

This brief talk is based on my new project (funded by SSHRC, a federal agency).

- 1) Are there significant neighbourhood effects on children and youth?
- 2) Can we disentangle neighbourhood effects from the influence of parents, siblings?
- 3) What are the social mechanisms that involve neighborhoods in child socialization (neighbourhood disadvantage, peer groups (gangs etc.), neighbourhood social capital?)
- 4) How can research on neighbourhood effects inform Human Resources Development Canada policies aiming to reduce the incidence of “vulnerable children”?

Child Outcomes:

Cognitive development and “mental health” (usually boils down to anxiety or aggression)

Influential review papers. For example Jencks and Mayer’s article summarizing possible mechanisms for neighbourhood effects or the more critical review by Ginther et al.

Statistical studies. For example, the paper by Tremblay et al. available from HRDC. “Ecometrics”: the attempt to measure characteristics of neighbourhoods.

We will create improved measures of *neighbourhood economic and social disadvantage* as well as neighbourhood *collective efficacy*, *social support* and *social capital*.

Defining neighbourhood boundaries can be highly subjective but most researchers use postcodes, zip codes, Census enumeration areas (small), Census tracts (bigger) or Census subdivisions (biggest).

Ecometrics has links with classic sociological studies of slums, suburbs and villages (Chicago school: also Lloyd Warner) also with social geography. There are several types.

One type uses Census averages for Census enumeration areas, Census tracts, postcodes. These can be purchased from Statistics Canada (“small area statistics”)

Another type (of interest for this presentation) records the presence of certain facilities (community centres, hospitals, parks, places of worship, playgrounds, schools, etc.) as well as the ratings that observers make of neighbourhood quality and climate. One observer may see different things from another, even for the same neighbourhood, but if we average the ratings made by a sufficient number of informants we can claim to be measuring certain emergent properties of neighbourhoods. Research of this kind requires “human subjects review” (also called “ethical review”). A key phrase from the Tri-Council Statement on Ethics is “naturalistic observation”. My project has received ethical approval on the understanding that no interviews will be carried out.

Archival data on neighbourhoods are also relevant (accounts from old newspapers) as well as more obviously qualitative data, such as photographs and videos of neighbourhoods, but we must be careful about the possibility of including identifiable individuals in such images.

Why not just use Census characteristics of neighbourhoods?

Census variables that have been linked to child outcomes in analysis of Canada's National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth include the incidence of female-headed lone-parent families and other indicators of neighbourhood affluence, such as the local unemployment rate, the percentage of families below a low-income cut-off, the percentage of high-income families and neighbourhood classifications derived from cluster analysis. Such census-based indicators are useful to the extent that contextual characteristics of places reflect aggregated characteristics of local populations, but they are limited when it comes to measuring aspects of neighbourhood social organization.

Why obtain ratings of neighbourhoods?

Sociologists have also used interviewer and adult respondent ratings of the helpfulness of neighbours, neighbourhood safety (Sampson and Morenoff, 1997); the availability of good local parks, playgrounds and play spaces; the incidence of membership in voluntary organizations; and the extent to which children are involved in socially organized group activities. Qualitative and local historical data can be very important in this measurement enterprise. In a recent review, Sampson et al. (1999) emphasize as crucial for the advancement of our understanding that neighbourhood characteristics such as aggregated respondent ratings "can and should be treated as ecological or collective phenomena rather than as individual-level perceptions..." (ibid: 456-7.)

Selected References

- Ginther, Donna, Robert Havemann and Barbara Wolfe. 2000. "Neighbourhood Attributes as Determinants of Children's Outcomes: How Robust are the Relationships?" *Journal of Human Resources*, 35, 4: 603-42.
- Jencks, Christopher and Susan E. Mayer. 1990. "The Social Consequences of Growing Up in a Poor Neighbourhood." Pp. 111-186 in *Inner-City Poverty in the United States*, edited by Laurence E. Lynn, Jr., and Michael G. H. McGeary. Washington D.C., National Academy Press.
- Sampson, Robert J., Jeffrey D. Morenoff and Felton Earls. 1999. Beyond Social Capital: Spatial Dynamics of Collective Efficacy for Children. *American Sociological Review*, 64: 633-660.
- Sampson, Robert J. and Steve Raudenbush. 1999. "Systematic Social Observation of Public Spaces: A New Look at Disorder in Urban Neighbourhoods." *American Journal of Sociology* 105: 603-651.
- Tremblay, Richard, Bernard Boulerice, Holly Foster, Elisa Romano, John Hagan and Raymond Swisher. 2001. "Multi-Level Effects on Behaviour Outcomes in Canadian Children". Applied Research Branch. Strategic Policy. Human Resources Development Canada. W-01-2E. This is available on the HRDC Web site.

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For background information, see some .pdf files at my Web site (under reconstruction)
<http://www.chass.utoronto.ca/~cjones/research/>