

The Effects of Housing and Neighborhood Chaos on Children

Disorder and instability at home and in the neighborhood are detrimental to young children's healthy development, in part because of the strain on parents from these conditions.

by REBEKAH LEVINE COLEY, ALICIA DOYLE
LYNCH, AND MELISSA KULL

Poor families often confront chaos and instability in their family, home, and neighborhood contexts. For very young children, this environmental chaos interrupts critical routines and stability at a time in life when they matter dearly. Indeed, research has shown a link between chaos in a child's early home environment and harm to physical and mental health, brain development, and other outcomes.¹ Yet how exactly chaos affects children is still a question. Is it the timing of the disruptions—early in life rather than later, for example? Is it the intensity of the chaos? And can sensitive parenting shield children against the harms of chaotic home and neighborhood environments?²

The current study seeks answers to those questions.³ It examines the timing and intensity of household and neighborhood disorder and family instability and explores whether parents can buffer any negative effects on young children.

Housing and Neighborhood Disorder Are Associated with Poorer Childhood Outcomes

Greater housing disorder—broken windows, exposed wires, peeling paint, rodents, and other unsanitary or unsafe conditions—predicted greater developmental delays among two-and-a-half-year-old children, although the effect was modest. In addition, greater housing disorder was linked to

KEY FINDINGS

- Greater housing disorder is linked to poorer health and developmental delays among children, whereas neighborhood disorder and family instability inhibit children's emotional and behavioral well-being.
- Chaos during early childhood is associated with more negative repercussions for child functioning than chaos experienced in infancy or toddlerhood.
- The broader and more intense the chaos, the greater the harm to health and well-being.
- Parental distress is one reason for the poorer outcomes among children, whereas surprisingly, warm, sensitive parenting does not protect children.

children's poorer physical health at age six. Neighborhood disorder—crime and social disorder such as abandoned buildings, burglaries, assaults, and drug dealing—was associated with greater behavioral problems among children at age six.

Family and Residential Instability Has Mixed Effects on Children

A mother's relationship instability, in either cohabitation or marriage, was associated with heightened emotional and

behavioral problems among children. However, the number of residential moves a child experienced—another form of instability—was not associated with his or her functioning.

The Timing and Intensity of the Chaos Matter

The effects of chaos are felt more keenly later in childhood. No significant links emerged between chaos experienced during infancy and later functioning at age two-and-a-half or six. Early childhood chaos, however, predicted greater behavioral problems at age six. This finding runs counter to the theory that infants, owing to their rapid and highly sensitive brain development, are highly susceptible to environmental stress.⁴

Not surprisingly, the higher the intensity of chaos a child experienced, the stronger the effects on developmental delays, poor health, and behavior problems.⁵

Sensitive Parenting Does Not Buffer Children

Many have argued that warm, sensitive parenting can buffer children against hardship. But this study finds no such buffering effect.* Instead, it finds that the negative effect of environmental chaos on children, particularly their poorer emotional and behavioral outcomes, is in part the result of a mother's psychological distress. It appears that she transmits her distress to her children.

Policy Implications

The findings underscore how important order, consistency, and safety are to young children. Chaos in a child's early years, whether from poor quality housing, social disorder in neighborhoods, or a parent's relationship instability, has ramifications for children's healthy development. Policies and programs that help to stem the chaos in children's lives thus may have long-lasting benefits.

Improving housing conditions is a first step. Centralizing inspections and data collection for housing code violations, using other city services such as firefighters and meter readers to report on conditions, and aggregating data from various city public agencies into an easy-to-use tracker are all promising directions for keeping both public and private landlords in compliance with housing safety regulations. Home-visiting programs, which have proved effective in bolstering healthy child development, could pay particular attention to family and household chaos in a child's life

and help ameliorate the causes and effects. These programs provide emotional support that benefits mothers, research shows, and can help alleviate the stress that negatively affects children.

Providing greater funding and fewer hurdles for housing voucher holders could allow families to choose more stable neighborhoods. Vouchers allow low-income families to move to higher-income neighborhoods where resources to support optimal child development are more plentiful. However, landlords in these "hotter" markets, with greater prices and demand, have few incentives to accept vouchers, given the paperwork and required inspections. Streamlining the process while safeguarding families could help more low-income families acquire higher-quality homes in less chaotic neighborhoods. Housing counseling support for voucher holders and increased funding for vouchers is also needed; current funding only reaches 25 percent of those who need housing support.

Study Design

The study uses data on 495 low-income children from the Three-City Study, a longitudinal study of families living in Boston, Chicago, and San Antonio from 1999 to 2006. The study follows children over time, with surveys at ages one (in 1999), two-and-a-half (in 2001), and six (in 2005-06). Chaos included housing disorder, neighborhood disorder, relationship instability, and housing instability. The study identified associations between chaos and a range of physical and mental health outcomes, controlling for a host of child, family, and household characteristics found to be associated with both chaos and child well-being. Chaos intensity was assessed by combining the four domains of chaos to capture breadth, depth, and chronicity of chaos. Relationship instability was measured as the number of shifts in marital or cohabitating relationships across the six years of the study. ■

*The authors acknowledge the limitations of measuring "sensitive parenting."

Endnotes

1. See, e.g., J. Coldwell et al., “Household Chaos Links with Parenting and Child Behavior,” *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 47 (2006): 1116-22; G. W. Evans et al., “The Role of Maternal Stress and Social Resources,” *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 32 (2005): 232-37; and L. Vernon-Feagans et al., “Chaos, Poverty, and Parenting: Predictors of Early Language Development,” *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 27 (2012): 339-51.
2. For more on the potential moderating effects of sensitive parenting, see, e.g., J. Shonkoff and A. Garner, “The Lifelong Effects of Early Childhood Adversity and Toxic Stress,” *Pediatrics*, 129 (2012): 232-46. Overall, there is relatively little empirical support to suggest that parenting serves as a protector by buffering against the negative effects on children. See Coldwell et al., “Household Chaos Links with Parenting and Child Behavior,” who found that a combination of high chaos and negative parenting heightened behavior problems. Others find that parenting moderates the harmful effect of neighborhood disorder. See T. Schofield et al., “Neighborhood Disorder and Children’s Antisocial Behavior: The Protective Effect of Family Support among Mexican American and African American Families,” *American Journal of Community Development*, 50 (2011): 101-13.
3. This study is based on research by Rebekah Levine Coley, Alicia Doyle Lynch, and Melissa Kull, “Early Exposure to Environmental Chaos and Children’s Physical and Mental Health,” *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 32 (2015): 94-104.
4. Other research mirrors these findings. Bachman et al. find that family instability is more detrimental to older children than infants. H. Bachman et al., “Maternal Relationship Instability Influences on Children’s Emotional and Behavioral Functioning in Low-Income Families,” *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*, 39 (2011): 1149-61. However, given how hard it is to reliably measure a child’s development in the early years, the results should be interpreted with caution.
5. Past research has found that when forces are recurring, broad, or intense, they have more impact on a child. See J. Shonkoff, “Building a New Biodevelopmental Framework to Guide the Future of Early Childhood Policy,” *Child Development*, 81 (2010): 357-67; and Shonkoff and Garner, “Lifelong Effects of Early Childhood Adversity.”

Rebekah Levine Coley is a professor of applied developmental and educational psychology at Boston College. Her research delineates how economic disadvantage inhibits children’s healthy development, and evaluates approaches to improving the well-being of economically disadvantaged children. *Alicia Doyle Lynch* is a statistical and methodological consultant and director of Lynch Research Associates with a doctorate in child psychology from Tufts University. *Melissa Kull* is a research scientist in the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. She holds a doctorate in applied developmental and educational psychology from Boston College. Her research examines the influence of early childhood contexts on children’s health, skill development, and school readiness. The authors gratefully acknowledge *Barbara Ray* of Hired Pen, Inc., for assisting in drafting this brief.

ABOUT THE HOW HOUSING MATTERS TO FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES RESEARCH INITIATIVE

This brief summarizes research funded by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation as part of its How Housing Matters to Families and Communities Research Initiative. The initiative seeks to explore whether, and if so how, having a decent, stable, affordable home leads to strong families and vibrant communities. By illuminating the ways in which housing matters and highlighting innovative practices in the field, the Foundation hopes to encourage collaboration among leaders and policymakers in housing, education, health, and economic development to help families lead healthy, successful lives. The views expressed herein are not necessarily those of the MacArthur Foundation.

MacArthur Foundation

The MacArthur Foundation supports creative people and effective institutions committed to building a more just, verdant, and peaceful world. In addition to selecting the MacArthur Fellows, the Foundation works to defend human rights, advance global conservation and security, make cities better places, and understand how technology is affecting children and society.

For more information or to sign-up for news and event updates, please visit www.macfound.org.

John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
140 South Dearborn St., Suite 1200
Chicago, Illinois 60603-5285
Telephone: (312) 726-8000

 www.macfound.org

 twitter.com/macfound

 youtube.com/macfound