US PARTNERSHIP ON MOBILITY FROM POVERTY

How Neighborhoods Affect the Social and Economic Mobility of Their Residents

Margery Austin Turner and Ruth Gourevitch

August 2017

Historically, high housing costs have intersected with discriminatory market practices and exclusionary land-use policies to block low-income families and people of color from communities that offer safety, good schools, a healthy environment, and access to jobs. At the same time, many neighborhoods where housing is more affordable—and where poor people of color have been concentrated—have been the victims of disinvestment and neglect, leaving them with failing schools, inadequate services, physical and environmental blight, and high levels of crime and violence. Many people who could afford to move have fled from these communities, further raising their poverty rates and accelerating the cycle of disinvestment, powerlessness, and distress.

Today, economic segregation is on the rise across much of the United States, creating enclaves of low-income neighborhoods that lack the resources and amenities (as well as the political and market power) most middle- and high-income communities take for granted (Pendall 2015; Greene et al. 2016). Understanding the mechanisms through which neighborhood conditions can affect long-term social and economic outcomes for their residents is a crucial step in promoting mobility from poverty.

This memo summarizes the research evidence about four causal mechanisms through which conditions in distressed communities can undermine the long-term life-chances of their residents: the availability and quality of services, crime and violence, the role of peer groups and social networks, and access to employment opportunities.[1]

The Availability and Quality of Services

Limited access to high-quality services in distressed communities significantly disadvantages families. Poverty, race, and the political fragmentation of metropolitan regions all work to undermine the political and market power people and communities need to obtain quality services from government and the private sector.

The poor quality of public schools is arguably the most consequential challenge. The average low-income student attends a school that scores at the 42nd percentile on state exams, compared with the average middle-/high-income student, who attends a school that scores at the 61st percentile on state exams (Rothwell 2012). Poor school quality can significantly undermine future economic mobility. Students in higher-quality K–3 classrooms end up with higher earnings, college attendance rates, and other improved outcomes by age 27 (Chetty et al. 2010). The problem of poor school quality is exacerbated in distressed neighborhoods, where parents often lack the resources and experience to provide supportive or supplemental services to better their children's education.

Despite the fact that most children in the United States attend some form of preschool by age 5, access to quality child care and preschool is limited in distressed communities. This not only puts

children at an early developmental disadvantage, but also makes it difficult for parents to care for their children while maintaining employment.

In addition to school quality, distressed communities typically lack numerous other public and private services. Limited access to quality health centers, food markets, parks and recreational facilities, and transit all put residents at a disadvantage. Low-income census tracts have half as many grocery stores as wealthy census tracts, making it more difficult for residents of distressed neighborhoods to access healthy, affordable food. Since access to healthy food is associated with decreased obesity and other diet-related issues, this significantly impairs the health of low-income residents. The lack of quality health centers and transit options in the neighborhood perpetuates this problem, leaving residents with numerous barriers to maintaining a decent quality of life (Treuhaft and Karpyn 2010).

Crime and Violence

Exposure to crime and violence can profoundly disrupt child and adolescent development and undermine a person's long-term well-being. Childhood experiences of trauma and abuse are strongly related to future mental and physical health problems, such as alcoholism, cancer, and suicide risk (Boivin and Hertzman 2012). This problem extends beyond child development; because trauma stimulates a psycho-physiological stress response that undermines health, residents of all ages who experience or witness violence and disorder in their communities suffer more depression and fearful anxiety (Hill, Ross, and Angel 2005).

High levels of crime and violence also make it more difficult for a community's residents to find safe spaces to exercise and play outdoors. In California, one in four teenagers living in disadvantaged neighborhoods reported having no safe park near home (Babey, Hastert, and Brown 2007). Violence and crime can also threaten the safety of school and work commutes, create unsafe school environments, and disrupt learning in the classroom. Furthermore, the degree to which individuals, particularly adolescents, are surrounded by violence and crime can lead them to view these behaviors as normal, potentially leading to their own involvement in violence and crime.

Crime and violence also bring increased police presence, with potentially devastating consequences for residents. Police are charged with keeping communities safe, but many departments do so with intensive tactics that emphasize street stops and high concentrations of officers in "hot spots."[2] Currently, these tactics are most often applied to communities of color, contributing to disproportionate rates of involvement with the criminal justice system, high rates of arrest and incarceration, and, in the most tragic circumstances, fatal encounters with police. Arrest and incarceration unquestionably undermine a person's prospects for social and economic success.

Peer Groups and Social Networks

Research shows that low-income people's social ties are more confined to the communities in which they live than those of middle- and high-income people, making them more dependent on their neighborhood's social networks for information, services, and mutual support. However, in distressed neighborhoods, these networks are limited in the opportunities and services they can provide. For

example, African Americans living in poor neighborhoods are more socially isolated and have reduced access to resources through their networks (Tigges, Brown, and Greene 2008). These limitations can constrain economic opportunities: a parent in a community where few people have decent-paying jobs is less likely to hear about—or gain referrals—to potential job opportunities.

Social networks also play an important role in a community's capacity to demand services, investment, and problem-solving from government. When residents are socially and politically isolated from the networks that exercise power in a community, their voices are less likely to be heard, their needs less likely to be addressed, and their capacity to shape city- and region-wide decisionmaking profoundly constrained (see, for example, Benner and Pastor 2015).

Although peer groups are not strictly confined to a person's immediate neighborhood, the community environment plays a significant role in establishing peer groups, especially for adolescents. Peer pressure can detrimentally affect adolescents by promoting drug and alcohol use. Low-income neighborhoods are associated with increased peer drinking and increased adolescent drug use, and this exposure to alcohol and drugs can influence an adolescent to participate in these behaviors (Chuang et al. 2005). Peer pressure can also create a culture where it is cool to not care about school, and that attitude could in turn contribute to increased absenteeism and decreased achievement levels. Low-income, young people of color who were admitted to high-performing charter schools were higher achieving than low-income, young people of color who were in low-performing schools, pointing to negative peer pressure as a mechanism for lower school achievement (Coller et al. 2014).

Access to Employment Opportunities

With the simultaneous decline in manufacturing employment and the suburbanization of jobs, many inner-city neighborhoods became physically isolated from job opportunities, hampering both proximity and accessibility.[3] The cost of owning and maintaining a car is too high for many low-income people, and in most metropolitan areas it takes people without reliable access to automobiles much longer to reach employment opportunities (Pendall et al. 2014). This is largely because of the lack of frequent, safe, public transportation options serving distressed communities and connecting them to areas where jobs are abundant. Moreover, "for people who work multiple jobs or overnight shifts in [low-income] communities, and for those—mainly women—who have to balance work, child care, and elder care, mass transit almost never works" (Pendall, Blumenberg, and Dawkins 2016). Long commutes mean that residents from low-income communities have fewer hours to spend working each day and fewer hours with their families before and after work.

Notes

[1] For more extensive reviews of this research literature, see Turner and Rawlings (2009) and Turner et al. (2014).

[2] Jesse Jannetta and Samuel Bieler, "Strong Medicine: Using Policing Power with Care," *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, May 17, 2015, http://www.urban.org/urban-wire/strong-medicine-using-policing-power-care.

[3] Similarly, economic forces have left many rural communities far from centers of employment opportunity.

US PARTNERSHIP ON MOBILITY FROM POVERTY

References

Babey, Susan, Theresa A. Hastert, and E. Richard Brown. 2007. *Teens Living in Disadvantaged Neighborhoods Lack Access to Parks and Get Less Physical Activity.* Los Angeles: UCLA.

Benner, Chris, and Manuel Pastor. 2015. *Equity, Growth, and Community: What the Nation Can Learn from America's Metro Areas.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Boivin, Michel, and Clyde Hertzman, eds. 2012. "Early Childhood Development: Adverse Experiences and Developmental Health." Canadian Academy of Health Sciences Expert Panel (with Ronald Barr, Thomas Boyce, Alison Fleming, Harriet MacMillan, Candice Odgers, Marla Sokolowski, and Nico Trocmé). Ottawa, ON: Royal Society of Canada.

Chetty, Raj, John N. Friedman, Nathaniel Hilger, Emmanuel Saez, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, and Danny Yagan. 2010. "How Does Your Kindergarten Classroom Affect Your Earnings? Evidence from Project STAR." Working Paper 16381. Cambridge, MA: National Bureau of Economic Research.

Chuang, Ying-Chih, Susan T. Ennett, Karl E. Bauman and Vangie A. Foshee. June 2005. "Neighborhood Influences on Adolescent Cigarette and Alcohol Use: Mediating Effects through Parent and Peer Behaviors." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* VOL (ISS): pp–pp.

Coller, Karen, Rebecca Dudovitz, Martin Shapiro, Sheryl Kataoka, Arleen Brown, chi-Hong Tseng, Paul Chung, David Kennedy, Richard Buddin, and Peter Bergman. 2014. "Low-Income Students in Charter High Schools Less Likely to Engage in Risky Behavior." Los Angeles, CA: UCLA.

Greene, Solomon, Rolf Pendall, Molly Scott, and Serena Lei. 2016. "Open Cities: From Economic Exclusion to Urban Inclusion." Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Hill, Terrence, Catherine E. Ross, and Ronald J. Angel. 2005. "Neighborhood Disorder, Psychophysiological Distress, and Health." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 46 (2): 170–86.

Pendall, Rolf. 2015. *Worlds Apart: Inequality between America's Most and Least Affluent Neighborhoods*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Pendall, Rolf, Evelyn Blumenberg, and Casey Dawkins. 2016. "What if Cities Combined Car-Based Solutions with Transit to Improve Access to Opportunity?" Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Pendall, Rolf, Christopher Hayes, Arthur (Taz) George, Zach McDade, Casey Dawkins, Jae Sik JJeon, Eli Knaap, Evelyn Blumenberg, Gregory Pierce, and Michael Smart. 2014. *Driving to Opportunity: Understanding the Links among Transportation Access, Residential Outcomes, and Economic Opportunity for Housing Voucher Recipients*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Rothwell, Jonathan. 2012. "Housing Costs, Zoning, and Access to High-Scoring Schools." Washington, DC: Brookings Institution.

Tigges, Leann, Irene Browne, and Gary P. Green. 1998. "Social Isolation of the Urban Poor: Race, Class, and Neighborhood Effects on Social Resources." *Sociological Quarterly* 39 (1): 53–77.

Treuhaft, Sarah, and Allison Karpyn. 2010. "The Grocery Gap: Who Has Access to Healthy Food and Why It Matters." Oakland, CA: PolicyLink.

Turner, Margery Austin, Peter Edelman, Erika Poethig, and Laudan Aron. 2014. *Tackling Persistent Poverty in Distressed Neighborhoods: History, Principles, and Strategies for Philanthropic Investment*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Turner, Margery Austin, and Lynette A. Rawlings. 2009. *Promoting Neighborhood Diversity: Benefits, Barriers, and Strategies*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Acknowledgments

This report was prepared for the US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty with funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. We are grateful to them and to all our funders.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to organizations represented by the 24 members of the Partnership or to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders.

The authors thank Nisha Patel, Matt Rogers, and Lionel Foster for their helpful guidance. The authors also thank Tony Iton of the California Endowment, Josh Bolten of the Business Roundtable, Bill Bynum of the Hope Enterprise Corporation, Raj Chetty of Stanford University, Luis Cortes of Esperanza, Kathy Edin of Johns Hopkins University, Larry Katz of Harvard University, and Juan Salgado of City Colleges of Chicago for their participation in the US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty's Place Learning Group. The authors are responsible for all errors.

ABOUT THE US PARTNERSHIP ON MOBILITY FROM POVERTY

With funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Urban Institute is supporting the US Partnership on Mobility from Poverty, chaired by David Ellwood and consisting of 24 leading voices representing academia, practice, the faith community, philanthropy, and the private sector.

The Partnership has consulted widely, seeking out diverse voices and expertise as it examines the causes of persistent poverty and stagnant mobility. Ideas come not only from the Partners themselves: the Partnership solicits new thinking from innovative leaders, programs, and individuals around the country. The Partnership is learning from communities and families experiencing poverty, from the nation's leading service providers and advocates, from a wide network of experts, and from the latest research findings. The Partnership's approach is geographically agnostic and politically nonpartisan; its findings will be transparent and available to all.