

Supporting Neighborhood Opportunity in Massachusetts

Executive Summary

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I. Introduction

The Supporting Neighborhood Opportunity in Massachusetts (SNO Mass) program is a statewide housing mobility program, developed by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC)¹ in 2019 for families with rental subsidies through EOHLC's federally funded Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) Program. SNO Mass offers housing counseling, financial assistance, and landlord incentives to expand housing choice and assist interested families in moving to "high opportunity" neighborhoods. Eligible families enroll in the program through the Regional Administering Agency (RAA) that administers their voucher.²

Each program participant receives individual support from a housing mobility counselor to help them explore neighborhoods that best fit the family's needs and preferences, to identify and address any potential barriers to moving, and to search for apartments. Common barriers for families in this program range from household-specific challenges, such as credit issues, to deeper systemic issues, like widespread housing discrimination based on nationality, race, ethnicity, family status, and source of income.

All participating SNO Mass families also compete for apartments in the same rental housing market as all other households without vouchers. And voucher holders are often at a disadvantage to non-voucher holders, especially when searching in cities and towns that have attributes that are desirable such as high-quality schools, services, and resources, safety, and parks or open space. In SNO Mass, these types of neighborhoods are called "opportunity areas" and are identified by the Child Opportunity Index (COI).³ The COI is a measure of

relative opportunity for a geographic area, based on 29 indicators in the education, health, and socioeconomic domains that are associated with positive child developmental outcomes.⁴



As in other housing mobility programs, the support and incentives provided through SNO Mass have shown to be effective at increasing voucher holders' access to opportunity areas. As important, participating SNO Mass families report improved quality of life, including access to better schools, safer environments, and better physical and mental health.

From the beginning, EOHLC was deliberate about wanting to learn about the components of SNO Mass that enabled families to move to and stay in higher opportunity areas in order to implement any course corrections that could improve the program. SNO Mass initially operated as a pilot in two regions of the state, demonstrating early successes and presenting some opportunities for change, before expanding statewide. As a statewide housing mobility program, EOHLC was also interested in building knowledge and contributing to research about the effects of neighborhoods on

1 The Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities was formerly the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD). Earlier SNO Mass reports and materials will refer to DHCD.

2 Households eligible to participate in SNO Mass include those with HCV vouchers that are in "good standing" with the RAA and the current property owner and not amid eviction/termination proceedings "for cause," have one or more children under the age of 18 and are currently living in an area not designated as a SNO Mass Opportunity Area. [Supporting Neighborhood Opportunity in Massachusetts \(SNO Mass\) Program | Mass.gov](#)

3 The Child Opportunity Index (COI) was developed by DiversityDataKids.org and the Institute for Child, Youth and Family Policy at Brandeis University.

4 Census tracts (hereby referred to as "neighborhoods") are ranked as "Very Low," "Low," "Moderate," "High," or "Very High" Opportunity depending on their relative score. For example, the neighborhoods in the bottom 20% are considered "Very Low" Opportunity, while those in the top 20% are considered "Very High" Opportunity. For the purposes of SNO Mass, the top 40% of neighborhoods in the state (i.e. those that ranked as either High or Very High Opportunity) are considered "Opportunity Areas" that SNO Mass participants can move to.

adults and children over time.

Lessons from HUD's Moving to Opportunity program (MTO), the largest housing mobility demonstration program in the country (1993-2008), informed the SNO Mass program design and implementation strategies. This program provided early evidence of improvements in adult and child physical and mental health as a result of moving to lower poverty and less segregated neighborhoods. While the early findings from MTO suggested limited economic and educational gains, follow-up research of MTO families a decade later (2017) showed that children's outcomes in adulthood varied substantially across neighborhoods and that moving to some types of neighborhoods earlier in childhood significantly improved health and earnings potential. Specifically,

- Every additional year of childhood spent in a better environment improves a child's long-term outcomes.⁵
- Moving to a lower-poverty neighborhood before the age of 13 increases college attendance and earnings and reduces single parenthood rates. For example, children under 13 whose families received an experimental MTO housing voucher and moved to a low-poverty neighborhood earned 31% more as young adults than the control group.⁶
- Using a subsidized voucher to move to some types of neighborhoods increases the child's total lifetime earnings by about \$302,000.⁷
- Moving to lower-poverty areas also greatly improves the mental health, physical health, and subjective well-being of adults as well as family safety.⁸

Other studies of housing mobility have focused on and found similar effects particularly regarding positive impacts on the physical and mental health of voucher holder families in these programs. Currently there are 28 mobility programs operating in the U.S., eight of which are part of HUD's Community Choice Demonstration (2020) to evaluate whether and to what extent housing mobility-related services facilitate moves to opportunity areas.⁹

Supporting Neighborhood Opportunity in Massachusetts

Building off the research on neighborhood effects and housing mobility, the goals for the SNO Mass program include increasing housing choice (the range of neighborhoods where voucher holders can find housing) in the HCV program, helping families to move to and stay in the neighborhoods they have chosen, and supporting longer term positive life outcomes by ensuring access to all the resources available in those neighborhoods. This report shares important findings about SNO Mass participant experiences and focuses on early outcomes of the families who moved during the first three years of the SNO Mass program (2019-2021).

Study Approach

The evaluation study results in this report are based primarily on in-depth interviews with SNO Mass participants from different regions of the state.¹⁰ Our aim was to understand if and how participants' observations of their residential neighborhoods and experiences aligned with the program's goals and selected measures of opportunity. Further, we sought to learn about

5 Chetty, R., & Hendren, N. (2017). The Impacts of Neighborhoods on Intergenerational Mobility I: Childhood Exposure Effects. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 133(3), 1107–1162. http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/assets/documents/movers_paper1.pdf.

6 Chetty, R., & Hendren, N. & Katz, L.F. (2016). The Effects of Exposure to Better Neighborhoods on Children: New Evidence from the Moving to Opportunity Experiment. *American Economic Review*, 106(4), 855–902. https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/lkatz/files/chk_aer_mto_0416.pdf.

7 Ibid.

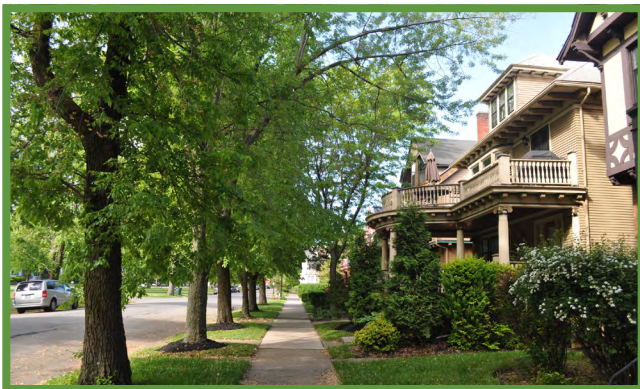
8 Ibid.

9 Mumphery, D. Johnson, C., Weismann, G., Knudsen B., DeFord, K. & Tegeler, P. (2022) Housing Mobility Programs in the U.S. 2022. Poverty Race and Research Action Council (PRRAC). [https://www.prrac.org/Housing-Mobility-Programs-in-the-U.S.-2022-\(December-2022\)-PRRAC-Connecting-Research-to-Advocacy](https://www.prrac.org/Housing-Mobility-Programs-in-the-U.S.-2022-(December-2022)-PRRAC-Connecting-Research-to-Advocacy).

10 The mixed method research informing this report includes semi-structured interviews, as well as analysis of post-move survey data and review and analysis of program administrative data to provide context for the qualitative findings.

participants' expectations and thoughts about the benefits and/or challenges of living in the SNO Mass neighborhoods they chose.

Thirty-four interviews were conducted with the heads of household in SNO Mass families that moved to opportunity areas ("participants"), representing 52 percent of all families that had moved to opportunity areas as part of the program at the time of the study. The study represents six of nine geographic regions where the state operates the HCV program and 23 different cities and towns.¹¹ The demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the families in this study closely mirror those of the participating SNO Mass families that did not take part in the study.¹² Participants had lived in their SNO Mass neighborhoods for between 6 and 22 months at the time of the interviews, with an average of 13 months. Across the participant households, there were a total of 71 children under age 18 years old. The interview guide included 70 open and closed-ended questions exploring factors thought to be important for promoting positive adult and child outcomes, such as the quality of the living environment (indoors and outdoors), community safety, education opportunities, parks and open space, and local services and resources. The stories from families participating in SNO Mass provide additional details about how and why the program matters beyond what the numbers in administrative and survey data can tell us.



II. Key Findings

Where Participants Moved

The 34 SNO Mass participants in the interview sample moved to 23 different cities and towns across the state. Longmeadow, Dedham, and Swampscott were among the more common locations participants moved to, which in part reflects the initiation of the SNO Mass pilot in the CTI and Way Finders administering areas.¹³ The map below shows the geographic distribution of participants by the COI. While participants may not have moved significant distances from their prior neighborhood, they moved to neighborhoods that had significantly greater opportunity ratings than their prior neighborhoods. At the time of the interviews, 91% were living in high or very high opportunity neighborhoods.¹⁴

SNO Mass neighborhoods were experienced as calm and safe environments, and often even better than expected in terms of social interactions with community members.

Participant descriptions of why they enrolled in SNO Mass reinforced how important the neighborhood environment felt to their family well-being. SNO Mass movers described their new neighborhoods as friendly, family-oriented, quiet, clean, and peaceful, with good schools and inviting outdoor places where they could spend time with their children free of worries about safety that they experienced in prior neighborhoods.

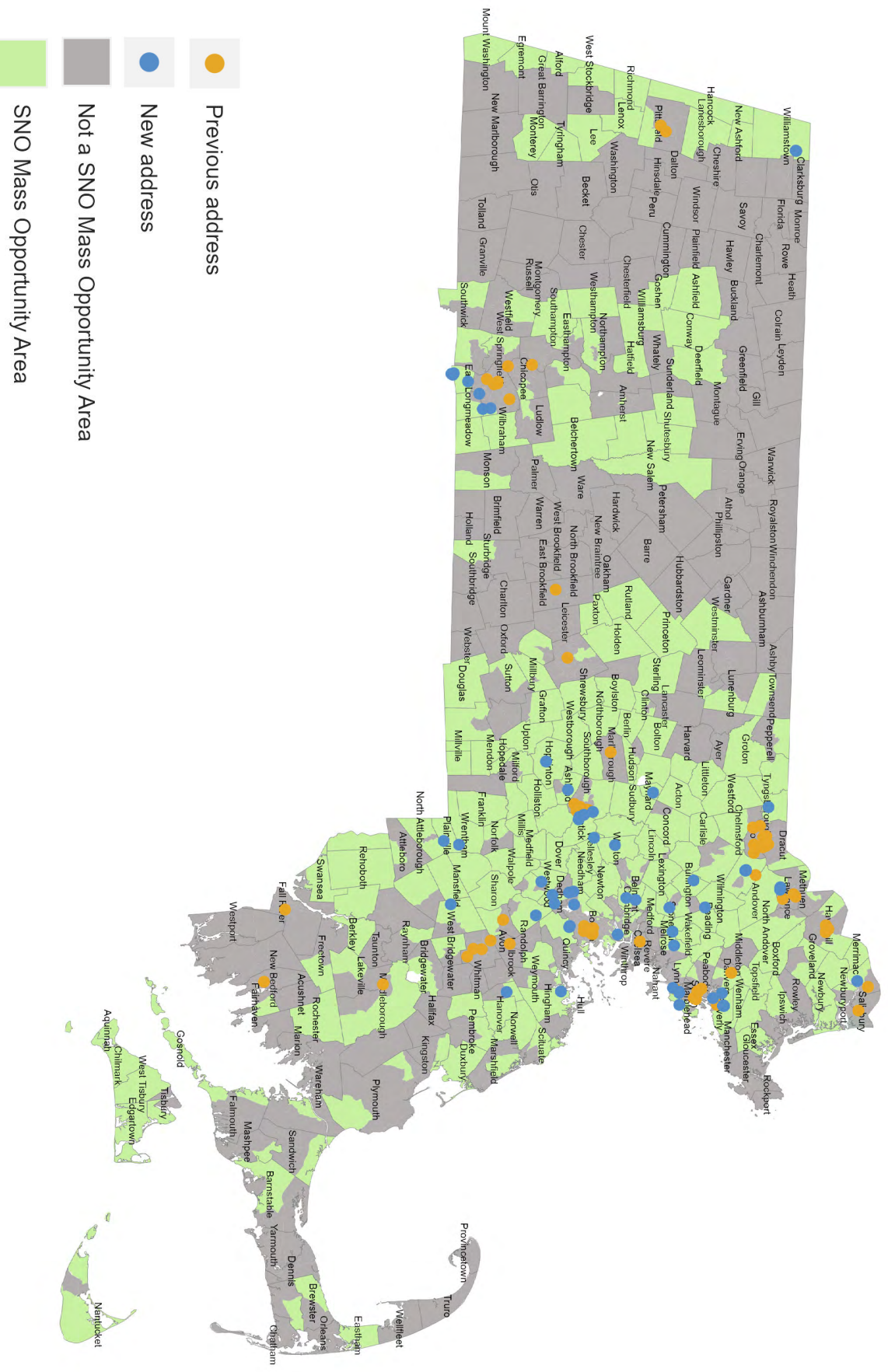
¹¹ There were no moves to SNO Mass opportunity areas in three of the nine regions at the time of the study.

¹² See Appendix.

¹³ For the first 1.5 years, SNO Mass only served families in two of EOHL's regional voucher administrative areas. See: Way Finders region and CTI region. Supporting Neighborhood Opportunity in Massachusetts (SNO Mass) Program | Mass.gov

¹⁴ Areas designated as "high" and "very high" changed slightly in the second half of 2019 with the release of the COI Version 2.0, so some families moved to an area that had been High opportunity under COI 1.0 but was designated Moderate opportunity under COI 2.0.

Previous and New Location of SNO Mass Participants



“Right now, I wake up and my front door is open. I feel safe. [Is there security?] No, I am just not feeling suspect of everything. It feels like a home. At 8pm it’s quiet. It’s like a vacation. Everybody respects their neighbors.”

– Maya, who lives with her 7-year-old daughter in Merrimack Valley

Most SNO Mass movers found their new neighbors and community at large to be warm and welcoming. Positive encounters in the community included friendly exchanges as well as more engaged efforts to make new neighbors feel comfortable such as sharing toys and yard equipment and leaving holiday gift baskets on the doorstep. Positive social interactions helped participants feel a sense of belonging, especially when children spent time in their neighborhood engaged in social and recreational activities. Sixty percent of the participants said that their children had made friends with someone in the neighborhood with whom they spend time outside of school. All participants (100%) said that their children fit in and had friends at their new schools. While nearly all participants said that they believed their family had adjusted well to the neighborhood, the younger school-aged children (13 and under) tended to have an easier time due to friendships they made in the immediate neighborhood or at school.

“Nice thing about here is that my daughter—when she makes friends in elementary—then they’ll go to the same middle and high school. They’ll be together all the way through.”

- Alejandra, Western Mass, 3 children

Almost all participants felt that they lived in an inclusive community even when they moved somewhere they observed to be less diverse racially, ethnically, and/or economically.

Almost all participants (86%) said that their current neighborhood was “inclusive” when we defined it as a place “where residents of diverse backgrounds are accepted and welcomed.” When asked further about the diversity in their new neighborhoods, half of the movers thought their neighborhood was racially diverse, and half thought their community was not racially diverse. In a few cases, perceptions of the same town differed. All participants said that their new SNO Mass neighborhood was higher income and less economically diverse compared to their prior neighborhood. Participants shared subtle and complex interactions experienced when living in a place where people might not “look like you.” Four participants had had one isolated incident with someone whose behavior towards them felt unkind (e.g., staring, giving “dirty looks”), and three more described feeling that they needed to act in a certain way to avoid being looked down upon or out of place because of their racial or ethnic identity or income, though their actual experiences in the neighborhood had only been positive. Regardless of views of the area’s diversity, it was the more immediate and personal interactions with community members, especially close neighbors, that mattered to feelings of belonging.

Health improvements were substantial, and participants credited their neighborhood and housing environments as the major factor contributing to these positive outcomes.

The findings indicate that a substantial proportion of the participants experienced significant improvements in their health as a result of moving and living in their new community. About six in ten participants (59%) indicated their physical health had improved since they moved—and attributed the improvement to the move. Three-quarters of the participants (74%) said their emotional well-being and their level of stress improved due to the move and their new living environments. Further, close to half of the participants (47%) said their children’s health improved because of the move. Common themes related to health improvements included lower stress, better sleep, safety, peace and quiet, more exercise and outdoor time, more space, children spending more time outdoors with less supervision, and better air quality.

“My middle daughter had a lot of social anxiety from living in the last place we lived in - had a lot of counseling. She has done a complete 180 – she’s so much at peace. It is very peaceful. She loves watching the bunnies and squirrels – and there’s a pool out in the summer, a fire pit and grill. Her whole attitude has changed. We are just calmer. It’s a really happy place to be—the environment really does determine it.”

– Alyssa, mother of 2 girls, North Shore



New schools provided better services and accommodations for children with learning challenges and safer learning environments.

Three-quarters of all participants (76%) said their children changed schools when they moved. Nearly all of those whose children were attending new schools indicated they were happy with the schools, and most said the new schools were better in comparison to their prior schools. Participants described specific school improvements as they relate to academics, social dynamics, and enrichment opportunities. They shared stories about their children making the honor roll for the first time, receiving the services or extra help they needed, positive social experiences with classmates, and welcoming and safe school environments. Nearly half (46%) of the participants whose children moved schools reported their children were doing much better because they were not being bullied like they were in their prior school. The increased attentiveness of teachers and other school personnel also brought attention to the challenges and unmet needs of students that were not addressed in the past. Half (50%) of those whose children changed schools said at least one of their children had learning challenges or other special needs. Many participants emphasized the significant improvement in communication with teachers and other members of the school community, noting that their concerns were actively considered or addressed.

“I think it’s an excellent program—it helped to push myself and my family—to open up a door and reach better and believe we can do it.”

– Blanca, 2 sons, Western Mass

Participants did not have to leave behind all their connections to family, friends, services, and organizations to take advantage of the benefits of opportunity neighborhoods.

The amount of time that a family (both adults and children) spends in their SNO Mass neighborhood is important and necessary to access the resources that SNO Mass offers, but our findings suggest that it is not determinative of family experience in the program or enjoyment of the neighborhood. Personal choice appears to be the driving factor influencing where participants spend their time. For almost half of all mover households (42%), child and adult activities primarily took place in their SNO Mass neighborhood. In contrast, few households (10%) spent almost all their time in neighborhoods outside of where they lived. The largest group (48%) split their time between multiple neighborhoods including prior towns and other places where they have important connections – to family, friends, places of worship, or work.

Most of the “recreational” time in the SNO Mass neighborhood was centered on children’s interests, including organized sports, leisure time with friends, and school-sponsored activities. Public outdoor spaces (e.g., parks, playgrounds) and apartment complex amenities, especially swimming pools, were the most often cited resources used by participants.

The level of engagement with neighborhood institutions and organizations did not correspond

to participants’ feelings of belonging in the community or satisfaction with their neighborhood. Several patterns emerged to explain why only two households said that their level of involvement in social and civic activities changed when they moved. Participants (adults) continue to spend time with the people that they care about, regardless of where they live. An intentional choice to maintain some social distance in new neighborhoods (even when seeking out activities and local connections for their children) may be another reason why so few adults said they had had a significant change in their social networks. Further, gaining familiarity with local resources and developing social connections may also take longer than 6-22 months, and access could have been delayed due to the Covid pandemic – as schooling took place remotely and recreational and community activities were limited. Some benefits such as healthier, calmer, quieter environments, and the associated improvements from them, are more subtle; they do not require actively seeking out resources or joining groups or organizations.

“They accommodate the kids and the families so much. Here—I can’t believe they did this—but they made this happen for us. Instead of putting my daughter on a minibus, they stop and put her on the big bus with my son. Just so my kids could go to the bus stop together and get on the bus together. They did that—changed things and made it happen to give them that experience and make it easier on us.”

– Audrey, mom of 3 children, Western Mass

Challenges were primarily about property-related conflicts and financial burdens.

Disputes, when they occurred, were either isolated and specific to one person or event or in a few cases constituted a challenging relationship with a neighbor, property owner, or management company. Neighbor conflicts were primarily about challenges that can be common in rental properties, such as the navigation of shared public space. A handful of participants described how neighbors spoke to them about noisy children, their barking dogs, parking spaces, or asked them to put away belongings or patio furniture on shared porches or lawns. And while most participants reported positive relationships with their landlords, eight (24%) had a complaint or reported having a negative experience with their landlord. These residents most often specified that they had requested repairs that were not addressed or not addressed quickly enough, and a few had conflicts about pet fees or rent and utility calculations that they felt were not accurate and impacted their relationship with the property owner. As there were greater household costs for some participating households, and perhaps higher expectations about housing quality associated with additional housing costs, property issues could become a source of concern.

New or higher utility bills and higher costs for groceries were the most common expenses participants mentioned. A few participants noted the costs for school-related activities such as fees for participating in sports or afterschool programs. Although most participants said that they had experienced no change in their financial situation since moving, six participants (18%) indicated they were more financially stable now, and four (12%) said they felt less financially stable. Interestingly, most who indicated there were greater costs associated with living in their new neighborhood still felt financially stable—and some of those same participants felt they were even more financially stable now. They speculated that the reason could be attributed to enhanced confidence and an overall reduction in stress levels for themselves and their children.



Offering a stable living environment, SNO Mass broadens participants' outlook on life and the future.

Participation in SNO Mass was empowering. Many participants talked about increasing confidence and a positive shift in their outlook while living in their SNO Mass neighborhoods. As families began to reflect on their experience, one of the common narratives that emerged was how participants had gained a feeling of empowerment and an expansion in their own capacity. With more peace and quiet in their lives, participants could relax with their children and turn toward their own education or financial goals. This expansiveness was most evident in conversations about planning for the future. When we asked a question about where they see themselves in the next five to ten years, most participants said that they wanted to stay in their same neighborhood and two-thirds wanted to become homeowners. However, participants were also aware their SNO Mass neighborhoods might not be a feasible location to buy property given the high cost of housing in those towns.

“SNO Mass has changed my life and my children’s life. [It] gives people opportunity for their children for schooling and overall living - takes them out of negative areas. Mainly for me, my thing is my children, and they all deserve a chance, and to get away from the dark side.”

- Alyssa, mother of 2 girls, North Shore



There was little notable variation in participant experience and outcomes by neighborhood, race, ethnicity, family size, time of the move, or length of time they were living in the neighborhood.

Although all the locations that participants moved to are high or very high opportunity neighborhoods, they are heterogenous in size, density, geography, urbanity, etc.¹⁵ We might expect some of these differences to translate into different outcomes. However, on meaningful measures such as impressions of neighboring and belonging, school quality, amenities, and safety, most participants shared similar observations and experiences. There were no observable patterns by race and ethnicity, for example, in how well families said they had adjusted to their neighborhood or whether they perceived their community as welcoming or diverse. Similar responses were also provided by families with one child or multiple children. Outcomes did not seem to vary by the length of time someone had lived in a neighborhood or by the time at which the interview took place relative to their move.

III. Lessons & Recommendations

Our findings demonstrate numerous successful individual participant outcomes across the subject areas investigated in this study and offer insights into the results. Additionally, we discuss factors contributing to less common outcomes, such as parents' decisions to keep their children in a prior school or why some participants felt they had a hard time adjusting to the neighborhood. We provide policy and program recommendations considering both typical patterns and individual outliers. This report highlights key areas where mobility counseling can focus, offering program guidance based on participant experience. We suggest ways that the findings can be used to support access to neighborhood resources and build a community for SNO Mass participants where they connect and support one another. Finally, we present ways in which this study can inform the Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) program, offering ideas for improvement and suggesting research questions to explore.

¹⁵ Even in the three towns where more than one participant resides, they lived in different census tracts, or neighborhoods.

Pre-move counseling focus areas

Education

Schools play a central role in the housing mobility research model that explores how neighborhoods impact outcomes. Many families identified better and safer schools as one of their motivations for moving and a top priority for choosing a particular community. The findings showed that new schools are an important site for building social connections in the neighborhood. Participants also talked about important improvements in communication and better services for children with higher needs. Although most participants said that they researched their new town's schools or were aware that a school was "good," some parents noted that they were unaware of the depth of their child's needs or did not know how the special education system worked in their new community.

Mobility counselors cannot be experts in all school districts and schools but should introduce this topic during conversations about neighborhood preferences and schools, with suggestions about how to research and outreach to schools with services for children with special needs. Given our findings, the staff may want to spend extra time discussing this aspect of new communities during their housing search. This could be offered as a package of material that participants can review at home. After moves, check-ins should include attention to school-related challenges and improvements. EOHLC can also highlight this finding for other stakeholders, including the state's Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) with whom they could partner and propose or pilot programs. Through the counseling and additional support provided by SNO Mass, EOHLC has the opportunity to collaborate and enhance outcomes for families in the voucher program.

Diversity

Neighborhoods with a range of characteristics and demographic profiles (location, socioeconomic characteristics, size, density, housing types, etc.) were all able to offer resources and benefits that families said were important to their health and wellbeing. Although half of the participants said that their neighborhood or city/town was diverse and 86% said it was inclusive, some families also had a more challenging experience with neighbors or others in the community, and a few expressed feelings of discomfort or isolation and wanted to keep their lives anchored to their prior community. By discussing the level of diversity in SNO Mass communities as compared to prior neighborhoods – by race, ethnicity, income, etc. – mobility counseling could help families anticipate and prepare for potential challenges with acclimation. As the number of SNO Mass participants increases, there may also be opportunities to introduce peers with similar interests and/or backgrounds or to connect a new participant with a past participant. Although it is not necessary in order to claim the benefits of SNO Mass neighborhoods, spending time in the neighborhood engaging with others through social and recreational activities can help individuals build relationships and feel a sense of belonging in their community. When families experience a sense of belonging and establish local connections, they are likely to have stronger support systems that can help them navigate any challenges and trade-offs in their new neighborhoods.

“Race — I was kind of worried about that, because growing up I thought of these neighborhoods as racist — but everyone was welcoming. There’s a Black Lives Matter sign right across the street and my neighbors are not white.”

– Danika in Western Mass



Post-move strategies to engage and support families

After three years of operation, the number of families moving to and staying in their SNO Mass neighborhoods for at least two years is relatively high. Of the 62 families who moved between July 2019 and December 2021 (the population that would have been eligible for this study), 60% are still in the same unit and 73% are still in a High/Very High Opportunity neighborhood. After a participant moves, SNO Mass offers frequent check-ins, conducts a series of 4 surveys in the first few months, and offers post-move counseling for up to two years. There was significantly less interaction with counselors after moving as compared to the pre-move engagement, in part because there are no requirements to do so, and the needs of participants are not as clear or may be evolving in the first few months (in comparison to the goal of leasing an apartment). Within the standard voucher program, social service programs focus on goals such as increasing self-sufficiency (e.g., the Family Self-Sufficiency Program).

Mobility programs impact participant outcomes and the administration and success of the housing choice voucher program. The aspect of SNO Mass that is more typically “case management”-oriented occurs after someone has moved into their unit, but counselors and participants may not

be as accustomed to thinking about direct housing assistance in a broader way, as a social service. The findings identified challenges and noted the pace of integration in new communities and can point to additional ways that post-move counseling can better engage and serve participants.

Community information

Mobility counselors should help connect participants to a full range of childcare options in their new community to make sure they have the support to stay in the neighborhood long term. A handful of participants arrived to find that childcare programs (including daycares and before-/after-school programs) had long waiting lists, were expensive, or were impractical for their needs. In order to maximize their ability to access all resources including childcare, SNO Mass should first ensure that families have the counseling and financial support to enroll their children in all available local activities that may be of interest – recreational activities in particular seem to foster friendships and broader neighborhood investment. This may require additional focus on how housing and mobility services will be coordinated with other types of organizational assistance post-move.

Much of the information about community resources and landlord relations is provided during individualized pre-move counseling and in optional workshops. This material and support should be provided – whether shifted or adapted or repeated – as part of the program’s post-move services. Some of this information can be specialized – for example, for families with teens – and all of it should be available both online on a dedicated SNO Mass site, and through the 1-1 counseling that is currently available.

Most participants said that they had not reached out to SNO Mass for anything after moving, and several said during the interviews that they were unaware that there were supports and services they could access.¹⁶ The program can recognize that it may take a while before participants have the time

¹⁶ SNO Mass provides two years of post-move counseling as well as financial supports up to a cap of \$2,500 which can be used on pre-move expenses such as moving costs, as well as post-move expenses such as activity expenses for children. In addition to the \$2,500 for pre-move and post-move expenses, the program can also cover the cost of the participant’s security deposit.

and motivation to fully explore a neighborhood. SNO Mass mobility specialists should periodically (e.g., every quarter) provide some suggestions about how to connect to resources in their area and provide reminders about the supports that SNO Mass can offer, including financial assistance. As families continue to live in a community, they may also become more aware of their own information gaps and types of activities with which they could use additional support (e.g., school sports programs, employment, daycare options).

SNO Mass will need to identify some longer-term post-move approaches to ensure kids have what they need to succeed in high school (and beyond). Mobility specialists can support parents in encouraging their teenagers, especially, to make new connections to explore the opportunities in the neighborhoods, find meaningful work, and figure out college/training/careers. This may mean specifically outreaching to families with children above the age of thirteen and partnering with other providers, state or local, that can assist with these goals.

Property and landlord-tenant relationships

While only a small number of families encountered difficulties concerning landlords and/or neighbors regarding property-related matters, all renters can benefit from ongoing proactive assistance in establishing and maintaining positive relationships with landlords and management companies. Many SNO Mass participants have been in the HCV program for a long time and have been great tenants, but issues naturally occur in rental properties for voucher and non-voucher holding tenants alike. SNO Mass can continue to play a role in helping participants prepare for and manage potential conflicts around shared space, maintenance problems, and other issues we heard about in the interviews. Current SNO Mass landlords could also share their positive experiences in the program with industry groups and at annual RAA property owner recognition

functions. Building ongoing positive relationships will continue to serve the families and the property owners in the long term and will help to build trust with property owners who may rent to future SNO Mass participants. Although the program recognizes the prevalence of housing discrimination faced by voucher holders and encourages participants to take pre-move workshops on fair housing rights and strategies, post-move counseling and workshops could emphasize the importance of nurturing relationships with landlords once individuals have moved into a property.

Building on SNO Mass

Families shared similar preferences for some neighborhood characteristics such as safe environments and good schools so it is not surprising that we would find that an increased sense of security and improvements in health would be an early benefit of the program. This impact has been significant in many studies of housing mobility programs.¹⁷ SNO Mass participants also came to their new homes and towns with different ideas about what they wanted and needed from the neighborhood. For those whose neighborhood experience was different than what they expected, it was almost always more positive than they had hoped. Even the participants that said they'd had a harder time adjusting to the neighborhood—the handful who felt more isolated from a familiar or more culturally similar network of friends and family or shops, or those who had housing-related challenges with property owners or neighbors—were ultimately happy with the choice they had made to enroll in SNO Mass. Towards the end of the interview, participants were asked a question about the overall benefits and drawbacks to their family from living in their new community. While all participants (100%) provided examples of the benefits, just four participants (12%) identified a drawback.

The interview process, by following an open-

17 Popkin, S. J., Leventhal, T., & Weismann, G. (2010). Girls in the 'Hood: How Safety Affects the Life Chances of Low-Income Girls. *Urban Affairs Review*, 45(6), 715 -744. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1078087410361572>; Ludwig J, Duncan GJ, Gennetian LA, Katz LF, Kessler RC, Kling JR, & Sanbonmatsu L. (2012). Neighborhood effects on the long-term well-being of low-income adults. *Science*. 337(6101), 1505-10. doi: 10.1126/science.1224648. PMID: 22997331; PMCID: PMC3491569.

ended conversational format, afforded the opportunity to hear about less “measurable” but meaningful kinds of outcomes. One of these was the role of SNO Mass in increasing personal agency, not only by bridging access to resources, but by expanding the universe of neighborhoods that are accessible to voucher holders. Over and over, we heard from participants about the empowering nature of the move. This message can be harnessed to support current participants by building supportive program networks across the state. Some ideas for fostering this community include a state-wide SNO Mass newsletter and resident advisory boards that provide ongoing input into program operations and impacts.¹⁸ The stories about positive experiences and relationships, as well as the trade-offs and challenges, can also be used to help encourage new families who might best relate to and trust the experience of fellow voucher holding families.



Building on this finding also requires thinking about how to support families as they plan for the future. Almost all (95%) families that moved with the program would like to continue living in their SNO Mass area for the next five to ten years. Participants indicated they want to stay in their current neighborhood or one like it, but many also thought that they would not be able to afford to buy a home where they were living. Three-quarters of the participants we spoke with were thinking about owning a home as their next step after SNO Mass. To support this and other personal goals, EOHLC should make sure that participants are aware of and encouraged to connect to current programming such as the Family Self-Sufficiency (FSS) program. In addition to the post-move services, there are other programs to which warm referrals can be made, several of which are provided by the Regional Administering Agencies. These programs encompass financial planning, preparedness for homeownership, and initiatives specifically designed for first-time home buyers.

Lessons for EOHLC’s SNO Mass and Housing Choice Voucher program

Mobility counseling was very important to families, and very different from the standard assistance provided to HCV voucher holders. The aspects of mobility counseling that rose to the top during interviews with SNO Mass participants included helping to identify or clarify unique family needs and goals, responding quickly to any problems, facilitating more positive landlord interactions, and providing support and encouragement when the housing search was hard or long. Participants’ own recommendations for potential program improvements also speak to the intersection between the mobility program and the larger HCV program. The following two broad themes surfaced when discussing how the program could make improvements.

18 Mumphery, D. (2021). Genuine Engagement with Housing Choice Voucher Families (prrac.org). Mobility Works & Poverty & Race Research Action Council. Policy Brief.

- More program/staff communication, specifically information and explanation about how the housing search process works in SNO Mass; and staff-participant communication during the search and with housing agency program representatives.
- Increase access to and the supply of apartments in opportunity areas affordable within the payment standard.

To respond to these suggestions, SNO Mass could consider training and pairing experienced staff from one RAA with staff that have less experience or agencies with high staff turnover. This could help increase clarity and set expectations about information that must be provided to households, as well as expectations around program operations. Similarly, cross-training staff from the SNO Mass program with voucher program representatives helps to support program administration and coordination.

The findings also begin to address questions about where additional support would be needed to increase access to a wider range of neighborhoods. If participants in SNO Mass are comparable to other families in the HCV program, in their experiences, preferences, and goals, then their motivation for moving, the selection of cities and towns where they moved, and the most important aspects of counseling can be applied to enroll more families in the program. There is nothing to suggest that the group of families in this study is uniquely qualified to benefit from SNO Mass. This group of participants had held a voucher for an average of 10 years and at the time of the interview had been living in their prior neighborhood for an average of almost seven years. Most of these families had been considering moves, if not actively searching for a new place, for a long time before SNO Mass financial support and counseling acted as a catalyst by providing the necessary scaffolding and encouragement for a move.

Over the long term, SNO Mass may consider broadening the SNO Mass opportunity areas to increase the places in which participants can access resources and opportunities while also feeling a

sense of belonging. EOHLC could increase the payment standards in some areas and/or expand the counseling focus on the current SNO Mass neighborhoods (or cities and towns) that have not been as attractive or accessible to families. Below we elaborate on how more “moderate” census tracts or partial census tracts may also be considered for the program. It is important to note that high-cost local and regional housing markets across the state continue to be extremely competitive and EOHLC is limited to the caps imposed by program regulations and funding for the federal HCV program for administration of the SNO Mass program.



Contribution to research on housing mobility

Follow-up research is essential for identifying longer-term outcomes for children, teenagers, and adults and to identify ongoing or new challenges that may need addressing. The interviews contain a rich source of material to increase understanding about additional topics of interest to housing mobility researchers and practitioners. There is an opportunity to examine housing search and housing discrimination, counseling supports and services for example, or to pair the interview data with pre-move assessment data, post-move survey results, and compare findings with HCV administrative data on all current SNO Mass movers as well as to all families in EOHLC’s HCV program. The study points to areas where SNO Mass findings can inform

related policy domains such as further research on how housing programs could best support education outcomes, particularly for families with children with special needs or who are at risk of academic or social difficulties.

Moreover, while in-depth interviews with participants was a very effective methodology for this study, future research could tap into other methods such as focus groups and Photovoice, an innovative participatory method that engages participants in sharing their experiences through audio recordings, photographs, journaling and/or video recordings. Talking with SNO Mass participants who did not move to opportunity areas or participants who dropped out of the program altogether may also provide important insights that can inform future program adjustments. Further, landlords, either those renting to SNO Mass participants or not, could be invited to participate in focus groups to broaden our understanding of their perspectives and experiences.

A recent article about the impacts of housing mobility on asthma reinforces this study's findings about the importance placed on the environment – it served both as a motivation to move and is linked to SNO Mass participants' explanations of the improvements in physical health and mental health for themselves and their children. In Baltimore, children with asthma whose families participated in a program that helped them move into low-poverty neighborhoods, experienced significant improvements in asthma related disease “with measures of stress, including social cohesion, neighborhood safety, and urban stress, estimated to mediate between 29% and 35% of the association between moving and asthma exacerbations.”¹⁹

New research from Raj Chetty et al. describes the significance of economic connectedness—defined as connections to people of higher economic status—as being as important as neighborhood poverty rates and other community characteristics that have been associated with economic gains for children in mobility programs.²⁰ Breaking



19 Pollack CE, Roberts LC, Peng RD, et al. (2023). Association of a Housing Mobility Program With Childhood Asthma Symptoms and Exacerbations. *JAMA*. 329(19), 1671–1681. doi:10.1001/jama.2023.6488

20 Chetty, R., Jackson, M.O., Kuchler, T. et al. (2022). Social capital II: determinants of economic connectedness. *Nature*, 608, 122–134. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-022-04997-3>; Reeves, R.V. & Fall, C. (2022). Seven key takeaways from Chetty's new research on friendship and economic mobility. Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2022/08/02/7-key-takeaways-from-chettys-new-research-on-friendship-and-economic-mobility/>

down barriers to economic connectedness include “integration and interaction challenges”; a positive outcome requires that lower income households are spending time in places with households that have a higher economic status, followed up by real and lasting social connections.²¹ Returning to earlier work on social capital and cohesion,²² this idea might be described as bridging social capital.²³

Our findings add to this dialogue by illustrating how and when the social connections of SNO Mass participants crossed neighborhood boundaries and where and why children and adults expanded their social networks. SNO Mass has been successful in increasing the number of voucher households that move to places with more economically advantaged households. In SNO Mass, there are passive benefits from moving and living in a safe environment that don’t require active engagement, and some that only occur through participation. Participants felt connected to their community in different ways and where participants spent time was guided by personal choice as well as by opportunities. For example, new local schools and recreational activities appear to be an important mechanism linking community and neighborhood to youth development, and new friendships for children came from spending time locally.



21 In this research this is measured by Facebook friendships.

22 Putnam, R. (1995). Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital.” *Journal of Democracy*, 6(1), 65-78. doi:10.1353/jod.1995.0002; Curley, A.M. (2010). Relocating the Poor: Social Capital and Neighborhood Resources, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 32(1), 79-103. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9906.2009.00475.x>; Caughy, M.O. & O’Campo, P.J. (2006). Neighborhood Poverty, Social Capital, and the Cognitive Development of African American Preschoolers. *American Journal of Community Psychology* 37, 141–154. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-005-9001-8>.

23 Briggs, X. (2002). Bridging Networks, Social Capital, and Racial Segregation in America, Working Paper Series rwp02-011, Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government.

“Over here, you can even see the stars better. They’re closer. One time, there was a shooting star shower.”

– Alejandra, mother to three,
Western Mass

Conclusion

The findings described in this report provide a contextualized view of SNO Mass participants’ experiences moving to a new neighborhood and insights into the impacts of the program on their families. The benefits participants spoke of were profound—reduced stress, improved health, feeling safe, feeling at home, better schools — improvements many described as life changing. It will be important to explore how these positive findings hold over time, deepen, or expand.

The study offers some suggestions into which neighborhoods to include in housing mobility programs, a question that remains in the literature and practice. Although census tracts are the unit of analysis for quantitative data on neighborhood opportunity, we know that neighborhoods do not fit neatly into census tract boundaries. We also learned that families continue to cross neighborhood lines, to prior neighborhoods and other locations, and heard about how they engage with people and places where they live, work, attend school, shop, and socialize. The in-depth interviews allowed us to contribute a more precise picture of the neighborhood contexts in which SNO Mass participants are living. Future research might build on the study findings to identify new “opportunity” measures based on these lived

experiences. Further, it is important to continue to assess how participants' experiences do or do not align with what the census tract measures tell us about opportunity.

The findings also highlighted the opportunities that families gained access to and appreciated in opportunity neighborhoods, especially welcoming outdoor public activities and spaces. Living in SNO Mass neighborhoods was not isolating for most families. Participants selected communities that felt safe and stable, and felt that with some adjustment they fit in across places with a range of economic, racial, and ethnic diversity. The objective measures of neighborhood – whether poverty or diversity, etc. – were less critical than more immediate and personal exchanges that made a community seem smaller, comfortable, and close. At the same time, participants explained how moving made their world larger, by increasing the range of places where they spent time, moving to places which previously seemed to have almost insurmountable

barriers to entry (realizing housing choice), building feelings of personal capacity, and through an expansion of physical and mental space. If investing in measures to improve connectedness increases economic standing for lower income households (i.e., increasing intergenerational mobility)²⁴, this study suggests ways to support social connections for people who move to new neighborhoods. To conclude, this study highlights several key directions that SNO Mass can pursue in order to optimize opportunities for families. These include offering comprehensive information about new neighborhoods and local organizations, effectively addressing potential conflicts related to housing properties, anticipating and responding to social and educational needs and community expectations, and enhancing post-move engagement to ensure families feel settled and connected within their new community.



24 Ibid. Reeves, R.V., Richard V., & Fall, C. (2022).