



# Neighborhood distress and school dropout: the variable significance of community context

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## Abstract

Although a substantial body of recent research has examined the impact of neighborhood socioeconomic distress on youth socioeconomic attainment and urban social dislocations, few studies have determined under what conditions, and for what types of adolescents, neighborhood characteristics matter most. Drawing on theories of collective socialization, social capital, and social control, we develop hypotheses regarding the conditional nature of neighborhood effects on the risk of dropping out of high school, and we then test these hypotheses by estimating event history models based on data from the 1968–1993 waves of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics. We find that, among African Americans, the detrimental impact of neighborhood socioeconomic distress on school dropout has increased significantly over the past quarter-century, a probable repercussion of the increasing geographic concentration of urban poverty. The negative effect of neighborhood distress on high school completion is particularly pronounced among black adolescents from single-parent households and among white adolescents from low-income families, results broadly consistent with Wilson's claim that exposure to neighborhood poverty reinforces the damaging consequences of individual disadvantage. Supporting the social capital perspective, among both black and white adolescents the deleterious impact of neighborhood distress on school dropout is stronger for recent in-movers than for long-term residents. The impact of neighborhood disadvantage also varies significantly by gender for both racial groups and, among whites, is stronger for younger than older adolescents. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of these findings for theories of neighborhood effects.

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## **1. Introduction**

Few events in the adolescent life course determine subsequent social and economic opportunities more than dropping out of school. Adolescents who leave school before graduating enjoy fewer prospects for employment and earnings later in life (Murnane et al., 1995; Pallas, 1987; Rumberger, 1987), are more likely to become involved in criminal activity (Griffith et al., 1989; Kasen et al., 1998) and drug use (Swaim et al., 1997), and face a variety of other potentially deleterious outcomes, including reduced productivity and increased psychological stress (Wehlage and Rutter, 1985).

Given these myriad repercussions of prematurely leaving the educational system, it is not surprising that the determinants of school performance and the risk of school dropout have been the subject of intense investigation. While most research has focused on the role of individual, family, and school characteristics, a recent wave of studies has attempted to identify the impact of the broader social context on adolescent educational outcomes. Based on observed spatial variations in school performance and dropout rates, and drawing heavily on Wilson's (1987, 1996) seminal thesis, this research has sought to identify the extent to which neighborhood socioeconomic characteristics affect various aspects of adolescents' academic performance. While the results of these investigations are far from uniform, most have revealed that neighborhood context, in many ways, complements the impact of individual- and family-level attributes. In comparison to young people from wealthier neighborhoods, those from areas with high levels of poverty and distress tend to have lower test scores and grades (Dornbusch et al., 1991; Gonzales et al., 1996; Turley, 2003), reduced cognitive abilities and higher retention rates (Entwisle et al., 1994; Halpern-Felsher et al., 1997), a higher risk of dropping out of school (Aaronson, 1997; Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; Connell and Halpern-Felsher, 1997; Connell et al., 1995; Crane, 1991; Ensminger et al., 1996), a lower likelihood of post-secondary education (Duncan, 1994), and ultimately complete fewer years of schooling (Corcoran et al., 1992). Thus, although dissenting evidence can be found (Evans et al., 1992; Plotnick and Hoffman, 1999), in general this body of research suggests that neighborhoods play a meaningful role in determining academic outcomes.

But despite this general conclusion, we currently have relatively little knowledge about the degree to which these neighborhood effects vary across time or by personal and family attributes. For example, despite strong but sometimes opposing theoretical suggestions, only a few studies have explored whether the impact of neighborhood characteristics on the risk of dropping out is conditioned by family- and individual-level factors, and none of these studies utilizes data that allow for the examination of how these effects may have changed in recent decades or vary across the

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