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## Seeing their surroundings: the effects of neighborhood setting and race on maternal distress<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth at two points in time, we examine the relationship between maternal psychological distress and perceived neighborhood disorder for three groups: African Americans, Mexican Americans and whites. Findings show that across all racial groups neighborhood perceptions are more salient in shaping levels of distress than is objective neighborhood location. However, objective location (e.g., central city residence) does considerably influence how mothers perceive their neighborhoods in the first place. These results suggest that future research on the independent consequences of the neighborhood context should incorporate both subjective assessments and objective indicators of living arrangements. We also observe that perceived neighborhood disorder and psychological distress are affected by marital status, educational attainment, household income, and employment. Moreover, compared to their Mexican American and white counterparts, family structure (e.g., number of children) appears to be more detrimental in shaping outcomes for African American mothers.

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## **1. Introduction**

What is the relationship between maternal psychological distress and subjective appraisals of the neighborhood context? Do perceptions of neighborhood disorganization (e.g., level of crime, access to police protection, suitability of environs for rearing children) affect psychological distress differently than objective location (e.g., central city residence versus rural communities)? And, after controlling for family structure, health, and socioeconomic status, does the relationship between maternal psychological distress and the neighborhood context vary by race?

Over the last decade and a half, social scientists have amassed a considerable literature devoted to understanding the effects of neighborhood characteristics on individual and group outcomes (Aneshensel and Sucoff, 1996; Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; Crane, 1991; McLeod and Shanahan, 1993; Wilson, 1987, 1996). Most of this research has explored the influence of the neighborhood context on the outcomes of children and adolescents. Not surprisingly, youth more likely suffer negative outcomes when reared in neighborhoods that experience significant amounts of social disorder and decay. Typically, scholars maintain that the neighborhood represents a collective socialization agent, with effects independent of schools and families, that may encourage or hinder healthy development (Booth and Crouter, 2001; Wilson, 1996). Correspondingly, less research has been committed to understanding the impact of community conditions on the psychological adjustment of parents. Yet, if parents, as the major caretakers, are also affected by neighborhood conditions, there may well be farther reaching consequences of neighborhood conditions than would be detected when studying only young people. Understanding if and how parents are affected by their neighborhood surroundings could provide another link in the chain of the collective socialization argument.

Data constraints limit the scope of this specific research to the question of how neighborhoods affect psychological distress among women with children. While this is an admitted shortcoming, there are valid reasons to focus our study on maternal outcomes. Recent research reveals that mothers still are primarily responsible for the upbringing of children and maintenance of the home (Bird, 1997; Simon, 1995). According to Rosenfield (1989) and Simon (1992, 1995), the role demands and symbolic meanings attached to motherhood are unlike those experienced by men and childless women. Whether mothers, similar to children and adolescents, have psychological difficulties as a result of neighborhood influences is an important consideration in itself. If a mother is unsettled by her neighborhood ambience, the impact may spill over to other family members that depend on her. Therefore, neighborhoods may be especially germane to the psychological well-being of women with children.

First, a residence may impede mothers from realizing one expectation of the maternal role – that is, to provide a safe, attractive, and nurturing domicile. Second, since neighborhoods are also related to the quality and availability of facilities such as schools, parks and playgrounds, and police protection, mothers may be especially alert to neighborhood situations. Third, mothers may be particularly susceptible to the nature, quality, and frequency of contact with neighbors, which is important since social support has been shown to lessen stress (Menaghan, 1982; Menaghan

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