

Neighborhoods count in eighth-grade math achievement

“...place of residence may have important consequences for the academic success and the resulting life chances of adolescents.”

WHERE A CHILD lives *does* make a difference in how well he or she performs in school. Children who live in neighborhoods with high crime and extreme poverty often don't achieve academically as well as those who live in safer, cleaner, more affluent neighborhoods.

Though crime, poverty and a disproportionate number of single-parent households are often facts of life in inner-city neighborhoods, parental disinterest is not. In fact, parents in poor neighborhoods may be more diligent than other parents about supervising their children because of the dangers in the neighborhood and a shortage of organized activities. They may have high expectations for their children in middle-school and well beyond. In fact, low-income parents in disadvantaged neighborhoods may have higher expectations for their children than higher-income parents in the same, or a similar, neighborhood.

The effect of a neighborhood on its schools and the achievement of its youngsters in those schools is well-documented. Less is known, however, about the interplay of a neighborhood with its schools and parents and how that interplay impacts student achievement. “Research on the possible links between schools, family practices and student achievement is very sparse. So far, little is known about whether schools shape the processes by which parents transmit educational advantages to their children,” say the authors of *Neighborhood and School Influences on the Family Life and Mathematics Performance of Eighth-Grade Students* (Report 54).

This study, by researchers Sophia Catsambis and Andrew A. Beveridge, is presented in a recent CRESPAR technical report. Catsambis and Beveridge looked for both direct and indirect effects of neighborhoods on schools and families and the follow-through influences of those schools and families on student achievement. Neighborhoods, they hypothesize and later determine, may affect parents' involvement with the children's education and, thus, their abilities to help their children succeed in school. Although more research is needed to determine the magnitude of neighborhood effects, the study points to the importance of considering neighborhood context in further research and school program development.

The study measured achievement among eighth-graders in mathematics because it has proven to be an important predictor of college attendance and completion. They chose to look at eighth-graders because those students are on the verge of independence, as young adolescents, influenced more by their peers, perhaps, than by their parents and teachers.

Using data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) of 1988-92 and the 1990 U.S. Census, the researchers were able to analyze families, neighborhoods, and schools simultaneously. Parent involvement was measured by seven indicators, including parents' contacts with schools, parents' educational expectations for their children, and parent-child communication about school.

Findings

Among the study's findings are:

- Disadvantaged neighborhoods and schools with high poverty and absenteeism rates depress students' mathematics achievement.
- Disadvantaged neighborhoods keep parents from activities, such as participation in parent-teacher organizations, that seem to positively influence students' success in school, including mathematics achievement.
- Where they live may have a greater effect on inner-city students because they tend to live in poor, and often dangerous, neighborhoods.
- Parents have higher educational expectations for daughters and for all children who show interest in school.
- Parents' involvement with schools is influenced by socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity and the mother's work status.
- African American parents may overcome the impact of disadvantaged neighborhoods more effectively than parents of other races, despite low socioeconomic status. They are likely to increase contacts with schools in poor neighborhoods and provide more out-of-school lessons for their children.
- Parents can help their children overcome the educational disadvantages of their neighborhoods by frequent communication, close monitoring of activities and extra learning experiences, such as museum visits and music lessons.

“We conclude that place of residence may have important consequences for the academic success and the resulting life chances of adolescents. Although the life chances of minority and poor adolescents are negatively affected by the characteristics of their neighborhoods, some of these disadvantages may be offset by family and parenting practices,” the report states.