Overcoming the Odds?

Adolescent Development in the Context of Urban Poverty

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Adolescence, a time of rapid biological, emotional, and social changes, brings with it a heightened developmental risk (McCord, 1997). This risk may be highest for adolescents growing up in poverty within our country’s inner cities. In addition to the normative stress of adolescence, poor inner-city youth face multiple stressors and adversities including crowded housing, poor-quality schools, inadequate nutrition, and the presence of violence and drugs in their neighborhoods (Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999). These factors, in turn, have been linked to a host of negative outcomes (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Gorman-Smith & Tolan, this volume). Nonetheless, some inner-city youth survive these circumstances, overcoming adversity to become productive members of society. This chapter will highlight research that helps us understand the dynamic process of risk and resilience during this difficult transition in an even more difficult context.

We begin this chapter with a definition of adolescence and urban poverty and then lay out a rationale for focusing on two outcomes, school achievement and dropout and behavior problems of an internalizing or externalizing nature. We then identify salient factors that increase vulnerability or protective processes for youth growing up in urban poverty. We end with a discussion of resilience, emphasizing the limits of resilient adaptation and implications of this for theory and research on resilience, as well as for interventions that may better the lives of these vulnerable youth.
ADOLESCENCE AND URBAN POVERTY

The definitions of adolescence and urban poverty have been subject to so much controversy that entire papers have been written about how to best define them. Although a detailed presentation of these arguments is beyond the scope of this chapter, we do not want to skirt them entirely.

Adolescence

The definition of adolescence has shifted over time due to both biological and societal changes. Once neatly marked by the “teen” years (13–19), such that adolescent and teenager were interchangeable terms, the traditional starting point of adolescence, puberty, is beginning earlier than ever. This is especially the case for girls. One large study of girls in pediatric practices found that by the age of 10, almost 70% of white girls and 95% of African American girls show evidence of breast development and pubic hair. A quarter of African American girls start breast development by age 8 (Herman-Giddens et al., 1997).

Whereas puberty is beginning earlier, the endpoint of adolescence, traditionally marked by independence from parents and economic self-sufficiency, is happening later. Finishing high school is no longer a ticket to employment that can lead to establishing an independent residence and supporting a family. An increasing number of college-bound youth experience extended adolescence, maintaining an economically dependent relationship with their parents well beyond their teens.

Some youth may not experience adolescence at all, defined as a protected space between childhood and adulthood. Numerous factors, including structural inconsistencies in the definition of adolescent roles, age-condensed families and blurred intergenerational boundaries, an accelerated life course, and culture-specific definitions of successful developmental outcomes, combine to place these adolescents either in adulthood or developmentally ambiguous roles from very early ages (Burton, Obeidallah, & Allison, 1996). Young people who experience an adolescence extended at the tail end are more likely to be white and middle- or upper-class. Those who do not experience adolescence at all are more likely to be African American or Latino, urban, and poor. As such, the very definition of adolescence and the nature of this developmental transition may depend on youths’ levels of poverty and their neighborhood environments.

Urban Poverty

At the turn of the millennium, 17% of children below the age of 18 in the United States were living in families with incomes below the federal poverty line. More than twice as many children (39%) live in or near poverty (Dalaker & Proctor, 2000). Those under 18 years of age are more likely to be poor than any other age group.

There are also vast disparities in rates of poverty across ethnic groups. The poverty rate in 1999 was 24% for African Americans, 23% for Hispanics, 11% for Asian/Pacific Islanders, 8% for non-Hispanic whites, and 25% for American Indians and Alaska Natives. Clearly, children and adolescents of color are overrepresented among the poor (Dalaker & Proctor, 2000).

The ability of older adolescents to obtain lawful work does not seem to significantly affect these disparities in ethnic poverty rates. Among working adolescents, 6% of white non-Hispanic adolescents were poor compared to 20% of working black adolescents and 18% of working Latino adolescents.

Poverty rates also vary by the type of neighborhood youths live in. When we refer to the urban poor, we mean those living within central cities in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, defined by census tracts in which more than 40% of the residents are poor. Although a quarter of poor African Americans live in neighborhoods characterized by concentrated poverty, only 3% of whites do so (Jargowsky, 1997). Inner-city neighborhoods are primarily African American and/or Latino, although we know extremely little about the neighborhoods characterized by the latter.

Other important issues in deriving a clear understanding of adolescents in poverty and the impact that this may have in the long term are the duration of poverty and whether they have grown up in persistent poverty. Here again, ethnic disparities are evident. Among nonblack children, 20% spent 1–4 years in poverty, 5% spent 5–9 years in poverty, and 1% spent 10 or more years in poverty. In contrast, for African American children the statistics are bleaker, with 32% living in poverty for 1–4 years, 18% in poverty for 5–9 years, and 29% in poverty for 10 years or more. Only 21% of the African American children followed over time lived above the poverty threshold for their entire childhood (Lewit, 1993). These disparities are significant because, although virtually no studies account for this factor, the amount of time spent in poverty is related to child outcomes (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997).

In sum, neither adolescence nor urban poverty is a homogeneous phenomenon. Unfortunately, few research studies provide the details...
necessary to calculate family poverty status or neighborhood income characteristics. For this reason, we chose to review studies that were relevant to the questions at hand, even when they never precisely specified that youths in the study were part of the urban poor or when definitions of urban poverty were loose or vague. In addition, given the confound between urban poverty and ethnicity, we sometimes draw upon research on African American adolescents within metropolitan areas, even when it was not clear whether the sample was primarily poor.

**ADOLESCENT PROBLEM BEHAVIORS AND OUTCOMES**

As Luthar and colleagues have stated in their theoretical examination and reformulation of risk and resilience, we cannot address either issue adequately without tying them to specific outcomes (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Luthar, Doenberfer, & Zigler, 1999). We must specifically address risk, or resilience for specific problems.

We report on studies that examine school achievement or behavior problems of an internalizing or externalizing nature, such as depression, delinquency, or aggression. We chose to focus on these problems because they are associated with life in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty, and either first initiated, detected, or exacerbated during adolescence, and have serious consequences for later life outcomes (McCord, 1997).

**VULNERABILITY AND PROTECTIVE MECHANISMS FOR POOR URBAN ADOLESCENTS**

Early models of risk typically attributed the vulnerability of inner-city youth, and more specifically African American inner-city youth, to the tangle of pathology created by their culture and their families (see, for example, Coronado & Watson, 1998). More recent, sophisticated research and theory consider the neighborhood as the cradle of risk (Booth & Crouter, 2001). There is a great deal of evidence supporting this latter position. These risks are especially high for adolescents, given their increasing mobility and autonomy. Although it is difficult to protect youth from the dangers of the inner city at any age, families of young children are better able to create risk-free laconae within their homes and immediate vicinity.

From among the vast array of potential risk factors in poor inner cities, we have chosen to focus on violence and victimization. Violence and the threat of victimization are two of the most dramatic risks associated with inner-city life. They also fall disproportionately upon youth. Furthermore, there is increasing evidence that the aftereffects of exposure to violence are more than transitory and may directly affect the developmental outcomes we are most interested in. On the positive side, we examine the role of youth serving community organizations as sources of protection in low-income urban neighborhoods.

Moving from the neighborhood to a more proximal center for vulnerability or protection, we next examine the family and the peer group. We focus on the role of harsh/punitive parenting and a delinquent peer group as vulnerability factors and on parenting that combines warmth and firm discipline as a protective factor. We have chosen not to focus on characteristics within the adolescent. Environmental factors are so salient and overwhelming for inner-city youth that there has not been much recent research that focuses on the individual as the locus for risk or protection. Characteristics such as intelligence, an easy temperament, or a positive life outlook can help youth cope with adversity, and the converse might heighten stress. However, this is the case whether one lives in a wealthy suburb or an inner city; we found no consistent empirical evidence that individual characteristics uniquely contribute to coping with the risks of inner-city life. In light of an earlier body of work that placed blame on inner-city youth and their families for their own problems, a focus on the individual without compelling evidence seemed inappropriate.

It is also worth noting that studies focusing on risk among poor inner-city youth typically draw upon an ecological model of development in which more distal risks, such as those in the neighborhood, are filtered through the more proximal environments of the family and the peer group before they result in youth vulnerability. These studies attempt to identify mediational mechanisms, rather than searching for moderators of risk. Studies that focus on mediation better help us understand how risk translates into vulnerability. Those that focus on moderation best help us understand resilience processes. Thus, more than a review of the literature, this chapter serves as a call for more sophisticated research in this area.

**NEIGHBORHOOD INFLUENCES**

**Violence and Victimization**

Our nation's poor urban youth are particularly vulnerable to the high incidence of violence in this country. Crime rates in our nation's urban locales were 74% higher than those in rural areas and 37% higher than those in suburban areas during the period 1999–1998. Urbanites experienced the highest rates of rape and sexual assault, robbery, aggravated
assault, simple assault, and personal theft. Moreover, community violence was especially high in inner-city neighborhoods characterized by poverty. Across all urban, suburban, and rural locales, lower annual income was associated with a higher incidence of violence. Households supported by less than $7,500 a year were twice as likely to report victimization of a family member than households with annual incomes above $75,000. And victimization rates among the urban poor were 41% higher than those among the poor living in rural locations (Duhart, 2000).

Media representations of youth violence have focused disproportionately on them as perpetrators and relatively rarely on them as victims. Portrayals of violent adolescents are readily accessible and direct public attention away from their risk of victimization (Hashima & Finkelhor, 1999). Stereotypes notwithstanding, victimization rates among adolescents were twice the national average. Adolescents between the ages of 12 and 15 were more often victims of crime than any other age group; although youth 12 to 24 years old represented less than a quarter of the U.S. population (1992 to 1994), they experienced nearly half of all violent victimizations (Perkins, 1997).

Among adolescents living in extremely disadvantaged inner cities, violence has been described as common and their neighborhoods have been compared to war zones (Dubrow & Garbarino, 1989). Available data lend credence to such descriptions across numerous urban settings and age groups. In a Chicago area study, more than half of inner-city early adolescents reported that within the past year, they had witnessed a violent attack and stayed home out of fear of violence (Attar, Guerra, & Tolan, 1994). Mothers in New Orleans reported that over 25% of their 9- to 12-year-old children had witnessed a shooting, and 20% had witnessed a stabbing (Osofsky, Weavers, Hann, & Fick, 1993). In a sample of Detroit youth aged 14-23, about 40% had seen someone shot or stabbed, and over 20% had seen someone killed (Schubiner, Scott, & Tzelepis, 1993). In a sample of low-income 7- to 14-year-old African American urban youth, almost half had witnessed a murder, and nearly 75% had seen someone shot or shot at (Fitzpatrick & Boldizar, 1998).

In addition to the experience of witnessing violence, referred to as **covictimization**, inner-city youth are often the direct recipients of violence. A child living in the inner city is more apt to die from violence than from any other single cause. One study found that 75% of urban youth had been beaten up, stabbed, or shot, almost twice the rate of their suburban counterparts (Campbell & Schwarz, 1996). Moreover, havens safe from violence are hard to identify. Only 17% of mothers of preadolescents and early adolescents in New Orleans rated hanging out or playing in the neighborhood as very safe, and only 30% rated school as safe (Osofsky et al., 1993).

In addition to poverty and urban dwelling, certain ethnic groups are at increased risk for victimization related to gang activity. Compared to their white counterparts, poor African American and Latino students are more likely to report the presence of gang activity in their schools and to fear attack while coming to or leaving school. Students who attended schools with gangs were more likely to be afraid of violence near or around their school and were more likely to alter their behavior for protection (Bastian & Taylor, 1991).

The relationship between victimization and covictimization with adjustment difficulties is well established. There are strong associations between violence exposure and victimization, on the one hand, and levels of aggression, anxiety, or depression, on the other (see Gorman-Smith & Tolan, this volume). There is also some evidence that living in poor inner cities may strengthen the link between exposure to violence and aggression. In a longitudinal study of inner-city African American and Latino preadolescents, exposure to violence was associated with peer-rated aggression, but only for youth in areas of high neighborhood disadvantage (Attar et al., 1994).

Exposure to community violence has also been linked to school-related problems. Students exposed to violence were more likely to report evidence of compromised cognitive functioning, to have lowered academic achievement and school attendance, and to have higher rates of school dropout (Shakoor & Chalmers, 1991). A national telephone survey of adolescents aged 10-16 likewise found that youth who reported being victimized had more school difficulties, as indicated by having trouble with a teacher (Boney-McCoy & Finkelhor, 1995).

In sum, there is a great deal of evidence that adolescents in inner-city neighborhoods, compared to similar youths of other ages or similarly aged youths from more affluent settings, are exposed to elevated rates of violence, whether as a witness or as a victim. There is also a growing body of research linking this exposure or experience to internalizing and externalizing behavior and to school underachievement. When examined directly, these associations generally account for a modest to moderate amount of variance in internalizing or externalizing behaviors.

**Community Organizations and Youth-Serving Agencies**

What factors within inner-city neighborhoods might help youth stay out of trouble or recover from trouble? Churches, community centers, and
neighborhood youth-serving organizations, such as girls' and boys' clubs, Little League, and YM/YWCAs have been found to influence youth positively (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Adolescents involved in voluntary activities and services are less likely to participate in problem behaviors like assault, stealing, and vandalism (Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998).

Community youth organizations have often been described as urban sanctuaries, serving as sources of hope and support in the lives of many inner-city youths (McLaughlin, Irby, & Langman, 1994). There are countless anecdotal accounts to this effect, and there are many studies indicating positive associations between participation in neighborhood organizations and social competence or reduced problem behavior. For example, one study found that in the Chicago Area Projects, in which two youth organizations provided services and organized activities aimed at delinquency prevention, youth in treatment neighborhoods, compared to comparison neighborhoods, had lower delinquency rates (Schlossman & Sedlak, 1983). Unfortunately, there are few studies like this one that have utilized random assignment procedures, leaving open the interpretation that youth who participate in such organizations are more competent or display less problem behavior to begin with. Thus, although community organizations may serve as safe havens to ameliorate the risks of inner-city lives, the empirical evidence for this remains thin. Moreover, we could find no evidence that the positive effects of community involvement were unique for youth in urban neighborhoods.

Peer and Family Influences

In this section we highlight research on vulnerability and protective factors within the peer and family microsystems. We begin by presenting research demonstrating that adolescent problem behavior is associated with participation in delinquent peer groups and harsh parenting practices. We then move to research suggesting that warmth and support from family members, and parenting styles that include firm control and close monitoring, may mitigate the effects of both negative neighborhood and peer group factors.

Delinquent Peer Groups

A recent review suggests that the peer group may represent the primary agent through which neighborhood socialization adversely affects child outcomes (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Within inner-city neighborhoods and schools, the peer culture often reflects the violence in the larger community. Adolescents growing up in high-crime, dangerous neighborhoods are exposed to more delinquent peer groups than other youth (Wilstrom, 1998), and a large body of evidence implicates delinquent peers in the development of adolescent behavior problems (Dryfoos, 1990).

Moreover, the personal characteristics valued by peers on inner-city streets are often not consistent with success in the more conventional mode (Jarrett, 1999). The link between peer popularity and academic performance is not as strong as that between peer group pressure and externalizing behaviors, but both empirical and ethnographic studies have suggested that it is hard for inner-city African American youths to find peers who are supportive of school achievement (Fordham & Ogbo, 1986; Lutheran, 1995).

Social relations on the streets in impoverished inner-city communities have been described as "individualistic and predatory," with "getting over" and "hustling" considered valid ways of gaining access to limited resources (Jarrett, 1999). The potentially negative role of inner-city peers was nicely illustrated by a recent study with a sample of mostly African American and Latino adolescents attending low-income inner-city schools in Baltimore, Washington D.C., and New York City (Seidman et al., 1999; see also Seidman & Pedersen, this volume). Using a pattern-based analytic approach, Seidman and colleagues identified six experiential peer clusters and examined their risk or protective functions vis-à-vis depression and antisocial behavior. The most protective of these clusters for both depression and antisocial behavior was labeled disengaging-accepting. This cluster of adolescents had relationships with peers characterized by high levels of perceived social acceptance or popularity but not much support per se. Instead, actual relationships with peers were described as "marginal." The study authors suggest that this marginality may have provided them with a safe haven from the antisocial values common among their peer group (p. 16).

Harsh and Punitive Parenting

Parents bringing up youth in low-income inner cities find themselves in a difficult position. They are responsible for protecting their children, but living in the inner city can feel anything but safe. A study examining the link between exposure to violence and parenting, albeit with younger children, found that about a fifth of inner-city mothers who witnessed violence did not feel safe and curtailed the neighborhood activities of their
children (Taylor, 1997). Another study, also of young children, found that parents reported being more vigilant and more regulating of their children’s experiences when they perceived the neighborhood as less safe (Parke & O’Neill, 1999). Under such conditions, parents are more likely to adopt discipline styles characterized by restrictive and punitive methods (Garbarino, Kostelnky, & Dubrow, 1991; Mcloyd, 1997). In her excellent review of parenting among the poor and disadvantaged, Mcloyd (1990) noted that a lack of financial resources combined with the cascading stresses typical of inner-city life leads to “quick and decisive” disciplinary strategies that can be described as harsh and are typically linked to adolescent problem behaviors, especially those of an externalizing nature.

Although the extant research has consistently found that parenting practices among poor, especially minority, families are power assertive or harsh, some have suggested that this may be an adaptive response to the dangers of the inner city. The argument of these investigators is that under these circumstances, a more controlling parenting style may result in more positive outcomes for young people. There is some, albeit limited, evidence in support of this assertion. We present this evidence in the next section, as we review the literature on parental support and child protection strategies.

**Parental Support and Protection**

During the adolescent years, family roles are reorganized to accommodate the adolescent’s increasing need for independence. During this period, conflict between children and their parents is at its height (Steinberg, 1990), and developing effective parenting strategies that combine warmth and nurturance with appropriate discipline is always a challenge. The inner-city environment, where collective socialization strategies or collective efficacy is especially weak (Sampson et al., 1999), makes the challenge even greater. But even within the inner city, some parents manage to rise to the occasion, developing strategies that both support and protect their young.

The ethnographic work of Jarrett (1997, 1999) offers powerful descriptions of how some parents persist in their parenting efforts even in the worst community conditions. The child protection strategies that she has identified include child monitoring, parental resource seeking, and in-home learning.

**CHILD MONITORING.** The core of the youth monitoring strategy is restricting the association between an adolescent and undesirable neighbors or peers. The most common ways to do this are through isolation and chaperonage. Isolation refers to confining children, such as not allowing them out of the house after school or allowing them to go only to certain places. Chaperonage involves having a family member or a family friend accompany a child during routine or high-risk activities. For example, a mother may have her adolescent son take his younger brother with him when he goes to his girlfriend’s house when her parents are not around.

Part of the task of monitoring entails maintaining clear generational role boundaries and demanding respect from children. Although some mothers attempt to be friends with their daughters, Cauce and colleagues (1996) described how, when an urban African American adolescent called her mother “pal” during a mother–daughter interaction task, the mother immediately replied, “I’ll give you pal in the mouth. I’m not your pal.” Time and again during these interactions, mothers were found to listen to daughters, show respect for their opinions, and encourage them to behave in a more autonomous fashion while also reminding their daughters that when “push comes to shove, they [the mothers] were in charge” (p. 110).

**PARENTAL RESOURCE SEEKING.** Jarrett’s work also identifies community-bridging parents who create “insulated and enriching developmental niches” (Jarrett, 1998, p. 48) for their children. Astute parents help their children identify safe spaces within the neighborhood and more desirable neighbors and peers. For example, James Comer (1989), a doctor and dean of the Yale Medical School, described how his mother, a domestic worker, helped to connect him with a doctor whose house she cleaned.

Ethnographic studies have also highlighted ways in which groups of affiliated relatives or extended kin networks can assist children and youth in navigating around the risks in inner-city neighborhoods. Sometimes these kin were of higher economic status and provided families and youth with valuable resources. These kin can also fill in for each other and share roles (Jarrett, 1997). Extended kin networks and role flexibility have often been considered among the unique strengths of African American families.

**IN-HOME LEARNING.** This strategy, specific to intellectual development, involves devising learning activities that can be carried out at home and that reinforce school expectations. For example, parents may look for teachable moments to reinforce what a child is learning in a history or civics class. Rewarding a child for good school performance,
such as attaching privileges to school grades, is another variation of this strategy.

The rich ethnographic research, briefly described earlier, elucidates the creative strategies that families use to both support and protect their young in risky circumstances. Although the nature of the work does not allow us to clearly tie these strategies to child or adolescent outcomes, the findings of several empirical investigations corroborate Jarrett’s observations while forging stronger links with adolescent adjustment. More specifically, studies suggest that parental disciplinary strategies that are higher in control may be most adaptive for urban African American youths. These are also among the relatively few studies of primarily low-income urban adolescents that examine the moderating effects most often associated with a resilience perspective. Several of these are based on the work of the same study team: Mason, Gonzales, Cauce, and their colleagues (Gonzales, Cauce, Friedman, & Mason, 1996; Mason, Cauce, Gonzales, & Hiraga, 1994, 1996). These studies all draw upon data from an investigation of primarily low-income, urban African American adolescents aged 12 to 14. The adolescents were followed for a 3-year period, and all the studies cited used prospective designs in which outcomes from year 1 were controlled for before looking at the predictors of behavior in year 2.

The first of these studies focused on maternal warmth, or the affective quality of the adolescent–mother relationship, examining whether a close and warm relationship between an adolescent and his or her mother could counteract the negative influences of father absence and a delinquent peer group. Results indicated that, as expected, participation in a more delinquent peer group was a vulnerability factor for adolescent externalizing problem behavior. This vulnerability was exacerbated by father absence. Maternal warmth, conversely, not only served to buffer the negative effects of a delinquent peer group, it served to substantially mitigate the combined negative effects of a delinquent peer group and father absence. In other words, adolescent externalizing behavior was especially elevated for youths with delinquent peers in a mother-only household when their relationship with their mother was distant and lacked affection. However, when the relationship between adolescent and mother was close and warm, the effects of a delinquent peer group and father absence were close to negligible. These results strongly suggest that the relationship between a mother and her adolescent child can serve a protective function, even under conditions of multiple risk (Mason et al., 1996).

The next set of studies focused on another aspect of mother–adolescent relationships: maternal control or a mother’s disciplinary style. The first of these studies examined school achievement as an outcome and found that within neighborhoods that adolescents perceived as more risky (e.g., with more vandalism, gang activity, crime), they attained better grades when mothers exercised higher levels of restrictive control. The opposite was true for adolescents who described their neighborhoods as more low risk. They attained better grades when their mothers exercised lower levels of restrictive control (Gonzales et al., 1996).

That the effects of maternal control vary by context was further corroborated by the third study in this set. This study found a curvilinear relationship between maternal control, whether restrictive or behavioral, and externalizing problem behavior: Optimal levels of adolescent behavior were found when parental control was neither overly harsh nor overly lenient. Furthermore, this window of optimal control was particularly narrow for youths at risk due to a negative peer environment. This condition was referred to as the need for precision parenting, a term that underscores the difficulty of parenting adolescents in risky environments (Mason et al., 1996).

The results of the ethnographic and empirical studies just summarized suggest that parents who cultivate close and warm relationships with their adolescent children, who monitor their whereabouts and provide firm discipline, neither overly harsh and punitive nor overly lenient and lax, can have a positive impact on the behavior of their children. Moreover, parenting of this sort has not only been shown to have a direct effect upon adolescent behavior, it also serves to moderate or buffer the negative effects of a risky neighborhood or peer environment. Thus, effective parenting can make a difference in high-risk environments.

This research is quite clear about the best strategies for childrearing in these tough environmental settings. It also indicates that, in such circumstances, this type of parenting is difficult. The toll is especially high for precisely those parents least able to pay it. Cauce et al. (1996) referred to parents of urban African American youth as “between a rock and a hard place,” and one parent described her efforts to exercise just the right amount of control as akin to “threading a needle in the dark.”

We believe that it is still premature to conclude, as did the National Research Council (1993), that high-risk urban environments swamp the effects of parents or other potential protective factors. But there is at least one study indicating that, within the very worst inner-city neighborhoods, this may be the case. Results of the Chicago Youth Development
Study (Gorman-Smith, Tolan, & Henry, 1999), which focused on early adolescent African and Latino American males from either inner-city, underclass neighborhoods or otherwise urban, poor neighborhoods, found that among the latter, parenting had little impact on problem behavior of a delinquent or externalizing nature. When hierarchical regressions were conducted to examine the social predictors of delinquency for boys within urban poor but not underclass neighborhoods, family cohesion, beliefs about families, and family disciplinary practices were all significant predictors that also mediated the impact of life stress upon adjustment. On the other hand, within inner-city underclass neighborhoods, those where more than 40% of the residents were poor, only stress predicted adolescent male delinquency. None of the family or parenting variables had any effect. As the authors note, the variation in predictive relationships by neighborhood type is particularly striking because there were no differences between groups on level of stress experienced, family relationships, parenting practices, or beliefs about families. Thus, like previous studies, this one also indicates that the challenges for inner-city parents are great. But its results are more sobering and suggest that resilience may be hard to find in the most difficult of these environments.

LIMITS OF RESILIENT ADAPTATION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERVENTION

In this chapter, we have tried to shed light upon resilience processes among adolescents in the context of poverty by focusing on both vulnerability and protective factors. We identified one vulnerability factor at the community level, community violence, and one protective factor, the presence of youth-serving community organizations. At the microsystem level, we identified two vulnerability factors, delinquent peer groups and harsh and punitive parenting, and one protective factor, parental support and firm discipline.

We tried to be balanced in our focus on risk and protection, but this task proved impossible. Identifying vulnerability factors was easy. The competition among constructs for salience was keen. For example, we could have easily focused on the vulnerability of youths growing up in single-parent families or on the vulnerability that comes from attending poor-quality and underresourced schools. We could also have focused on racial discrimination as a risk factor because so many youths who are urban and poor are also members of ethnic minorities. Lastly, a great deal has been written on the role of stress in inner-city environments, a construct that cuts across several of these risk factors. It would not be hard to make the case that youths growing up in this difficult environment are vulnerable largely because of the confluence of stresses in their lives (Attar et al. 1994; Gorman-Smith et al., 1999). Space limitations not only constrained us from presenting the full range of variables that have been identified as posing risks to youths growing up in the inner city, they also constrained us from presenting more fully all the research supporting their status as risk factors. Indeed, although we may not fully understand the mechanisms by which community violence, delinquent peers, or harsh parenting affect behavioral adjustment, there is little question about whether their impact is negative.

Conversely, our identification of protective factors was constrained not by space limitations, but by the research literature. We struggled to identify protective factors, and the research literature supporting the protective function of those factors we did identify was difficult to locate. These constraints likely reflect those posed by the neighborhood environment surrounding inner-city youth, especially if one focuses on inner-city neighborhoods characterized by concentrated poverty. Put bluntly, although there is much research still to be done, the empirical evidence in support of protection and resilience in such settings is quite thin. It is undoubtedly the fact that some youths survive the rigors of the inner city and emerge intact. There is also much room for resilience research that identifies the strengths of inner-city youths, which exist alongside the many problems that have been identified. Indeed, such research is especially important because it can help us identify areas that we can build upon when developing intervention or prevention programs. For example, in their work with poor, urban, substance-abusing mothers, Luthar and Suchman (2000) were able to harness strengths such as their strong concern for their children in motivating them to make good use of a relationally based intervention.

Still, it is important to acknowledge that relatively few empirical studies have identified factors in the community, family, or peer group that actually mitigate the negative effects of inner-city life. In light of the strong evidence for the presence of potent and multiple risks in the inner city and the relatively weak evidence suggesting that there are clearly identifiable protective factors that counteract these risks, there is a surprising amount of resistance to labeling these environments as toxic. In part because so many inner-city residents are black and brown, there is a legitimate fear that so labeling these environments might lead to stigmatizing the people who live in them. Perhaps for this reason, in the past several years it has
been more fashionable to issue calls for research focusing on those youths who manage to do well in these environments than to rail against a social structure that allows children to grow up in such toxic circumstances. Indeed, it has become almost a cliché to say that despite the tremendous obstacles they face, many poor inner-city youths are doing just fine. Yet, a hard, sober look at the research literature suggests that, much as we’d like to think otherwise, this may not be the case.

In one study of poor, inner-city sixth and seventh graders, 21% of the boys and 5% of the girls reported that they had carried a gun; 21% of the boys and 16% of the girls reported that they had initiated a fist fight or showing match three or more times, and a full 67.7% had hit someone “because they didn’t like what they said or did,” all within the previous 6 months. Although resilience processes were not explicitly examined, there is reason to believe that the search for resilience would not have turned up much. Only about a third (35.5%) of these youths were found to be without serious problem behaviors, either delinquency, school failure, high-risk sexual behavior, or substance abuse. Indeed, almost a third of all youth (30.5%) had serious problem behaviors in at least three of these areas. And they were barely teenagers (Barone et al., 1995).

Another study of 13- to 17-year-old African American boys growing up in three of the higher-crime areas in Washington, D.C., found that fewer than one-fourth of these youths (22%) failed to self-report an act that could be considered criminal. Moreover, within the past 6 months, even these “nonoffenders” committed, on average, more than one act that could be considered a juvenile offense, like underage drinking or running away from home (Washington, D.C., Juvenile Violence Research Study, cited by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1990).

When making pronouncements about resilience among poor urban youth, it is important to keep in mind that the bulk of the research that has identified resilience processes among poor, minority, or urban adolescents has not focused exclusively on those growing up in inner-city neighborhoods characterized by concentrated poverty. Instead, youths in most of these studies have represented a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and a range of urban neighborhoods (Seidman, 1991). For example, the studies by Mason, Gonzales, Cause, and colleagues were conducted with urban African American youths living in Seattle, where there are very virtually no neighborhoods that are truly underclass. Moreover, although the youths came primarily from families of modest means, with about 40% in poverty or near poverty, almost 20% were at least lower middle class. There was no significant association between income and problem behavior in these studies, but this does not rule out the fact that the processes associated with resilience in these studies (e.g., a warm relationship between adolescent and mother, an adequate amount of parental control) were confounded with economic status, neighborhood residence, or exposure to risk. For example, the mothers most able to monitor their adolescents adequately and provide them with adequate, but not too much, control may have been those living in the better neighborhoods with access to more resources.

The evidence suggests that such confounds are common; the riskier the setting, the less likely we are to find protective factors. As we have already alluded to, the type of protective parenting described in our review is probably most difficult to sustain in inner-city neighborhoods. The very nature of inner-city neighborhoods, the dangers they pose, and the sheer grind of living day in and day out under an onslaught of poverty-related stress mitigate against just the type of parenting that is most apt to deflect their effects upon children. Indeed, the difficulty of these circumstances is most apt to lead to harsh and punitive parenting styles that serve to magnify neighborhood risks.

By the same token, although strong youth-serving community organizations may provide some protection from neighborhood violence, such organizations are rare in precisely those neighborhoods in which we are apt to find the highest levels of violence. Ironically, those neighborhoods with the greatest need for such organizations typically don’t command the resources, political or economic, to sustain high-quality youth-serving organizations (Connell & Aber, in press). Rates of participation in organized after-school activities are lower for youth in low-income families compared to their more privileged counterparts. Such activities are less available in poor communities because they are generally locally funded, including reliance on fees for service (Quinn, 1999).

Thus, whether it is politically correct to say so or not, when we focus on inner-city neighborhoods with a high poverty concentration, the limits of resilience are all too obvious. Although it may not be impossible, it is certainly hard for the researcher with open eyes, just as it is hard for an adolescent living in these neighborhoods, not to be overwhelmed by risk.

The primary implication of this review for intervention is that although we undoubtedly should and need to focus on and identify the strengths and resilience processes that do exist among inner-city underclass youths, it is equally important to work on diminishing the risks these youths are exposed to. History suggests that it is not possible to create an environment
so oppressive as to totally vanquish the human spirit and eliminate the
capacity of some to survive and overcome, but some environments come
close. If one limits oneself to environments that one is likely to encounter
every day in the United States, inner-city neighborhoods characterized
by high concentrations of poverty perhaps come closest. We might
do well to acknowledge this more readily and to focus our resources not
only on reinforcing factors that may mitigate toxicity, but also on making
these environments less toxic. This is not a new point. It has been
made more eloquently by previous resilience researchers (see Luther &
Cicchetti, 2000), but in an environment where public policies aimed at
providing a safety net for the poor are increasingly being cut back, it is a
point well worth repeating.

Note
1. The census data provide this information only for 16- and 17-year-olds.

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