



2011

*Moving to Opportunity: The Story of an American Experiment to Fight Ghetto Poverty.* Xavier de Souza Briggs, Susan J. Popkin & John Goering. Reviewed by Margeurite Rosenthal.

Marguerite Rosenthal  
Salem State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rosenthal, Marguerite (2011) "*Moving to Opportunity: The Story of an American Experiment to Fight Ghetto Poverty.* Xavier de Souza Briggs, Susan J. Popkin & John Goering. Reviewed by Margeurite Rosenthal," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 38 : Iss. 3 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol38/iss3/16>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [maira.bundza@wmich.edu](mailto:maira.bundza@wmich.edu).



aspirations to get education, they were not as clear how to succeed.

As noted by Harding in his preface, sociologists have studied poor communities for decades. The prevailing approach has viewed economically marginalized residents of inner cities as having different values and norms from mainstream culture. These values and norms in turn have caused violence, family dysfunction, and a range of other social phenomena considered pathological. It was very good to read Harding's acknowledgement that the culture of urban or inner city neighborhoods are not monolithic and not totally alien from mainstream American values. Overall, the research in this book would be considered "good sociology." The book is well-written and interesting reading. It is ethnographic research that is well-grounded in widely accepted theory about cultural and social isolation in poor, urban neighborhoods, but recognizes problems associated with access to resources and mainstream opportunities.

*Wilma Peebles-Wilkins, Dean Emerita, School of Social Work,  
Boston University*

Xavier de Souza Briggs, Susan J. Popkin & John Goering,  
*Moving to Opportunity: The Story of an American Experiment  
to Fight Ghetto Poverty*. Oxford University Press, 2010.  
\$19.95, paperback.

*Moving to Opportunity* examines and evaluates the housing initiative by the same name [hereafter MTO] begun by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in 1994 (and still in progress at the time the book was written). It was designed to help families living in impoverished and distressed housing projects move to better neighborhoods, assess the interventions and measure the outcomes. Termed an "assisted housing mobility" program, the MTO experiment involved public housing residents in 5 cities (Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles and New York) and was loosely based on a desegregation plan developed to implement the 1976 Supreme Court decision, *Gautreaux v. Chicago Housing Authority*, a successful class action suit that argued that Chicago public housing residents were owed assistance to move out of their substandard

apartments in dangerous public housing complexes. Housing vouchers assisted 7,100 black families in obtaining housing outside of the Chicago ghettos. An influential 1992 evaluation reported that those families who had moved to majority white neighborhoods showed improvements in children's school achievement and adults' participation in employment.

In October 1992, Congress authorized a \$70 million MTO housing voucher program with an additional \$1.5 million for relocation counseling. As the authors point out, "Congress had just ordered the largest low-income housing demonstration in decades ... Under newly elected President Bill Clinton, it would soon become one of the most ambitious social experiments ever attempted" (p. 51). Under contract with Abt Associates, HUD's implementation of this experiment involved randomly assigning voluntary public housing or housing-assisted tenant subjects from high poverty census areas into 3 groups: the first received relocation assistance along with housing vouchers restricted for use only in low-poverty areas; the second received housing vouchers with no restrictions and no help; and the third group remained in public housing. HUD also funded research that included both quantitative and qualitative components.

The initial foci of the research were the success or failure of housing relocation and housing stability and achievements in employment and school success. The outcomes in these areas were generally disappointing, with many in the two experimental groups moving back to their old neighborhoods (if not their initial housing projects) within a few years and with mixed outcomes for educational achievement—better for girls, worse for boys—and employment. Unanticipated on the part of the program's designers, apparently, were the difficulties in finding and remaining in suitable and stable housing (this varied by city and depended on the availability of rental housing generally), the lack of public transportation that inhibited seeking and staying in employment, participants' information deficits and lack of information-seeking skills, and perhaps especially, the pull of social connections in the tenants' original neighborhoods. On the other hand, the researchers had not anticipated how important the desire for safety was in motivating tenants to move and the positive outcomes in terms of safety (especially for girls), health and mental health

that characterized those who moved successfully.

In 10 chapters, the book details the unfolding of the residents' experiences at several points over the course of the experiment with attention to the differences among the cities. The text is enhanced, in this regard, by quotes from the renters themselves, whose stories of success and frustration amplify the statistical outcome data. The authors do not shy away from critiquing the underfunded, and therefore inadequate, way in which the supportive counseling services were implemented. Compliers, those in the first group who successfully found housing in low poverty areas, did have modestly better outcomes than the those in the other groups. The authors' summary chapter, "Lessons," appropriately labels MTO as "the strong-idea-weakly-implemented problem" (p. 223) and details the several ways in which the experiment was based on erroneous assumptions about the poor and their available resources.

*Moving to Opportunity* is carefully researched and documented. It is sometimes repetitive, likely the result of its having three authors. The book will be of interest to social policy and urban planning students and academics as well as planners who have a particular interest in housing for the poor; sociologists interested in social mobility and its deterrents will also find this book informative. It documents once again that expecting that housing will solve entrenched poverty, in the absence of other needed social and economic supports—jobs, adequate income, schools with sensitive teachers and guidance personnel, public transportation and so forth—is foolhardy.

Marguerite Rosenthal, Emerita, School of Social Work, Salem State University

Erica Caple James, *Democratic Insecurities: Violence, Trauma, and Intervention in Haiti*. University of California Press, 2010. \$60 hardcover, \$24.95 paperback.

This book on Haiti and the consequences of political unrest and imposed democracy by MIT anthropologist Erica Caple James is one of the most important books on the country published in years. Although marred by excessive academic jargon, it radiates intelligence and understanding. James'