How Neighborhoods Affect Health, Well-being, and Young People's Futures

A research consensus is emerging that four neighborhood factors— social cohesion, social control, spatial mismatch, and environmental hazards— have the strongest effect on personal outcomes.

by GEORGE C. GALSTER

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Among the many potential factors reviewed, the evidence most consistently points to neighborhood social cohesion, informal social control, spatial mismatch, and exposure to environmental hazards, including violence, as important factors in how neighborhood affects personal outcomes.

As children, the neighborhood we live in can affect many things in our lives, from those we play with to whether we breathe polluted air. Just as innovation can cluster in certain regions like Silicon Valley, luring talent and creating synergies that spur new ideas and products, so too can crime and social disorganization cluster. In 1987, noted scholar William Julius Wilson in *The Truly Disadvantaged* proposed a theory for why crime and poverty clustered, and persisted, in certain neighborhoods. Since then, research has expanded our understanding of the connection between neighborhoods—their unique cluster of advantage or disadvantage—and life outcomes.

Although we know that neighborhood influences health, education, work, and other factors, what is less understood is *how* they affect those outcomes. Getting inside the black box of "neighborhood effects" can help policymakers better target their limited funds. Indeed, it is risky for policymakers to design strategies to intervene without knowing the exact pathway that influences travel in a neighborhood.

KEY FINDINGS

- Four neighborhood factors—social cohesion, social control, spatial mismatch, and environmental hazards—have the strongest effect on personal outcomes.

- There is a direct line from exposure to neighborhood violence and pollution to poorer health.

- Peer effects and role models among disadvantaged teens are particularly influential in later outcomes.

- Having more affluent neighbors can help inspire more positive norms among residents, but not as much as "bad influences" can undermine positive norms.

- The chronic stress of living in dangerous or run-down neighborhood can affect parenting styles, which can in turn affect children.

- Less clear is the effect of stronger social networks, perhaps because there is less socializing across socioeconomic lines than one might expect.

This brief, based on "The Mechanism(s) of Neighborhood Effects: Theory, Evidence, and Policy Implications," a chapter in *Neighborhood Effects Research*, identifies a set of factors that stand out as important pathways that connect neighborhoods to personal outcomes.[1] Although researchers have not yet reached a consensus about the relative contribution of each of these factors, agreement is emerging that these factors do wield considerable influence.

Neighborhood Forces Thought to Influence Outcomes

Past research has identified four main forces driving the impact of neighborhoods on life outcomes. The first encompasses the **social processes** at work in neighborhoods, such as the extent of social networks, collective socialization around norms or role models, the influence of peers, competition for resources between groups, or "relative deprivation," a form of keeping up with the Joneses.

Environmental factors, such as exposure to violence or the area's physical surroundings, from broken windows to environmental pollutants, can also be in play. **Geographical forces** are a third element, such as the distance of the neighborhood to good jobs or its relative isolation in the city. Finally, **neighborhood resources** such as day care, schools, medical clinics, and the types of stores and amenities in the neighborhoods, from supermarkets to liquor stores, may have a connection to individual outcomes.

Neighborhood Factors That Seem to Matter the Most

Of these elements, the following surface in multiple studies as key factors in "neighborhood effects."

The clearest effect of neighborhoods on outcomes is in their **impact on health**. There is a direct line from exposure to violence to psychological consequences. Likewise, there is a clear line between neighborhood environmental pollutants and poor health. The question remains, however, how much violence or pollution does it take to have an effect and how long does the effect linger?

Social cohesion and **informal social control** (norms and role models) appear to wield considerable influence on outcomes, although neither fully explains them. Peer effects and role models among disadvantaged teens seem particularly influential. Studies have found links between deviant peer groups and teens' grades,[2] mental health,[3] antisocial behavior, and substance abuse.[4] There is less connection to job outcomes, however. Also, the presence of more positive role models or higher-income youth does not seem to provide ballast against more negative influences.

Beyond teens, having more affluent neighbors can help inspire more positive norms among residents, but not as much as "bad influences" can undermine positive norms. Further, collective social norms only seem to take hold after a substantial share of neighbors enforcing these norms becomes dominant.

It is also no coincidence that neighborhoods cut off from jobs and quality public services—**spatial mismatch**—have higher unemployment and less educational progress among residents. These forces play a nontrivial role in explaining labor force and educational outcomes.[5]

Another fairly clear link between neighborhood and child outcomes comes through the effects on **parenting**. The chronic stress and strain of living in a neighborhood that is dangerous, chaotic, and rundown can seep through in parenting styles, which can in turn affect children. Parents' sense of efficacy can also wane, and their health and mental health can be compromised, which indirectly affect children.[6]

Less clear is the effect of **stigma** that attaches to a neighborhood, **local politics**, or the type of **amenities** in the neighborhood, such as a prevalence of liquor stores and a lack of high-quality supermarkets. Also less clear is the effect of stronger **social networks** (the "who you know, not what you know" factor), perhaps because there is less socializing across socioeconomic lines than one might expect. Affluent and poorer neighbors are not moving in the same social circles.[7]

More Work Is Needed to Help Policymakers Better Target Resources

Given the complexity of neighborhoods' effect on life outcomes, there is yet far too little evidence to claim that a certain condition or attribute causes children to drop out of school or young adults to drop out of the workforce. Approaches that target a myriad of conditions and barriers are likely most promising. The Obama Administration's 2014 initiative, Promise Zones, for example, acknowledges that neighborhoods and their residents face complex and interrelated problems.

Promise Zones will coordinate the ongoing efforts of multiple federal programs, from housing to education and criminal justice. Over the next four years, up to 20 hard-pressed neighborhoods (with poverty rates 20 percent and higher) will benefit from tax credits and federal personnel on the ground to help groups streamline the many available programs across departments. The coordinated programs include the Promise Neighborhoods efforts, modeled after Geoffrey Canada's Harlem Children's Zone

with cradle-to-career programs. They also include Choice Neighborhood programs, which redevelop distressed public housing and the surrounding neighborhoods. Crime and violence will be targeted as well via criminal justice programs under the Byrne Criminal Justice Initiative. In all efforts, it will be important to ensure that neighborhoods are not pitted against one another in seeking funding and resources.

To advance our understanding of neighborhood effects, research must turn to more nuanced methods, including longer-term horizons and a broader palette of neighborhood measures. Better data are also needed. Studies should more often couple administrative data on crime, low birth weight, or child maltreatment, for example, with data on local institutions, schools, facilities. These in turn should be coupled with measures of pollution at a fine-grained local scale.

Without better studies and more definitive answers, policymakers risk misdirecting already scarce resources. Doing so courts, at best, inefficiencies in programs and spending, and at worse, unforeseen negative consequences for children and families. ■

Endnotes

1. George Galster, "The Mechanism(s) of Neighbourhood Effects: Theory, Evidence, and Policy Implications." Pp. 23-56 in *Neighbourhood Effects Research: New Perspectives,* edited by M. van Ham, D. Manley, N. Bailey, L. Simpson, and D. Maclennan (Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer, 2012).

2. N. Darling and L. Steinberg, "Assessing Neighborhood Effects Using Individual-Level Data." In *Neighborhood Poverty*, Vol. 2, edited by J. Brooks-Gunn et al. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1997).

3. R. L. Simons, "Parents and Peer Group as Mediators of the Effect of Community Structure on Adolescent Behavior," *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 24 (1996): 145-72.

4. E. Dubow, R. Edwards, and M. Ippolito, "Life Stressors, Neighborhood Disadvantages, and Resources: A Focus on Inner City Children's Adjustment," *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, 26 (1997): 130-44; A. Case and L. Katz, "The Company You Keep: The Effects of Family and Neighborhood on Disadvantaged Youth." Working paper 3705 (Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1991).

5. For a review, see John Kain, "The Spatial Mismatch Hypothesis: Three Decades Later." *Housing Policy Debate*, 3 (1992):371-460.

6. M. Spencer, "Resiliency and Fragility Factors Associated with the Contextual Experiences of Low-Resource Urban African-American Male Youth and Families." In *Does It Take a Village? Community Effects on Children, Adolescents, and Families*, edited by A. Booth and A. Crouter (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001).

7. M. Schill, "Chicago's New Mixed-Income Communities Strategy: The Future Face of Public Housing?" In *Affordable Housing and Urban Redevelopment in the United States*, edited by W. Van Viet (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1997); Susan Clampet-Lundquist, "HOPE VI: Relocation: Moving to New Neighborhoods and Building New Ties," *Housing Policy Debate*, 15 (2004): 415-447.

George C. Galster is the Clarence Hilberry Professor of Urban Affairs, Department of Urban Studies and Planning at Wayne State University. He is the co-author, with Anna Santiago, of Opportunity Neighborhoods for Low-Income Latino and African American Children*, a comprehensive study of neighborhood effects using a natural experiment in Denver, which will be published by HUD in 2014.*

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