households

Anna Rhodes & Stefanie DeLuca
Johns Hopkins University

Objectives:

Studies suggest that family instability and residential mobility negatively affect youth educational outcomes, social development and emotional wellbeing. However, the movement of children between households and changes in their caregivers may affect children differently depending on why these changes occur. The fluid movement of children between households with new adult caregiving arrangements may be beneficial if these transitions are driven by unsafe neighborhood environments, poor school quality, or risky home environments and the move provides appreciable gains in the quality of their social and educational environments. The literature on extended kin, generally focusing on low income African-American communities, indicates that these larger networks of support are an important part of how families function within this community. However, these more complex family structures are not modeled in the family instability literature, which instead gives priority to changes in the relationship between parents and their romantic or marital partners. Using in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with low income African-American families in Mobile, Alabama this paper will explore the role of extended kin caregivers and the fluid movement of children between households, with an explicit focus on the conditions that drive these changes. Understanding why household fluidity helps us uncover the potential implications of this fluid movement for children's well-being. In particular, we consider factors such as family relationships, safety, school quality, neighborhood context, and resources like personal space and food. This paper will explore the following research questions:

1. What types of family structure changes do we observe when focusing on the fluid movement of children across households and the role of non-parental caregivers?
2. What are the conditions under which these complex care arrangements develop?
3. What are the potential implications of these complex family structures and transitions for children's well-being?

Theoretical Framework:

Researchers have long debated whether family instability (such as divorce or remarriage) has harmful effects on children and adolescents (Cherlin, 1999). While such instabilities may not account completely for variation in child well-being, countless studies confirm that changes in family structure are negatively related to important educational, developmental and social outcomes for young people (Amato 2005; Sun & Li 2011; Brown 2006; Magnuson & Berger 2009;Fomby & Cherlin 2007; Osborne & McLanahan 2007; Beck et al. 2010). However, this relative consensus in the literature addresses only issues of family instability that focus on parents and changes in parental relationships, with few studies examining the effects of non-parental adults, such as grandparents and aunts, on children's outcomes. This body of work fails to consider the fluidity of children across extended kin households and its consequences for children's outcomes. These more complex family arrangements involving children and non-parental adults are particularly prevalent among poor and minority families. Scholars have recognized for some time that kincare and extended family networks are an important feature of African American families (cf. Burton, 1997; Stack and Burton, 1993; Burton and Jarret, 1999). For example, Stack (1974) writes, "…how misleading it is to regard child keeping apart from residence patterns, alliances and the interpersonal relationships of adults". Hunter & Ensminger (1992) found that about 1 in 5 African American children in nuclear family households during first grade were living with extended kin before or during adolescence. The extended family households in their sample were the most fluid household structures, especially households in which children were living with kin guardians.

In general, scholars explain the negative effects of family instability on children through social capital frameworks, which emphasize the importance of keeping relationships within the family intact, and the instability

hypothesis, which suggests that household changes lead to periods of stressful adjustment for children and parents. While such instabilities may be more detrimental for disadvantaged children, who may experience these instabilities more often than their more advantaged counterparts, there is an alternative hypothesis for how family transitions affect youth. Among low income minority families who live most of their lives in poor neighborhoods characterized by high levels of violent crime and poor performing schools, changes in family structure and residential arrangements could actually be proactive family management strategies. Families and children living in dangerous neighborhoods learn to adapt to these chaotic environments, and it may be that some of the processes that look like instabilities to an outsider might in fact be proactive coping mechanisms and a means to confer advantages to their children.

Lending support to the argument that African-American families' network of extended kin may be a positive resource for children, Fomby & Cherlin (2007) find that there is almost no association between family transitions and children's externalizing behavior among black children, but for white children family transitions are associated with higher rates of negative behaviors. Their findings may reflect the importance of extended kin in black families, which may attenuate the effects of nuclear family instability. We argue that depending on the conditions under which these arrangements arise, extended kin networks may help children experience better environments and have positive, rather than negative, developmental consequences. However, Jarret and Burton (1999) also note that the pace of change in black family structure, as well as the blurring of roles in the age hierarchy, have serious consequences for how youth are cared for and how behaviors are monitored. This implies that the more fluid family structures of poor black households may facilitate some positive outcomes for young people, but they may also create additional stress and instability.

All told, there seems to be an important disconnect in the literature on family instability: on the one hand, scholars conclude that family or residential instability diminishes child development; on the other hand, some scholars point to kin care and the fluidity of family residential arrangements as an important resource for low income minority families. This paper will explore what gives rise to these fluid family arrangements, particularly focusing on why children move between households, to understand the implications of these dynamics for children's well-being. We also examine how this mobility changes their access to healthy and safe homes and neighborhoods, higher quality schools, personal space, food, and access to supportive relationships with adults and children.

Data and Methods:

For this study, we use in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations collected over three summers from 2009-2011 in Mobile, Alabama. The research team moved to Alabama every summer interviewing and visiting with families in their homes and neighborhoods. We met the heads of household, children, friends, and extended family members for our sample families. To identify families we utilized a sampling frame drawn from a large neighborhood based survey of high poverty neighborhoods that has been ongoing in Mobile for the past fourteen years (Bolland, 2003). We utilized a stratified random sample of families from within these neighborhoods. All of the families interviewed are African-American, very low income, and had at least one child under the age of 18 living with them when the first interview was conducted. This allowed us to interview families from several dozen different neighborhoods in the metropolitan area.

We used a semi-structured interview style in which we asked families to describe their "life story" and probed with questions about domains such as family's residential histories, family composition, and schooling trajectories for children. The longitudinal nature of our data also allowed us to follow up from year-to-year often filling in gaps from previous interviews, as we were able to ask more directed questions in subsequent summers as respondents grew more comfortable with our team. In 2011 we added a youth component, interviewing youth between the ages of 10 and 22 in a randomly selected subsample of families, providing further insight into family fluidity from a youth perspective. All of the interviews lasted approximately 2-4 hours; adult respondents were paid $50 for their time and youth respondents were paid $25.

Interviews transcribed verbatim were analyzed using the qualitative software Maxqda, allowing systematic coding to identify instances of residential mobility, family transition, family structure, and instances of

kin helping care for children both formally and informally. Analysis of the coded segments, and broader interview context, allows for a descriptive articulation of the movement and care of children across the entire sample.

Preliminary Results and Expected Findings:

There is significant variation in the family compositions and arrangements in our low income African-American sample. Of particular note is the fluid movement of children across households, sometimes with their parents or caregivers, and at other times independent of their nuclear family unit. We will describe how these arrangements develop, and their implications for children's well-being through changes in children's access to high quality relationships with kin, safe home and neighborhood environments, schools, and resources such as personal space and food.

These arrangements in family care for children develop for many reasons but we observe financial need, school zones, safety, housing instability, and family conflict as the reasons our respondents most frequently cited for the mobility of children across households. Financially, parents often need access to inexpensive childcare while they work, and they rely on kin for this care, ranging in length and formality from only several hours to full-time care with parents only looking after their children on their days off, or stopping by between day and evening shifts at work. The childcare needs often imply schooling needs, and children attend schools zoned for the home of their extended kin caregiver so that someone can pick them up after school while their mother is working. We also observe families who have children live with extended kin so that they can attend schools that are perceived to be higher quality. Frequently, we see older children as agents in making these schooling decisions, either because they want to attend a new school or because they want to remain in a school when their nuclear family moves; sometimes they will ask to live with another family member to stay in their old school.

Safety demands also lead to the fluid movement of children across households, as neighborhood violence prompts parents to move their children in with extended kin because their neighborhoods are perceived to be safer. Youth sometimes proactively make the choice to move in with a relative, especially to avoid moving into the projects with their nuclear family so that they will not be surrounded by violence and drugs, or face being beaten up because they are an outsider. Parents and other family members also make these choices for children, taking them to a family member's house to stay because they can play outside there safely. Because poor families move more often than their middle-class counterparts, residential instability is a frequent occurrence in our sample, and it often leads entire nuclear families to double-up in a relative's home or parents to disperse across homes to be less burdensome, sending different children to live separately with various relatives while they work to find adequate and affordable housing for all. Family conflict and instability issues, such as an abusive partner or a drug addiction also lead children to move in with another family caregiver. Drug addiction frequently leads to more formal and long-term kin care arrangements, especially if the foster system is involved.

Across all of the conditions under which children move into extended kin households, we often observe that these moves do not include all the children in a household. This results in the separation of siblings across multiple homes, with some children moving into new care arrangements while others remain behind, leading to changes in family structure for all children even though only a few may actually move. Similarly, adults and children are at times separated, such that a residentially uprooted nuclear family may be divided across several extended kin households leading to both a residential transition and a family composition change. The existing literature on family structure would hypothesize that these significant changes create instability and stress that leads to negative consequences for children across a whole host of outcomes; however, these moves may result in more stable housing, safer neighborhoods, and better familial support arrangements. Therefore, these broader family networks play a potential stabilizing role when a single nuclear family or parental dyad faces instability, either moderating negative consequences or simply leading to positive consequences.

Two case studies provide examples of the variations we observe in the fluid movement of children between households, the formality and length of family care arrangements, and the potential implications of these transitions for children's well-being. The first case study focuses on three siblings: Thomas and his younger twin siblings, Charlie Jr. and Chantalle. These are the children of Charlie Sr. but they spent most of their childhood living with their paternal grandmother Margaret. Thomas first went to live with his grandmother, who became his legal guardian, when he was just three months old because his mother threw him against a wall. His siblings

Charlie Jr. and Chantalle also came under the legal care of their grandmother within two years. This initial, formal transition into their grandmother's household provided an immediate increase in the safety of these siblings.

The siblings' aunt Kendra and cousin Tamika also lived in their grandmother's unit in a local housing project throughout their elementary school years. Kendra describes the relationship among all four of the children saying "all of them grew up together at my mom's house and stuff. All of them just like sister and brother." Kendra and her daughter Tamika moved out in 2005, when Kendra bought her own home, and she took Chantalle to live with her "because I didn't want Chantalle in that environment with the boys." Kendra decided to provide Chantalle with a more appropriate environment for a girl by having her move into her new home with her daughter, rather than remain in a household dominated by boys. In 2005 Margaret and the boys were forced to move due to renovations to the project. She relocated to a different housing project, and her son Nicholas came to live with the family because he was seriously ill. For several years Margaret and the boys lived in the new unit, but in 2009 two major events led to significant family transitions. The first was that their uncle Nicholas, who had served as a major role model for the two boys, passed away. The second was that Charlie Jr. was arrested when he accidentally shot himself as he was shooting at another man in the housing project. The police recovered the gun from Margaret's unit and the entire family was forced to leave for violating their lease agreement.

Following this forced residential move, Charlie Jr. went to jail, Thomas moved in with his aunt Kendra, his cousin, and his sister Chantalle, and Margaret went to live with Charlie Sr. and his girlfriend Michelle. Thomas describes this move as his choice saying "my dad wanted me to move in with him, but I didn't want to. So I could have moved in with my aunt or my other aunt, so I decided to move with this one." He chose not to move in with his dad because he was worried that "if I have stuff, all that stuff will go missing. And I think that's it and then arguing between by dad and my step mom." In Margaret's interview from 2011 she describes how Charlie Sr.'s girlfriend uses crack and how their home is right next to a crack house. In fact, she narrates the local drug trade activity to the interviewer during their interview on Charlie Sr.'s front porch. Thomas decides to move in with his aunt Kendra for a safer and more stable environment both in the home and the neighborhood, but he may sacrifice access to more personal space since fewer people live in his father's house. In our 2011 interview with Kendra, she also reveals that Thomas called her asking if he could move into her house because "he wanted to live with his sister," and through this move Thomas and Chantalle are reunited. By the 2011 interviews Charlie Jr. had also moved into the house with his siblings when he was released from jail; his grandmother wanted him to move in with his aunt Kendra upon his release, rather than his father, so that he would also have access to the safer neighborhood that might separate him from the negative influences that led to his shooting.

The caregiving support for the three siblings has remained relatively unchanged because their grandmother and aunt both remain continually involved in their care and support, regardless of their residential arrangement. Their grandmother continued to receive benefits for the children even after they moved in with Kendra because she retained formal custody, but she shared these resources with Kendra to cover the cost of caring for the children. Their grandmother also continued to see them regularly, often daily, even though she lived in a separate household. This complex residential arrangement of extended family has involved several transitions, although most of the transitions seemed to provide an increased level of safety in the household or the neighborhood, and the children have, since very early childhood, experienced stable involvement and care from both their aunt and their grandmother.

The second case study family is that of Shirley, a 54 year old African-American woman raising her 20 year old son, Sean, and 12 year old grandson, John, in a home she has lived in for the past 22 years. Her grandson, John, is our focal youth in this case study as he experienced several transitions across households that vary in their length and formality. John grew up in his grandmother's house. He was born while his mother was still living at home but even when his mother moved out and got her own apartment, John's care was still provided almost entirely by his grandmother because his mother worked and attended school, making it difficult for her to manage his care. The decision for John to live with his grandmother was based on her ability to provide constant supervision and care that his mother could not provide while she was working. Shirley's ability to provide consistent care is a resource that she shares with her sister Patty as well, watching her two boys before and after school while she works until she can pick them up at around 5pm.

Although John and his mother do not live in the same household his mother has remained actively involved. For example, Shirley describes their arrangement in regards to school decisions saying "they would tell me stuff, but I always let my daughter handle John's teachers and stuff." John's grandmother attends meetings at school if his mother is working, but most of his primary school issues are handled by his mother. John's mother also remains the primary disciplinarian even though he lives with his grandmother. Shirley told us that "if he do something, I say, I'm a call his Momma. I say you need to talk to John. I don't have no problem out of him." She leaves the discipline up to his mother and John knows that if his grandmother calls his mom he is in big trouble. His mother also helps provide financial support for John by buying school supplies and some snacks and other food items. John's residential arrangement has been stable, and while his separation from his mother may have been stressful, we observe that his mother has remained consistently in his life, and his residential arrangement with his grandmother provides access to constant care that would not be possible at his mother's apartment.

John went to the locally zoned elementary school for his grandmother's house in first through third grades but switched to go to the school zoned for his mother's apartment in fourth grade, and began staying more frequently with his mother. This residential transition was driven by the fact that his mother and grandmother thought the school zoned for his mother's apartment was a better school. However, John still frequently stayed with his grandmother who would drive the extra 20 minutes to take him to the better school. However, a disagreement between his mother and the principal forced him to leave that school and he returned to attending schools zoned for his grandmother's house and went back to living at her house. In this instance, although John's relationships to his caregivers remain unchanged regardless of the residential movement, it is likely that his school transitions could have negative academic consequences. When we examine the reasons for this residential move it was driven by a desire to provide him with greater schooling opportunities, however, in this instance that opportunity was lost.

Although John's primary residence is his grandmother's house, he splits his time between his mother, grandmother, and father. In 2011 Shirley told us that John spends about 5 days a week with her, around one day a month with his mother, and two days a week with his father during the school year. She told us that he likes her house better than his mother's because "he can get away with murder over here. It make him more independent and stuff like that." Thus, John gains independence at his grandmother's house even if he loses privacy because he sleeps on an air mattress on the living room floor, having to instruct his grandmother to get off the computer so he can go to bed. However, the residential environment that John views as the most resource rich is his father's house. Recently, John has begun to spend more time with his father's family, going over to his house on weekends and spending the summers with him for the past two years. When the interviewer asked John which house he likes best he responded "my dad's [because] I like to spend time with my brothers." John has experienced dramatic changes in his family structure over the past two summers when he moved into his father's house. However, this change is not negative in his eyes but rather an opportunity for fun with his brothers.

Through these two stories we see the variety in length and formality of kin care relationships and the fluidity of children across households. Thomas, Charlie Jr., and Chantalle have experienced a formal and long-term care arrangement with their grandmother, driven by the formal child services structure, which provided the children with a safer home environment. Chantalle's move into her aunt's house was largely decided by the adults in her life, deeming a female home environment more appropriate for her than living with all of her brothers, while Thomas made his own choice to move in with his aunt later, choosing this over the alternative of living with his father for reasons related to safety and household stability. Their early childhood was defined by a two-caregiver home but neither of these caregivers were their biological parents, rather this role was fulfilled by their aunt and grandmother. This house was residentially divided but these two primary caregivers have remained continuously involved in their lives and their care since early childhood.

In the second case study, John experiences several different households in a given week, with varied levels of formality in the caregiving provided in each household. Although he spends most of his time living with his grandmother because it provides a stable care environment, the primary responsibility for his care is really divided between his mother and his grandmother who are both actively involved in his upbringing. Across these three households John also experiences different interactions with other youth. He has a close relationship with

his brothers and prefers staying with his father because of these relationships. John's story, thus, points out how children's relationships with other youth may affect their happiness and general well-being.

The family structures and family transitions analyzed in the existing family literature do not clearly apply to either case study presented, due to the literature's exclusive focus on parental relationships. In both families the primary caregivers are not biological parents but members of their extended families. The extended kin literature points out the importance of these other adults, discussing the role frequently played by grandmothers and aunts in the care for children across black families. This literature, however, has been largely ignored by the quantitative studies measuring the effects of family structures and transitions on children. However, as Fomby & Cherlin (2007) articulate, we might expect that part of the reason some studies find non-significant results for family instability on outcomes for black youth is that the role played by extended kin caregivers moderates their effects for these young people. Through these case studies we observe instances in which a family structure change and residential move which are conceptualized as destabilizing by the existing literature actually lead to safer home environments, safer neighborhood spaces, and more resources. If our causal models were to assess these more complex family structures we hypothesize that they would find that under certain circumstances children's fluid movement between households may have positive effects. Our data does not allow causal analysis, but we observe clear descriptions by our respondents about the positive consequences they perceive many transitions to have for children in their families.

Further analysis in the complete paper will continue to focus on the movement of children across households and the roles of non-parental caregivers, with the explicit aim of encouraging further research in family scholarship to examine complex family structures, both descriptively as this paper aims to do, and empirically by measuring the effect of these types of family transitions on children's outcomes, bringing the existing literatures on the extended family, family structure, and family transitions into one conversation that revisits the question about which kinds of transitions for youth are most consequential, both positively and negatively, and why.

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