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Perceived neighborhood quality, family processes, and trajectories of child and adolescent externalizing behaviors in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Rationale: Externalizing behavior problems are common among children and adolescents, and have considerable negative impacts on their long-term health and wellbeing. Substantial evidence supports a link between neighborhood conditions and externalizing behaviors. However, the timing of neighborhood effects on the developmental course of externalizing behaviors and the role of family and peer processes in shaping neighborhood effects remains unclear.

Objective: The current study aims to examine the relationship between perceived neighborhood quality and trajectories of child externalizing behaviors in a U.S. nationally representative cohort, focusing on the timing of neighborhood effects and the role of family and peer processes in mediating these effects.

Methods: The study included 3563 children who participated in three consecutive waves of Child Development Supplement of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics in 1997, 2002 and 2007. In a latent growth curve model (LGCM), we estimated trajectories of externalizing behaviors and the effects of perceived neighborhood quality on the trajectories, using parental, family and peer processes as potential mediators.

Results: At baseline, better neighborhood quality was moderately associated with fewer externalizing behaviors among seven-to twelve-year-olds, but was not associated with externalizing behaviors among children six years and younger. During follow-up, better neighborhood quality was associated with small decreases in externalizing behaviors, primarily mediated by lower levels of parental distress and family conflict.

Conclusions: This study suggests that better perceived neighborhood quality contributes to fewer externalizing behaviors throughout childhood and adolescence, and that parental distress and family conflict are the main mediators of these effects. Given the pervasiveness of exposure to adverse neighborhood conditions, efforts to reduce concentrated poverty and improve neighborhood environments may improve children and adolescents' mental health at the population level.

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1. Introduction

Externalizing behaviors are a cluster of problem behaviors marked by defiance, impulsivity, disruptiveness, aggression and antisocial acts (Achenbach and Edelbrock, 1981). A common form of childhood maladaptation, externalizing behaviors affect 6–15% of

preschool children in industrialized western societies (Campbell, 1995; Stemmler and Lösel, 2010), and many of those who demonstrate early problems continue to be affected throughout childhood and adolescence (Campbell, 1995; Stemmler and Lösel, 2012). Externalizing behaviors interfere with children's social functioning and learning (Masten et al., 2005; McLeod and Kaiser, 2004), and predict adverse outcomes such as substance abuse, delinquency and violence later in life (Odgers et al., 2008; Stemmler and Lösel, 2012), placing high costs on individuals and society. Externalizing behaviors are known to be generally stable over the course of development; however, their onset, persistence and desistance are

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affected by environmental conditions (Burt et al., 2005; Loeber and Hay, 1997).

The neighborhood is an integral part of the ecological system of child development and sets the larger context for children's interactions with families and peers, relationships which are among the most powerful drivers of child development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006). Previous theories have proposed that neighborhoods affect children's development through their safety, environmental quality, physical maintenance and social organization (e.g., social networks, organizational participation and informal social control) (Jencks and Mayer, 1990; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Sampson, 1997), as well as through their effects on families and peers (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000). In a substantial body of literature, evidence has pointed to possible neighborhood effects on child externalizing behaviors (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000; McBride Murry et al., 2011; Sampson et al., 2002). However, previous studies have rarely considered the timing of neighborhood effects on the developmental course of externalizing behaviors. Further, there is no consensus regarding the role of family and peer processes in shaping the potential neighborhood effects. Informed by developmental theories, the current study aims to fill these knowledge gaps in order to inform interventions to improve neighborhood conditions and promote optimal health and development in childhood and beyond.

1.1. Theoretical framework on neighborhood and the development of child externalizing behaviors

Patterson's Coercion Theory (Granic and Patterson, 2006; Patterson, 1986) provides a framework for considering the development of externalizing behaviors in the context of family and peer relations. It suggests that persistent antisocial behaviors arise through repeated coercive exchanges between parent and child. The exchanges are characterized by the parent's demands for compliance, the child's refusal to comply and his or her escalating complaints, and the parent's eventual capitulation. Home "training" in a hostile and noncompliant behavioral style leads the child to academic failure and peer rejection in school. With weak parental monitoring, the child is at high risk for deviant peer affiliation and engaging in delinquent acts and drug use.

Contextual factors may predispose families to ineffective family management practices leading to child problem behaviors. According to Conger's Family Stress Model (Conger et al., 1994), family stressors such as financial difficulties contribute to parental depressed mood, leading to family conflicts, disrupted parenting and subsequent child problem behaviors. At the same time, perceived danger, physical neglect, and breakdown of social relations and norms in the neighborhood are also family stressors that may have similar effects on families and children (Gutman et al., 2005; Kohen et al., 2008; Kotchick et al., 2005; Roosa et al., 2005). In this study, processes affected by family and neighborhood stressors, specifically, parental distress, family conflict, parental discipline and monitoring, are collectively labeled *family processes*.

Coercion Theory also describes deviant peers as important to children's advancement along antisocial paths. Children with weak monitoring from parents (Patterson, 1986) and those living in neighborhoods with many financially struggling families and weak collective control of deviant youth behaviors (Sampson, 1997) may have higher risk of deviant peer affiliation. In this study, affiliation with antisocial peers is referred to as the peer process.

1.2. Evidence of neighborhood effects on child externalizing behaviors

A substantial literature links neighborhood poverty, danger and social disorganization to children's externalizing behaviors. The most rigorous evidence comes from residential mobility programs that manipulate children's neighborhood conditions through experimental/quasi-experimental approaches. The Gautreaux residential mobility program was the result of a court-ordered desegregation in Chicago in the early 1970s. Public housing residents received housing vouchers to move to scattered-site housing units in other neighborhoods on a first-come, first-served basis. Compared to moves within Chicago, moves to low-poverty, less segregated suburbs substantially reduced boys' involvement with the criminal justice system but increased girls' risk of criminal convictions (Keels, 2008). The Moving To Opportunity for fair housing program (MTO) in the 1990s randomly assigned public housing residents in four cities to receive housing vouchers to relocate to low-poverty neighborhoods. Receipt of vouchers improved mental health and reduced arrests among girls, reduced property crimes among boys in the short term, but increased problem behaviors and arrests for property crimes among boys over the long term (Gennetian et al., 2012). In conclusion, findings from the experimental studies on neighborhood effects on children's behavioral outcomes are mixed. Some of the null findings may be due to older child age at the time of the moves (Chetty et al., 2015), lack of long-term neighborhood improvements (Briggs et al., 2010), and self-selection of the study sample (Chyn, 2016). However, both experiments suggest that moving to low-poverty neighborhoods reduced children's exposure to violence, gangs and harmful substances (Keels, 2008; Kling et al., 2005).

The two experimental studies included mostly older children and adolescents in poor, segregated, and dangerous neighborhoods. Several longitudinal observational studies of adolescents in similarly high-risk settings support the role of exposure to neighborhood danger and subsequent fear and post-traumatic stress in predicting adolescent externalizing and violent behaviors (McCabe et al., 2005; Ruchkin et al., 2007; Sharkey and Sampson, 2010). In addition, several longitudinal studies of adolescents in both high-risk settings and general populations support indirect neighborhood effects on adolescent externalizing behaviors mediated by parental discipline and monitoring and peer affiliations (Chung and Steinberg, 2006; Pettit et al., 1999; Simons et al., 2005; Tolan et al., 2003). Other studies have found effects of neighborhood danger and social disorganization on adolescent externalizing behaviors and delinquency to be *conditional on* parental monitoring and discipline (Beyers et al., 2003; Pettit et al., 1999; Simons et al., 2005).

Although studies of neighborhood and externalizing behaviors have generally focused on adolescents, who may have more direct interactions with their neighborhood than children, neighborhood influence may start much earlier. For example, there is some evidence that neighborhood poverty, danger and exposure to violence and deviant peers is related to early onset of antisocial behaviors (Ingoldsby and Shaw, 2002). More recently, a longitudinal study in a high-risk sample found perceived neighborhood problems (e.g., unemployment, abandoned homes), but not neighborhood poverty, to be associated with early-onset of externalizing behaviors in middle childhood (Ingoldsby et al., 2006). Two other studies among the general U.S. population found neighborhood cohesion (Kohen et al., 2008), residential stability and female headed households (Humphrey, 2015) to be associated with externalizing behaviors among preschoolers; a third study found neighborhood poverty or affluence was not associated with externalizing behaviors in preschoolers (Anderson et al., 2014).

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