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The Spaces Between:

An Examination of Parents' Perceptions of
Neighborhood Cohesion and Child Well-
being

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at the UNIVERSITY of CHICAGO

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Abstract

Poverty and economic disadvantage have a robust and potent effect that extends through cities to neighborhoods to children and families. Yet, limited studies have examined the dynamic and multileveled processes by which parents' perceptions of their neighborhoods intersect with their children's opportunities. This study utilizes the *Making Connections* Survey longitudinal dataset to examine how parents' perceptions of neighborhood social cohesion and informal social control shape participation in extracurricular activities and perceived educational opportunities within the context of child-, parent-, household-, and community-level data. Findings indicate that only informal social control (and not social cohesion) predicts participation in extracurricular activities, while community and household income are also significant predictors. Comparatively, both social cohesion and informal social control predict increased educational opportunities (satisfaction with schooling). Further, parents of boys are less likely to feel satisfied with their sons' educational opportunities, while household and community characteristics are not associated with perceived educational opportunities. This study offers insight into how parents' perceptions of their neighborhoods may shape their children's well-being within the multiple embedded contexts of their lives.

The Spaces Between: An Examination of Parents' Perceptions of Neighborhood Cohesion and Child Well-being

Disparity caused by income inequality is a rapidly growing and deeply rooted phenomenon that occurs across local and national spaces in the United States. The income gap between the top and bottom 20 percent of the United States is well documented ([Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, 2017](#); Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). Income disparity is also an urgent issue as it has a potent effect on individuals, groups, and societies (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009). It manifests itself across children's lives, including those in neighborhoods where poverty and depressed opportunities for economic mobility have created increased instability. Extensive research has shown that inequality, poverty, race, and ethnicity play an important role in children's social, emotional, and academic well-being (e.g., Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; McLanahan, 2004; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000; Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). Only a limited number of studies, however, have examined the dynamic processes by which parents' perceptions of their neighborhoods intersect with their children's opportunities as they change over time, while accounting for demographic factors across multiple contextual levels that may differentially shape those processes.

Theoretical Perspectives

Decades of psychological, sociological, and demographic research have consistently found that inequality and poverty play an important role in the social, emotional, and academic outcomes of young people (e.g., Bianchi, 1999; Eggebeen & Lichter, 1991; Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Iceland, 2003; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; McLanahan, 2004; Hernandez, 2004; Roeser, Eccles, & Sameroff, 2000; Sirin, 2005; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2009; Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). Yet research has often been limited to separate areas of inquiry. To bridge these varying areas of inquiry, ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) is utilized to frame how the microcontext of neighborhoods shape child development. At its core, ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) assumes that individual development is dependent upon and inextricable from the environment(s) around the child. Rather than focusing on a child's social, cognitive, and physical development as an autonomous organism, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model contends that development is the result of a dynamic transactional relation between individuals and their environment(s). These reciprocal interactions, termed *proximal processes*, "are posited as the primary engines of human development" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, p.798). For example, in an ecological

systems framework, the unit of analysis is not merely what neighborhood a child resides in, but rather how the child and her/his caregivers perceive, experience, and make sense of their neighborhood, which in turn shapes opportunities and activities for their child within that environment (Spencer et al., 1997). Indeed, there are limited studies that allow for this nested nature of development (with the *Making Connections* study as an important exception).

The ecological model views the environment as nested systems ranging from the *microsystem* (most proximal to the individual) to *macrosystem* (more distally situated) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The microsystem is most immediate to the developing child and is marked by ongoing and reciprocal exchanges *within* the contexts of home, family, school, and neighborhood, as well as the reciprocal interactions that occur *between* people in those environments, such as parents, teachers, and peers. The macrosystem encompasses the broader norms, stereotypes, beliefs, expectations, laws, and cultural practices of a society, all of which impact the structure and function of settings (e.g., neighborhoods) and the relational dynamics within those settings. A core assumption of the ecological model is that systems function jointly. One example of this joint functioning is the role of the *mesosystem*, which describes the interactions and relationships that occur between direct microcontexts, such as neighborhood and school. For example, parents' interactions with teachers reflect overlaps in the microcontexts of school and family and the transactional nature of one's ecologies. As such, the macrosystem impacts the individual via proximal processes that operate within microsystems, so it is through parents' perceptions of their neighborhoods, and subsequently opportunities and activities associated with those perceptions, that values from the macrosystem (including larger processes that drive income disparity) are manifested, enacted, and experienced.

When probing this link between micro- and macro-contexts, the bioecological model lacks explicit attention to how the cultural ecology shapes development. In particular, it fails to articulate how disparities or power hierarchies that are built into the macrosystem impact normative developmental processes. Key theoretical extensions of ecological systems theory have attended to these social realities, specifically with regard to low-income and racial-ethnic minority youth living in the United States (e.g., Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997). These theoretical extensions argue that social position variables, such as race and gender, are a key component of those ecologies. Garcia Coll places beliefs systems about race, ethnicity, and class at the center of her theory of human development and asserts that developmental processes are deeply affected by a child's social position or "social address" (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender) within a social-stratified society (Garcia Coll & Szalacha, 2004). She posits that social position variables gain meaning through the macrocontext and have a direct and indirect effect both on individual development, as well as microcontexts of development, such as

neighborhoods. Yet it is not the social position per se that influences development but the cultural *meaning*, and subsequent structures and opportunities associated with that position, that influence developmental processes. Ultimately, social position variables such as race and class gain meaning through beliefs and values perpetuated in the macrocontext, indirectly shaping individual development via social mechanisms (e.g., interactions with others), which in turn create youths' direct environments and outcomes. Thus, ecologically-grounded developmental research is necessitated upon integrating the role of key social position variables, such as race and gender.

Empirical Perspectives

Beyond a theoretical commitment to contextually-based research, scholars are increasingly interested in empirical examinations of how the multiple contexts in which youth are embedded shape and influence developmental processes (e.g., Burton & Price-Spratlen, 1999; Burton, Price-Spratlen, & Spencer, 1997; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Extensive empirical work builds the foundation for its necessity. Of particular importance for the present study are two key areas of research: (1) the role of poverty and inequality as a key predictor of child and youth outcomes; and (2) the impact of neighborhood contexts on the lives of children and youth.

Poverty and inequality. Numerous studies have consistently found that poverty is robustly associated with a range of negative outcomes for children and youth across multiple domains of development, including their psychological, mental, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, language, academic, and physical well-being (see Aber, Bennet, Li, & Conley, 1997; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). These findings do not suggest, however, that poverty “causes” negative outcomes. Rather, as articulated by Yoshikawa and colleagues (2012), poverty is felt and experienced in the lives of children and their families via critical mediating mechanisms across varying levels of context. These mediating mechanisms include (1) individual processes, such as child and parent perceptions and beliefs, (2) relational processes, such as interactions and relationships between children and their parents, peers and other key individuals, and (3) institutional processes including those related to schooling and neighborhoods.

Before considering the impact of poverty, it is critical to establish a definition. While research has typically focused on “absolute poverty” – defined as falling below a specific objective external standard of the costs of meeting basic needs – scholars have also called for more nuanced perspectives on poverty (Aber, Jones, & Raver, 2007; Haveman, 2009; Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). For example,

“relative poverty” refers to the experiences of income inequality for low-income individuals, while “subjective poverty” refers to individual perceptions of need in relation to others (Aber, Jones, & Raver, 2007; Haveman, 2009; Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). These definitions are particularly meaningful, given that in the United States and other nations with higher annual GDP, income inequality is a particularly powerful measure, and strongly predicts outcomes such as life expectancy (Kawashi, Kennedy, & Wilkinson, 1999). This broader perspective highlights the need for empirical work to examine intra-group variation within low-income families and communities. Such work is necessary to build upon our understanding of *how* poverty becomes apparent in the lives of children and their families. Furthermore, it may be used to help identify strengths and opportunities occurring within low-income communities that help to support child well-being.

Neighborhoods as key developmental microcontext. Emerging alongside empirical work illustrating the impact of poverty on development, developmental psychology has displayed growing interest in measuring and examining how development differentially unfolds within neighborhood contexts (Burton & Price-Spratlen, 1999; Coulton & Irwin, 2008; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Witherspoon & Hughes, 2014). In fact, children’s residential neighborhoods are particularly important microcontexts of child development (Coulton & Irwin, 2008; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Witherspoon & Hughes, 2014). Such studies have typically focused on neighborhoods that are seen to have structural disadvantage. In particular, historically, institutional policies, such as public housing policy, contributed to deep concentrations of poverty and racial segregation within particular neighborhoods in American cities (Massey, 1996; Massey & Denton, 1993). Simultaneously, sociologists have argued that growing areas of concentrated affluence were typically outside of cities (in the suburbs) in the 1980s and 1990s (Massey, 1996; Massey & Denton, 1993).

In this framework, disadvantaged neighborhoods are typically described as having high rates of poverty, unemployment, single-parent households, violence, incarceration, and residential instability (see Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2009). Such characteristics often overlap and are confounded by race, ethnicity, and immigrant status. Robust and consistent findings illustrate that youth who live in “disadvantaged” neighborhoods are more likely to display externalizing behavior and school problems (see Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; Odgers et al., 2009) and less likely to have social ties (Markowitz, Bellair, Liska, & Liu, 2001). Further, studies indicate that social class, particularly as it relates to disadvantage and marginalization, is an important factor in educational opportunities, which in turn are deeply tied to later school-to-work transitions (Bluestein et al., 2002). Perceptions of economic and income disparities also intersect in critical ways with other social position variables, such as gender and race (Lott & Bullock, 2007). Furthermore, variations in political participation and social action stem from

differing levels of perceived capacity to affect social change which are themselves shaped by experiences of inequality, particularly for young people who are marginalized or disadvantaged due to income or social class (Diemer & Li, 2011).

Across empirical studies of neighborhood influences on child development, findings indicate the importance of both structural and physical, as well as social and relational, components of neighborhood influences on development. These processes are grounded in two key theories: social disorganization theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942) and collective efficacy theory (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997).

Research focused on the physical or structural aspects of neighborhood disadvantage, such as graffiti and dilapidated houses, is most commonly framed via social disorganization theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942). Social disorganization theory argues that structural components of neighborhoods that typify “disorganization” (such as residential instability and poverty), impact the likelihood of residents developing strong community ties, in turn impacting youth behavior and outcomes (e.g., Kingson, Huizinga, & Elliott, 2009).

Beyond the physical components of neighborhoods, strengths-based theories on neighborhood influences highlight the importance of close social ties that may help to protect youth growing up in challenging neighborhood circumstances (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Specifically, scholars have posited the importance of collective socialization and social capital for residents as a psychological construct that functions as the embodiment of general trust of neighbors and connection to community (Johnson & Soroka, 2001). This sense of belonging and identity with one’s neighborhood is believed to help support residents via shared norms, social organization, and extended networks. In particular, Sampson and colleagues (1997, 2008) assert that collective efficacy includes two components: social cohesion and informal social control. Social cohesion includes a sense of shared values, trust, and solidarity among neighbors, whereas social control concentrates on the willingness of neighbors and residents to intervene in times of need. These two aspects of collective efficacy function jointly, with perceptions of informal social control being dependent on having relationships with neighbors that are built on mutual trust (Sampson, 2008). Typically, however, research has focused on these variables as they are associated with neighborhood-level outcomes (such as reduced crime) and youth outcomes (such as incarceration, depression, and academic achievement). More work is needed to move beyond a focus on direct influences of social cohesion and informal social control on youth outcomes. There is a need to understand the intermediary processes that occur within and between microcontexts (in this case, neighborhoods and schools) that may also support our understanding of neighborhood influences on youth outcomes. This is particularly important given that neighborhood and school experiences, while

often studied as separate microcontexts, are deeply intertwined (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Fox & Fine, 2013; Stoudt, Fine & Fox, 2011/12; Cammarota, 2011).

Demographic correlates of neighborhood influence. As posited by Garcia Coll and colleagues (1996), social position variables are critical for understanding variations in neighborhood influences on development. Two key social position variables noted in the extant literature are gender and race. Numerous scholars have illustrated the deeply gendered experiences that boys and girls undergo as they move through their neighborhoods. For example, previous research indicates that girls may feel less connected to their neighborhoods overall (Cobbina, Miller, & Brunson, 2008; Fagg et al., 2008; Karcher & Sass, 2010). Furthermore, a vast literature of work has exposed the deeply racialized and segregated manner in which neighborhoods are structured and experienced. In addition, these experiences are often deeply intersectional, with boys of color feeling particularly targeted (Nelson, Stahl, & Wallace, 2015; Noguera, 2009; Roger et al., 2016). The important role of race in shaping neighborhood experiences may emerge since ethnic minority youth often live in ethnic enclaves or more racially segregated neighborhoods (Brown & Brooks, 2006; Lee & Ferraro, 2007). Such experiences may be associated with higher levels of discrimination (Niwa et al., 2014), which may subsequently lead to a heightened sense of social cohesion and control. Work focused on how race is associated with neighborhood influences on development has typically focused on urban, low-income communities of color and would continue to benefit from the inclusion of diverse urban, low-income families, including white families.

Links to child outcomes. A broad range of existing research has examined how neighborhood influences shape youth outcomes, such as depression and academic achievement, yielding mixed findings regarding direct influences of neighborhood-level disadvantage and youth outcomes (e.g., Cantillon, 2006). Yet, more work is needed to explore the mechanisms by which parents' perceptions of neighborhoods (particularly via social cohesion and informal social control) may ultimately shape their children's well-being. This is particularly important given that previous research has illustrated that parents' and youths' perceptions of neighborhood risk are not necessarily highly correlated (e.g., Burton et al., 1997; O'Neill et al., 2001). One important potential mechanism that should be examined is the mesosystem link between neighborhoods and educational spaces, specifically perceptions of school quality and participation in organized extracurricular activities. Extracurricular, or out-of-school activities are particularly important for low-income and at-risk children and youth, supporting their development and providing supervision and activities when children are not in school (Bartko, 2005). This need is heightened given differences in participation in organized extracurricular activities, with low-income children being less likely to participate in extracurricular activities (Lauver, Little, & Weiss, 2004) even if it is targeted to them. Previous research has also indicated that children of parents who were more

engaged in community volunteering, as well as parents who perceived their neighborhoods as safer, were more likely to have their children participate in out-of-school activities (Coulton & Irwin, 2008). As with variations in perceptions of neighborhood influences, racial and gender differences also emerge in participation in out-of-school activities (Wimer et al., 2006), as well as perceptions of school quality and satisfaction (Lopez, 2006; Nelson et al., 2015; Noguera, 2009). Parents' perceptions of school quality and their voluntary, explicit choices to have their children participate in organized extracurricular activities may be two important pathways or mechanisms that ultimately shape child development and well-being (Eccles et al., 2003). This is particularly true for low-income children who are facing multiple structural challenges, including racism, income inequity, and inequality in access and quality of educational opportunities (Brown & Evans, 2002; Mahoney, 2000; Nelson et al., 2015; Noguera, 2009; Pederson, 2005; Rogers et al., 2015; Wimer et al., 2006).

Contributions and gaps in the literature. Taken together, these theoretical and empirical perspectives highlight three important points of neighborhood influences on child development. First, the contexts that children and youth inhabit make an indelible imprint on their developmental pathways, with neighborhoods representing a key microcontext. Second, socio-historical and cultural forces that emanate from the macrosystem alter the geography of parents and their children's microcontexts in critical ways. Finally, it is crucial to note that embedded studies of children and families must integrate and account for dynamic intra- and interindividual processes. In fact, as argued by Aber and Nieto (2000), even if neighborhoods are "structurally disadvantaged," critical strengths and opportunities may only be observed by examining individuals' experiences and perceptions of their own neighborhoods. Despite the contributions of these vast literatures, theoretical and methodological gaps remain. Key among them is the need to integrate more nuanced ecological approaches to understanding the mechanisms by which poverty and disadvantage influence child development (e.g., Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009; Yoshikawa et al., 2012). In particular, more research is needed on individuals' perceptions and experiences of the dynamic processes by which "disadvantage" dynamically unfolds at the intersections of key microcontexts of children's lives.

The Present Study

The present study utilizes the Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Making Connections* (MC) Survey dataset to examine how parents' perceptions of neighborhood social cohesion and informal social control shape child well-being for families living in the U.S. Specifically, are parents' perceptions of neighborhood social cohesion and informal social control associated with key demographic variables at the child level

(child age, child sex), parental level (race), household level (income), and community level (MC study site)? Further, do parents' perceptions of neighborhood social cohesion and informal social control predict activities (participation in extracurricular activities) and perceived opportunities (school satisfaction) over and above demographic variables?

Methods

Data and sample

Data utilized for this study come from responses to household surveys conducted as part of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Making Connections* Survey (MC). Data were collected by NORC at the University of Chicago. The Urban Institute performed data analyses and other research support. Surveys collected for *Making Connections* were a component of a larger longitudinal comprehensive community initiative that took place in low-income neighborhoods across ten US cities (Oakland, CA; Hartford, CT; Denver, CO; Des Moines, IA; Indianapolis, IN; Louisville, KY; Providence, RI; San Antonio, TX; White Center, WA (outside Seattle), and Milwaukee, WI). The larger community change initiative spearheaded by MC is a ten-year project that started in 1999. Households were randomly sampled from all addresses within MC neighborhoods and were followed across three time points. Further data regarding each included *Making Connections* city site are included below and will be referred to as "site" throughout this manuscript. Data for the present study were drawn from households with children who had data at Waves 2 and 3 across the seven cities that participated in all three waves of the survey¹. All analyses with child data referred to a "focus child" who was selected at random from all children within the household. After a focus child was chosen, the parent/guardian was selected as the survey respondent. All analyses were conducted only with households where the focus child was school-aged at W3. In addition, respondents were only selected for the final sample if they solely identified as black/African American, hispanic/Latino, white, or other (Asian, Native American, Native Hawaiian), yielding a final total sample of 907 (see Table 1). Analyses focused only on respondents who solely identified with one racial group since research indicates that individuals who identify as mixed-race have broad variation in their experiences, which are based upon a range of additional factors including skin tone, language, and family structure (Shih & Sanchez, 2009). Respondents came from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds with 32.7 percent identifying as Latino/a, 34.8 percent as black/African American, 24.7 percent as white, and 7.7 percent as other racial/ethnic categories (Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Native American). Focus children were an average of 9.05 years old and were split relatively equally by gender (45.2 percent female; 54.8 percent male). As

¹ Three sites – Oakland, Milwaukee, and Hartford did not participate in Wave 3 of the survey and are omitted from this analysis.

only these two data waves were utilized in the current analyses, Waves 2 and 3 will subsequently be referred to as Times 1 and 2 for clarity.

Survey Neighborhoods. The communities included in this study from the *Making Connections* Survey have important similarities. In all of the sites (Denver, Des Moines, Indianapolis, San Antonio, Providence, Louisville, and White Center), the surveyed neighborhoods are economically disadvantaged, located in urban sections of metropolitan areas, and were part of local community outreach efforts that were funded in part by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. Despite these similarities, however, they have key differences. The following descriptions can be found in further detail in the following references (Bachtell, 2012; Coulton, Theodos, & Turner, 2009). Denver, which is used as the reference group for the present analyses, falls essentially in the “middle” of most of the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the survey neighborhoods. Denver has a high proportion of Latino and foreign-born residents (particularly from Mexico and Vietnam) who predominantly rent and have high residential mobility (Bachtell & Lattner, 2011). Their households also have a smaller proportion of children and higher levels of education compared to the other sites. Des Moines is unique among the sites for its majority of homeowners and large minority of individuals with high school (but no college) degrees. The population in Des Moines is predominantly non-Hispanic white and black, but with a growing population of Latinos. Indianapolis is predominantly white and almost all respondents were monolingual (English-speaking). San Antonio is distinct because it has a large percentage of female respondents, more households with children, and quite low levels of education and household income. This same pattern was quite similar to Providence, with high proportions of female respondents, households with children, and low household income. Residents in Providence had the highest likelihood of speaking Spanish of all of the sites and the lowest likelihood of home ownership. Similarly, Louisville had high proportions of low household income and education, alongside high rates of renting. Residents were also predominantly black. Finally, White Center (Seattle) was the most financially well-off among the sites, with higher rates of home ownership and marriage. White Center also has the largest proportion of other language speakers (in this case, Vietnamese).

Measures

Measures in this study included perceived social cohesion and informal social control, as well as child outcomes and key demographic variables.

Perceived social cohesion. Perceived social cohesion was measured using a five-item scale utilized in previous studies on collective efficacy (e.g., Collins et al., 2014; Sampson et al., 1997). Item responses were rated on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). It included

statements such as, “People in my neighborhood are willing to help their neighbors” and “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), the Child and Family Well-Being Study (Winston et al., 1999), The Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (Earls, 1995), and the HOPE VI Panel Study (Popkin et al., 2002). It has also been used reliably within this larger MC study (e.g., Collins, Neal, & Neal, 2014).

Informal social control. A five-item scale was used to measure informal social control, specifically operationalized as informal social control. Item responses were rated on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely). It included statements such as, “If some children were spray-painting graffiti on a local building, how likely is it that your neighbors would do something about it?” and “If the fire station closest to their house was threatened by budget cuts, how likely is it that your neighbors would do something about it?”

This measure has been used reliably in previous studies on collective efficacy (e.g., Collins, Neal, & Neal, 2016; Sampson et al., 1997).

Demographic variables. Five demographic variables were used in this study’s analyses and included child gender, child age, parents’ race, household income, and site. Race was derived from the parent’s self-identification of race and was split into four categories, including white, black/African American, Latino/a, and other (which included Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Native American. For analyses, race categories were dummy-coded into dichotomous variables with white as the reference group. Child gender was included as a dichotomous variable with female as the reference group. Child age was grand mean centered and utilized as a continuous variable. Household income included merged data either from respondents who were able to give specific estimates of household income or those who provided ranges of income (within \$5,000 increments). Site was noted based on where households were located and were one of the seven cities noted above (Denver, Des Moines, Indianapolis, San Antonio, White Center, Louisville, Providence).

Child outcomes. Child well-being outcomes were measured using two single-item measures indicating perceptions of school quality and participation in organized extracurricular (out-of-school) activities. First, perceptions of educational opportunity were drawn from an item regarding satisfaction with their child’s schooling. Survey respondents were asked the following question about the focus child: “How satisfied are you with the job [child’s school] is doing to educate your child?” Responses ranged from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). Second, survey respondents were asked if the focus 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.” If they answered “yes,” they were then asked the frequency of such activities (daily, 2-3 times a week weekly, monthly, a few times a year, or seasonally). Based on these two questions, an ordinal measure of extracurricular participation was computed and ranged from 0 to 4 with the following categories: 0 (never), 1 (rarely), 2 (sometimes), 3 (often), and 4 (daily).

Results

Descriptive statistics for all study variables are presented in Table 1. The respondents were categorized by race/ethnicity and were only included in the final sample only if they solely identified as black/African American, Hispanic/Latino/a, white, Asian, Native American, or Native Hawaiian. Due to low rates of participants identifying as Asian, Native American or Native Hawaiian, respondents in those categories were subsequently coded as “other” for the purposes of analyses. In the final sample, 24.7 percent of respondents were white, 34.8 percent were black, 32.7 percent were Latino/a, and 7.7 percent were Other. Focus children had an average age of 9.05 years old and were split relatively equally by gender (45.2 percent female; 54.8 percent male). Means and standard deviations are also presented for parent-level predictors related to neighborhood (perceptions of social cohesion and informal social control at Wave 1), as well as child-level outcomes associated with well-being at Times 1 and 2 (frequency of participation in extracurricular activities and satisfaction with schooling). Unweighted bivariate correlations were also conducted among key predictors and outcomes in this study (see Table 2).

Table 1. Percentages, means, and standard deviations of study variables

	% / M(SD)
Parent-level predictors	
Social Cohesion (T1)	3.10 (0.84)
Informal Social Control (T1)	3.25 (0.82)
Child-level outcomes	
Frequency of participation in extracurricular activities (T1)	1.91 (1.56)
Frequency of participation in extracurricular activities (T2)	2.01 (1.55)
Satisfaction with schooling (T1)	4.20 (0.94)
Satisfaction with schooling (T2)	4.26 (0.94)
Child Age (T1)	9.05 (3.66)
Child Sex (T1)	
Female	45.2
Male	54.8
Race (T1)	
Black	34.8
Latino/a	32.7
White	24.7
Other	7.7
Site	
Denver, CO	13.3
Des Moines, IA	16.9
Indianapolis, IN	14.2
San Antonio, TX	13.8
White Center (Seattle), WA	13.8
Louisville, KY	12.5
Providence, RI	15.5
Total Household Income (T2)	\$31,079 (\$28,510)

Table 2. Intercorrelations among study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Social Cohesion (T1)	–					
2 Informal Social Control (T1)	0.74**	–				
3 Extracurricular Activities (T1)	0.03	0.04	–			
4 Extracurricular Activities (T2)	0.06	0.07*	0.27**	–		
5 School Satisfaction (T1)	0.07†	0.10*	0.04	-0.04	–	
6 School Satisfaction (T2)	0.07*	0.08*	0.03	0.05	0.13**	–

† $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

A series of hierarchical linear regression analyses were used to examine two core research questions: (1) Are parents' perceptions of neighborhood social cohesion and informal social control associated with key demographic variables of the child, parent, household, and community (child age, child sex, race, household income, site)? (2) Do parents' perceptions of neighborhood social cohesion and informal social control predict perceived opportunities (school satisfaction) and activities (participation in extracurricular activities) related to their children's well-being over and above key demographic variables?

All regressions were conducted using weights accounting for variations in populations among the cities where data were collected. It is recommended that household-level population sample weights are used to make inferences about households in the survey neighborhood in Waves 2 and 3. This weight was then summed to the sample size. Race, gender, and site were dummy-coded with female, white, and Denver being utilized as reference groups.

Demographic correlates of social cohesion and informal social control

Multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to determine concurrent demographic correlates of parents' perceptions of neighborhood social cohesion and informal social control at Time 1. Analyses were run separately for social cohesion and informal social control. The first analysis indicated that key demographic correlates significantly predicted social cohesion, $R^2 = 0.08$, $F(12, 786) = 5.65$, $p < .001$. Specifically, child age and race (being black or Latino/a compared to white) predicted higher social cohesion. Additionally, households in Des Moines and Seattle were associated with higher social cohesion compared to Denver. Finally, higher household income predicted higher social cohesion. The second analysis also indicated that key demographic correlates significantly predicted informal social control overall, $R^2 = 0.06$, $F(12, 780) = 4.98$, $p = .001$. Similarly, race (being black or Latino/a compared to white), site (Des Moines, and Seattle compared to Denver), and household income positively predicted informal social control. However, in this case, child age no longer predicted informal social control.

Table 3. Demographic Correlates of Social Cohesion and Informal Social Control

	Social Cohesion	Informal social control
	β	β
Child Sex (Male)	0.04	0.07*
Child Age	0.07 [†]	0.04
Black	0.17***	0.10*
Latino/a	0.27***	0.29***
Race Other	0.07 [†]	0.001
Des Moines	0.17**	0.21***
Indianapolis	0.03	0.09
San Antonio	0.05	0.05
White Center (Seattle)	0.17**	0.18**
Louisville	0.02	0.03
Providence	0.03	0.03
Household Income	0.11**	0.089*

¹Reported betas are standardized and all analyses utilized sample weights.

²Reference groups are female, white, and Denver.

[†] $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

Linking parents' neighborhood perceptions to child well-being

Multiple linear regression analyses were then conducted to determine whether parents' perceptions of neighborhood social cohesion and informal social control at Time 1 predicted child well-being outcomes at W2 after controlling for autoregressive effects of child well-being at W1 as well as key demographic variables. Autoregressive effects refer to controlling for individual baseline levels of outcomes (in this case, social cohesion and informal social control at T1) to ensure that variation at T2 is not based on variation in baseline levels for each individual. The first step of each model included only autoregressive effects, the second step included child and parent level demographic variables (race, child age, child sex), the third step included household and community-level demographic variables (site and household income, and the final step included social cohesion or informal social control. Analyses were run separately for the two child well-being variables that represented engagement in activities (frequency of participation in extracurricular activities) and perceived opportunities (satisfaction with school). In addition, models were run separately by social cohesion and informal social control to distinguish among their influence on child outcomes. All regression analyses were run utilizing household sample weights to account for variations among households across cities included in the full sample.

Participation in extracurricular activities. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine whether social cohesion and informal social control at W1 predict later child participation in extracurricular activities at W2, after controlling for frequency of participation in extracurricular activities at W1 and key demographic control variables. The first model was conducted to evaluate whether social cohesion predicted later participation in extracurricular activities over and above demographic characteristics. While the overall model was significant, $F(14, 554) = 4.06, p < .001$, social cohesion did *not* account for a significant proportion of the variance in participation in extracurricular activities after controlling for baseline levels and demographic characteristics ($\beta = 0.02, ns$). In this model, the significant predictors of later participation in extracurricular activities were the baseline levels of those activities ($\beta = 0.19, p < .001$), as well as household and community-level variables. This included household income ($\beta = 0.11, p < .05$), and the following cities: Indianapolis ($\beta = -0.23, p = .001$) and San Antonio ($\beta = -0.20, p < .05$). See Table 4 for a summary of analyses.

Table 4. Linear regression of focal child participation in extracurricular activities at T2

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
	β	β	β	β
Extracurricular Activities T1	0.21***	0.10***	0.19***	0.19***
Child Sex (Male)	-	0.06	0.05	0.05
Child Age	-	0.05	0.04	0.04
Black	-	0.08	0.09†	0.09
Latino/a	-	0.01	0.02	0.01
Race Other	-	0.02	-0.01	-0.01
Des Moines, IA	-	-	-0.13†	-0.13†
Indianapolis, IN	-	-	-0.23***	-0.23***
San Antonio, TX	-	-	-0.20*	-0.20*
White Center, WA	-	-	-0.11	-0.11†
Louisville, KY	-	-	-0.07	-0.07
Providence, RI	-	-	-0.08	-0.08
Household Income	-	-	0.11**	0.11*
Social Cohesion T1	-	-	-	0.02
ΔR^2	0.04***	0.01	0.04**	0.00

¹Reported betas are standardized and all analyses utilized population factor weights.

²Reference groups are female, white, and Denver.

³ $F(1, 567) = 26.20, p < .001$ for step 1; $F(6, 562) = 5.41, p < .001$ for step 2; and $F(13, 555) = 4.36, p < .001$ for step 3.

† $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p \leq .01$, *** $p \leq .001$

The second model was conducted to evaluate whether informal social control predicted later participation in extracurricular activities over and above baseline levels and demographic characteristics. In comparison to the previous model, informal social control significantly predicted later frequency of participation in extracurricular activities after controlling for baseline levels and demographic characteristics, $R^2 = .10, F(14, 550) = 4.21, p < .001$. Specifically, parents who perceived higher levels of informal social control in their neighborhoods reported their children participating in more extracurricular activities over time ($\Delta R^2 = 0.01, \beta = 0.11, p < .01$). See Table 5 for analysis summary of the second model.

Table 5. Linear regression of focal child participation in extracurricular activities at T2

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
	β	β	β	β
Extracurricular activities T1	0.20***	0.19***	0.18***	0.19***
Child Sex (Male)	-	0.05	0.04	0.04
Child Age	-	0.03	0.02	0.02
Black	-	0.08	0.09 [†]	0.08
Latino/a	-	0.02	0.01	-0.03
Race Other	-	0.02	-0.004	-0.004
Des Moines, IA	-	-	-0.13 [†]	-0.16*
Indianapolis, IN	-	-	-0.23***	-0.24***
San Antonio, TX	-	-	-0.19*	-0.20*
White Center, WA	-	-	-0.11	-0.13 [†]
Louisville, KY	-	-	-0.07	-0.07
Providence, RI	-	-	-0.08	-0.09
Household Income	-	-	0.11**	0.10*
Informal Social Control T1	-	-	-	0.11**
ΔR^2	0.04***	0.01	0.04**	0.01**

¹Reported betas are standardized and all analyses utilized population factor weights.

²Reference groups are female, white, and Denver.

³ $F(1, 563) = 23.32, p < .001$ for step 1; $F(6, 558) = 4.68, p < .001$ for step 2; and $F(13, 551) = 3.97, p < .001$ for step 3.

[†] $p < .10, *p < .05, **p \leq .01, ***p \leq .001$

These results suggest that children are more likely to engage in activities extracurricular, out-of-school activities when their parents perceive higher levels of informal social control, or the perception of residents' willingness and readiness to take on issues affecting their neighborhoods. Yet, this relationship does not appear to be impacted by parents' sense of trust and shared values among neighbors (in this case, social cohesion). Both household and community-level characteristics played an important role (household income and site) in predicting engagement in extracurricular activities.

School Satisfaction. Multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine whether social cohesion and informal social control at W1 predict later satisfaction with schooling at W2, after controlling for frequency of satisfaction with schooling at W1 and key demographic control variables. The first model was conducted to evaluate whether social cohesion predicted later satisfaction with schooling over and above demographic characteristics. Social cohesion accounted for a significant proportion of the variance in satisfaction with schooling after controlling for baseline levels and demographic characteristics, $R^2 = .09, F(14, 492) = 3.36, p < .001$. Specifically, parents who reported higher levels of social cohesion with neighbors reported feeling more satisfied with their child's schooling over time ($\Delta R^2 = 0.03, \beta = 0.16, p < .001$). In addition, parents of boys were significantly less likely to be satisfied with their child's schooling ($\beta = -0.15, p = .001$). See Table 6 for analysis summary for social cohesion.

Table 6. Linear regression of school satisfaction at T2

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
	β	β	β	β
School Satisfaction T1	0.08*	0.07 [†]	0.05	0.03
Child Sex (Male)	-	-0.12**	-0.14**	-0.15***
Child Age	-	-0.01	-0.03	-0.04
Black	-	0.04	0.05	0.01
Latino/a	-	0.08	0.11	0.06
Race Other	-	0.02	0.05	0.04
Des Moines, IA	-	-	0.17*	0.14 [†]
Indianapolis, IN	-	-	0.11	0.10
San Antonio, TX	-	-	0.12	0.12
White Center, WA	-	-	-0.03	-0.06
Louisville, KY	-	-	0.03	0.03
Providence, RI	-	-	-0.02	-0.02
Household Income	-	-	0.07	0.06
Social Cohesion T1	-	-	-	0.16***
ΔR^2	0.01*	0.02*	0.04**	0.03***

¹Reported betas are standardized and all analyses utilized population factor weights.

²Reference groups are female, white, and Denver.

³ $F(1, 505) = 3.56, p=.06$ for step 1; $F(6, 500) = 2.39, p < .05$ for step 2; and $F(13, 293) = 2.54, p < .01$ for step 3.

[†] $p < .10, *p \leq .06, **p \leq .01, ***p \leq .001$

The second model was conducted to evaluate whether informal social control predicted later satisfaction with schooling over and above baseline levels and demographic characteristics. Similar to the previous model, informal social control also significantly predicted later satisfaction with schooling after controlling for baseline levels and demographic characteristics, $R^2 = .08, F(14,489) = 3.09, p < .001$. Specifically, parents who reported higher levels of informal social control reported higher satisfaction with their child’s schooling over time ($\Delta R^2 = 0.02, \beta = 0.13, p < .01$). As with the previous model, parents of boys were less likely to be satisfied with their child’s schooling ($\beta = -0.15, p < .001$). See Table 7.

Table 7. Linear regression of school satisfaction at T2

	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
	β	β	β	β
School Satisfaction T1	0.09*	0.08 [†]	0.05	0.04
Child Sex (Male)	-	-0.13**	-0.14***	-0.15***
Child Age	-	-0.02	-0.04	-0.04
Black	-	0.04	0.05	0.03
Latino/a	-	0.09	0.11	0.07
Race Other	-	0.02	0.05	0.05
Des Moines, IA	-	-	0.17*	0.14 [†]
Indianapolis, IN	-	-	0.11	0.10
San Antonio, TX	-	-	0.13	0.13
White Center, WA	-	-	-0.03	-0.06
Louisville, KY	-	-	0.03	0.03
Providence, RI	-	-	-0.02	-0.02
Household Income	-	-	0.07	0.06
Informal Social Control T1	-	-	-	0.13**
ΔR^2	0.01*	0.02*	0.04**	0.02**

¹Reported betas are standardized and all analyses utilized sample weights.

²Reference groups are female, White, and Denver.

³ $F(1, 502) = 3.87, p = .05$ for step 1; $F(6, 497) = 2.67, p < .05$ for step 2; and $F(13,490) = 3.09, p < .001$ for step 3.

[†] $p < .10, *p \leq .05, **p \leq .01, ***p \leq .001$

These results suggest that parents are more likely to feel satisfied with their child’s schooling when they have both a higher sense of trust and shared values among neighbors (social cohesion), as well as a higher sense that neighbors are willing and ready to take on issues affecting their neighborhoods (informal social control). It is important to note, however, that regardless of parents’ perceptions, parents of boys are much less likely to feel satisfied with their sons’ schooling. In addition, unlike with engagement in extracurricular activities, household and community-level characteristics did not predict satisfaction with schooling.

Discussion

This study joins a broad body of research indicating how economic disadvantage has important implications for child well-being. Yet, the majority of research focuses on the direct links between either macrolevel (income) or microlevel (parent or family characteristics) variables on child outcomes. Our findings attempt to add depth to extant studies by integrating variables at all key levels of context (child, parent, household, and community). In fact, our findings suggest that there is an important interplay between parents’ perceptions of their neighborhoods and their children’s engagement and satisfaction with opportunities. Furthermore, different aspects of collective efficacy, in this case social cohesion and informal social control, are differentially related to participation in extracurricular activities and school satisfaction. Specifically, social cohesion only predicts school satisfaction, while informal social control

predicts *both* school satisfaction and participation in extracurricular activities. Finally, these findings highlight that this relationship cannot be examined in a vacuum outside of child-, household-, and community-level characteristics, as they also wield differential impacts on child outcomes.

Linking parents' perceptions of neighborhood cohesion with child outcomes

Participation in extracurricular activities. While social cohesion and informal social control have been conceptualized as two core related components of perceptions of collective efficacy, findings indicate that only a sense of informal social control, and not social cohesion, significantly predicted participation in extracurricular activities (over and above key demographic characteristics). As theorized by Sampson and colleagues (1997, 2008), these two components of collective efficacy occur jointly, yet also fulfill different needs. In this case, only informal social control, which is based on the willingness of neighbors to intervene in times of need (rather than a more general sense of trust and shared values) helps support parents as they utilize opportunities for their children in the form of extracurricular activities.

Beyond a sense of informal social control, these findings indicate that participation in organized extracurricular activities is deeply shaped by household- and community-level variables. First, higher household income was positively associated with higher participation in extracurricular activity. Thus, as might be expected, children's opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities were based on access to increased financial resources, supporting extant research on the need to provide access to quality, subsidized programs in economically disadvantaged communities. Second, children in households based in San Antonio and Indianapolis were significantly less likely to participate in extracurricular activities compared to those in Denver. These findings indicate three key points. First, it is not merely economic disadvantage at the household (income) level that drives access to extracurricular activities. Rather, community-level characteristics (e.g., site) must also be considered. In this case, San Antonio has a much higher ratio of households with children and female respondents, as well as overall lower levels of education and income compared to Denver. These varying characteristics are all important components of disadvantage as they function in family's lives. This indicates that the compounding of disadvantage may have profound implications for children's well-being. On the other hand, children from households in Indianapolis were also less likely to participate in extracurricular activities. While Denver and Indianapolis are very similar on almost all community characteristics, one key difference is that Indianapolis has significantly higher rates of non-immigrant households (predominantly white and black). This finding speaks to how immigrant status may sometimes act as a protective factor and support academic achievement (Lopez, 2003; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2009). Taken together, these findings help support the assertion in ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) that

child development differentially unfolds within multiple embedded and jointly functioning levels of context.

School Satisfaction. Unlike participation in extracurricular activities, both social cohesion and informal social control appeared to function jointly and with the same purpose with regards to parents' perceptions of educational opportunities. Specifically, both a sense of shared values, trust and solidarity (social cohesion), as well as informal social control (or the willingness of neighbors and residents to intervene in times of need) helped to scaffold parents' satisfaction with schooling over time. Unlike participation in extracurricular activities, however, satisfaction with schooling was not as deeply linked to household and community-level characteristics. Rather, gender played a persistently important role in terms of how parents perceive educational opportunities. Specifically, respondents who were parents of boys were less likely to feel satisfied with their sons' school experiences and opportunities. This mirrors extant research indicating that boys, particularly boys of color, face systematic challenges in school settings (Nelson et al., 2015; Noguera, 2009; Rogers et al., 2015). This set of findings supports the theory that children face differential challenges based on the intersections of race and gender (Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Rogers et al., 2015). Specifically, the *social positions* conferred by categories based on race and gender are associated with structures and opportunities made available to children.

Taken together, these findings highlight two important points. First, parents' perceptions of social capital (as measured by social cohesion and informal social control) in their neighborhoods have important implications for both school satisfaction and extracurricular activities associated with their children's well-being. Further, while social cohesion and informal social control function jointly, they are important and distinct processes. Second, one cannot disentangle developmental processes from contextual processes. In fact, understanding the mechanisms by which collective efficacy overall shapes children's outcomes must be housed within family-, household-, and community-level processes.

Limitations and conclusions

Developmental research has long focused on the direct relationships between family-level characteristics (e.g., parents' beliefs and behaviors, family characteristics) and children's well-being, whereas neighborhood research has often focused on how collective efficacy is associated with either neighborhood-level outcomes (such as reduced crime) and youth outcomes (such as depression and incarceration). While this work is foundational, there have been increasing calls to examine development as it unfolds *within* context. This is particularly needed given that multiple levels of context (extending from the individual to the macrolevel) function jointly (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). In particular, there is a need to understand the intermediary processes that occur within and between microcontexts (in

this case, neighborhoods and schools) that may also support our understanding of neighborhood influences on youth outcomes. This is particularly important given that neighborhood and school experiences, while often studied as separate microcontexts, are deeply intertwined (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Fox & Fine, 2013; Stoudt, Fine & Fox, 2011/12; Cammarota, 2011).

This study offers a number of important contributions, but also has some key limitations.

First, this study illustrates the importance of addressing the need to integrate multiple levels of context when examining mechanisms by which economic disadvantage shapes the direct lives of children and families. One important asset of this dataset is that it includes a longitudinal set of household-level data that allows for analyses at both community and household level, specifically as they extend to residents' perceptions of their neighborhoods. While this study is an important starting point, future analyses should utilize this unique dataset by integrating change over time at the community level as it is associated with change over time for children and families. Second, these findings shed light on the myriad means by which poverty and economic disadvantage shape children and families as they move through their neighborhoods. However, given that *Making Connections* focused on economically disadvantaged communities with substantial grass-roots community organizing, these findings cannot necessarily speak to the experiences of higher-SES urban communities or communities with less community organizing. Future analyses would benefit from including more nuanced variables to tap into the complexity of how economic disadvantage manifests in families' lives, such as the role of household composition. Finally, this study underscores the importance of community-level differences (between cities) and their associations with perceptions of neighborhood collective efficacy. These findings are meaningful given that people often think of their neighborhoods in terms of relationships with people around them (Bachtell, 2012; Guest & Lee, 1984). However, this study does not include a measure related to how respondents actually define their neighborhoods. This is a recurring problem in research about neighborhoods and future analyses would benefit from including a measure of neighborhood beyond parents' perceptions. This is particularly important since neighborhoods are often defined in different spatial and institutional ways (Bachtell, 2012). Ultimately, future research would be improved by utilizing analytic approaches that integrate change over time across multiple nested levels of context.

Despite robust and overarching agreement that child development unfolds over time within the multiple embedded contexts of children and their families' lives, more research is needed to examine these complex and intersecting processes. This study takes the critical step of exposing the means by which these overlapping contexts shape children's well-being and highlights three core points. First, the contexts that children and their families inhabit make an indelible imprint on the relationships and pathways that

they develop and experience. Neighborhoods are a particularly important context, as they function as both a direct microcontext, as well as an mesocontext that bridges multiple microcontexts (such as school and home). Second, socio-historical and cultural forces that emanate from the macrosystem alter the very geography of children's microcontexts in critical ways. This includes the social position variables of income, gender, and race, which play critical roles in the structures and opportunities made available to children and families. Finally, developmental studies cannot be divorced from the complex world(s) in which children and their families live. Moreover, analyses are needed to unpack how microcontexts function in concert with each other. Such work may provide insight into potential interventions and policies to support all children and families.

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