

Sharkey

Stuck in Place

Urban Neighborhoods
and the End of Progress
toward Racial Equality

PATRICK SHARKEY

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS

Chicago and London

Patrick Sharkey is
associate professor
of sociology at New
York University and
an affiliated member
of the faculty at the
Robert F Wagner
School for Public
Service.

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London
© 2013 by The University of Chicago
All rights reserved. Published 2013.
Printed in the United States of America.

20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 1 2 3 4 5

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-92424-3 (cloth)
ISBN-13: 978-0-226-92425-0 (paper)
ISBN-13: 978-0-226-92426-7 (e-book)
ISBN-10: 0-226-92424-6 (cloth)
ISBN-10: 0-226-92425-4 (paper)
ISBN-10: 0-226-92426-2 (e-book)

Library of Congress-in-Publication Data

Sharkey, Patrick

Stuck in place : urban neighborhoods and the end of progress
toward racial equality / by Patrick Sharkey.

pages ; cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-92424-3 (cloth : alkaline paper)

ISBN-10: 0-226-92424-6 (cloth : alkaline paper)

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-92425-0 (paperback : alkaline paper)

ISBN-10: 0-226-92425-4 (paperback : alkaline paper)

[etc.]

1. African American neighborhoods—Social aspects.
2. African American neighborhoods—Economic aspects.
3. Urban African Americans—Social conditions. 4. Urban African Americans—Civil rights. 5. Discrimination in housing—United States. 6. Equality—United States. I. Title.

E185.S6.S514 2012

323.1196'073—dc23

2012017909

© This paper meets the requirements of ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992
(Permanence of Paper).

Contents

Acknowledgments, vii

- 1 Introduction, 1
- 2 The Inheritance of the Ghetto, 24
- 3 A Forty-Year Detour on the Path toward Racial Equality, 47
- 4 Neighborhoods and the Transmission of Racial Inequality, 92
- 5 The Cross-Generational Legacy of Urban Disadvantage, 117
- 6 Confronting the Inherited Ghetto: An Empirical Perspective, 136
- 7 Toward a Durable Urban Policy Agenda, 166

Notes, 201

References, 217

Index, 243

ments of whites and blacks, and one that may have profound implications for understanding why there has been so little progress toward racial equality, at least in economic terms, since the civil rights era. Even if a white and a black child are raised by parents who have similar jobs, similar levels of education, and similar aspirations for their children, the rigid segregation of urban neighborhoods means that the black child will be raised in a residential environment with higher poverty, fewer resources, poorer schools, and more violence than that of the white child. These differences have an important impact on children's opportunities as they move toward adulthood. While the black child may receive the same amount of schooling as the white child, it is likely that he will attend schools of lower quality than his white counterpart because of the area in which he lives. While the black child's parents may have the same amount of income and the same education as the parents of the white child, neighborhood inequality means that the black child is likely to be surrounded by peers who have been raised by parents with less education and fewer resources to devote to their children, less cultural capital and social connections to draw upon. While the white child is likely to be surrounded by peers who aspire to go to college, the black child is more likely to be surrounded by peers who fear going to prison.⁴⁴

In other words, even if the family environments of black and white children raised in the 1970s were similar, their residential environments were likely to be very different. This is the lingering influence of neighborhood inequality, and the findings in this chapter suggest that this lingering influence has been a primary mechanism for the reproduction of racial economic inequality in the post civil rights era.

This chapter thus represents an initial step toward the goal of understanding the long-term consequences of the inherited ghetto. The next chapter goes a step further and considers the impact of neighborhoods from one generation to the next.

Chapter 5

The Cross-Generational Legacy of Urban Disadvantage

We have seen the impact that children's neighborhoods have on their economic trajectories as they move into adulthood. But there is no reason to think that this impact is limited to the individual who is raised in a poor neighborhood. One of the basic, yet crucial insights of sociologists who study the reproduction of inequality is that human lives are linked together in various complex ways, but most notably through the family unit. This idea of "linked lives"⁴⁵ means that the advantages or disadvantages accumulated over a lifetime—the human and cultural capital acquired, the physical and mental health status of an individual, the resources that an individual obtains and works to protect—all of these accumulated hardships and assets are not felt solely by the individual in adulthood, but instead are transmitted, at least in part, to the next generation. The products of accumulated advantages are used to secure the same advantages for children: to impart the same cultural capital, to purchase housing in areas that are safe and healthy and that offer quality learning environments and well-functioning institutions. The hardships accumulated over a lifetime may be passed on to children via the physical and mental health of parents or the diminished resources available for the purchase of a quality and safe home, neighborhood, and school environment.

It is in this sense that the disadvantages faced during childhood in one generation may linger on to affect the life chances of the next generation—that is, to form a legacy of disadvantage. How, specifically, might such intergenerational pathways of influence emerge? As we saw in the previous chapter, there is strong evidence that childhood neighborhoods affect adult outcomes, a finding that is supported in an enormous literature from sociology, economics, epidemiology, and other disciplines. While this literature is not perfect, if one accepts the idea that children's neighborhoods affect *any* dimension of adult social or economic status, health, or family life that is important for child rearing then there is the potential for cross-generational impacts to be present. For example, if the childhood neighborhood influences adult mental health, and if mental health is an important aspect of

effective parenting, then there is the potential for an indirect pathway of influence linking one's childhood neighborhood to one's mental health as an adult to one's offspring's development. The number of potential pathways such as this one is almost limitless. If we think about all of the pathways collectively, then we begin to see the ways that neighborhood inequality may extend across generations, meaning disadvantages experienced in one generation may linger on to affect the life chances of the next generation.

This idea reinforces the core argument of the book, which is that to understand neighborhood inequality we must think in terms of generations, not single points in time or even single periods in an individual's life. It is not only that a child's neighborhood environment might affect her adult economic status, but that disadvantage (or advantage) experienced by a child is often a continuation of disadvantage experienced by her parents, and it is often disadvantage that is then passed on to her own children. To understand neighborhood inequality we have to consider the accumulation of disadvantage and advantage over generations.

The introductory chapters of the book described in detail the persistence of neighborhood inequality across generations—I now examine the consequences of cumulative, multigenerational disadvantage. While I have analyzed already the effects of spending childhood in disadvantaged environments, the central argument of this chapter is that there is something very different about neighborhood disadvantage that is experienced continuously over time and that is passed on from parents to children, across generations.

One way to investigate this claim is to examine the raw differences in the developmental outcomes of children from families that have lived in poor neighborhoods for consecutive generations, compared to those from families that have lived in poor neighborhoods for a single generation and those from families that have never lived in poor neighborhoods. The time frame of the PSID, which began in 1968, allows for an analysis of children from families that have been observed for two generations. A special supplement to the PSID, consisting of a set of questions asked of children, allows for a particularly interesting look at how children's developmental outcomes differ depending on the family's history of neighborhood environments.²

Consider first the comparisons in figure 5.1, which displays the average scores on two tests of cognitive skills, a reading/language test and an applied problems test, among children from four different groups of families. The tests, which are among the most widely used assessments of children's intelligence, are scaled to have a mean of about 100 in the population, meaning children who score above 100 are above average for their age group and

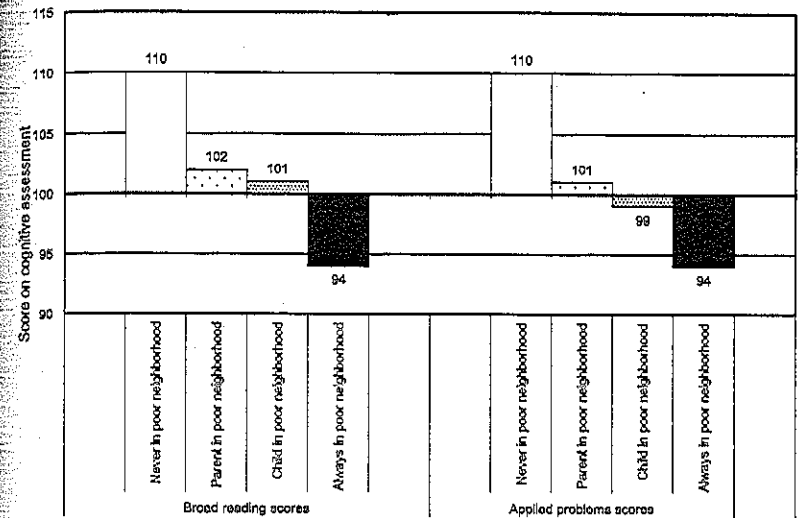


Figure 5.1. Raw average scores on tests of broad reading skills and applied problems skills, by neighborhood poverty status over two generations.

those below 100 are below average. Like a common IQ test, these tests are scaled to have a standard deviation of 15 points, which means that about 70 percent of the population scores within 15 points of the mean, somewhere between a score of 85 and 115, and 95 percent of the population scores within two standard deviations of the mean—that is, between a score of 70 and 130.

On the far left of figure 5.1 are scores on the “broad reading” test among children from families that never live in poor neighborhoods over the two generations in which we are able to observe them. These children have an average score of 110, meaning they are 10 points above the population average. Moving to the right, the graph then shows the average scores among children who have a parent that was raised in a high-poverty neighborhood—but the child him/herself was not raised in a poor neighborhood. These children have an average score of 102, about 8 points lower than the first group. This tells us that children raised by parents from poor neighborhoods score lower than those raised by parents who were not from poor neighborhoods, despite the fact that the children did not grow up in a poor environment. The third group consists of children who were themselves raised in poor

neighborhoods, but whose parents were not raised in poor neighborhoods. These children have similar scores as the second group—they score 101, on average. From the scores of these two groups of children, it is difficult to know which is more important for children's cognitive development: the child's own environment or his parent's childhood environment. If one were to look only at these scores and guess, the conclusion would be that a parent's childhood neighborhood and the child's own neighborhood are equally important. By itself, this is an interesting observation, when one considers that virtually the entire literature estimating the impact of neighborhoods has focused exclusively on the child's environment.

More intriguing is the last group in the figure, the group comprising children from families that have lived in poor neighborhoods for *consecutive* generations. These are children who have spent their own childhoods in poor neighborhoods and who also have a parent who was raised in a poor neighborhood. As is clearly visible from the graph, these children score markedly lower than their peers in any of the three other groups, with an average score of 94 on the broad reading test. If we compare them to the group of children from families that never lived in poor neighborhoods, they score 16 points lower, a cognitive deficit that is comparable to missing somewhere between four and eight years of schooling. But an equally striking result emerges if we instead compare this group to children who also were exposed to neighborhood poverty in their own childhoods but whose parents were *not* raised in poor neighborhoods. If it is only the child's environment that matters, we might expect to see roughly equivalent test scores among children raised in equivalent environments. Instead, we see that the effects of neighborhood poverty may be amplified if it is experienced over generations—children exposed to neighborhood poverty over multiple generations score substantially lower than any other group, even children who were raised in similarly poor neighborhoods but whose parents were not raised in poverty. This finding provides the initial, suggestive evidence indicating that the consequences of life in poor neighborhoods may not be captured fully in a single generation.

Interestingly, the patterns present in figure 5.1 are not uniform as we look at other dimensions of children's lives. In some domains, it is the child's own neighborhood that appears to be most salient; in others it is the parent's neighborhood; and in others it is the combination of the environments in which the family members have lived across successive generations.

Consider the area of health, another important dimension of successful child development. Unlike the patterns present for cognitive ability, the parent's childhood neighborhood appears to matter little for her child's health.

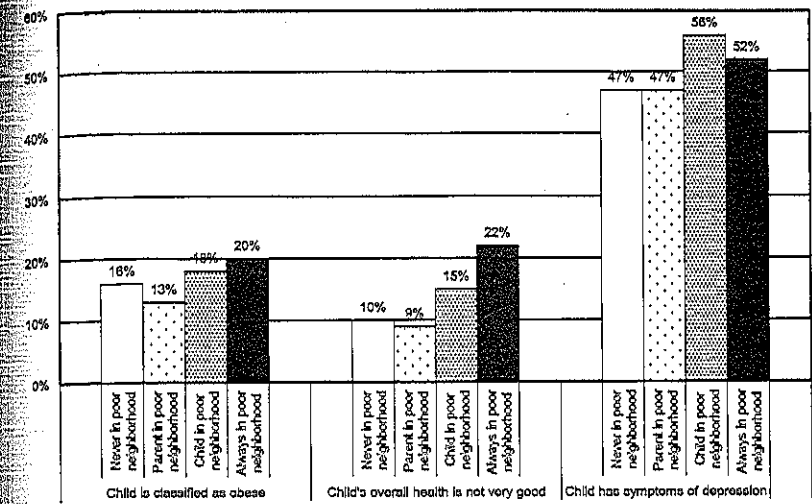


Figure 5.2. Children's obesity, overall poor health, and depression symptoms, by neighborhood poverty status over two generations.

Figure 5.2 presents the evidence, displaying rates of obesity, parent-reported poor health, and symptoms of depression among children in families who have lived in each type of neighborhood. While rates of obesity do not vary sharply by neighborhood poverty, children from families that have lived in poor neighborhoods over consecutive generations are the most likely to be obese. This group is also the most likely to report relatively poor overall health. However, children who have spent childhood in poor neighborhoods, but whose parents did not, are the most likely to report symptoms of depression. For all of the health measures, the general pattern is that the child's own environment and the cumulative experience of neighborhood poverty over consecutive generations are most strongly associated with physical or mental health problems.

The same patterns are present when children are asked about anxiety toward the future, as shown in figure 5.3. Children who are raised in poor neighborhoods, whether or not their parent was raised in a similarly poor neighborhood, are most worried about getting a good job when they reach adulthood and are most discouraged about their future. The immediate environment surrounding children seems more important than any lingering influence of the parent's childhood environment.

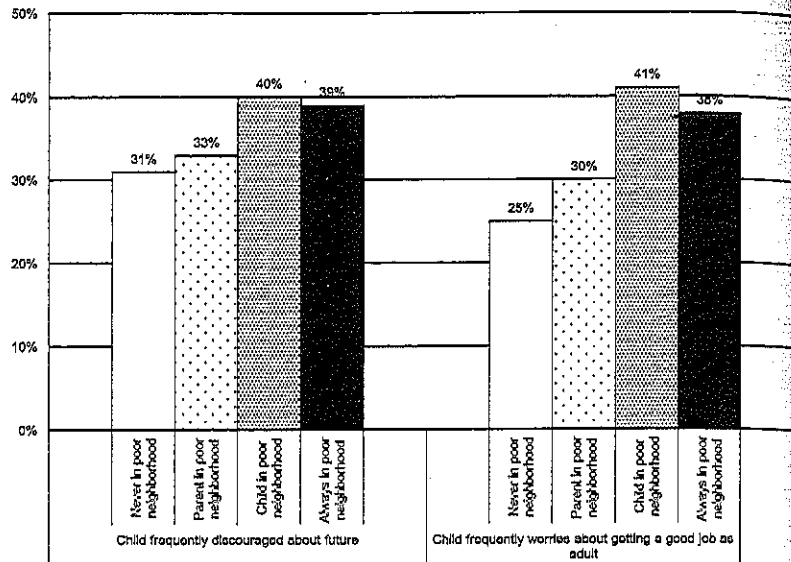


Figure 5.3. Children's anxiety toward the future, by neighborhood poverty status over two generations.

This is not true when we examine children's and parents' thoughts about how far the child will go in school. Here it is the parent's childhood neighborhood that seems to have the strongest relationship with aspirations and expectations about the child's educational attainment, as shown in figure 5.4. For instance, if we examine parents' expectations about whether their child will graduate from a four-year college, as shown in the second set of columns in the figure, we see that about half of parents who were raised in poor neighborhoods do not expect their child to earn a college degree, compared to just 33 percent of parents who are raising their children in poor neighborhoods but did not grow up in a poor neighborhood themselves. In this case, the experience of being raised in poverty seems to have lasting influence on the parent's conception of the possibilities for her child's education.

The influence of the parent's childhood neighborhood extends to the child's own expectations and aspirations about his or her educational future. Children who do not live in poor neighborhoods but are raised by parents who grew up in poor neighborhoods are most likely to neither aspire

nor expect to graduate from a four-year college. More than half of children in this group say that they do not want or expect to earn a college degree, perhaps indicating that the child's own mindset is influenced more by the expectations of parents than by what he sees in his own environment.

These descriptive figures do not offer a perfectly clear picture of whether it is the parent's childhood environment or the child's own environment that matters more. They do suggest that in focusing exclusively on the child's neighborhood we may be missing something important about the lingering or cumulative influence of the residential environments that family members have experienced over time. What children see around them appears to be most salient in how much they worry about their own future, but it is the parent's childhood environment, experienced a generation earlier, that seems most important in influencing the child's aspirations and expectations about her own education. What is common to virtually all of the figures I have shown is that the cumulative experience of life in neighborhood poverty, over multiple generations, appears to be a very different experience than exposure to neighborhood poverty at a single point in time, or in a single generation. More than a fifth of children from families that have lived in poor neighborhoods over consecutive generations are obese or have

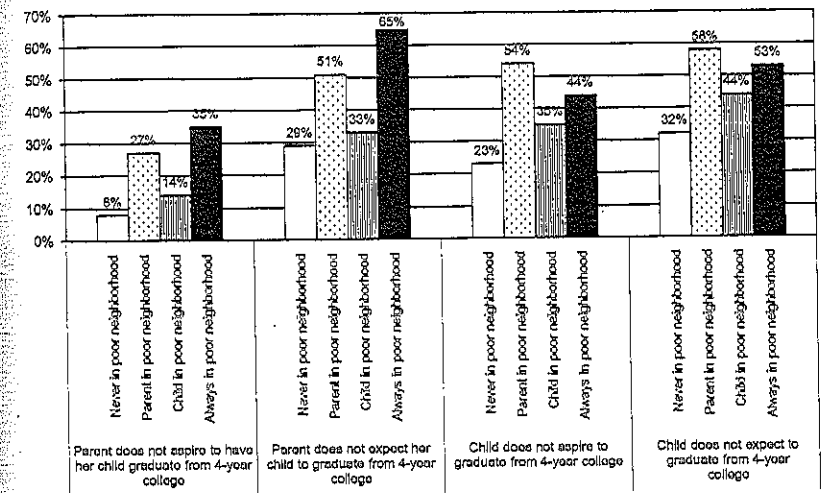


Figure 5.4. Aspirations and expectations for graduating college, by neighborhood poverty status over two generations.

poor health, more than a third are discouraged about their future or worry about getting a job, and more than half have no expectations about getting a college degree. These figures provide initial evidence suggesting that the cumulative experience of life in poor neighborhoods may matter most for many of the most important indicators of successful child development.

But there are other ways to interpret the findings. It could be that something about the families that find themselves in the nation's poorest neighborhoods for long periods of time leads to their children scoring lower on cognitive assessments or being less ambitious or less healthy than their peers. In other words, it could be that characteristics of the families themselves explain the patterns in these figures, rather than anything about the neighborhoods in which these families have lived.

The remainder of the chapter attempts to address this possibility, and it does so by utilizing new methods that are designed to isolate the cumulative impact of life in neighborhood poverty over multiple generations, as distinct from the impact of any family characteristics that might lead to worse child outcomes regardless of where a family has lived. Rather than examining a whole range of outcomes at once, I focus on a single outcome that developmentalists consider crucial for children's successful trajectories, and the outcome with which I began the chapter: cognitive skills.

The Connection between Neighborhoods and Cognitive Skills

Why focus on the child's cognitive development, as opposed to some other measure of the child's skills, opportunities, or life chances? For one thing, children's cognitive ability, whether it is interpreted as intelligence, IQ, or simply performance on tests of cognitive achievement, is almost universally shown to be a powerful predictor of future success. While most claims about intelligence and cognitive ability are hotly debated, this one is not. Cognitive skills are not the only predictor of future educational, economic, or social outcomes, but there is extensive evidence linking children's performance on cognitive assessments to a wide range of developmental and adult outcomes, including educational attainment, adult economic status, and health.³ If the neighborhood environment influences the development of early cognitive skills, this relationship may be a key to understanding inequality across a number of domains.

Of course, a more basic assumption that needs to be justified is that cognitive skills are malleable; that is, that the development of cognitive skills is affected by the type of home, school, or neighborhood environment that surrounds us. While there is little doubt that cognitive ability has a genetic

component, there is also widespread agreement that development is sensitive to children's social environments.⁴ Children's cognitive skills have been shown to be associated with parents' education, alcohol use, mental health, social and economic status, and parenting practices and various aspects of the home environment.⁵ These same characteristics of parents may affect the schooling experiences of children, which also influence children's cognitive development.⁶

For the true skeptics, those who believe that cognitive skills are purely a function of an inherent, fixed, genetic intelligence, we can point to experimental evidence that is very difficult to dispute. One such piece of evidence comes from a study of children who were given up by their birth families and were living in Romanian orphanages early in life. The institutions from which the study's sample was selected were notorious for their dull and regimented environments, which offered little stimulation or individual attention to children.⁷ Although Romanian orphanages are a somewhat extreme context within which to study cognitive development, the severity of the institutional environment in which the children were being raised makes the evidence particularly powerful, as it reveals just how detrimental it is to be raised in a setting that offers little stimulation and minimal attention.

To carry out the experiment, researchers from Harvard's Medical School received permission from the Romanian government to follow a sample of infants in the orphanages and to randomly assign a group of these orphans to be placed with foster families who were screened by the researchers. The researchers then followed the sample over time and administered cognitive assessments to the children in the sample at age five.

The results from the study provide powerful evidence in support of the idea that the developing child requires a nurturing, enriching environment in order to experience cognitive growth. Children who were randomly assigned to foster parents scored substantially higher than those who remained in the orphanage, with the most pronounced differences found among children who had been fostered at the earliest ages. Further, the scores among children who remained in the orphanages throughout the study indicated borderline mental retardation, a shocking finding revealing the full extent to which the institutional environment in which the children were raised was stunting their cognitive development. While Romanian orphanages of the early 1990s may represent the most extreme form of environmental deprivation, the findings from the experiment are not limited to orphans in Bucharest. There are numerous intervention studies in the United States that are conducted in less severe settings, but that support the

central findings from the Bucharest Study. These studies demonstrate very clearly that providing enriched and nurturing environments for children is crucial to their cognitive development.⁸

Still, most of this research assesses the effects of a change in the home or school environment on cognitive development—what do we know about the effects of the neighborhood environment in particular? In the abstract, there are several ways in which children's residential environments may influence their cognitive development, including the presence or absence of environmental toxins such as lead in the home, the soil, or the air, the degree and character of interpersonal verbal interactions within disadvantaged or violent neighborhoods, the quality of the schooling environment (which is in part determined by one's neighborhood), and the quality of parent/child interactions within the home, which may be affected by the surrounding environment.⁹ These are all plausible links between neighborhood inequality and cognitive outcomes. Despite these theoretical connections, the research assessing the relationship between neighborhoods and children's cognitive development has produced conflicting results.

One set of studies is based on data from the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) social experiment, in which low-income families in public housing were randomly offered vouchers that allowed them to move to low-poverty neighborhoods. One analysis pooled data from all five cities in the MTO experiment and found that moving to low-poverty neighborhoods had null effects on cognitive test scores, with the exception of a positive effect on the reading scores of African Americans.¹⁰ However, subsequent re-analysis of the same data suggests a more complicated story. In the two cities where families lived in the most severely disadvantaged neighborhoods, Chicago and Baltimore, the impact of moving to a new, lower-poverty neighborhood was substantial.¹¹ The strong impact found in the Chicago site of MTO is consistent with another recent study of families who were offered housing vouchers through a lottery system within Chicago's public housing waiting list,¹² reinforcing the possibility that moving to a new neighborhood may have large impacts on children's cognitive test scores if it occurs in cities like Chicago, which feature some of the poorest, most violent and racially segregated neighborhoods in the nation. This evidence is examined in more depth in chapter 6.

There is a broader issue to consider when evaluating and attempting to synthesize the results from studies of families that move from one neighborhood to another, however. In these studies, experimental or not, the very design of the study and the experimental "treatment" under study do not provide any information about the impact of long-term, or multigenera-

tional, exposure to disadvantaged environments. In assessing the effect of a point-in-time move to a new neighborhood, for instance, the Moving to Opportunity experiment does not consider the possibility that the neighborhoods experienced at earlier points in time have a lingering influence on family members. For instance, it is highly likely that caregivers in families residing in public housing have lived in similarly poor neighborhoods throughout their entire lives. Growing up in an impoverished community is likely to have influenced the quality of a mother's school experience, which may have influenced the options available to her in the labor market, which may have affected her income, which may have affected the quality of the home environment in which she raises her own child, which ultimately may have affected the cognitive development of the child. In assessing the impact of a move to a new environment, we must make the implicit assumption that an abrupt change in environment has the potential to overturn, or at least disrupt, this lifetime of disadvantages that have accumulated over time. If we think in terms of generations, then the limits of residential mobility experiments in revealing how the neighborhood may alter the life chances of individuals and families become clearer.

Whereas the goal of research from residential mobility experiments is to identify the impact of a point-in-time change in the environment, the goal of this chapter is to identify the impact of living in the nation's most disadvantaged neighborhoods over two generations of a family. This is a challenging task.

The most common way to assess the relationship between neighborhood characteristics and children's cognitive ability is to use observational data collected from sample surveys, but this approach presents several additional complications that make it difficult to identify the cumulative impact of the neighborhood environment. The studies that are based on survey data typically show statistically significant associations between neighborhood socioeconomic composition and cognitive test scores, after controlling for various measures of family socioeconomic status and demographic characteristics.¹³ However, the strength of the relationship often is found to vary by age and to be substantively weak, leading some to question the importance of neighborhoods for children's cognitive development.

But the key problem with many of these studies, from the perspective of this book, is that they preclude the possibility of multigenerational effects by controlling for aspects of a child's family background that may be influenced by a parent's own neighborhood during childhood. For instance, a researcher may examine the association between a child's neighborhood characteristics and her cognitive ability while controlling for the family's in-

come, marital status, and health. This approach is problematic, because it ignores the possibility that parents' childhood neighborhoods affect these aspects of their adult lives. For instance, if a parent's childhood neighborhood influences her adult income—and, as we saw in the previous chapter, there is good evidence suggesting this to be the case—then controlling for family income will “block” the indirect relationship between the parent's childhood neighborhood and her child's cognitive ability, a generation later. In other words, this approach would reveal only the portion of the impact of the parent's childhood neighborhood that does not run through her own income as an adult, leading to an underestimate of the total impact of the parent's childhood neighborhood.

To attempt to identify the cumulative impact of neighborhoods on children's cognitive development is thus a methodological problem as well as a theoretical problem. The methodological problem is one that arises in any scenario in which important factors like family income are potentially influenced by experiences at an earlier time point—or in an earlier generation. Instead of traditional regression models, recent research I have conducted with sociologist Felix Elwert draws on newly developed methods from biostatistics that were designed to generate unbiased effects in exactly this type of situation.¹⁴

Although the methods are complicated, they are designed to facilitate a relatively simple set of results that are easy to interpret. To understand the set of results that I will present below, first imagine an experiment—in truth, it is an experiment that would be difficult or impossible to carry out, which is why it's necessary to use statistical methods instead of experimental methods to try to produce the same results. In this experiment, which we'll imagine began in the 1970s, a group of black and white families with children are selected from across the country. Each of these families flips a coin. Those who flip “heads” are assigned to live and raise their children in poor neighborhoods—which I will define as neighborhoods with at least a 20 percent poverty rate. Those who flip “tails” are assigned to live and raise their children in nonpoor neighborhoods, meaning neighborhoods with less than 20 percent poverty. This is the first part of our imagined experiment.

Now fast forward in time twenty-five or so years later, to the mid-1990s, when the second round of the experiment takes place. The children of our original families are now grown and are raising their own children. Once again, we ask each of these families, whom we have followed over time, to flip a coin. And again, those who flip “heads” are assigned to live and raise their children in poor neighborhoods, and those who flip “tails” are assigned to live and raise their children in nonpoor neighborhoods. After

continuing to follow the families for several years following the second coin flip, we then travel to the homes of these families and ask their children, the second generation of the experiment, to complete two assessments of cognitive skills. Having tracked the families for several decades, over two generations, we are now ready to examine the results of the experiment.

How do the children in families that have always lived in nonpoor neighborhoods score on these tests of cognitive skills? Do their scores differ from children whose parents were raised in poor neighborhoods, but who themselves were not? What about the children from families that, by virtue of two coin flips, have lived in poor neighborhoods continuously for two generations?

The methods that we utilize are designed to reproduce this exact experiment and to allow us to estimate the answers to all of these questions.¹⁵ The main results from the analysis are shown in figure 5.5. This figure is identical to the first figure of the chapter, figure 5.1, except that instead of presenting “raw” average scores for the four groups of children, figure 5.5 presents “adjusted” scores for all four groups. These adjusted scores are designed to reflect the score that the children in each group would achieve if we had conducted the experiment described above. That is, if children were randomly assigned to live in poor neighborhoods or nonpoor neighborhoods over consecutive generations, how would these different groups score on tests of cognitive skill?

First considering children's scores on tests of reading and language ability (the left side of the figure), the first column shows that children from families that never live in poor neighborhoods over the two generations score about six points higher than the national average, with an average score of 106. If the family lived in a poor neighborhood in the first generation but not the second, children scored about 101 on average, five points lower than the first group. Children from families that lived in poor neighborhoods in the second generation, but not the first, scored about the same as those that only lived in poor neighborhoods in the first generation. The average score for this third group is 102. Lastly, we have children from families that lived in poor neighborhoods in both generations. These children scored substantially lower than any of the other groups, with average scores of about 97, nine points below the group of children from families that never lived in poor neighborhoods. This is evidence for an enormous cognitive deficit, and it is a deficit that is due entirely to living in neighborhood poverty over consecutive generations.

The pattern of results for the second test of applied problems is somewhat different—results are shown on the right side of figure 5.5. With this

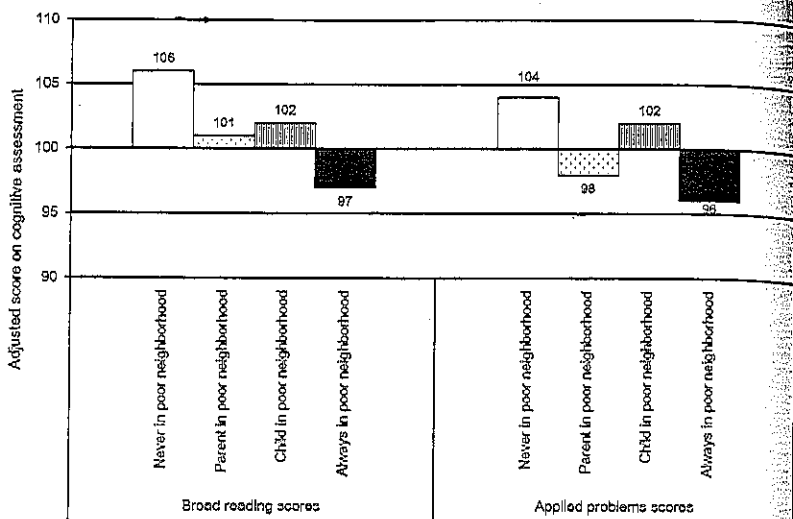


Figure 5.5. Statistically adjusted scores on tests of broad reading skills and applied problems skills, by neighborhood poverty status over two generations.

test, the impact of neighborhood poverty is even more pronounced and has a substantial, lasting influence on children's cognitive skill. Children from families that never lived in poor neighborhoods again score the highest, with average scores of 104. But the second group, children from families that lived in poor neighborhoods only in the first generation, scores substantially lower. The average score for this group of children is 98, six points lower than the first group. These children also scored much lower than children from families that only lived in poor neighborhoods in the second generation of the experiment, who score 102 on average. And finally, children in families that live in poor neighborhoods over consecutive generations have an average score of 96, lower than any of the other groups.

Considering the overall patterns present in figure 5.5, two results stand out. First, while research examining how neighborhoods affect children's outcomes has focused exclusively on the child's own environment, there is very strong evidence suggesting that the parent's childhood neighborhood, experienced a generation earlier, is at least as important to the development of cognitive skills—and in the case of the applied problems assessment, the evidence suggests the parent's environment during childhood may be more

important than the child's own environment. Second, the multigenerational impact of neighborhood poverty is substantial. Living in poor neighborhoods over two consecutive generations reduces children's cognitive skills by roughly eight or nine points on the standard IQ scale, or slightly more than one half of a standard deviation.

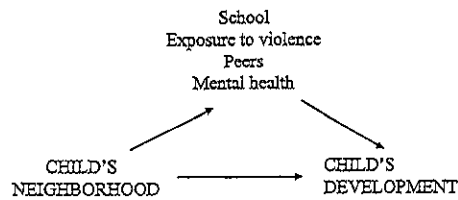
To provide some perspective on the magnitude of this estimated effect, it may help to consider some estimated effects of other factors that are thought to be related to intelligence or cognitive ability. For example, in 2007 a study was published showing that firstborn children had higher IQs than their second-born siblings.¹⁶ The study received an enormous amount of attention in the press and scrutiny in the academic world, as it purported to show strong evidence that firstborn children were smarter than their siblings. With all of this attention, the magnitude of the estimated difference between firstborn children and their siblings was about three points on the same scale that I am using for the current analysis. The cumulative impact of neighborhood poverty is about three times as large as the "firstborn" effect.

Another, perhaps more relevant example is the effect that schooling has on children's cognitive ability. After considering the literature on this subject, Christopher Winship and Sanders Korenman concluded that a year of schooling improves children's cognitive ability by somewhere between two and four points.¹⁷ This means that the effect of being raised in a family that lives in a poor neighborhood over two consecutive generations is roughly equivalent to missing two to four years of schooling.

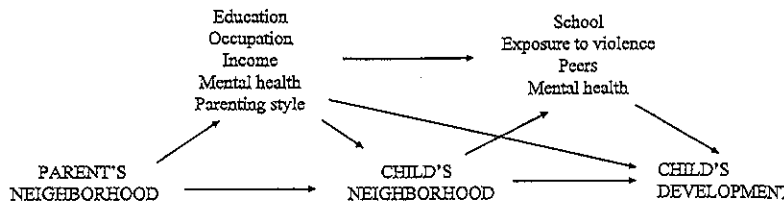
The Legacy of Disadvantage

The magnitude of the effects of multigenerational neighborhood poverty is striking. But just as important as the size of the effects is their meaning. If nothing else, this analysis demonstrates that the full impact of neighborhood inequality cannot be captured by looking at a single point in a child's life or even at a single generation in a family's history. In chapter 2, I showed that the large majority of African American families living in today's most disadvantaged residential areas are the same families that occupied the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in the 1970s, raising the possibility that we may be missing something important if we fail to consider the history of families' environments, or if we fail to think about neighborhood disadvantage as a multigenerational process. This chapter shows just how important that history can be.

Thinking about neighborhood environments in this way complicates the way we study and assess the impact of neighborhoods on individuals.



a) A single-generation model of neighborhood effects



b) A multigenerational model of neighborhood effects

Figure 5.6. Moving from a single-generation model to a multigenerational model of neighborhood effects.

Instead of considering a relatively straightforward set of mechanisms by which a child's neighborhood might influence her developmental trajectory, a multigenerational perspective forces one to consider a more complicated and expansive set of pathways by which families' neighborhood environments may have a lingering influence that extends across generations.

This new, multigenerational conceptual model of neighborhood effects is represented in figure 5.6. The top panel of the figure shows a "standard," single-generation, model of how neighborhoods affect child development. Under this model, a child's neighborhood is linked with a given developmental outcome measure (such as cognitive skills) through, for instance, the child's peers, the quality of the school setting, or exposure to violence or environmental toxins. The extension to this model that I propose is shown in the second panel of the figure. In this multigenerational model, a child's neighborhood environment, in Generation One, is linked with a range of outcomes as she approaches adulthood, including her cognitive develop-

ment, her educational attainment, her mental health, her occupational trajectory, her economic success, and even her potential romantic partners. These impacts of the childhood neighborhood environment do not disappear when the child enters adulthood, but linger on and affect various aspects of her adult life, including the family and neighborhood environment in which she raises her own children, her parenting style, and the resources she is able to devote to her children. In this way, the effect of the child's environment in Generation One persists over time, and affects the development of the child in Generation Two. From this perspective, disadvantages experienced by the child in Generation Two can be viewed as a legacy of disadvantage experienced in Generation One, with the potential for cumulative disadvantages to emerge over time.

The evidence presented in this chapter suggests that this type of multigenerational perspective is crucial to understanding the relationship between neighborhood environments and cognitive ability, one of the most important predictors of children's future educational and economic success. But the results from this chapter do more than contribute to our understanding about how neighborhoods may influence the development of cognitive skills. The findings also offer a new perspective that may influence how we interpret results from other studies that have been produced in this literature.

Consider, for instance, the experimental and quasi-experimental evidence available from residential mobility programs, including the Gautreaux program in Chicago, the Moving to Opportunity experiment, and other similar programs.¹⁸ In all such programs, participants (typically low-income families living in public housing) are provided the chance to move to less disadvantaged environments, frequently in the same city or within the metropolitan area. Research using data from such programs takes advantage of the fact that the residential destinations of participating families are determined, at least in part, by factors outside of their own choosing. Because there is some random variation in the destinations of participating families, these studies provide more convincing evidence on the causal effect of a change in the neighborhood environment arising from a residential move.

By design, however, these studies do not capture the cumulative effects of a family's neighborhood environments experienced over time. The exclusive focus on a family's current neighborhood environment overlooks the possibility that the impact of neighborhood environments extends across generations. A change in a family's neighborhood may bring about an abrupt and radical change in the social environment surrounding children,

but for many families—particularly African American families—this change is a short-term departure from a familial history of life in disadvantaged environments. The shift in context may improve the opportunities available to adults and children, the child's peers and school environment, and the parent's mental health, but it cannot undo the lingering influence of the parent's childhood environment. In short, a temporary change of scenery is unlikely to disrupt the effects of a family history of disadvantage.

This assessment should not be taken as a critique of the residential mobility literature, but as a lens with which to interpret the results from this strand of research. Evaluations of residential mobility programs provide powerful evidence for policy makers interested in designing programs to move families into areas that may be less violent than the worst public housing projects, areas that may offer better schools and safer streets. But these programs tell us little about the cumulative disadvantages facing a family living in America's poorest neighborhoods over long periods of time, unless the residential move creates a lasting change in the neighborhood environment that persists over multiple generations. Most of the more prominent programs, such as the Moving to Opportunity project, did not produce this type of change in families' environments. For example, the initial drops in neighborhood poverty among families in MTO's experimental group have faded quickly, due to moves back to high-poverty neighborhoods and rising poverty in the destination neighborhoods of experimental group families.¹⁹ If the most powerful effects of neighborhoods stem from exposure in prior generations, as the evidence presented here indicates, it is perhaps not surprising that research from mobility programs has generated inconsistent and relatively small impacts.

Next, consider the extensive literature on neighborhood effects based on observational survey data. The most common analytic approach in this literature involves estimating neighborhood effects while controlling for a set of family background measures. A common claim made in reviews of these studies is that the family environment is more important for child development than the neighborhood environment.²⁰ A multigenerational framework suggests that such a conclusion is misleading. Aspects of family background that are linked with child developmental outcomes, such as parental income or education, are likely to be influenced by neighborhood conditions in the prior generation. In this sense, individuals and families *embody* neighborhood histories, and these histories can have consequences that extend across generations.

It is in this sense that I refer to a "legacy" of disadvantage. When we think about the reproduction of inequality, in income, education, occupations,

wealth, or cognitive ability, it is not sufficient to focus on a single point in an individual's life or even on a single generation of a family. Instead, we must understand the history of disadvantages experienced over generations of family members. When one thinks about the past four decades in American urban history, what stands out most visibly are the persistent racial divides that are present in our nation's workplaces, its schools, and its neighborhoods. It is more difficult to follow the experiences of individual families that occupy these workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods. But if we focus on these families over long periods of time, we come to a different view of racial inequality. We come to see that it is the same families that have suffered the consequences of inequality for multiple generations. We come to see the cumulative impact of disadvantage, and it is severe.

I believe this perspective is essential to understanding American inequality. But where does this perspective leave us? How do we move forward, when the inequalities of the past continue to be felt in the present? It is to these questions that I turn in the final two chapters of the book. Despite the overwhelming challenges that emerge when we begin to think about inequality from a multigenerational perspective, the forthcoming chapters provide hopeful evidence to suggest that ending the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage is possible. The investments required to do so present the true challenge.