

# Ever-More Rooted Americans

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Many scholars attribute contemporary ills to greater “rootlessness” among Americans. Residential mobility may be of some concern because local communities are disordered and vulnerable individuals are at risk when turnover is especially rapid. However, rates of residential mobility actually *declined* between the 19th and 20th centuries and continued to decline between 1950 and 1999. Analysis of Current Population Surveys shows that: in the population overall, the decline in mobility rates occurred for *local* moves—rates of cross-county moves stayed almost constant; Americans across age, race, gender, and class experienced the decline; but certain specific groups experienced either no drop or a slight increase in mobility. The latter seem distinctive in being the most economically marginal.

Sociologists and public intellectuals alike often assert that increasing residential mobility is a major contributor to problems of American communities in the latter half of the 20th century. We can find, for example, statements in the media such as this one in the *New York Times* (May, 16, 2001, p. A22): “The broad social shifts underlying [changing family patterns include]... the ever-growing mobility of Americans.” But this assertion is founded on a false assumption. American residential mobility, commonplaces about “modern rootlessness” notwithstanding, has *not* increased. (Also, it is *not* clear that typical mobility does cause problems.) Mobility has *decreased*, both in the long run, since the mid-19th century, and in the short run, since the mid-20th century. This is not a startling new discovery. It is well known to social historians and demographers, but seems unknown to the general public and to many scholars. In this article, I describe the general trends in mobility and then look more closely at trends in mobility for specific groups.

## FABLE AND FACT

Generations of sociologists may have been misinformed about mobility from their first encounter with the discipline. Peter Berger, in his classic 1963 textbook, *Invitation to Sociology*, wrote about the “unprecedented rate of geographical ... mobility in modern society” (p. 49). The

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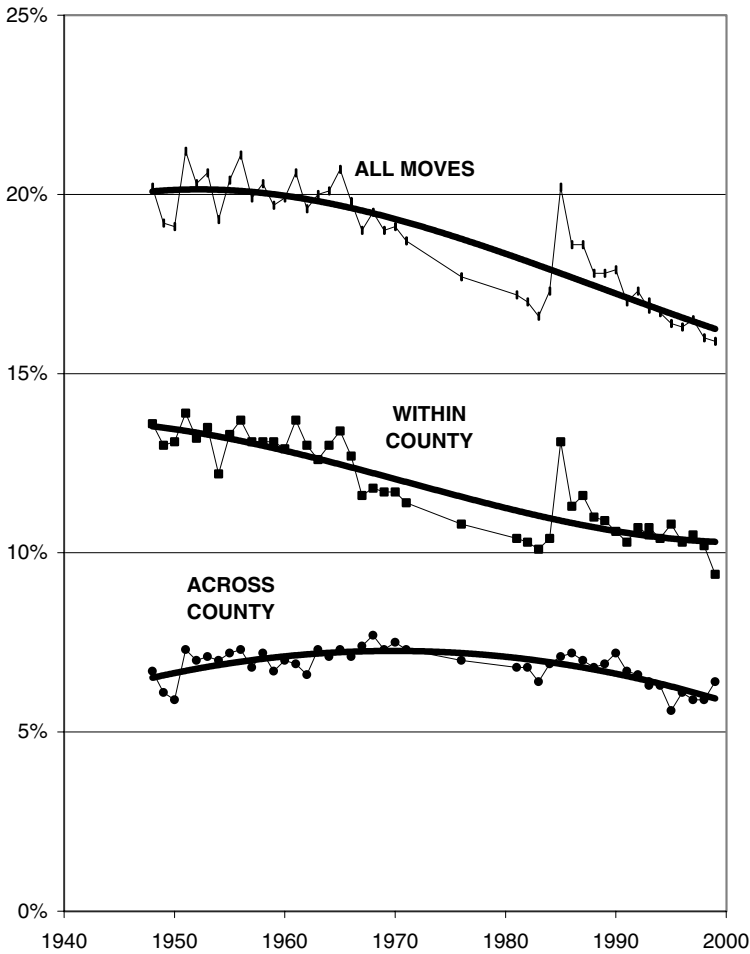
assumption that mobility has and is increasing appears in the writings of many excellent sociologists. Here are a few examples: Robert Wuthnow (1994, pp. 5, 22) wrote that “we *no longer* live in the same neighborhoods all our lives . . . [and this] geographic mobility uproots families from neighborhoods and kin” (italics added)—although he corrected this later (Wuthnow, 1998, p. 66); Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney (1987, p. 65) wrote that “increased geographical mobility is also a factor responsible for the weakening of traditional social ties. . . . So staggering are the numbers of people moving that Vance Packard some years ago entitled a book on the subject *A Nation of Strangers*. Such movement takes a heavy toll on social relationships. It results in weakened ties—to family and kin, to neighborhood and community—and often a sense of homelessness, or a metaphysical loss of home.” David Popehoe (1985, p. 120) cited the “high rate of residential mobility” to explain why neighborhoods are (supposedly) becoming more anonymous. James Jasper, in a recent book that characterizes America as a *Restless Nation*, states that Americans’ current mobility is the *same* as that of earlier generations (Jasper, 2000, p. 71).<sup>1</sup> Other examples are easy to find. A noteworthy exception to this consensus is political scientist Robert Putnam’s (2000) recent book, *Bowling Alone*. Putnam asks whether the decline in Americans’ civic participation could be the result of increasing residential mobility and answers, “No,” because mobility has declined.

To demonstrate the point, I turn immediately to Figure 1. The data are drawn from the Current Population Surveys, large Census Bureau surveys done every month for about 50 years. The annual March survey addresses residential mobility (excepting for several years in the 1970s). Interviewers ask respondents whether they had lived elsewhere the year before. The figure shows the percentage of Americans who, in the prior 12 months from 1948 through 2000, had changed homes, differentiating those who moved locally, defined as within a county, from those who moved farther, across county lines. (I use “within-county” as a proxy for local, realizing that, of course, it is only a crude one.)<sup>2</sup> Figure 1 shows that over the course of the half-century, the chances that Americans moved in any given year declined, mainly because Americans became less likely to move *locally*.<sup>3</sup>

For students of the American community, it is important to realize that the trends of the last half-century—de-industrialization of the urban core, rising crime rates for most of the era, centrifugal pressures, and so on—have coexisted with increasing residential *stability*. “Rootlessness” cannot be easily blamed or credited for such changes.

Much of this article is devoted to exploring the details of the trends shown in Figure 1, asking how mobility rates have changed in recent decades for different groups within the American population. But before turning to those analyses, I address two preliminary questions: Why should we care about residential mobility? And, how have mobility rates changed over the long term?

**PERCENT OF AMERICANS WHO MOVED, BY DISTANCE, 1947-48  
TO 1998-99**



**FIG. 1.** Residential mobility of Americans, 1947–1948 to 1998–1999, by distance. The bold lines represent best-fitting cubic functions of year. *Source:* Current Population Surveys reported by Bureau of Census (2000c).

### DOES RESIDENTIAL MOBILITY MATTER?

In typical discussions of mobility (outside the specific research literature), authors take as given that residential mobility is deleterious. But is it? Or, better put: For whom is it? A sensible answer requires us to make three sorts of distinctions when we can. We should treat separately the consequences of mobility for *communities* from those for *individuals*. And for the latter, we need to distinguish *voluntary* moves

from *forced* moves. Finally, we should also distinguish *local* from *distant* moves.

Research suggests that *neighborhoods* with high rates of residential turnover do experience more problems than stable neighborhoods: fewer social ties among residents, more disorder, more crime. These negative consequences probably arise because residents in unstable neighborhoods know one another less well, are less likely to act in concert, less frequently “police” the neighborhood (controlling youngsters and watching strangers), and are less committed to the neighborhood. Although this is the conventional interpretation of research findings, note that the causality could be the reverse. Perhaps problem-ridden neighborhoods drive residents away. It is also important to understand that the individuals who suffer from high-turnover neighborhoods may not be—indeed, probably are not—the ones who leave, but the ones who stay put while people all around them move in and out.<sup>4</sup>

For *individuals*, the proposition that mobility is damaging is even more problematic. For adults at least, there is little evidence that changing homes is generally harmful. Most contemporary moves are voluntary—to take a better job, to live in a better home—and are thus life improvements. Also, most moves are relatively short, making changes in social ties and life habits less wrenching. Adjustments are necessary when people who move a significant distance lose touch with some kin and friends, but, even then, movers reestablish ties relatively quickly. Indeed, there are some people, particularly poor people in poor neighborhoods and minorities in segregated neighborhoods, who would benefit from moving away but cannot.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, there are people for whom mobility poses a greater social and emotional risk, in particular, those who are *forced* to move. This category includes victims of natural or man-made disasters, the poor who cannot meet housing costs, dependent wives who must follow their husbands’ job changes or residential preferences, spouses who experience divorce unwillingly, and children. Even in such cases, mobility still is usually benign, but coerced movers do face higher risks than do voluntary movers (Fischer et al., 1977, pp. 177–185).

Researchers have focused, in particular, on how residential changes affect children’s emotional well-being and performance in school. They have found that children who move often tend to have greater problems than do other children (see, e.g., Long, 1975; Haveman et al., 1991), but that finding is best explained by the fact that such mobile children are likelier to be in poor and troubled families (Pribesh and Downey, 1999). One study’s results (Tucker et al., 1998) suggest that children suffer only if they make many moves or live in a single-parent or a step-parent household. The best conclusion is that frequent moves are more often a *sign* of problems than a *cause* of one, but also that moving *is* a moderate risk factor for children, especially for otherwise vulnerable children (see also Hagan et al., 1996; McClanahan and Sandefur, 1994).

Here, then, is one place for concern about residential mobility: It may work well for the people who decide to move but may put the ones they

drag along—and the neighborhoods they leave behind—at greater risk. The next question is: How have rates of mobility changed over the long course of American history?

#### INCREASING RESIDENTIAL STABILITY: THE LONG VIEW

For centuries, foreign observers have described Americans as constantly on the move, “almost nomadic” in the words of English observer James Bryce (Woodward, 1991, pp. 71–75). Fragmentary evidence about the 18th and 19th centuries suggests that Americans were indeed more mobile than Europeans (Friedeburg, 1995). And contemporary statistics demonstrate that Americans still move more often than do Europeans (Long, 1988, 1992). The question at hand, however, is the historical comparison. Towns varied in their turnover rates; economically stagnant villages in New England, for example, had relatively little in- or outflow (Barron, 1984, ch. 5). But the most accurate generalization from the historical record is that Americans several generations ago moved considerably more often than Americans do today. High population turnover is, summarized a social historian, “one of the central findings and now one of the central themes of nineteenth-century social history” (Darroch, 1981, p. 217). For example, in Sangamon County, Illinois, only two of every ten households living there in 1840 stayed to 1850 (Faragher, 1986, pp. 144–145); in Clinton, Ohio, only 7 percent of voters recorded sometime in the 1850s were voters in both 1850 and 1860 (Winkle, 1988, ch. 5); in rural Missouri, only about one-fourth of heads of households enumerated there in 1860 were still there in 1870 (Gregson, 1997); and in Boston’s Jamaica Plain district, half of the household heads listed in the 1880 census could not be found there by the 1890 census takers (von Hoffman, 1994, p. 32). Death accounts for only a small fraction of the many “disappeared” residents; the great majority of them had moved on.

Methodological difficulties make tentative any conclusions about mobility patterns 100 to 150 years ago (see, e.g., Sharpless and Shortridge, 1975; Parkerson, 1982). The greatest difficulty is that most estimates rely on counting how many residents of a town listed in one year could be found again  $x$  years later; if the list compilers (census takers, voting registrars, tax officials, or city directory editors) are sloppy, residents are missed or misrecorded the second time around; rates of moving out then appear high. On the other hand, common problems also lead to *underestimating* out-migration.<sup>6</sup> The variety of data historians have used clearly points to the conclusion that 19th-century mobility was greater than late 20th-century mobility, perhaps as much as twice as great (see also Thernstrom, 1973). Moreover, fragmentary data on the early 20th century point to a significant decline in out-migration rates before 1950, suggesting a crudely monotonic trend.<sup>7</sup>

The rates at which Americans left town actually underestimate total mobility; they do not take into account *local* moving, changing homes

within towns. Moving locally was even more frequent than moving out of the area. This local churning is symbolized by New York City's famous "Moving Day." Rental leases traditionally expired on May 1. Thousands of people filled the streets of the city on that date, carrying their possessions to and fro in a massive game of musical chairs. One visiting Englishwoman wrote in 1842, "from the peep of day till the twilight may be seen carts, which go at a rate of speed astonishingly rapid, laden with furniture of every kind, racing up and down the city, as if its inhabitants were fleeing from a pestilence" (quoted in Scherzer, 1992, pp. 20, 234 n.20). A 1926 Rodgers and Hart hit song ("Mountain Greenery"), made famous by Bing Crosby, begins:

On the first of May  
This is Moving Day  
Spring is here  
So blow your job  
Throw your job away  
Now's the time to trust  
To your wanderlust.

But in the second half of the 20th century Americans seemed to curb that wanderlust. The 19th-century patterns of annual moving, driven in part by legions of transient boarders and lodgers and floating "hobos," essentially ceased. Relatively few studies track within-town mobility, but the best estimate is that rates of local turnover were also greater in the late 19th than in the late 20th century.

We lack reliable numbers on residential mobility for the early part of the 1900s, but we do have them for the last several decades. As Figure 1 shows, rates declined slowly but steadily since 1950.<sup>8</sup> This greater root-*edness* is particularly striking given all the other changes that Americans experienced during the period that would have encouraged them to move and to move far: increasing proportions of Americans living alone, cheaper and easier transportation, new mass media displaying alluring pictures of other places, increasing travel exposing people to various corners of America, a military draft that for about two decades moved young men out of their parents' homes, the expansion of higher education, the rise of the Sunbelt, and the development of retirement towns. That total geographic mobility nevertheless *dropped*, that rates of distant moves were stable, testifies to the importance of countervailing influences. What might those be?

I do not know of any comprehensive answer to this question. Most historians would probably agree that mobility declined over several generations in part because the great migrations of the past—migrations from Europe, from the settled states to the frontier, from the farms to the cities—ended. Also, many of the intense and uncontrollable shocks to normal family life, such as deaths of breadwinners, farm failures, natural disasters, and catastrophic depressions, became less common, affected fewer people, or were cushioned by an expanding social net. Because

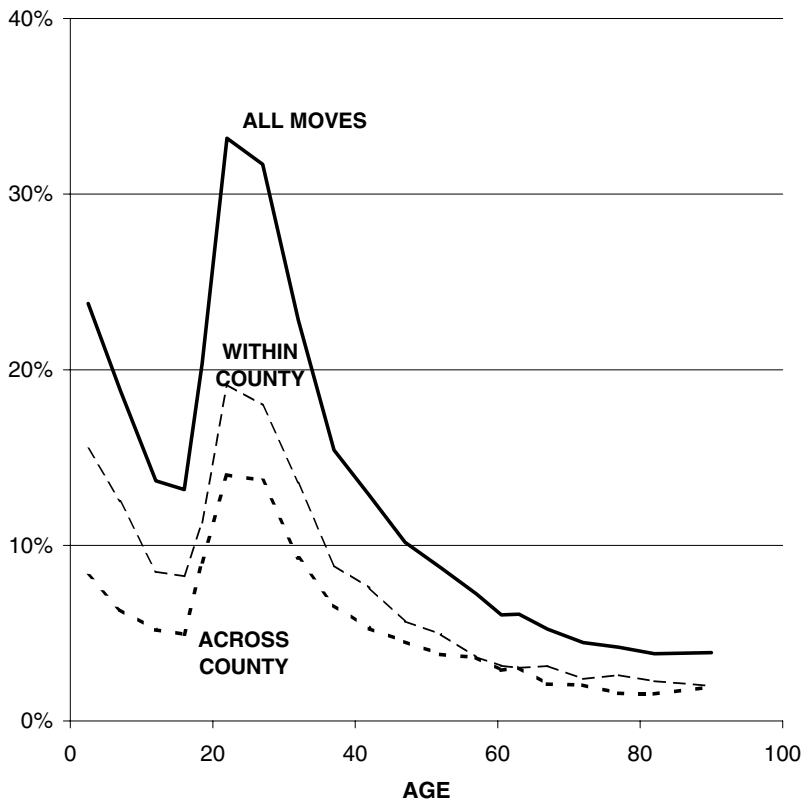
fathers lived longer, workers earned more, government provided farm support, people bought home insurance, and the state created income guarantees for the unemployed, the disabled, and the retired, fewer American families were *forced* to move. (This also implies that the most damaging kinds of moves declined the fastest.) Easier daily travel probably contributed to stability, too. When living more than a couple of miles from one's job was impractical, changing jobs required changing homes; when a half-hour's drive can easily cover a dozen miles, people can change jobs and stay in their homes. Also, increases in home ownership reduced mobility. Homeowners are much less likely than renters to move; between 1998 and 1999, for example, only 8 percent of owners moved, compared to 33 percent of renters (Bureau of Census, 2000a). So, as affluence and government subsidies encouraged home ownership to expand from 47 percent in 1900 to 55 percent in 1950 and 67 percent of households in 2000 (Bureau of the Census, 1975, p. 646; 2000b), it in all likelihood contributed to stability. Indeed, three historians (Tobey et al., 1990, p. 1413) have argued "that the [New Deal] federal government deliberately changed the conditions of home buying [through various financial devices] in order to decrease geographic mobility in the United States," with the further intent of encouraging "conservative" civic involvement. Some of these trends, such as increasing job security, family affluence, and, for the nonelderly, home ownership, stalled in the last quarter of the century. Yet, Americans still continued to settle down.

### WHO MOVES?

I turn to examining how these recent trends in mobility differ for different sorts of Americans, after first reviewing what we know about *who* is likely to move. Most analyses reported here were completed when only the 1997–1998 CPS data were available. There is no reason to suppose that the basic patterns would be different with inclusion of a year or two of later data. A methodological caution: the CPS data are gathered *after* the move, making it hard to establish whether some trait, such as a person's job, is the cause or the consequence of moving. I stress traits that certainly or probably precede moving, such as age, rather than traits that may be the consequence of the move, such as the kind of household structure the individual lived in.

A well-known fact is that stage in the lifecycle strongly shapes moving patterns. This can be seen in Figure 2, which shows the percentage of Americans who moved between March 1998 and March 1999 by their age and by how far they moved (Bureau of the Census, 2000d). We can see the sharp peak in moving in the early 20s as Americans leave home, marry, and have their first child. The secondary peak in the lines, that among the youngest, reflects the mobility of the children of those young adults. After the early family-formation years, the chances of moving

**PERCENT OF AMERICANS WHO MOVED, 1998-99, BY AGE,  
BY DISTANCE**



**FIG. 2.** Residential mobility of Americans, 1998–1999, by age and distance of move.  
*Source:* Current Population Surveys, U.S. Census Bureau Web Page (2000).

drop off rapidly such that older children and their parents are relatively *immobile*. Similarly, people who were living as primary individuals, alone or with nonrelatives, are much likelier to have recently moved than married people (data not shown).

Because age is so determinative of moving, most analyses of other factors need to hold age constant. Educational differences, for example, show up largely among those aged 25 to 35. Those without a high school diploma are more likely than others to move *locally*, but those with a college degree are more likely to move *across county lines*.<sup>9</sup> Crudely summarized, better-educated people move some distance in response to career opportunities and less-educated people move locally in response to housing situations or difficulties. Similarly, African and Latino Americans move *locally* at a slightly higher rate than do whites (Bureau of the Census, 2000e). Other factors statistically held constant, total rates of mobility are higher for adults who are: young, male, white, unmarried, nonparents,



poorer, renters, and new to the neighborhood (South and Deane, 1993, tab. 2). The last attribute, new to the neighborhood, underscores the common observation that much of American residential mobility is composed of repeat moves by the same people.

The 1998 Current Population Survey also asked respondents why they moved. Their answers fall into these categories (from analysis of the CPS):

Family Reasons	26%
To establish own household	8
Change in marital status	7
Other family	12
Career Reasons	20%
New job or transfer	10
Be closer to job	3
Attend college	2
Retire	1
Look for work/lost job	2
Other job-related reason	2
Housing Reasons	45%
Wanted better house/apartment	19
Wanted to own, not rent	9
Wanted better neighborhood	4
Wanted cheaper housing	1
Other housing reason	12

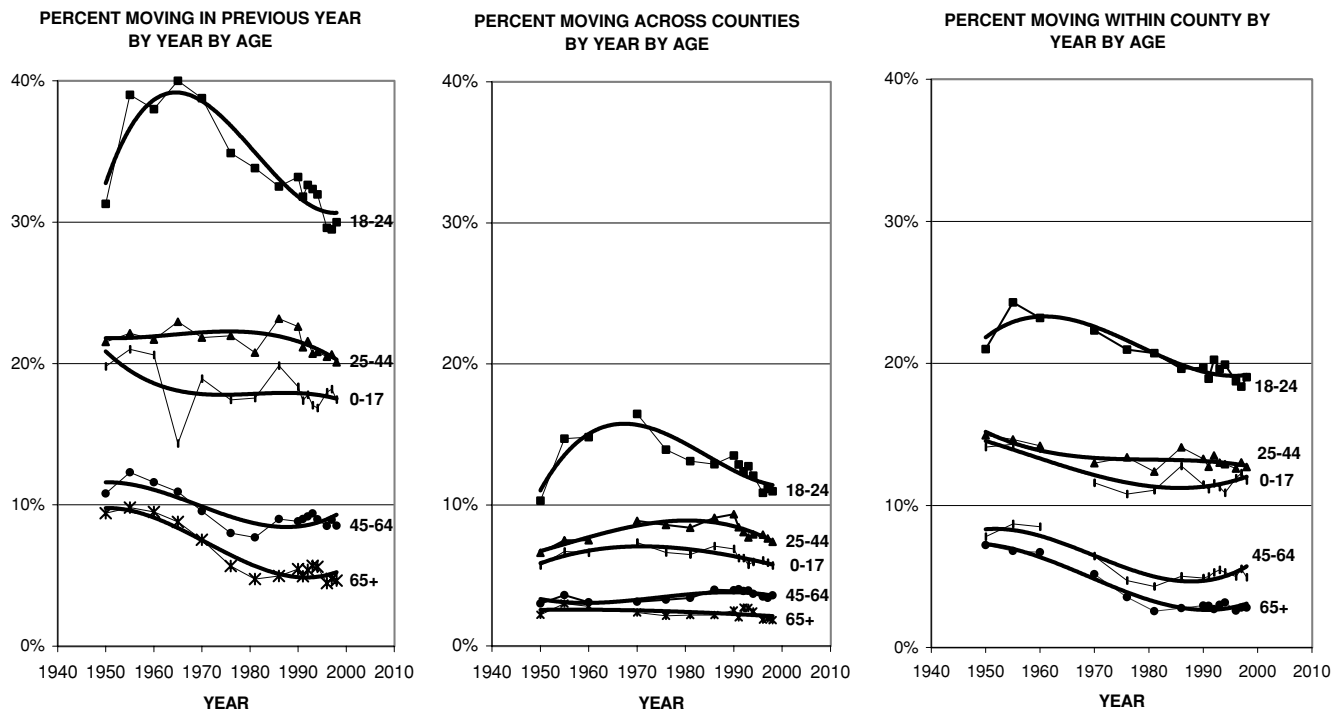
These numbers pool all kinds of moves. For distant, cross-state moves, job-related concerns account for the bulk of reasons people give (Long, 1988, p. 237ff), while housing reasons dominate local moves (see also Fischer et al., 1977, pp. 177–180). The life-cycle changes people often cite as reasons for moving, particularly marriage and parenting, are essentially housing issues, too, because people seek new housing that they think appropriate to their new statuses.

Having reviewed some of the basics about residential mobility, I turn to the question of whether the recent historical decline in mobility identified in Figure 1 is a general one or is specific to particular parts of the American population. For the remainder of this analysis, I draw on raw data from Current Population Surveys for 1965 through 1998, supplemented where possible by data drawn from published sources for earlier years.<sup>10</sup> For some parts of the analysis, the data describe trends from mid-century on; for others, we are restricted to roughly the last quarter of the 20th century.

FOR WHOM HAS MOBILITY DECLINED OR NOT?

LIFECYCLE

Because age and lifecycle so much determine rates of mobility, I address the question of whether the decline was specific to certain ages. Figure 3



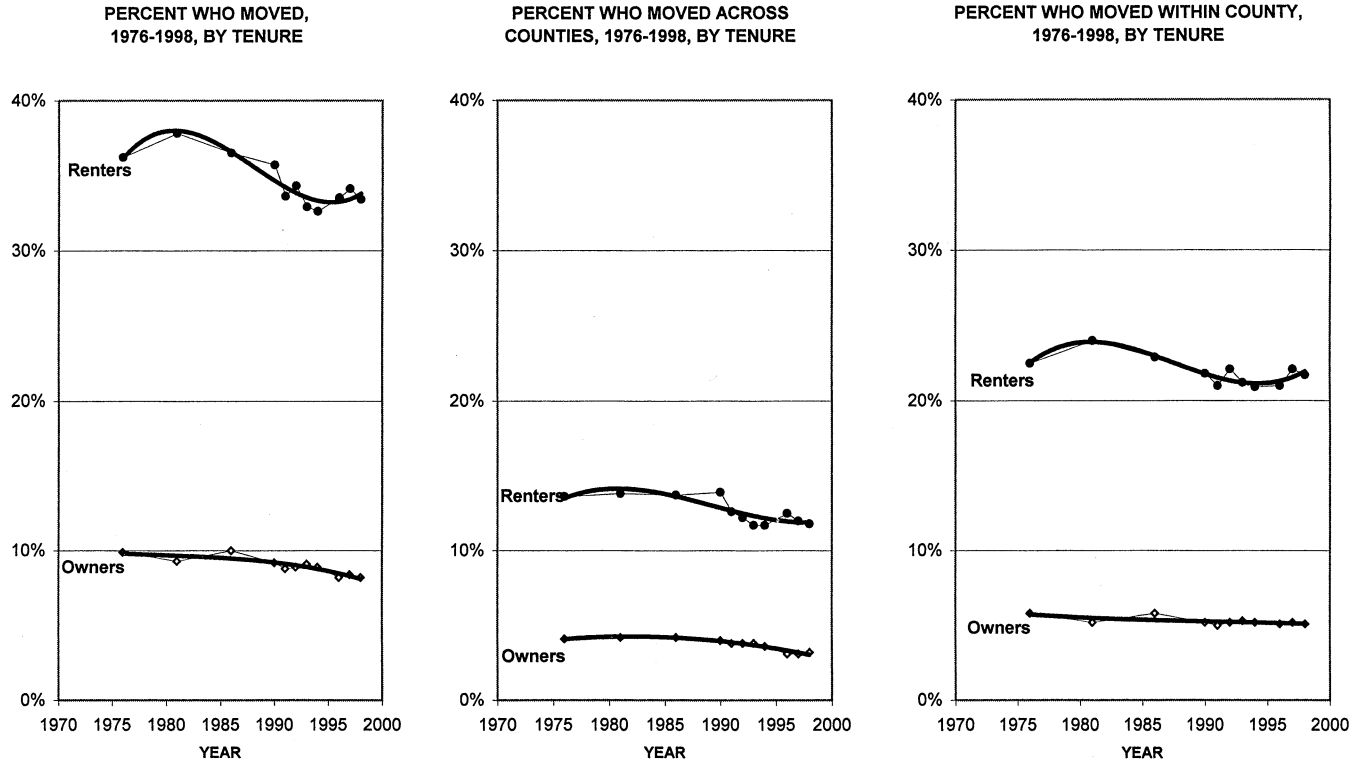
**FIG. 3.** Residential mobility of Americans, 1950–1998, for different age groups, by distance. *Source:* Analysis of Current Population Surveys.

shows the rates of total, distant, and local mobility for five different age groups from 1950 through the 1990s. We see that *total* mobility (left-hand panel) roughly declined more or less monotonically for all groups with the notable exception of the highly mobile 18 to 24 year olds. Their rate soared from 31 percent in 1949–1950 to 40 percent by 1965 before dropping rapidly to 30 percent in 1997–1998. It appears that long-distance mobility (middle panel) largely accounts for the 1955 to 1975 peak among the 18 to 24 year olds. One speculation is that this period covers the great expansion of higher education in America, the Cold War draft, the Vietnam War, and also the first big economic boom of the post-war period. (One puzzle, then, is why the mid-1990s boom did not generate similar rates of mobility for 18 to 24 year olds.) Figure 3 also shows that Americans outside this highly mobile subgroup moved *long distances* about as often at the end of the period as at the beginning but moved less often *locally* by the end of the century.<sup>11</sup> The general “settling in” of Americans over the last half-century is mainly the result of mature Americans and their minor children moving *locally* less often than did their parents and grandparents at mid-century. For example, in 1949–1950, 6.6 percent of 25 to 44 year olds had moved across counties and in 1997–1998, 7.4 percent had, an increase of 0.8 points. In 1949–1950, 14.9 percent had moved locally and in 1997–1998, 12.7 percent had, a decrease of 2.2 points. The contrast was sharper for each successive age group. (Comparing people by type of household from 1975 to 1998—earlier data being unavailable by household type—conveys a similar message: roughly constant inter-county moves and declines in intracounty moves across the board, most especially for Americans living in married-couple households.)

#### TENURE

As noted earlier, household tenure is important. In recent decades, renters were about four times likelier to have recently moved than homeowners.<sup>12</sup> There is a *prima facie* case that increasing home ownership explains decreasing mobility.<sup>13</sup> Figure 4 displays the trends from 1976 to 1998 in annual moving rates for owners and renters separately. (Respondents are classified as renters or owners based on their status *after* a move. This creates some distortion, but we can assume that most current renters were renters before their move and the same for owners. Also, to the extent that more movement is from renter to owner status rather than the other way, the effect of the error is to narrow the renter-owner difference but not to change the substantive conclusion.) We see downward trends for both groups, albeit only slight ones for the already low-mobility owners. We cannot attribute the bulk of the decline in national levels of mobility since 1975 to renters becoming owners.

Further undercutting a home ownership explanation for the post-1960s decline in mobility is the fact that home ownership did *not* increase across all age groups—it decreased for some—and yet, as we saw in Figure 3,



**FIG. 4.** Residential mobility, 1975–1998, by home ownership, by distance. *Source:* Analysis of Current Population Surveys.

mobility generally declined for all groups. Specifically, between 1976 and 1998, the percentage of children living in owner-occupied homes declined from 71 to 66 percent, but their mobility rate stayed the same—17 percent; among 18 to 24 year olds, the percentage in an owner-occupied home dropped from 57 to 55 percent, but mobility also dropped, from 35 to 30 percent; and for 25 to 44 year olds, residence in an owned home sank from 67 to 63 percent, yet mobility also declined, from 22 to 20 percent. (Residing in an owner-occupied home was steady among 45 to 64 year olds, 80 to 81 percent, and increased sharply among the elderly, 74 to 82 percent.)<sup>14</sup> Within age groups, then, home ownership rates both fell and rose, but mobility generally declined.

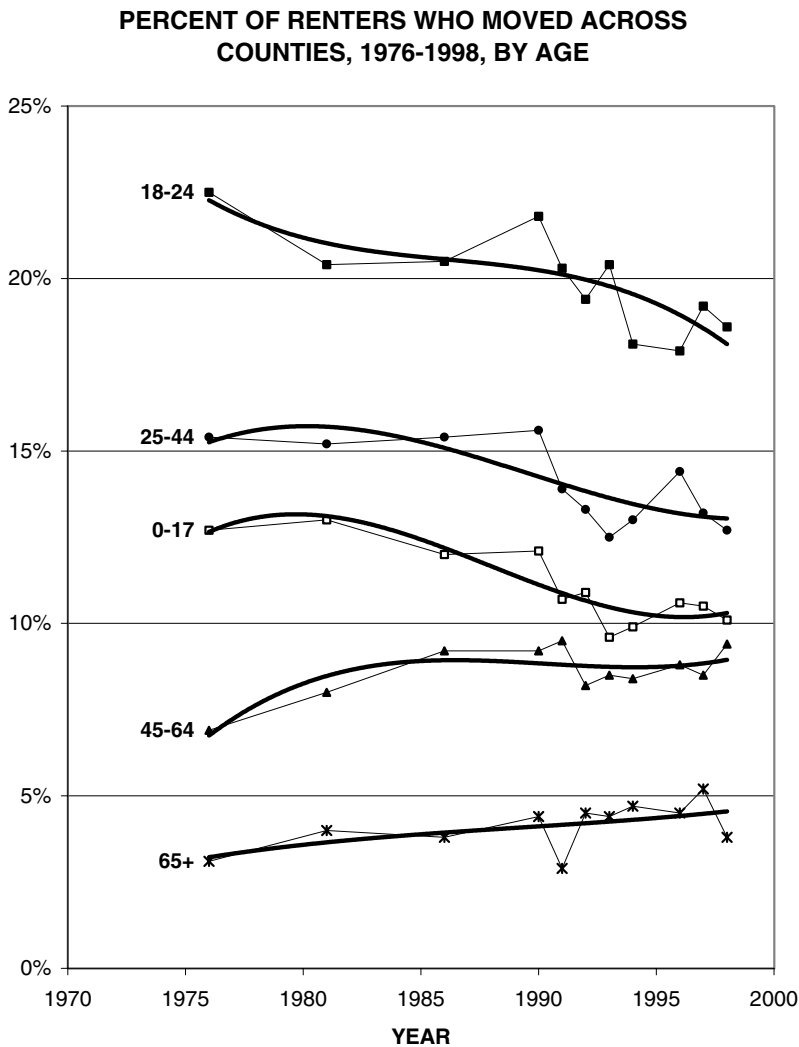
In searching for exceptions to the generality of declining mobility, I found one group that bucked the trend: *renters* over age 44. Older renters actually experienced slightly *more* mobility over the period than did other groups. This was true for local mobility, but even more so for cross-county moves. Figure 5 displays rates of *cross-county* mobility for renters only, by age group. Those 45 to 64 years old and those 65 and over were the least mobile age groups, but they moved slightly more often in the late 1990s than earlier on. Perhaps these trends were driven by an increase in the proportion of older homeowners who sold off their homes to become retired renters in a new community; perhaps these trends point to an increase in economically marginal older persons, the roughly one of five who could not afford (or did not want) to own.

#### STRATIFICATION

I turn next to the question of whether and how the trends in mobility might differ by persons' locations in the stratification system, by race, class, and gender. The answer about gender is simple: the difference between men and women in rates of total mobility between 1965 and 1998 vary from 0.5 to 1 percent with no difference in secular trend (data not shown).

Figure 6 displays the racial differences in three pairs of lines. *Total* and *local* mobility declined among both whites and nonwhites, although a little bit more for nonwhites. The pattern for *cross-county* moves is somewhat different. White and nonwhite rates converged as the former moved less often and latter moved more often. The changes in the nonwhite rate may reflect increasing movement of African Americans (and Asians in the later years) out from city to suburban locations.

We can observe class differences in at least two ways, by the occupation of the respondent (for those employed) and by the education of adult respondents. Occupation is another trait that may be a consequence of a move, so I will return to it later. Educational patterns are complicated by the strong association between age and education. Are the differences we see by educational level simply explained by the fact that young adults at the end of the 20th century were much likelier to be college educated than were their parents? How much does the fact that 18 to

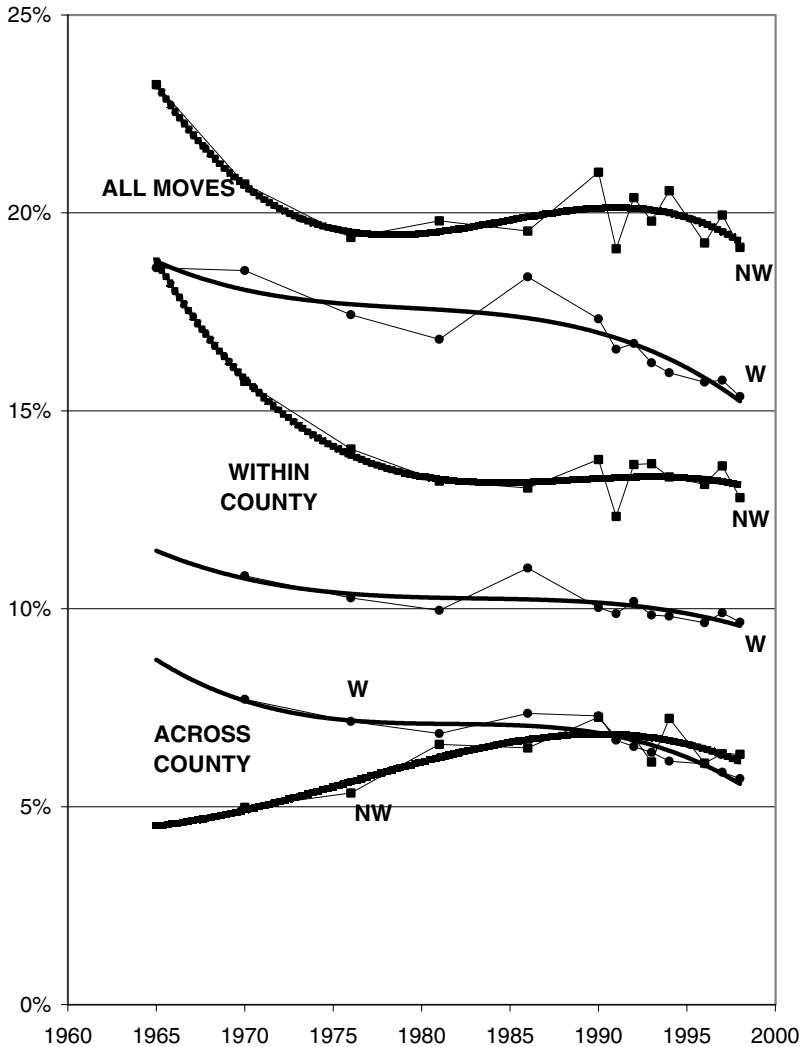


**FIG. 5.** Long-distance residential mobility of renters, 1976–1998, by age. *Source:* Analysis of Current Population Surveys.

24 year olds, the most mobile group, are often in the middle of their college careers affect the results? In the 1960s and 1970s, Americans differed substantially by education in rates of between-county moves: the higher the education, the higher the rates of moving. Those differences had strongly converged downward by 1998. Rates of within-county moves did not differ notably by education and trended slightly downward for all groups (data not shown). However, the confounding of age and education requires disaggregation.

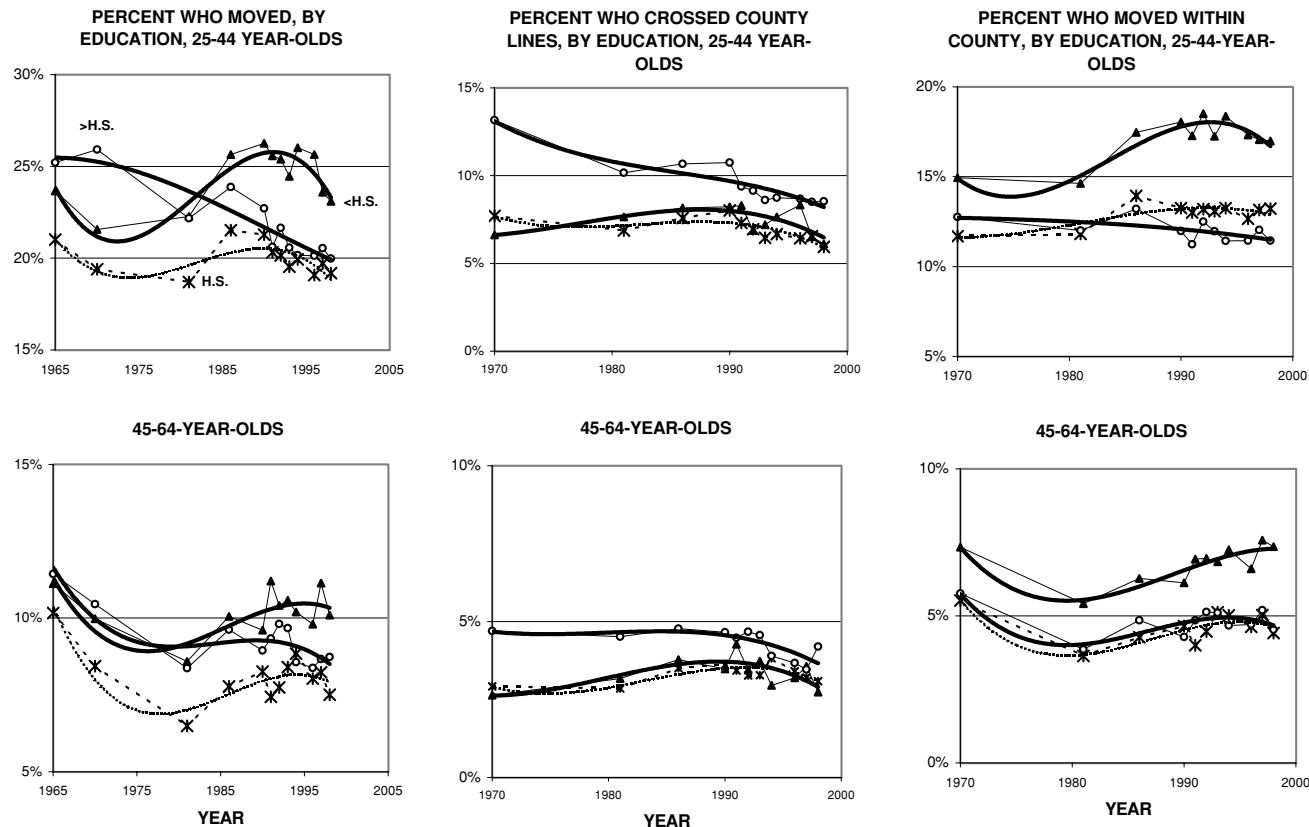
Figure 7 breaks up the data by age group, looking closely at those 25 to 44 years old and those 45 to 64 years old. (Note: For legibility, the

**PERCENT WHO MOVED, 1965-1998, BY RACE, BY  
DISTANCE**



**FIG. 6.** Residential mobility, by race, 1965–1998, by distance. Key: NW = nonwhite, heavy line; W = white, thin line. *Source:* Analysis of Current Population Surveys.

scale of the y-axis varies from graph to graph.) Although the complexities multiply, controlling for age and education simultaneously does highlight a particular group that did *not* share in the decline of mobility: high school dropouts. Those who had not graduated from high school—an increasingly small group as the 20th century drew to a close—experienced an *increase* in mobility, specifically *local* mobility, after 1980.<sup>15</sup> Or, put more precisely, over the decades, high school dropouts are increasingly likely to be movers.



**FIG. 7.** Residential mobility by respondent's education and age, by distance. Key: >H.S. = education after high school, stars; H.S. = graduated from high school, circles; <H.S. = did not graduate from high school, triangles. *Source:* Analysis of Current Population Surveys.



The trends by occupation (not shown) point in the same direction: Mobility rates, especially within county, declined notably for white-collar workers and also declined, albeit less sharply, for blue-collar workers (crafts workers, machine operators, laborers, and so on), but mobility *increased* for service workers (maids, guards, waiters, janitors, and such). Service workers' rates of total mobility were about 1.7 points higher in 1998 than in 1970.

The simplest explanation is that service work and the lack of a high school diploma define a group that became increasingly marginal in the last quarter of the century as it became increasingly composed of immigrants, as general educational levels went up, as income inequality grew, and as housing costs increased in real terms. The increasing local mobility of this group testifies to members' precarious housing situations. (Recall that within-county mobility is largely connected to housing changes, not moves for new jobs.) Such an explanation is consistent with the fact that Americans living in single-parent households had the same high rates of local moving in 1998 as in 1976 (data not shown). This account remains only tentative pending a full, multivariate analysis of the trend data, a task beyond the scope of this essay.

## CONCLUSION

A quick historical review tells us that over the long term, residential mobility has declined substantially in the United States. Americans today move less often than did their ancestors. Statistical analyses of the Current Population Surveys show that since the middle of the 20th century, Americans continued to move less and less frequently. In particular, Americans were less likely to move *locally*; rates of distant moves, those across between counties or farther, stayed roughly constant. Closer examination of mobility trends for different groups of Americans shows that the story of increasing rootedness generally applies across age, gender, race, housing tenure, and, with the exception of the lowest group, class. The social forces that have encouraged stability, particularly the drop in local moving, must be deep and pervasive. Some of these may be continuations of the trends that probably lowered mobility between the 19th and 20th centuries: increasing longevity, greater affluence and security, and the widening range of daily mobility.

The analysis reveals specific groups that experienced constant rates of mobility or even an increase in mobility, such as older people who rented, service workers, and the least educated. What these groups have in common, it seems, is economic marginality. And their increasing mobility, however modest those increases, may reflect their increasing marginality over the last few decades. Certainly, to lack a high school diploma was both rarer and more disadvantageous in the 1990s than in the 1960s. Also, increasingly expensive housing and widening inequality may have made these groups' housing situations more difficult. I am speculating that these groups, already disadvantaged, may have experienced more forced

moves over the period, just the kinds of moves that are most socially and emotionally costly.

Yet, the great majority of Americans were more *settled* at the end of the 20th century than at its middle, and, indeed, probably more settled than at any earlier time in American history. In particular, the rate of forced moves (likely, disproportionately local moves) probably declined even faster than the rate of voluntary moves, reducing the toll of mobility on individuals.

#### FINAL NOTE

The long-term decline in residential mobility is well known to historians. The annual declines are annually publicized by the Census Bureau (e.g., Bureau of the Census, 2000h) and often reported in the press. Semi-popular articles on the decline have appeared (e.g., Fischer and Stueve, 1978). Why, then, do off-hand references to “rootlessness” and increasing mobility appear so often, not just in popular publications, but also in sociological articles? One possibility is that increasing rootlessness fits too well the “grand narrative” of modernization latent in sociology and much other social science—that modernity is socially disorganizing and psychologically alienating—to be abandoned. When a fact like that displayed in Figure 1 clashes with a grand narrative, the fact is soon forgotten and the narrative chatters on.

#### Acknowledgments

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> On a different page, 95, Jasper allows that rates “have gone down ever so slightly in the 1990s.”

<sup>2</sup> In some cases, people move many miles within the same county and, in others, county lines are only a few blocks away. Absent data with specific mileage for moves, we must rely on this measure of “local.” It is, as we shall see, an important distinction. Generally, the intercounty rate is split roughly evenly between people who moved in-state and those who moved interstate. A small number, about a half of 1 percent of all American residents, have moved from abroad in the prior year. They are folded here into “across county.” The heavy curves are best-fitting cubic functions of year and serve here simply as “smoothers” to assist in reading the trends. Such smoothers, by definition, oversimplify and, in some cases, exaggerate trends at the end points. But the conclusions stand independently of the smoother, as is evident by comparing the early and late points.

<sup>3</sup> Mobility seems to have decreased in 20th-century Europe, too (Hochstadt, 1981; Darroch, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Sampson (1988, 1991); Sampson et al. (1999); Ross et al. (2000); Bergesen and Herman (1998); Miethe et al. (1991); Sampson and Groves (1989); Sampson et al. (1997); and Warner and Rountree (1997).

<sup>5</sup> A review of the literature to 1977 appears in Fischer et al. (1977, pp. 177–185); see also Long (1998). More recent studies are consistent with this summary, e.g., Ross et al. (2000), Buckhauser et al. (1995), Massey et al. (1987), Alba et al. (1994), and South and Crowder (1997). One ethnographic example of the “trapped” elderly is Ginsburg (1975).

<sup>6</sup> Many who were especially mobile—the poor, the unmarried, and the foreign-born, for example—were missed both the first *and* the second time, tamping down the measured migration rate (see, e.g., Parkerson, 1991, p. 514; Gregson, 1997). Also, because much of the data lists only heads of households, the movement of dependents, such as child servants, farm hands, and itinerant apprentices, is undercounted. Also, the typical studies miss any round-trip moves between time 1 and time 2 (e.g., a daughter leaves home to work in factory and then returns to care for ailing mother), because the listed individual is found both times. When 10 years elapse between two listings, as is typical in such studies, the chances of such circular migration having been missed are significant.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Tobey et al. (1990), using public utilities records from Riverside, California, find a major decline in mobility from before to after World War II, a decline they attribute to increased home ownership. See also Bell (1942).

<sup>8</sup> The zero-order correlation between year and the percentage of Americans who moved, from 1947–1948 through 1998–1999, is  $-0.87$ , with percentage who changed counties,  $-0.52$ , and with percentage who moved between states,  $-0.64$ .

<sup>9</sup> Those with post-graduate degrees were, in 1998–1999, about 2.5 times likelier than high school graduates and over three times likelier than those who failed to finish high school to move across regions (Bureau of the Census, 2000e).

<sup>10</sup> These data were organized and analyses run by Jon Stiles and Stephanie Mudge.

<sup>11</sup> Close attention to Figure 3 reveals that 25 to 44 year-olds and 0 to 17 year olds moved *long distances* at slightly higher rates in the 1980s than before or after. The 25- to 44-year-old adults were essentially the same people who as 18 to 24 year olds had moved so much in the 1960s and the 0 to 17 year olds were their children. Perhaps this slight 1980s rise-and-fall may be an echo of the earlier moves the same people had made in the 1960s.

<sup>12</sup> Between the 1960 and 1990 censuses, the proportion of renters who had moved in the prior 15 months *increased* from 38 to 42 percent and the proportion of homeowners who had moved dropped from 12 to 9 percent (Bureau of the Census, 2000f). Our annual 1976–1998 CPS data do not show such a difference in trends, with a couple of exceptions noted below.

<sup>13</sup> Using CPS data from 1965 through 1999 (Bureau of the Census, 2000a, 2000b), the correlation between annual national mobility rates and national homeownership rates is  $-0.71$ . For such aggregated data and without controls, this statistic is only mildly suggestive of a causal connection.

<sup>14</sup> These figures are based on our analyses of the CPS data. Typical census reports on home ownership are by age of head of household, but the focus here is on the individual resident.

<sup>15</sup> Here is another way to see what happened. The following table displays the *linear* correlation between year and percent moving for each of the categories in Figure 7 ( $n = 12$  observations).

Correlation with Year	Total Moves	Cross-County Moves	Within-County Moves
Age 25–44			
Less than high school degree	0.50	−0.00	0.71
High school degree	−0.22	−0.64	0.66
More than high school degree	−0.91	−0.93	−0.59
Age 45–64			
Less than high school degree	0.04	0.26	0.28
High school degree	−0.42	0.47	−0.10
More than high school degree	−0.77	−0.59	−0.23

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