Neighborhood Instability and the Parenting Behaviors of Mexican American Mothers with Toddlers
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Background

- The Mexican-American population is not well represented in current family research. The percentage of Mexican origin families living in poverty is nearly twice the rate of the general U.S. population (Pew Hispanic Center, 2009) increasing these families’ likelihood of residing in unstable neighborhoods.
- Neighborhoods that are chaotic and disorganized can be conceptualized as a source of community-level contextual instability, influencing young children’s development. For example, neighborhood violence and lack of cohesion directly influences young children’s behavior problems and language abilities (Kohen et al., 2008; Linares et al., 1994).
- Since young children are not in direct or indirect contact with the neighborhood, it is crucial to understand the mechanisms by which neighborhood quality influences young children. For example, the association between neighborhood violence and children’s behavior problems is mediated by mothers’ mental health (Linares et al., 2001).
- Researchers have also considered how neighborhood instability influences parenting behaviors. Chaotic, dangerous neighborhoods have been associated with decreased levels of maternal warmth and punitive parenting behaviors (Klebanov et al., 1994; Kohen et al., 2008).
- With a community sample of Mexican American mothers with toddlers, this study examines two aspects of neighborhood instability (danger and disorganization) and their direct associations with nurturing and negative parenting behaviors. Additionally, we examine if mothers’ depressive symptoms mediate these associations.

Methods

Procedure: Mothers were recruited through flyers and announcements at community agencies and events. Participants met with an interviewer and provided answers to a questionnaire packet (English or Spanish available). All mothers are measure-report.

Sample: N=81. Mother age M=30.90 (SD=7.26), Child age M=27.32m (SD=3.91). Yearly income (per capita) M= $46,396.35 (SD=5585.92). High school/GED or higher: 72%. Married/Cohabiting: 70%. Born in US: 42%. Interviewed in Spanish: 37%. Receiving WIC, food stamps, TANF, SSI: 74%.

Neighborhood Dangers: Me & My Neighborhood Questionnaire (α=.78). Higher scores indicate more danger (e.g., You see or hear a shooting near your home? You get robbed, attacked in your neighborhood?).

Neighborhood Disorganization: Me & My Neighborhood Questionnaire (disorder subscale; α=.68). Higher scores indicate more disorder problems (e.g., Grafitti on buildings and walls? Abandoned cars?).

Nurturing Parenting: Parent Behavior Checklist (nurturing subscale; α=.74). Higher scores indicate the use of more sensitive parenting behaviors.

Negative Parenting: Parent Behavior Checklist (discipline subscale; α=.76). Higher scores indicate the use of more harsh, discipline parenting behaviors.

Maternal Depression: Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (α=.77). Higher scores indicate more depressive symptoms in mothers.

Note: Standardized path coefficients, *p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001. Coefficients from direct effect model (without mediator) in parentheses. Control variables include: Economic Strain, Child Age.

Results

Neighborhood Disorganization Model:
- Neighborhood disorganization is associated with decreased nurturing parenting and increased negative parenting (after controlling for economic strain and child age).
- Maternal depression...
  - fully mediates the association between neighborhood disorganization and nurturing parenting
  - partially mediates the association between neighborhood disorganization and negative parenting

Neighborhood Danger Model:
- Neighborhood danger is only associated with increased negative parenting (after controlling for economic strain and child age).
- Maternal depression...
  - fully mediates the association between neighborhood danger and negative parenting

Discussion

- In this sample of Mexican American mothers with toddlers, reports of neighborhood disorganization are associated with less nurturing parenting and more negative parenting. Interestingly, reports of neighborhood danger are only associated with more negative parenting; neighborhood danger is not associated with decreases in nurturing parenting. Perhaps neighborhood disorganization undermines effective parenting overall, whereas neighborhood danger taps into mothers’ desire to keep their children safe, thus they feel the need to use harsher discipline methods (as a protective mechanism), but it does not interfere with their nurturing abilities.
- Maternal depression mediated all significant direct effects, meaning that maternal depression is one mechanism by which neighborhood instability influences parenting behaviors. Mothers’ perceptions of the danger and disorganization in their neighborhoods is strongly associated with depressive symptoms, which decreases nurturing parenting and increase negative parenting in the face of neighborhood disorganization, and increase negative parenting in the face of neighborhood danger.

Implications & Next Steps

- The results of this study indicate that parenting behaviors towards children as young as two-years-old are associated with neighborhood quality, and mothers’ depressive symptoms are one mechanism by which this occurs.
- Intervention and community services that work with Mexican American mothers may want to assess the neighborhoods these mothers live in and assess mothers’ perceptions of the dangerous and disorganized aspects of their environment. Interventions with the goal of increasing effective parenting practices should consider that community-level factors, such as neighborhood quality, may contribute to mothers’ depressive symptoms, in turn undermining parenting practices that are associated with healthy child outcomes.
- It is also crucial to consider how the neighborhood context may motivate parenting behaviors. For example, negative parenting behaviors in the face of neighborhood danger may be seen by parents as a way to protect children from the harsh environment. In future studies, it will be necessary to add child outcomes to similar statistical models. Ideally, longitudinal studies should examine the relation between neighborhood context, parenting, and children’s development over time.

Acknowledgements

The authors thank all of the undergraduate research assistants for their hard work and the mothers and toddlers who participated in our study. The authors acknowledge funding from the National Center for Family & Marital Research and the University of Arizona Foundation.