A place-conscious approach can strengthen integrated strategies in poor neighborhoods

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Executive Summary

Ample research evidence establishes that conditions in severely depressed neighborhoods undermine both the quality of daily life and the long-term life chances of parents and children. Policymakers and practitioners working to improve well-being and economic mobility in poor neighborhoods generally agree on the need for integrated approaches. Traditionally, many of these interventions have either adopted a place-based or a people-based strategy.

This paper argues for a third approach, a "place-conscious perspective," which can reconcile the two by addressing the interconnections between family assets and challenges, conditions in the places they live, and access to opportunities in the larger city or region. That approach leads us to focus on several important issues and questions.

We must think differently about the boundaries of a community and recognize that linkages between people and services operate between different governmental levels. We must understand that there are a variety of forms of leadership and that data gathering and analysis is critical and must be customized. And we must also see neighborhoods as fulfilling several functions, including for some households a launchpad to new opportunities.

Introduction

Policymakers and practitioners working to improve well-being and economic mobility in poor neighborhoods generally agree on the need for integrated approaches. Given the tangle of factors undermining the well-being of poor people, strategies that weave together elements aimed at improving health, safety, education, and employment are likely to have greater impact than any individual intervention. Moreover, progress in one domain (such as education) can be enhanced if "upstream" factors (such as stability, nutrition, health, and developmental readiness) can be identified and tackled. This explains the growing attention to population health strategies that address the range of family, housing, and neighborhood factors influencing physical and mental health over the life-course. And it explains the interest in community schools that provide services outside the school building and beyond the school day to both children and their parents.

But when we design and pursue these integrated strategies, how should we think about "place?" How do neighborhood conditions (social, economic, and physical) affect the lives of residents and the effectiveness of interventions? And what role can efforts to improve the neighborhood environment play in integrated strategies aimed at helping poor families?

Why Place Matters

Neighborhoods play a huge role in shaping the health and well-being of families and children. They are the locus for essential public and private services—schools being perhaps the most significant. Neighbors and neighborhood institutions help transmit the norms and values that influence behavior and teach children what's expected of them as they grow up. And where we live determines our exposure to crime, disorder, and violence, which can profoundly damage our physical and emotional well-being over the long-term.

The interaction between people and the neighborhoods in which they live are complex, with causal effects running in both directions (Sampson 2013).

But ample research evidence establishes that conditions in severely distressed neighborhoods undermine both the quality of daily life and the long-term life chances of parents and children.[1]

To illustrate: young people from high-poverty neighborhoods are less successful in school than their counterparts from more affluent communities; they earn lower grades, are more likely to drop out, and are less likely to go on to college. Neighborhood environments influence teens' sexual activity and the likelihood that girls will become pregnant as teenagers. And living in disadvantaged neighborhoods significantly increases the risk of disease and mortality among both children and adults.

New work from Raj Chetty further highlights the contribution of place to poor children's economic trajectories, and concludes that moving to better neighborhoods improves economic outcomes, especially for children who escape distressed communities when they are young and therefore experience greater exposure to better environments (Chetty, Hendren, and Katz 2015). Moreover, emerging evidence suggests that living in a high-poverty neighborhood undermines some outcomes across generations. For example, children whose parents grew up in poor neighborhoods score dramatically worse on reading and problem-solving tests than those whose parents grew up in non-poor neighborhoods, other things being equal (Sharkey 2013). In other words, neighborhood distress contributes to the persistence of poverty across generations.

Segregation and Poverty

Neighborhoods of concentrated poverty and distress aren't the products of "natural" or "normal" housing market operations. Rather, as Massey and Denton taught us in *American Apartheid (1993),* discriminatory policies and practices confining African Americans to segregated city neighborhoods produced communities with much higher poverty rates than existed in white communities. These poor, minority neighborhoods were subsequently starved of the resources and investments that communities need to thrive, like financing for homeownership, business investment, and essential public-sector services, including quality schools.

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[1] See Ellen and Turner 1997 and Turner and Rawlings 2009 for reviews of the research literature on neighborhood effects.

Today, although blacks and Hispanics are less starkly segregated from whites than they were in the past, ongoing racial and ethnic segregation and discrimination combine with rising income inequality to sustain neighborhoods of severe distress. And most of these neighborhoods are predominantly black or Hispanic. Poor whites (and Asians) are much more dispersed geographically, scattered throughout non-poor neighborhoods. As a consequence, of the roughly four million poor children growing up in high-poverty urban neighborhoods today, almost 90 percent are children of color (Turner et al. 2014).

Many people these days are sounding the alarm about worsening inequality, persistent inter-generational poverty, and limited opportunities for economic mobility in our country. It should go without saying that creating a true culture of health and economic opportunity to tackle poverty requires sustained interventions at many levels. No single intervention – or type of intervention – at any one scale can do the job. But the evidence about the damaging effects of neighborhood distress argues strongly that place-conscious interventions -- those that explicitly target the neighborhood conditions most damaging to family well-being and children's healthy development -- should be part of our policy portfolio.

Tackling Poverty in Place

The first major attempts to address poverty in the context of urban neighborhoods were the settlement houses founded in the late 19th century. Spearheaded most famously by Jane Addams and the Chicago Hull House, settlement houses provided services to community members (often recent immigrants) and advocated for urban reforms. Ever since, practitioners and policymakers inside and outside government have been devising and testing evolving strategies for tackling the problem of poverty in place.[2] More than a century of evolving experimentation has generated substantial evidence to support arguments that efforts to promote health, well-being, and economic mobility should include initiatives focused on the neighborhoods where poverty is concentrated.

Building on this knowledge, innovative practitioners, scholars, and advocates are now defining a next generation of strategies that can best be described as *place-conscious* rather than place-based. These

strategies recognize the importance of place and target the particular challenges of distressed neighborhoods. But they are less constrained by rigidly defined neighborhood boundaries, more attuned to market-wide opportunities and barriers, and more explicitly aimed at improving both day-to-day quality of life and access to opportunities for families and children.

Issues and Implications

Adopting a *place-conscious* perspective can liberate policymakers and practitioners from the tired (and unproductive) battle over *place-based* versus *people-based* interventions. Instead of pitting these approaches against each other, it encourages us to tackle the interconnections between family assets and challenges, conditions in the places they live, and access to opportunities in the larger city or region.

Rethinking Boundaries

Historically, efforts to overcome the negative effects of neighborhood conditions on families and children have primarily focused on changing conditions *within the boundaries* of a distressed neighborhood—by renovating buildings, delivering needed services, or organizing residents to work collectively. But many of the services and opportunities families need to thrive are located outside the neighborhoods in which they live, and interventions that connect them to these opportunities may be more effective than interventions that try to create them all within the neighborhood.

Place-conscious initiatives therefore work to **link neighborhood residents to city and regional opportunities** while also expanding opportunities within target neighborhoods. Employment strategies in particular call for this kind of linkage approach. Few people work in the neighborhoods where they live; rather, we commute to jobs in other parts of our metropolitan region. The primary employment challenge facing residents of distressed urban neighborhoods is access to job opportunities in the larger region. People may not know about those opportunities, they may not have the skills or credentials necessary to qualify for them, or the time and cost of commuting may be too high. A place-conscious intervention would improve access to regional employment opportunities rather than trying to create jobs within the neighborhood. This might include advocating for new bus lines or transit subsidies, enabling people to buy cars, or helping residents enroll

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[2] See Turner et al. 2014 for a history of place-based approaches and evidence of their effectiveness.

in a city- or region-wide training and placement program with a strong track-record of placing graduates in good jobs. Other examples of linkage strategies include helping parents learn about and enroll their children in high-performing schools outside the immediate neighborhood, or ensuring that people served by a community clinic can access specialized health services from a regional hospital when needed.

Correspondingly, while some neighborhood problems can be addressed through work by and with residents and community-based institutions, many require action at higher levels of governance. Severe distress within a neighborhood ultimately stems from the interaction of market forces with city, state, and even federal public policies that constrain opportunities for poor people and disinvest from the neighborhoods where they live. Therefore, the levers for addressing the many challenges facing these neighborhoods are not all contained within the boundaries of the neighborhood itself. The potential impact of initiatives focused solely on local collaboration can be limited because they are likely to have difficulty gaining access to resources at different levels of the political system or getting permission to deploy these resources flexibly across conventional policy domains (Weir, Rongerude, and Ansell 2011).

Therefore, the most effective place-conscious initiatives *work vertically* – organizing and advocating for changes to policy and practice at the city, regional, state, and federal levels. It may be *about* the neighborhood, but that does not mean all the action happens *in* the neighborhood. For example, some communities have complemented neighborhood-level changes with broader organizing efforts to ensure that low-income people have a seat at local decision-making tables when resources are being allocated. For example, CASA de Maryland[3] provides a range of direct services to immigrants and is planning a Promise Neighborhood program in the Langley Park neighborhood. This work has highlighted key challenges facing low-income families in Langley Park, so CASA has launched a multiyear advocacy campaign to ensure that the planned construction of a $2.2 billion light rail transit system will be accompanied by preservation and creation of safe, quality, and affordable housing, protections for small businesses, and economic opportunities for local residents. Other initiatives involve multiple community-based organizations, each targeting a particular neighborhood, but working together on larger, citywide policy and systems-change efforts. And some link to intermediary organizations or associations that help smaller, community-based groups advocate for broader policy changes.

Organizations as Leaders

Because the challenges facing distressed neighborhoods cut across conventional policy and practice domains, no single organization can effectively tackle them all, but place-conscious initiatives integrate the work of multiple organizations with complementary missions. However experience argues strongly for one organization to coordinate, lead, and facilitate these multiple stakeholders as they pursue a shared vision. Such a role has variously been described as "orchestra conductor," "quarterback," "hub," or "backbone." However it is labeled, it is essential to achieving meaningful and sustainable progress (Erickson, Galloway, and Cytron 2012).

Many different types of organizations can be the "*orchestra conductor*": a local foundation, a neighborhood-based non-profit, a school or hospital, or a city-wide intermediary. To illustrate, Neighborhood Centers, the biggest nonprofit service provider in Texas, operates a network of 75 service sites across the Houston metro area.[4] In every community where it works, Neighborhood Centers partners with other respected organizations—both public and private—to deliver the programs and services families need. In the suburb of Pasadena, for example, the Neighborhood Centers facility hosts the school district's English language classes, provides a distribution site for the local food bank, and offers child care for the mothers participating in other organizations' classes and activities. To be effective as an "orchestra conductor," an organization must have the capacity to bring actors together across silos, to integrate their agreed-upon strategies, and to advocate with key city and regional actors. The organization must also be respected as an authentic and viable leader within the community, established and successful in its own area of expertise, and financially stable with strong internal leadership.

The Role of Data

The most effective place-conscious initiatives use *data and evaluation* to inform their planning, to hold themselves and their partners accountable, and to

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[3] See http://wearecasa.org/who-we-are/mission-history/

[4] See http://www.neighborhood-centers.org/

continuously adapt and improve their strategies based on solid information (Kubisch et al. 2010b). Many are effectively exploiting new data sources and technologies to map community needs and resources, measure the performance of programs and services, and track individual, family, and neighborhood outcomes. For example, the Briya public charter school and Mary's Center in Washington, DC jointly deliver educational services for young children and their parents in conjunction with a high-quality health care for the entire family and links the families it serves with public and private agencies that deliver other needed services. Briya and Mary's Center have made data collection and analysis a major priority, and have invested in systems to collect and monitor data on all the individuals and families it serves, holding itself and its partners accountable and adapting or augmenting its services in response to new information (Butler, Grabinsky, and Masi 2015).

Some place-conscious initiatives are developing and tracking "collective impact" measures, which reflect the reality that no organization can single-handedly solve complex problems like neighborhood distress or persistent poverty, and that significant progress only occurs when actors from different sectors work together in pursuit of a common agenda (Kania and Kramer 2011). Collective impact efforts make this common agenda explicit by establishing a set of agreed-upon and measurable goals, which participating organizations can use to hold themselves and each other accountable and to ensure that their work remains aligned.

Some place-conscious initiatives are also experimenting with the development of integrated data systems, which enable them to track outcomes for individual children and/or adults across programs or institutions. Using individual-level data in this way raises serious concerns about privacy and is therefore governed by federal privacy protections, which in some cases block even reasonable access to information. But a number of local organizations and data intermediaries across the country are developing tools and approaches for responsibly linking and analyzing individual data to strengthen the performance of place-conscious interventions.[5]

Using data effectively requires the financial, technological, and intellectual resources to define meaningful outcome goals and indicators, collect needed

data, and analyze progress in real time. Given the complexity of these tasks, some place-conscious initiatives engage with a local research organization that can translate desired outcomes into operational measures and assemble and process the data necessary to track these measures over time. But these data and measurement tasks cannot simply be handed off to a research partner while other key partners develop and implement strategies and activities. Data gathering and analysis will only be useful if they produce information that helps local actors learn from disappointments as well as from successes, and continuously refine their efforts based on information. The hard work of measurement and analysis must be woven into the core planning and decision-making responsibilities of a place-conscious initiative.

Moreover, the types of data and analysis most useful for continuous, on-the-ground learning and improvement may not match the data required for more conventional program evaluations. As a consequence, evidence of progress in individual, family, or community outcomes may not provide the kind of rigorous evidence of *impact* necessary to convince skeptical scholars and policymakers that a program warrants replication. In fact, it may not be feasible to rigorously evaluate the overall impact of a place-conscious initiative using conventional evaluation tools (Nichols 2013).

Movement, Incubators and Launchpads

In the past, efforts to tackle poverty in place have often overlooked the reality that poor people move a lot, and mobility poses both challenges and opportunities for neighborhoods. Neighborhood distress is a dynamic process, sustained by the inflow of poor people (who have few alternatives for where to live) and the outflow of non-poor people seeking better environments. Residential mobility can reflect positive changes in a family's circumstances, such as buying a home for the first time, moving to be close to a new job, or trading up to a larger or better-quality house or apartment. But it can also be a symptom of instability and insecurity; many low-income households make short-distance moves because of problems with landlords, creditors, or housing conditions, or in response to family violence or conflict.

High levels of mobility complicate the intended mechanisms of many neighborhood change strategies, both because families may leave before they have had time to benefit fully from enhanced services and

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[5] See http://www.neighborhoodindicators.org/resources-integrated-data-systems-ids

supports and because new residents continue to arrive with needs that have not been met. One way to address this challenge is to try to reduce residential mobility among families living in a neighborhood who want to stay there. Helping families avoid unplanned or disruptive moves can play a critical role in their well-being and in the success of a neighborhood change strategy.

Traditionally, many community improvement initiatives have reflected an implicit vision that a neighborhood should function as an incubator for its residents—especially its low-income or otherwise vulnerable residents (Coulton, Theodos, and Turner 2009). The theory of change underlying this approach is that investments in neighborhood programs and services provide the supports that low-income families need to thrive, as well as the amenities that make them want to remain as their circumstances improve. Simultaneous investments in community building strengthen social capital and civic capacity, further enhancing the well-being of individual residents and the vitality of the neighborhood. And, gradual improvements in resident well-being reduce overall neighborhood poverty and distress levels.

But this is not the only possible vision for neighborhood success. Some neighborhoods may be launch pads for their residents, instead of incubators (Coulton, Theodos, and Turner 2009). Like an incubator neighborhood, a launch pad offers needed services and supports, enabling residents to advance economically. But as residents achieve greater economic security, they move on to more desirable neighborhoods and are replaced by a new cohort of needy households. Launch pad neighborhoods would experience high mobility, and, even though many residents were making significant individual progress, the neighborhood as a whole might not show much improvement on indicators such as employment, income, or wealth.[6] Past research suggests that neighborhoods that serve as entry points for successive waves of immigrants may function this way (Borjas 1998). For most neighborhoods, however, strategies that combine incubating and launching will offer the greatest promise. The key is offering choice: a

realistic possibility of remaining in an improved neighborhood that has long been home or moving to a healthier neighborhood that offers more economic opportunity, better schools, and greater safety.

Increasingly, therefore, place-conscious practitioners embrace and encourage residential mobility when it represents a positive step for a family. Staying in a distressed neighborhood may not always be in a family's best interest. Helping residents of a distressed neighborhood move to opportunity-rich neighborhoods should be part of a larger vision for improving outcomes. Better housing and neighborhood quality for a family should count as a success, whether it happens inside the boundaries of the original neighborhood or elsewhere. Thus, mobility strategies can be viewed as part of a larger portfolio of place-conscious tools, not as an alternative to neighborhood reinvestment and revitalization.

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[6] Note that viewing neighborhoods in this dynamic way complicates the challenge of evaluation, since the families participating in neighborhood programs and activities may no longer live in the neighborhood when it comes time to measure benefits or progress. In fact, they may have been replaced by families with worse outcomes and tracking families as they move poses substantial data and logistical costs.

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