

# The significance of relocation for chronically poor families in the USA

Sheridan Bartlett

**SUMMARY:** *This paper considers the difficulties facing the many low income households who are constantly moving - for instance because of eviction or as they search for better conditions - and the factors influencing their decision to move. After reviewing the literature on relocation, this paper describes the experiences of one low income family living in a small town in the United States who have moved 24 times since the birth of their nine year old daughter. The low paying, poor quality jobs they find do not encourage them to stay in one location and the family income is never sufficient to pay for decent housing. Moving becomes an escape from unsatisfactory conditions and a hope of better conditions in the new location. But it also means constant disruption for the children as they change school and lose friends, great difficulties for the whole family in maintaining social relations and the obvious difficulties in constantly re-registering with new authorities for health care and schools. The paper ends by considering the role of inadequate housing in supporting this cycle of constant relocation and suggesting that if low income groups could find decent housing, it would help break this cycle and the heavy costs it imposes on all family members.*

*Sheridan Bartlett is a research associate at the Children's Environment Research Group at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, and works as a consultant for Unicef. This paper draws on the findings of a study which investigated the role of housing in the child-rearing practices of some chronically poor families in the north-eastern USA. Dr. Bartlett is currently collaborating with Roger Hart, David Satterthwaite and Unicef's Urban Section on a book entitled *Managing Cities as if Children Matter* which will provide guidelines for local authorities on implementing children's rights within their municipalities.*

*Address: RDF 4, Box 400, Putney, Vermont 05346, USA; fax: (1) 802 387 4075; e-mail: sheridan@sover.net.*

*"Packing up and unpacking, packing up and unpacking. You'd just get comfortable and you have to move, or Dad wanted to move. The place wasn't nice. Or it wasn't right. Alcoholics next door banging on the wall or sometimes the landlords were jerks and they wouldn't fix things or they wouldn't care what was going on. We'd tell him the complaints but he wouldn't listen. I couldn't get no sleep because the people out back were partying and boogying and screaming and hollering. It got where my mom couldn't handle it, so she would just look in the paper for another place and another place, and another place. My mom would just figure it was better to move than fight a war she couldn't win." Liz, age 22, the mother of four boys.*

## I. BACKGROUND

**THIS REPORT EMERGES** from an ethnographic study on the significance of housing for families living in poverty in a small town in the north-eastern United States. Brattleboro, a vital and attractive town of 12,000 in the rural state of Vermont, serves

1. For other work related to this study, see Bartlett, S. (1997), "No place to play: implications for the interaction of parents and children", *Journal for Children and Poverty* Vol.III, No.1; also Bartlett, S. (1997), "Housing as a factor in the socialization of children: A critical review of the literature", *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* Vol.XLIII, No.2.

2. Bureau of the Census (1995), *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, Table 33.

3. Heller, Tamar (1982), "The effects of involuntary residential relocation: a review", *American Journal of Community Psychology* Vol.X, No.4, pages 471-492; also Hormuth, Stefan E. (1990), *The Ecology of the Self: Relocation and Self-concept Change*, Cambridge University Press: New York, Cambridge; and Stokols, Daniel and Sally Ann Shumaker (1982), "The psychological context of residential mobility and well-being", *Journal of Social Issues* Vol.XXXVIII, No.3, pages 149-171.

as a centre for surrounding villages and has a strong and diverse economic base. Despite the prosperity of many who live there, the town is also home to a number of poor, marginal families for whom housing and subsistence are an everyday concern. Approximately one out of four households in the area depends on some form of welfare assistance from the state. Poverty is not a racial issue in Brattleboro. Although the area is gradually becoming more racially mixed as people move in from cities to its south, poverty in Vermont is overwhelmingly white, as were the participants in this research.

The study involved my close contact with three families over a period of a year and a half, and it allowed for familiarity with family members, household routines, social networks, changing circumstances and on-going problems. Frequent observation and participation in household life was supplemented by regular in-depth interviews with the women in each family. The primary focus of the research was the effect of housing, and of housing-related problems, on the child-rearing patterns and strategies of these women.<sup>(1)</sup>

One of the by-products of poverty and inadequate housing for the people in this study has been a tendency towards frequent relocation. Members of these families have moved almost routinely an average of once every seven or eight months throughout their lives. This is in no way remarkable to them. Everyone that they know accepts as a given that those who live in untenable conditions move frequently, forced onward either by eviction, by hostilities with neighbours or by the desire for an improvement in living conditions. This discussion focuses on some of the causes and ramifications of repeated relocation for these families.

## II. A BRIEF SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE

**RELOCATION IN THE** United States is an issue which has received considerable attention in the social sciences, although little of this attention has been focused on the poor. Military families, those who relocate for professional reasons and elderly people moving into residential care programmes are the more common target populations for this research.

The current average rate of relocation for Americans is 16 per cent or once in every six years.<sup>(2)</sup> Anecdotal evidence points to a much higher turnover in poor communities but formal figures are hard to come by. Neither a search of the literature nor a telephone survey of knowledgeable people in the field has yielded any data on the relationship between chronic poverty and rates of relocation. Although there is a general lack of attention in the literature to the significance of relocation among the housed poor in the United States, research findings from the wider population do provide a useful point of reference.

Some investigators have pointed out that relocation, on balance, can be a positive experience, associated with an improvement in living conditions and that the ramifications of mobility depend necessarily on a range of social and individual factors.<sup>(3)</sup>

4. Leff, Melitta, John Roatch and William Bunney (1970), "Environmental factors preceding the onset of severe depressions", *Psychiatry* Vol. XXXIII, No. 3, pages 293-311.

5. Sluzki, Carlos E. (1992), "Disruption and reconstruction of networks following migration/relocation", *Family Systems Medicine* Vol. X, No. 4, Winter, pages 359-363.

6. Makowsky, Paula P., Alicia Skinner Cook, Peggy S. Berger and Judith Powell (1988), "Women's perceived stress and well-being following voluntary and involuntary relocation", *Lifestyles: Family and Economic Issues* Vol. IX, No. 2, Summer, pages 111-123.

7. Weissman, Myrna M. and Eugene U. Paykel (1972), "Moving and depression in women", *Social Science and Modern Society* Vol. IX, pages 24-28.

8. Starker, Joan E. (1990), "Psychosocial aspects of geographic relocation: the development of a new social network", *American Journal of Health Promotion* Vol. V, No. 1, September-October.

9. Stokols, Daniel, Sally Ann Shumaker and J. Martinez (1983), "Residential mobility and personal well-being", *Journal of Environmental Psychology* Vol. III, pages 5-19.

10. Brett, J.M. (1982), "Job transfer and well-being", *Journal of Applied Psychology* Vol. LXVII, 450-463.

But research for the most part has emphasized the stress associated with moving. Leff and her colleagues, examining the life events preceding depressive illness, found that 45 per cent of depressive patients had moved in the preceding year. Of the 20 stressful events uncovered, relocation was among those most frequently experienced, along with serious physical illness and changes in marital relationship.<sup>(4)</sup> Sluzki, in a review of the literature, claims that personal stress and family conflict are almost unavoidably connected with relocation. There is mounting evidence, he says, that in the years following a move, there is more alcohol abuse, family violence, marital breakdown and more accidents and disease for both parents and children.<sup>(5)</sup>

Makowsky and colleagues report that the effects of relocation are not short-term but tend to be deeper and more enduring.<sup>(6)</sup> Although some studies indicate that voluntary relocation is less likely to produce detrimental effects, other evidence points to patterns of depression even among those who willingly move to improve their circumstances.<sup>(7)</sup>

One of the effects of relocation is the breakdown of social networks. Not only are old connections more difficult to sustain but there is evidence that in the first year after relocation, new residents find minimal social support among their neighbours.<sup>(8)</sup> Those who are highly mobile have been found to show little personal involvement in their new neighbourhoods and communities<sup>(9)</sup>, and dissatisfaction with social relationships is reported as a common consequence of frequent relocation.<sup>(10)</sup>

### III. A CASE STUDY: THE EXPERIENCE OF HOPE AND HER FAMILY

**IN ORDER TO** explore the particular significance of relocation for families in poverty, I will look in some detail at the experience of one of the women who participated in the study described above. Although relocation has been a regular event in the lives of all these families, it has been particularly pivotal in the experience of Hope, her husband Paul and their two daughters. They have moved 24 times since the birth of nine-year-old Madeleine, or an average of once every four and a half months. This has included extended stays in homeless shelters and frequent periods doubled up with relatives, sometimes in the most difficult conditions. Hope's relationship with Paul has been troubled and there have been periods when they have lived apart from one another. During the past year, Hope and the children have lived in four different places and in three different towns. This does not include a stay in a homeless shelter or a brief period with relatives in Florida.

The family's frequent moves up and down the east coast of the United States have sometimes been the result of eviction. More often, though, these moves have been undertaken voluntarily to escape from difficult conditions and in the hope of finding better housing, better jobs and improving their situation in life. Hope finds it hard to distinguish between a voluntary and an involuntary move. She feels at one and the same time pushed

out by her current circumstances and pulled on by the vision of something better around the next corner. There is a certain alluring inevitability about the next move. "After being on the road for so long," says Hope, "all you ever want to do is move. If something doesn't work out, you want to move." Almost invariably, though, the result of their moves has been increased debt and hardship.

Hope recognizes that their constant mobility has been hard for her children. She recalls painful days on the road trying to reach the next temporary haven, while small Madeleine cried with hunger. During one of the family's most difficult periods, when jobs were impossible to find and they had worn out their welcome with relatives, they lived for a month in a tent in the woods with two-year-old Madeleine and her infant sister. Because cold weather was coming and the children were sickly, and because she dreaded shelter life for them, Hope gave the two girls up to foster care. Two weeks later, when they had found housing in another state, she was able to get Madeleine back. But the baby stayed on with the foster parents and was subsequently adopted. They have since had another child but Hope still grieves for her lost baby and she is sure that Madeleine's anxiety at being left alone stems from her time as a two-year-old living with strangers.

Factors that might normally contribute to keeping a family rooted do not play a significant role in the lives of Hope and her family. Social ties do not hold them. Relationships with extended family members have been strained for years and for the most part turning to relatives is an act of desperation rather than a desire for connection. Nor are friendships an important factor. Hope and her husband Paul, like the other adults in this study, tend to be suspicious of neighbours and refrain from the kinds of efforts with other people that a longer-term residence might encourage. Hope explains:

"Me and Paul are the type of persons that are to ourselves. Like with stuff that happens in the neighbourhood, we mind our own business. We don't get into other people's stuff. We learned that from the past, not to associate with neighbours. It seems to interfere with our life."

Jobs, similarly, are not an incentive for this family to remain settled. Although Hope and Paul have usually been able to find work, it has almost always been low-paying entry level work and it has seldom seemed worth holding on to for long. Frequently, these jobs do not yield even the US minimum wage of US\$4.50 an hour. When I first met Hope, she was waiting on tables at a fast food outlet for US\$2.50 an hour, plus tips. Few people left tips and it was not unusual for her to earn little more than the hourly wage or less than US\$20 a day. While this amount might seem generous in many parts of the world, in the United States it allows for only the most marginal of lives. Poverty guidelines for the United States in 1996 set US\$15,600 as the poverty level for a family of four. Even when Hope and Paul are both working, they can rarely earn that amount and it is

11. Fair market value for a two-bedroom apartment in this state is US\$7,800 a year. The subsidized cost of this apartment was US\$ 4,500 a year.

difficult for them to pay for their basic needs. Nor do they have any measure of job security.

Neither work nor relationships with other people, then, contribute to a desire to remain settled on the part of this family. The one factor that **has** had the power to break their cycle of mobility has been the subsidized provision of decent and affordable housing. A few years ago, they were accepted into a non-profit transitional housing programme in Brattleboro. The apartment they moved into was large, light and clean, the neighbourhood was pleasant and the rent was manageable.<sup>(11)</sup> There was a big backyard and Madeleine and her small sister, Whitney, spent hours out there each day playing on the tyre swing and in the sandpit. For almost two years Madeleine woke up in the same bed each morning, attended the same school and established a network of friends. It was a happy and productive time for the child. Paul had fairly steady work with a construction firm and Hope worked part-time as a waitress and was finally able to earn her high school diploma.

But after two years, when their allotted time in the programme was about to end, family life began to disintegrate again. There was much anxiety in the household about their next step. Hope and Paul argued frequently and he became violent and abusive as he had been at times in the past. Fearing for the children, Hope packed two small bags one morning after Paul left for work and she and the girls took a bus to a large town in the north where they knew no-one. Hope had saved enough money to support them for a week in a motel if necessary and she hoped to work out something more permanent before the money ran out.

They were fortunate enough when they arrived to find space in one of the city's homeless shelters and, with the help of emergency funds provided by a local crisis centre, they moved into an apartment fairly quickly. But Hope was lonely and felt vulnerable and preyed upon as a single woman. She hated this town and her children wanted to go back home. After several weeks, her resolve weakened and she tracked Paul down at his mother's place. He had vacated the apartment and sold most of their possessions. What he couldn't sell, he had abandoned.

The family was reunited and decided once again to start over somewhere new. They headed to Hope's family in Florida with their remaining funds but were received with hostility by her stepmother. Lacking the support they had hoped for and running out of money, they soon decided that their only option was to return to Paul's mother's trailer in a village about 20 miles from Brattleboro. She grudgingly agreed to let them stay for US\$ 50 a week and they moved in with her until they could save the money for the down payment on an apartment. It took several months. Their old car had broken down and Paul hitchhiked many miles to work each day. Rides were difficult to find and this cut into his hours at work. Job opportunities within the village were few and Hope was unable to find work during the hours that the girls were in school. But finally, the family saved enough for the rent on a one-bedroom apartment back in Brattleboro. The children returned to their former school and Hope found part-time work in the store below their apartment.

#### IV. THE IMPACT OF MOVING ON HOPE AS A PARENT

**THESE MOVES TAKE** a heavy toll on Hope's capacity to deal with the girls' needs. She is a committed mother and has been vigilant about her children's well-being. She sees to their health care, is involved in their schooling and takes them regularly to the library. Every time they move, however, it is necessary to get a new library card, find a new doctor, meet new teachers and have numerous records transferred. Without transportation or a telephone these routines are difficult to accomplish and it is often a month or more before everything is in place again.

Sometimes, the simplest problems are overwhelming. One morning soon after they moved in with her grandmother, Madeleine woke up with a fever and earache. They had no doctor now, were out of money and the programme that provided the children with medical care had ceased to cover them when they moved. Hope had to depend on the generosity of a village doctor, who agreed to treat Madeleine with the understanding that Hope would apply within the week for coverage to reimburse him. The pharmacist was not willing to take this chance and Hope had to borrow money for medication.

Reapplying for the children's medical coverage involved a trip to Brattleboro. With no car or public transportation, Hope once again had to ask for help. The emotional burden of presenting herself repeatedly as a person in need of assistance is humiliating for Hope and sometimes it results in a fatalistic failure to take action. On this occasion, the children were found once again to be eligible for medical assistance. The application form, however, required a statement of their rent costs along with the signature of their landlord. Paul's mother was unwilling to sign the form, fearing that she would be taxed for the US\$ 200 a month she was receiving from the family. Hope had to give up on medical assistance until they had their own place and she prayed that the girls stayed healthy.

This family has frequently lived doubled-up with relatives for up to three or four months. These are always difficult times for the children and for Hope, who finds she cannot deal with her girls the way she would like to but has to tailor her responses to the expectations of others in order to keep the peace.

When they lived in their grandmother's trailer, Hope and the two girls shared a double bed in a room that it filled entirely. Paul slept on a cot in a crowded and unheated storage room attached to the mobile home. Because their grandmother dislikes noise and disruption, the girls had to restrict their play to quiet games on their bed. They could not invite friends over when the grandmother was home from work or help themselves to food from the kitchen.

"They love their grandmother," says Hope, "but it's not their house. They can't do what they want. At our old place they would run around and be chasing after Paul and screaming and stuff. I don't mind it — it don't bother me.

But here I'm always after the kids. Noise, how they treat stuff. I mean they can't break anything. I can understand. It's her home. But it's really hard for us. It's just not our home and I hate it!"

Although Hope considered this living situation preferable to shelter life, it allowed Madeleine and her sister few opportunities for initiative or autonomy and reminded the older child constantly of her family's humiliating dependence.

Time spent in homeless shelters was even harder to cope with as a parent. Hope recalls a three-month period at a shelter in the state of Vermont when Paul was in jail for theft. It was better, she said, than shelters she had known in the past. Even so, it was a difficult and frightening place to be with children and there were frequently unpleasant encounters with other residents. In spite of the efforts of the staff, it did not feel to Hope like a safe place.

## V. THE IMPLICATIONS FOR MADELEINE

**MADELEINE, AT NINE**, is an unusually bright, resilient and appealing child. She learned to read at the age of four, has done well in school so far and makes friends easily. More than many children in poverty, she appears to have the capacity to be unbowed by her circumstances. It will be an uphill fight, however, for her to realize her obvious potential. These frequent moves have significant emotional, social and economic ramifications for her family, and Madeleine cannot help but feel their effects. Werner and Smith, studying the sources of resilience and vulnerability in children's lives, point out that, as the cumulative number of stresses and disadvantages in a child's situation rises, more protective factors are needed to ensure positive outcomes. They claim, furthermore, that a range of studies indicate increased vulnerability for girls as they enter adolescence.<sup>(12)</sup> Research looking specifically at the effects of relocation on children and youth supports this and finds that adolescent and pre-adolescent girls are particularly sensitive to the stresses surrounding a move.<sup>(13)</sup>

For most of first and second grade, Madeleine was able to be in the same school and she did very well. In the last year, however, she has changed schools three times. She is fortunate now to be back at her original school and is happy to be with old friends again. But it remains to be seen whether her academic interest and level of achievement can be maintained if the family's pattern of frequent moving persists. Research findings indicate that children who are homeless or insecurely housed suffer academically and are two to three times more likely to require special education classes.<sup>(14)</sup> One of the women in this study, Liz, reminiscing about her own frequent moves as a child, remarked that teachers stop paying attention to you if you're one of those kids who never stays around for long.

Friends are a strong source of support and of new opportunities for any child. Madeleine has always been outgoing and has

12. Werner, Emmy E. and Ruth S. Smith (1982), *Vulnerable but Invincible: a Longitudinal Study of Resilient Children and Youth*, McGraw-Hill:New York.

13. Brown, Anita, C. and Dennis K. Orthner (1990), "Relocation and personal well-being among early adolescents", *Journal of Early Adolescence* Vol.X, No.3, August; also Raviv, Amiram, Giora Keinan, Yehuda Abazon and Alona Raviv (1990), "Moving as a stressful life event for adolescents", *Journal of Community Psychology* Vol.XVIII, No.2, April.

14. Lines, Susan (1992), "Educational disadvantage in the primary school: children living in temporary accommodation", *Support for Learning* Vol.VII, No.1, pages 8-13; also Molnar, Janice M., Tovah P. Klein and William R. Rath (1990), "Constantly compromised: the impact of homelessness on children", *Journal of Social Issues* Vol.XLVI, No.4, pages 109-124.

made friends easily at school. One of the most difficult parts of moving for her has been leaving these friends behind. It's hard to know whether she, like her parents, will reach the point where it seems too complicated to try to make new friends. A certain isolation begins to be inevitable for children in this position, a sense that only the family can be relied on in the long run.

Liz's advice to her boys on this topic is poignant:

"Anthony and Michael, they fight over neighbour kids. This one's my friend, this one's my friend. And I say to them, 'Anthony, Mike, get used to it, because we'll move to a thousand places before you guys grow up. And your brother is going to be there every single day. But your neighbour friends are never going to be there. You'll never see them after we move from here. You'll never see the next ones or the next ones. Get used to it!'"

One can only surmise that, in keeping with the predictions of Werner and Smith, it will be increasingly difficult for Madeleine to maintain friendships, to sustain her achievement at school and to cope with the embarrassment of her family's unstable circumstances. When asked what she thinks Madeleine will do with her life, Hope responds, "She'll probably be like me. Go on welfare, have kids, stuff like that. I can't say she won't be pregnant at 16." She explains that in their situation, it's hard to hope for anything more than that. Given Madeleine's potential, this fatalism is particularly unfortunate. With a reasonable amount of stability in her life, it seems likely that she could defy Hope's prophecy and break out of the poverty that has so dogged her mother's life. One can't help but be frustrated and angered by the inability of parents and society to provide that continuity in her life.

## VI. FACTORS INFLUENCING THE DECISION TO MOVE

**WHILE FORCED EVICTION** (whether by landlords or by over-taxed relatives) is a factor in keeping this family, and others like them, perpetually on the move, it is not the whole story. As we have seen, there is nothing in particular keeping Hope and her family where they are. Neither social connections nor job opportunities serve as an anchor; nor does housing, as a general rule. For the most part, it is less than adequate and it consumes more than half of a minimum wage income. But the fact that there is nothing to hold them to a place is not sufficient explanation for constant mobility. Why should it be more appealing to go than to stay?

Shumaker and Stokols suggest that people bring a rational cost-benefit analysis to the decision to relocate and that they weigh the drawbacks of leaving against the advantages to be gained by doing so.<sup>(15)</sup> For these families it is often a question of weighing the untenable against the unknown. The factors that become a part of this equation for families in chronic poverty

15. Shumaker, Sally Ann and Daniel Stokols (1982), "Residential mobility as a social issue and a research topic", *Journal of Social Issues* Vol. XXXVIII, No. 3, pages 1-21.



are numerous and are more complex than at first might seem the case.

There are any number of reasons not to move, even if friendships, jobs and current housing fail to serve as anchors. First of all, these women are conscious of the costs for their children. They acknowledge that it is less than ideal for them to be uprooted continually and they recall the wrenching insecurity of their own early experience.

There are also significant financial costs to moving. More often than not these families forfeit their security deposit when they leave an apartment — a place that is already run-down can easily deteriorate further under the stress of family living. The down-payment on a new apartment, including security deposit and first and last month's rent, is substantial and can be extremely hard to manage for families with minimal income and no cushion of savings. There is also the cost of the move itself, again no small matter in the context of the incomes of these families. Regular moving services are out of the question and instead they must turn to informal alternatives which are not always reliable. Sometimes the solution is simply to leave things behind, as Hope did when she left Brattleboro last year with two overnight bags. This means "starting over" with a vengeance and, as Hope remarked ruefully, it was not the first time. Although it is possible to turn to emergency resources within a community, as Hope did, these cannot be counted on in advance and are, in any case, seldom sufficient to cover the financial and material losses represented by a move.

Perhaps the most compelling reason for staying in a place, given the choice, is the uncertainty that attends a move and the weight of experience that suggests the unlikelihood of any real improvement. The next-door neighbours in the old place might have been noisy alcoholics but in the new place they may be drug dealers. The old landlord might have ignored repairs but the new one may expect sexual favours. The windows might not have opened in the old place but the heat may not work in the new place. As long as there are fewer low-income rental units than people who need them, it remains a landlord's market.<sup>(16)</sup>

And yet these families continue to move. When conditions are sufficiently bad, and when relations with neighbours have deteriorated past a certain point, moving is considered to be a risk worth taking. The prospect of a temporary truce, a temporary escape, is worth the risk of new difficulties in a new place. Clarissa, one of the participants in this study, described perceptively the kind of relief that a move can offer:

"It's a way that you can escape for a while. You have to concentrate on moving so that this way everything else that's going wrong, everything that's bothering you, gets pushed to the back of your mind while you concentrate on this one thing. Sometimes if you don't find anything else to challenge yourself, you can explode. I've done it! It adds tension to the family but sometimes for me, it's just an escape from everything else."

16. Over the last 20 years in the United States, as both welfare benefits and the earned income of the poor has fallen, more than 1.3 million low-rent units have disappeared from the housing market, having been either abandoned or converted into more expensive housing; during the same period the federal government has dramatically reduced appropriations for new low-income housing. For more information, see Leonard, Paul and Edward Lazere (1992), "A place to call home: the low-income housing crisis in 44 major metropolitan cities", Washington DC: Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

17. Cooper Marcus, Clare (1995), *House as a Mirror of Self: Exploring the Deep Meaning of Home*, Emeryville: Conari Press; also Sebba, Rachel and Arza Churchman (1986), "The uniqueness of the home", *Architecture and Behavior* Vol.III, No.1, January-March.

18. Stokols, Daniel and Sally Ann Shumaker (1982), "The psychological context of residential mobility and well-being", *Journal of Social Issues* Vol.XXXVIII, No.3, pages 149-171.

When tension builds, problems pile up and both housing and neighbours become intolerable, then moving can be not only a relief and a distraction but also a way of claiming control over the situation, a way of doing something radical. People in easier circumstances might repaint the kitchen, plan a trip or make other changes in their lives that give them the sense of a fresh start. But these women have few such options. While they may appear, in the course of their moves, to be losing control of their lives, from their own perspective it almost always feels like a way of asserting control. Research indicates that the meaning of home in peoples' lives is significantly associated with the need for control and for self-expression.<sup>(17)</sup> When home fails to meet these fundamental needs, there is little to be lost on an emotional level by leaving it. And there is always the fantasy that life will be better in the next place. No matter how often experience points to the contrary, that possibility remains. There is the perennial longing for a fresh start and the women in this study could all be determined optimists.

Furthermore, moving is a familiar solution. It becomes a pattern, an almost routine response to dissatisfaction and building restlessness. Clarissa had thoughts about this too:

"You pass it on to your kids," she said. "My mother passed it on to me. I've been moving since I was three years old. And from the time I was eight until I was on my own, it was here, there and everywhere. I was always at a new school. And that's where I get my restlessness from. My parents passed it down to me and I'm doing the same to my kids."

Although moving for much of the population may be experienced as a major stress, for these women it is often perceived as a relief from stress. Relative to the other significant pressures in life, it holds no particular fears. Nor does it threaten them with the usual losses. "It's not really that much of a big deal," says Hope about moving. "You've just got to be a little organized." It is worth considering, however, how accurate their perceptions might be on this front. Research findings suggest that the important stresses related to relocation are not the acute, short-term strains at the time of moving but the longer-term consequences for well-being.<sup>(18)</sup> It is plausible that these women, who move every seven or eight months, may never actually emerge from the more enduring effects of these repeated dislocations and may, as a result, not recognize the stress that they inflict. Just because they are not actually giving up stability, security and a strong social network when they move does not mean they do not experience, and perhaps profoundly, the lack of these supports in their lives. More to the point, their constant mobility contributes, in the long run, to perpetuating these terrible holes in their lives.

The pattern of frequent relocation can only be destructive in the end for these families. It is not only expensive, draining and damaging for children. It is also a vicious cycle. Emotional investment in a place or a group of people is almost impossible for these families, knowing as they do that they are more likely

than not to be gone in less than a year. It is not possible to build community when people have no long-term vested interest in their place of residence. Instead, this pattern fosters the tendency towards suspicion, defensiveness and hostility with neighbours that so often precipitates the next move.

The only event in Hope's life that has been capable so far of interrupting her persistent mobility has been the availability of adequate and affordable housing. The same has been true for the other families in this study. As long as such housing has been available, these families have remained in one place and have made an effort to cope constructively with other difficulties in their lives. Beyond all the other obvious advantages offered by good housing, it makes it more difficult to pick up and go. It adjusts the equation to the point where staying is more attractive than leaving and where dealing with problems is more realistic than escaping from them. When life becomes complicated and restlessness starts to build, moving can no longer be a default response.

Inadequate housing takes a toll on families in numerous ways, both direct and indirect. The role it plays in stimulating and supporting a pattern of constant relocation is a significant one and it deserves to be explored in broader, long-term research efforts. The ramifications of relocation should also be carefully researched and should be weighed in any cost-benefit analysis of the provision of decent and affordable housing. By contributing to the stability of families and to the security of children, and by supporting the social conditions necessary for interaction and cooperation among neighbours, decent housing is a critical component in the creation of stable and vital communities.

