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# Understanding the Role of Neighborhood Conditions, Family Structure, and Social Support in Latina/o Student School Attendance and Participation in Afterschool Activities

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at the UNIVERSITY of CHICAGO

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## Abstract

The overarching goals of this study were to examine the pathways through which parents' perception of neighborhood conditions are associated with participation in organized afterschool activities and school absenteeism, and the role of social support networks in moderating those linkages among Latina/o two-parent and single-parent families. Very little empirical scholarship includes investigations examining neighborhood-, family- and school-level conditions among Latina/o youth. This study used data from the second and third Waves of the *Making Connections* Survey, a multiwave, multisite study of low-income neighborhoods in ten U.S. cities. This research examines the data from surveys completed between 2002 and 2011. A subsample of 1,053 Latina/o parents with 10-17-year-old children was examined.

Longitudinal path analyses suggest an indirect positive association between neighborhood control and participation in organized afterschool activities via instrumental social support, but only among two-parent families. Neighborhood cohesion was associated with school days missed and participation in organized afterschool activities among single-parent families. Overall, this study highlights the important role neighborhood conditions and key social sources of support play for Latina/o students living in structurally diverse families.

**Keywords:** Afterschool participation, family structure, instrumental support, Latina/o youth, neighborhood cohesion, neighborhood disorder, school absenteeism, school attendance.

## **Understanding the Role of Neighborhood Conditions, Family Structure, and Social Support in Latina/o Student School Attendance and Participation in Afterschool Activities**

School attendance and participation in scholastic and all-around activities (e.g., school clubs, youth groups, arts, dance, or language classes) are consistently related to a student's academic performance during the early school, elementary, and secondary school years (e.g., Covay & Carbonaro, 2010; Morrissey, Hutchison, & Winsler, 2014; Roby, 2004; Schreiber & Chambers, 2002). Despite growing awareness of the importance of student involvement in organized afterschool activities and school attendance, a school involvement gap persists among students from ethnic minority and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Janus & Duku, 2007; Magnuson & Waldfogel, 2005; Reardon & Portilla, 2016). Studies linking participation in school activities and steady school attendance to higher levels of academic performance among students of every sex, race/ethnicity, and SES signal the importance of promoting afterschool participation and school attendance (Cooper, Valentine, Nye, & Lindsay, 1999; Fredricks & Simpkins, 2012; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Morrissey et al., 2014; Vandell, Reisner, & Pierce, 2007). Conversely, research has illustrated the increased risk behaviors and poorer outcomes for youth who spend this time in unstructured and unsupervised settings outside school grounds (Jordan & Nettles, 1999; Morris & Kalil, 2006).

School attendance and participation in organized afterschool activities are critical forms of social capital because they contribute resources to support student academic success through active engagement outside of homes and away from potentially risky environments such as disorganized and unsafe neighborhoods (Fitzgerald, Miles, & Ledbetter, 2019; Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003). Home-to-school communication about students participating in school and after school is important to children's school success (Llopert & Esteban-Guitart, 2018). Also, fostering and ensuring school attendance can be a necessary precursor to higher academic achievement, particularly for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Roby, 2004; Sheldon & Epstein, 2004). In fact, since pre-school, students who attend school regularly score higher on tests than their peers who are frequently absent (Balfanz, & Byrnes, 2012; Gottfried, 2009). Conversely, chronic absenteeism, defined as missing at least 15 days of school in a year, is associated with dropping out of school, delinquent behavior and substance use, and academic failure in high school (McCray, 2006; Teasley, 2004).

These potential universal benefits of school attendance and active school participation in organized activities are known but ethnic minority children from low socioeconomic status families living in low-

resourced neighborhoods lack access and engagement in these enriching activities (Child Trends, 2015a; Afterschool Alliance, 2014). Although very few studies exist of ethnic minority youth's participation in school-based afterschool activities (e.g., Blomfield & Barber, 2009; Busseri, Rose-Krasnor, Willoughby, & Chalmers, 2006; Denault & Poulin, 2009), some data suggest when schools emphasize support and facilitate children's attendance and involvement in the school setting and away from unstructured neighborhood activity, the negative effects of income and parents' level of education on student success are decreased or even eliminated (Morrissey, Hutchison, & Winsler, 2014; Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman, 2007; Reyes, Gillock, Kobus, & Sanchez, 2000). In fact, increase in student involvement in organized afterschool activities and steady school attendance have been associated with early positive academic outcomes because this increased academic and social skills, leading to academic success among students from low-SES families (Hill & Craft, 2003; Morrissey, Hutchison, & Winsler, 2014). Moreover, school involvement is also associated with nonacademic outcomes such as student and parent satisfaction with school and fewer discipline problems (Hiatt-Michael, 2006; LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011), which can be even more impactful for low-SES families who traditionally do not have strong relationships with schools and school personnel (Kim, 2009). School activities increase social networks and cultural capital, which can be important to leveraging student access to additional support such as academic enrichment, subject tutoring, cultural and linguistic insight, and extended curriculum opportunities beyond the classroom and school (Barlow & Villarejo, 2004; Cosden, Morrison, Albanese, & Macias, 2001; Sheldon, Arbreton, Hopkins, & Grossman, 2010). Ethnic and linguistic minority families may benefit the most from these school-based resources, yet may be unaware of their availability, or face the most challenges in access, especially if information is not available in their native language (Quiocho & Daoud, 2006; Smith, Stern, & Shatrova, 2008). Latina/o students, in particular, are disproportionately at risk of not having access to academically enriching opportunities outside of school and in their homes. A report by The Urban Institute (Rawlings et al., 2007) showed that Latina/o families, particularly immigrant Latina/o families, are disproportionately at risk for not completing high school, having limited English skills, and being poor – all important for economic advancement, and all closely interconnected with the ability to provide children with an enriching scholastic home environment. These trends are further compounded by data that show Latina/o students attend some of the nation's most poorly-funded schools, resulting in disadvantages such as low-quality afterschool programs or none whatsoever (Freelon, Bertrand, & Rogers, 2012; Gándara, 2010).

Although Latina/o families often hold high educational aspirations or hopes for academic achievement for their children (Behnke, Piercy, & Diversi, 2004; Kirk, Lewis-Moss, Nilsen, & Colvin, 2011), data suggest that low-income and Latina/o students are at greater risk of school absenteeism and face significant

barriers to participating in high-quality afterschool activities compared to white students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Flores-Gonzalez, 2000). One estimate suggests that around 20 percent of fourth and eighth grade Latina/o students are missing three or more days of school a month, and this number is higher among Latina/o students from schools serving a higher number of low-income students (Child Trends, 2015a). Although few comprehensive and nationally-representative records of student participation in afterschool programs exist, one estimate from The Afterschool Alliance suggests Latina/o student levels of participation in organized afterschool activities have trended towards reaching an all-time high over the last two decades, from 15 percent in 2004 to 21 percent in 2009 to 29 percent in 2014. Despite the record growth in afterschool participation among Latina/o students, Latina/o parents still report experiencing more barriers to enrolling their children in school-based afterschool programs compared to white parents (Flores-Gonzalez, 2000). Most Latina/o parents value the role of afterschool programs in providing an environment that keeps their children safe and out of trouble while they are at work (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). However, there remains a significant number of Latina/o children with unstructured time after regular school hours. According to The Afterschool Alliance, approximately 1.4 million children remain alone and unsupervised during the afterschool hours and spend an average of 7.3 hours per week unsupervised after school (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). This number signals the ongoing need and unmet demand for afterschool programs among Latina/o parents and their school-age children.

The number of school-age Latina/o children in the United States has set a growing impetus for studying predictors of academic achievement and retention among Latina/o students. One in four children in the U.S. is now Latina/o (Pew, 2018), and roughly one-third are living in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015) and make up the majority of children of immigrants in the U.S. (Fortuny, Capps, Simms, & Chaudry, 2009). Across all ages, Latinos constitute a large segment of the U.S. population, comprising 17.3% of the U.S. population, and the total is projected to increase to about one-third in 2060 (Pew, 2015). Research on Latina/o children and youth can have implications for a large and growing segment of the U.S. population. Despite growing interest and burgeoning research on ethnic minority children's development, few of these studies have utilized within-group analyses to test predictors of children's positive development among Latina/o students. Only recently have a few scholars studying Latina/o student achievement and school participation utilized strengths-based approaches (e.g., Baker & DeWyngaert, 2018; Quirk, Nylund-Gibson, & Furlong, 2013).

The significant growth of single-parent and dual-earner households in recent years can translate to millions of children unsupervised after school and some with unreliable and unpredictable modes of transportation to and from school. Since the 1960's, the percentage of single-parent households has nearly

tripled (9 percent to 26 percent) and dual-earner households have more than doubled (25 percent to 60 percent) (Pew, 2015). Contemporary Latina/o families are following similar national family demographic trends; although many children in Latina/o families are living with both parents at home (61 percent), a quarter of Latina/o children are living in single-mother households (Child Trends, 2015b). Previous studies show evidence for the advantages of a second parent at home as they can provide additional forms of instrumental support such as monitoring, supervision, and co-parent support in caretaking tasks such as dropping off or picking up a child to and from school (Domina, 2005; Fisher, Leve, O'Leary, & Leve, 2003; Henry, 2007). An additional parent who can provide supervision and monitor a child's whereabouts may be especially important during the early adolescent years, a time when identity formation is most active and when youth are most likely to seek out opportunities and experiences that suit their interests (Meeus, 2011). Few scholars who study rates of school attendance and afterschool activity participation have accounted for outside sources of instrumental support that may be provided by close friends or extended family, especially among Latina/o families. Therefore, it is not yet clear if and how instrumental social support is linked to student school attendance and afterschool activity participation, and if this additional support is more salient for single-parent households compared to two-parent households. There are empirical studies that document the cumulative effect of instrumental social support and co-parental support on multiple markers of family well-being (Finch & Vega, 2003; Henly, Danziger, & Offer, 2005); it is less clear, however, if this effect is still present in the absence of a co-parent or romantic partner in the home. For single-parent households, instrumental social support can serve as a supplemental source of support in absence of a second parent. Overall, researchers must also consider how children's school attendance rates and afterschool activity participation fit within and outside the home niche.

Student attendance and participation in afterschool programs may stem from parental expectations of all-around scholastic performance and achievement. This association can be supported by prior scholarship that has shown positive relationships between Latina/o adolescents' perceptions of parental monitoring and academic motivation (Henry, Plunkett, & Sands, 2011; Plunkett, Behnke, Sands, & Choi, 2009). In general, academic achievement among children who come from families of historically disadvantaged backgrounds, such as low familial income, low education, and single-parent households, is disproportionately low in comparison to children from more advantaged families (Popenoe, 2009). These trends are further exacerbated by the neighborhood conditions that most Latina/o children and families are challenged with. Latina/o children and families tend to reside in Latina/o majority neighborhoods where half or more of residents are Latina/o. On average, Latina/o majority neighborhoods are low-income (less than \$25,000), and a considerably large share of residents in these neighborhoods is made up of immigrants (Pew, 2004). Consequently, neighborhoods with low-income residents of color may mean

fewer resources as a result of historical red lining in these areas (Metzger, 2000; Mitchell & Elwood, 2012). Students who reside in better quality neighborhoods outperform students who reside in low-resourced neighborhoods as they are more likely exposed to positive adult role models in the neighborhood, supportive and tight-knit social networks, and organized adult supervision (Ainsworth, 2002; Eamon, 2005; Gonzales, Cauce, Friedman, & Mason, 1996). Two of the most important and interconnected systems impacting children's early school success are home and school. Specifically, the home conditions are a form of social capital that links key developmental contexts (i.e., home and school) that are often associated with positive school performance (Eamon, 2015; Garas-York, 2010; Kuperminc, Darnell, & Alvarez-Jimenez, 2008). Few studies on children's academic achievement, however, move beyond the home setting to account for individual perceptions of structural neighborhood conditions and their connection to the school. Although structural components of neighborhoods can appear to constitute a distal part of the ecological niche for student school involvement, the perceived conditions of one's neighborhood can be proximal settings where children learn, grow and develop. According to the *ecological framework* (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), children function within multiple contexts or ecologies that influence each other and interact through transactions to shape a child's development. A relationship between a child's neighborhood and school can be considered part of the mesosystem as these two immediate settings (i.e., microsystems) interact to exert unique effects on children and youth (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Neighborhoods and members within neighborhoods are situated between the home and school environments, and together they form key proximal contexts that can justify the need for steady school attendance and participation in structured afterschool activities. Socioeconomically disadvantaged children and youth may reap greater benefits from safe and cohesive neighborhood environments, yet socioeconomically disadvantaged parents and youth often live in impoverished disorderly neighborhoods lacking social capital to bring to bear on school activities (e.g., Hill & Taylor, 2004). Further compounding the lack of available afterschool programs in some schools are the substantially higher risks of dropping out of high school among students who reside in disadvantaged neighborhoods compared to students residing in more affluent neighborhoods, homes and schools (Perreira, Harris, & Lee, 2006). The present study aims to build on existing work, while highlighting the connections between home and school in order to consider how neighborhoods and support networks may buffer children from risks to their school involvement.



## Present Study

In the current study, we take an ecological approach to examine how school attendance and participation in afterschool activities vary by neighborhood-to-home connections. As much as household composition (e.g., number of household residents) can vary, neighborhoods can differ greatly by their sociodemographic composition (e.g., ethnic enclaves), appearance (e.g., unkept front lawns, broken windows), and by private and public policy decisions (e.g., local ordinance) that affect neighborhood-level conditions such as unkept sidewalks or unfixed potholes (Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004). To best examine the pathways through which neighborhood conditions are transmitted to affect student school involvement and participation in organized afterschool activities, it is important to utilize an ecological lens and go beyond Census data to examine individual-, family-, and neighborhood-level processes. Although a burgeoning body of research and theoretical frameworks delineate the pathways through which neighborhood quality can affect family-level factors and children's development and well-being (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2001; 2003; 2004), there is still a limited understanding regarding if and how these pathways and mechanisms apply to single-parent and two-parent Latina/o families. Also, little work has investigated the role of perceived social support in mediating these pathways for both single- and two-parent families. Maintaining social and familial networks is a central feature of family life among Latina/o families (Updegraff & Umaña-Taylor, 2015), therefore, it is important to account for these key sources of support in Latina/o students' school involvement in the face of neighborhood disadvantage. Studies of school success have focused mainly on academic achievement or performance, and although these domains are central to closing the achievement gap, other correlates of school success such as school attendance and involvement in organized afterschool activities, especially in junior and high school, may set children on pathways for continued success in school.

Taken together, in the present study, we consider specific neighborhood-level risks and strengths to student school attendance and participation in afterschool activities, and the mediating role of perceived instrumental social support networks in the context of those risks and benefits.

### Research questions:

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1. Are neighborhood conditions among Latina/o families associated with student school attendance and involvement in organized afterschool activities?
2. Does perceived instrumental social support mediate the association between neighborhood conditions and student school attendance and involvement in organized afterschool activities?

The literature on neighborhood conditions and student attendance and involvement in afterschool activities among Latina/o families is too scant to make any definitive hypotheses. Even less clear from the literature is whether these pathways and associations function differently for single-parent vs. two-parent families.

A series of path models will be computed to test the following hypotheses:

H1: Neighborhood conditions (*organization; safety; cohesion; disorder*) at Wave 2 significantly predict student school days missed and participation in organized afterschool activities at Wave 3 among Latina/o students living in single-parent and two-parent households.

H2: Perceived instrumental social support (Waves 2 and 3) will mediate the associations between neighborhood conditions (Wave 2; *organization; safety; cohesion; disorder*) and student school days missed and participation in organized afterschool activities (Wave 3), such that instrumental social support at both Waves would predict student school days missed and participation in organized afterschool activities.

Multigroup comparison methods (Bollen, 1989) will be applied to the path model above to compare differences between single-parent and two-parent families. Individual paths will then be tested to measure difference across family types.

## Method

### Data and Participants

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Data from this project originate from the second and third Waves of household survey questionnaires out of the *Making Connections* Survey, funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF). NORC at the University of Chicago collected the survey data. The *Making Connections* Survey study is part of a larger initiative funded by the AECF focused on the philosophy of neighborhood transformation and family development across multiple, low-income sites in the United States. The *Making Connections* Initiative is a collaboration of organizations and residents working together to improve the outcomes of disadvantaged children by strengthening families, neighborhoods, and local services. Through multiple phases over a ten-year period, AECF funded a longitudinal survey at two points in time for three sites and at three points in time in seven sites. The survey was conducted in selected households in participating neighborhoods from the following ten cities: Denver, Colorado; Des Moines, Iowa; Hartford, Connecticut; Indianapolis, Indiana; Louisville, Kentucky; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Oakland, California;

Providence, Rhode Island; San Antonio, Texas; and White Center, Washington. Survey data at Wave 3 were not collected from Milwaukee, Oakland, or Hartford. The baseline survey was fielded in each of the ten *Making Connections* neighborhoods, and in each county that contained each *Making Connections* neighborhood. The Wave 2 survey was fielded in the neighborhoods only. Wave 2 was completed between 2005 and 2007 in the same ten sites. The Wave 3 cycle, scheduled between 2008 and 2011, was conducted in seven of the ten sites. In selecting the survey respondents in these households, first a focus child was selected at random; the resident adult who knew the child best was then interviewed for the study survey. Respondents had to be 18 years of age or older to be interviewed and had to be living in the selected household. No data were collected directly from children. On average, 16 respondents from within each neighborhood of the 413 *Making Connections* neighborhoods were interviewed. As a token of appreciation, respondents were given \$20 for their participation in a 45-minute, paper-and-pencil survey. Interviews were conducted in person or by telephone. In cases of limited English-speaking participants, translated materials and interviews were offered and employed by a bilingual interviewer or an interpreter of the interviewer's choosing, which typically was a trusted relative, neighbor, or friend. The median size of the ten *Making Connections* survey neighborhoods is 4.92 square miles and includes a population of over 30,000 people (Coulton et al., 2009).

The present study uses a sample of Latina/o parents ( $N=1,053$ ; 84% female) who reported on their 10-17-year-old children. The present investigation draws data from the second and third Waves of the *Making Connections* study. The current study sample is limited to households in which, at both Waves, a single parent was living with no other adults ( $n=684$ ) or living with a spouse ( $n=369$ ). Only parents who were the primary respondents at both the second and third Waves of the study and resided in the same household at the time of data collection were included in the analysis. Households in which there was another adult or relative living in the household besides the spouse at each Wave were not included. Data were collected from a total of 17 neighborhoods in seven city sites, with a majority of respondents residing in San Antonio, TX (43 percent), Denver, CO (22 percent), and Providence, RI (19 percent). Parents were on average 42 years of age ( $SD = 14.52$ ). The majority of Latina/o parents were of Mexican-origin (46 percent), followed by Puerto Rican (16 percent), and other Central and South American (38 percent). Twenty eight percent of the parents ( $n = 295$ ) reported earning at least a high school diploma or equivalent. Less than half of the respondents completed their interview in Spanish (39 percent). The sample included considerable variability in economic disadvantage at Waves 2 (\$23,803;  $SD = 20,739$ ) and 3 (\$20,579;  $SD = 23,098$ ). Child sex in this sample was about equally split, with 52 percent of the sample being boys. See Tables 1-3 for additional demographic descriptives.

## Measures

The *Making Connections* survey included a combination of previously validated scales and original items.

**Neighborhood cohesion.** A five-item scale (e.g., Collins et al., 2014; Sampson et al., 1997) of collective efficacy in the neighborhood was used to measure neighborhood cohesion. Items included “People in my neighborhood are willing to help their neighbors”; “People in my neighborhood generally don’t get along with each other”. Items were adapted from existing scales including the Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Study (Sastry et al., 2006), and the Child and Family Well-Being Study. A mean score was computed. Cronbach’s Alpha amounted to .87 at Wave 2.

**Neighborhood disorder.** An eight-item Likert-scale (with the following values: 0=Does not occur; 6=Very Common) was used to measure levels of neighborhood disorder. Respondents were asked questions that relate to the presence of graffiti, prostitution, racial incidents, and gangs and gang activity in the neighborhood. Cronbach’s Alpha resulted in .85 at Wave 2. A mean score was computed for this variable.

**Neighborhood safety.** A six-item Likert-scale (with values 1=Disagree Very Strongly; 7=Agree Very Strongly) was used to measure levels of safety in the neighborhood. Respondents were asked questions that relate to feeling safe at home at night, criminal activity limited to outsiders, or safety of outdoor child’s play. Cronbach’s Alpha amounted to .72 at Wave 2.

**Neighborhood social control.** A five-item Likert-scale represented neighborhood social control. Respondents were asked about the likelihood that their neighbors could be counted on to intervene in various ways if, for example, children were skipping school and hanging out on a street corner, children were spray painting graffiti on a local building, children were showing disrespect to an adult (Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods; Sampson et al., 1997). Cronbach’s Alpha resulted in .81 at Wave 2. A mean score was computed for this variable.

**Instrumental support.** Respondent’s perception of instrumental support was measured as a dichotomous variable where “YES=2; NO=1” was equivalent to a respondent ever having received instrumental support (e.g., borrowing money) from either a family member or a friend.

**Participation in organized afterschool activities.** Residents who responded to a dichotomous variable (YES=2; NO=1) were asked to respond to whether the child participated in organized activities outside of school hours or on weekends during the past year, including sports teams; music, dance, or language classes; youth groups, clubs, etc.

**Student school attendance.** Respondents were asked to respond to an open-ended question regarding their child's school attendance. Respondents were specifically asked to enter the number of days of school the child missed in the past four weeks, excluding school vacation days or holidays.

## Analytic Strategy

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First, preliminary analyses were performed by examining the descriptive statistics and correlations among all variables. Second, independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to examine mean-level differences in key study variables by family structure. Third, data screening procedures were used to test for outliers and normality in the dependent variables. Lastly, all continuous independent variables were mean centered.

Path analysis were computed in *Mplus* 8.2 software (Muthén & Muthén) to address the research hypotheses. An identical model for single-parent and two-parent families is presented in Figure 1, which represents the proposed paths between exogenous independent variables, mediators, and endogenous variables. A path modeling approach was utilized over linear regression in order to create greater model specificity and parsimony from multiple measures. Path modeling would also allow measurement of direct and indirect pathways from neighborhood conditions through instrumental social support and then to student school attendance and participation (see Figure 2).

## Results

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### Descriptive Statistics and Preliminary Analyses

Correlations, means, and standard deviations of all variables used in the current study are presented in Table 4. In line with collective socialization and contagion theoretical frameworks (see Jencks & Mayer, 1990, for a review), neighborhood cohesion was positively correlated with neighborhood safety and social control but negatively correlated with neighborhood disorder. Consistent with the literature, neighborhood cohesion was positively correlated with years living in the neighborhood while neighborhood disorder was correlated with fewer years in the neighborhood. Instrumental social support was negatively correlated with years in the neighborhood, pointing to the importance of residential stability in a neighborhood in establishing friendships in the area. Instrumental social support was negatively correlated with school absenteeism, showing a bivariate indicator of the potential protective role of social instrumental support. Consistent with prior work, youth participation in afterschool activities positively correlated with parent's level of education but negatively correlated with English-language competency. Two-parent households and single-parent households differed in their scores for neighborhood safety, such that the two-parent families group perceived significantly greater

neighborhood safety ( $M = 4.66$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ) than the single-parent families group ( $M = 4.53$ ,  $SD = 1.38$ ),  $t(1049) = 1.57$ ,  $p = .006$ .

Key path analyses proceeded in four steps: (1) tests of measurement models to assess equivalence of the measures across single-parent and two-parent families; (2) direct-effects structural models to test associations among neighborhood conditions and student outcomes; (3) mediated models to assess the role of perceived instrumental social support; and (4) tests to determine which paths differed across family structure groups.

### Measurement Models

Measurement invariance of the measurement models was tested by measuring statistically similar relations between pathways in both family structure groups. The single-parent households and two-parent household models were structurally identical. To assess fit for each family structure group, measurement models were estimated separately. Separate models for two-parent households (see Figure 3) and single-parent households (see Figure 4) fit the data well. A two-group measurement model across family structures was then tested. In this model, all parameters were restrained to be equal across single-parent and two-parent households, resulting in inadequate model fit under these constraints (combined fit information):  $\chi^2 = 81.08$ ; RMSEA = .0745; CFI = .911. When tested across groups for invariance using a nested significance test with a  $\chi^2$  difference test,  $(\chi^2 = 47.63) - (\chi^2 = 21.04) = (\Delta\chi^2 = 29.6, p < .001)$ , significant differences were found, meaning groups differed in their variances with equality constraints. Moreover, path associations varied by family structure (Bentler, 1990).

### Direct-Effects Study Model

The initial model for this study proposed associations between neighborhood conditions and student school attendance and participation in afterschool activities through a direct path and indirect path via instrumental social support. The first models tested incorporated only direct associations between neighborhood conditions and student school attendance and afterschool activity participation, which were assessed separately for each family structure group. Perceived instrumental social support was included in the model without any specified structural paths. Adequate model fit was observed (CFI = .991; RMSEA = .047).

### Perceived Instrumental Social Support Mediated Model

Perceived instrumental social support variable was included to assess whether parents' perceived support from social networks mediates the link between neighborhood conditions and student school attendance

and afterschool activity participation. As hypothesized, including perceived instrumental social support improved the fit of the model (Cole & Maxwell, 2003). This also led to the positive association between neighborhood social control and participation in organized afterschool activities ( $\beta = .09, p = .067$ ) to fall from significance in the two-parent families group. In the model, perceived instrumental social support was significantly associated with both neighborhood social control and participation in organized afterschool activities. Specifically, there were significant positive associations between neighborhood social control and Wave 3-perceived instrumental social support, thus rendering a strong indirect (mediated) pathway from neighborhood social control and participation in organized afterschool activities through Wave 3-perceived instrumental social support (see Figure 3). As Hoyle and Kenny (1999) note, the power of tests of mediation is greatest when the relation between the mediator and the endogenous variable exceeds the relation between the exogenous variable and the mediator. As shown in Figure 4, the direct paths from neighborhood cohesion and student school days missed and participation in organized afterschool activities were mediated by perceived instrumental social support in the single-parent families group. Specifically, there was a significant negative association between neighborhood cohesion and Wave 3-perceived instrumental social support, and a significant negative association between Wave 3-perceived instrumental social support and school days missed, albeit, a positive association with participation in organized afterschool activities in the single-parent families group.

### Family Structure Comparisons

Multiple group analysis was performed on two final models to determine family structure differences and similarities in the perceived instrumental social support-mediated models. Differences in individual paths were tested (e.g., Rucker, Preacher, Tormala, & Petty, 2011). A two-group model was then assessed where paths significantly differed for two-parent and single-parent families. Tests revealed that the paths between neighborhood conditions and instrumental social support at Waves 2 and 3 differed across two-parent and single-parent families. Across both family structures, neighborhood social control had a strong association with perceived instrumental social support, though, these associations differed by Wave. Specifically, among two-parent families, neighborhood social control was associated with instrumental social support at Wave 3; among single-parent families, however, neighborhood social control had a strong association with instrumental social support at Wave 2. In the single-parent family model, neighborhood cohesion was indirectly associated with school days missed and participation in organized afterschool activities, however, in the two-parent family model, neighborhood social control had a significant indirect association with participation in organized afterschool activities.

## Discussion

The findings of this study shed further light on the importance of considering neighborhood conditions and social sources of support when studying Latina/o students' presence at school and involvement in organized afterschool activities. Among the U.S. youth population, Latinos are the largest (Pew, 2015), and many of these youth are being raised in structurally diverse families, namely single-parent and two-parent families (Child Trends, 2015b). Therefore, it is important to account for the variability in the challenges and strengths single-parent and two-parent households possess, and study the social networks and ecological contexts that help them thrive and function their best. Although burgeoning research in children's school success has shed light on the importance of family-level variables in predicting school outcomes, very little work has accounted for neighborhood-level variables in these same studies, especially work devoted specifically to Latina/o students from diverse family structures. This study, therefore, worked to fill this gap in the literature by exploring how multiple and distinct neighborhood conditions (i.e., cohesion, disorder, safety, and control) are associated with Latina/o student school involvement. Specifically, this study tested the direct association between neighborhood conditions and two important yet understudied markers of school involvement: school attendance and participation in organized afterschool activities. Although student academic achievement and performance is a characteristic that is directly connected to long-term scholastic success after high school, this study sought to measure other important all-around scholastic activities that are consistently related to student academic performance. With a disparate gap in school attendance and need for afterschool involvement opportunities among ethnic minority youth, specifically low-income Latina/o students, these school involvement venues may be viable targets of intervention for school psychology professionals and administrators. With late federal initiatives such as No Child Left Behind or other high-stakes testing policies and implementations in public middle and high schools, school involvement can be an uncharted area worthy of attention and intervention.

The key findings from this study suggest neighborhood conditions play a crucial role in Latina/o students' days of school missed and participation in organized afterschool activities through their interactions with parents' levels of perceived social support networks. However, as demonstrated by the path modeling analysis computed, the dynamics of the interactions between neighborhood conditions and perceived social support can vary by family structure, namely whether the parent reporting was living alone or with a spouse. In families where a reporting parent was living with a spouse, or a two-parent family, social control was positively associated with perceived instrumental social support and student participation in organized afterschool activities. These associations can mean greater perceived instrumental social



support from friends and relatives and a neighborhood with neighbors willing to intervene if there was disorder or acts of delinquency in the environment are associated with greater likelihood of students participating in structured activities in schoolgrounds after school. This finding suggests having proactive neighbors willing to step in to stop a child from getting into trouble or to get him/her away from a troubling environment, along with having a strong social and familial network, can encourage Latina/o students to stay involved in positive roles and activities at school and away from unstructured or delinquent acts. Many of the families who were recruited and interviewed for this study, particularly in this sample, were low-income (household average income: \$23,803) and resided in mostly low-income and low-resourced neighborhoods, indicating a greater probability of disorder and danger in the neighborhood. It is important to note, however, that this finding was detected only among two-parent families and did not apply to Latina/o students from single-parent families. This research is in line with recent research suggesting two-parent, married households are nearly three times more likely than single-parent families to live in a neighborhood described by neighbors and families as supportive and safe (Bramlett & Radel, 2014). Moreover, it may be that Latina/o students from two-parent families are reaping the benefits of living in neighborhoods where neighbors are likely to be invested in and monitor the activity occurring in their neighborhood.

Among Latina/o students from single-parent families, the findings suggest neighborhood cohesion is a more prominent predictor of students' school attendance and participation in organized afterschool activities than any of the three other neighborhood conditions. However, these associations only existed through the mediating role of parents' perceived instrumental social support at Wave 3. At Wave 3, Latina/o students were likely to miss fewer days of school and more likely to participate in a structured afterschool activity when parents reported living in a cohesive neighborhood environment in the previous Wave. However, access to a friend or relative for help, if needed, was less utilized among these families. It may be that in a cohesive neighborhood where neighbors are willing to help one another, parents may feel less of a need to consider outside friends or relatives for help if the circumstance were to arise. Instead, parents may turn to their neighbors to whom they feel connected and can trust in times of need. On the other hand, it may be that single parents are likely to view their neighbors as helpful or as more willing to help if they do not have a strong social network of friends or relatives. Having neighbors one can confide in for help and support can be especially important for single parents and their school-age children who may need an extra hand to drop off a child at or pick her/him up from school. Put differently, not having these extra sources of support nearby can mean the difference between having and not having transportation to and from school and/or an afterschool activity. It is important to note that all of the families in this study's sample had resided in the same household at both Waves of the study. The lapse

of time between the two Waves when data were collected encompasses a period of approximately six years, meaning, families, regardless of whether they are new arrivals to the neighborhood, to the region, or to the country, as in the case of recent immigrant Latina/o families, had a considerable amount of time to build a relationship with their neighbors. This may mean that the benefits of a cohesive neighborhood in regard to student school involvement may not be detectable until a period of years have lapsed to allow those connections to grow.

Overall, the findings point to new directions and areas of inquiry when exploring pathways to improving the scholastic experience and performance of ethnic minority students living in diverse families and neighborhood conditions. A few notable limitations of the study include the absence of a measure of school involvement in the schoolgrounds directly from teachers or school personnel. Solely using parental reports may not be a reliable method to obtain these sources of information, especially due to the lack of knowledge parents may have about their children's whereabouts at school or after school. Another notable limitation is that more objective measures of neighborhood conditions were not assessed in this study. Census-tract data or geographic information technology or tools can help pinpoint exact data regarding neighborhood conditions such as crime rates, cases of citizen's arrests, or collective neighborhood projects (i.e., beautification or gardening neighborhood projects). This study, however, utilized a within-group analysis of a population group (i.e., Latina/o families), which some scholars (Schwartz et al., 2014) suggest is a powerful approach to studying ethnic-minority families, contrary to comparative studies. Also, this study utilized three-layers of the ecological systems theory, namely family-, school-, and neighborhood-level characteristics, which moves beyond traditional techniques that limit the unit of analysis to a single-family household. To that end, this study encourages future scholars to move beyond the family household and explore the peripheral environments of the home that sorely need further investigation to improve the conditions, both social and academic, in which students learn and grow.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

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The findings of this study point to social support as one key approach for practitioners to target when working to bolster school attendance and participation in school and afterschool hours among Latina/o students from two-parent and single-parent families, especially in the face of neighborhood risks. This study underscores the need for community leaders, practitioners and municipal policymakers to help provide resources and services that assist families to make or maintain social connection with those living close to them and to be wary of the social forces breaking these key connections.

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**Table 1.** Sample Descriptives of Families from the *Making Connections* Study (N = 1,053)

Characteristic	N(%)	M(SD)	Min	Max
Single-parent household	684 (65)			
Two-parent household	369 (35)			
Age of parent reporter		42.64 (14.52)	18	54
Years lived in the city		22.14 (14.63)	0	50
Household annual income (\$)		23,803 (20,739)	0	160,000
<b>National origin of parent reporter</b>				
Mexico	484 (46)			
Puerto Rico	169 (16)			
Cuban	10 (1)			
Other	400 (38)			
<b>Language of the interview</b>				
English	642 (61)			
Spanish	411 (39)			
<b>Parent's highest level of education</b>				
< 8th grade	232 (22)			
> 8th grade but no HS completion	244 (23)			
GED	76 (7)			
HS graduation	219 (21)			
Trade/vocational school	42 (4)			
1 to 3 years of college	173 (16)			
Graduated four year college	45 (4)			
Graduate degree or higher	22 (2)			
<b>Enough money for food</b>				
Yes	757 (72)			
No	283 (27)			
<b>Parent reporter employed</b>				
Yes	582 (55)			
No	469 (45)			



**Table 2.** Sample Descriptives of Interview City Sites and Neighborhoods (N = 1,053)

	<b>N (%)</b>
<b>Interview city site</b>	
Denver (CO)	228 (22)
Des Moines (IA)	69 (6)
Indianapolis (IN)	10 (1)
San Antonio (TX)	461 (43)
White Center (WA)	83 (8)
Louisville (KY)	3 (1)
Providence (RI)	199 (19)
<b>Interview neighborhood site</b>	
Baker (CO)	25 (2)
Boulevard Park (WA)	37 (3)
California (KY)	1 (1)
Cole (CO)	69 (6)
East Des Moines (IA)	42 (4)
Elmwood (RI)	50 (4)
La Alma/Lincoln Park (CO)	60 (6)
Martindale-Brightwood (IN)	3 (1)
Phoenix Hill (KY)	1 (1)
Smoketown (KY)	1 (1)
South East Indianapolis (IN)	7 (1)
South Providence (RI)	77 (7)
Sun Valley (CO)	74 (7)
West Des Moines (IA)	27 (2)
West End (RI)	72 (6)
West San Antonio (TX)	461 (44)
White Center (WA)	46 (4)

**Table 3.** Sample Descriptives of Target Children from the *Making Connections* Study (N =1,053)

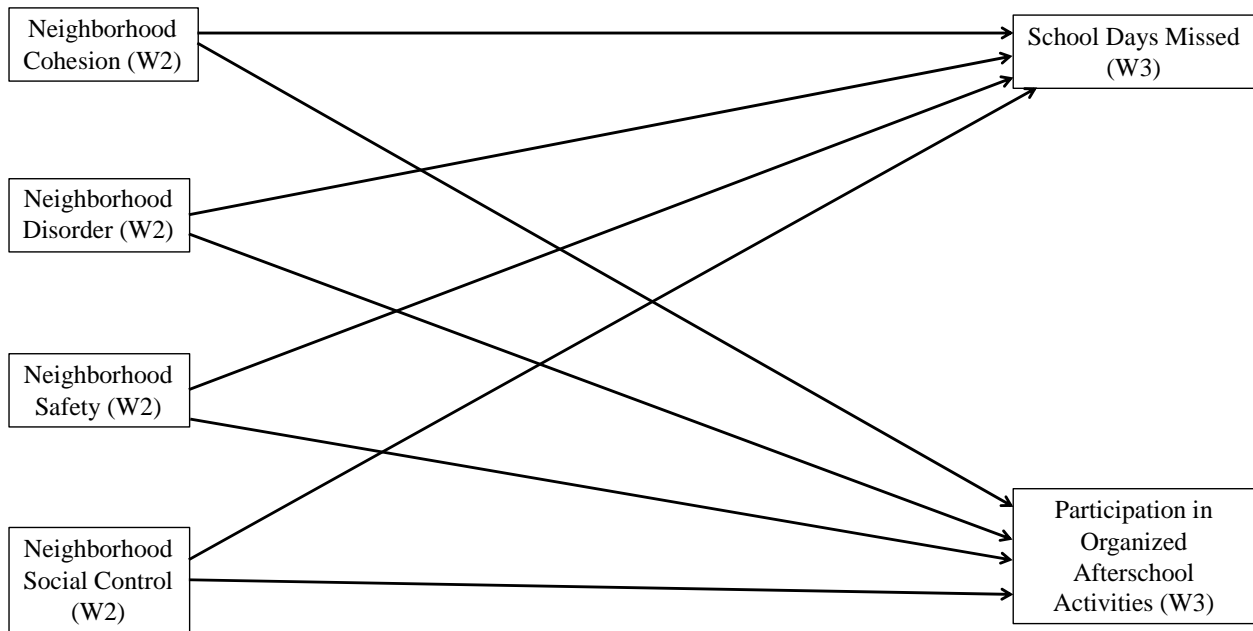
Characteristic	N (%)	M (SD)	Min	Max
Child age (Wave 3)		12.04 (3.24)	10	17
10	133 (13)			
11	128 (12)			
12	119 (11)			
13	120 (10)			
14	143 (14)			
15	136 (13)			
16	142 (13)			
17	124 (12)			
<b>Child sex</b>				
Male	558 (53)			
Female	495 (47)			
<b>Child has asthma</b>				
Yes	190 (18)			
No	863 (82)			
<b>Child has health insurance</b>				
Yes	800 (76)			
No	252 (24)			

**Table 4.** Correlations, Means, Standard Deviations, and Range of Key Study Variables from Wave 2 of the *Making Connections* Study (N =1,053)

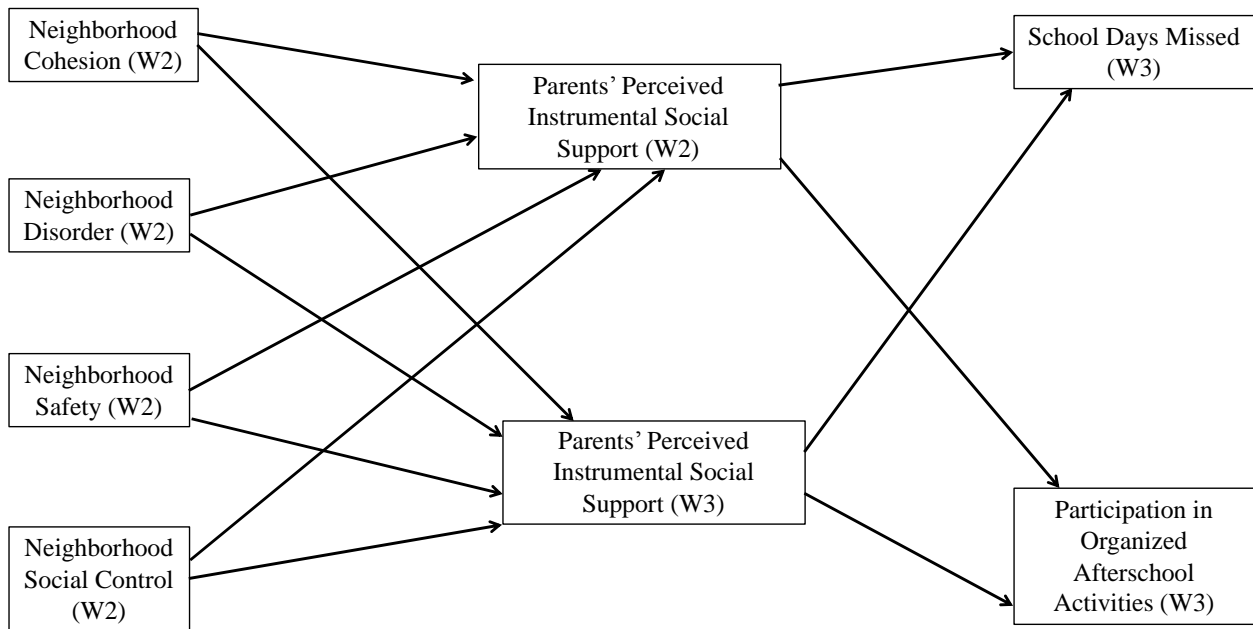
Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Neighborhood cohesion	—										
2. Neighborhood disorder	-.42**	—									
3. Neighborhood safety	.44**	.41**	—								
4. Neighborhood social control	.42**	-.40**	.38**	—							
5. Instrumental social support	.04	.03	.04	.01	—						
6. School days missed <sup>a</sup>	-.04	.01	-.01	.02	.08*	—					
7. Child health	.08*	-.06	.09**	.04	.01	-.08*	—				
8. Participation in school activities <sup>a</sup>	-.01	.06	.03	-.01	-.01	-.07	.13**	—			
9. Parent’s level of education	.02	-.03	.03	-.12**	-.04	-.02	.18**	.19**	—		
10. Parent’s English competency	.06	-.03	-.04	.12*	.11*	.01	-.16**	-.21**	-.36**	—	
11. Years in the neighborhood	.16**	.19**	.07*	.04	-.09**	-.01	.04	.09	.07	-.12**	—
M	3.27	2.32	4.47	3.41	1.32	1.21	4.01	1.52	3.22	2.13	9
SD	.61	.64	1.36	.98	.45	2.47	.97	.49	1.83	.94	10
Range	0-5	0-6	1-7	1-5	1-2	0-28	1-5	1-2	1-9	1-4	0-35

Note. a = Wave 3.  
\*p < .05. \*\*p < .01.

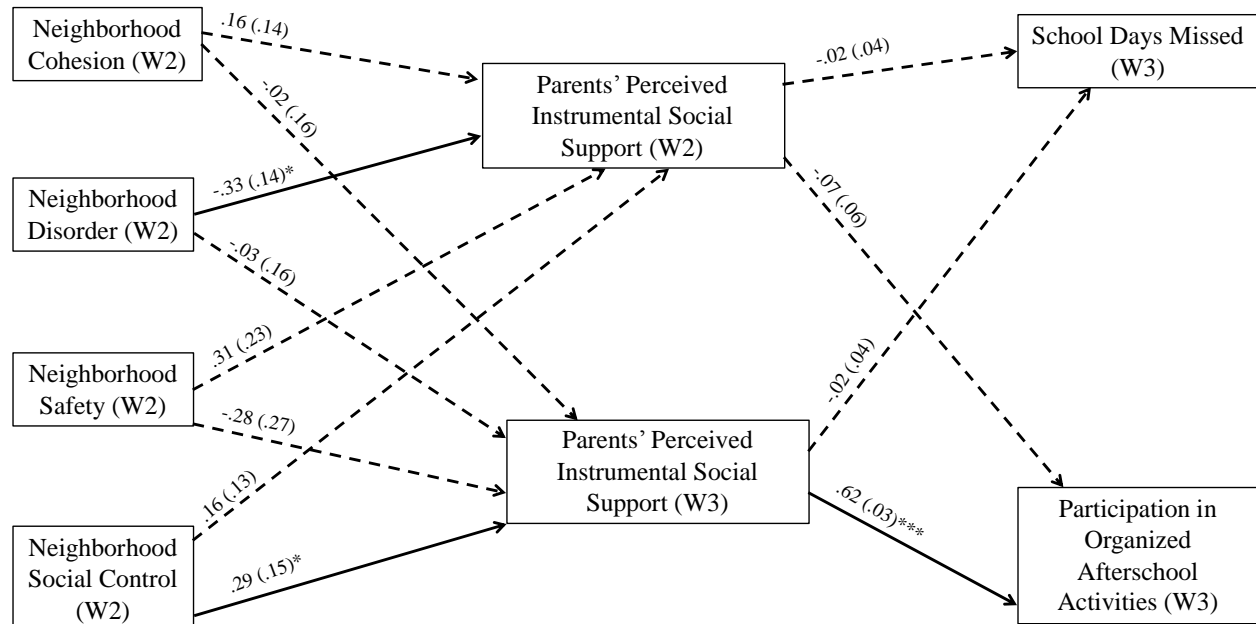
**Figure 1.** Conceptual and Analytical Direct-Effects Model Predicting Student School Attendance and Participation in Organized Afterschool Activities Among Single-Parent and Two-Parent Families.



**Figure 2.** Conceptual and Analytical Indirect Effects Model Predicting Student School Attendance and Participation in Organized Afterschool Activities Among Single-Parent and Two-Parent Families.



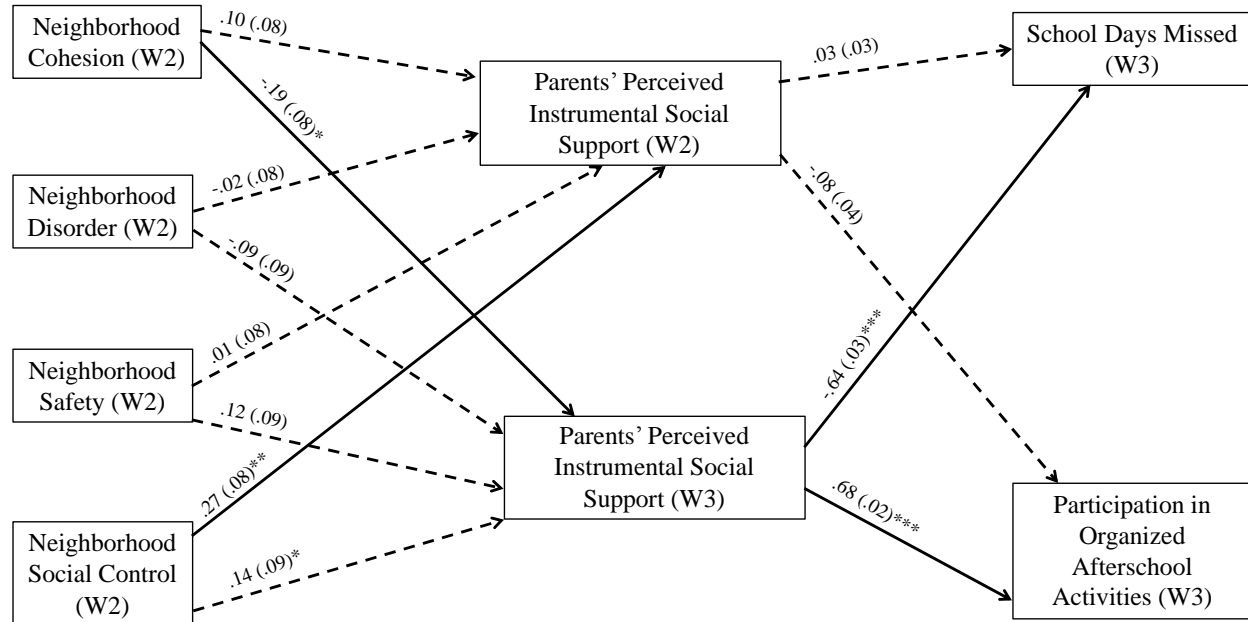
**Figure 3.** Path Model Demonstrating Indirect Effects of Neighborhood Conditions on Student Participation in Organized Afterschool Activities via Perceived Instrumental Social Support in Two-Parent, Latina/o Families with 10-17-year-old children from the Second and Third Waves of the *Making Connections* Study ( $n = 369$ )



Note. Solid lines are significant; Dashed lines are not significant. Model Fit:  $\chi^2 = 10.47$ ,  $df = 10$ ,  $p = .411$ ; RMSEA = .010; CFI = .91.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

**Figure 4.** Path Model Demonstrating Indirect Effects of Neighborhood Conditions on Student Attendance and Student Participation in Organized Afterschool Activities via Perceived Instrumental Social Support in Single-Parent, Latina/o Families with 10-17-year-old children from the Second and Third Waves of the *Making Connections* Study ( $n = 684$ )



Note. Solid lines are significant; Dashed lines are not significant. Model Fit:  $\chi^2 = 8.46$ ,  $df = 10$ ,  $p = .401$ ; RMSEA = .009; CFI = .99.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .