

GOOD KIDS from BAD NEIGHBORHOODS

Successful Development
in Social Context

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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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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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After completing the neighborhood surveys, we decided to conduct an in-depth ethnographic study of five selected Denver neighborhoods in an effort to integrate both survey and ethnographic data in our analysis of neighborhood effects on development. Our thanks go to Julie Henly who managed this part of the study and to Katherine Irwin, Kristi Jackson, and Deborah Wright who, together with Julie, did the observational work and in-depth individual and focus group interviews. This team did an outstanding job under difficult circumstances and delivered a rich, high-quality data set, which has been only partially mined in this book.

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Growing Up in Disadvantaged Neighborhoods

We have this one little guy, 13 years old . . . You can just see him, every day, trying to decide which is more glamorous, the Youth Council or the Foote Street Posse. The Foote Street Posse boys offer him five hundred dollars a week to be a lookout. All we offer is knowledge. They win, hands down, most every time.

Finnegan, *Cold New World*, 1998:26

INTRODUCTION

There is widespread concern that the social fabric of American community life has deteriorated, and this breakdown in neighborhood quality is directly responsible for the high rates of youth crime, substance abuse, unemployment, teenage pregnancy, welfare dependence, and mental health problems that characterize many of our inner-city neighborhoods. The neighborhood is generally assumed to play an essential role in raising children, and when the strong interpersonal ties, shared socialization values and processes, and effective appropriation and utilization of community resources fail to materialize or develop in the neighborhood, children are put at risk for poor developmental outcomes and dysfunctional lifestyles. The saying, "It takes a village to raise a child," captures this perspective on the importance of neighborhoods for a successful course of child and youth development.

This is the perspective typically taken by youth and parents in the study reported in this book. For both, the neighborhood is seen as an important context that shapes family and peer activities and individual developmental outcomes. The following exchange took place in a focus group meeting in one of our Chicago study neighborhoods. The focus group leader asked the teens in the group to describe their neighborhood. The initial responses indicated that it was a place with a lot of abandoned

buildings, gangs, and drug dealers. Then the conversation turned as follows:

FG LEADER: What else? Drugs. Gangs. Abandoned buildings.

VOICE: It's not a very good place to raise children.

FG LEADER: Would the group agree with that? It's not a good place to raise children?

VOICE: Yeah.

FG LEADER: Why is that?

FEMALE: There's too many bad influence, too many drug dealers, too many . . .

MALE: Too much violence. . .

FEMALE: My little sister and brother already think the gangs are cute. They walk around trying to do gang handshakes . . . gang phrases.

FG LEADER: How old are they?

FEMALE: My little brother is 10, and my little sister just made 14.

FG LEADER: . . . we've talked a little bit – actually a lot – about how hard it is being a teenager growing up here. Do you think it's hard for your parents, also?

VOICES: Yes.

FEMALE: It's hard because a lot of parents who do care about their kids, but know they've gone the wrong way, they have to worry about if their sons or daughters don't come in at night if she's gonna have to identify the body or what. She don't know if the kids will come in alive or . . .

FG LEADER: So, it's hard on them just because it's so hard on you, and they're all worried about you.

FEMALE: And they're scared. They want better for us. But my parents can't do any better. I mean, in terms of jobs, my parents can't afford to live somewhere else. . .

The youth who participated in the above focus group discussion tell us what it is like to live in Longmont,¹ a poor disadvantaged inner-city neighborhood. Their poignant descriptions of the problems in their neighborhood clearly suggest that the odds of failure and adoption of dysfunctional lifestyles are greater for youth in such environments. When asked what comes to mind when they think of their neighborhood, the teenagers blurted out such things as abandoned buildings, drug dealers, gangs, violence, school dropouts, teen pregnancies, and the absence of community organizations. They also discussed the lack of security and the problem of safety in neighborhood schools, as well as the absence of parks and playgrounds in the neighborhood. It was also clear that the teenagers in this focus group discussion had a conception of what constitutes a "good" neighborhood. They mentioned ethnic diversity, positive organizations

like the YMCA, adequate housing, and jobs to employ people – things that their community lacked.

The focus group leader had to prompt the teenagers to think about things that were positive in their neighborhood. Several talked about the positive influence of some of the parents in the neighborhood. It appeared from their discussion that they believe their parents face a much greater challenge in raising children than do parents in more stable working- and middle-class neighborhoods, where attempts at normal child-rearing are not constantly undermined by social forces that interfere with a healthy course of child development. The teenagers in the focus group discussion all agreed that their community was *not* a good place for raising children. Their feelings are consistent with the views expressed by adult residents in other disadvantaged neighborhoods in this study. Our findings suggest that what many impoverished inner-city neighborhoods have in common is a general feeling among the adults that they have little control over their immediate environment, including the environment's negative influence on their children.

Nonetheless, despite the problems in neighborhoods like Longmont, many of the children living in high-poverty neighborhoods do in fact succeed in conventional terms and become productive and responsible adults. Our findings suggest that approximately half of youth living in high-poverty Denver neighborhoods were on a successful developmental trajectory. By understanding the factors that enable these youth to overcome the adversity they face, we can design more appropriate interventions and policies to maximize a successful course of child and youth development for all our children.

OVERCOMING ADVERSITY IN DISADVANTAGED NEIGHBORHOODS

At present, relatively little is known about how adolescents overcome adversity in high-risk neighborhoods.² Most neighborhood studies focus on the failures and pathologies of those living in poor neighborhoods. *The primary objective of this study is to understand how some youth living in disadvantaged neighborhoods succeed when others do not.* It is a study of success, not failure. But our focus is not solely on high-poverty neighborhoods such as Longmont. In order to fully comprehend the factors and processes that lead to successful adolescent outcomes in high-risk areas, one also needs to understand how and why adolescents in other neighborhoods succeed or fail.

The fact is that many middle-class suburban neighborhoods do not have a recreation center, library, bank, or grocery store in their immediate neighborhood. Can the presence or absence of these institutional facilities, called for by the teens and parents in Longmont, explain the difference in the likelihood of success for neighborhood children? Many middle-class youth

have access to these places only by virtue of their (or their parents or friends) access to cars, whereas this form of access is much less likely for families living in neighborhoods like Longmont. This suggests that the significant social contexts in middle-class communities may not be the neighborhood but the school, the nearest recreation center, and the other places where families gather and interact. Without the comparison with more affluent neighborhoods, the general role of neighborhood influences on child and youth development can not be established; nor can the possibility of differential effects by type of neighborhood be explored.

Some high-poverty, disadvantaged neighborhoods have higher rates of successful adolescent development than others. Even poor neighborhoods differ substantially in the number and effectiveness of informal networks, access to conventional institutions, and the presence or absence of gangs and criminal organizations. These more proximate contextual differences make it easier (or harder) for families and peer groups to function in positive ways and for youth to grow up and become responsible adults. Moreover, neighborhood research has shown that these emergent neighborhood properties change over time and have different effects on different age groups.³ In short, there is a good deal of variation across neighborhoods, both poor and affluent, in the organizational structures, informal processes, cultures, and lifestyles that emerge from the interactions of residents. The extent to which these features of neighborhood life are determined by the physical and social ecology of the neighborhood, and the role the neighborhood ecology and emergent organization and culture play in promoting a successful development, has yet to be established. We will review the available theory and research on neighborhood effects that supports this conclusion in subsequent chapters.

Our focus in this book is on the neighborhood as a sociogeographic place that provides the context for individual experiences, group interaction, and social development. The social context embodies the structural and cultural constraints and opportunities that influence developmental outcomes. These constraints and opportunities include those that enhance or impede participation in social institutions, that provide or deny access to institutional resources (such as schools, religious organizations, businesses, civic groups, recreational facilities, museums, the arts, and other enrichment programs). These constraints and opportunities also determine the extent to which adults in the neighborhood are integrated by a set of shared obligations, expectations, and social networks – factors that affect the degree of formal and informal social control in the neighborhood and the types of values and behavior that are promoted and rewarded.

As the teens in the Longmont focus group noted, the socialization patterns of parents are likely influenced by the constraints and opportunities encountered in their neighborhoods. We expect that average parents will have more success in raising their children when they reside in

neighborhoods where strong institutions support and sustain their efforts. Styles of socialization may differ depending on the neighborhood and these differences may result in different social outcomes for children. Moreover, styles and strategies of socialization that are effective in middle-class suburban neighborhoods may be less effective in promoting the welfare of children in poor inner-city neighborhoods. In short, by focusing on the neighborhood as a sociogeographic setting, we shall see how it both directly and indirectly influences the developmental course of children living there.

Our focus goes beyond the search for neighborhood contextual effects. We propose to examine the combined contextual effects of the neighborhood and the other major social contexts that influence child and youth development – the family, school, and adolescent peer group. The explanatory model for this study is thus a multicontextual model in which critical features of each of these contexts are identified and both individual and combined contextual effects are considered. In this multicontextual model, the effects of neighborhoods may turn out to be direct, indirect, insignificant, or even spurious. If we find significant neighborhood effects, we expect that families, schools and peer groups will mediate or moderate a significant proportion of these ecological effects on development.

THE POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTION OF THIS STUDY

There are important differences of opinion about the significance of neighborhoods as socialization contexts and the advisability of mounting neighborhood-based initiatives to help at-risk children and families. The evidence for neighborhood-level differences in *rates* of crime, teen pregnancy, educational attainment, health problems, child abuse, and neglect is compelling. Clearly, there are differences between neighborhoods on rates of involvement in these behaviors.⁴ The same can **not** be said for the evidence that neighborhoods matter much for individual-level outcomes, that is, that the level of poverty in the neighborhood accounts for whether individual residents do or do not become involved in these behaviors, once ascribed individual traits (race/ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and gender), family resources, socialization practices, and the influence of other more proximate social contexts have been taken into account.⁵ Moreover, there are major differences in the conclusions from ethnographic accounts of neighborhood influences on individual development and lifestyles and survey studies examining these individual-level effects while controlling for other relevant factors; ethnographic studies suggest relatively strong neighborhood effects and survey research suggests very modest ones.

Some have argued that because of the development of mass transportation, nearly universal access to cars, TV, film, videos, the internet, and the emergence of huge retail outlets (Wal Mart, K-Mart, Lowe's, and Home Depot) as well as the service industry, the physical, geographical

neighborhood is no longer the *functional* neighborhood. Modern contexts for family- and peer-group interaction are the workplace and special interest locations (schools and school-based activities, recreational centers, churches, concerts, shopping centers, and video arcades). From this perspective, physical neighborhoods are no longer meaningful socialization contexts.

In the light of these differences in findings about the importance of neighborhoods, there is reason to question whether it takes a village to raise a child and whether neighborhood revitalization efforts are likely to be effective.⁶ There is a clear need for further research to determine (1) if neighborhoods are still meaningful socialization contexts, in both our modern suburban areas and our high-poverty inner cities; (2) if so, how it is that physical and ecological characteristics influence the social organization and culture of the neighborhood; and (3) how these emergent neighborhood characteristics operate to shape family, school, and peer group socialization processes and content, and directly or indirectly contribute to a successful or unsuccessful course of individual development. Answers to these questions should shed light on the current debates about when and how to intervene in neighborhoods to improve youth developmental outcomes.

PRIMARY STUDY OBJECTIVES

This study of neighborhoods differs from most earlier studies in several important ways. First, most studies of the ecology of the neighborhood have focused narrowly on the compositional effects of concentrated poverty. Without question, differences in socioeconomic composition are a critical feature of neighborhoods, one that has been linked to variation in many child development outcomes. However, the neighborhood ecology is more varied and complex than is captured by this one dimension. There are both theoretical and practical reasons for considering other compositional characteristics, if we are to gain a better understanding of the general ecology of the neighborhood, and how it drives the dynamics of growing up. The residential stability of the neighborhood, for example, turns out to be as important as poverty for some developmental outcomes in this study. Our conceptualization and measurement of neighborhood ecology is thus multidimensional and we demonstrate that the classification of neighborhoods as good or bad places for raising children based on these multiple ecological dimensions does a better job of accounting for neighborhood differences in development than does poverty alone.

We also include a measure of the physical environment when examining how the neighborhood ecology influences families and youth. While the early work of Park and Burgess (1924), Shaw and McKay (1942), and others in the Chicago School⁷ considered the physical conditions in the neighborhood as an important dimension of its ecology, more recent neighborhood

research on youth development often ignores this feature.⁸ Again, we find that physical differences between neighborhoods turn out to be more important than concentrated poverty for explaining differences in some child-development outcomes. *One distinguishing feature of this study is thus the multidimensional conceptualization and measurement of the neighborhood ecology as a physical and social context where people live and interact.*

Second, relatively few neighborhood studies have actually identified and measured the specific structures and processes that link the social compositional and physical features of the neighborhood ecology to family socialization patterns, school quality, types of peer groups, and child development outcomes. We develop and test a complex model of neighborhood effects. This model specifies how features of the neighborhood ecology influence social interaction processes in the neighborhood to form the specific informal organization and culture that emerges. This model can also be used to show how this emergent organization and culture shape the socialization processes and development of youth living in the neighborhood, either directly or indirectly.

Third, while our primary focus is on the neighborhood context and its influence on youth development, our full model is a multicontextual model of development that includes measures of the family, school, and peer contexts, as well as the neighborhood context. *We thus consider how the neighborhood ecology, organization, and culture influence family socialization processes, the quality of schools and the types of peer groups emerging in the neighborhood, and how these multiple contexts combine to shape developmental outcomes for neighborhood youth.* Few studies of child development have considered the complex interplay of these multiple socialization settings. Most consider only the family, although a few include child-care settings and/or early school contexts.⁹ We test this multicontextual model at both the neighborhood level and the individual level with good success.

Finally, the developmental outcomes for this study are different from many earlier studies that have focused primarily on how concentrated neighborhood poverty contributes to the social pathologies and arrested development of the poor – parental neglect, dysfunctional families, unemployment, mental and physical mental health problems, school dropout, delinquent gangs, crime, violence, drugs, and other indicators of developmental failure. In contrast, *this is a study of successful development.* Specifically, it is a study of how youth growing up in the worst neighborhoods, as judged by the neighborhood's social composition and physical ecology, develop the skills, values, commitments, and competencies necessary for a healthy, productive life and avoid the entanglements of health-compromising behavior and lifestyles that often derail a positive course of development for youth living in these neighborhoods. In this respect, this study follows the line of inquiry initiated by Reckless and his colleagues

in their classic article, *The Good Boy in a High Delinquency Area*,¹⁰ although their theoretical perspective was quite limited and has virtually no overlap with the explanatory model developed and tested here. One of the surprises in this study is that *a majority of youth from the worst neighborhoods appear to be on track for a successful transition into adulthood*. Our specific objective is to understand how this occurs. Better neighborhoods do have better developmental success rates, but living in an ecologically poor or disadvantaged neighborhood does not preclude high-quality parenting, good schools, supportive peer networks, and good individual development outcomes. Moreover, dysfunctional social contexts do not cluster to the extent often envisioned by social scientists.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

We will justify the claims made here in subsequent chapters where the research on neighborhood, family, school, and peer group influences on child and youth development is reviewed. The [next chapter](#) will describe the study, its specific objectives, critical definitions, data sources, sampling strategy, and study measures. Special attention is given to the problem of conceptualizing and identifying neighborhoods as a unit of analysis. In Chapters [3–8](#), we provide reviews of existing research on each social context and build our explanatory model of multicontextual effects, starting with the most distal context (neighborhood ecology in Chapter [3](#)), then adding the family context, the school context, and finally, the peer context in subsequent chapters. Chapter [9](#) presents the test of the full multicontextual model, with all contexts and individual attributes considered simultaneously. In each of the findings chapters, we consider contextual influences on developmental success at both the neighborhood level and the individual level. Chapter [10](#) highlights our major findings and discusses the implications for program development and policy formation. We conclude that chapter with some recommendations for future research on successful youth development.

With the exception of the final chapter, each of the chapters begins with a synopsis of the information found in that chapter. The reader can quickly determine what will be covered in that chapter and decide whether or not to read the detailed account. It is possible to skip right to the last two chapters, but this would result in missing some important findings that are masked when all of the contexts and individual attributes are included in a single model. To facilitate a smooth reading, references are largely confined to notes and technical information is found either in the notes or Appendixes. For those with technical skills, taking the time to read these notes and examine the tables in the Appendixes will provide a more detailed understanding of our findings and interpretations.

Notes

1. The names of study neighborhoods have been changed to comply with human subjects guarantees of confidentiality.
2. An important exception involves the work on resilience (for example, Werner and Smith, 1992; Rutter, 1979; and Garmezy, 1985). However, these early studies focused primarily on family and school protective factors rather than neighborhood contextual conditions. More recent work on resilience has considered community-level factors, for example, see Wolkow and Ferguson (2001).
3. Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Aber, 1997a.
4. For a review of this evidence, see Bursik and Grasmick, 1993 and Sampson, 2001.
5. Simcha-Fagan and Swartz (1986), Furstenberg et al. (1999), Brooks-Gunn et al., 1997a, b; Booth and Crouter, 2001.
6. Booth and Crouter have recently published a book raising this question: *Does it Take a Village?* (2001).
7. See Bursik and Grasmick (1993:6–8) for a brief description of this early work and those contributing to this school of thought.
8. There are important exceptions, primarily those recent studies that focus on neighborhood disorder and the “broken windows” perspective (Bratton, 1998). This work views residents’ fear of crime as a reaction to neighborhood physical conditions and observed incivilities (for example, see Skogan, 1990 and Taylor, 2001). However, the focus of these studies is largely limited to the effects of neighborhood physical conditions on crime and fear of crime.
9. For example, the recent NICHD Study of Child Care and Child Development (2005) considered the family and child-care contexts, and some limited schools setting influences, but ignored neighborhood and peer contexts entirely.
10. Reckless et al., 1957.

Growing Up in Denver and Chicago

The MacArthur Neighborhood Study

SYNOPSIS

The Neighborhood Study is one of a series of integrated studies about youth development in multiple social contexts – neighborhoods, families, schools, and peer groups. This work was undertaken by the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Adolescent Development. This study developed and tested the most detailed and comprehensive model of neighborhood influences on families, schools, peer networks, and individual developmental outcomes. Denver and Chicago were selected as study sites and probability samples of neighborhoods in each city were selected as study neighborhoods. The rationale for selecting these two cities and the neighborhoods in each city is described.

A neighborhood is both a physical place and a social context; its boundaries have both geographical and social dimensions. Different ways of identifying geographical boundaries are explored and different census-based boundaries are compared with resident's perceived boundaries. Based on this analysis of the validity of different approaches to identifying neighborhoods, we decided to use census block groups and tracts to define and select neighborhoods for this study.

In Denver, 33 neighborhoods (census block groups) were selected with an average size of 27 square blocks. The samples of youth and families from each of these neighborhoods contained, on average, 19 families and 25 youth for a total sample of 662 families and 820 youth aged 10–18. Forty neighborhoods (census tracts) were selected in Chicago, with an average size of 14 square blocks. The sample of families and youth from each of these neighborhoods included, on average, 14 families and 21 youth aged 11–16, for a total sample of 545 households and 830 youth. Demographic descriptions of these neighborhoods are provided, with a focus on rates of affluence and poverty and racial/ethnic composition.

The information collected and available for this study involves four different sources: U. S. Census data for the years 1970, 1980, and 1990; personal interviews with parents of adolescents living in these neighborhoods; interviews with their teenage children; and in-depth interviews and focus groups (qualitative data) involving a separate sample of adults and adolescents living in six selected study neighborhoods. The study thus involves multiple sources of information and both survey and qualitative types of data. This ensures that our findings are rigorous and well grounded in the experiences of adolescents and adults living in these neighborhoods.

A common set of measures was developed and used in both Denver and Chicago. Additional measures were developed that were unique to Denver, taking advantage of additional data available for this site. These measures are described in the following chapters as they become relevant to the discussion. Finally, the general approach to this study and to the presentation of findings are described.

Growing Up in Denver and Chicago

The MacArthur Neighborhood Study

Male Adolescent – Broadmore: Uh, I'd say living here I have a whole lot better chance (for success) than living in another neighborhood.

Female Adolescent – Longmont: If I'm going to be successful and have kids, I don't want them to grow up here. I'm not trying to dis my neighborhood, but I can't have no kids and think I'm safe over here.

INTRODUCTION

This study of how kids living in bad neighborhoods manage to grow up successfully involves neighborhoods in two large, urban cities – Denver and Chicago. Initiated in 1991, it is one of a set of integrated studies of the MacArthur Foundation Research Network on Successful Adolescent Development. The main goal in all of these studies was to understand how youth growing up in poor, disadvantaged neighborhoods often manage to complete a successful course of adolescent development in spite of the social and economic adversity that characterizes their home environment. All of these studies used an ecological/developmental framework that viewed youth development as the result of many complex interactions, focusing on both individual attributes and dispositions as well as the set of conditions and social processes occurring in the multiple social contexts in which children and adolescents live. These physical and social contexts – the family, the school, and peer networks – were viewed as nested within and/or influenced by neighborhoods.¹ This ecological life-course paradigm is described more fully in Chapter 3.

Denver and Chicago were selected as study sites for several reasons. First, the authors were involved in ongoing neighborhood studies in both cities. Thus it was possible to do some preliminary work building on these existing studies and to use their sampling frames when drawing the new samples for this study.² Further, we had already established the necessary

contacts and collaboration with the city officials and local neighborhood organizations that facilitated the implementation of these new studies. Second, both Denver and Chicago are large urban cities with a significant number of high-poverty, ethnically diverse neighborhoods. We also chose Denver and Chicago because the high-poverty neighborhoods in these two cities differed in some potentially important ways. Those in Chicago typically involved older, more established neighborhoods with many high-rise public housing projects; in Denver, these neighborhoods are relatively newer and are predominantly characterized by single-family dwellings and low-level apartment buildings.

There are some advantages in conducting the study in *two* urban cities. First, two sites offer a test of the generality of the model of neighborhood effects developed for this study, and the conditions and strategies employed by individuals and families who successfully overcome the negative predicted effects of living in a bad neighborhood. There are too many instances where neighborhood findings from a single city are generalized broadly. A study of two sites with similar measures and analyses provides a modest test at best, but two is clearly better than one. Second, the discovery of city differences in neighborhood structure, culture, and social processes can lead to refinements in our conceptual model of neighborhood effects. Should the general effect of poverty on youth development be different in Denver and Chicago, this would lead to a search for the source of this difference in local governmental policies and practices, historical development of high-poverty areas, different geographical characteristics (like resident density), demographic trends in housing markets, and other factors that were not controlled in the study and differed by city.

IDENTIFYING THE GEOGRAPHICAL BOUNDARIES OF NEIGHBORHOODS

"Neighborhood" is both a physical place and a social context. Its boundaries have both geographical and social dimensions. Surprisingly, there is little agreement among researchers about how to identify the physical or geographical boundaries of an urban neighborhood or even about its typical size.³ In the long tradition of neighborhood research, a number of definitions have been used, ranging from the "next-door" neighborhood consisting of those homes or apartments immediately adjacent to one's own residence; to a small cluster of residential blocks;⁴ to the "walking-distance" neighborhood typically defined as the elementary school catchment area;⁵ to a single census tract;⁶ and finally to groups of census tracts or zip code areas.⁷ Bursik and Grasmick (1993:5) tell the story of a reporter who was frustrated at the inability of a Carnegie Institute panel of experts to agree on a working definition of the neighborhood as a physical area with clear physical boundaries. The reporter suggested a practical

definition offered him in private by a worker in the Puerto Rican Labor Office: "A neighborhood is where, when you go out of it, you get beat up."

There is, however, now some consensus about what a neighborhood is. Drawing upon Bursik and Grasmick's excellent review of the problem of identifying urban neighborhoods, we suggest three conceptual themes about which there is general agreement. First, a neighborhood is a relatively small physical area in which persons inhabit dwellings. They are small, residential environments nested within larger communities. Second, there is a social life that emerges within the neighborhood as the residents interact with one another. Thus, the physical size of the neighborhood is small enough to allow residents to interact on a *face-to-face* basis. The collective life of a neighborhood exists in the almost daily encounters with neighbors, the watching out for each other's children, working and partying together, borrowing food and tools, participating in neighborhood organizations and activities, and collaboration in interactions with the school, church, and other institutions in the larger community. Residents develop an informal social network with common interests in and shared expectations about their neighborhood and its relationship to the larger community. Ahlbrandt and Cunningham report that half of the residents in their Pittsburgh sample reported visiting regularly with neighbors and engaging in many of their "life activities" in and near their neighborhood.⁸ Finally, the neighborhood has an identity and some historical continuity. In many communities, neighborhoods acquire names that are widely recognized and used in everyday conversation and by the media to locate persons and events within the city. These names sometimes have an official status, as is the case in Chicago and Denver, reflecting housing developments or city planning areas. They also have their own history of development and change over time, which generates a reputation for being desirable or undesirable, safe or dangerous, and affluent or poor places to live. These officially named neighborhoods are often quite large and are not consistent with the first theme identified above; in other cases they are small enough to be characterized by face-to-face interaction.

Establishing some geographical area, some physical boundaries to differentiate one neighborhood from another, is the minimum criterion for selecting neighborhoods to study and to determine whether an individual lives in one neighborhood or another. In practice, the "small physical size" characterization of neighborhoods is problematic. Most earlier quantitative studies of neighborhoods have used census tracts or groups of tracts as neighborhoods. The most ambitious neighborhood study to date, the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, combined 865 census tracts into 343 "Neighborhood Clusters," with an average of 2.5 tracts and 8,000 persons in each cluster.⁹

Recently, neighborhood researchers have started to question the appropriateness of using census tracts to identify neighborhoods.¹⁰ Census tracts

typically involve 4,000 or more residents,¹¹ a relatively large area with far too many people to be involved in face-to-face interactions and the resulting type of collective life described above. Although it is true that the original tracking by the Census Bureau more than 70 years ago attempted to capture homogeneous social areas where there was some sense of a collective life and neighborhood culture, many of these areas have changed dramatically over the years. Present tract boundaries may not capture coherent interacting or cultural neighborhoods. They are not internally homogeneous units; neither structural nor organizational features are likely to be evenly distributed within tracts or groups of tracts.¹² On the other hand, areas with widely acknowledged identities and historical traditions, such as *Woodlawn* or *Oak Park* in Chicago and *Cole* or *Five-Points* in Denver, typically involve more than a single tract and frequently include parts of tracts. Today, areas that have acquired a widely held reputation or identity are often quite large, both geographically and in numbers of residents living in these areas. There may well be more informal neighborhoods within these historical areas involving smaller geographical areas that are known only to those residents living in areas within or immediately adjacent to the neighborhood. Otherwise, the identity criterion for establishing neighborhoods appears to be inconsistent with the other two criteria in our modern cities.

A number of alternatives exist to using census units (tracts, block groups, or blocks) to identify neighborhoods. For example, residents living in an area might be asked in a household survey or ethnographic study to locate the boundaries of their neighborhood.¹³ Whether there is enough consensus among residents to make this a feasible alternative for neighborhood research efforts has yet to be established, but there is at least some evidence that this may be a viable alternative.¹⁴ It is also possible to ask city planners and local land-use experts to map the community into neighborhoods. Taylor¹⁵ reports considerable agreement between residents and city planners about neighborhood geographical boundaries. Another approach is to rely upon formal neighborhood organizations to specify their neighborhood boundaries.¹⁶ There are many such neighborhood organizations in Denver, for example, but there are also many areas identified as neighborhoods by the city planning office that have no formal neighborhood organization.

In practice, neighborhood research has relied almost exclusively on census tracts to identify neighborhoods without paying much attention to how well these geographical areas reflect the sociological conceptualization of neighborhoods. In part, census neighborhoods were used because these geographical areas are already identified and data on residents and dwellings are collected and aggregated to these geographic units every decade. There is indeed a rich, historical archive of census data going back to 1930. However, there has been little effort to validate the use of census tracts as geographic neighborhoods, to compare this approach to

identifying neighborhoods with alternative approaches such as those described above, or even to systematically compare different census units like blocks, block groups, tracts, and groups of tracts that reflect major differences in area size.

VALIDATING NEIGHBORHOOD BOUNDARIES

Using data from a community sample in Denver,¹⁷ we explored several ways of identifying neighborhoods and compared their validity in a “construct validation” study. We then replicated this construct validation study with data from the Chicago Neighborhood Study. The results of this work are summarized here; other sources offer a more detailed description of this study and findings.¹⁸

First, we asked respondents in both Denver and Chicago a series of questions about the size of their neighborhood and its physical and demographic characteristics. Each adult respondent was asked:

“When you think about your neighborhood, are you thinking about (1) the block or street you live on? (2) this block or street and several blocks or streets in each direction? (3) the area within a 15-minute walk from your house? or (4) an area larger than this?”

This set of questions was designed to yield responses that roughly matched (1) a census block, (2) a census block group, (3) a census tract, and (4) a group of census tracts, respectively.

The most frequent response in both Chicago and Denver was “this block or street and several blocks or streets in each direction,” a geographical area roughly equivalent to a typical census block group (see Figure 2.1). A majority of respondents in both cities identified their neighborhood as a geographical area involving a single block or block group. Less than 15 percent identified their neighborhood as an area larger than the area they could walk in 15 minutes (a census tract).¹⁹

Most residents perceive their neighborhood as a relatively small geographical area. The vast majority (85 percent) identify an area that is as small as a single block and no larger than a census tract. Other studies of perceived neighborhood boundaries report similar findings. For example, Birch et al., interviewed residents in Houston, Dayton, and Rochester, asking them to identify the “... boundaries or borders of your neighborhood.” Those living in single-family dwellings typically identified the houses immediately around their house or those on their block; apartment dwellers typically identified their apartments and persons on their floor, wing, or in their building.²⁰ Not surprisingly, people tend to make their own house the center of their neighborhood. This makes sense if social interactions are the central defining criteria for establishing neighborhood boundaries.²¹

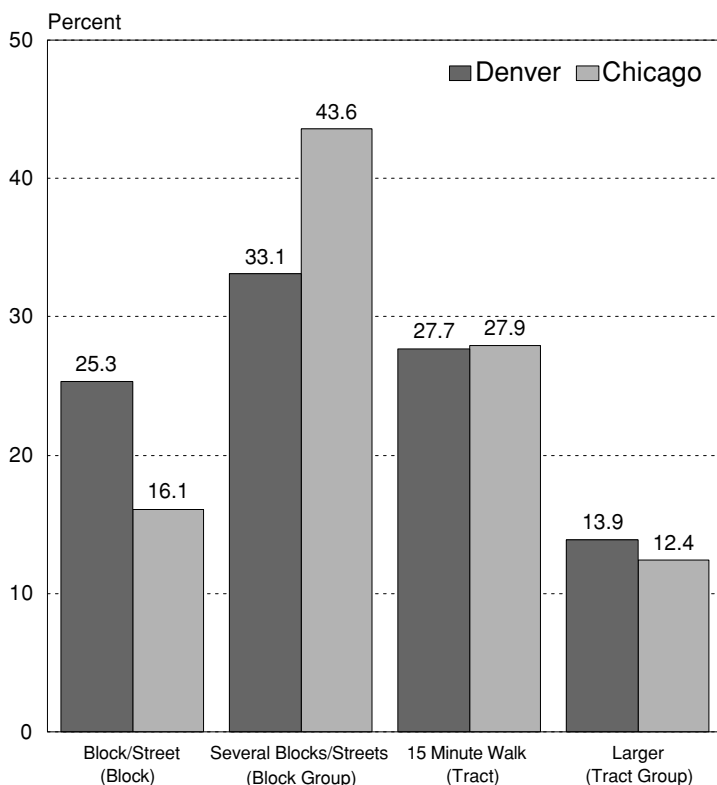


FIGURE 2.1. Perceived Neighborhood Size

How stable are these perceptions of neighborhood size? Over a one-year interval, Denver residents who had not moved were asked the same question about neighborhood size, with almost 60 percent providing a consistent response on both interviews.²² Among those changing their response, there was a tendency to choose a smaller, rather than a larger neighborhood area at the second interview. In any event, considerable stability emerged in resident perceptions about neighborhood boundaries over time, but it is not perfect or absolute. This finding might reflect real changes in neighborhood physical characteristics and/or social dynamics over the one-year interval. It also might be the result of some unreliability or ambiguity in the question about neighborhood size.

We also found some evidence that residents change their perception of neighborhood boundaries when they answer different kinds of questions about their neighborhood.²³ As we covered different topics in the interview that were related to the respondents' neighborhood, we asked them again at the end of each set of questions which of the above neighborhood

areas they were thinking about when answering these questions. Later in the interview, when we asked about institutional programs or agencies located in their neighborhood, residents tended to identify a larger area than they identified at the beginning. About half of those originally identifying their neighborhood as a block or block group identified an area larger than a block group after this set of questions. By contrast, when asked about neighborhood youths' chances of realizing their educational and occupational goals, there was a slight tendency to select smaller areas. Questions about respondents' informal networks and activities in the neighborhood or the extent to which their neighbors shared their values and norms generated a high level of consistency with their original response (85–90 percent). These findings indicate that the geographical boundaries of the perceived neighborhood shift somewhat as residents describe different features of their neighborhood. They appear to be somewhat flexible, both over time and depending on the issues involved. Still, there is enough consensus and stability in perceived neighborhood boundaries to study neighborhoods as discrete physical and social contexts.

Individual perceptions of neighborhood boundaries also tend to vary by race and class.²⁴ Black residents are more likely to choose smaller neighborhoods (a block or block group) while whites (Anglos) select larger ones (typically tracts).²⁵ The trend for Hispanics is bimodal; they tend to select either a single block or a multitract area. Lower socioeconomic status (SES) residents are more likely to perceive their neighborhoods as blocks or block groups whereas higher SES residents view their neighborhoods as block groups or tracts. Perceived neighborhood size appears unrelated to the level of poverty in the neighborhood even though it is related to individual SES. Our analysis also revealed that blacks, lower SES respondents, and those living in high-poverty neighborhoods, are the most consistent in their perception of neighborhood size, both over time and across question content. Perhaps the physical neighborhood is a more salient social context for people relegated to these neighborhoods, or for these people, the physical and functional neighborhoods are the same. In any case, poor black respondents living in high-poverty neighborhoods are most likely to view their neighborhood as a single block or block group and to use this definition consistently throughout the interview when asked about different neighborhood characteristics and activities.

Using these data on perceived neighborhood boundaries, we constructed a perceived neighborhood typology and compared different census unit neighborhoods on several perceived criteria to evaluate their validity for a study of neighborhood effects. Respondents were assigned to a block group, tract, or multitract neighborhood, based on their response to the above question. We wanted to determine if assigning residents to these different census units had any effect on the correspondence between their aggregated descriptions of their "neighborhood" in our 1990 survey and

official 1990 census descriptions for these census units. We reasoned that the greater the agreement between individual perceptions and the census reports of selected neighborhood characteristics for a particular census unit, the more valid that unit of neighborhood for our study.

Respondents were asked a series of questions that paralleled information available from the census. For example, we asked respondents how many families in their neighborhood were single-parent families, were poor, were on welfare, were black (Hispanic, Asian, or white), were renting, had five or more occupants per house, and had moved in or out of the neighborhood in the past year. We then tested to see if resident perceptions were more *accurate* (consistent with census data) when they had selected a block group, a tract, or a multitract as their neighborhood. The correspondence between individual perceptions and census-recorded characteristics was greatest for those identifying block groups as their neighborhoods. The differences between block group and tract neighborhoods were in some cases relatively small, and the correspondence was consistently and substantially higher for these two neighborhood units than for multitract neighborhoods.

We also looked for differences in the *homogeneity* of perceived neighborhood characteristics for these different neighborhood units. In this case, we were concerned with how similar individual perceptions are within neighborhoods and how different they are between neighborhoods. There should be less variation in these descriptions of the neighborhood when residents who live in the same objective neighborhood are describing it than if persons who live in different neighborhoods are describing their separate objective neighborhoods. In this analysis, we found the same pattern noted above – assignment to block groups produced more within-neighborhood similarity and between-neighborhood differences in perceptions of neighborhood characteristics than did assignment to tracts or multiple tract groups. Moreover, in this analysis, differences between block group and tract neighborhoods were more substantial, suggesting that block groups were more homogeneous neighborhood units than census tracts.

QUALITATIVE DATA ON NEIGHBORHOOD BOUNDARIES

We also explored neighborhood boundaries in a qualitative study of five selected neighborhoods in the larger Denver sample of neighborhoods. This study involved a series of adult and adolescent focus groups, in-depth semistructured interviews, and personal observations in each of these five neighborhoods. In order to compare residents' own sense of neighborhood boundaries with census boundaries, we asked participants in each of these (census block group) neighborhoods to draw a map of their neighborhood, showing the streets involved, businesses (if any), churches, schools, recreation centers, places where kids hang out, and any other important

landmarks. During the adult focus group discussion about what it was like for adults to raise children in their neighborhood, or in youth focus groups about what it was like growing up in that neighborhood, participants also indicated where specific events were located on this map. For example, if there was a serious fight or drive-by shooting in the neighborhood, we attempted to locate it on this map; if there was a crack house in the neighborhood, a house fire that neighbors helped put out, or a person who let kids use his garage and tools to work on their bikes or cars, we attempted to locate these places on the map.

In some neighborhoods, it proved quite difficult to get agreement among participants about neighborhood boundaries. In others there was a general consensus about boundaries. Figures 2.2 and 2.3 illustrate the overlap in census-type boundaries and resident-perceived boundaries in Parkview,

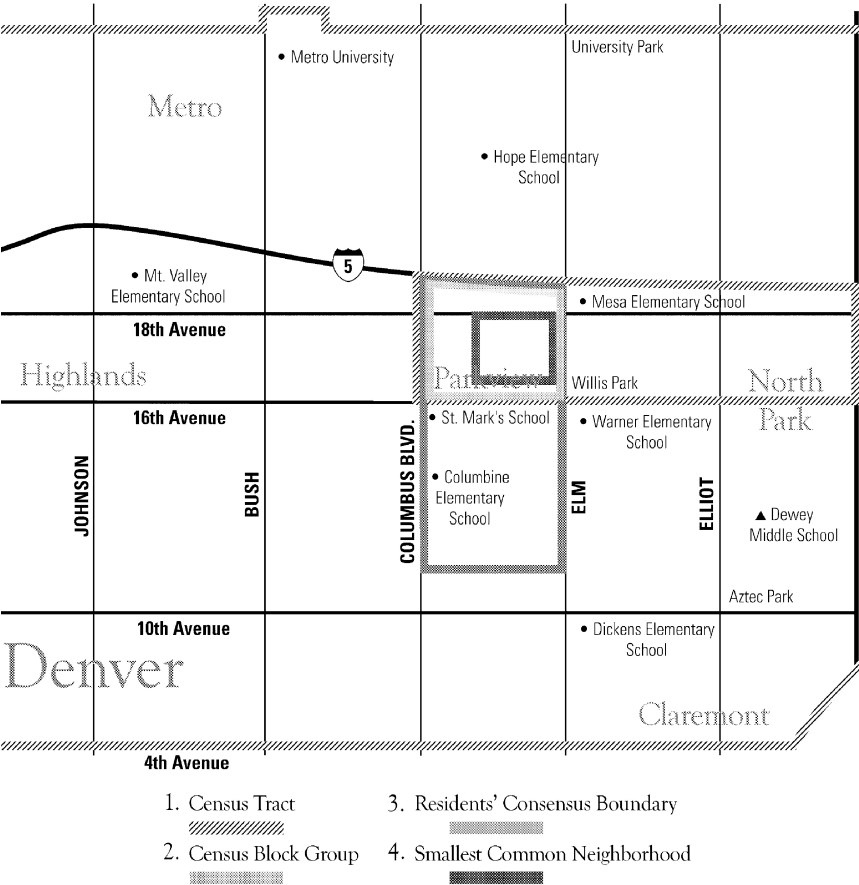


FIGURE 2.2. Parkview Teen Map



FIGURE 2.3. Parkview Adult Map

one of these selected Denver neighborhoods, as perceived by adolescents and parents. On each map, four boundaries are identified: (1) the census tract, (2) the census block group, (3) the residents' general consensus about the boundary, and (4) the neighborhood area common to the individual perceived boundaries of *all* residents sampled. In general, there is a high consensus between parents and adolescents living in Parkview about these boundaries.

Consensus about boundaries was higher when there was an effective neighborhood organization, a neighborhood watch program, or some other type of organized activity in the neighborhood. Sometimes particular physical characteristics helped to establish clear neighborhood boundaries, like freeways, major streets, and particular housing characteristics.²⁶