

# Neighborhood Influences on Adolescent Risk Behavior

Tama Leventhal, PhD  
Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Development

*Board on Children, Youth, and Families  
Committee on the Science of Adolescence*

*May 28, 2009*



*I would like to acknowledge the William T. Grant Foundation and the Bureau of Maternal and Child Health for their support. Based on Leventhal, T. Dupere, V., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2009). Neighborhood influences on adolescent development. In R. M. Lerner & L. Steinberg (Eds.), Handbook of adolescent psychology (3rd ed.) (pp. 411-443). New York: John Wiley and Sons.*

# Outline

1. Non-experimental evidence:  
Neighborhood structure ➤ Risk behavior
2. Experimental evidence:  
Neighborhood structure ➤ Risk behavior
3. Theoretical models  
Mechanisms behind the links



# What is a neighborhood?



# Why Neighborhoods?

- Research focus on individual & family factors
- Adolescence marked by growing importance of contexts beyond family ...more than peers
- Important social settings for youth
  - Venue for peer interactions
  - Major institutional basis for allocation resources

# Outline

## 1. Non-experimental evidence:

Neighborhood structure ➤ Risk behavior

## 2. Experimental evidence:

Neighborhood structure ➤ Risk behavior

## 3. Theoretical models

Mechanisms behind the links

# Non-Experimental Evidence: Study Designs

- Post-hoc approach
  - National data sets and city/regional samples
  - US Census data
    - SES/income (high & low)
    - Racial/ethnic diversity
    - Residential instability
- Neighborhood-based studies
  - Generate desired variability
  - More reliable neighborhood estimates
  - Beyond census

# Non-Experimental Evidence: Findings on SES

- High-SES → Higher achievement
  - Possibly stronger for males than females
- Low-SES → More behavior and emotional problems, risky behavior, and delinquency
- Low SES → More early childbearing, less contraceptive use & more frequent intercourse

# Non-Experimental Evidence: Summary

- Small to modest effects
- Consistent across national and neighborhood-based studies
- Covary for extensive child and family background characteristics
- Selection problems

# Outline

1. Non-experimental evidence:  
Neighborhood structure ➤ Risk behavior

2. Experimental evidence:  
Neighborhood structure ➤ Risk behavior

3. Theoretical models  
Mechanisms behind the links

# Experimental Evidence: Mobility Programs

- Target low-income families in public housing in high-poverty neighborhoods
- Random or quasi-random assignment to move to lower poverty neighborhoods
- Not directly target adolescent risk behavior

# Experimental Evidence: Gautreaux Program

- Desegregation of Chicago's public housing
- Vouchers to move to private housing
  - Poor city neighborhoods
  - Middle-class suburbs
- After at least 10 years in suburbs (vs. city)...
  - Achievement: ↑ high school graduation, college attendance, employment, wages
  - Crime: Boys: ↓ arrests & conviction for drug offenses
  - Girls: ↑ conviction for criminal offenses

# Experimental Evidence: Moving to Opportunity (MTO)

- 4,600 families in public housing (5 cities)
- Randomly assigned to 1 of 3 groups:
  - Voucher for private housing in low-poverty neighborhood
  - Voucher for private housing in neighborhood of choice
  - Remain in public housing
- After 5 years in low-poverty neighborhood
  - Substance Use: **Girls:** ↓ marijuana/alcohol use  
**Boys:** ↑ cigarette use
  - Crime: **Girls:** ↓ arrests for violent & property crimes  
**Boys:** ↑ arrests for property crimes
  - Mental Health: **Girls:** ↓ psychological distress/anxiety
  - No effects: delinquency, sexual behaviors, achievement, physical health

# Experimental Evidence:

## Yonkers Family & Community Project

- Desegregation order: 200 townhouses built in 8 middle-class neighborhoods
- Assigned via lottery to new public housing
- Quasi-experimental study of 315 families
  - Lottery winners
  - Lottery losers & similar families
- After 7 yrs in middle-class neighborhoods ...

Substance Use: ↑ total use (tobacco, alcohol & marijuana)

Behavior Problems: ↑ hyperactivity

Negative effects largely for older adolescents

# Outline

## 1. Non-experimental evidence:

Neighborhood structure ➤ Risk behavior

## 2. Experimental evidence:

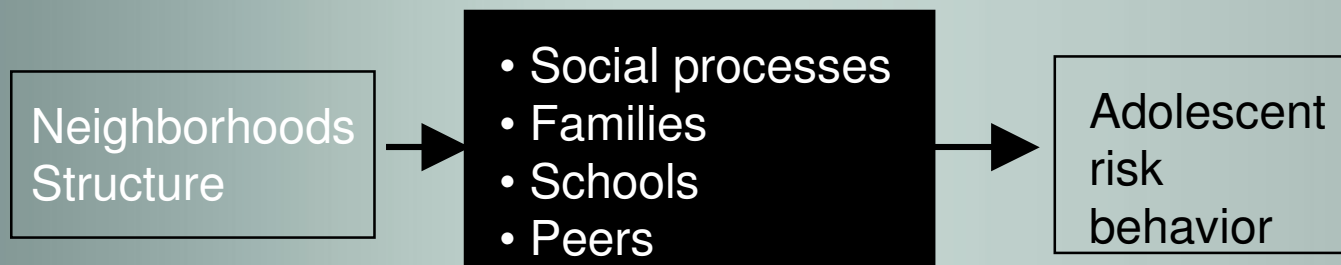
Neighborhood structure ➤ Risk behavior

## 3. Theoretical models

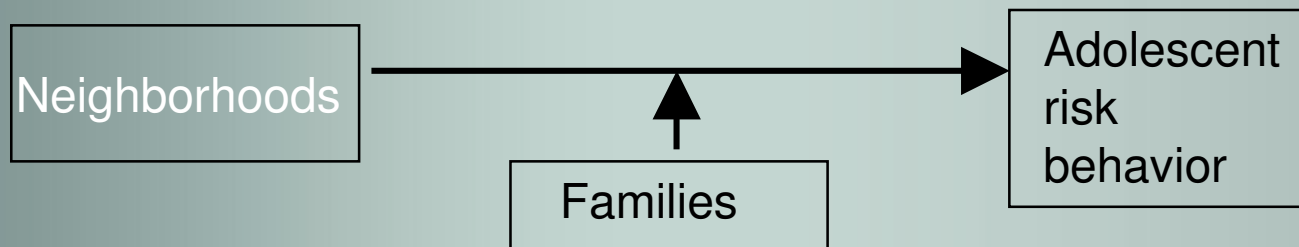
Mechanisms behind the links

# Theoretical Models

- Influence of neighborhoods direct & indirect



- Other contexts modify influence of neighborhood effects



- Three proposed models

# Institutional Resources

Quantity, quality, diversity, and affordability of resources in neighborhood

- Lower-SES neighborhoods fewer and lower quality resources
- Institutional resources important to adolescents' risk behavior:
  - Schools
  - Health and social services
  - Recreational and social programs
  - Employment

# Norms and Collective Efficacy

Neighborhood-level capacity to work together towards common goals and values

- Cohesion among members reinforces norms and values regarding behavior
- When collective efficacy strong, physical threats reduced
  - Violence
  - Availability of illegal and harmful substances
- Function of neighborhood structure

# Relationships and Ties

## Families and social networks

- Neighborhood disadvantage affects adolescents via parents' well-being & behavior
- Parenting modifies neighborhood influences on adolescent risk behavior
  - Supervision/monitoring modulates exposure to extra-familial influences
  - Sensitivity/warmth protects against consequences of neighborhood disadvantage

# Adolescent Risk Behavior: Evidence for Theoretical Models

## Institutional Resources

- Emerging support for role of social and recreational resources

## Norms & Collective Efficacy

- Compelling evidence for importance of community-level supervision of youth

## Relationships & Ties

- Mixed findings but highlight salience of parental monitoring and support

# Percent change in odds of sexual onset w/1 *SD* increase in collective efficacy by gender & parental control



*Note.*  $N = 77$ ; person-period level  $N = 1,723$ ; figure presents odds adjusted for child and family background characteristics, parental control and support, peer characteristics, prior problem behaviors, and neighborhood structure; \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ .  
*Source.* Browning, C. R., Leventhal, T., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2005). Sexual initiation in early adolescence: The Nexus of parental and community control. *American Sociological Review*, 70 (5), 758-778.

# Conclusions

- Neighborhood context matters
- Poverty/low SES most consistent
  - Collective efficacy potential pathway
- Neighborhood effects dependent on gender and other characteristics
- Magnitude of effects
- Understanding complexities informs effective programs and policies