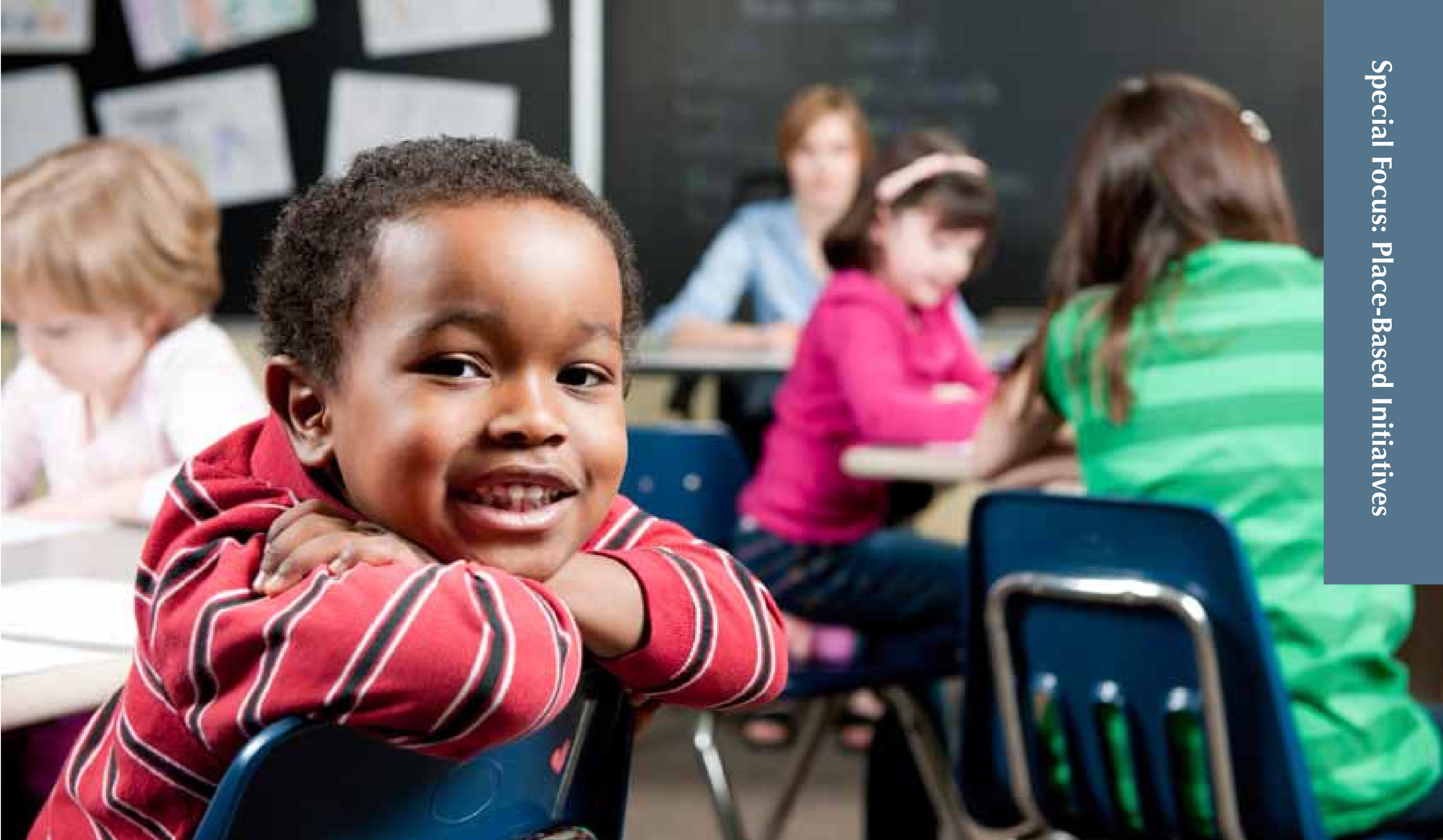


Understanding How Place Matters for Kids

By Susan J. Popkin, Gregory Acs, and Robin Smith, The Urban Institute

Introduction

A central goal of U.S. social welfare policy is to ensure that all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential as productive adults. Yet it is increasingly clear that where children live plays a central role in determining their life chances. Children growing up in high-poverty neighborhoods, with extreme levels of racial and economic segregation and inadequate public services—police, schools, sanitation, grocery stores—are at risk for a range of negative outcomes, including poor physical and mental health, cognitive delays, risky sexual behavior, and delinquency.[1] The consequences for these children's life chances—and for society—are severe: they are more likely than those who grow up in less distressed communities to drop out of high school, get involved in gangs, become teen parents, and less likely to be employed when they reach adulthood.[2]

Despite the importance of place, there has been comparatively little research on the ways that the neighborhoods where children live affect their transitions to adulthood or on the characteristics other than poverty that might influence their development. Even fewer programs or policies have tried to address the community mechanisms that might be causing such bad outcomes. Rather, the majority of research and policy attention concentrates on the individual child, the child's family, and school settings, touching on many points along the path to adulthood, beginning with pregnancy planning, and continuing through pre- and postnatal care, early childhood development, schooling, and the myriad challenges confronting adolescents as they transition into adulthood. As a result, policies aimed at helping disadvantaged children and youth tend to focus on individual families and children and on school-based reforms. Even the highly regarded Harlem Children's Zone, which does aim to address multiple dimensions of the broader community, has as its core a state-of-the-art charter school program.[3]

Current research on neighborhoods and their impact on children and youth shows a strong correlation between concentrated poverty and a range of negative outcomes.

Part of the problem is a lack of research that explicitly ties youth outcomes to neighborhood factors, as opposed to parental or other household socio-economic variables. The Urban Institute has long been involved in trying to understand how places matter, and we have recently extended our focus to look explicitly at youth. Our view of how neighborhoods influence and interact with other factors to impact youth draws on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory of human development.[4] Specifically, we believe that there are multiple layers or spheres of influence that affect children and adolescents as they move toward adulthood. These spheres include a youth's own individual characteristics (e.g., self-esteem, attachment to achievement in school, attitudes about relationships, aspirations, intelligence); family background (e.g., family structure, income, residential stability); school (e.g., staff to student ratio, mobility, proportion of children receiving free lunch); and neighborhood (e.g., concentrated poverty, large gang presence, high levels of social and physical disorder, weak social institutions).

So how does the neighborhood sphere influence youth outcomes? Current research on neighborhoods and their impact on children and youth shows a strong correlation between concentrated poverty and a range of negative outcomes. As noted above, adolescents growing up in neighborhoods marked by concentrated poverty are at risk for many negative outcomes, including poor physical and mental health, risky sexual behavior, and delinquency.[5] Boys are at greater risk for becoming involved in delinquency and crime, and there is much concern about the long-term effects of incarceration and disconnection from the labor market.[6] Girls growing up in high poverty face gender-specific risks, including pressure to become sexually active at increasingly younger ages, with early sexual initiation bringing its own hazards: pregnancy, the risk of sexually transmitted disease, and dropping out of school to care for children.[7] All of these threats have serious, long-term implications for the life chances of low-income adolescent girls.[8] And because of these risks, parents are more likely to severely restrict girls' activity and keep them close to home,[9] limiting their ability to take advantage of educational or recreational opportunities and placing them at risk for obesity.

Yet the mechanisms that shape these outcomes are less well known, and our understanding of which types of youth outcomes are most sensitive to youths' neighborhood contexts are similarly limited.[10] There are a number of theories as to why kids in better neighborhoods do better, including: (1) higher levels of social organization or collective efficacy (the trust neighbors have in one another and their shared expectations) that promote monitoring of residents' behavior and consequent reductions in threats of neighborhood danger, disorder, and associated conditions;[11] (2) stronger institutional resources for youth and their families, including higher quality schools, youth programs, and health services;[12] (3) affiliation with less deviant peer groups;[13] and (4) higher levels of parental well-being and behavior that promote positive family functioning.[14]

But other aspects of the social and physical neighborhood environment that have not as yet been explored may also affect youth outcomes in ways we do not yet understand.

Key Areas for Future Study

Further research is necessary to better understand how specific features of a neighborhood influence outcomes for youth from various demographic backgrounds. The Urban Institute's Program on Neighborhoods and Youth Development is dedicated to filling this gap in research and policy knowledge. Building on our past research, we have identified three key research priorities: (1) improving outcomes for adolescent girls in distressed neighborhoods, (2) assessing housing and neighborhood-based interventions aimed at improving outcomes for at-risk youth, and (3) supporting vulnerable youth and their transition to adulthood.

Adolescent Girls in Distressed Neighborhoods

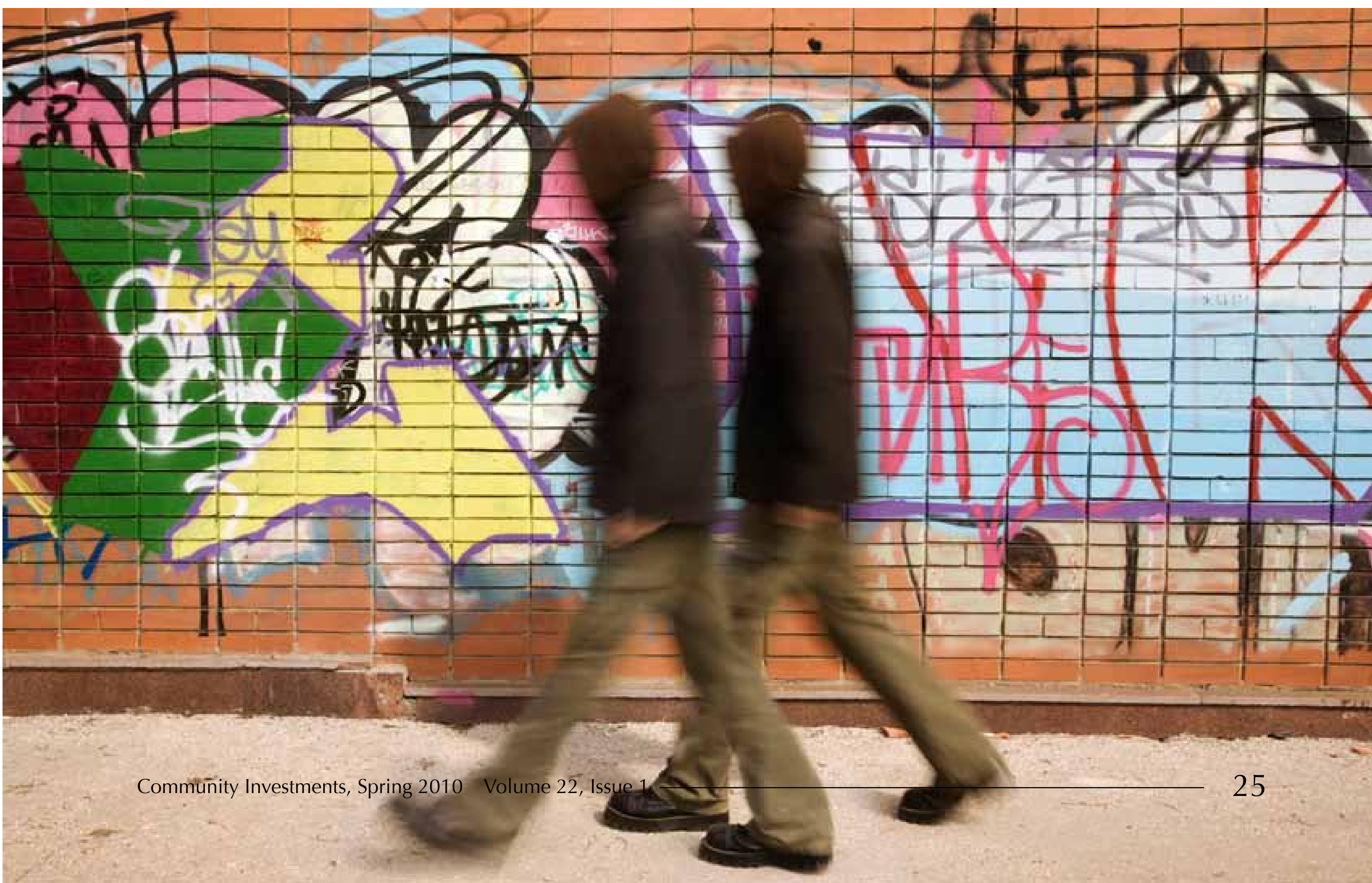
Previous research on the Moving to Opportunity for Fair Housing (MTO) Demonstration revealed some puzzling findings about the impact of place on adolescent girls.[15] MTO was a unique attempt to try to improve the life chances of very poor families with children by helping them leave the disadvantaged environments thought to contribute to adverse outcomes. MTO targeted families, most of them African American or Latino, living in some of the nation's worst neighborhoods—distressed public housing—and used housing subsidies to offer them a chance to move to lower-poverty communities. The hope was that moving would provide access to safer neighborhoods with better schools. In these safer neighborhoods, adolescents—both girls and boys—would be exposed to fewer negative influences like gangs and drugs, and should then be at lower risk for mental health problems and delinquency and other risky behavior. But, surprisingly, interim findings from the MTO demonstration showed

dramatic improvements for adolescent girls in the experimental group in terms of mental health and reduced delinquency, but no comparable benefits for boys.[16] Qualitative research intended to probe this puzzle suggested a potential explanation for these gender differences, specifically that for girls, moving to lower poverty not only meant less exposure to gang violence and drug trafficking, but a profound reduction in fear of sexual harassment, coercion, and violence.[17]

Based on these findings, we theorize that certain high poverty neighborhoods are characterized by a coercive sexual environment (CSE), and it will be important to articulate the elements of CSE within neighborhoods; develop a measure of CSE than can be tested via a comprehensive survey of adolescent girls; and create a measurement tool or index to assess community-level risk factors and allow practitioners to more strategically target interventions aimed at the neighborhoods in which at-risk middle and high school youth reside.

Although CSE may influence many outcomes for youth of different ages, sexes, and race/ethnicities, we believe the issue is particularly important among adolescent girls. Adolescent girls in high-poverty neighborhoods are at high risk for sexual coercion and assault. Such victimization has profound long-term consequences for girls' overall well-being; thus, it is critical for prevention efforts to identify modifiable factors that can reduce the risk of victimization. Evidence that poverty and disadvantage within neighborhoods correlate with intimate partner violence and sexual assault highlights the role of neighborhood environments; however, characteristics such as poverty and disadvantage are not likely to be causally related to such victimization. Rather, our qualitative evidence from research on MTO strongly suggests the role of omnipresent sexual threats, sexual harassment, and a resulting climate of fear of victimization within many disadvantaged communities.

However, to understand how a CSE might lead to negative youth outcomes, we need to better understand the elements that make up a coercive environment, and then explore the role of a CSE in increasing risk for adolescent girls. The ultimate goal of this research is to provide guidance for the development of targeted neighborhood-level interventions to reduce the CSE, and ultimately reduce the burden of sexual violence and coercion among female adolescents. The hope is that in targeting CSEs, we can improve other critical outcomes, such as school completion and delaying childbirth until adulthood.



In comparing youth from distressed neighborhoods with youth from more economically advantaged neighborhoods, researchers found that twice as many youth from distressed neighborhoods fail to earn a high school degree than those from nondistressed neighborhoods.

Housing and Neighborhood-Level Interventions

A second key area for further exploration is the impact of housing and neighborhood-level interventions aimed at improving the life circumstances of very low-income families. Much of this research has focused on interventions aimed at families living in distressed public housing; these families are extremely poor and live in what are some of the most distressed communities in the nation.

The Urban Institute's five-site HOPE VI Panel Study explored the impact of the HOPE VI program, the $6 billion federal effort to transform distressed public housing into healthy, mixed-income communities, on residents' lives.[18] Our research indicated that most of these families ended up using vouchers to move to communities that were less poor and distressed than their original developments, relatively few returned to the new developments, and a substantial minority ended up in other traditional public housing. Outcomes for children were a critical part of this research; our findings indicated that those who moved out of public housing benefited from living in neighborhoods that were dramatically safer, but as in MTO, did not move to areas that offered access to better schools or employment opportunities. Further, our research indicated that youth who remained in distressed public housing were experiencing higher rates of behavior problems and delinquent behavior over time—most worrying, this effect was especially pronounced for girls.[19] We are currently conducting follow-up research in one of the HOPE VI Panel Study sites, Chicago, and will have more evidence on longer-term outcomes for these families.

Vulnerable Youth and the Transition to Adulthood

The Urban Institute recently completed a project for the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning of Evaluation at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that examined the role of different aspects of youth vulnerability and risk-taking behaviors on several outcomes for young adults. The project used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 Cohort. In comparing youth from distressed neighborhoods with youth from more economically advantaged neighborhoods, researchers found that twice as many youth from distressed neighborhoods fail to earn a high school degree than those from nondistressed neighborhoods. Similarly, youth from distressed neighborhoods are half as likely to be consistently connected to work or school between the ages of 18 and 24 than their counterparts from nondistressed neighborhoods. Finally, youth from distressed neighborhoods are more than three times as likely to have had sex before age 13 than those from less-distressed communities. In future work, Urban Institute researchers hope to gain a better understanding of how neighborhood distress influences these outcomes and to identify modifiable neighborhood level factors that may affect youth at younger ages and set them down a path toward negative outcomes.

Conclusion

Many children who grow up in poor families in low-income neighborhoods go on to finish high school and even college and escape poverty as adults, but too many do not. In particular, adolescents growing up in communities of concentrated poverty are at risk for a range of negative outcomes including teen pregnancy, sexual victimization, dependence on public assistance, and engaging in substance abuse and criminal activity. Although there is considerable research on the relationship between easily measured neighborhood attributes (like poverty and male joblessness) and youth outcomes, recent work suggests that previously underappreciated elements of many low-income communities may contribute to poor transitions to adulthood for adolescents. To date there has been little exploration of the connection between such pressures, neighborhood context, and youth development. We hope the work of the Urban Institute's Program on Neighborhoods and Youth Development can help fill the gap and give policymakers and service providers the information they need to improve the life chances of young people. CI

Endnotes

Community Change Initiatives from 1990-2010

1 The full publication will be available in summer 2010. For more information, see www.aspenroundtable.org or contact akubisch@aspenroundtable.org

Understanding the Different Types of Low-Income Neighborhoods

1 Elwood M. Hopkins is Managing Director of Emerging Markets, Inc. and President of the Center for Place-Based Initiatives. Juan Aquino, Rudolph Espinoza, and Daniel Tellalian also contributed to this article.

2 *Managing Neighborhood Change, A Framework for Sustainable and Equitable Revitalization* (2006), Alan Mallach proposes a six-type classification system based on the condition of the local housing stock, homebuyer characteristics, and housing prices. For each type, he specifies strategies for improving housing as well as the implications of these strategies on local residents. In a 2005 study entitled, "Housing in the Nation's Capital," Margery Austin Turner, G. Thomas Kingsley, Kathryn L.S. Pettit, Jessica Cigna, and Michael Eiseman propose a new neighborhood typology for Washington, DC neighborhoods based on housing characteristics.

3 The Center for Housing Policy uses a composite of data on subprime lending, foreclosures, and mortgage delinquencies to categorize neighborhoods according to foreclosure risk. Similarly, in *Using Data to Characterize Foreclosure Markets*, Phyllis Betts at the University of Memphis segmented five different types of home loan borrowers (in terms of their level of financial precariousness and ability to absorb a mortgage) and characterized neighborhoods according to which of type of borrower predominates. She then factors in the type of housing stock and general housing market trends, discovering four distinct neighborhood types: Classic Distressed; Transitional-Declining; Stable Neighborhoods of Choice; and Transitional-Upgrading.

4 In *Contributions of Accessibility and Visibility Characteristics to Neighborhood Typologies and their Predictions of Physical Activity and Health*, a team from the University of Michigan and Detroit Health Department proposed nine neighborhood types in terms of health impact. For each, the team correlated physical characteristics (housing density, sidewalk coverage, street configurations, pedestrian pathways) to physical activity of residents and the prevalence of heart disease, diabetes, dietary cancers, and obesity.

5 In 2005, the USC School of Policy, Planning, and Development compared twenty residential neighborhood types in terms of the mobility patterns of residents. They separated neighborhoods by their location in the inner city, inner suburbs, outer suburbs, or exurban areas. The types are grouped according to clusters of traits that influence transportation decisions: street configurations, access to freeways or public transit, local land uses, topographies versus level ground and so on.

6 In *How Does Family Well-Being Vary across Different Types of Neighborhoods?*, Margery Austin Turner and Deborah Kaye use data from the National Survey of America's Families to classify neighborhoods as family environments. The authors of *Neighborhood Poverty: Policy Implications in Studying Neighborhoods,* tackle a similar task. In "Explorations in Neighborhood Differentiation" in *The Sociological Quarterly,* Donald Warren compares service utilization across neighborhoods.

7 In *Sharing America's neighborhoods: The Process for Stable Racial Integration,* Ingrid Gould Ellen examines six types of neighborhoods in various stages of racial and ethnic transition. For each, she identifies a typical bundle of quantifiable factors (ethnic breakdown, tenure, and demographic shifts underway) and qualitative factors like overall social stability. In *Paths of Neighborhood Change,* Richard Taub, D. Garth Taylor, and John Dunham identify eight neighborhood types at different stages of evolution from decline to gentrification to stability.

Five Simple Rules for Evaluating Complex Community Initiatives

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Understanding How Place Matters for Kids

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