RESEARCH BRIEF

Are Americans Stuck in Place? Declining Residential Mobility in the US

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In the 1980s, nearly one in five Americans moved every year. About one in ten Americans moved between 2018 and 2019 **(Figure 1)**. Residential mobility rates have been falling for decades, representing a cross-generational shift, with declines particularly steep among young adults and for local moves. The reasons behind this long-term decline are unclear but have been linked to various factors, including demographic change, housing affordability, and labor. This brief discusses the state of residential mobility today, focusing on domestic mobility between and within states, and reviews historical trends in this behavior. It then examines the motivations behind domestic mobility and briefly explores the possible reasons for the long-term, secular decline. This brief does not cover the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on residential mobility, as the most recent mobility data are from 2019.

Why Mobility Matters

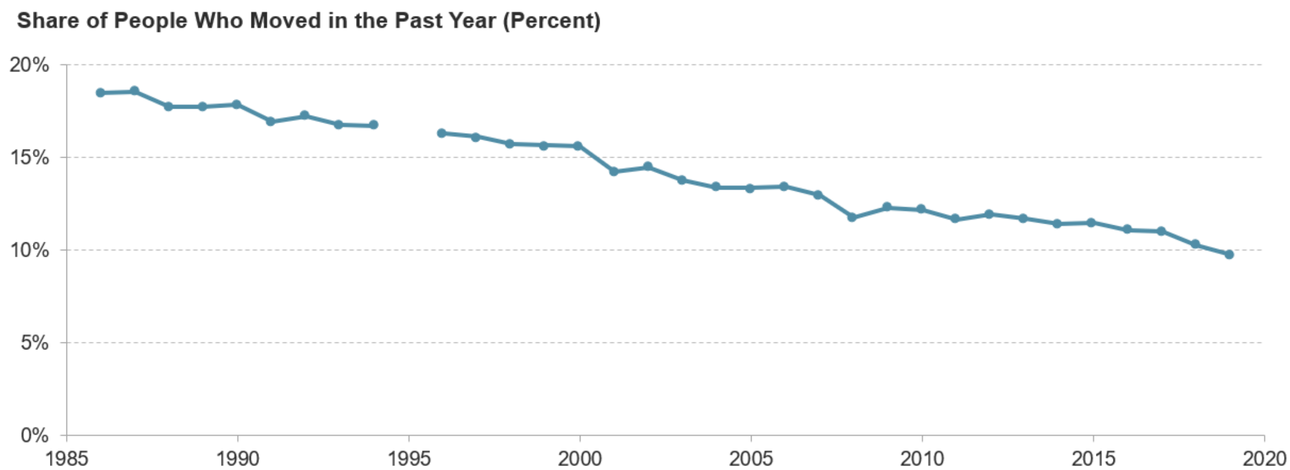
Residential mobility is a fundamental part of modern life. Nearly everyone moves at some point, and every place is affected by these moves. The US Census Bureau measures population change through three components: domestic migration, international migration, and natural population change (the number of births minus the number of deaths), underscoring the importance of mobility. Many states rely on interstate migration as their primary source of household growth, especially retirement-friendly states like Arizona, where 71 percent of household growth in 2018 was due to domestic migration. Economists argue that high migration rates allow labor markets to have flexibility and adaptability, and that low migration rates can lead to stagnation and income divergence between places (Ferreira, Gyourko, and Tracy 2010; Ganong and Shoag 2017). One economist has noted a growing economic divide—a 'Great Divergence'—between American cities that began in the 1980s and has resulted in geographic segregation along educational lines, with highly-educated workers living in high-income and high-cost cities, and less-educated workers living in the opposite (Moretti 2012). Moretti noted that the high costs of high-productivity cities serve as a barrier to in-migration of low-wage workers, which could be depressing mobility and perpetuating the economic divide. Residential mobility also reflects satisfaction with the housing stock, as moves are most frequently motivated by a desire for better housing. Connections with family and community also play a role in mobility; one-quarter of moves in 2019 were motivated by family-related reasons.

The Basics of Residential Mobility

According to American Community Survey (ACS) data, 13 percent of Americans moved between 2017 and 2018 (the most recent available ACS data).[i] Residential mobility declines with age, as illustrated by 25 percent of individuals aged 18-24 moving between 2017 and 2018 compared to 6 percent of individuals age 65 and over. The difference is nearly as wide between renters and homeowners: in 2018, 24 percent of renter households had moved in the past year, compared to 6 percent of homeowner households. Low-income Americans are more likely to move as well, with 14 percent of people in the bottom income quartile moving between 2017 and 2018, compared to 11 percent of those in the top income quartile. The majority of these moves are over short distances. According to Current Population Survey (CPS) data, 65 percent of moves between 2018 and 2019 (the most recent available CPS data) were within the same county, 17 percent were between counties but within the same state, 14 percent were between states, and 4 percent were from abroad **(Figure 2)**.

FIGURE 1

RESIDENTIAL MOBILITY IS IN A LONG-TERM DECLINE

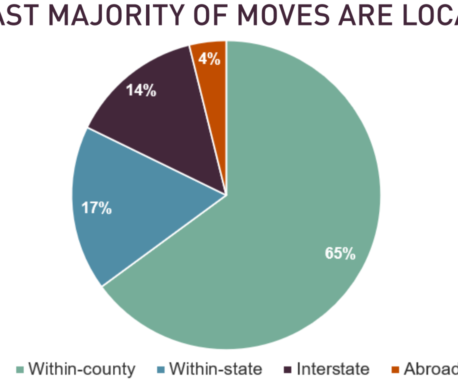


Notes: Person-level data for persons 1+ years old. Excludes group quarters and imputed values from 1996-2019.
Source: JCHS tabulations of US Census Bureau, Current Population Surveys via IPUMS-CPS, University of Minnesota.

Local moves are so common that they drive the trends in mobility, but interstate migration is particularly important because of its implications for regional economic growth and the effects it has on household and labor composition in each state. A number of states have seen consistently positive net domestic migration flows in recent years, primarily concentrated in the Sunbelt, according to data from the Census Population Estimates Program (PEP). Florida and Texas are the most popular destinations, gaining over 100,000 people per year on average from domestic migration from 2010 to 2019; other Sunbelt states with consistently positive domestic migration include North Carolina, Arizona, Tennessee, and South Carolina. A few western states are consistently attracting more domestic migrants than they lose as well, including Washington, Oregon, Colorado, and Idaho. The list of states experiencing the opposite is headed by New York, California, and Illinois, all of which lost residents to domestic migration in recent years, with New York averaging 150,000 fewer residents annually since 2010 and California and Illinois both averaging 95,000 fewer residents moving in than moving out. Other states with consistently negative domestic migration in recent years include many states in the Rust Belt, including Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Ohio, and parts of the Northeast, including New Jersey, Connecticut, and Massachusetts. This is not to say that these states are not attracting any domestic migrants, but rather that more domestic migrants are leaving than arriving.

FIGURE 2

THE VAST MAJORITY OF MOVES ARE LOCAL



Notes: Person-level data for persons 1+ years old. Movers are defined as those who moved in the past year. Within-state moves are between counties in the same state. Excludes group quarters and imputed mobility numbers.
Source: JCHS tabulations of US Census Bureau, 2019 Current Population Survey via IPUMS-CPS, University of Minnesota.

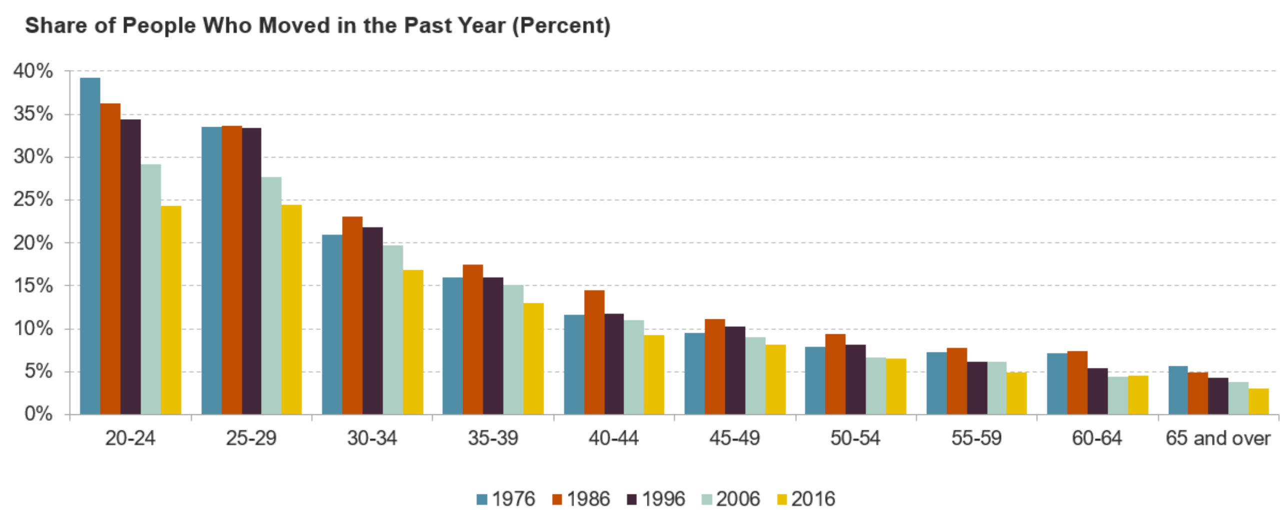
Net migration flows also differ by county and type of community, according to Census PEP data and the Urban-Rural Classification Scheme from the National Center for Health Statistics. Namely, net domestic migration is generally negative in large urban counties and rural counties, but positive elsewhere. Overall, 52.5 percent of counties experienced negative domestic migration and 47.5 percent of counties experienced positive domestic migration in 2018, but the split is not usually so even. Among counties classified as 'large central metro,' 77 percent experienced negative domestic migration in 2018, but for the counties in their immediate surroundings classified as 'large fringe metro,' only 29 percent experienced negative domestic migration that year. A majority of medium metro and small metro counties saw positive domestic migration in 2018, but a majority of micropolitan and noncore counties (i.e. rural areas) saw negative domestic migration that year.[ii] This reveals some of the location preferences among movers, whether they are moving locally or across state lines.

Historic Declines in Mobility

Regardless of where Americans choose to move, however, the fact remains that the share of Americans moving every year has been declining steadily since the 1980s and declining overall since the 1940s. Today's mobility rates are at an all-time low in available data. The US Census Bureau reports that the national mobility rate in 1948 was 20.2 percent (US Census Bureau 2015). According to CPS data, the national mobility rate hovered around 18 percent in the mid-1980s and then dropped by almost half to 10 percent in 2019 **(Figure 1)**. Since moving locally is the most common type of move, it is not surprising that the decline in local mobility is driving the overall decline. Around 15 percent of people moved locally in the 1980s, whereas only 8 percent moved locally in 2019. According to CPS data, interstate migration appeared to peak at 3.3 percent in 1990, before declining and then stabilizing in recent years around 1.5 percent.

FIGURE 3

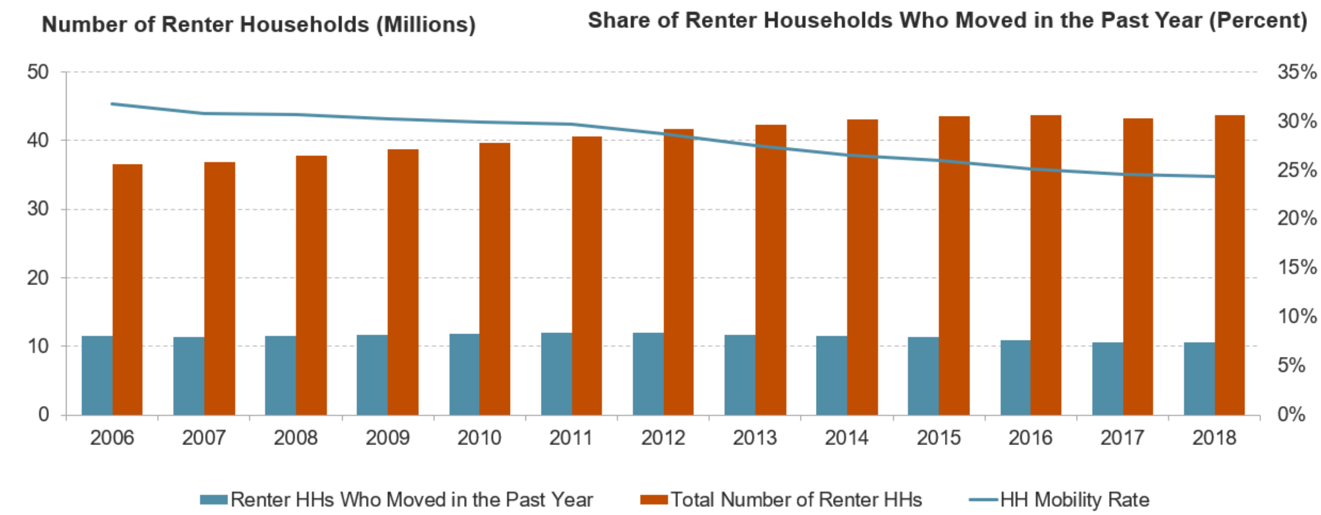
MOBILITY DECLINE IS SHARPEST AMONG YOUNG ADULTS, ACROSS GENERATIONS



Notes: Person-level data for persons 1+ years old. Excludes group quarters and imputed values from 1996-2016.
Source: JCHS tabulations of US Census Bureau, Current Population Surveys via IPUMS-CPS, University of Minnesota.

FIGURE 4

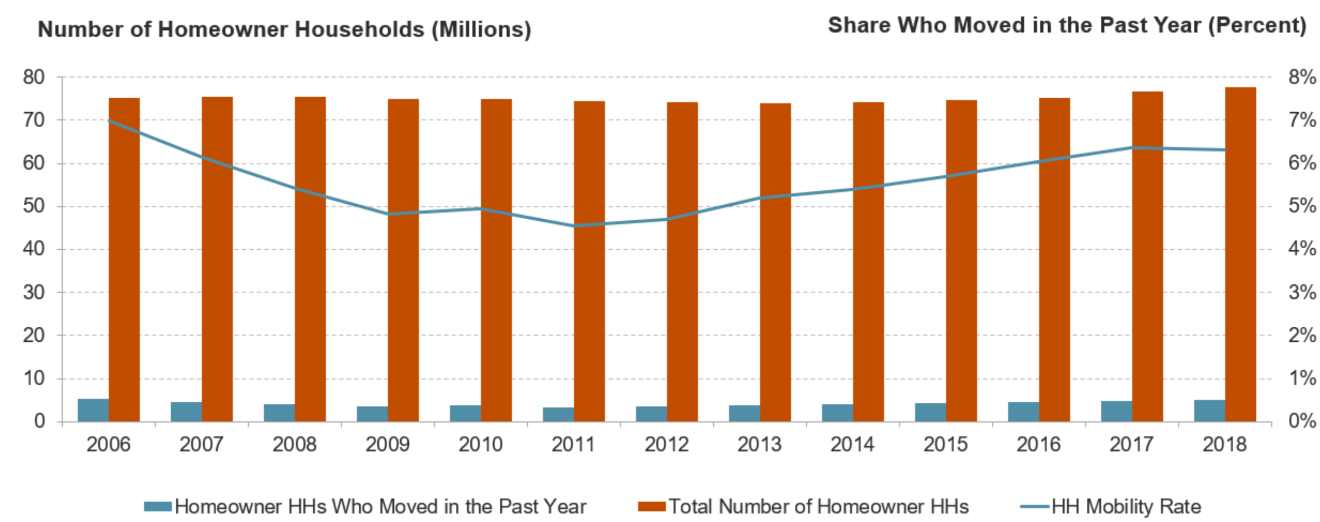
RENTER MOBILITY IS DECLINING, EVEN WITH GROWING NUMBERS OF RENTERS



Notes: Household-level data. Excludes group quarters.
Source: JCHS tabulations of US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates via IPUMS-USA, University of Minnesota.

FIGURE 5

HOMEOWNER MOBILITY RATES ARE RECOVERING TO PRE-RECESSION LEVELS



Notes: Household-level data. Excludes group quarters.
Source: JCHS tabulations of US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates via IPUMS-USA, University of Minnesota.

The sharpest declines in mobility rates have been among younger adults. Almost 40 percent of individuals aged 20 to 24 moved in 1976 (the first available year of CPS mobility data), but less than 25 percent of these individuals moved four decades later, in 2016 **(Figure 3)**. The decline among those aged 25 to 29 was not as steep but still substantial, dropping from 33 to 24 percent from 1976 to 2016. While these declines are dramatic, mobility rates among older adults have been declining as well. For example, 5.6 percent of adults age 65 and over moved in 1976, but only about 3 percent moved in 2016. While this may seem like a small change, it represents a 46 percent decrease. Mobility rates continued to fall between 2016 and 2019.

Renters are much more likely to move than homeowners, but their mobility rate has been dropping precipitously. According to ACS data, even as the number of renter households grew by over 7 million between 2006 and 2018, the number of renter households moving each year dropped by almost 1 million, and the share of renter households moving each year dropped from 32 percent to 24 percent **(Figure 4)**. The homeowner household mobility rate was 7.0 percent in 2006, and while that rate dropped after the 2008 recession to a low of 4.5 percent in 2011, it recovered to 6.3 percent in 2018 **(Figure 5)**. This despite the fact that homeowners appear to be staying in their homes longer, according to average time in residence data from the American Housing Survey (AHS). At the time of survey in 2007, homeowners had been in their residence for 14 years on average, whereas in 2017 (the most recent available AHS data), homeowners had been in their residence for an average of 16 years. Renters have a much lower average time in residence, but this average ticked up slightly over that period, from 4.1 years in 2007 to 4.5 years in 2017.

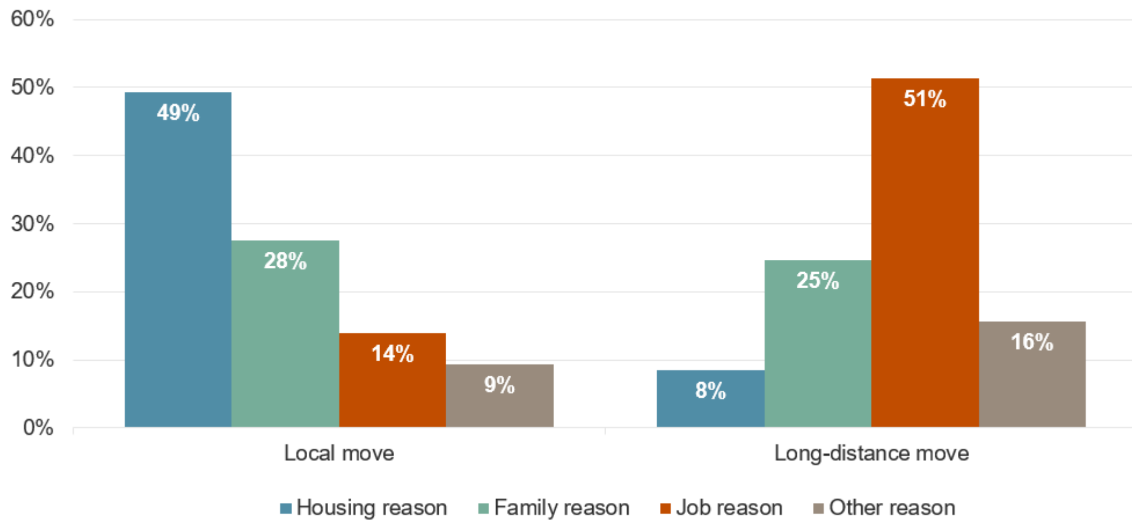
Why Do Americans Move?

Despite the focus on job-related long-distance moves, the most common type of move is local (within county or within state) and the most common motivation is to improve housing. The Current Population Survey asks respondents for their primary reason for moving, and categorizes these reasons into four groups: housing, family, job, and other. Housing-related reasons include wanting new or better housing, and transitioning to homeownership; family-related reasons include a change in marital status, and establishing one's own household; job-related reasons include moving for a new job or transfer, and moving for an easier commute; and other reasons encompass a wide array, from attending college to moving in with an unmarried partner. Housing was the most common reason behind moves in 2019, accounting for 40 percent of moves, with family motivating 27 percent of moves, jobs motivating 21 percent of moves, and other reasons accounting for the remaining 12 percent. When all reasons for moving are examined regardless of category, the top three most popular in 2019 were wanting new or better housing (17 percent of all moves), a new job or job transfer (12 percent), and establishing one's own household (11 percent).

Motivations for moving differ substantially by the distance of move: housing drives local moves, and jobs drive long-distance moves **(Figure 6)**. Among local moves, nearly half were made for housing-related reasons in 2019, 28 percent for family-related reasons, and 14 percent for job-related reasons. For long-distance moves (between states), the most common motivator is job-related (51 percent), followed by family-related reasons (25 percent); a minority of long-distance moves are driven by housing (8 percent) or other reasons (16 percent). Job-related reasons were the primary motivator for long-distance moves for all ages in 2019 except for those age 65 and over, for whom family-related reasons and other reasons were the most common motivators.

FIGURE 6

HOUSING DRIVES LOCAL MOVES, WHILE JOBS DRIVE LONG-DISTANCE MOVES



Notes: Data are based on the reported primary reason for moving (i.e. no individual reported more than one category). Person-level data for persons 1+ years old. Movers are defined as those who moved in the past year. Local moves are defined as within county or within state; long-distance moves as between states.
Source: JCHS tabulations of US Census Bureau, 2019 Current Population Survey via IPUMS-CPS, University of Minnesota.

Why Are Americans Moving Less?

There is no consensus about any one factor that may be driving the historic declines in mobility. Instead, explanations appear to fall into three categories: demographic change, housing affordability, and labor.

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE

America's two largest generations are growing older: in 2018, the youngest baby boomers were in their mid-50s and the oldest had reached their 70s, while the youngest millennials were just reaching their 20s but the oldest were in their mid-30s, according to National Population Estimates data. Since people move less often as they age, mobility should be expected to fall, but looking at recent declines in mobility reveals that aging is not the primary predictor of these declines.

The mobility rate for all individuals age 18 and over in 2008 was 14.4 percent, which dropped in 2018 to 13.2 percent, a decline of 1.2 percentage points. In this ten-year period, there were notable increases in the sizes of the 25-34 year-old age group and the 65 and over age group. If 2008 mobility rates by ten-year age group are applied to the 2018 populations in those age groups, the simulated mobility rate would be 14 percent. This calculates to 0.5 percentage point of the decline being attributable to aging, and 0.8 percentage point attributable to other factors. Thus, in this one simulation, aging accounted for only about one-third of the decline in mobility. The rest of the decline is seen within age groups, especially for young adults, as discussed above.

HOUSING AFFORDABILITY

High housing costs and the growing number of cost-burdened households, as detailed in the *State of the Nation's Housing* report (Joint Center for Housing Studies

2019), may also be limiting residential mobility. Rates of cost burdens (wherein households spend more than 30 percent of income for housing) are high in metropolitan areas of all sizes and rural areas, especially for renters with lower incomes. These cost burdens are becoming increasingly common for households higher up the income scale as well, especially in high-cost areas. As discussed above, economists argue that housing costs in particularly expensive areas discourage people from moving there, as any job would need to have a sufficiently high salary to make up for the higher cost of living (Moretti 2012). Cost burdens could present barriers to local moves as well. According to ACS data, there was a weak negative correlation between local mobility rates and cost burden rates for households in the 100 most populous metro areas in 2018. This could be due to households wanting to avoid the transaction costs of moving or preferring to stay in their current housing as prices rise around them, whether they are renters or homeowners.

LABOR

Several labor-related changes may also be depressing mobility. One major development has been the rise in dual-earner households. According to ACS data, over 60 percent of family households had two or more workers in 2018, and 11.1 percent of those households moved in the prior year. The mobility rate for family households with only one worker was 14.4 percent in 2018. This tracks with the intuition that having two earners in a household would make moves more difficult to coordinate, and therefore less likely. Higher shares of people working from home could also lessen the need for job-related moves. Indeed, from 2008 to 2018 the average mobility rate of individuals working from home was 12 percent, whereas the average mobility rate of individuals commuting to work was 15 percent, according to ACS data. The number of Americans working from home in 2018 was 40 percent higher than in 2008, though as a share of the overall workforce working from home only increased from 4.1 percent to 5.3 percent over that period. Companies are also proving less likely to fund relocation, which could be dampening mobility. According to an analysis by an outplacement firm, the average annual relocation rate from 1986-1995 was 30 percent but it was only 11 percent from 2007-2017 (Challenger, Gray & Christmas, Inc. 2018).

Conclusion

As of 2019, Americans were moving less than in any year for which there is available data. Mobility rates have nearly halved in the past three decades, falling from almost 20 percent to around 10 percent. Declines in mobility have been the sharpest among the most mobile: renters and young adults. These declines have occurred across generations but accelerated in the 2000s and 2010s, with 20-24 year-old individuals moving about 40 percent less often in 2016 than in 1976. While interstate migration rates stabilized in recent years, local mobility rates have been in a continuous free fall, dropping from 15 percent in the mid-1980s to 8 percent in 2019. Since local moves are the most common type of residential mobility, this trend is driving the overall decline. The reasons for this decline are likely related to aging, unaffordable housing, and changing labor dynamics, but there may be other factors as well. Whatever the reasons for this trend, the fact remains that at the end of the 2010s, the new normal was a less mobile America.

While this brief did not cover the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on residential mobility, there are many possible outcomes, none of which are certain at the time of this publication. During the quarantine period, there has been evidence of sharp drops in home sales (Chen 2020), which will depress homeowner mobility. Recent interest rate cuts have also led to a spike in mortgage refinance applications (Nothaft 2020), and these more affordable mortgages could act as a disincentive for homeowners to move in the future. Another effect of the quarantine period has been a dramatic increase in working from home, which could lead to a permanent shift toward higher rates of working from home in the future. As discussed above, higher rates of working from home could dampen the number of job-related moves.

There may be a spike in mobility after the quarantine period ends, however, from people moving to cheaper housing (if available) after losing income from a job loss. There may also be a substantial increase in evictions and foreclosures after temporary bans end, unless payment assistance is provided on a large scale. The consequences for mobility will likely not be clear for months or even years to come.

Endnotes

i This brief cites several data sources, most frequently the American Community Survey (ACS) and the Current Population Survey (CPS). The ACS offers more reliable estimates due to its larger sample sizes, and the CPS offers more historical data and information on motivations for moving. Both sources show the same trends over time, but the ACS reports slightly higher mobility levels and rates. Moving is defined in both surveys as living in a different place at the time of survey than one year prior. To avoid inflation of mobility estimates, I exclude all residents of group quarters in ACS and CPS, and all CPS imputed values from 1995 onward (see Molloy, Smith, and Wozniak 2011).

ii Many counties with negative net domestic migration offset these losses through sufficiently large international migration inflows. For more, see (Frost 2020).

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