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Delbert S. Elliott, Scott Menard, Bruce Rankin, Amanda Elliott, William Julius Wilson, David Huizinga  
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## Good Kids from Bad Neighborhoods

This is a study of successful youth development in poor, disadvantaged neighborhoods in Denver and Chicago – a study of how children living in the worst neighborhoods develop or fail to develop the values, competencies, and commitments that lead to a productive, healthy, and responsible adult life. While there is a strong focus on neighborhood effects, the study employs a multicontextual model to take into account the effects of other social contexts embedded in the neighborhood that also influence development. The unique and combined influence of the neighborhood, family, school, peer group, and individual attributes on developmental success is estimated. The view that growing up in a poor, disadvantaged neighborhood condemns one to a life of repeated failure and personal pathology is revealed as a myth, as most youth in these neighborhoods are completing the developmental tasks of adolescence successfully.

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# Good Kids from Bad Neighborhoods

*Successful Development in Social Context*

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## Foreword

The last several decades have witnessed a pervasive transformation in the organization of knowledge and the process of social inquiry. In salutary contrast to their traditional – and parochial – preoccupation with disciplinary concerns, the social sciences have increasingly begun to take complex social problems as the starting point in their confrontation with the empirical world. Indeed, with regard to a particular discipline, that of sociology, Neil Smelser expressed doubt not long ago that this name would denote an identifiable field in the future, and he predicted that “scientific and scholarly activity will not be disciplinary in character but will, instead, chase problems” (1991, pp. 128–29). In the same vein, the prestigious Kellogg Commission noted pointedly that “. . . society has problems; universities have departments” (1997, p. 747). It is largely from the focus on complex problems of concern to society that whole new fields of knowledge have emerged in recent decades – among them behavioral science – and that *transdisciplinary* perspectives have, of logical necessity, come to inform and shape empirical inquiry. This volume by Elliott and colleagues exemplifies these recent developments and beautifully instantiates the *transdisciplinary* perspective of contemporary behavioral science.

Reflecting these trends, and self-consciously committed to furthering them, the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Adolescent Development in High-Risk Settings undertook a large-scale and extended program of collaborative, *transdisciplinary* research. The concerted aim of its various research projects was to further understanding about how young people growing up in circumstances of disadvantage, adversity, and even danger, nevertheless manage to do well, that is, to keep out of serious trouble, to stay on track, and to prepare themselves for the transition into young adult roles – in short, how they manage to “make it” (Jessor, 1993).

This volume is the third in a series reporting findings from those collaborative, converging, *transdisciplinary* endeavors, all in pursuit of that

concerted aim – the illumination of successful adolescent development despite settings of disadvantage and diversity. The first volume, *Managing to Make It: Urban Families and Adolescent Success* (Furstenberg et al., 1999), while also considering multiple contexts of adolescent life in inner-city Philadelphia, had a primary focus on the family context and, especially, on the strategies parents employ to safeguard and ensure their adolescents' future in the face of limited resources and constrained opportunity. The second volume in the series, *Children of the Land: Adversity and Success in Rural America* (Elder and Conger, 2000), explored the responses of farm and small-town families in rural central Iowa to raising their adolescents during the drastic farm crisis of the 1980s that had decimated their financial resources and drove many from the land.

Elliott and his colleagues began their project with a key focus on the neighborhood context in both Denver and Chicago, but the logic of their theoretical and analytic framework required them to examine closely the other important contexts of daily adolescent life as well – the family, the school, and the peer group. By first articulating and then testing a comprehensive, transdisciplinary framework for explaining neighborhood effects, and also engaging the larger ecology of youth development, these authors have provided us with a landmark accomplishment in social inquiry. It is an achievement that will surely set the standard for future investigations of the role that the everyday settings of social life play in shaping the way young people grow up.

The contributions of this work are theoretical, analytical, and empirical, and some of these will be noted. But first, it is important to position it in relation to widely shared stereotypes about the urban poor. There has been an unfortunate tendency to emphasize dysfunction and failure as characteristic of those living in poverty and of the institutions – families, schools, communities – in which they are embedded. Compounding this stereotype has been a perspective that erases individual variation among the disadvantaged, seeing them as essentially homogeneous – a monolithic subgroup of the larger population. This volume makes clear that nothing could be further from reality, and in this regard its findings, fully consonant with those of the earlier volumes in the series, are a welcome and compelling corrective.

From the outset, and by deliberate contrast, the MacArthur Network projects sought to account for the observable success of so many young people despite circumstances of poverty and adversity in their everyday lives. As one scholar had earlier noted about adolescent black males growing up poor, “Given these cumulative disadvantages, it is remarkable that the proportion of black male adolescents who survive to become well-adjusted individuals and responsible husbands and fathers is so high, or that the percentage who drop out of school, become addicted to drugs, involved in crime, and end up in jail is not considerably greater” (Taylor,

1991, p. 156). The concurrence of the authors of this volume with that perspective is evident in the conclusion they draw from their comprehensive findings: "... a majority of youth from the worst neighborhoods appear to be on track for a successful transition into adulthood" (Chapter 1).

Rejecting the myths of homogeneity and of failure and dysfunction among the poor as being no more than caricatures, the present research instead established those factors at the contextual and individual levels, which underlie and explain the extensive variation in successful developmental outcomes that are, in fact, obtained among youth in high-risk settings. Their research strategy was to develop a multilevel, multicontext framework that conceptually could link attributes of neighborhoods (in this case, level of disadvantage) to adolescent developmental outcomes (in this case, level of success). This theory is elaborated cumulatively, chapter by chapter, from a model of the neighborhood, to a neighborhood plus family model, to models that then add the school and the peer contexts, culminating ultimately in the specification of the full conceptual framework for the explanation of neighborhood effects on youth development. *This transdisciplinary theory of neighborhood effects, assimilating constructs from sociology, social psychology, anthropology, geography, and epidemiology, must be seen as a major contribution in its own right.* It advances this field of research beyond its usual reliance on single dimensions, such as the concentration of poverty, to characterize neighborhoods in more complex ways; it permits the appraisal of indirect neighborhood effects, especially those that may be mediated through other contexts embedded in the neighborhood – the family, the school, or the peer group; and perhaps most important, it specifies the mechanisms or processes that constitute the chain of influence between neighborhood, on the one hand, and the course and content of adolescent development, on the other.

Despite a long history and a recent resurgence of social science interest in the neighborhood, its conceptualization and specification have remained problematic. Even the geographic delineation of urban neighborhoods, usually relying on census units, differs across studies; indeed, in this very volume, the Chicago site employed the larger unit of census tract, whereas the Denver site used the smaller unit of block group. What is ultimately at issue, and what runs throughout the authors' grapplings with the neighborhood notion, is how to ensure that the specification of neighborhood employed *is relevant to the experience and actions of its residents*, and it is in this regard that they make another important contribution. For the geographic delineation of a neighborhood, invoking the criterion of relevance to experience/action clearly favors employing the smaller unit wherever possible. That criterion also influenced the descriptive characterization of neighborhoods – a multidimensional characterization is likely to be more relevant to experience/action than any one of its components.

But most important are the implications of that criterion for the constitution of neighborhoods *theoretically*. Descriptive attributes of neighborhoods, such as dilapidated housing, have to be seen as remote or distal in the causal chain, their influence on experience/action requiring mediation by theoretical constructs, such as neighborhood social organization and neighborhood culture, which are causally closer, that is, more proximal to experience/action. This theoretical mediation is clearly illustrated in the full, multicontextual model at which the authors arrive. The descriptive characteristics of the neighborhood are represented as causally most distal from the adolescent developmental outcomes of interest, and their influence is represented as mediated by the theoretically defined properties of neighborhoods, that is, their organization and their culture. This is a contribution to thinking about neighborhoods that should help shift the balance more toward theoretically guided specification and away from the customary reliance on descriptive characteristics that happen to be readily available.

The authors' concern with the theoretical properties of neighborhoods advances understanding in yet another way. It makes clear the critical difference between the compositional effects of neighborhoods (the effects that derive from the individual-level characteristics of the people who happen to live there or might have moved there, their socioeconomic status, for example, or their ethnicity) and what might be called "true" neighborhood effects (those that reflect the organized interactions among its residents, their informal social networks, for example, or the degree of their consensus on values). These are *neighborhood-level* properties, what the authors of this volume refer to as "emergents," and it is these that capture what the construct of neighborhood should mean if it, indeed, means something more than the average of the characteristics of the people who live in it. Here is yet another contribution of this volume; it not only makes this distinction a guiding premise of the research, but the measures devised and the design of the analyses permit a clear separation between these two types of neighborhood effects.

This volume is rich with compelling findings that force our thinking in new directions about the influence of neighborhoods on successful adolescent development. The research reaffirms our expectation from the literature that neighborhoods do matter. But it also reveals that they matter quite differently, if we are seeking to explain neighborhood-level differences in rates of a developmental outcome (i.e., differences between neighborhoods) or seeking to explain differences in a developmental outcome at the individual level (i.e., differences between individuals). The neighborhood measures, taken together, are shown to provide a significant account of neighborhood-level differences in rates of success and, as expected, rates of successful development are indeed higher in better neighborhoods. But

what emerges most strikingly about neighborhoods as a source of influence on successful adolescent development is *how modest that influence is at the individual level*. In short, what the research reveals is that most of the individual-level variation in success occurs *within neighborhoods, not between neighborhoods*, and the implications of that finding are enormous. It requires rejecting the idea that there is an inexorable linkage between growing up in a poor neighborhood and being destined for poor developmental outcomes. Indeed, the magnitude of within-neighborhood variation in successful outcomes – in both advantaged and disadvantaged neighborhoods – is such that the neighborhood per se, disadvantaged or otherwise, cannot be considered to mortgage an adolescent's developmental future. A more salutary finding would be difficult to envision.

It is in their exploration and dissection of the within-neighborhood variation that the authors of this volume make perhaps their most significant contribution to neighborhood research. By designing the project to permit examination not only of the neighborhood context itself, but also of the social contexts that are embedded within it – families, schools, and peer groups – the investigators were able to advance knowledge in several important ways. First, they were able to show that most of whatever effects neighborhoods have on adolescent developmental outcomes are indirect – mediated by their effects on the other contexts they encompass. Second, in examining those other contexts, they found that, within any given neighborhood, there can be considerable variation in quality vis-à-vis successful developmental outcomes. That is to say, the quality of parenting in families, for example, or of the climate of schools, or of the modeling by peer groups within a neighborhood remains highly variable; said otherwise, the quality of its social contexts is not, or is only weakly, determined by the quality of the neighborhood. Thus, to explain within-neighborhood variation in successful developmental outcomes requires an account of within-neighborhood variation in families, schools, and peer groups – and this is precisely what these investigators have been able to do. Third, they have been able to establish that there is variability among these contexts in quality such that knowing, for example, that there are dysfunctional families in a neighborhood tells little about the quality of its schools or of its peer groups. In short, there seems to be only what, in the Network's studies, came to be referred to as “loose coupling,” not just between a neighborhood and these other social contexts, but also among these other contexts themselves. Such findings underline the importance of attending to within-neighborhood differentiation – conceptually and empirically – in any study of neighborhood effects.

A bountiful harvest of findings about neighborhood effects, beyond those already noted, and with clear implications for social policy and for community interventions, awaits the reader. These include findings about

the relative importance of the different social contexts of adolescent life; about the variables in those contexts that are most influential in shaping an adolescent's course of development along a trajectory of success; about how different predictors are engaged when the outcome being predicted is different, say, problem behavior instead of personal competence; about the difference developmental stage seems to make; and about much more. Along the way, the reader will find the volume inviting, accessible, and transparent, reflecting the care taken by its authors to provide a synopsis at the beginning of each chapter, to build the argument chapter by chapter, to summarize their major findings in the final chapter, and to reserve most technical material for the Appendixes.

As is the case with all research, especially research dealing with the complexities of the social environment, there are limitations to the conclusions that can be drawn from this study; these are sensitively acknowledged and clearly confronted by the authors. However, it needs to be emphasized here that the main findings of the study are unusually compelling. This stems, first, from the attention given to operationalizing the physical, compositional, and theoretical or emergent attributes of neighborhoods, and then to directly measuring them; it stems also from the authors having constituted innovative and comprehensive measures of adolescent developmental success. The study gains its most substantial increment in compellingness by having carried out the test of its explanatory model in two very different urban sites – Denver and Chicago – and in both advantaged and disadvantaged neighborhoods in both sites. The major findings remain consistent across those tests. Finally, the study's findings are consistent with those reported in the two earlier volumes, thereby supporting the reach of the authors' transdisciplinary explanatory model and further extending its generality.

In addressing an important social problem in the way that they have, D. S. Elliott and colleagues have not only strengthened our grasp on successful youth development in disadvantaged neighborhoods, but they have, at the same time, enriched behavioral science.

Richard Jessor  
September 2005

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