

Rossi P H. *Why families move: a study in the social psychology of urban residential mobility*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1955. 220 p.
[Department of Social Relations, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA]

This monograph challenged the then prevalent views of residential mobility, showing that it was an adjustment process in which families moved in response to changes in household size, age, and gender mixes, as housing appropriate for one life-cycle stage became inappropriate at a later stage. Household life-cycle interpretations of residential mobility have since become the prevailing models of residential changes. [The SSCJ® indicates that this book has been cited in over 365 publications since 1966.]

Peter H. Rossi
Social & Demographic Research Institute
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, MA 01003

November 11, 1987

In 1948 I was working on my dissertation in Columbia University's Department of Sociology when I was asked by Robert K. Merton to take over the design and direction of a research project on residential mobility, for which he had received a grant from the Housing and Home Finance Agency. I was quite flattered by his offer and, with some trepidation, started to work, finishing both the project and my dissertation in 1951.

Urban sociology was one of my major interests in graduate school. The field was a patchwork of journalistic descriptions of exotic neighborhoods and ethnic enclaves, some urban land economics, and a great deal of speculation on why cities were different from traditional societies. Among the key ideas was that urban places were characterized by extreme mobility, constantly varying activities, excessive stimulation from the mass media, and a constant milling about of the population. Mobility, in this sense, was reckoned to be harmful both to the individual, deadening his or her senses, thereby producing urban ennui, and to the society, in which the lack of fixed roots led to a deterioration of the sense of community. Residential mobility was seen as the locational manifestation of social mobility, with persons changing their addresses to fit their class aspirations, and a major contributor to the special urban character.

The study was designed primarily to show what effects, if any, residential mobility had on both the sense of community and the social ties that individuals acquired and secondarily to show that social

mobility was at the root of urban milling about. The study design included a panel of 924 households randomly selected in four contrasting neighborhoods in Philadelphia. We attempted to predict who would move and then followed up each household after a year both to check our predictive ability and to see what effects relocation had upon households that had moved in the interim.

I spent several fruitless months examining our survey data, looking for signs that distinguished "movers" from others (e.g., their social alienation, the kinds of values that they held) according to conventional views of mobility. There did not seem to be any discernible effects. Furthermore, there was a great deal more residential mobility than there was social mobility, and the two appeared relatively unconnected.

In contrast, there were some very strong findings, not on effects but on the determinants of residential shifts: mobility in 1948 and 1949 was quite predictable, being driven by the association between household size and composition and the housing involved, conditional upon sufficient household income. This was the greatest discovery: residential mobility was based on housing, and households that could afford to move from housing units that did not meet their needs for space and amenities to units that did meet those needs. At first I was quite disappointed with these findings because they seemed to make some of the major ideas of classical sociologists appear trivial. But, within a few months, I was sure that I had uncovered a major daily social process that linked life-course events to the housing market.

When published, the monograph was panned by almost every reviewer. One called me the "Kinsey of the moving industry," adding that my findings had about as much to do with the real reasons why families moved as Kinsey's findings had to do with love and substantiating his critique with several anecdotes about families moving from the Eastside to the Westside of Manhattan in order to bring their residential addresses into line with their social status aspirations.

For about a decade after publication, the monograph was largely ignored by every relevant field. Then, somehow, the intellectual climate changed, possibly because subsequent researchers found the same processes at work.^{1,2} The monograph began to be cited more frequently and was finally reprinted in 1980 by Sage Publications.³

It is sometimes disturbing to have become a "classic" author. Recently, I received a phone call from a graduate student, who excitedly told me he had just read the "great classic" and had to call me when he learned that I was still alive, apparently believing that the monograph was the climax rather than the beginning of my professional work.

1. Clark W A & Moore E G, eds. *Residential mobility and public policy*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1980. 320 p.
2. Michelson W. *Environmental choice, human behavior and residential satisfaction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977. 398 p. (Cited 135 times.)
3. Rossi P H. *Why families move*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1980. 243 p.