

# Introduction

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The resurgence of interest in the influences of neighborhood and community contexts on the development of children, youth, and families who reside and interact in them is a welcome addition to social science. Through a new generation of studies, researchers are attempting to assess the combined effects of individual, family, and neighborhood/community characteristics on the development of children and adolescents. An interdisciplinary group of scholars working under the auspices of the Social Science Research Council planned and undertook a research program on the influences of community and neighborhood contexts, in interaction with family processes, on the development of poor children and adolescents. The group's collaboration resulted in the two-volume *Neighborhood Poverty*. The first volume, *Context and Consequences for Children*, presents findings on the consequences of neighborhood residence on children and adolescents, drawing upon six developmental data sets. The second volume, *Policy Implications in Studying Neighborhoods*, highlights our group's approach toward, as well as other scholars' perspectives on, investigating links between child and family outcomes, on the one hand, and neighborhood residence, on the other. In this chapter we discuss the impetus for the Social Science Research Council working group collaboration, as well as the organization of volumes 1 and 2.

## INTELLECTUAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL IMPETUS FOR THE RESEARCH

Several developments in social and scholarly life provided the impetus for the collaborative research described in this volume. During the late 1980s, after nearly two decades of relative neglect, issues concerning the causes and consequences of poverty reemerged on the U.S. political and intellectual agendas. Renewed public interest in the problems of urban poverty was sparked by the visibility of homeless people in American cities during the early 1980s and by journalistic accounts of social pathologies in inner-city neighborhoods.

The problems highlighted in such accounts included violent crime, drug use, out-of-wedlock births, school dropout, rising and chronic unemployment, and welfare dependence. Inner-city poverty and the social disorganization thought to be associated with it were often said to be “exploding.”

The perception that social problems in poor urban communities were becoming more intense and interrelated led to a concern, reflected in Ken Auletta’s (1982) book *The Underclass* and in Nicholas Lehmann’s series of *Atlantic Monthly* articles, that an “urban underclass” was forming in inner-city neighborhoods. Academic interest in these issues was stimulated by arguments put forward by the sociologist William Julius Wilson in a series of papers that were eventually published as *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987). Wilson argued that severe social dislocations were occurring in some neighborhoods as a result of the increasing concentration of joblessness and poverty. Isolation from informal job networks, lack of exposure to norms and behavior patterns of the steadily employed, lack of access to effective schools, and women’s lack of opportunity to marry men with stable jobs were among the “effects” that Wilson hypothesized of concentrated joblessness and poverty in the inner city (see also Wilson 1991a, 1996).

As used in the media and among scholars, the concept “urban underclass” has typically included one or more of the following characteristics: (1) persistence and/or intergenerational transmission of poverty; (2) geographic concentration; (3) social isolation from mainstream society; (4) unemployment and underemployment; (5) low skills and education; (6) membership in a minority group. In the early and mid-1980s, little was known about the overlap or interaction among these characteristics. Researchers and policy makers asked whether concentrated poverty in central cities causes or reinforces unemployment, welfare dependence, school dropout, out-of-wedlock births, and involvement in crime and drugs; and whether such behaviors, in turn, lead to the persistence of poverty and its intergenerational transmission through their effects on children.

Toward the end of the 1980s, the Committee on National Urban Policy of the National Research Committee reported that poverty appeared to be worse in many large cities than it had been ten or twenty years earlier and that poverty seemingly was becoming more spatially concentrated in inner-city neighborhoods. The committee identified the phenomenon of increasing poverty concentration in inner-city neighborhoods as the national urban policy issue most meriting further attention. Meanwhile, private foundations concerned with the plight of disadvantaged families were independently becoming convinced of the need for comprehensive community-based interventions to address the problems of urban disadvantaged children and families.

In response to these developments, and with encouragement and support from the Rockefeller and Russell Sage Foundations, the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) established a research program in 1988 to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of persistent and concen-

trated urban poverty and to build the knowledge base needed to design and implement better policies and programs for the persistently poor in urban areas. The program sought to establish a framework for the analysis not only of structures and processes that generate or maintain persistent concentrated urban poverty but also of those that help people overcome such poverty. It also sought to recruit and nurture a pool of talented, well-trained young scholars who would advance research on the topic. Under the direction of the SSRC's Committee for Research on the Urban Underclass, several working groups of scholars were established to clarify the causes, effects, and relationships among the set of social conditions that had come to be associated with the term *urban underclass*.

A significant challenge for the program was to link larger socioeconomic and political forces, the changing context of poverty at the community level, and the outcomes and experience of families and individuals. In 1989, the SSRC's committee appointed the Working Group on Communities and Neighborhoods, Family Processes, and Individual Development to improve our understanding of the ways in which neighborhoods and communities influence the development of families and the children who reside in them. The group comprised social scientists with diverse disciplinary backgrounds, as well as theoretical and methodological orientations, to facilitate the conceptualization and investigation of links that require multilevel and cross-disciplinary analysis. The members included J. Lawrence Aber (Columbia University), Jeanne Brooks-Gunn (Columbia University), Linda M. Burton (The Pennsylvania State University), P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale (University of Chicago), James P. Connell (Institute for Research and Reform in Education), Thomas D. Cook (Northwestern University), Warren E. Crichlow (York University), Greg J. Duncan (Northwestern University), Ronald F. Ferguson (Harvard University), Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr. (University of Pennsylvania), Martha A. Gephart (Columbia University), Robin L. Jarrett (Loyola University), Vilma Ortiz (University of California, Los Angeles), Tim Smeeding (Syracuse University), Margaret Beale Spencer (University of Pennsylvania), and Mercer L. Sullivan (Rutgers University).

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH STRATEGIES

Our working group took as its mandate the following questions: Does concentrated residential poverty, along with the associated economic and social neighborhood disadvantage, place children at risk? Are diverse neighborhood characteristics mediated by family structures and processes, or do they exert a separate and powerful influence on children's lives, over and above family influences?

We began by reviewing the existing theory and research. A review of existing quantitative research (Jencks and Mayer 1990) revealed weak and inconsistent effects of neighborhood composition on individual outcomes, but

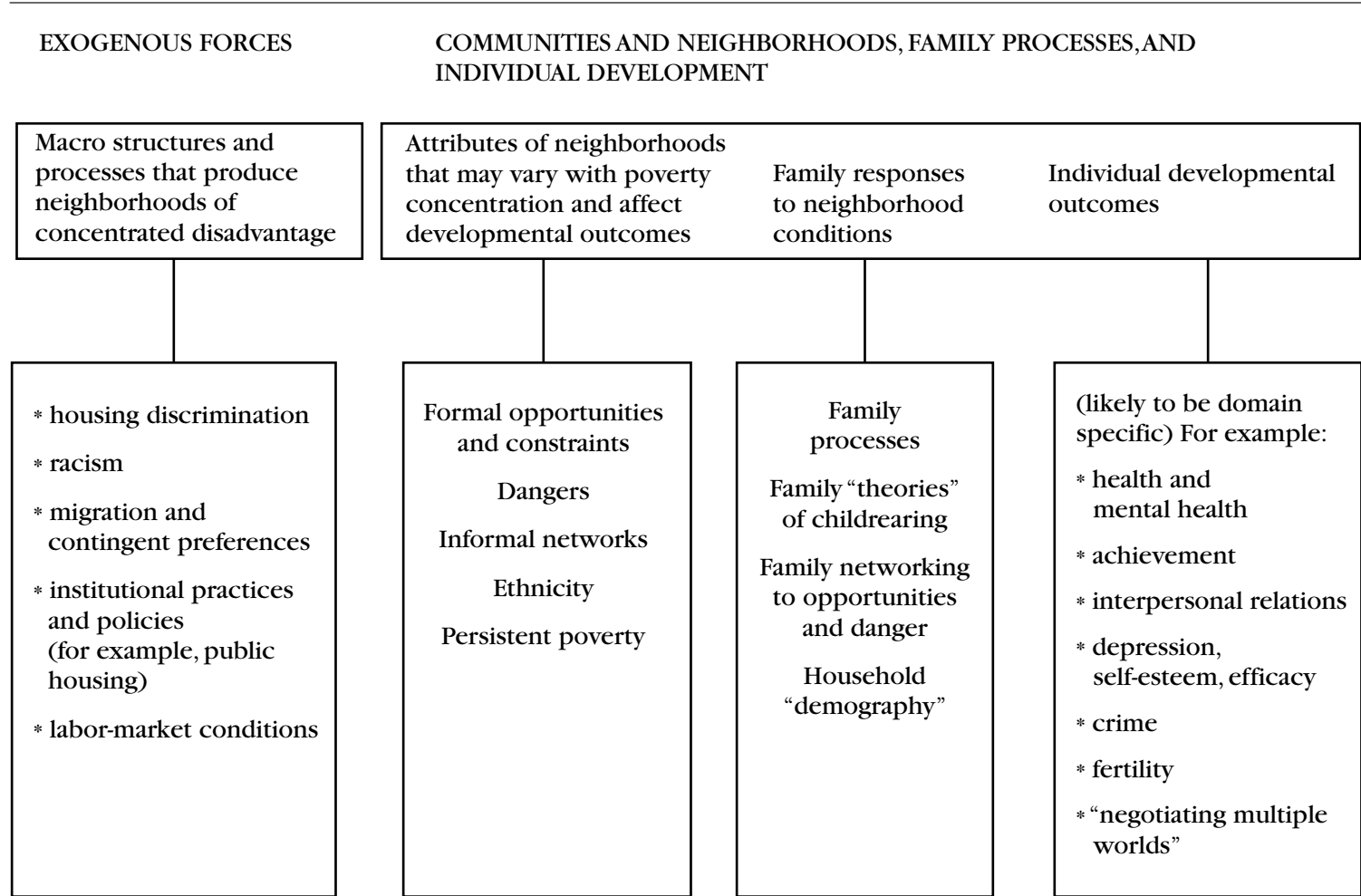
many of the studies were flawed. In the early phase of our own work and of other scholars investigating the nature and effects of the changing context of urban poverty at the community level, research undertaken by scholars working in the traditions of social ecology and social disorganization theory was largely ignored. The insights from such work have subsequently been incorporated in the thinking of our group and of others studying urban poverty (see chapter 1; Sampson and Morenoff vol. 2).

For some time, ethnographic researchers had argued for the importance of neighborhoods and communities in understanding poverty. A number of studies (for example, Anderson 1990; Sullivan 1989; Williams and Kornblum 1985) highlighted the salience of local community factors for understanding the poor's life chances and experiences. But ethnographic research had not produced systematic analyses of the effects of neighborhoods and communities on families and the individuals in them (see Furstenberg and Hughes vol. 2; Jarrett vol. 2; Merriwether-de Vries, Burton, and Eggele 1996).

Theory and research on family structures and processes and on individual development increasingly recognized the importance of the contexts within which individuals are situated. Most existing research, however, focused on the more proximal contents of families, peers, and social networks (see chapter 2). The growing literatures in these areas did not directly address the effects of neighborhood and community contexts or of concentrated and persistent poverty upon individual development.

After commissioning a review of existing research on differences among ethnic groups in the functioning of poor families and households (Jarrett 1990), we developed a conceptual framework to guide our research (figure A). This framework considers as exogenous the macro structures and processes that produce neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage, including housing discrimination, racism, migration and contingent preferences, and institutional practices and policies. At the neighborhood and community levels, our framework specifies structural and sociodemographic characteristics, including formal opportunities and constraints, dangers, ethnicity, and persistent poverty, as the attributes of neighborhoods that may vary with the concentration of poverty and resource deprivation and that may affect developmental outcomes (see chapter 1; Sampson and Morenoff vol. 2). The community-level social and cultural processes are illustrated in our framework by informal networks. Such processes are assumed to mediate the effects of structural and sociodemographic characteristics on outcomes. Family structures and processes, including household demography, family theories of childrearing, and family networking to opportunities and dangers, in turn, are assumed to mediate the effects of community-level processes on individual outcomes. Individual developmental processes, such as efficacy, competence, and identity processes, mediate individual outcomes that are domain specific and appropriate for particular developmental stages. Because developmentalists expect both ontogenetic and social-structural causes for later outcomes (such as teenage

FIGURE A Conceptual Model



pregnancy and school dropout), our framework posits that neighborhoods will affect later outcomes by influencing relevant childhood outcomes. In this volume, we evaluate neighborhood and community influences in early and middle childhood and adolescence.

Our review of existing work revealed little theory or research about the characteristics of neighborhoods and communities that affect children, youth, and families; about the nature of those effects; or about the mechanisms and mediating processes at the community, family, and individual levels through which the effects operate. Multiple theoretical perspectives, fragmented by discipline and often by method, provide partial, potentially complementary (but sometimes conflicting) guidance about the characteristics of neighborhoods that may affect the development of children, youth, and families, and about the mechanisms through which such characteristics affect families and individuals. It seemed clear that new multidisciplinary and multilevel research was needed, yet existing theory and research seemed inadequate as a basis for designing a major new data collection effort. Meanwhile, policy and program solutions were making assumptions about links across levels, but existing knowledge was inadequate to assess the links hypothesized.

Given the state of existing theory and research, we took as our major challenge the development of new theory, concepts, methods, and empirical findings that would guide future research. To address this challenge, we decided to undertake several types of collaborative research that would build on and analyze existing quantitative and qualitative data. These collaborative research activities have been undertaken with support from the Russell Sage Foundation, the Smith Richardson Foundation, the W. T. Grant Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation. We deeply appreciate their support.

Using a common conceptual and analytical framework, the group decided to design and undertake coordinated analyses of the separate and combined effects of families and neighborhoods on children and youth. These analyses have been undertaken using six developmental data sets that vary in the developmental outcomes and the family- and individual-level mediating processes assessed, as well as in the ages and ethnicities of the children and adolescents sampled. Most of the chapters in this book are devoted to the results of these analyses.

To investigate in greater depth some of the processes through which neighborhoods and communities of concentrated social and economic disadvantage are thought to affect families and individuals, the group also established four multidisciplinary research teams. These teams focused on (1) multi-generational families, (2) household economies, (3) school/community/family links, and (4) ethnic, gender, and other identity processes. Building on ongoing research and on existing data, these teams are exploring ways of integrating quantitative and qualitative analyses to investigate the processes of mediation between the characteristics of neighborhoods and communities and the developmental trajectories of the resident families and children. These approaches are reflected in the chapters in volume 2.

The group's quantitative analyses have addressed three major questions: (1) Is there a meaningful underlying organization to the variation in neighborhood socioeconomic composition? (2) What are the direct effects of variation in neighborhood socioeconomic and sociodemographic composition on the development of children and youth, net of family socioeconomic factors? (3) Are neighborhood effects mediated by particular family and individual psychological variables?

One of the core activities of our working group was the collaborative examination of neighborhood effects in six different data sets, as detailed in this volume. The group decided to use geocoded data as the unit of analysis (see chapter 4). Six data sets were selected that focused on children or youth, had address data available, and had longitudinal data collected. Three were local site studies, and two were national studies. One was an eight-site study. The Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), a national twenty-five-year study, was analyzed by Duncan and his colleagues. The Children of the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY), a national study of youth started in 1979 and now including the offspring of the females in the 1979 cohort, was analyzed by Chase-Lansdale and her colleagues. The Infant Health and Development Program (IHDP), an early intervention trial for low-birth-weight premature infants and their families, was used by Brooks-Gunn and her colleagues. The upstate New York study includes African American and white children and youth from an upstate New York school district; this data set was used by Connell and his colleagues. The Atlanta study, directed by Spencer, focused on African American youth in a number of Atlanta schools. The study by Aber and his colleagues also focused on youth, but in three different cities—New York City, Washington, D.C., and Baltimore. African American, white, and Latino youth were included, and the sample was drawn from poor schools.

The investigators all agreed to analyze their data in exactly the same way—something of an anomaly in social science research. After much discussion, the group decided how to conceptualize neighborhoods and the family-level variables to include in the analyses. Results are presented in the same format to facilitate comparisons across studies in this volume. Of importance vis-à-vis the reported neighborhood effects is the fact that three samples were “local” samples, with less variability in census tracts, while three were national (or, in the case of the IHDP, an eight-site one), which resulted in more census tracts being represented. This design detail is discussed fully in chapter 11.

## OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS IN THIS VOLUME

This volume includes chapters on conceptual and framing issues and empirical findings. In this introduction and the three conceptual chapters that follow it we review the existing theory and research upon which we have drawn our analyses. Chapter 1 describes what is known about neighborhoods and communities as contexts for development, and reviews con-

temporary theory and research on neighborhoods and communities as contexts for development. The author describes the changing context of poverty at the community level, summarizes several theoretical perspectives that have guided our thinking about neighborhood and community influences, and discusses issues that arise in conceptualizing and measuring neighborhoods and communities. She then reviews the results of recent community and contextual analyses that are relevant for understanding neighborhood and community influences on development.

Chapter 2 builds on the framework outlined by Gephart in chapter 1. The authors include family and individual contextual factors, as those, together with neighborhood contextual effects, might influence child and youth outcomes. The developmental-contextual framework, within which this volume's analyses are embedded, is then outlined. The authors introduce a number of key concepts used in the study of development, review Bronfenbrenner's (1979b) developmental-contextual framework, and discuss how neighborhoods could influence development at each major developmental stage.

Chapter 3 provides an overview of how *neighborhood* was defined for the complementary analyses and the measures used to characterize neighborhoods. The authors describe the common conceptual framework and measurement strategy that the group developed to describe the variation in neighborhood structure and composition sometimes associated with variation in developmental outcomes. They describe the procedures and results of efforts to distill a factor structure of neighborhood conditions that was used in all subsequent analyses across all data sets. They also use data on neighborhood characteristics to place the six developmental data sets analyzed in this volume, which involved samples of children and youth from vastly different neighborhood conditions, into a national comparative context. Finally, they describe the neighborhood conditions under which children and adolescents live and describe how neighborhood poverty covaries with family poverty for black and white children and youth.

The results of our empirical analyses are presented in the next five chapters. The analyses are organized by developmental stage: early childhood (ages three to seven), late childhood and early adolescence (ages eleven to fifteen), and late adolescence (ages sixteen to nineteen). In most cases, each chapter presents results from two or more of the six data sets. Chapters 4 and 5 contain analyses from the IHDP and the children of the NLSY. Chapter 6 summarizes results of neighborhood analyses on children and young adolescents from the upstate New York, Atlanta, and Northeast Corridor studies. Chapter 7 contains results from the upstate New York data set, and chapter 8 involves findings from the PSID and the upstate New York study.

The chapters include discussions of behavioral and school achievement outcomes. The outcomes vary across chapters, since different aspects of behavior and achievement are tapped at different ages. However, comparable measures were available in the data sets that focused on each age

group. For example, the early childhood data sets both included measures of verbal ability and behavior-problem checklists. Consequently, some general comparisons may be made about the specificity of findings by development epoch and data set (Chase-Lansdale and Brooks-Gunn 1995).

Analyses reported were designed so that we could look at direct neighborhood effects (chapters 4, 6, and 8). A series of analyses were conducted in order to look at the effect of the five neighborhood variables in predicting the agreed-upon child and adolescent outcomes. Then, regressions with family-level variables added were run, to see whether neighborhood effects were independent of these family-level variables. These analyses were conducted for boys and girls separately, as well as for black and white children separately (interaction terms were also entered into the original equations to examine gender and race interactions). In studies where sample size allowed, four groups were assembled—white girls, white boys, black girls, and black boys. In some cases, analyses were conducted using different “cut” points for poor neighborhoods, since black children are much less likely to live in affluent neighborhoods and white children in poor neighborhoods, so that neighborhood effects might be relative to the distribution of each group (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan et al. 1993; Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, and Klebanov 1994).

An additional set of analyses was run in order to look at possible mediated, or indirect, effects of neighborhoods on child and adolescent outcomes, as reported in chapters 5 and 7. In chapter 5, the authors use the IHDP and the Children of the NLSY data sets. Both of these have measures of the home environment, including provision of learning experiences and maternal warmth (Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, and Duncan 1994; Sugland et al. 1995). Mediated models were built in order to see whether any of the observed neighborhood effects operated through the home environment, and evidence for such effects was found in both data sets. Additionally, the authors of chapter 5 divided their samples into those living in resource-rich and resource-poor neighborhoods to see whether the factors influencing young-child outcomes differ for these two broad neighborhood types. Chapter 7 presents an illustration of a mediated model from the upstate New York study. The authors take as their starting point different aspects of the self-system and motivational processes as possible mediators of neighborhood effects on school outcomes.

Given that neighborhood analyses are beset by a number of issues, chapter 9 describes and assesses possible sources of bias that jeopardize the drawing of causal inferences from analyses of neighborhood effects. Many of these “sources of bias” reflect the inadequacies of the conceptual model that underlies our analyses, namely, that developmental outcomes are additive functions of family conditions and neighborhood factors. The authors consider the possibility of omitted interactions between family and neighborhood conditions and between them and other moderators of their effects. They discuss the possibility that important unmeasured characteristics of

families lead them to reside in certain kinds of neighborhoods and to have children with different developmental trajectories (selection effects). They consider transactional models of development that emphasize the reciprocal relationships between individuals and families shaping and creating their environments (for example, by deciding where to live), and the characteristics of those contexts influencing individual and family characteristics (such as income, family structure, and decision making). The possibility that neighborhood influences are underestimated due to suppression effects from other unmeasured variables and that neighborhood effects may not be linear across the range of neighborhood conditions are also considered.

Chapter 10 provides a lively and sometimes provocative account of the implications of this volume's findings for federal policy. The authors situate the findings presented here within a very broad context, discuss policy initiatives relevant to the findings, and outline the policy community's data needs. In effect, they suggest future directions for theoretically relevant, contextually rich, and policy-relevant research.

In chapter 11, the authors summarize the results, integrating across study, developmental epoch, and outcome domains and, whenever possible, across qualitative and quantitative data. They discuss the need for work on mediating processes, as well as for the combination of macroapproaches and microapproaches (as done by Korbin and Coulton in volume 2).

## CONCLUSION

We hope that these two volumes will encourage research and evaluation studies on the neighborhoods in which children reside. Our goal also is to stimulate more contextualized research that includes innovative ways of assessing neighborhood contexts. Finally, given that extrafamilial resources, and in some cases intrafamilial ones, are distributed via neighborhoods or other more local geographic areas (such as school districts, health districts, and counties), we hope that those who evaluate changes in federal and state allocations to children and families will take seriously variations by place or neighborhoods. Indeed, place has become even more important, given the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Bill of 1996. States now are able to fashion their welfare programs in a variety of ways, with much less federal oversight than before. The first implementation of state requirements makes clear the fact that variations are occurring at the county and state levels. Obviously, we must be prepared to examine the new welfare bill's effects community by community.