Geographic Mobility, Gender, and the Future of Work
About this Report

This report focuses on the increasing levels of inequality in the distribution of economic opportunity across the United States and the declining geographic mobility of workers. The decline in geographic mobility is of particular concern for women and families, especially those with small children and sick or elderly family members that they care for, due to the lack of supports for families, particularly in many large, economically thriving cities. This report is the third in a series of reports on gender inequality and the future of work. The other two reports examine care work in the future of work and the past and potential future for gender inequality in hours worked. The report series was supported by the Google Foundation, with additional support from the Ford Foundation and the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

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Geographic Mobility, Gender, and the Future of Work

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Executive Summary

Geographically, economic opportunity is unequally distributed across the United States. A disproportionate share of all private-sector jobs—one in five—are located in just four metropolitan areas: New York, San Francisco, Chicago, and Seattle. This uneven distribution of jobs—and related variation in unemployment rates—mean that large numbers of Americans live in economically depressed communities with few jobs or other opportunities. These trends are occurring during a time when the economy has been in recovery for a decade, unemployment rates are low, and employers are complaining that they cannot find the workers that they need—all factors that have historically been associated with an increase in geographic mobility. However, the data in this report show that geographic mobility generally, and mobility for work in particular, has declined substantially over the last several decades.

This report explores the research literature and analyzes long-term trends in the data to describe patterns in women’s and men’s geographic mobility, particularly for work. The report begins by presenting the evidence on trends in job-related geographic mobility from a gender perspective. The data shows that mobility varies widely over the life cycle: young people are more likely to move for jobs than middle-aged or older people; single people more than married people; and people with children less than people without children. The paper further investigates trends in mobility by race and ethnicity, for single and married parents, and for men and women with different levels of education, for women and men with incomes below the poverty line and from different regions of the country. These analyses show that geographic mobility has declined for all demographic groups of workers.

Next, this report assesses the validity of many common explanations for the decline in geographic mobility. The data strongly suggest that the observed declines in mobility are not due to changes in the composition of the workforce, but rather that there are fundamental changes in the costs of and economic returns to moving.

Finally, this report identifies responses that may help workers overcome mobility constraints, both by making it easier and more attractive for workers to move to good jobs, and by reducing the need for geographic mobility through place-based policies and the use of technological solutions.
Geographic Mobility has Fallen for Workers from All Demographic Groups and Regions of the Country

• While men traditionally had higher rates of geographic mobility than women, women’s and men’s rates have converged, with both declining over time.

• Rates of job-related mobility have declined for both women and men across all of the largest racial and ethnic groups between 2004-2008 and 2014-2018.

Decline in Mobility is Not Due to Changes in the Composition of the Workforce

• Younger workers are more likely to move than older workers—more than 20 percent of workers in their mid-twenties had moved across county or state lines in the previous year, while less than five percent of those aged 58 or older had done so. The aging of the population, however, accounts for only a small portion of the overall decline in geographic mobility.

• Married couples, women and men with children, and married, dual-earner couples are less likely to move than single women and men, women and men without children, and married couples that are not dual-earner couples. However, the data in this report show that mobility rates fell independent of marital, parental, or dual earner status. The decline was particularly sharp for dual-earner couples whose mobility rates dropped by 55 percent between 1999 and 2018.

• Women and men with a bachelor’s degree or more are twice as likely to move for work as those with only a high school diploma. This mobility gap has increased over the last ten years; however, there has been a decline in mobility for both groups of workers and job-related mobility has declined in spite of the increased share of the workforce with a bachelor’s degree.

• Geographic mobility rates have fallen substantially for workers with incomes below the official poverty line.
• Women and men in the South have the highest rates of moving across county and state lines but women and men in all regions have seen an overall decline in mobility since 1996-1998.

Decline in Mobility Reflects a Number of Economic and Social Factors

The decline in workers relocating for work reflects a number of factors including the high social and economic costs of geographic relocation as well as the impact of structural changes such as changes in the occupational structure, increased occupational licensing, the rising cost of housing, and the lack of family supports such as child care. The economic costs of relocating can be prohibitive, while returns to relocating for work have declined for many low-wage workers.

• Moving to another county or state for work means leaving behind support networks that assist with child care and other family caregiving needs, further increasing the costs of geographic mobility. As the baby boom generation continues to age and need more intensive care, this cost will only continue to increase.

• Differences across states in licensing requirements are a potential cost that workers face in their efforts to relocate to take advantage of economic opportunities in other states.

• As many jobs have been deskilled and wages in low-wage occupations have converged across place, the economic returns to geographic mobility have declined.

• Another cost borne by low-income families when moving for work is the loss of public benefits, such as housing subsidies or child care assistance, that are tied to their current location. Long waiting lists for these services in economically thriving cities undermine the ability of workers to take advantage of the employment opportunities in new locations.

• Large increases in the cost of housing in cities with the most dynamic economies reduce the returns to moving for work and in many cases make it impossible for low-wage workers to live in these cities.
Increased Family Supports in Economically Vibrant Cities, Combined with Place-Based Policies in Economically Depressed Cities Can Improve Outcomes for All Workers

The broad-based decline in job-related mobility in spite of the growing polarization of employment opportunity suggests that larger structural issues are acting as barriers to relocation for many workers. These barriers include stagnant wage growth that makes moving less financially beneficial, a lack of family-friendly supports—such as high quality, affordable child care—for working families, and a lack of affordable housing in the areas where jobs are growing.

Policies that address the increasing costs and diminishing returns to moving, especially for workers in low-wage jobs, include:

- Employers and state and local governments in cities with thriving economies and growing demand for workers could make it more attractive for workers to move to their states, by working to increase the number of jobs that pay above the national median wage for workers, especially in jobs that do not require a college degree; raising the minimum wage to a living wage; and implementing a state earned income tax credit if the state does not already have one.

- Housing subsidies could be particularly helpful for single parents and low-income workers who might otherwise be unable to move to cities with high and increasing housing costs.

- Ensuring that occupational licenses are accepted across state borders would overcome some of the limits of state-by-state licensing.

- Helping families address their need for assistance with affordable, high-quality child care and elder care would increase the feasibility of balancing work and family demands. Local resource hubs, for example, can help women and men establish the connections they need for care work.

- Even if all the costs of moving are addressed and incentives to move are increased, not all workers will be motivated to relocate. Family and community ties matter and are becoming even more important in the context of an aging population. It will be equally important to stimulate job growth where workers
live and invest in the supports that workers will need to be economically secure where they are.

Understanding the factors that enhance or diminish geographic mobility for women and men can help communities, employers, and policymakers implement innovative ideas to both increase mobility to some locations to meet growth in demand for workers, and use technology and employment innovations to more equitably distribute opportunity in other locations in the future. Because moving disrupts existing support networks, and may be less economically beneficial to women because of their lower earnings, a greater emphasis on creating family-friendly cities in city and regional planning could help attract families to new locations.
Introduction

Economic opportunity is distributed unequally across the United States and is becoming even more unequal. Just four metropolitan areas—New York, San Francisco, Seattle, and Chicago—have one of every five private-sector, non-administrative jobs across all metropolitan areas in the United States (Shearer, Vey, and Kim 2019). Technical innovation and related jobs are concentrated in a few metropolitan areas, and in a handful of states (Muro and Liu 2017). Between 2010 and 2016 alone, half of all employment gains in the United States were concentrated in just 20 metropolitan areas (Muro and Whitton 2018). Job growth and business formation since the Great Recession have been distributed very unequally, and in many parts of the country have not reached pre-recession levels (Economic Innovation Group 2018). The spread of machine learning, Artificial Intelligence (AI), and automation is expected to further exacerbate these geographic inequalities.

In addition to job growth being concentrated in a few areas, there are substantial numbers of women and men who live in areas that are economically depressed and who have been unemployed long-term or have simply dropped out of the labor market. Vacancy rates and levels of unemployment vary considerably across the country. In April 2019, for example, unemployment in the Midland, TX, Metropolitan Statistical Area (MSA) was under 2 percent (1.7 percent), while it was 7.5 percent in the Yakima, WA, MSA and 14.3 percent in the Yuma, AZ, MSA (BLS 2019a). Different groups of workers have different labor market experiences; Black women, for example, have an unemployment rate of 5.6 percent, compared with 3.1 percent for White women and just 2.2 percent for Asian women (BLS 2019b).

The mobility of workers across county or state lines is at historically low levels, despite reported shortages: the majority of Federal Reserve banks report that employers are facing shortages of skilled and unskilled workers, while the National Skills Coalition highlights shortages of middle-skilled workers across states (Federal Reserve Bank 2019, National Skills Coalition 2017). A low level of mobility is reducing the ability of workers in depressed communities to take advantage of many job opportunities (Bartik 2019) at the same time that it is making it harder for employers to find the workers they need.
Geographic Mobility can Increase Social Mobility and Reduce Social Inequality

Research by Chetty et al. (2014a, b) has highlighted the growing role of geography in shaping inequality in the United States. Geographic mobility has also been important for reducing inequalities between states and regions. Ganong and Shoag (2017) argue that labor migration from poorer to richer states historically reduced wage growth in more dynamic regions and boosted wage growth in poorer states, creating a mechanism for the convergence of incomes across the United States. They argue that land use regulations increased housing costs, particularly in wealthier states, making it less affordable for people seeking jobs that did not require advanced education. They estimate that inequalities in hourly wages would be 10 percent lower if inter-state migration had stayed at the same level as it was from 1940 to 1980.

Geographic mobility has also been crucial to advancement in many occupations, including management (Markham, Macken, Bonjean, and Corder 1983), academia (McBrier 2003), and administrative occupations (Hoff and Mitchell 2008; McGee 2010). Markham and Peck (1986) cite several mechanisms for mobility to boost careers. Geographic mobility offers a pathway away from areas with high unemployment and can open new segments of the labor market to workers, providing opportunities for higher wages and new skill acquisition. If enough workers leave economically depressed areas, their move has the potential to boost the wages of those who stay behind. Finally, a willingness to travel may signal to employers and managers career commitment, leading to future growth opportunities.

A gender lens on exploring reasons for mobility is critical. Women are less likely than men to benefit through higher wages when they change jobs (Goldin et al. 2017). Women also face more barriers than men when making decisions about geographic mobility and their careers. Because women typically have more caregiving responsibilities than men, they may be less able to comply with relocation requirements. Among graduating doctoral students, for example, Kirchmeyer (2006) found that having children constrained academic women’s ability to relocate, restricting their access to career opportunities while having little effect on men independent of parental status. In other types of occupations women’s inability to relocate could result in their being excluded from the career track and succession planning considerations. Women may also lose out if their spouses’ careers depend on relocating (Venator 2018).
This report explores research and analyzes data to describe patterns in women’s and men’s geographic mobility, especially for work. It reviews literature on why people move and why mobility may have declined and notes that it is not completely clear from current research whether the decline in mobility is a cause or consequence of other economic and social changes. Some factors limiting geographic mobility include low income, proximity to and support from friends and family, life events such as having a new child, neighbors’ shared norms and social values, and the psychological costs of moving (Kosar et al. 2019; Huttunen et al. 2018). The paper explores how these factors may have become more important recently in accounting for the decline in mobility.

Mobility varies widely over the life cycle: young people are more likely to move for jobs than middle-aged or older people; single people more than married people, and people with children less than people without children. The paper further investigates trends in mobility by race and ethnicity, for single and married parents, and for men and women with different levels of education. The decline in mobility can be seen for all major groups, suggesting that there is some underlying change in the economics or preferences for moving, rather than a change in the composition of the workforce from those who find it easier to move (single people) to those who find it more difficult to move (dual income couples, parents of dependent children). The paper then reviews the evidence for the major explanations advanced for the decline in mobility.

Lastly, the report identifies promising practices for overcoming mobility constraints, both by making it easier and more attractive for workers to move to good jobs, and by reducing the need for geographic mobility through place-based policies and the use of technological solutions. Understanding the factors that enhance and/or diminish geographic mobility for women and men can help communities, employers, and policymakers implement innovation to both increase mobility to meet growth in demand for workers in some locations and utilize technology and employment innovations to more equitably distribute opportunity in the future. Because moving disrupts existing support networks, and may be less economically beneficial to women because of their lower earnings, a greater focus on family-friendly cities in city and regional planning can increase women’s ability to relocate to take advantage of economic opportunities and help attract families to new locations.

Methodology

In this paper, geographic mobility is defined as moving across state or county lines in the previous calendar year. IWPR documents long-term trends in geographic mobility.
between 1964 and 2018 for those aged 18-65 using microdata from the Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic and Supplement taken from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS CPS-ASEC) at the University of Minnesota. These data examine trends in geographic mobility by sex, age, marital status, and dual-earner couple status.

The CPS-ASEC includes questions about the reason for moving beginning in 1999. There are nineteen potential reasons for moving, including to establish one’s own household, attending or leaving college, a new job or job transfer, looking for work or losing a job, and other job-related reasons.¹ To ensure large enough sample sizes for IWPR’s analyses, all job-related reasons are combined. These analyses also combine three years of data (2006-2008, 2016-2018) to further ensure adequate sample sizes.

These analyses examine geographic mobility by gender, race and ethnicity, parental status, educational attainment, poverty status, and region of the country. Racial groups in these analyses are non-Hispanic, while those of Hispanic ethnicity may be of any race. Regional analysis follows the U.S. Census Bureau’s Regions and Divisions. Analysis of geographic mobility for workers below the official poverty line focuses on women and men aged 25-65 in order to exclude workers 18-25 who were still in college and whose poverty, if they are poor, may be temporary and qualitatively different.

Geographic Mobility Has Fallen Sharply Since the 2000s

During the last two decades geographic mobility in the United States has fallen sharply, after having remained comparatively stable for the preceding thirty years. The decline in interstate/intercounty mobility began in the early 2000s, continued its steep decline during the Great Recession of 2007-2009, and has not returned to previous levels since the recession ended. Women’s and men’s mobility trends are closely matched; while

¹ Researchers have noted that CPS ASEC findings on mobility differ from administrative (IRS) data on mobility, and suggest caution for relying primarily on CPS ASEC. However, they also note that these problems do not hold for data on economic migration such as job-related moves (Hyatt, Entarfer, Udea, and Zhang 2018).
historically women were slightly less likely to move than men, in recent years trends have fully converged (Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Women’s and Men’s Rates of Geographic Mobility are Declining and Look Increasingly Similar**

*Trends in Geographic Mobility for Persons Ages 18-65, by Gender, 1964-2018 (Percent of Total Population)*


Job-related geographic mobility reached its lowest point in 2010 (Figure 2). After some increases during the recovery, the trend reversed again, and in 2018, geographic job mobility was almost as low as it was in 2010. Thirty-four percent fewer women and 39 percent fewer men reported they moved in the past year in 2018 than in 2000 (authors’ calculation).

Gender differences in geographic mobility are broadly in line with women’s lower share of the total workforce. For example, in 2017, women were 47 percent of the workforce, and 47 percent of everyone who moved for job-related reasons in that year.

Moving for a job is often related to having left college to find a job. The number of women and men who moved to attend or leave college also declined between 1999 and 2018, although the decline was much less than for job-related mobility. Gender differences in college-related mobility are remarkably small (Figure 2).
Figure 2. Men and Women Are Equally Likely to Move for College, but Men Are More Likely to Move for a Job than Women

*Trends in Geographic Mobility for Job and College Related Reasons, Persons Ages 18-65, by Gender, 1999-2018*

*Notes:* Geographic mobility counts defined as number of people who moved across state or county lines in the previous calendar year.


**Job-Related Mobility Has Declined for Women and Men Across All the Largest Racial/Ethnic Groups**

It is important to consider migration for women and men from different racial and ethnic groups because they have unique experiences, face different barriers to mobility, are concentrated in different parts of the country, and have widely varying social and economic resources. For example, during and after the first and second World Wars, large numbers of Black residents of the rural South moved to northern cities for economic opportunities not available to them in the South in what has come to be known as the Great Migration (Tolnay 1997). Boustan (2017) reports that in 1910, more than nine in ten black Americans lived in the South, but by the 1950s, 40 percent of African Americans lived in cities outside the South, primarily in New York, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles. Today, many Black residents are returning to the South, moving to Texas, Florida, and Georgia (Boustan 2017; Allen 2017). The move to
southern states is in part due to the lower cost of living compared with large northern cities, as well as the increasing economic opportunity in the South (Curtis 2018, Frey 2004).

Figures 3A and 3B examine trends in job-related mobility before and after the Great Recession and show that rates of job-related mobility have declined for women and men across all racial and ethnic groups between 2004-2008 and 2014-2018. The largest decline in mobility was for Hispanic men followed by women from racial/ethnic groups not identified separately. Asian women and men have the highest rates of geographic mobility followed by women and men from racial/ethnic groups not identified separately. While the proportion of people who move for jobs are not large for either women or men, men (Table 3B) have higher rates of geographic mobility than women of the same race/ethnicity (Figure 3A), with the exception of other/multiracial women and men in 2004-2008.

**Figure 3A. Other/Multiracial Women Saw Largest Decline in Geographic Mobility Since 2004**


Figure 3B. Asian Men Have Highest Rates of Geographic Mobility

Note: White, Black, Asian, and Other men are non-Hispanic, Hispanic men may be of any race.

Traditional Explanations for Mobility Do Not Fully Explain its Decline

In the past, job-related mobility tended to rise in tight labor markets and fall in times of high unemployment. Given the strength of the economy, the current downturn in mobility is counterintuitive. One cause of the decline may be the changing demographic composition of the workforce. Past research has established a number of factors accounting for differences in mobility rates of the population, including those related to the life cycle and family formation, education, and the economic resources of households (see, for example, Geist and McManus 2008). Mobility patterns, for example, vary starkly by age. Mobility for both women and men is highest in their mid-twenties when more than 20 percent of people moved across state or county lines, and then slows down substantially, to fewer than two percent of the population ages 71 and older (Figure 4). As the population ages, we would expect geographic mobility to decline. Yet, the aging of the population accounts for only a small amount of the decline. Hyatt et al. (2018) estimate that the aging of the population accounted for only a tenth of the observed decline in mobility from 2000 to 2010. Analysis of pre-recovery trends in mobility also failed to find confirmation of demographic changes as decisive factors in the observed decline of mobility (Hyatt et al 2018; Molloy, Smith, and Wozniak 2016).
Figure 4. Geographic Mobility Declines with Age

Geographic Mobility by Age and Gender, 2013-2018 (Percent of Age Group)

Notes: Geographic mobility share shows percent of the total population who moved in the previous calendar year.

Mobility rates have fallen across all age groups. For the purposes of this analysis, we have grouped people into three broad age categories: ages 18-30; ages 31-45; and ages 46-65.\(^2\) Figure 5 shows that mobility has fallen for each broad age group, and particularly among individuals from the youngest age group.\(^3\) Among individuals aged 18-30 years who reported moving in the past year, mobility fell by half from 14 percent (for both women and men) in 1966 to seven percent in 2018. While rates of mobility have also declined in the older age groups, the decline has been much stronger for the youngest age group (Figure 5).

\(^2\) We chose 65 as the cut-off year because the focus is on job-related mobility and the current social security retirement age is 66.
\(^3\) Gender differences are small, and not shown separately.
Figure 5. Geographic Mobility among Young People Has Fallen by Half since 1964

*Trends in Geographic Mobility Compared for Individuals Ages 18-30, 31-45, and 46-65, from 1964-2018*

Notes: Geographic mobility is the percent of the total population who moved in the previous calendar year.

Another factor that may be contributing to the decline in geographic mobility is the fact that workers are changing jobs less frequently than in the past, possibly because the returns to obtaining a new job have declined (Molloy, Smith, and Wozniak 2014; Molloy, Smith, Trezzi, and Wozniak 2016). This trend is particularly worrisome for young workers because a major source of wage growth for young workers has been switching jobs. One possible reason for the decline in switching jobs may be the increased segmentation of firms into low-return firms and high-return firms, providing fewer switching opportunities for workers in low-return firms (Furman and Orszag 2015). This decline in job switching may explain some of the decline in geographic mobility generally.

**Changes in Parental or Marriage Status do not Explain the Decline in Geographic Job Mobility**

While gender itself has become less of an independent factor in accounting for mobility, having children and being part of a dual-earner couple makes job mobility less likely. Cooke (2008) suggests that "that internal migration research should embrace the family as a central component of migration, or rather that family migration should move front
and center in discussions regarding migration in general.” He also notes that “family migration is extremely complicated,” not least because of the growth in dual-earner couples and the shifting dynamics between women’s and men’s careers in families.

Moving as a family is more complicated than moving as a single person, particularly when kids are involved. This is especially true for women who are typically responsible for child and elder care. Bielby and Bielby (1992) used survey data to assess gender differences in attitudes toward the opportunity of a substantially better job that would require a move and confirmed that men were much more positive about relocating for a good job than women. That said, they also found clear differences between men with more and less traditional attitudes to gender roles: men who rejected traditional gender roles were much more likely to say they would forego the opportunity of a move for a better job if that would harm their wives’ job.

Mincer (1978) suggested that the costs of moving are higher for couples than singles, given that locational preferences of two people have to be accommodated. In the context of gender inequality in earnings, with husbands typically having higher earnings than wives (especially, of course, at the time at which Mincer wrote his study), he further suggests that it would be unlikely for a couple to move for the wife’s job given that her new job would have to have earnings high enough to compensate her husband for the loss of his job. Because the majority of men’s jobs are tied to specific locations and women’s are not, husbands’ jobs are more likely to determine where the family lives (Benson 2014). Married women may be willing to accept lower wages because they expect migration-induced interruptions in their careers (Gemici 2007; Huttunen et al. 2018). A Danish study on dual-earner couples found that when couples do move, they typically prioritize the husband’s career progression rather than the wife’s, contributing 36 percent to gender earnings differentials (Sorensen and Dahl 2016). A recent Australian study confirms that married men are more likely to improve their earnings after a move than married women; they also find that women are more likely than men to report higher levels of well-being following a move (Preston and Grimes, 2019).

Venator (2018) picks up on the differences in the geographic distribution of different occupations for career relocations for women and men in dual-earner couples. A couple is significantly more likely to move when both partners work in occupations where work is concentrated in similar localities (or work in similar occupations). Where women choose highly specialized occupations as well, spouses limit one another’s mobility. Aply called the “two-body problem,” the trailing spouse is often unable to find work in the new location (Venator 2018; see Benson 2014).
Our analysis shows that married dual-earner couples\textsuperscript{4} are less likely than other married couples to move for job-related reasons, and that having at least one child in the household reduces mobility for married couples, but more so for married dual-earner couples.\textsuperscript{5} Job mobility for dual-earner couples declined sharply between 1999 and 2018,

Figure 6. Married Dual-Earner Couples are the Least Likely to Move for a Job

*Trends in Geographic Mobility for Job-Related Reasons by Married Individuals Ages 18-65, 1999-2018 by Dual Earner Status and by Presence of Dependent Children*

Notes: Geographic Mobility defined as anyone who moved across state or county lines in the previous calendar year. Children are younger than 18 years. Married, not dual earners includes families where just one spouse had earnings in the year of the move, or neither; in dual-earner couples both spouses had earnings in the year of the move. Source: IWPR analysis of the Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement (Ruggles et al. 2018).

\textsuperscript{4} Limited to couples who are married.

\textsuperscript{5} Not shown here are job mobility rates for married dual-earner couples without dependent children who have the lowest numbers of job movers; while we have not tested this theory, we assume that this is largely a reflection of age (couples being older, and hence moving less).
by 55 percent (authors’ calculations). During the same period, the share of dual earners among all who moved for job-related reasons fell from close to four in ten job movers (38 percent in 1999) to fewer than three in ten job movers (27 percent in 2018; Figure 6).6

Figure 7 shows that the decline in the number of job movers corresponds to a decline of overall interstate mobility. While dual-earner couples on the whole are less likely to move across state or county lines than single people, mobility rates declined overall, whether people are single, married with just one spouse working, or whether they are part of a dual-earner couple.

**Figure 7. Single and Married People Saw Similar Trends in Declining Geographic Mobility**

*Trends in Geographic Mobility by Marital and Dual Earner Status, 1988 – 2018 (Percent)*

Notes: Geographic Mobility share defined as percentage of couples in that group who moved across state or county lines in the previous calendar year. ‘Married-Dual Earner’ includes couples where both spouses had earnings in the year of the move. ‘Married, other’ includes all couples with zero or one earner in the year of the move. ‘Not married’ includes individuals who were widowed, divorced, separated, and never married in the year of the move.


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6 In a next step of the analysis, we will test how far this decline is reflected in changes in household composition among all families, not just those who moved.
While the differences in mobility between parents of dependent children and other women and men in Figure 8 are small, the decline in mobility for mothers and fathers of dependent children, single or married, is smaller than the decline in mobility for all women and all men. This points to the fact that parental status, while important, can only account for a small share of the decline in mobility over the last decade.

**Figure 8. Rates of Geographic Mobility Decline among Parents are Lower than among Women and Men Overall**

*Share of Women and Men with Children under 18 Who Moved for Job-Related Reasons, 2006-2008 to 2016-2018*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2006-2008</th>
<th>2016-2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Mothers</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Fathers</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married Mothers</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married Fathers</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Mothers and fathers are defined as having children younger than age 18.

**College Graduates are More Responsive to Distant Labor Market Opportunities**

Research points to the long-run increase in educational attainment as the key driver behind the increases in mobility in the United States since 1850 (Rosenbloom and
Sundstrom 2003) and the propensity to migrate increases with education (Basker 2003). This may be because college graduates are more responsive to distant labor market opportunities than workers with less education (Wozniak 2010). Figure 9 shows that women and men are more likely to have moved for job-related reasons if they had at least a bachelor’s degree, than if they had just finished high school or had less than a high school diploma. In fact, the latest data shows that women and men with at least a bachelor’s degree are more than twice as likely to move as women and men with a high school diploma or less. The difference in geographic mobility between the two educational groups has grown since 2006-2008 (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9. Geographic Mobility Increases with Higher Education, But Has Declined for All Groups**

*Rates of Job-Related Geographic Mobility by Educational Attainment and Gender, 2006-2008 and 2016-2018*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High school or less</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College or Associate Degree</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor and above</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Figure 9 also shows that mobility has declined for all groups when comparing recent trends with pre-recession trends. These broad trends also hold for mothers and fathers, with the decline in job mobility more marked for single mothers than for married mothers and fathers (data not shown). The decline in job-related mobility for college-educated workers may indicate that although college-educated workers are still the most likely to benefit from geographic mobility, these workers may be less able to turn their
degrees into wage increases through moving than in the past (Malamud and Wozniak 2010).

Low-Skilled Workers with Earnings Below the Poverty Line May Be Less Likely to Move to Places Where Jobs Are Growing

Research on the job mobility of workers with less than a high school education—workers often deemed to be low-skilled workers—suggests that moves can lead to short-term wage gains for these workers, but not necessarily long-term increases (Yankow 2003). This may help explain why women with a high school education or less are less likely to move for job-related reasons today than they were a decade ago. When the data are examined by parental status, they show that the decline in geographic job mobility is steepest for single mothers with a high school degree or less. These women are now almost half as likely to move for a job as they were a decade ago (data not shown).

Figure 10 builds on this analysis by showing mobility rates for women and men with earnings below the poverty line. These data show that over the last decade, geographic mobility to improve employment prospects has also declined considerably for women and men who live in poor households. Single mothers have particularly high rates of poverty (Milli, Huang, Hartmann, and Hayes 2017) and therefore may be hit especially hard by the barriers to geographic mobility. And while both poor women and poor men have seen their geographic mobility rates decline, women, who are most likely to have family caregiving responsibilities, remain less likely to migrate than their male counterparts.
Figure 10. Workers with Low Incomes, Especially Single Mothers, Have Seen Sharp Declines in Geographic Mobility Since 2006-2008.

Rates of Job-Related Geographic Mobility by Parental Status and Gender for Workers from Households with Incomes below 100 percent of the Poverty Level, 2006-2008 and 2016-2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>2006-2008</th>
<th>2016-2018</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fathers</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Mothers</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married Mothers</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married Fathers</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The official poverty level is used here. This measure considers an individual in poverty if their family income falls below 100% of the federal poverty threshold (see https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2019/demo/p60-266.pdf, appendix B). There were too few single fathers in the sample to estimate geographic mobility for job-related reasons. Source: IWPR analysis of the Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement (Ruggles et al. 2018).

The Decline in Geographic Mobility Occurred in Each Region of the Country

Figure 11 below shows the changes in rates of geographic mobility for women and men in each of the four regions of the country. This figure shows that the highest rates of
inter-county and interstate migration occurred in the Southern United States in 1996 with the lowest migration rates occurring in the Northeast. By 2016-2018 the South continued to have the highest rates of geographic mobility; however, each of the regions has seen an overall decline in mobility for both women and men.

**Figure 11. South Has Highest Rates of Geographic Mobility, but Most Regions Have Seen a Decline since 1996**


Note: Regions are based on the Census Bureau’s Regions and Divisions. Data are for women and men aged 18 through 65.


Only the Northeast, with the lowest levels of geographic mobility of all regions, saw a slight increase in mobility after the end of the 2007-2009 Great Recession for both women and men while the Midwest, with the second lowest mobility rate, saw a slight increase for men. The increases in mobility in both of these regions, however, is just 0.2 percentage points or lower. Across all states the decline in rates of mobility are similar for women and men.

**Structural Economic and Social Factors Contribute to Reduced Geographic Job Mobility**

The data presented above, as well as other research, confirm that there has been an across-the-board decline in job-related mobility since the early 2000s and across all demographic groups. The decline started before the 2007-09 recession and has not
reversed since the economy has recovered. This points to individuals making different decisions today about geographic relocation than they once did. This change reflects the high social and economic costs of geographic relocation as well as the impact of structural forces, including changes in the occupational structure, rising housing costs, increased occupational licensing, and the lack of portable public benefits.

**Changes in the Job Market May Inhibit Mobility**

Changes in the structure of work may be one reason that workers are less likely to move today than in the past (Molloy, Smith, and Wozniak 2016). Kaplan and Schulhofer-Wohl (2017) suggest that the economic benefits from migration have diminished as there has been a decline in the earnings differential for many occupations between geographic locations. When internal migration rates were higher, many workers were moving from rural areas to urban areas and from places with low wages and few jobs to places where their opportunities would be better and wages higher after accounting for higher costs of living. Many of the jobs that remain have been deskillled, leading to a decline in wages for workers without a college degree in high-wage cities (Autor 2019) so that those workers now earn essentially the same wages as their counterparts in smaller towns and rural communities. Thus, the flow of low-skill workers to cities seeking new skills and work opportunities has drastically declined because these changes make it less beneficial to move, especially given the higher costs of living, particularly the cost of rent, in many cities.

Molloy, Smith and Wozniak (2014) argue that there could be a reduction in incentives for workers to change employers when it would require them to relocate. These authors show a simultaneously strong downward trend in labor market transitions (such as moving from job to job, changing industry, and changing occupation) and a decline in interstate migration since the 1980s.

**Family Care Demands Increase the Costs of Moving**

Another factor that is likely contributing to a decline in geographic mobility is the increased caregiving needs families face. Mulder (2018) suggests that reduced mobility for job-related reasons may reflect increased interdependence and care commitments for friends or elderly relatives outside of the households. This is especially likely as the Baby Boom generation ages and people live longer, resulting in an increasingly larger older population. Because this older population increasingly needs more intensive care, the demands on family and friends has also grown (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2016). Ortman et al. (2014), project that the share of
American adults 80 years of age or older will increase by ten percentage points between 2012 and 2050.

In addition to the increased care needs of older family members, demand for high-quality, affordable child care typically outstrips its availability (Childcare Aware 2016). Together these changes also serve to reduce incentives to move. Moving is costly, and the economic returns may not compensate for these costs, particularly because such moves may also entail the loss of access to social supports, such as child care provided by family or friends, which is particularly true for families and individuals with low earnings. Many poor women with minor children rely to some degree on family and friends to help provide child care while they work, attend school, and take care of their other responsibilities. The difficulties of accessing public child care and housing benefits in a new location, often involving very long waiting lists (Schulman and Blank 2017), impede mobility.

**The Structure of Public Benefits May Hold Low-Wage Workers in Place**

Many public benefits, such as child care assistance and housing subsidies, are administered at the state level. The criteria to qualify for these benefits, as well as how long it can take to gain initial access, can vary across states. The Housing and Urban Development (HUD) website, for example, explains that waiting lists are common because demand for housing often exceeds what public housing authorities have available and, when these lists are too long, the waiting list itself may be closed completely (Housing and Urban Development, ND). Schulman and Blank (2017) found that 20 states either already had children on a waiting list for child care assistance or they were no longer adding children to the waiting list at all in 2017. In five states, there were more than 20,000 children on these waiting lists. For those families who already have access to these resources, moving—especially during times of economic hardship when demand on these resources are higher—might mean navigating new bureaucratic structures and long waitlists. Notowidigdo (2011), for example, shows that falling residential rents and increasing social insurance benefits during economic downturns actually act as deterrents from moving away from areas in public decline.

**Rising Housing Costs in Cities Limit In-Migration of Low Wage Workers Seeking Opportunities**

The high cost of housing in many cities with the most dynamic economies also make it less realistic to expect many workers to move there, particularly for younger or lower paid workers (Ganong and Shoag 2017, Schleicher 2017, Semuels 2017). Ganong and
Shoag provide the example of a janitor who left the Deep South for New York in 1960 and saw a net earnings gain even after paying for housing. Today, once the same worker paid for housing, their earnings would actually be less than if they had they stayed in the Deep South. This net loss is due to the higher cost of housing in many cities like New York and San Francisco (see also Ikeda and Washington 2015).

The cost of housing in many ‘superstar’ cities is out of reach for many low-wage workers. The high costs of housing in these cities mean that even workers with middle-class earnings will struggle and those living below the poverty line are effectively excluded from these cities and many of the jobs within them. Cities with increasing demand for workers must address the need for housing to reduce the barriers of relocating for work.

**Occupational Licensing is a Potential Barrier to Geographic Mobility**

Occupational licenses set skills standards and ensure that workers in an occupation—such as nursing, electrician, and cosmetologist—have the relevant training to perform their work safely. Occupational licensing can also make it easier to find work for workers who may otherwise face discrimination (Blair and Chung 2018). Yet, differences across states in licensing requirements may further hinder workers’ ability to move freely across state lines by increasing the costs of relocating for economic opportunities. Occupations that require state licenses have lower levels of interstate migration than non-regulated occupations, limiting the labor supply in some states (Johnson and Kleiner 2017). These same occupations do not see low rates of intrastate migration, suggesting that the licensing requirements do restrict interstate migration (Johnson and Morris 2017). Johnson and Morris (2017) estimate that the increase in licensing requirements are responsible for four percent of the secular decline in interstate migration (2017). Some states address the issue by using interstate reciprocity agreements. Interstate reciprocity agreements allow workers in one state to move to and work in partner states with their existing license rather than requiring them to apply for a new license in the state or pay the fees (DePasquale and Strange 2016; Timmons, Vargo, and Norris 2019). One example is the Nurse License Compact (NLC), which was introduced to reduce barriers to movement for nurses between participating states. However, DePasquale and Strange (2016) find that the NLC did not increase the supply or mobility of nurses. While these agreements may help some workers move, the researchers suggest that only a truly national scheme will help workers relocate to fill demand.
The Costs of Relocating Can Be Prohibitive, Particularly for the Unemployed

Moving, especially across state lines, can be expensive. Such costs may particularly limit the option to move for workers with few resources or who are unemployed. Recognizing the high costs of moving, a labor market intervention in Germany provided financial supports to unemployed job seekers willing to move to a new region. This intervention had positive results; those who were able to move as a result of the subsidies improved their earnings and found more stable jobs, compared with others who did not participate (Caliendo, Künn, and Mahlstedt 2017). A pilot program could be useful in determining whether covering moving costs would provide sufficient incentives for relocation in the U.S. labor market. It should be noted, however, that this alone is unlikely to significantly improve mobility rates as moving for career advancement is less likely than it used to be even when moving costs are subsidized by employers (Ransom 2019; Balgova 2018).

Moving Forward

This report shows that the decision to move for economic opportunity is not simple or straightforward. It has been ten years since the recovery from the Great Recession began and the country has had a decade of economic expansion, currently has historically low levels of unemployment, and many employers are reporting difficulty finding needed workers. These factors alone might lead to the expectation that geographic mobility would have increased, at least since the end of the Great Recession. Add to this the uneven geographic distribution of jobs—especially good jobs that are disproportionately concentrated in what have been termed ‘superstar’ cities like New York, San Francisco, and Seattle, while cities like Scranton, PA, and Youngstown, OH, continue to see large declines in their job density (Schneider 2019, Vey, and Kim 2019)—the expectation of geographic mobility might be even higher.

Yet, the data presented in this report show that geographic mobility generally, and job-related mobility in particular, has declined since the early 2000s. This decline can be seen consistently across the nation and demographic groups, whether we look at disaggregated trends by region, gender, race/ethnicity, parental status, or educational attainment. The falling rates of geographic mobility under economic conditions that would have historically promoted high levels of mobility point to larger structural issues that may act as barriers, including stagnant wage growth, making a move less financially worthwhile; lack of such family-friendly supports as high quality, affordable child care for working families; and a lack of affordable housing in the areas where jobs are growing.
**Policies that Reduce Barriers to Mobility**

Given uneven job growth, addressing these barriers to mobility will be important. Addressing the increasing costs and diminishing returns to moving, especially for workers in low-wage jobs, could restore some incentives for workers who must uproot their families and lives to follow work opportunities (Kaplan and Schulhofer-Wohl 2017; Konczal and Steinbaum 2016). Employers and state and local governments in cities with thriving economies and growing demand for workers could make it more attractive for workers to move to their states, by working to increase the number of jobs that pay above the national median wage for workers, especially in jobs that do not require a college degree (Fee et al. 2019); raising the minimum wage to a living wage; and by implementing a state earned income tax credit if the state does not already have one.

**Housing subsidies** could be particularly helpful for single parents and low-income workers who might otherwise be unable to move to cities with high and increasing housing costs. Young workers just entering the job market would similarly benefit from targeted housing subsidies where job growth is high (Bleemer et al. 2017). These policies would particularly benefit women workers who are more likely to have financial responsibility for other family members yet have lower earnings than their male counterparts.

Some workers may also be inhibited from moving by the lack of cross-state recognition of occupational licenses. A national scheme to ensure that occupational licenses are accepted across state borders would overcome some of the limits of state-by-state solutions and allow licensed workers to move freely within the country and to go where there are the best job opportunities.

Finally, to address the needs of many families who provide care for elderly family members and depend on friends and family to help with childcare, employers and policymakers can provide subsidized childcare. Policymakers can also develop local resource hubs to help women and men establish the connections they need for care work. State and local areas can be ranked on the extent to which they are family-friendly taking into consideration access to child care, elder care, transportation, and health care.

Given the high costs of living in many economically thriving communities, especially the high cost of housing, these policies are important to support those working families already in these communities, but they may not be enough to reverse the decline in geographic mobility. Instead, it may become ever more important to work to improve the communities where women, men, and families already live.
Reducing the Need for Geographic Mobility

Even if all the costs of moving were addressed and incentives to move were increased, not all workers will be motivated to relocate. Family and community ties matter and are becoming even more important in the context of the aging U.S. population. To meet their caregiving responsibilities, many women and men require the support and resources embedded in their current social networks, making moving for employment impractical. Thus, instead of primarily focusing on making it easier to move, it might be as important to stimulate job growth where workers live and invest in the supports that workers will need to be economically secure. While technological innovation is leading to greater polarization of job growth, it also makes place less important and provides opportunities for connecting communities to work.
References


