

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. This 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 concentrated 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 the structures and processes that generate or maintain persistent and 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; Gephart vol. 1).

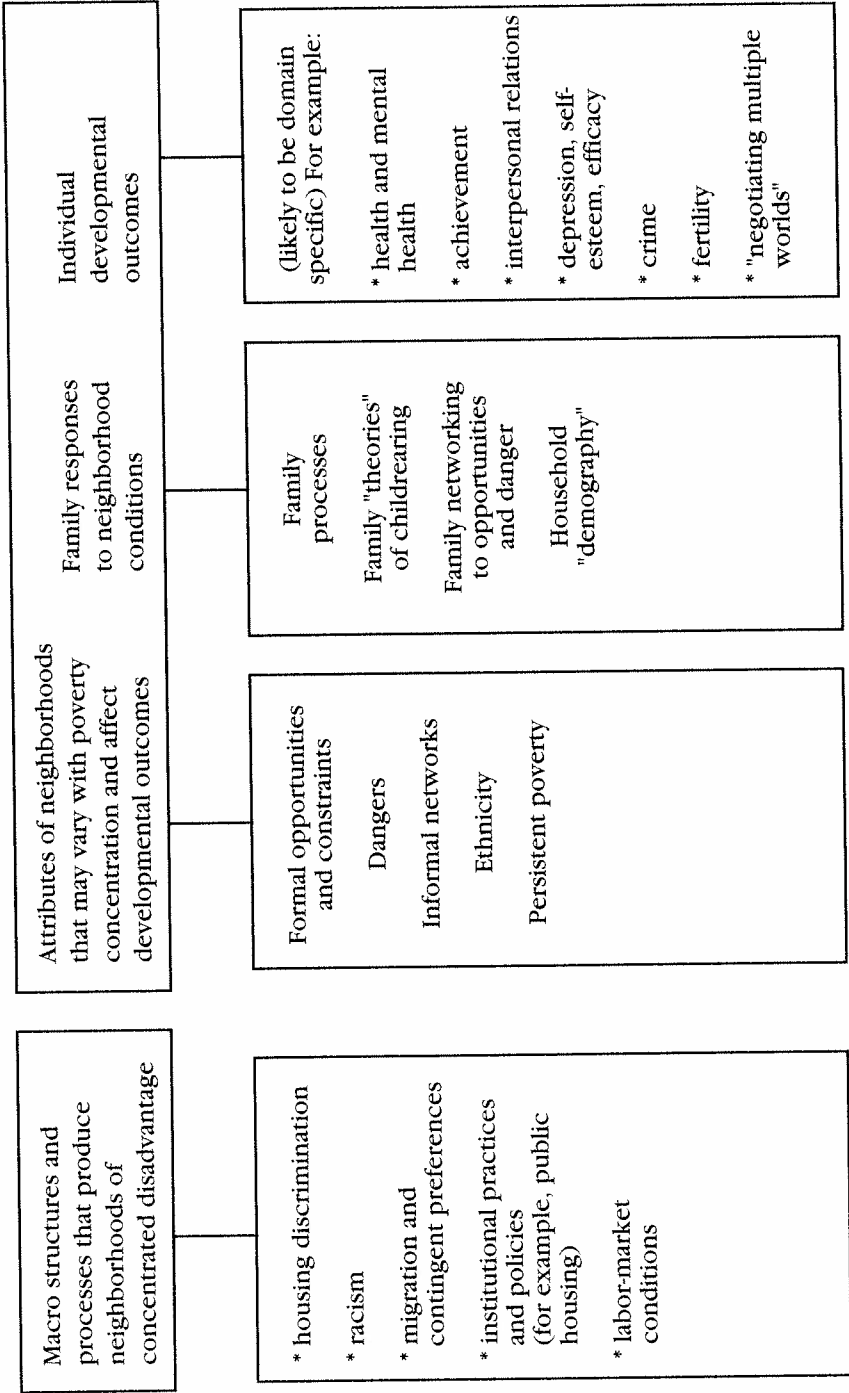
For some time, ethnographic researchers had argued for the importance of neighborhoods and communities in understanding poverty. A number of studies (for example, Anderson 1990; Sullivan 1989; Williams and Kornblum 1985) highlighted the salience of local community factors for understanding the poor's 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 chapters 2 and 3; Merriwether-de Vries, Burton, and Eggeleton 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 contexts of families, peers, and social networks (see Aber et al. vol. 1). 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; Gephart vol. 1). 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 childbearing, 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

FIGURE A. Conceptual Model

EXOGENOUS FORCES
COMMUNITIES AND NEIGHBORHOODS, FAMILY PROCESSES, AND
INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT



appropriate for particular developmental stages. Because developmentalists expect both ontogenetic and social-structural causes for later outcomes (such as teenage pregnancy and school dropout), our framework posits that neighborhoods will affect later outcomes by influencing relevant childhood outcomes.

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 effect 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 volume 1 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 this volume.

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 volume 1. The group decided to use geocoded data as the unit of analysis (see Duncan and Aber vol. 1). 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 in chapter 11 of volume 1.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS IN THIS VOLUME

This volume includes chapters on conceptual and framing issues, on methodological issues related to assessing neighborhoods, and on the policy implications of our focus on neighborhoods and the children who reside

in them. The first four chapters present conceptual frameworks (as well as research exemplars) that are currently being employed in the study of neighborhood contexts. The research on neighborhood effects has been plagued by a plethora of definitions of *neighborhood*. Consensus is probably impossible given that *neighborhood* has different meanings as a function of historical period, geographic region, city planning, perceptions of outsiders and insiders, and characteristics of families residing in particular neighborhoods. Age, ethnicity, and gender also play a role in how *neighborhood* is constructed. Chapter 1 reviews two research traditions in urban sociology and criminology—the traditional ecological perspectives and social area analysis—and considers their implication for the study of neighborhood poverty and its contextual effects on individuals and families. The authors show how current debates on urban poverty, which are concerned with the nature and effects of changes within and between neighborhoods, would benefit from being framed within this broader theoretical tradition.

Chapter 2 provides a theoretical frame for the authors' work on neighborhood effects on family management in their Philadelphia study. They maintain that more in-depth interviews with individuals are needed to portray the neighborhoods of perceived residence and that individuals' definitions of *neighborhood* are central to an understanding of community. They contend that geocoded data may not represent neighborhoods in any form that is meaningful to individuals or families.

Chapter 3 contains a somewhat different theoretical approach to the study of neighborhood, as derived from ethnographic accounts of life in different community contexts. The author summarizes her insights from ethnographic research to assess the conceptual assumptions guiding some of the quantitative analyses reported in volume 1. She also suggests larger implications, for both future research and policy, of findings and observations from both the quantitative and qualitative research on children and families.

Chapter 4 adds a perspective linked to combining epidemiological and ethnographic approaches. The authors summarize some of the key findings from the Cleveland study of neighborhoods, in which epidemiological sampling and intensive interviews were conducted simultaneously. They illustrate how epidemiology may be used as a frame for ethnographic work, and for placing such work in a larger context.

The next chapters address methodological issues related to neighborhood analyses. Our hope is that these chapters will "ground" qualitative and quantitative findings on neighborhood effects with the appropriate cautions about interpretation. Chapter 5 describes a sibling-based procedure for controlling for possible sources of bias that jeopardize the drawing of causal inferences from the analyses of neighborhood effects.

Chapter 6 presents analyses from two studies, one in Philadelphia and the other in Prince George's County, Maryland, employing neighborhood-based designs. This chapter challenges empirical and theoretical assumptions about

testing mediational models of social processes of neighborhood effects. The findings point to the striking heterogeneity within neighborhoods (as opposed to between neighborhoods) and the difficulty in distinguishing between neighborhood demographic and process variables.

Chapter 7 contains interesting analyses of community effects, using a school-based sample. From their large California study, the authors derive neighborhood-based estimates by summing parent and adolescent responses by neighborhood. Clearly, this procedure requires that sampling be clustered by neighborhood (to obtain a stable or somewhat stable neighborhood estimate). This strategy reveals a number of neighborhood-based effects that could not be obtained from the approaches used in volume 1's quantitative chapters. They demonstrate that parental norms and sanctions, as well as cohesiveness among youths' parents, are associated with youth behavior.

Measurement issues, as seen from a more contextualized approach, are addressed in chapter 8. The authors' premise is that ethnographic research can be used as a springboard for addressing more innovative ways of characterizing neighborhoods. They talk about several different properties of neighborhoods, including neighborhood of residence versus neighborhood of influence, and the discussion highlights the fluid and multidimensional nature of community of influence.

Much-needed data on an alternative approach to measuring neighborhood—the windshield observation—are presented in chapter 9. The windshield method is based on neighborhood observation of resources, neighborhood upkeep, dangerous activities, and so forth. The methodology developed in both the Atlanta and Harrisburg studies is described, as well as the measure developed in the Atlanta study. Then, the usefulness of this approach is considered, by comparing the results using geocoded data and windshield observations, vis-à-vis outcomes.

Chapter 10 focuses on the meaning of the results presented in volume 1 in terms of state and local policy. The authors provide a brief historical look at community-based initiatives, which are usually based on state and local policy and practices. They explain how the current community-based initiatives are grounded in earlier efforts and how the current programs are moving in new directions. They then describe a few of the most-promising community-based initiatives and consider how qualitative and quantitative work informs these new directions.

Chapter 11 examines the question of how we might strengthen neighborhood-based programs. Also, the authors consider the ways in which resources are allocated at the neighborhood level for children, with a special focus on poor neighborhoods in cities.

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 neighborhood. 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.