

Moving home during childhood: is it harmful?

65

POLICY BRIEFING

OCT 2021

Approximately 50 per cent of children in Scotland move home in their first 10 years of life. Many families move home when they have young children; this could be because of the need for larger housing; more suitable residential areas; parental separation; or precarious housing situations, such as renting. These moves may affect children's social, emotional and cognitive development. In this policy briefing, we report quantitative evidence from a cohort of children born in the early 2000s collected in the 'Growing Up in Scotland' study.

The findings indicate that children that move home tend to fare worse in terms of their socio-emotional development. This is particularly true if they move more than once. Evidence on cognitive achievement is more mixed, with children who move more faring worse at age five. But by age 10, there seems to be no difference in cognitive achievement between children who have moved and children who have not. A large part of the negative effect of moving home is explained by the lower socio-economic backgrounds of the families who move more frequently. Other life experiences which trigger a move, such as parental separation, are also important. The findings show, however, that over and above the effect of social background and life experiences of mobile children, frequent moves do seem to have a detrimental impact on children's development.

Key Points:

- *Over 50 per cent of children in Scotland moved home at least once by age 10.*
- *Children from more disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to move home, and to move more than once.*
- *Moving home in childhood is associated with lower socio-emotional well-being at age five and age 10.*
- *Cognitive outcomes at age five are also lower for children who moved home, but no differences are seen in cognitive outcomes at age 10.*
- *Children's social backgrounds and adverse life experiences associated with moving (such as parental separation) explain a large part of the negative effect of moving home.*
- *The effect of frequent moves on children's socio-emotional well-being at age 10 persists after accounting for the social backgrounds and life experiences of children moving home.*

Introduction

Many families move home when they have young children. Most moves are motivated by the need for larger housing or the desire to raise children in more suitable local areas. Others, however, can be the undesired consequence of adverse circumstances, such as relationship break-ups, evictions, or financial hardship. As housing and employment precarity, as well as couple instability, have become increasingly common experiences for young parents, it is crucial to understand the implications of moving home for children's development and well-being.

Previous studies have shown that children who move home tend to fare worse on several outcomes than children who stay in the same place. Moving home is seen as a disruptive event associated with changes in other social contexts which are important for childhood development and well-being: their family, their peer group, their school, and their neighbourhood. Instability in one or more of these contexts might have harmful consequences for children.

However, not all moves are equal, nor are the families who move the same. Whereas more advantaged families will often make intentional moves to better housing or neighbourhood, disadvantaged families are more at risk of deterioration of their housing and social contexts. Families might also differ in the resources they have to cope with the stress associated with a move.

The study

The study intended to shed light on the role of social inequalities in explaining the effect of residential mobility on children's outcomes. There were two main research questions:

1. To what extent does the family social background explain the negative effect of residential mobility on child outcomes?
2. Does the negative effect of residential mobility persist after controlling for other adverse circumstances associated with a move?

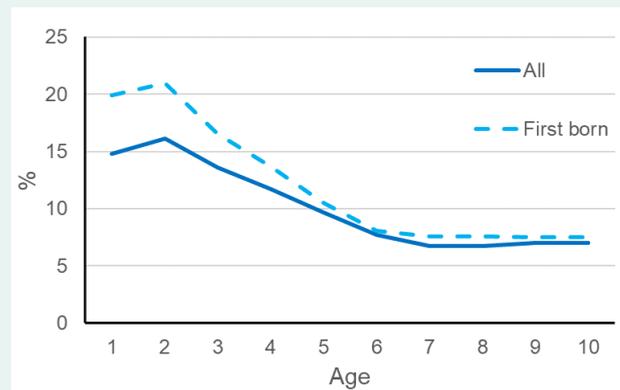
The study used data from Growing Up in Scotland, a longitudinal survey following children born in Scotland in 2004-05. It looked at residential moves during early childhood (from birth to age five) and middle childhood (from age five to 10); and it explored their association with children's cognitive development and socio-emotional well-being. Cognitive development is measured through standardised, age-specific assessments of children's language ability: the BAS-II Naming Vocabulary Score at age five, and the WIAT-UK Expressive Vocabulary Score at age 10. Socio-emotional well-being is measured

using two sub-scales from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire: the Internalizing Score summarises emotional and peer relationships problems, the Externalizing Score captures conduct and hyperactivity problems.

To compare the effect of residential mobility across outcomes, the three measures were standardised so that higher z-scores indicate better cognitive and non-cognitive outcomes. Multivariate regression analyses were used to estimate the effect of moving home on children's outcomes, net of family background and life-course experiences.

Main findings

Overall, 54.5 per cent of children moved at least once by age 10. Moves are more frequent during early childhood, and particularly so in the two years following the child's birth. Nevertheless, around seven per cent of children also move each year between the age of five and 10.



Source: Author's elaboration of Growing Up in Scotland data, Sweeps 1-8

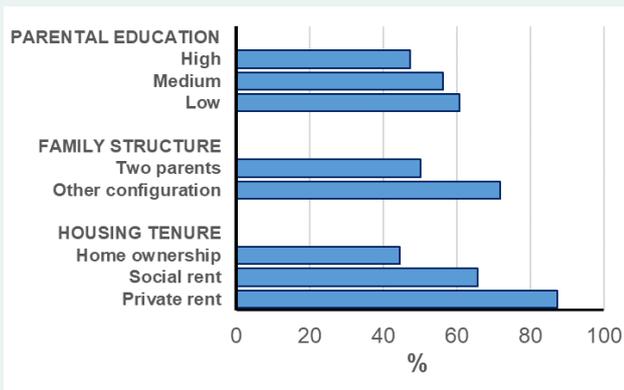
Figure 1: Percentage of children moving home in Scotland, by age

Family background and moving home

There is a clear social gradient in mobility patterns. Children who were born in two-parent families, with highly educated parents, and living in owned accommodation at birth are less likely to move during childhood. Children from more disadvantaged families are more likely to move, and to move more than once between birth and age 10.

Moving home and children's outcomes

Figure 3 shows mean z-scores of children's socio-emotional well-being (SDQ internalizing and externalizing scores) and cognitive ability (BAS and WIAT vocabulary scores). Lower z-scores indicate worse outcomes.



Source: Author's elaboration of Growing Up in Scotland data, Sweeps 1-8

Figure 2: Percentage of children moving home in Scotland, by selected family characteristics at birth

Children who moved home during early childhood fare worse at age five than children who stayed in the same residence, both in terms of their socio-emotional well-being and their vocabulary abilities. The difference is particularly pronounced between children who did not move and children who moved twice or more.

The negative association between moving home and children's socio-emotional well-being persists at age 10. Children who moved three times or more up to age 10 report significantly more emotional and peer-relationship problems.

Both at age five and age 10, conduct and hyperactivity scores are also significantly worse for children who moved, and particularly so if they moved more than once.

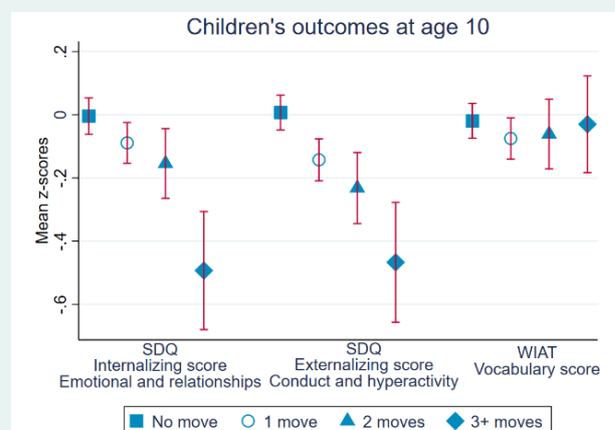
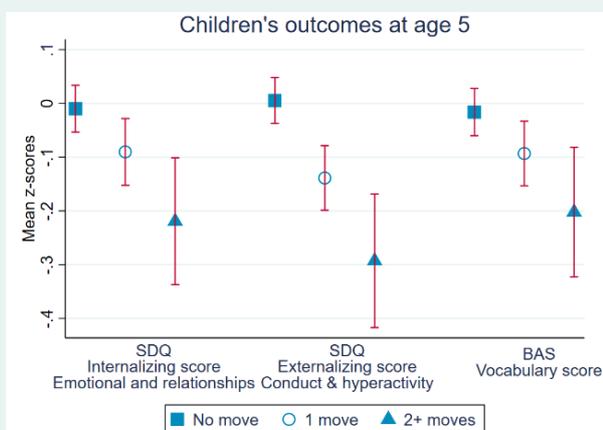
Surprisingly, given that moving home might entail a change of school which could impact on children's learning, cognitive scores at age 10 do not differ between movers and non-movers.

These descriptive findings are in line with previous studies suggesting that residential moves in childhood can negatively impact on children's development and well-being. However, children and their families move for different reasons and have unique characteristics that may account for the differences between mobile and non-mobile children, rather than residential mobility itself causing negative effects on children.

The role of children's social backgrounds and adverse life-course experiences

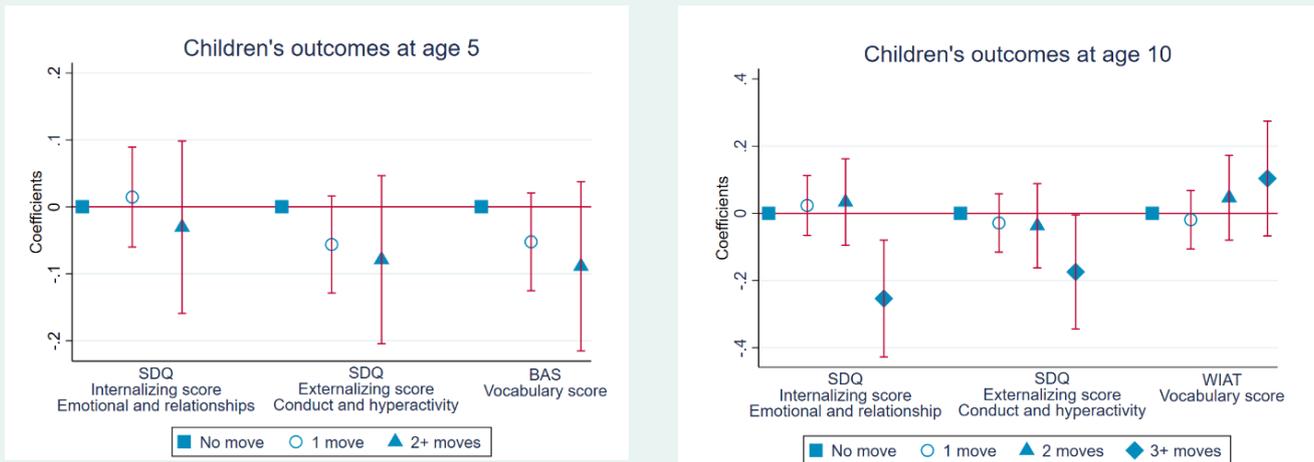
Using multivariate regression analysis the research investigates the extent to which differences in children's outcomes are driven by the socio-economic backgrounds of mobile families and adverse life experiences which might trigger a move. The results highlight the importance of family background for a child's learning, socialisation and emotional well-being. Parental education and parental social class are both independently associated with children's outcomes at age five and at age 10: the lower the parents' educational level or social class, the lower the children's socio-emotional well-being and cognitive skills.

Children's outcomes also differ depending on housing and neighbourhood characteristics. Children who were born in rented accommodation (both in the private and in the social rental sector) and in the 20 per cent most deprived neighbourhoods are not only more likely to move home during childhood, but also to report lower socio-emotional well-being and cognitive scores.



Source: Author's elaboration of Growing Up in Scotland data, Sweeps 1-8

Figure 3: Children's socio-emotional well-being and cognitive outcomes at age five and 10, by frequency of moves. Mean z-scores and confidence intervals.



Note: All models are adjusted for: Child characteristics at baseline; Parental education and social class; Mother's age at birth; Housing tenure and neighbourhood deprivation; Changes in parental employment and family structure.

Source: Author's elaboration of Growing Up in Scotland data, Sweeps 1-8

Figure 4: Fully adjusted regression estimates of moving frequency on children's outcomes at age five and 10. Coefficients and confidence intervals.

Lastly, around 20 per cent of children experienced parental separation before age 10. These children have higher residential mobility rates than children in intact families, and also fare worse in terms of their social, emotional and cognitive development. But do children's social backgrounds and life experiences fully account for the effect of moving home? Figure 4 shows that controlling for children's socio-economic backgrounds, and for other life experiences which often precede a move, does indeed explain away almost all the negative impact of moving home on children's outcomes. However, children who make repeated moves (i.e. moving three or more times over their first 10 years of life) show significantly lower levels of socio-emotional well-being, over and above the effect of their social backgrounds and life experiences.

Policy implications

The study supports previous evidence suggesting that children who move home, and do so repeatedly, experience

lower social, emotional and cognitive development. A large part of the detrimental effect of moving home is attributable to the lower socio-economic backgrounds of mobile children, and to other adverse childhood experiences, but children who move more frequently remain significantly more likely to report lower levels of socio-emotional well-being.

This finding is of scientific and societal relevance and should inform future housing policies in Scotland. The majority of children experiencing repeated moves do so within the private rented sector, and the number of children being born and growing up in rented accommodation is growing. For some children, housing instability exacerbates other forms of socio-economic inequality and family disadvantage.

As part of the policies aiming to reduce inequalities and to support all children's ability to thrive, future governmental efforts should include the issue of affordable, secure and high-quality housing for families.

Authors

Francesca Fiori
(University of St Andrews)

Edited by Becki Dey & Teresa McGowan
(University of Southampton, CPC)

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges funding from the ESRC (Understanding Inequalities ES/P009301/1) and the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE Research Re-boot (Covid-19 impact) Grant Ref. 1054).

ESRC Centre for Population Change

Building 58
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Southampton
SO17 1BJ

Tel: +44 (0)23 8059 2579
Email: cpc@southampton.ac.uk

@CPCpopulation

/CPCpopulation

Centre-for-population-change