

## Neighborhoods, Poverty, and Children's Well-Being

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Research on neighborhood effects suggests that neighborhood characteristics such as poverty, crime, and residential turnover influence several interrelated aspects of the neighborhood environment that, in turn, affect families and children. These mechanisms can be summarized in four categories: child and family-related institutions; social organization and interaction; normative environment; and labor and marriage markets. We will briefly describe each of these.

*Child and family-related institutions* include schools, child care providers, public libraries, recreational programs and activities (such as music lessons, youth organizations, sports activities, arts and theater activities, and mentoring programs), parks, religious institutions, and social service providers. These institutions play a vital role in the general process of socialization, but many also impart important skills and provide specific services. While the availability and quality of these institutions may be affected directly by public policy (for example, by school improvement pro-

grams in poorer neighborhoods), they are also likely to be determined by neighborhood socioeconomic characteristics (Jencks and Mayer 1990; Aber et al. 1997). For example, child care centers and after-school programs may be more readily available, hire better staff, and provide better service in more affluent or well-educated neighborhoods, because residents demand it and can afford to pay for it. As described later, more socially organized neighborhoods may also be able to demand better institutions through collective action and the political process, even if income and educational levels are low. Poorer neighborhoods may be worse off than others not only because they have weaker institutions but also because the greater needs of families are likely to overtax the existing institutions (Aber et al. 1997).

Neighborhood *social organization and interaction* has recently received considerable attention in research on neighborhood effects. Social disorganization theory suggests that some neighborhood characteristics (such as poverty, ethnic heterogeneity,

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high residential turnover rates, low homeownership rates, and concentration of recent immigrants) make it harder for residents to establish social ties and agree on the values needed to exercise social control and work together on common goals. As a result, socially disorganized neighborhoods are more difficult, dangerous, and stressful places to live. Parents and children in these neighborhoods are both more likely to participate in deviant behavior (delinquency, crime, violence, substance abuse) and to suffer the consequences of this behavior in others (Shaw and McKay 1969; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002). Sampson and his colleagues (Sampson, Morenoff, and Earls 1999; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002) argue that neighborhood collective efficacy—that is, shared expectations and the involvement of neighborhood residents in active support and social control of children—is key to a positive neighborhood environment for children. In neighborhoods with higher collective efficacy, residents are more likely to monitor and, when necessary, correct children's behavior. They are also more likely to work together on neighborhood problems and to build and maintain strong local institutions.

Two other theoretical perspectives—William Julius Wilson's (1987, 1996) collective socialization model and James Coleman's (1988) social capital theory—suggest related ways in which neighborhood social interaction may be important for children. Collective socialization models posit that neighborhood adults play an important role by monitoring children's behavior (as Sampson and his colleagues emphasize) and by providing role models. For example, Wilson argues that the selec-

tive out-migration of middle-class professionals from African American inner-city neighborhoods has resulted in fewer positive role models for the children in those neighborhoods. Social capital models suggest that the key elements are the dense and overlapping social ties among adults and children. In neighborhoods with more social capital, children know that they will be held accountable for their actions and that they can rely on neighborhood adults for support. However, as Wilson (1996) and Sampson, Morenoff, and Earls (1999) note, high levels of social capital can facilitate the enforcement of *both* negative and positive norms and behavior. Wilson (1996, 62) points out, for example, that in neighborhoods "characterized by high levels of individual and family involvement in aberrant behavior," a high degree of social integration among adults can in fact help to create and reinforce problem behavior among children.

Connections with the world outside the neighborhood may also be important. Especially in disadvantaged neighborhoods, extralocal social ties can provide access to information about, or assistance with, opportunities, services, or normative feedback from those who move in other social circles (Coleman 1988; Stack 1974; Edin 1991; Tigges, Browne, and Green 1998). Melvin Oliver's (1988) study of social networks in urban African American communities in Los Angeles shows that extralocal social ties vary considerably among neighborhoods. He concludes that in poor neighborhoods the lack of outside social ties may be a significant disadvantage. In recent decades urban sociologists have argued that despatialized social networks have displaced the role of neighborhoods in urban life; neigh-

borhoods are increasingly *unimportant*, they argue, in individuals' lives (South 2001; Fischer 1984; Wellman 1999). However, Barry Wellman (1999, 27), a proponent of this view, admits that "communities have not totally lost their domestic roots. . . . Local relationships are necessary for domestic safety, controlling actual land use, and quickly getting goods and services." He shows, for example, that much of Toronto residents' telephone contact is with neighbors rather than with extralocal ties (Wellman 1996). As Sampson and his colleagues (2002) point out, social ties among neighbors do not need to be strong or close in order to be effective. In fact, social disorganization theory suggests that neighborhood environments depend on weak and limited ties among neighbors who share a minimum level of trust, agreement on basic standards, and willingness to live by and enforce those standards. Nonetheless, the relative importance for children's development of urban neighborhood environments versus social networks is an empirical question for which we do not yet have complete answers.

The economic models suggest that *labor and marriage markets* are key elements in neighborhood effects on families and children (Duncan and Hoffman 1990; Haveeman and Wolfe 1994). Local labor markets, marriage markets, and, in some neighborhoods, the illicit economy provide constraints and opportunities for neighborhood residents. Market conditions affect adults and adolescents most directly. However, by affecting their *parents'* probabilities of employment and marriage, local markets may have indirect effects on younger children. For example, in neighborhoods with poor labor markets, higher rates of parental un-

employment may affect children by increasing stress on parents, depressing household income, and creating a more stressful home environment.

Neighborhood characteristics, such as high levels of marriage, are thought to affect children's well-being both directly, by providing a positive normative environment, strong institutions, effective monitoring and social control, and a supportive climate for children, and indirectly, through effects on parents and the home environment. As noted earlier, neighborhood labor market and marriage market conditions can affect parents' income, family structure, and the home environment. Neighborhoods may also directly affect parenting behavior and family dynamics (Aneshensel and Sucoff 1996; Klebanov et al. 1997; Coulton 1996; Korbin and Coulton 1997). For example, parents in extremely disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely to exhibit more punitive, authoritarian, and coercive parenting styles and to use corporal punishment (McLoyd 1990; Sampson and Laub 1994) as well as to withdraw emotionally from their children (Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, and Duncan 1994). These responses are likely to have detrimental consequences for children's emotional, cognitive, and social development, and those consequences may later be reinforced by other negative aspects of neighborhood life.

Several theorists emphasize the key role of the *normative environment* itself in linking neighborhood compositional characteristics (such as poverty or high turnover rates) and child outcomes. Neighborhood norms may be a consequence of the characteristics of the people who live in the neighborhood—their income level, ethnic

background, education, or immigrant experience. Those norms may also be affected by the social organization and interaction and by marriage and labor markets, as described earlier. The central idea in this literature is that the greater the concentration of like-minded people, the stronger the normative climate and the greater the exposure of neighborhood residents to these norms. For example, black children in poor inner-city neighborhoods may be more likely to be exposed to social problems, because the extreme concentration of poverty in inner-city African American neighborhoods since 1970 has created negative normative environments in which behavior considered negative by the middle class is reinforced and valued (Massey, Gross, and Eggers 1991; Massey and Denton 1993; Wilson, 1987, 1996; Fordham and Ogbu 1986). However, this process is not necessarily limited to concentrated-poverty neighborhoods or to negative outcomes—for example, some observers have argued that concentrated immigrant communities in Los Angeles can provide supportive climates for social mobility (Waldinger 1996). The “epidemic” hypothesis (Crane 1991; Case and Katz 1991) is a specific version of theories about normative environments. Jonathan Crane (1991) argues that concentrated-poverty neighborhoods dramatically increase adolescents’ exposure to problem behavior and negative norms through contacts with peers. Epidemics of social problems can occur once neighborhoods reach a critically high level of negative social behaviors. . . .

#### Neighborhood Selection

A serious problem in studying neighborhood effects on children’s well-being is the

potential endogeneity of neighborhood (and school) characteristics. Endogenous characteristics are independent variables that may be correlated with unobserved factors not included in the model. In the case of neighborhood selection, the problem is that parents can choose the neighborhood in which they live but they can also affect children’s development in many other ways. Thus, parents’ attitudes about child development may affect both the type of neighborhood their children grow up in and other factors that affect their children’s development, such as parenting and the home environment. Parents who move to help their children escape the influences of gang activity, drug use, teenage pregnancy, or crime, or who choose a neighborhood for the quality of its schools, may also be better parents in other ways. Other neighborhood attributes that may influence both parents’ choice of where to live and children’s behavior and development include the strength of neighborhood ties and characteristics of other families and children in the neighborhood. To the extent that neighborhood of residence is a choice, all neighborhood characteristics should be treated as endogenous. It is important, however, to understand the source of the endogeneity in order to identify appropriate analytic strategies.

Neighborhood attributes may be endogenous because place of residence is a choice variable and is determined in part by factors that also influence children’s behavior and development. Thus, a common set of parent and family characteristics determines both children’s behavior and development *and* neighborhood choice. Some of these characteristics, such as household income and parents’ education, are measurable and can be controlled in models of children’s behavior

and development. However, some are unobserved and hence are picked up in the random component of statistical models, where correlation with included regressors—neighborhood characteristics—leads to biased and inconsistent estimates of all model parameters. As Greg Duncan and his colleagues explain (see, for example, Duncan, Connell, and Klebanov 1997), the problem of neighborhood selection is thus really one of omitted variables. Specific unobserved (omitted) parent and family factors are the parents' cognitive ability and family motivation and aspirations, which may influence the degree to which a family values its children's behavior and development (as well as its choice of place of residence).. . .

### Neighborhood-Effects Analyses

The extensive neighborhood-effects literature published since 1990 has generally sought to answer one or more of the following three questions:

1. Are children who grow up in poor neighborhoods worse off than other children?
2. Are disparities in children's welfare by neighborhood poverty level due to differences in their families' characteristics, or do neighborhood conditions themselves play a role?
3. What mechanisms link concentrated-poverty neighborhoods to poorer outcomes for children?

Studies addressing these questions have generally been of two types. The largest group is non-experimental or observational studies, generally based on sample survey data. More recently, several experimental studies have assessed the consequences for

poor families of moving into nonpoor neighborhoods. Both types of studies have usually sought to investigate the first two questions—whether children's outcomes differ by neighborhood characteristics and whether this variation persists if family attributes are held constant. A smaller number of studies have attempted to answer the third question by exploring the mechanisms that may link the characteristics of concentrated-poverty neighborhoods to poorer outcomes for children.

Recent reviews by psychologists, economists, and sociologists have thoroughly cataloged and critiqued this literature (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000; Ginter, Haveman, and Wolfe 2000; Duncan and Raudenbush 1999, 2001; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002). In this section, we draw on these critiques and our own reading of the literature to summarize the results of non-experimental research on neighborhood effects. We then consider more recent experimental studies.

### *Observational Studies*

Observational studies are typically based on individual and household data from sample surveys linked with census data on the local areas (usually census tracts) in which children and families live. These studies have employed a wide range of study designs, survey datasets, theoretical approaches, neighborhood, family, and outcome measures, and statistical methods. Here we summarize the results of this very diverse group of studies.

First, basic descriptive analyses have shown that many dimensions of children's well-being (including teen sexual behavior, substance abuse, mental health, cognitive and achievement scores, high school completion, youth violence, delinquency, and

child abuse) vary significantly by neighborhood income levels and, less often, by other neighborhood characteristics such as residential stability, high school completion rate, female headship, social disorder, and social cohesion. Children and teens living in poorer neighborhoods generally have worse outcomes.

Second, a substantial part of the variation in children's outcomes by neighborhood income level is accounted for by differences in family income and other family characteristics. In other words, when family characteristics such as income, family structure, and parents' educational attainment are held constant, the relationship between children's outcomes and neighborhood income levels is substantially reduced. Moreover, Ginter and her colleagues (2000) show that the more complete the set of family characteristics that is held constant, the greater the decline in the size and significance of coefficients on neighborhood variables. They conclude that the results of many neighborhood-effects studies are likely due, at least in part, to omitted variables at the family level. Nonetheless, these researchers and others find that some neighborhood characteristics retain significant effects even after extensive controls for family and individual characteristics are introduced.

Third, the size of neighborhood effects on children's outcomes is generally modest and considerably smaller than the effects of family and individual characteristics. For example, in studies reviewed by Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2000), neighborhood characteristics accounted for 5 to 10 percent of the variance in children's outcomes. Duncan and Raudenbush (2001, 132) argue, however, that "the degree of neighborhood-based 'action' may still be large

enough to be consistent with cost-effective, neighborhood based interventions."

Fourth, results from these studies, not surprisingly, suggest that the effects of neighborhood conditions (net of family SES) vary by type of child outcome investigated (behavior problems, school readiness, teen sex, delinquency) and by the child's age, ethnicity, and gender. For example, Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and their colleagues examined an extensive set of child development indicators across a broader age range (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Aber 1997). Duncan and Raudenbush (1999) summarize the results as follows: (1) neighborhood effects appear in the preschool years but are most consistent for school-age children; (2) neighborhood effects appear to be stronger for cognitive and achievement outcomes than for behavior and mental health measures; and (3) white children appear to be more affected by neighborhood conditions than African American children. Sampson and his colleagues (2002) argue that the evidence of neighborhood effects on crime rates is stronger than the evidence for other types of outcomes.

Fifth, several studies suggest that the presence of affluent neighbors has a greater impact on children's outcomes than neighborhood poverty (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Aber 1997; Duncan and Raudenbush 1999; Sampson, Morenoff, and Earls 1999). However, Ginter and her colleagues (2000) dispute this conclusion. Their reanalysis of the PSID data includes variables indicating the percentage of households with high and low income as well as the income of the child's family relative to that of other families in the neighborhood. Their results suggest that "the income of the family relative to that of its neighbors—rather

than the extent to which the neighborhood is populated by high (low) income families—may be the more relevant consideration” (628). This is an important topic for future neighborhood-effects research.

Sixth, reliable methods for assessing neighborhood social and physical environments are not well developed and tested. Those studies that have examined intervening processes have investigated a broad range of potential mechanisms. For example, Sampson and his colleagues (Sampson et al. 1997; Sampson and Raudenbush 1999; Morenoff, Sampson, and Raudenbush 2001) show that informal social control, collective efficacy, and social ties are significantly related to outcomes such as delinquency, crime, and homicide. Scott South and Eric Baumer's (2000; Baumer and South 2001) results suggest that peer attitudes and behaviors account for a substantial proportion of neighborhood effects on adolescents, particularly teen parenthood and sexual activity. Dawn Upchurch and her colleagues (1999) and Carol Aneshensel and Clea Sucoff (1996) show that perceived “ambient hazards” (for example, neighborhood disorder, disorganization, and threats) are an important mediating factor between neighborhood disadvantage and teen sexual behavior and mental health.

Finally, a few studies have tackled endogenous residential choice using non-experimental data and statistical models. William Evans, Wallace Oates, and Robert Schwab (1992), Anne Case and Lawrence Katz (1991), and Eric Foster and Sara McLanahan (1996) used instrumental variables to eliminate the correlation between unobserved parent attributes and neighborhood variables. However, finding credible and viable instruments is a very difficult

task. Instead, Daniel Aaronson (1997, 1998) and Robert Plotnick and Saul Hoffman (1996) have used sibling fixed effects in analyses of educational attainment, adult economic status, and teen pregnancy in the PSID. While Aaronson found significant neighborhood effects once unobserved family characteristics were controlled, Plotnick and Hoffman did not. Aaronson (1998) suggests that the difference in results lies in the types of sibling pairs included and the measurement of neighborhood variables. Gary Solon, Marianne Page, and Greg Duncan (2000) take another approach: they compare correlations for sibling pairs with correlations among neighbors within sampling clusters in the PSID. Their results suggest that the size of neighborhood effects is small and considerably smaller than family effects.

### *Experimental Studies*

More recently, several experimental or quasi-experimental studies have attempted to tackle the issue of endogenous neighborhood selection. The initial effort was the Gautreaux Program, in which low-income African American families from Chicago housing projects were given Section 8 housing vouchers that could be used only in predominantly white or multi-ethnic neighborhoods (typically in suburban areas). The control group was Section 8 voucher recipients who used their vouchers in the city of Chicago. James Rosenbaum (1991, 1995) shows that children who move to the suburbs rather than cities are less likely to drop out of school and more likely to attend college, have a job, and receive higher pay. However, the study has several methodological limitations, including self-selection into the study and substantial sample attrition.

The Moving To Opportunity (MTO) experiment was a more carefully designed outgrowth of the Gautreaux Program developed by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and implemented by local public housing authorities and non-profits between 1994 and 1999 in Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York (Brennan 2002). Participants were volunteers from very low-income families with children in public housing or Section 8 project-based housing in inner-city, high-poverty neighborhoods. Each participant family was assigned randomly to one of three groups: the *experimental group*, which received vouchers that could be used only in low-poverty areas plus counseling and assistance locating housing; the *comparison group*, which received geographically unrestricted vouchers and standard housing authority briefings and assistance; and the *control group*, which continued to receive project-based assistance. The study sought to answer two questions: What impact does mobility counseling have on families' residential choices and housing and neighborhood conditions? And what are the effects of neighborhood conditions on the well-being of MTO families?

The follow-up design and analyses of MTO in each city have been conducted by separate groups of researchers using different data collection and analytic strategies. This approach has the disadvantage that it is harder to make comparisons across cities (and hence generalizations beyond each city). But it also has the advantage that the multiple research strategies used provide a richer picture of the experimental process and outcomes. The one commonality among all five sites is that HUD conducted

a self-administered baseline survey of all families who volunteered to participate. Researchers in most study sites conducted follow-up telephone surveys two to three years after families were assigned to treatment groups. The Boston and Los Angeles projects also conducted qualitative studies with a sample of participants. In contrast, analyses of Boston participants have relied on baseline passive and active tracking of respondents and administrative data on arrests and school performance. Furthermore, the project in each city focused on a somewhat different set of children's outcomes.

As in almost all social experiments, the MTO project encountered significant problems in implementation of the experimental treatment (Matulef 1999). Large proportions of families who were offered vouchers did not move during the period when the vouchers were valid, and analyses comparing movers to nonmovers in the experimental and comparison groups show that movers are significantly different from nonmovers. As a result, most (but not all) MTO analyses adopt analytic strategies that account for this selection. For example, Jens Ludwig and his colleagues (Ludwig, Duncan, and Pinkston 2000; Ludwig, Ladd, and Duncan 2001) in Baltimore and Lawrence Katz and his colleagues (Katz, Kling, and Liebman 2001) in Boston produce both intent-to-treat (ITT) and treatment-on-treated (TOT) estimates. ITT analyses compare outcomes for families assigned to the two treatment groups whether or not they actually moved with outcomes for the control group. Thus, ITT results are "lower bounds" on the effects of the treatment because the two treatment groups include substantial proportions of families who never moved. These researchers also

estimate an "effects of TOT" parameter, which is a measure of the effect of moving on those who actually moved during the program. The TOT analysis uses instrumental variables methods to estimate the difference between families in the treatment groups who moved with those in the control group who would have moved if offered the opportunity. In the New York study, Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2003) use a conceptually similar approach by comparing treatment group movers with both treatment group nonmovers and those who were assigned to the control group. . . .

In general, most studies show some improvements in children's outcomes in the treatment groups compared with the controls. In particular, the Boston and Baltimore studies show significant differences in behavior problems, including juvenile arrests and respondent-reported behavior problems. This result is particularly striking since both studies report that children in the experimental group were more likely than those in the other groups to be arrested prior to their move. Experimental group children in New York, especially boys, experienced fewer depressive and anxiety-related behaviors.

Baltimore children in the treatment groups also had better test scores. Compared with the control group, children in the experimental group had better test scores overall, while those in the comparison group had better reading scores. There is some evidence in the Baltimore results that experimental-group children were more likely to be suspended from and drop out of school. Ludwig, Ladd, and Duncan (2001) suggest that middle-income schools are less likely to tolerate behavior that is ac-

ceptable in schools in poor neighborhoods. Health outcomes were better for children in the experimental group in Boston. The Boston and Chicago studies also report significant declines in fears about safety and increases in feelings of safety, a point of view echoed in the Los Angeles and New York studies.

An important concern of the New York and Los Angeles studies was the impact of moving into middle-class neighborhoods on poor children's social adjustment, social capital, and friendship patterns. If children move to better neighborhoods but feel left out or are socially isolated, they may not be better off in the long run. In general, the results to date are reassuring. Children in all three groups were as likely to have a friend in the neighborhood. In some cases, children were less likely to participate in extracurricular activities in the experimental group. Maria Hanratty, Sara McLanahan, and Becky Pettit (1998) speculate that experimental group families may face more stringent financial situations because of higher rents and large security deposits compared with other groups.

In summary, the early results of the MTO experiments provide important new evidence that neighborhood social and physical conditions affect family life and at least some aspects of children's well-being. The results of these experimental studies are limited by implementation problems and unexpected events as well as by difficulties in generalizing to the rest of the population. Nonetheless, the results of experiments combined with those from observational studies will play an important role over the next several years in helping us understand the role of residential patterns in children's well-being.

### Discussion

Despite the serious methodological problems that are only beginning to be addressed adequately, a review of previous experimental and observational studies suggests that growing up in a poor neighborhood negatively affects children's outcomes over and above the effects of family socioeconomic status. However, the effects may be complex and difficult to observe. For example, the MTO results suggest that a major effect of moving to a better neighborhood is feeling safer and less anxious and depressed. Although we might expect a greater sense of safety and lower anxiety and depression to have very important long-run effects on children's emotional development and outlook on life, the effects may be less immediately apparent on school performance, skills acquisition, and behaviors, outcomes that are more typically measured in surveys and administrative data.

Research to date also suggests that family effects on children's outcomes are significantly larger than neighborhood effects. However, it is important to keep in mind that the measurement of neighborhood characteristics is at a much more rudimentary stage of development than measurement of family processes in large-scale surveys. Because of their pervasive role in most children's lives, it makes sense that families would have a greater influence on children's well-being than neighborhoods or other social environments. However, public policy generally has considerably less ability to influence parents' behavior and attributes directly than to affect neighborhood quality. Hence, even modest neighborhood effects may be of considerable interest to policymakers.

Moreover, it is important to consider residential segregation and neighborhood and family effects on children's well-being in a larger context. The finding that neighborhood effects are more modest in size than family effects can be misleading to the extent that neighborhood conditions, and residential segregation more generally, have an important influence on families' socioeconomic status and family dynamics. Residential segregation has been implicated by many scholars as a key mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of inequality (Massey and Denton 1993; Wilson 1987, 1996; Jargowsky 1997). The argument is that restriction to concentrated-poverty neighborhoods compounds the difficulty that poor, minority families face in escaping poverty because in poor neighborhoods housing values remain low, the chances of criminal victimization remain higher, high-paying jobs are less available, exposure to disease and substance abuse is greater, and individuals are more socially isolated. Thus, residential segregation and residence in concentrated-poverty neighborhoods may be an important determinant of the family socioeconomic status and a major indirect influence on children's outcomes.

If residence in a poor and dangerous neighborhood affects parents' attitudes, mental health, and parenting practices (Furstenberg et al. 1999; Kling, Liebman, and Katz 2001; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Aber 1997), it is even more difficult to disentangle "family" effects from "neighborhood" effects. Nonetheless, several recent experimental and observational studies promise to provide clearer answers than past research on the direct and indirect pathways through which residential segregation affects children growing up in poor neighborhoods.

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