

Rotten Outcomes: How Impoverished Neighborhoods Influence the Life Trajectories of Children in the United States

Paul D. Steele, Professor of Sociology and Criminology, Director, Center for Justice Studies
School of Public Affairs, Morehead State University

Abstract

To use Lisbeth Schorr's term, children who are at risk for "rotten outcomes" are not randomly scattered throughout the society but are, rather, concentrated in impoverished neighborhoods. In recent decades, government policy and public opinion in the U.S. has reflected the belief that children who experience rotten outcomes are, at least in large part, somehow responsible for their own problems. I assert that the social influences which the child experiences in their neighborhood of residence also influence their life outcomes in both direct and indirect ways. Neighborhoods are social environments where children experience life: presenting risks and opportunities, offering or withholding resources necessary for success, creating experiences with and beliefs about social institutions and their representatives, and providing the ecology in which children develop into adults.

This article summarizes contemporary scholarly perspectives and unpublished research that describe how neighborhoods influence life outcomes for children. It adopts a social capital perspective in addressing the influence of neighborhood's residents, places, and institutions on the child's safety, health, and education, distinguishing between compositional and contextual neighborhood effects. It concludes that the life outcomes of children, be they successful or rotten, are influenced by their access to the resources of immediate family and peer social networks (bonding capital), connections to other residents and their networks (bridging capital), and relations with representatives of broader social institutions as manifested in their neighborhood (linking capital).

Introduction

Children who are at risk of victimization, deviant behaviors, poverty, and social failure are not randomly scattered throughout the social landscape. Rather, to use Lisbeth Schorr's term, the vast majority of children who are at high risk for "rotten outcomes" live on the social margins of society, concentrated in impoverished neighborhoods. Schorr's inventory of rotten outcomes includes "having children too soon, leaving school illiterate and unemployable, and committing violent crimes" (1988: xvii). Today we might add substance use, chronic health problems, and criminal victimization to her list.

In recent decades, neo-conservative government policy in the U.S. has increasingly paralleled the public's belief that children who experience rotten outcomes are, at least in large part, somehow responsible for their own problems. There is, in fact, an impressive body of contemporary research linking the personal traits and decision-making of children with disapproved behaviors and their consequences. While not disputing the associations found in these studies, I assert that the social influences which the child experiences in their neighborhood

of residence also influence the child's life outcomes in direct and indirect ways. Neighborhoods are social environments where children experience life: presenting risks and opportunities, offering or withholding resources necessary for success, creating experiences with and beliefs about social institutions and their representatives, and providing the ecology in which children develop into adults.

This article summarizes contemporary scholarly perspectives that describe how neighborhoods influence life outcomes for children. I adopt a social capital perspective, to organize research findings concerning the influence of neighborhood's constituent residents, places, and institutions on the child's safety, health, and education. My position is also colored by a series of research studies in which I have been involved. I conclude with a discussion of the ways in which neighborhoods influence programs and social policies intended to prevent and intervene with rotten outcomes. While the discussion focuses primarily on policies in the U.S., I believe that a general understanding the impact of neighborhood dynamics on the life outcomes of children could also be useful in other cultures.

Neighborhoods: People and Context

Like many terms in the social sciences, "neighborhood" has been used in varying and inconsistent ways, to the point that it has lost any precise meaning. Still, most definitions suggest that neighborhoods are (a) locations that are large and structurally complex enough for established patterns of social interaction to exist within and between multiple social groups, formal organizations and agencies, but (b) are small enough that they can be described as a place distinctive from the broader community and society in which they are situated. In spite of differences in definition, social scientists have shown that neighborhoods exert important influences on life outcomes, including those related to substance abuse (Boardman, et al. 2001), delinquency and criminality (Sampson and Groves 1989, Sampson and Laub 1994), adolescent sexual behavior and pregnancy (Brooks-Gunn, et al. 1993, Sucoff and Upchurch 1998), health status (Latkin and Curry 2003, Ross and Mirowsky 2001), and health service utilization (Kirby 2008).

Neighborhoods influence life outcomes for children in both direct and indirect ways. Perhaps the most common belief is that children are most affected by their contact with the neighborhood's residents. Social learning theories of crime suggest that children are more likely to become juvenile delinquents if they live in a neighborhood that is overly-populated with gang members, drug dealers, and other criminal "mentors." Social learning theories illustrate an important neighborhood "compositional effect:" that the residential make-up of the neighborhood explains why those who live there experience particular life outcomes (Kirby 2008). For example, from this perspective children who grow up in neighborhoods populated with an abundance of undereducated and underemployed people are likely to repeat the experiences of their neighbors and experience similar economic underachievement.

An alternative perspective suggests that there is something about living in an impoverished neighborhood that negatively affects life outcomes regardless of the individual

characteristics of its residents: the influence of the neighborhood on child outcomes can be “contextual” in nature. Anderson and colleagues have found that, even after controlling for several individual-level factors, residents of neighborhoods with high rates of poverty and unemployment were less likely to have seen a doctor in the previous year (Anderson and Davidson 2001, Anderson et al. 2002). Kirby and associates have also found that census block groups characterized by economic disadvantage and residential instability are associated with poor health care access, net of many individual characteristics (Kirby and Kaneda 2005, Kirby et al. 2006). In more recent research, Kirby (2008) has demonstrated that being poor while residing in a poor neighborhood is less problematic in terms of health care access than being poor and residing in a middle class or mixed social class neighborhood. He concludes that poor people living amongst others with similar circumstances are able to tap into the collective knowledge of how to access the services that exist in poor neighborhoods, while poor people living in mixed-class neighborhoods are isolated from the knowledge network of their more affluent neighbors. Similarly, rotten outcomes for children that are structurally facilitated through the greater availability of deviant opportunities, such as greater access to illicit drugs or opportunities to join delinquent gangs, can be seen as a neighborhood contextual effect.

The Social Capital Perspective

The social capital perspective has become an increasingly popular orientation among scholars who are attempting to understand the individual and collective social behaviors observed in localized neighborhoods and other social networks. The concept of social capital is grounded in a core premise of sociology: that involvement and participation in groups has important consequences for both the individual and the social group as a whole (Portes 1998). Pierre Bourdieu’s original conception of social capital considers the amount that individuals possess is based on the size of their social network and the capital that the members of the network possess. Bourdieu (1985) believed that social capital can be converted to economic capital, thus perpetuating class inequality (Baum 2000). James Coleman (1988), on the other hand, emphasized the collective aspect of social capital, defining it as a trust aspect of the social group that facilitates the actions of individuals. Consistent with Durkheim’s vision of a well-integrated society, Coleman asserts that interpersonal trust allows people to operate independently but with confidence in the other person’s dependability (DeLeon 1997). A third widely-cited approach to social capital is provided by Robert Putnam who, like Coleman, defines social capital as “the features of social organizations, such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (1995: 67). There is some disagreement whether social capital is a trait of groups or something that individuals can accrue, and some scholars are inconsistent in their opinion on the matter (Derose and Varda 2009). However, all of these definitions indicate that social relationships between people or groups are an asset that “can be called upon in a crisis, enjoyed for its own sake, and/or leveraged for material gain” (Woolcock 2001: 12).

Since social capital relates to the nature and degree of social networks and relations, much of the recent research concerning its impact on life outcomes distinguishes between various types of relationships. Many investigators rely on Mark Granovetter's (1973) classic article "The Strength of Weak Ties," in which he examined the difference between the strong intragroup ties that exist between people of similar background and weak intergroup ties which exist between people of different backgrounds. Social capital theorists usually refer to strong intragroup ties as "bonding capital," which is effective in providing support among group members (such as members of a family), while weak intergroup ties can be effective in promoting cohesion among dissimilar people, building diversity, promoting the diffusion of information and broad social cohesion, and providing pathways for mobility not available within the person's own group. Social capital theorists define the latter as "bridging capital." A third type is "linking capital," which describes explicit, structured relations between people and representatives social institutions, such as the social relations between neighborhood residents and police officers, school teachers, and health care providers. Linking capital is an important means for acquiring broader community and institutional resources on behalf of individuals, groups, and neighborhoods (Woolcock 2001). Collectively, the concepts of bonding, bridging, and linking capital, integrated with neighborhood compositional and contextual effects, provide a basis for exploring social relations in the neighborhood and how they influence the life outcomes of children.

Linking Capital: Relations With Social Institutions.

Social institutions are larger formal organizations and agencies that have broad social influence on the lives of citizens, within and beyond particular neighborhoods. These institutions have a direct effect on the life experiences and outcomes for children, and can exert indirect effects as well, through the mediating influence of the neighborhood. Residents, singly and in groups, also attempt to influence social institutions, at least within the boundaries of the neighborhood. Depending on the success of neighborhood activism, residents often develop compensatory systems to deal with gaps in institutional support. These compensatory behaviors often become visible manifestations of the neighborhood's distinctive culture.

General institutional effects on children. On the most basic level, the overall quality of institutional response to social concerns affecting children in general will have some influence in impoverished neighborhoods. From this perspective, the approach of broad system resourcing should help "everyone's boat to float higher;" resulting in better government and agency services for all children in a city, state, or nation.

"No Child Left Behind will benefit all children, regardless of their backgrounds or needs." George W. Bush, U.S. President

For example, states that prioritize and invest in public health care and prevention programs are likely to achieve better health outcomes for their impoverished child residents, relative to their

counterparts in states that do not make health care a priority for resource investment. Similarly, cities with well resourced transit systems provide better public transportation to their impoverished neighborhoods than those cities that do not have developed transit systems. Similar patterns exist for law enforcement and criminal justice institutional activities: everything else equal, we might expect that more ethical and professional police departments and courts will dispense fairer justice to all of their citizens, including impoverished children.

Differences in context: institutional influence by neighborhood. Broad social trends do not affect all neighborhoods in the same way. An obvious recent example is the general economic collapse currently affecting the U.S. and other nations. While this global event has negatively influenced the economic well-being of all citizens, its effects have been more pronounced in impoverished, under-capitalized neighborhoods due to the imbedded poverty, lower levels of personal savings, unemployment or employment in vulnerable jobs, poor educational levels, and other neighborhood deficits evident there.

“Sometimes we have to do things a little different around here. It’s because of the neighborhoods, and the people.”-Sergeant, New York Police Department

A deliberate pattern of unequal treatment of neighborhoods by social institutions increases the distinction between impoverished and more affluent neighborhoods, but there is strong support for the philosophy of “contextualizing” institutional responses to social problems. This philosophy assumes that by making situational alterations to general policies by taking into account the unique characteristics of neighborhoods and their residents, agencies can better allocate social and economic resources and produce better outcomes for both. Situational crime prevention strategies, community-oriented policing, and local control of schools are examples of contextualized adjustments to broader institutional policies and directives. While the reason resource distribution disparity can be a conscious attempt to reduce inequality among residents and neighborhoods, in some cases well-intentioned efforts can actually produce greater disparities. It is more even troubling when blatant or indirect institutional discrimination targeting marginalized social groups is the reason behind the unequal allocation of institutional resources. While institutional decision-makers might not intend to systematically harm the life outcomes of impoverished children, their efforts to secure economic, political or social capital for other groups can reduce the life chances of poor children to the category of “collateral damage.”

Positively-intended neighborhood institutional strategies. On a positive note, some well-intentioned contextualized strategies, such as many of the community-oriented policing approaches used in impoverished neighborhoods, are effective in producing public safety (e.g., Braga 2007, Farrington and Welsh 2007, Welsh and Farrington 2007). On the other hand, other well-intentioned strategies have unintended negative outcomes. Kirby (2008) observes that some impoverished neighborhoods are resourced better in some ways than their more privileged counterparts, in that many cities choose to situate some public health care services, clinics, drug

treatment centers, food banks, shelters, and similar institutional representations in poor neighborhoods. This pattern was also observed in community audits of services: some high-crime, impoverished inner-city neighborhoods had a wealth of services providers and specialized programs supported by government and non-profit agencies (Steele and Broidy 2005). Unfortunately, these efforts were often focused on the consequences of neighborhood impoverishment and disorganization and failed to address their underlying causes, resulting in dependence culture among residents. In these communities, personal success was defined almost exclusively within a neighborhood context that was unrecognizable to the society as a whole: successful residents are those who can skillfully navigate the bewildering and inconsistent rules that govern access to much-needed institutional resources.

Withholding institutional services. More typically, social scientists remark upon the absence or poor quality of services in impoverished areas, or the unique ways in which institutional representations of services perpetuate marginalized social status. An example of the former was found in research that we conducted concerning a neighborhood based storefront program that was developed in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Neighborhood residents complained that they received little fire or emergency rescue service from the city. Firefighters and emergency medical professionals confirmed this complaint, saying that they were unwilling to enter the neighborhood without police escort because they did not consider it safe. Thus, while professionals considered this an issue of personal safety, residents believed that they were being neglected by government institutions (Steele 1997). If we were to consider risk of rotten outcomes as the criterion for the service resource allocation, impoverished neighborhoods should receive not only the most but also the finest quality of services. The opposite appears to be true: in several books, Jonathan Kozol (2005) has lamented the poor quality of schools in impoverished neighborhoods, noting the dearth of material resources, lack of effective teachers, and pervasive attitude of hopelessness.

Predatory institutional practices. Potentially more disturbing and disruptive are predatory practices by larger social institutions in impoverished neighborhoods. Three examples illustrate this practice. The first is predatory financing and financial practices employed in impoverished neighborhoods. Mainstream financial institutions largely ignore poor neighborhoods (Rubin 2007). In their absence, groups such as high interest financing groups, and pay-day loan and check-cashing storefronts have proliferated, which encourage chronic indebtedness (Kubrin et al. forthcoming). Second, recent research has linked the unwillingness of supermarket chains and healthy food outlets to locate in poor neighborhoods with high rates of chronic obesity, diabetes and other dietary health problems (Boardman et al. 2005). Finally, business sector decisions have resulted in the relative absence of skilled manufacturing, service and professional employment in impoverished neighborhoods. Residents that are fortunate enough to secure meaningful work are faced with lengthy commutes to and from work sites, or moving out of their home neighborhood altogether. In Los Angeles and other decentralized metropolitan areas, public transportation systems are typically limited and expensive, forcing inner-city residents to rely on personal transportation, which can be an insurmountable barrier to

getting and keeping good jobs (Moore 1978, National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders 1968).

Neighborhood advocacy. Just like economic capital, social and political capital is not evenly distributed by neighborhood. Often the goals of the broader community reflect the priorities of that larger and more politically powerful group, and not necessarily the needs and wishes of those residing in impoverished neighborhoods. Thus, a broad conservative political effort to reduce government entitlement programs, or to resist restrictions on gun ownership, is likely to affect the citizen residing in impoverished neighborhoods differently than their more well-to-do counterpart (Miller 2008). As another example, impoverished communities where the proportion of residents under age 18 is relatively high generally express strong support for community investment in public education. On the other hand, more affluent and politically powerful residents of the broader community are less likely to prioritize public education, especially if it involves more taxation, since they have fewer children and they can afford to send the children they do have to private schools. Instead, they are generally more concerned about crime rates and encourage strict enforcement in impoverished areas. Impoverished residents want better schools, but what they get is more aggressive police surveillance.

It must be said that while the power balance might favor institutional leaders, residents of impoverished neighborhoods can still influence the way in which broader social institutions operate in their neighborhood. Public education in the U.S. has traditionally embraced the “little red schoolhouse” notion of local control. While centralized control of schools has increased in recent decades in the attempt to manage costs and improve outcomes, local school board members, parent-teacher associations and local school volunteers still wield considerable influence on the daily activities of school children. Also, many criminal justice initiatives rely on the participation of neighborhood residents. These include Neighborhood Watch programs, Community Policing, Crime Stoppers, and Safe Harbor programs, but the most obvious example in the U.S. is the Weed and Seed program. Operating in over 600 high-risk neighborhoods, community members are active participants in advisory boards and in specific crime prevention and intervention strategies targeting their residential areas. Research conducted in two Weed and Seed sites in the same community attributed disparities in their success to differences in the orientation of community advisory board members (Steele 2005a, 2005b). As a part of that project, an intervention developed by our research group in collaboration with neighborhood residents is the Community Critical Incident Review program (Steele 2006), in which local community members participate with criminal justice and other government agencies to prevent violent crime within a small geographical area such as a city block, street intersection, or apartment complex. In this way, local residents become active participants in the activities of larger social institutions within their own neighborhood.

Bridging Capital: Children In Neighborhood Social Networks

As mentioned earlier, the “weak ties” that exist with heterogeneous groups can promote integration and solidarity among diverse individuals, and provide opportunities that do not exist

within the child's immediate network. As children mature, they develop increasingly strong connections to neighborhood social networks and their access to bridging capital, i.e., the resources commanded by others in these diverse networks, continues to grow. The rate of bridging capital accumulation is particularly rapid among child residents of impoverished neighborhoods, in that they tend to move outside of their immediate family networks at an earlier age than their more advantaged counterparts.

Neighborhood networks socialize children into the skills and values present among other neighborhood residents (Jencks and Mayer 1990), provide resources and opportunities to reach desired goals, and protection from undesired outcomes. The direction of neighborhood influences upon children is especially important in impoverished neighborhoods, given the greater availability of deviance-facilitating networks, places and opportunities for problem behaviors, and the relatively limited personal and institutional protections for children from them.

Negative bridging capital and rotten outcomes for children. From a compositional standpoint, impoverished neighborhoods are a gathering point for gang members, drug addicts, sexual deviants, and other social misfits who are likely to victimize children or at least expose them to nonconforming life styles and rotten life outcomes. For their long-term survival, deviant social groups rely on recruiting new members, mostly younger people from the local area. These groups socialize children into not only the skills necessary to successfully engage in a deviant lifestyle, but also to value their mentors, accept or at least rationalize the behaviors in which they engage, and neutralize the reactions of conventional groups concerning their nonconforming behaviors (Becker 1963, Sutherland 1947).

In addition, neighborhood social networks can foster a localized mistrust of social institutions. Tom Tyler (2006) describes the emergence and consequences of system mistrust among inner-city residents in Chicago. He points out that if residents of impoverished neighborhoods experience unjust treatment at the hands of government agencies, they will not feel compelled to respect or support them or comply with their rules. For Tyler, system mistrust is a better predictor of crime rates in impoverished neighborhoods than racial composition or economic disadvantage.

“In Bed-Sty, whenever someone saw a (Child Protective Service) worker come in the neighborhood, we would call each other to get the hell out (of their apartments) with their kids.

We knew that the Baby-Stealers had arrived. You couldn't go home until they left.”

Mother living in the Brooklyn's Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood

Some chilling examples of neighborhood-level system mistrust have been reported recently. First, while the number of violent crimes in the U.S. continues to decline, police clearance rates for homicides are also declining. Lower clearance rates have been attributed to the changing nature of the homicides, coupled with lack of citizen cooperation. Specifically, as other forms of homicide decline, a growing proportion of the remaining killings are related to

gang and drug-distribution activity. These crimes are especially prevalent in impoverished neighborhoods, where residents mistrust the system, and witnesses are unlikely to provide the police with information, either because of their lack of respect for them, or their mistrust of the police department's ability to protect them from gang and drug-dealer retaliation. System mistrust also affects victim participation in the system as shown in several studies documenting the reluctance of victims of domestic violence to testify against their assailant, and in the unwillingness of Native children in Indian Country to participate in federal crime investigations of their alleged sexual abuse (Steele 2009).

A final type of negative neighborhood influence relates to the physical environment of the neighborhood. Impoverished neighborhoods are typically established in less desirable locations, such as along railroad lines and slaughterhouses (Southside Chicago), in poorly drained, disease ridden lowlands (East Los Angeles), industrial areas (Milwaukee) or around interstate highways and freeways (several cities). In addition to ecological deficits, high rates of residential mobility, lack of personal resources, landlord neglect, and poor agency oversight have diminished the living environment for children in impoverished neighborhoods. Environmental and industrial hazards further contribute to the poor outcomes for children, as found by Kozol (1991). We found consistent patterns of pollution in public wells serving an impoverished, high crime neighborhood in the Southwestern U.S. (Steele 2005b). Other studies in the U.S. and other countries have shown that accidents related to children accessing controlled access highways, waterways, canals and flood control channels, abandoned buildings, poorly lit areas, unsupervised parks, playgrounds and forested areas, junkyards, and the like are a greater threat to impoverished children who have such hazards in or near their neighborhood, and no safer alternative area in which to recreate. The absence of other preventive influences, such as security personnel, electronic surveillance systems, controlled traffic patterns, and adequate street lighting also place children in impoverished neighborhoods at greater risk (Clarke 1995).

Bridging capital that promotes positive outcomes. On a happier note, a sense of mutual cooperation, trust, and willingness to share resources can emerge within neighborhood social networks. Contrary to the commonly-held belief, impoverished neighborhoods are not landscapes of universal loneliness, anonymity, despair, and fear. Rather, in many stable lower class areas, a sense of mutual cooperation and trust can emerge, often as an antidote to the neglect of political decision-makers, institutional authorities and the well-to-do. Within the neighborhood are citizens, and representations of larger institutions such as local churches and schools, that can provide important resources to children, tailored to their characteristics and needs, and the nature of the neighborhood itself.

While avoiding the influences of larger social institutions that they mistrust, members of neighborhood networks can be very supportive of each other, and creative in compensating for the lack of quality institutional support. Sampson and Groves (1989) and others assert that stable impoverished neighborhoods can develop mutual regard and assistance networks that promote child safety and development. They describe this kind of mutual trust and support among neighbors as a form of "collective efficacy;" a mutual empowerment that develops within stable

social networks of like-thinking residents who face similar problems. Our research among female residents of impoverished neighborhoods in St. Louis found that they cope with insufficient welfare support through well-developed bartering and mutual support networks. For example, one resident provided transportation to the medical clinic in return for child care services. Similar results are reported by Carol Stack in *All Our Kin* (1974) a classic anthropological investigation of impoverished African-American families and informal social networks.

Informal support also takes the form of information-sharing. Kirby found that that poor families residing in poor neighborhoods are more likely to access health care services than their counterparts living in middle class or mixed-income areas, because other members in the neighborhood social network were willing to help them gain access to public health care agencies. Neighborhood social networks are also helpful in sharing information how to successfully violate the letter and spirit of service agencies. In St. Louis, we discovered that pregnant women learned from other neighborhood women to go to the local cemetery and identify recently deceased men as the biological father on the child's birth certificate. This was necessary since the state would only provide a mother with full support for the first child resulting from a relationship with a particular man. Government officials concluded that impoverished women were promiscuous with several men, but did provide full financial support for their each of their children. In reality, these mothers had stable, long term relationships with a single man who was the father of all her children, but learned from other mothers how to better provide for their family through this subterfuge.

Bonding Capital In Neighborhoods: Indirect Child Influences

Family bonding and child outcomes. As noted above, very young children have little direct contact with the broader society, and thus are not likely to accrue linking or bridging capital on their own until they mature. Whatever benefits that they might gain from local social networks and institutional representations in their neighborhood are mediated by the family unit in which they reside. For example, some interesting recent research has investigated the mediating effects of parents and peers in understanding neighborhood effects on adolescent cigarette and alcohol use (Chuang, et al., 2005).

Through social bonds within the family children might also be able to command whatever resources, skills, and knowledge that the family possesses independent of its bridging and linking networks. The family's capacity and willingness to acquire and use social capital on behalf of their children is a powerful determinant of the child's life outcomes. Immediate and long-term consequences of family decisions on behalf of their children have been well documented in scholarly disciplines such as psychology, sociology, developmental studies. From a social capital perspective, family influence on the child's life outcomes is determined by the type and amount of social capital that the family is able to control, the willingness of the family to use those resources on behalf of the child, and the moral character of social capital that they make available to the child.

First, impoverished families are relatively limited in the amount of economic, political, and social capital that they possess themselves, or can leverage on behalf of their children. As well documented in government reports concerning child abuse and neglect, poor families are at a disadvantage, regardless of their best intentions, in being able to protect their children from victimization (Sedlak and Broadhurst, 1996). They are also less able to provide for quality education opportunities, cultural enrichment, material possessions, a healthy diet, and necessary medical and other professional services. For example, we observed that incarcerated juvenile offenders from impoverished families had rarely been examined for dental, vision and hearing problems, language processing difficulties, or mental health concerns. Their institutional comportment and school performance improved dramatically when they were given adequate dental care and provided with hearing aids and eye glasses when needed (Steele, 2002).

*“T--- doesn’t come to school much because he is afraid his (gang) enemies will find him here. His mother is single and works three jobs to provide a decent home to her kids, but because of that is never around to supervise him or the other kids.
-Eighth grade teacher, Albuquerque Public Schools*

Of course, economic resources aren’t the only form of bonding capital important in raising children. As Patricia Hersch (1998) poignantly describes in her book *A Tribe Apart*, even children of professionals can be deprived of parental engagement and support while still receiving abundant material support.

Second, to must decide to use whatever resources they possess or can access on behalf of their children. The decision to use scarce resources is grounded in parental knowledge and attitudes concerning child rearing. Young, immature, or substance-addicted parents often place their own needs before those of their children, passing their own rotten outcomes into their family’s next generation. In other instances, parents might choose to withhold resources, if they feel that the child deserves punishment, or if they are not wanted. Even if they are motivated to the best they can for their family, parents might be forced to choose between meeting the needs of one child to the exclusion of others. In an environment of scarce resources, parents must make hard choices between meeting one of their children’s desire for enriched educational opportunities with another child’s need for specialized health care.

The third factor influencing the family’s impact on child outcomes is the moral content of the resources that they bestow upon their children. Our society relies on families to socialize their children into the knowledge, skills, and aptitudes necessary to produce socially-conforming and productive citizens. However, families in impoverished neighborhoods are less able to provide the tangible economic resources and opportunities necessary for their children’s success. On the other hand, family members who have embraced deviant values and are embedded in deviant social networks are in a position to transfer their skills, values, and opportunities for deviance to their children.

“Sixty of the guns seized during the raid were provided to the gang by one straw buyer. She was the mother of one of the gang leaders.”
Gang unit investigator, Albuquerque Police Department

Adult family members who have experienced rotten outcomes themselves expose their children to deviant acts that they are likely to repeat (Verrecchia et al. 2010, Widom 1989), including drug dealing and gang activity (Moore, et al., 1978). We confirmed in one study that the most powerful predictor of adolescent being sent to jail or prison was their immediate family’s history of incarceration (Steele, 2002).

In summary, families can protect children from harmful influences that negatively affect their life outcomes, they can be the source of those influences, or both. We found that children who are raised in communal extended family environments on Indian tribal lands were well connected to traditional cultural values and supported by otherwise impoverished families, but they were also more likely to be sexually abused by a member of their extended family than were non-Indian children, when controlling for other influences (Steele, 2009). Even in the most dysfunctional family units, however, there is often a member that is a positive and protective influence for the child. In a study of drug-exposed infants and their substance-abusing mothers, we found that this role was often occupied by the child’s maternal grandmother (Steele, et al., 1993a, 1996).

Non-family bonding capital. While space does not allow for a detailed discussion of this topic, it should be mentioned that children build increasingly strong social networks with peers as they mature, so that by adolescence they rival the influence of the family. Affiliation in peer networks is based largely on shared values, interests and experiences. In impoverished neighborhoods, peer networks have limited economic resources for the child can call upon, but they can be quite influential in shaping the child’s attitudes and in providing opportunities for engaging in socially acceptable or deviant activities. One dilemma is that as impoverished children become objects of stigma, due to their behaviors or merely their origin, they tend to isolate themselves from conventional society and become immersed in deviant or otherwise culturally distinctive peer social networks (Link and Phelan 2001).

Neighborhood Influences On Service Interventions For Impoverished Children

In the past I have noted that marginalized children suffer not only greater risk for negative events, but experience less effective system interventions that might protect them, or prevent their re-victimization (Steele, 2009). One reason for the poor intervention outcomes is that impoverished children receive lower quality services. Another is that children and their families are less likely to comply with treatment regimes. Poor compliance is associated with the limited social capital available to impoverished children and their family, to comply with a treatment plan created by institutional representatives (Steele, 2004). It is also due to mistrust and reluctance to participate in the treatment plan. Failure to actively participate as expected by children’s court, the delinquency court, child protective services, or school administrators is

often taken as a punishable offense rather than an inability to comply (Neustein and Leshner, 2005). In addition, children and families from impoverished neighborhoods could very well choose not to comply with a treatment plan if it requires them to tap into bridging and linking networks. This is especially the case if they and other bridging and bonding network members mistrust the system. For these reasons, our studies have found a poor record of compliance with treatment plans by impoverished children and families (Steele, et al, 1993a; 1993b; 1996).

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