The Urban Institute's Program on Neighborhoods and Youth Development: Understanding How Place Matters for Kids

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Jeanette lives in a public housing complex on Chicago's south side; to her, it is very clear how place matters for her 17-year old daughter, Kathy. Jeanette says she has to keep her daughter indoors to protect her from the dangers in their community. When asked what she worried about, she replied:

> *Just too much killing, innocent kids being shot and being killed, just because they wanted to be outside, you know what I'm saying. It was frightening for your child to go outside. I did used to keep her in because I was just that paranoid, because that's a terrible feeling for your only child to be hurt like that.*

Likewise, Kathy said the kids in her neighborhood had to hide from the constant shooting. She explained in detail the problems in her neighborhood:

> *Like, sometimes we'll be outside and just hear some gunshots—it be an ugly sight, because you shouldn't—you shouldn't—your kids have to, you know what I'm saying, get up and run from where you live, you know what I'm saying, where you pay rent at just because somebody's going to act ignorant.[1]*

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 (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000; Leventhal, Dupéré and Brooks-Gunn 2009; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002; Sampson et al. 2007). 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 (Johnson 2009).

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 (Tough 2008). The Urban Institute's Program on Neighborhoods and Youth Development is dedicated to filling this gap in research and policy knowledge, focusing on understanding the relationships between neighborhood-level factors and the well-being and development of children and youth and identifying and evaluating place-based, community-wide strategies to help children grow up to reach their full potential as adults.

In this framing paper, we first present a brief overview of theory and research on how social and physical context affects the life chances of children and youth. We then discuss the goals and initial research agenda for the Program on Neighborhoods and Youth Development, including (1) better understanding the dimensions of neighborhood environments that lead to negative outcomes for children to develop targeted interventions; (2) drawing on lessons from our research on housing and community-based interventions to inform policy initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for youth, such as Choice Neighborhoods and Promise Zones; and (3) using primary and secondary data at the local and national levels to explore how place affects development, health, and risky behavior for children and youth.

Ecological Model of Youth Development

The ultimate goal of policies aimed at children is to have them arrive at adulthood with the skills and resources necessary to succeed in the labor market, contribute to civic life, and, if they so desire, form stable families and raise children of their own. Thus, the key outcomes for children include finishing high school (and potentially attending or

completing college), holding down a job, forming healthy relationships, and avoiding negative outcomes, such as landing in jail or having children at young ages outside marriage. However, many important intermediate outcomes can affect whether a youth makes a successful transition to adulthood. For older adolescents, these include school completion and a successful transition to college or the labor market—and avoiding the problems that can derail their progress, like depression, substance use, criminal activity, and childbearing. For younger adolescents and school-age children, important intermediate outcomes include positive academic performance, healthy cognitive development, and prosocial behavior. It is also possible to monitor cognitive development and behavior for infants and toddlers to assess whether they are on a positive developmental trajectory. And for children of all ages, physical and mental health status can affect all of these other dimensions and, ultimately, the transition to adulthood.

Our view of how neighborhoods influence and interact with other factors to influence youth draws on Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1989) *ecological systems theory of human development*. Specifically, 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).

There are several theories about the mechanisms that relate neighborhood characteristics to youth outcomes. In particular, better neighborhoods may lead to better youth outcomes because of several factors: (1) higher levels of social organization or collective efficacy that promote monitoring of residents' behavior and consequent reductions in threats of neighborhood danger, disorder, and associated conditions (Browning, Leventhal, and Brooks-Gunn 2005; Sampson, Morenoff, and Raudenbush 2005); (2) stronger institutional resources for youth and their families, including higher quality schools, youth programs, and health services (Jencks and Mayer 1990; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000); (3) affiliation with less deviant peer groups (Brody et al. 2001; Elliott et al. 1996); and (4) higher levels of parental well-being and behavior that promote positive family functioning (McLoyd 1998; Simons et al. 1996).

What We Know bout Neighborhoods and Youth

Current research on neighborhoods and child and youth outcomes shows a strong correlation between concentrated poverty and range of negative outcomes. As noted above, adolescents growing up in neighborhoods marked by concentrated poverty are at risk for a range of negative outcomes, including poor physical and mental health, risky sexual behavior, and delinquency (Ellen and Turner 1997; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000, 2004; Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley 2002). 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 (Edelman et al. 2006; Holzer 2009). 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 (Alan Guttmacher Institute 1994; Albert, Brown, and Flanigan 2003; Cooksey, Rindfuss, and Guilkey 1996; Tubman, Windle, and Windle 1996; Johnson 2009). All of these threats have serious, long-term implications for the life chances of low-income adolescent girls (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, and Morgan 1987; Kendall-Tackett, Williams, and Finkelhor 1993). And because of these risks, parents are more likely to severely restrict girls' activity and keep them close to home (Quane 2008), limiting their ability to take advantage of educational or recreational opportunities and placing them at risk for obesity.

It is not clear how concentrated poverty and other neighborhood features influence youth outcomes, in general, and what types of youth outcomes are sensitive to youths' neighborhood contexts (Sampson 2008). Further, concentrated poverty is only one aspect of a neighborhood, and other aspects of a youth's neighborhood context (some of which may be strongly linked to concentrated poverty) may exert important influences on their outcomes. For example, Sampson et al. (1997) argue that the collective efficacy or social cohesion in a neighborhood—the trust neighbors have in one another and their shared expectations—influences the well-being of neighborhood residents. Other aspects of the social and physical neighborhood environment that have not as yet been explored may well affect the youth outcomes.

Program on Neighborhoods and Youth Development: Research Agenda

The central mission of the Program on Neighborhoods and Youth Development is to better understand and characterize the key features of a neighborhood that influence

youth and to assess the effects these features have on youth of differing ages, genders, races, and ethnicities. The goal of this research is to use this knowledge to develop and assess evidence-based interventions aimed at improving the life chances of youth from distressed communities. We are initially focusing on three key areas: (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) using primary and secondary data at the local and national levels to explore neighborhood influences on health and child outcomes.

Adolescent Girls in Distressed Neighborhoods

Our interest here builds on our research stemming from puzzling findings from the Moving to Opportunity for Fair Housing (MTO) Demonstration (Briggs, Popkin, and Goering forthcoming). 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 (Orr et al 2003; Kling, Katz, and Leibman 2007). Qualitative research intended to probe this puzzle suggested a potential explanation that for these gender differences, specifically 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 (Popkin, Leventhal, and Weismann forthcoming).

Based on these findings, we theorize that certain high poverty neighborhoods are characterized by a ***coercive sexual environment*** (CSE), and we have a series of research proposals aimed at articulating the elements of CSE within neighborhoods; developing a measure of CSE than can be tested via a comprehensive survey of adolescent girls; and creating 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, our initial proposed work focuses on 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 that we 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 coercive sexual environment might lead to negative youth outcomes, we need to conduct new research to further articulate the elements that make up a coercive environment, and then explore the role of a CSE in increasing risk for adolescent girls. We are developing a multi-level study to address this critical knowledge gap. Our first step involves identifying the dimensions of a neighborhood CSE and developing a quantifiable measure of it. We will evaluate how well our measure of the CSE predicts sexual violence victimization among female adolescents. The goal is to develop a strong predictive model to help practitioners target resources and develop effective strategies for intervention.

We will initiate this phase of this research by launching a research project in the city of Baltimore, where we have a research partner with comprehensive data on neighborhoods and a school district committed to research that can help reduce truancy and improve school completion rates. We will conduct focus groups in Baltimore neighborhoods we identify as having high or low CSE attributes with youth, community leaders, and service providers. Ultimately, we hope to do a panel survey of parents and youth to allow us to explore how neighborhood influences affect youth outcomes over time. For this initial research effort, we are partnering with scholars from the Harvard School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins University, and the Jacob France Institute at the University of Baltimore, and we have a working relationship with the Baltimore (MD) City

Schools which will allow us to identify and study vulnerable youth in their neighborhood settings.

The ultimate goal of this research is to provide guidance for the development of targeted neighborhood-level interventions to reduce the coercive sexual environment, 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 terms of the research agenda for the Program on Neighborhoods and Youth Development, we see this initial effort as a significant exploration of how place matters and how to measure these aspects effectively.

Housing and Neighborhood-Level Interventions

The second part of the Neighborhoods and Youth Development research agenda builds on the Urban Institute's extensive research on multidimensional housing and neighborhood-based 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. Over the past decade, the Urban Institute has studied the impact of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's MTO Demonstration, which randomly assigned residents of distressed public housing in five cities to receive either an experimental voucher they could only use in a neighborhood that was less than 10 percent poor, a regular housing voucher, or to remain in public housing. We conducted qualitative research as part of the Interim Evaluation (Orr et al. 2003; Popkin et al. 2002) and then led the Three-City Study of MTO, a mostly qualitative exploration of key puzzles raised by the interim research (Briggs, Popkin, and Goering forthcoming). The goal of MTO was to test whether moving to lower poverty communities would improve the life chances—specifically employment and educational outcomes—for these very low-income adults and youth. At the interim evaluation, the findings showed substantial benefits for adult women and girls' mental health, but no such benefits for boys and no impacts on adult employment or youths' educational achievement. In addition to our findings on the differential effects of neighborhood environments on male and female adolescents, our follow-up research also highlighted how MTO failed to get families into communities with high-performing schools (Briggs et al. 2008). We are currently part of the team for the final evaluation, both exploring housing and neighborhood outcomes for the MTO families and

conducting additional qualitative research to further explore the issue of CSE and the effects of neighborhood environments on adolescent girls that were central to our earlier research. This additional research on MTO will complement the larger exploration of neighborhood environments we hope to undertake as part of the new Neighborhoods and Youth research agenda.

The Urban Institute's five-site *HOPE VI Panel Study* (Popkin, Levy, and Buron 2009) 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. 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 (Gallagher and Bajaj 2007). 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.

We have also conducted extensive research on the impact of public housing transformation in Chicago, which had more distressed public housing than any other city in the United States and an extremely ambitious plan to convert most of it into mixed-income housing. The Plan for Transformation called for relocating thousands of families either temporarily or permanently; evidence from the HOPE VI Panel Study and several studies of Chicago suggested that a significant portion of the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA)'s residents were so troubled that they were likely to fail to meet the criteria for either mixed-income housing or vouchers. Indeed, findings from the Panel study suggested that the most vulnerable families were being left behind in traditional developments that had the potential to become as bad or worse as the communities they came from. This concern led us to develop the *Chicago Family Case Management Demonstration*, a multiyear project to assess the cost-effectiveness and impact of providing intensive case management services to approximately 400 families in two CHA

developments. The demonstration involves a partnership of the Urban Institute, the CHA, and Heartland Human Care Services, a large social service agency. The goal of the demonstration is to improve outcomes for these vulnerable families, including housing stability, family functioning, and employment. We are specifically tracking outcomes for children and youth. In addition, the demonstration is now serving as a model for serving the needs of vulnerable public and assisted housing families and we are now working to develop a national replication of the Chicago Demonstration to assess how this approach might work in other settings and communities.

Finally, the Urban Institute is heavily involved in assessing programs for youth in the District of Columbia. We currently assist the Parkside Alliance for Children in planning to create a "Promise Zone" in the District's 7th Ward. Promise Zones are modeled on the Harlem Children's Zone (Tough 2008), a multipronged initiative aimed at improving the life chances of children and youth in an entire community. Harlem Children's Zone provides a pipeline of services that can take children from birth (parenting classes) all the way through to college. The program aspires to change the trajectory of a large enough proportion of children in the neighborhood to change the character of the entire neighborhood from severely distressed to a healthy environment for families. The Urban Institute will provide data for the District's planning efforts and help to develop and implement a full-scale assessment. As with our work on housing-based interventions, this work will help us to understand what it takes to effectively design and implement interventions that can improve outcomes for youth from distressed communities.

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, Urban Institute 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.

Growing the Program

The Program on Neighborhoods and Youth Development already has a busy agenda. In the coming year, we hope to launch our new research initiative in Baltimore to explore the elements of the CSE and how it affects outcomes for adolescent girls. Likewise, we will continue to use our work on MTO to probe how neighborhoods affect outcomes for girls. In addition, we will expand our work on housing and neighborhood-based interventions, replicating and expanding the Chicago Demonstration in other sites and helping to plan for a Promise Zone in the District. Finally, we will continue to explore key issues around neighborhood influences on young children and adolescents using existing datasets.

Note

1. Residents interviewed for the HOPE VI Panel Study, 2005. All names are pseudonyms. From Popkin and Cove (2007).

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