



background

Neighborhoods

The roles they play in the development of a child

Why Neighborhoods Matter *Some Characteristics Linked to Child Outcomes*

Children's neighborhoods are not benign influences in their lives, researchers say. Certain neighborhood traits place children at risk, while others help them develop a thick-skinned resiliency to circumstances that otherwise might threaten their futures.

The study of neighborhoods and the roles they play in shaping the lives of children is drawing considerable interest as the importance of the context of children's early development becomes more clear. Recent brain research, for example, suggests children's development is strongly influenced by experience and environment, including the stimulation they receive, nourishment, care, and their surroundings.

Researchers as well as policymakers are increasingly interested in understanding the risk factors, such as poverty, and protective factors, such as affluence, that influence development, particularly in light of growing evidence that it is the accumulation of such factors – not a single circumstance – that most affects the outcomes of children.

But while research offers an intriguing glimpse into the role neighborhoods play in the lives of children, the picture is far from complete. In some cases, the findings are more the result of theoretical work than empirical evidence, and the pathways by which neighborhoods influence children and adolescents remain ripe for closer study.

Do Neighborhoods Matter?

When neighborhoods are studied to determine their effects on child and adolescent outcomes, the yardsticks

used most often are school readiness and achievement, behavioral and emotional problems, and sexuality and childbearing. And the effects of a neighborhood are often associated with the socioeconomic status (SES) of its residents.

Do neighborhoods matter? The answer is, generally, yes.

But the known impact of neighborhoods on development tends to vary according to the child outcome measured. For example, neighborhood SES appears to be a particularly strong influence when it comes to school readiness, school success, and whether or not children drop out early or stay to graduate.

However, the role neighborhood SES plays in the development of behavior and emotional problems is less consistent and, therefore, less certain.

School Readiness

One of the most consistent find-

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ings is that children living among high-SES neighbors are better prepared to enter school and that once they begin their school careers they are more likely to do well when compared with children who live in less affluent communities.

High SES is a factor that considers such neighborhood characteristics as percentage of professional workers and managers who live there, percentage of residents earning more than \$30,000 a year, and the percentage of college-educated residents.

When the SES of neighbors is high, young and early school-age children tend to have higher IQs, verbal ability, and reading recognition scores. In the Infant Health and Development Program (IHDP), for example, no neighborhood effects were seen until children in the multi-site program for low-birth weight, premature infants turned three years old.

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Then, researchers noted, living in a high-SES neighborhood tended to have a positive effect on children's IQ scores.¹

Children living in high-SES neighborhoods are more likely to complete high school, attend college, and finish more years of schooling than those living in middle-income neighborhoods. In Chicago's Gautreaux Project, children of the low-income families who were moved from public housing to the more affluent suburbs were more likely to stay in school, enroll in college preparatory classes, and to go on to college than their peers who remained in the city.² The may contribute to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development shift away from building housing projects in favor of finding housing for low-income families in other neighborhoods.

Research also suggests that an exodus of neighbors employed in professional fields can spell trouble for children. One study found that children tended to have higher school drop-out rates when the number of professional or managerial workers fell below 5% of the neighborhood's population.³

Behavior Problems

Studies suggest that neighborhood characteristics, including the SES of neighbors and the stability of the neighborhood, are associated with behavior problems among children. However, these findings are less consistent than those reported for cognitive and school outcomes.

Among adolescents, regional studies such as the Pittsburgh Youth Study report that higher levels of criminal and delinquent behavior are associated with growing up in neighborhoods where SES is low and welfare and unemploy-

ment rates are high. Conversely, African American teenagers who moved out of high-poverty districts in Baltimore were less likely to be arrested for violent crimes, such as assault and rape, than peers who continued to live in poor neighborhoods.⁵

The mental health of children may also be influenced somewhat by the characteristics of their neighborhoods. Some studies suggest that living among neighbors of low SES is associated with poorer mental health of children and adolescents, more so for externalizing behaviors, such as acting out and aggression, than for than internalizing behaviors, such as depression and withdrawal.

Among three-year-olds, living in neighborhoods where few professionals and managers reside has been associated with more internalizing and externalizing behavior problems.

Sexuality and Childbearing

Researchers also report that various indicators of neighborhood SES

may be associated with sexual activity among adolescents. For example, the likelihood of babies born to adolescents and unmarried women is higher in neighborhoods where few professional and managerial workers live.

On the other hand, the availability of certain neighborhood resources is associated with lower risk of childbearing among unmarried women.

Job opportunities are associated with fewer sexuality-related outcomes among adolescent females. For example, the age at first intercourse and premarital sexual activity is older for adolescent females who are employed – a finding researchers believe is largely due to the fact that young women who work receive more adult monitoring and supervision.

Such findings clearly suggest that neighborhoods matter when it comes to the outcomes of children. The question now is, precisely how do community characteristics influence child develop?

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references

This report is largely based on the following article.

Leventhal, T., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2000). The neighborhoods they live in: The effects of neighborhood residence on child and adolescent outcomes. *Psychological Bulletin*, *126* (2), 309-337.

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¹Brooks-Gunn, J., Duncan, G.J., Klebanov, P.K., & Sealant, N. (1993). Do neighborhoods influence child and adolescent development? *American Journal of Sociology*, *99*, 353-395.

²Rosenbaum, J.E., Kulieke, M.J., & Rubinowitz, L.S. (1988). White suburban schools' responses to low-income Black children: Sources of successes and problems. *Urban Review*, *20*, 28-41.

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⁴Ludwig, J., Duncan, G.J., & Hirschfield, P. (1998). *Urban poverty and juvenile crime: Evidence from a randomized housing-mobility experiment*. Unpublished manuscript.

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