

The Well-being of Children: Are There “Neighbourhood Effects”?

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Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

We know that children's development is influenced by many factors. The most familiar are factors in the child's life such as family composition, socio-economic status, and so on. Increasingly, however, studies seek to map "neighbourhood effects," that is the impact on developmental outcomes of the area in which children live. The notion is that the composition and condition of neighbourhood can increase or decrease children's life chances. Such research seeks to demonstrate that the individual circumstances of a child and her family do not completely account for developmental achievements and life success; neighbourhood matters. But, while there is a growing body of research asserting that as children grow up the determinants of their development go beyond the immediate or even extended family, there is little agreement about the nature of the relationships between neighbourhood and child outcomes.

The first goal of this Discussion Paper is to update the state of knowledge on the impact of neighbourhood on child development, focusing on "what we know" as well as where further research is needed.

We first describe the aggregate factors identified as affecting child development. Average socioeconomic status (SES) has been identified as the key factor in explaining differences in developmental outcomes, such as IQ, school readiness, and delinquent behaviour. These effects can be positive as well as negative. Living in a well-off neighbourhood can "pull up" a child from a low-income family, for example. Despite the crucial role played by SES, however, researchers have begun recently to use more refined variables and indicators and to pay attention to other characteristics of the neighbourhood, such as family composition (including numbers of lone parents), residential mobility and forms of civic engagement. One of the major lessons of most studies of neighbourhood effects on children's development is that the factors are highly intertwined or inter-related.

Given the evidence of such inter-relationships, as well as weak relationships and a lack of agreement about causality, researchers have sought to develop theoretical models. We identified and analyze four theoretical approaches:

- The social organization approach, which highlights the ways adults in a neighbourhood influence young people who are not their own children;
- The institutional approach, which focuses on institutions and resources such as schools, policing or recreation programs that influence children;
- The epidemic approach, which begins from the idea that peer influences can spread problem behaviour; and
- The stress approach, which emphasizes the importance of exposure to physical toxins such as lead in soil and paint, as well as such social and psychological conditions such as community violence.

Each approach identifies a specific key factor and combines the others in different ways. Here too, however, there is little consensus, as theories compete with each other to account for the observed patterns. Moreover, while research continues to look for neighbourhood effects, it is important to recognize that studies consistently find that family and individual variables remain very, if not the most, important.

Given these mixed and non-systemic results a substantial critical literature exists, commenting on the empirical studies. These comments can be divided into two types. One is about the ways that studies are conducted, that is their research design. A second type of comment raises issues about the explanatory capacity of empirical studies and theories. Beyond the shape of the relationship – that is, converging, diverging, strong or weak – causality is perhaps the most difficult challenge for researchers in this field. All of this means that the models are rarely able to answer the “why” – that is the cause – question.

The literature does provide three lessons, however. A first is that the effects of a neighbourhood are shaped by children’s different experiences by gender, class and ethnicity. However, even when studies find that individual factors are most important, they still *do find* neighbourhood impacts that go beyond the situation of individual families. These, however, probably affect individuals in different ways at different life stages, and seem to be weakest for youngest children, but are perhaps more important for their parents. A second major lesson was that people at least partially create their own environments and, therefore, social composition across neighbourhoods generates as much heterogeneity as is found among individuals. Engagement patterns are important. Finally, neither income nor neighbourhood is the sole determinant of poor developmental outcomes. There will always be children in both poor and affluent, cohesive and fragmented neighbourhoods who will experience poor developmental outcomes.

The key conclusion of Part 2 of this paper, assessing the literature on community effects, is the need for caution in assigning too much importance to these factors. Otherwise, there is a risk that policy-makers will downplay attention to individual family effects and to direct interventions and services for children.

A second goal of this Discussion Paper is to provide the tools for policy-makers seeking to improve child outcomes by intervening at the neighbourhood and community level. In the second part of this Discussion Paper, we move beyond the theories to an environmental scan of a number of pilot projects and other interventions that were constructed in accordance with the principle that neighbourhood has a real impact on child development. We reviewed 13 projects, describing and classifying them according to the theoretical approach which most influenced their design, using the classification of theoretical approaches and neighbourhood factors catalogued in Part 2.

Again, there are a number of observations that emerge from the environmental scan. First is that there are relatively few programs that focus both on children and community development, seeking to shape community involvement and empowerment as well as improve child outcomes. The institutional approach is, by far, the dominant one. As an approach, it leads easily and naturally to projects to improve services and provide better distribution in order to improve developmental outcomes, but they do not actually address the community-level factors of

cohesion, interaction, democratic empowerment, and so on. There are fewer projects that seek to intervene using the social organization approach to change the values, attitudes and behaviour of community members and thus *create* a community effect. Some projects do combine the institutional approach with social organizational components. Finally, some projects seek to alter the individuals, literally by moving them to another neighbourhood with different characteristics. We examine one example of this approach, based in the United States.

A second type of observation derived from the environmental scan is that there is, as yet, little good evaluation data – and therefore assessment – of these strategies. Where more evaluations have been undertaken, as in the case of *Better Beginnings*, *Better Futures* or *1, 2, 3 GO!*, the conclusion (as it was in the academic literature) is that direct interventions are more important in ensuring good developmental outcomes for children than are indirect ones. The strong relationship between the “target” for programming (children, parents, or community leaders) and the outcomes appears in many programs. In other words, child-focused programs affected child outcomes, parent/family-focused programs affected parent and family outcomes, and neighbourhood programs affected neighbourhood characteristics. The programming to foster community empowerment, local decision-making, and so on, can achieve improvement in quality of *community life*, but the consequences for young children are less easily observed or assessed because they are indirect.

Overall, then, the conclusions that emerge from the environmental scan, as from the academic literature on neighbourhood and community level influences, confirm the conclusions developed by CPRN for *The Best Policy Mix for Canada’s Children* which identified three enabling conditions for good outcomes, that is adequate income, good parenting, and supportive communities. That major analysis of Canadian and international data observed that neighbourhood and community circumstances are only one of three factors that affect child outcomes. As many of the studies and experiments reviewed here confirm, income and parenting are absolutely key. Therefore, public policy must take care to ensure programs are available that will allow parents to access adequate income, whether via employment, child maintenance, social assistance and/or child and family benefits. Good parenting can be helped via services, whether individualized or delivered via community mechanisms. These, too, are key. And finally, families and children who live in supportive communities, where they are respected and their contributions valued, will also do better than those in communities lacking cohesion, good services, and facing other threats to well-being.