

# Department of Government Working Papers

(Pamphlet)

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no. 19

No. 19

## POPULATION MOVEMENT IN RESPONSE TO LOCAL TAXES AND SERVICES: THE RESULTS OF A PILOT STUDY

KEITH DOWDING,  
PETER JOHN &  
PHILIP COWLEY

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ISBN 1-872166-66-0

£3.00

Available from the Editor, Keith Dowding,  
Department of Government, Brunel University,  
Uxbridge, Middlesex, UB8 3PH, England.

1991

**Brunel**   
THE UNIVERSITY OF WEST LONDON

**POPULATION MOVEMENTS IN RESPONSE TO LOCAL TAXES AND SERVICES:  
THE RESULTS OF A PILOT STUDY**

**Keith Dowding, Peter John and Philip Cowley\***

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## 1. Introduction: The Tiebout Model

In 1956 Charles Tiebout in his essay 'A Pure Theory of Local Expenditures' set out a simple model for explaining the sorting of residential populations in metropolitan communities with many local authorities. His idea, sometimes referred to as the Tiebout model, is that individuals choose to locate themselves within communities that provide them with the optimal package of services and taxes.[1] Local governments compete for citizens and 'consumer-voters' who choose the area best suited to themselves.

This model of population movements in response to taxes and services has proved controversial. Whilst it or its variants have been accepted by many economists, urban geographers, sociologists and political scientists (for example, Ostrom *et al.* 1961, Warren 1966, Bish 1972), others have criticized it, arguing that it is unrealistic and, particularly in the case of the United Kingdom, inapplicable (Sharpe and Newton 1984, McLean 1987). Many tests of the theory have been carried out, most of them in the United States, though a few in Britain (for example, for the US: Oates 1969, Hamilton 1975, Hamilton *et al.* 1975, Stein 1987; for Britain: Aronson 1974, Davies 1982). These have produced mixed results and fail to test the behavioural foundations of the model (Dowding and John, 1991). An alternative research method using a sample survey is a better test.

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1. Tiebout writes about 'individuals' but we are testing 'households' because households move rather than the individuals. This makes no difference to the model. There has also been some discussion of whether the Tiebout 'theory' is really a theory, a model, an hypothesis or none of these. For simplicity, we generally refer to it as a model.

Rather than being a single model, Tiebout is a 'family of models' sharing the same underlying hypothesis: that individuals, households and businesses locate according to the local taxes and services that suit their preferences. The models take different forms. For example, some researchers have applied the model to the study of house values and land capitalization (Oates 1969, and essays in Zodrow ed. 1983), whilst others have concentrated upon population shifts of easily identifiable social groups (Cebula 1974a, 1974b, 1976a, 1977, 1978, Cebula and Avery 1983). When we refer to the Tiebout model we mean that family of models which share the behavioural foundations of Tiebout's original formulation.

Tiebout's original formulation was, as his title suggests, a 'pure theory' which means that the assumptions of the model are pared down to their simplest form. Factors extraneous to the central hypothesis are assumed away. He assumes local authorities raise most of their finance from local taxes; a multiplicity of authorities in metropolitan areas; people who consume local services live and pay taxes to that local authority; everyone lives on dividend income and is therefore completely mobile; and people have perfect information. These assumptions have been criticized (Sharpe and Newton 1984, McLean 1987), in our view unfairly, because economists often design theories whose assumptions can be relaxed for empirical testing. Thus, even in the 'real world', we are able to test the Tiebout variables and distinguish them from other influences on location decisions.

Existing empirical tests of Tiebout fail to isolate the variables that Tiebout claims are important. Most use aggregate

data to see if shifts in population and, for example, in land values are correlated with tax/service packages. However, the research fails to demonstrate that the population has moved as a result of tax/service packages. Cebula's, evidence, for example, is consistent both with tax/service packages' following social groups and social groups' following tax/service packages. The research on house and land value also fails to demonstrate that other competing hypotheses are inapplicable. The literature makes an error frequent in social science: 'to "test" a hypothesis by checking whether the results are "consistent" with it without exploring whether they are also consistent with other, conflicting hypotheses' (Mueller 1989, p. 193). The number of influences affecting locational decisions is so great that isolating possible Tiebout effects by using aggregate data is extremely difficult if not impossible. However, we can use a sample survey to test directly whether people are influenced by tax/service packages.

Testing Tiebout is more difficult in Britain than in the US. The model requires large metropolitan areas with many local authorities. This reduces the cost to households of taking into account local authority taxes and services when they make residential choices. As British jurisdictions are extensive, this condition only exists in the large metropolitan areas. London is, of course, the largest urban concentration and is best suited for testing the model. It was used for an aggregate test of Tiebout (Davies 1982). Its author considered that 'the existence of relatively cheap transport facilities makes it possible for those who work there to choose their place of residence from a variety of areas administered by different local authorities.' The abolition in 1986 of the metropolitan-wide authority, the Greater

London Council, makes London more like those U.S. cities characterized by fragmented local government. The variation in local tax levels is also marked in London, particularly since the introduction of the community charge or poll tax. We propose, in our main study, to study households that have moved into and within four neighbouring London boroughs - Camden, Westminster, Wandsworth and Lambeth. Two have a low poll tax and two high. Their services have mixed reputations.

## 2. The Sample

The pilot study was conducted in the London Borough of Hillingdon. Politically, Hillingdon is a marginal borough; council control moved from Labour to Conservative at the May 1990 local elections. Its poll tax was set at £366 in 1990. It was chosen because of its proximity to Brunel University.

The sample consisted of households which had made the decision to move in the past year. In order to obtain the sample we compared electoral registers for the years 1990 and 1991. By tracing names from one register to the next we located 67 households which had moved in that period. The households were selected only where an identifiable household had left one address, and a new identifiable household had moved in. We tried to ensure that every questionnaire was sent to a household that had recently moved, and we were successful in all but one case (where it had moved eight years previously). For the main survey we will generate a list of households which have moved in a single year, and from it randomly select the sample.

Electoral registers have limitations as a sampling method. Those people who fail to register are those who move most frequently. This is compounded by the introduction of the poll tax, which has reduced electoral registration, particularly in London, as people tried to avoid paying it. Private tenants are likely to be particularly under-represented as a consequence. However, other than using the costly postal address files or relying on lists from local councils and estate agents, no other easy method is available.

The decision to move is taken by households, rather than by individuals. Therefore the letters accompanying the questionnaire (see Appendix 2) were headed 'Dear Householder(s)' and included a paragraph asking for the letter to be passed on to the head (or heads) of the household if the recipient were not that person. In most cases the electoral roll allowed us to identify the sex of the householders though this did not allow us to know the exact familial relationship or relationship of landlord and tenant in some shared houses. To avoid causing any offence the words 'Mr' and 'Mrs' were not used on the addresses to avoid the presumption that the husband was the 'head of household'. Where there were two names on the electoral register the letter was sent to both members. Where there was some doubt, particularly in houses with a large number of family members, the telephone directory was consulted for the initials of the head or heads of household. Where the telephone directory was not helpful the letter was sent to the first person on the electoral register on the assumption that it would be passed on to the head(s) of household.



### 3. Questionnaire Design

As we conducted a postal survey we required a questionnaire that was short and fairly simple (see Appendix 1 for the questionnaire). We consulted past surveys on why people move (Rossi 1980, Census of Employment 1981, Nationwide Building Society 1982, National Dwelling and Household Survey 1983, Office of Population and Census 1983, Ball 1983, Champion *et al.* 1987, Saunders 1990), though we decided against repeating their questions. However, this does not rule out comparisons with previous surveys.

#### Questions 1-4

1. Approximately how long have you been living at your current address?
2. Do you:
  - a. Rent your house from a private landlord
  - b. Rent your house from the Council
  - c. Rent your house from a Housing Association/Co-op
  - d. Own or part own your house
3. What is the name of your local Council?
4. And what local Council did you live in before moving?

The first question checks that respondents have moved in the period when the poll tax was introduced. The second question ascertains their tenure. The third and fourth questions are important for testing Tiebout's behavioural assumptions. If householders are unable to identify correctly their local council then it is difficult to argue that they moved to that borough for

tax/service reasons. The fourth question is important for isolating those respondents who moved within the borough from those who moved in from outside. This question will be more valuable in the multi-borough main survey as it will distinguish between those who move within the borough, between the four boroughs that are included within the main survey, and those who move into one of the four boroughs from outside. We can then check households' movements from and to boroughs of high/low poll taxes against their answers to later questions on their reasons for moving. We can then ascertain whether households that say they have moved (in part) to avoid paying a high poll tax have in fact moved to an area where the poll tax is significantly lower.

#### **Questions 5-6**

**5. What factors led to your decision to move from your previous address?**

Then follows a list of factors.

**6. Having made the decision to move from your old address, what factors entered into your decision to move to this particular address?**

Then follows a list of factors.

Questions 5 and 6 are the key questions of the survey. We are most interested in two decisions that households make when they move. First, the decision to move **from** where a household is living. Second, once a household has decided to move, where it is to move **to**. Of course, these two decisions can be so closely related that they form the same decision. For example, if a household moves because one member has a new job, then it moves

**from** its former address because it is not convenient for the new place of employment and may move **to** another address that is convenient for the place of employment. However, in models of location decisions, these two decisions are often separable, and the two-step approach is used in empirical studies (for critical discussion, see Stillwell and Congdon, 1991). For example, if a household moves because it wants to live in a larger house, then it moves **from** a smaller **to** a larger house. However, a household may choose to live in one larger house rather than another larger house because of the better tax/service provisions in the borough of the former. In London if a household moves because of new employment it may move to a house near, say, good Underground links with the place of employment, but it might choose one borough rather than another because of its tax/service provisions. Question 6, therefore, could isolate a Tiebout effect that was not a factor in the original decision to move.

The factors that are listed in question 5 (see Appendix 1) include all those reasons that had scored highly in previous surveys plus 'To move to a lower poll tax area', and 'To move to better council services'. We also included an open-ended question to discover any additional reasons, and invited further comments. This was specifically included for the pilot survey to see if any amendments might be required for the main survey. In both questions 5 and 6 we asked respondents to specify their reasons as 'Very Important', 'Fairly Important' or 'Unimportant'.

**Questions 7-11**

7. If you have moved since the introduction of the poll tax, is your poll tax here lower or higher than in your old council?
8. Do you consider the services here to be better or worse than from your old council?
9. If your move was within the same borough, what do you think of poll tax and services that the borough provides?
10. What had you heard about the council that you would be paying your poll tax to (eg the level of poll tax/rates or the quality of services)?
11. And did this have any effect on your decision to move to your current address? Yes or No.

These questions are designed either to check and to provide data to tabulate against the answers in questions 5 and 6. We split questions about taxes and services in questions 7 and 8 in order to test against each of side of the tax/service mix. We hope to whether a single factor, either tax or service levels, proves to be more important. Question 9 tests the attitudes of respondents towards their tax/service mix.

Question 10 ascertains households' knowledge of taxes and services of the borough they are moving into. Surveys have demonstrated that people have a good knowledge of their poll tax levels (Bloch and John, 1991). We also need to demonstrate, if Tiebout's behavioural foundations are to be confirmed, that households are aware of the tax/service mix in the boroughs to which they move. This question also allows us to cross-check against responses to questions 5 and 6. Question 11 asks if local

taxes and services had an effect on why households moved to their current address. This is a simple test of the Tiebout model.

**Questions 12 and 13.**

**12. What is your occupation?**

**13. Do you have any children under sixteen living with you?**

These questions enable us to analyse against social class and to check we have a reasonable sample of the moving population. Question 13 could be illuminating if households move in order to take advantage of local education facilities and standards.

#### **4. Fieldwork**

The questionnaires, together with a covering letter and a pre-paid return envelope, were sent to the sample households on 5 July 1991. We received 21 replies before the second mailing was sent three weeks later. The second mailing received 14 responses, and we received 7 more from the third mailing after a further three weeks had passed. This made a total of 42 replies from 67 questionnaires sent; a response rate of 62.7 per cent. However, because we excluded 7 respondents who had moved over 2 years previously, the effective response rate was 52 per cent.[2] This is a good response rate for a postal survey, suggesting our questionnaire had been effectively designed.

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2. Two years was the cut-off point because the poll tax would not have been a factor much earlier. This period would be longer for the main survey in 1992 or 1993 as the poll tax would have been in place for longer. Thus our effective response rate should be slightly higher.

We received no spoilt questionnaires and each question was answered clearly. Given that the main survey will be conducted in central London boroughs that typically have lower response rates, about 5-10 per cent less than the national average, we may follow-up by telephone.

### **5. Analysis of the Results**

This section analyses the responses of the pilot survey. Thirty-five responses are not a statistically significant number. However, the answers provide a further indication that the questionnaire is logical and robust. It can also be a guide to likely responses from the main survey.

#### **The respondents**

There were no responses from private-sector tenants; and only five were council tenants (all had moved within the borough). One respondent lived in a housing association or co-op. The rest were home owners or part owners. Most respondents were professional households.

The respondents were about equally divided into 20 households that had moved within the borough (intra-borough migrants) and 15 that had moved from outside (inter-borough migrants). Most of the inter-borough migrants were from neighbouring authorities. When testing for Tiebout influences, these movements are very different, and we analyse them separately. Table 1 breaks down the respondents by migrant status and tenure.

**Table 1: Intra- and inter-borough migrants by tenure**

	Owners	Council	HA/Co-op	Total
Intra-	14	5	1	20
Inter-	15	0	0	15

**Inter-borough migrants**

The responses of the 15 inter-borough migrants to question 5, ascertaining the factors that affect households' decisions to move, are set out in Table 2.

**Table 2: Decision to move from previous residence**

	Very important	Fairly important	Unimportant
Job	1	1	9
Family	2	4	7
Larger	9	1	4
Smaller	1	1	10
Dislike	0	6	5
Better	6	3	3
Cheaper	1	1	10
Lower	1	5	7
Services	1	3	7
Neighbours	0	2	9
Shops	1	5	6
Education	2	1	9

The results show a mixed response, with households selecting many options. Surprisingly household employment was not a great factor, nor were family reasons. Moving to a larger house was the most frequently cited most important reason. Within this category four respondents said that they were getting married. It is important for the Tiebout model that, after dislike of previous house, poll taxes and services are the next important factor.

Table 3 shows the results to question 6, the second stage of the moving decision.

**Table 3: Inter-borough migrants' reasons for moving to location**

	Very important	Fairly important	Unimportant
House	14	0	0
Job	3	5	4
Location	5	7	2
Poll Tax	1	9	4
Services	2	7	4

The type of house was predictably the most important factor households identified as affecting their location decision. The next most important factor was the location, with 12 households saying it was very or fairly important. But, showing the importance of the Tiebout effect, the third important factor was the poll tax, with 10 households out of 15 saying it was very or fairly important. The next factor was council services, followed by employment.

Probing the service and tax dimension, Table 4 shows inter-borough migrants' knowledge of the difference between their present poll tax and their previous councils', and Table 5 shows their opinion of the difference between the service levels of their old and new councils.

**Table 4: Inter-borough migrants' knowledge of present council's poll tax level compared to previous council's**

Higher	Same	Lower	Don't Know
1	3	9	2



**Table 5: Inter-borough migrants' opinion of present council's services compared to old council's**

	Better	Same	Worse
	4	10	1

Several respondents had moved from higher poll tax areas, though opinion was divided about whether they were better or worse areas for services. Table 6 shows a tabulation of the two questions. Table 7 shows whether respondents took into account local taxes and services.

**Table 6: Opinion of services cross-tabulated with knowledge of poll tax**

		Poll tax		
		Higher	Same	Lower
Services	Better	0	0	4
	Same	1	3	4
	Worse	0	0	1

**Table 7: Effect of poll tax and local services on decision to move cross-tabulated with knowledge of the poll tax.**

	Higher	Same	Lower
Yes	0	0	2
No	1	3	7

Thus few inter-borough migrants said they were affected by local poll taxes and services. The two that did appeared logical in moving to a lower poll tax area.

**Intra-borough migrants**

Twenty households moved within the borough. Table 8 reports their response to question 5.

**Table 8: Intra-borough migrants' decision to move from previous residence**

	Very important	Fairly important	Unimportant
Job	0	2	7
Family	4	3	5
Larger	5	3	2
Smaller	1	1	7
Dislike	1	5	3
Better	3	3	4
Cheaper	0	1	7
Lower	1	1	7
Services	1	1	7
Neighbours	1	4	5
Shops	1	2	6
Education	0	1	8

The responses to the open-ended questions show that moving to buy own home from rented accommodation was considered important by 2 respondents. The type of house proved to be the most important factor. The desire for a lower poll tax proved not to be an important factor. Table 9 shows the response to the location decision.

**Table 9: Intra-borough migrants' reasons for moving to location**

	Very	Fairly	Unimportant
House	13	1	0
Job	2	6	3
Location	4	4	3
Poll Tax	2	2	8
Services	2	4	6

Respondents indicated that the type and price of the house was the most important factor; it would be surprising if they said this was unimportant. The responses to the open-ended question indicated that the type of area was an important influence on residential choice. As with the inter-borough migrants, the poll tax and council services were chosen as a factor by some households, though not so many as the inter-borough migrants. But this does suggest that some households are influenced by local taxes and services even when they move locally.

The response to the open-ended question number 9 was designed to elicit the intra-borough migrants' attitudes to their local tax and services. We coded the responses into (1) content with poll tax level and services; (2) poll tax too high; content with services or not mentioned (3) poll tax considered reasonable or not mentioned; discontented with services; (4) poll tax too high; discontented with services; and (5) poll tax too low; discontented with services. Table 9 contains the results.

**Table 9: Attitude to local poll taxes and services**

(1) Contented	12
(2) PT too high, contented with services	1
(3) Content with PT, discontented with services	1
(4) PT too high, discontented with services	4
(5) PT too low, discontented with services	2

Most households were content with the poll tax, which shows Hillingdon or the sample to be unusual. All the intra-borough migrants answered 'no' to question 9, which asked them if asked them if their thoughts about local taxes and services had affected their decision to move.

### **Implications for the design of the questionnaire**

Overall the questionnaire was robust, with respondents answering without confusion. Households were able to assess the list of factors affecting their decision to move and their residential choice. Some of the questions will be changed in the light of the response to the open-ended questions; marriage and home-ownership will be included as reasons for moving. We propose to retain the open-ended questions because nearly all respondents added a comment, and the results could be interesting if coded for the main survey. We would add a scale for each extra factor the respondents identify.

Question 9, for the inter-borough migrants, need not be an open ended question, and we propose introducing a scale along the lines of questions 7 and 8. Questions 10 and 11 need redrafting.

### **Conclusions**

The results show that, within the limited generalizations that are possible for a pilot study, some households take account of local taxes and services in their location decisions. This was a factor in their decision to move house, but it had greater influence on their residential choice once they decided to move. This appears to confirm our hypothesis that Tiebout effects operate among a bundle of factors affecting residential choice. The results are, of course, statistically insignificant, and might not be replicated in the main survey. But as most respondents answered the questions in line with other surveys, the result seems sensible and credible.

However, we were not able to show that many of the households which had moved into the borough from higher poll tax areas said they were taking advantage of low poll tax. Only two respondents said they were influenced by local poll taxes and services when asked directly. But this part of the questionnaire needs further development, and we would address this problem when designing the main survey.

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1. Approximately how long have you been living at your current address? \_\_\_\_\_ Years

2. Do you:

*\*Please tick correct box*

- a. Rent your house from a private landlord
- b. Rent your house from the Council
- c. Rent your house from a Housing Association/Co-op
- d. Own or part own your house

3. What is the name of your local council? \_\_\_\_\_

4. And what local Council area did you live in before moving? \_\_\_\_\_  
*\*If you merely moved within the borough just write 'Same'*

5. What factors led to your decision to move *from* your previous address?

*\*Please mark each of the following as being very important, fairly important or unimportant.*

	Very Important	Fairly Important	Unimportant
A change in job	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To be near family or friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To move to a larger home	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To move to a smaller home	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Dislike of old house	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To move to a 'better' area	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To move to a cheaper area or house	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To move to a lower poll tax area	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To move to better council services	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To get away from neighbours	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To move near to shops or other facilities	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
To be in a different education catchment area	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Any other (please specify): _____			

If you want to expand on your answers then please add any comments:

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6. Having made the decision to move *from* your old address, what factors entered into your decision to move *to* this particular address?

*\*Again please specify how important each of the following factors were:*

	Very Important	Fairly Important	Unimportant
Right house at the right price	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Proximity to job or family	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Good location (eg near shops)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

6. *\*Continued*

Very  
Important

Fairly  
Important

Unimportant

Low poll tax

Good council services

Any other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

If you want to expand on your answers then please add any comments:

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7. If you have moved since the introduction of the poll tax, is your poll tax here lower or higher than in your old council?

*\*Please tick correct box*

Higher

Same

Lower

8. Do you consider the services here to be better or worse than from your old council?

*\*Please tick correct box*

Better

Same

Worse

9. If your move was within the same borough, what do you think of your poll tax and the services that the borough provides?

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10. What had you heard about the council that you would be paying your poll tax to? (eg the level of poll tax/rates or the quality of services)

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11. And did this have any effect on your decision to move to your current address?

*\*Please tick correct box*

Yes

No

The following two questions are merely to help us ensure that we have a representative sample of the population.

12. What is your occupation? \_\_\_\_\_

*\*(if retired, please write 'retired' and then your last main occupation. If unemployed, please write 'unemployed' and then your last main occupation)*

13. Do you have any children under sixteen living with you?

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**ALL REPLIES ARE TREATED IN THE UTMOST CONFIDENCE.  
THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR TAKING THE TIME TO ANSWER OUR QUESTIONS.**

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