Residential Choice and the Demand for Better Places

Evidence on housing barriers migration intentions digital exploration and domestic travel

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Executive assessment

America's observed residential patterns do not reveal all the places its households would choose if affordable homes, dependable livelihoods, suitable education, and everyday support were available together. Existing research shows that financial and practical barriers can materially alter residential choices. Search activity can also provide information about migration before a move appears in administrative records. Together, these findings justify a programme of research into unmet residential demand.

They do not establish that 100 million Americans want to move or would move if those barriers were removed. This paper treats that number as a motivating hypothesis. The relevant population must be estimated from realistic household choices, with a defined time horizon, actual trade-offs, and a credible option to stay. A national total would still not demonstrate demand for a particular town or development.

The Knowledge Towns Institute proposes studying residential choice through three connected lenses: the conditions households need, the signals they generate while exploring alternatives, and the capacity of places to meet their needs. This approach can inform housing policy, university and community planning, and regional development. Its success should be measured through improved lives and greater choice, including the ability to remain in a community.

This is an evidence synthesis and proposed research agenda. It reports no new national survey, proprietary forecasting model, or completed Institute pilot. It has not undergone external peer review. Recommendations and illustrative calculations are identified separately from findings in the cited literature.

Why observed residence is an incomplete measure of preference

A household's address reflects preferences filtered through income, prices, available homes, employment, family responsibilities, and uncertainty. Staying can express attachment and satisfaction. It can also reflect the absence of a feasible alternative. Moving can express opportunity, but it can equally follow eviction, relationship change, or financial pressure. Neither mobility nor immobility is intrinsically evidence of wellbeing.

The strongest counterargument to a broad pent-up-demand thesis is that many households value their existing lives. In the Federal Reserve's 2024 survey, 77% of adults were somewhat or very satisfied with the overall quality of their neighbourhood. Satisfaction with one dimension does not rule out wanting a different home, but it cautions against treating the population as broadly displaced from its preferred geography. [1]

A useful framework therefore separates aspiration, conditional preference, feasible action, and additional impact. Aspiration concerns an imagined improvement. Conditional preference concerns a specified offer. Feasible action requires the household to manage costs, coordination, and timing. Additional impact asks whether an intervention changes the outcome relative to what would otherwise occur.

The geographical scale matters. Moving into a better neighbourhood within the same labour market may preserve jobs and care networks. Moving across the country can require rebuilding both. Knowledge Towns could potentially serve either demand, but the same assumptions and conversion rates should not be applied to both.

Housing constraints have measurable effects

Harvard's Joint Center for Housing Studies reports that 22.7 million renter households were cost-burdened in 2024, representing 49% of renter households. These households spent more than 30% of income on housing and utilities. The finding establishes the scale of financial pressure; it does not identify how many households want to relocate or would benefit from doing so. [2]

Mortgage terms create a different constraint. FHFA's updated analysis estimated that mortgage-rate lock-in prevented approximately 1.72 million home sales between the second quarter of 2022 and the second quarter of 2024. These are estimated forgone transactions, not a count of unique people permanently prevented from moving. Nevertheless, the finding demonstrates that observed housing turnover can be suppressed by a specific financial mechanism. [3]

These mechanisms require different responses. A renter may need lower monthly costs and enough cash for a deposit. An owner may have substantial equity but face a much higher payment after moving. A young adult may need an attainable independent household. An older owner may need an accessible smaller home near relatives. A single affordability measure will miss important differences.

The Institute's interpretation is that housing policy should evaluate the full cost of a residential transition. Rent or mortgage payments are only part of the comparison. Utilities, insurance, transportation, childcare, selling costs, and the loss of informal support can change whether a cheaper home produces a more affordable life. This is a proposed assessment framework rather than a quantified national result.

Practical assistance can change neighbourhood choice

The Creating Moves to Opportunity research provides unusually strong causal evidence. In a randomised trial involving housing-voucher recipients, information, financial support, and customised search assistance increased the share moving to high-upward-mobility areas from 15% to 53%. A second trial indicated that customised assistance was particularly important. The findings challenge the assumption that observed residential segregation simply reflects strong preferences to remain in low-opportunity areas. [4]

The scope of that result is essential. The participants were eligible families in a particular voucher and housing-market setting. The study concerned access to neighbourhoods, not nationwide demand for migration into smaller towns. Applying its percentage-point effect to all Americans would be unjustified.

For the Institute, the implication is to examine coordination as a substantive barrier. A household can know that a better option exists and still struggle with landlord requirements, applications, timing, unfamiliar institutions, or limited time to search. A place strategy that supplies information alone may therefore underperform one that helps resolve household-specific obstacles.

There is also an important difference between assistance and structural improvement. Helping a household find an available home does not create additional housing. Explaining school enrolment does not create a place in a full school. Employment navigation does not guarantee a suitable job. Research should identify which constraints can be addressed through coordination and which require investment or institutional change.

Work schools and social ties form a joint decision

A household considering relocation evaluates several connected systems. For working-age families, employment feasibility may depend on both adults, the reliability of remote arrangements, career progression, and access to future employers. A location that works for one job today may be fragile if that job disappears. This paper therefore proposes measuring resilience of employment access rather than merely recording whether one vacancy exists.

Schooling also acts in two directions. A family may seek a different education, or remain because it trusts its existing school. Gallup's September 2026 findings show 66% of parents satisfied with their own child's education, compared with 32% satisfaction with K–12 education nationally. National dissatisfaction is consequently a poor proxy for a household's willingness to move. [5]

A credible alternative must specify access as well as quality. Families may care about special educational support, childcare hours, transport, continuity of friendships, and available places. A generic school score or a proposed technological improvement cannot establish that those needs will be met. Claims that AI-enabled education will unlock migration remain hypotheses requiring evidence about outcomes, access, cost, and parental acceptance.

Family ties deserve equal status with economic constraints. Relocation can remove unpaid care, practical help, belonging, and the ability to support older relatives. Some households want to return nearer family but cannot find work or suitable housing there. These different situations suggest testing nearby alternatives, return migration, and multigenerational options separately.

The proposed Knowledge Towns contribution is to consider these conditions together. Whether their joint improvement has an effect greater than the sum of individual improvements is an empirical question. It should be tested through realistic choices and subsequent behaviour, not asserted from the attractiveness of the concept.

Domestic travel reveals attachment but not necessarily migration

Tourism and residential demand may share underlying attractions: landscape, culture, recreation, family connections, and a pleasing built environment. USDA's analysis of 2020–2024 population change identifies many rapidly growing nonmetropolitan counties in recreation and retirement destinations. Yet 51% of nonmetropolitan counties lost population during the same period. An amenity-growth relationship should not be presented as a general rural revival. [6]

A study of pandemic-era domestic migration using Postal Service change-of-address data adds a qualification. Rural recreation counties initially gained through both increased arrivals and reduced departures; by the third pandemic year, differences between recreation and non-recreation counties had balanced. A temporary shock can therefore produce a pattern that should not be extrapolated indefinitely. [7]

The relevant research question concerns how visits change. Repeated stays, longer visits, working weekdays, and exposure to less attractive seasons might indicate growing familiarity with ordinary life. They might also reflect an established holiday routine, second-home use, or visits to relatives who have already moved. The current evidence does not establish a universal ranking of these signals.

A robust study would follow visitors and non-visitors from the same origin markets, record whether migration was already under consideration before a trip, and distinguish leisure travel from house-hunting. It would also include unpaid accommodation and stays with family. Hotel demand alone omits several potentially important routes into residential attachment.

Digital exploration provides an additional window

Lin, Cranshaw, and Counts analysed 120 million Bing queries from 2014–2016 containing migration intent. Their state-level analysis found that search-based measures added predictive information beyond baseline models. This is direct evidence that online exploration can help anticipate domestic migration, although it does not validate a current town-level forecasting product or every proposed type of search. [8]

Zillow's September 2026 rental-search analysis illustrates the origin–destination relationships visible in housing browsing. Boston users accounted for 16.1% of rental-listing page views in Providence, while New York users accounted for 6% in Hartford. These figures measure page views rather than households, completed moves, or incremental demand. Repeated browsing by a small number of users can affect such measures. [9]

Different platforms define markets and users differently. Redfin's methodology identifies a browsing origin and excludes users without a consistent home metro in the month. Its geographic definitions can group neighbouring markets. Such choices may improve one aspect of measurement while omitting some travellers or obscuring shorter-distance transitions. [10]

Google Trends provides sampled and normalised relative interest. It does not provide an absolute count of households planning a move. Low-volume searches may be suppressed or noisy, making small-town estimates particularly difficult. Separately, Google's Travel Analytics documentation describes processed and anonymised travel-related search sources; detailed access cannot be presumed. [11, 12]

The Institute proposes testing persistence, narrowing choices, practical enquiries, and actions involving effort or money. A progression from destination videos to housing searches and school enquiries may be informative. Aggregate increases across these categories do not show that the same households generated them. Individual sequences require voluntary longitudinal research or appropriately governed data access.

Digital evidence also contains false signals. News, disasters, advertising, investment interest, platform redesigns, and changing listing supply can alter activity without changing residential intent. Strong evaluation must compare prediction against prior migration, prices, jobs, distance, and seasonality, using only information available at the time a forecast would have been made.

Interpreting the 100 million proposition

The Census Bureau estimated a U.S. population of 340.1 million in July 2024. Relative to that dated benchmark, 100 million is about 29% of the population. This arithmetic is a scale comparison, not evidence that such a share wants to move. It includes children and other household members, who should not be counted as independent adult decision-makers. [13]

The proposition needs a defined offer and period. One hundred million people with some residential aspiration is different from 100 million people willing to accept feasible alternatives within three years, and different again from 100 million additional movers over a decade. Existing evidence reviewed here does not substantiate either of the latter claims.

An illustrative sensitivity calculation shows why a smaller result could still matter. If an assumed pool of 100 million people produced additional ten-year conversion of 10%, 25%, or 50%, the outcomes would be 10, 25, or 50 million additional people moving. At an assumed 2.5 people per moving household, those correspond to 4, 10, or 20 million household moves. None of these inputs is an estimate from this paper.

Household moves are not net new housing requirements. Most movers vacate a home, some form new households, and available homes may be in the wrong places or unsuitable for the next household. Nor does income arriving in one region necessarily constitute new national income. A credible scale analysis must account for vacancies, household formation, prices, displacement, public services, and the effects on departing communities.

The central hypothesis is therefore qualitative before it is numerical: a meaningful population may prefer residential combinations that are scarce or inaccessible. The research should discover the size and composition of that population rather than work backwards from a desired headline.

Implications for policy and place development

First, assess existing residents and potential newcomers together. A successful place may help local young adults establish households, older residents downsize, and families remain near their support networks. These outcomes can be as valuable as attracting people from distant metropolitan areas.

Second, demonstrate that a proposed place can supply what it promises. A housing plan should include attainable costs and delivery timing. An employment proposition should specify access and uncertainty. Educational claims should address provision and suitability. Demand analysis that ignores these constraints risks measuring interest in a place that cannot be delivered.

Third, investigate campuses and other civic anchors as potential coordinators. They may provide settings in which housing, learning, workspaces, culture, and local partnerships can be considered together. This is an institutional proposition to evaluate, not a claim that any university can guarantee those outcomes or that named institutions have agreed to participate.

Fourth, connect demand to supply before using it to guide investment. A popular destination can experience rising land values and rents if additional demand meets little new capacity. The programme should measure incumbent housing pressure, access to services, and displacement alongside arrival numbers.

Finally, compare relocation with improving the current place. If better housing or schools allow a household to stay and thrive, that is a successful expansion of choice. The most appropriate intervention may be local reform rather than recruitment from somewhere else.

Additional areas of research

National conditional demand. Establish a representative survey of realistic household choices, including people who do not want to move. Vary housing costs, work security, school access, family distance, home type, and daily amenities. Record who would move and compare alternatives with staying. Estimate household and person totals using appropriate weights and uncertainty.

Interactions among barriers. Test whether housing, work, and schooling are complements, substitutes, or decisive for different groups. Include partner employment, disability access, care responsibilities, and financial transition costs. Separate willingness to move locally from willingness to change regions.

Behavioural validation. Follow consenting households over time to observe searches, visits, enquiries, applications, abandoned plans, completed moves, and decisions to stay. Include non-intenders and correct for attrition. Investigate whether respondents' stated preferences predict actual behaviour under comparable offers.

Digital and travel prediction. Build origin–destination models only where geographic coverage and history are adequate. Compare digital-only, travel-only, and combined measures with strong baselines using held-out years and places. Publish false alarms and uncertainty. Treat new series without usable history as prospective experiments.

Causal tests of assistance. Begin with verified available housing and services. Where appropriate, randomise an offer of navigation, trial visits, introductions, or capped transition support. Measure additional effects relative to usual information. A successful assistance trial would not establish the causal effects of constructing homes or improving schools; those require separate studies.

Supply and delivery. Assess whether demand can be accommodated at the proposed price, scale, and timetable. Model housing delivery, employment access, schools, childcare, utilities, and transport. Allow demand to affect prices and congestion. Compare new construction, adaptive reuse, and improvements within existing neighbourhoods.

Durability and distribution. Follow affordability, employment continuity, social connection, regret, and ability to remain after relocation. Examine effects on existing residents and communities of origin. Educational and health benefits require suitable measures and longer follow-up; they should not be inferred from an early move.

Institutional coordination. Compare campus-linked initiatives with similar places using other anchors or ordinary delivery arrangements. Test whether coordination actually reduces cost or uncertainty, and whether a simpler intervention performs as well. Publish negative results and disclose commercial interests.

A staged Institute programme

The first stage should combine an evidence register, qualitative interviews, data-access audit, and survey testing. Its purpose is to resolve definitions and feasibility before committing to a national estimate. The public output would be a protocol stating the hypotheses, scope, uncertainties, and evidence that could overturn the proposition.

A second stage would field the national choice study and recruit a longitudinal panel. A third would test predictions and practical assistance in a small number of places with verified capacity. Scaling would depend on additional benefits, reasonable costs, and acceptable effects on existing residents. Sites should be selected for variation and evaluability rather than solely for enthusiasm.

The Institute should publish core methods and findings, including null results. Regional commissioned research may later apply validated methods, while advisory work can translate them into practical choices. Proposed products must not be represented as an operational national observatory before access, validation, and delivery capacity exist.

Existing evidence supports a serious inquiry into constrained residential choice. It establishes that some barriers matter and that search activity can contain useful information. The next task is to connect those findings to representative household preferences, observable action, causal interventions, and feasible place capacity. That chain of evidence would allow the Institute to estimate unmet demand without confusing aspiration with a deliverable market.

References

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