



Assessing the benefits of a rising tide: Educational attainment and increases in neighborhood socioeconomic advantage



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ABSTRACT

An emerging approach to studying associations between neighborhood contexts and educational outcomes is to estimate the outcomes of adolescents growing up in neighborhoods that are experiencing economic growth in comparison to peers that reside in economically stable or declining communities. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), I examine the association between education attainment and changes in socioeconomic advantage in urban neighborhoods between 1990 and 2000. I find that residing in a neighborhood that experiences economic improvements has a positive association with educational attainment for urban adolescents. Furthermore, race-based analyses suggest consistently positive associations for all race subgroups, lending support to protective models of neighborhood effects that argue high neighborhood SES supports positive outcomes for adolescents residing in these contexts.

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1. Introduction

Although the United States has experienced over 50 years of rising high school graduation rates, disparities endure among adolescents differentiated by race, class and residential location (Rumberger, 2001; Stark and Noel, 2015). The graduation rate for black males is currently 30 percentage points lower than that of white males (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012; Sum and Harrington, 2003). In addition, there are gaps of over ten percentage points between the graduation rate for adolescents growing up in economically disadvantaged urban communities, compared with their peers from more economically advantaged contexts (Swanson, 2009; Wodtke et al., 2011). The urban dropout crisis is particularly acute among black males, with only 28% of black males in urban schools graduating from high school on time, compared with 45% for black males nationwide (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012).

Researchers interested in understanding these residence-based disparities often base their analysis on the comparison of youth who relocate from disadvantaged urban contexts via intra- or inter-district busing policies or housing relocation programs (DeLuca and Dayton, 2009; Leventhal et al., 2009). Another approach, which we know much less about, is to focus on studying adolescents growing up in previously disadvantaged neighborhoods that experience economic growth. This approach capitalizes on the fact that whereas urban poverty and concentrated disadvantage often endure over time, economic growth has been observed in many poor urban communities, particularly during the 1990s (Ellen and O'Regan, 2008; Galster et al., 2003; Jargowsky, 2003; Kingsley and Pettit, 2003). This growth has sparked much debate regarding whether these gains are associated with improvements in the quality-of-life for residents of changing urban communities, notably

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children and adolescents (Hackworth, 2007; Vigdor, 2002). Are there educational benefits for adolescents who reside in communities that are becoming more socioeconomically advantaged?

This study focuses on the association between neighborhood economic growth and the educational attainment of adolescents from urban neighborhoods during the 1990s. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), I ask two specific research questions: (1) do adolescents living in urban neighborhoods that undergo increases in economic advantage have greater educational attainment compared with their peers who reside in neighborhoods that experience less growth? And, (2) does the nature of this association differ across racial subgroups?

In the sections that follow, I review the extant literature on neighborhood effects as they pertain to educational attainment among adolescents. This review is punctuated by a discussion of how methodological complications inherent in neighborhood-based studies have led researchers to rely heavily on mobility programs as a means of assessing the influence of neighborhood characteristics on youth's educational outcomes. Finally, I outline the emerging place-based strategy of studying individuals who reside in neighborhoods that change as an alternative method of investigation. This strategy is extended in the present study to incorporate two distinct modeling techniques that treat the metric of neighborhood change as a continuous rather than dichotomous indicator, while also accounting for endogenous selection into neighborhood contexts.

1.1. Neighborhood advantage and educational attainment

Educational attainment, a commonly studied developmental outcome for adolescents, is most often operationalized by measuring high school graduation rates. Although it may only represent one discrete step on an individual's path to social and economic independence, graduating from high school is a pivotal gateway that may foreshadow economic well-being later in life (Crowder and South, 2011; Fischer and Kmec, 2004; Murnane et al., 1995; Swanson, 2009). These educational milestones are shaped by the multitude of ecologies within which children develop, such as the home, school and neighborhood (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The neighborhood context may be particularly salient for adolescents, as peer groups and other non-familial ecologies become more influential than the home due to decreased parental oversight and increased time spent outside of the home compared with earlier childhood (Elliott et al., 1996; Leventhal et al., 2009; Steinberg and Morris, 2001).

Elevated neighborhood socioeconomic advantage as signaled by high levels of affluent, professional, and well-educated residents may have both positive and negative associations with educational attainment (Dupere et al., 2010; Jencks and Mayer, 1990; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000). On one hand, *protective* models argue that elevated neighborhood SES is likely to be associated with higher levels of adolescents' educational attainment. On the other hand, *person-environment fit* models suggest that high neighborhood SES may have deleterious effects on the educational trajectories of some disadvantaged individuals who reside in increasingly advantaged contexts (Boyle et al., 2007; Kupersmidt et al., 1995; Lund and Dearing, 2012).

Protective models argue that high neighborhood SES is positively associated with educational attainment through institutional and social mechanisms. High SES influences the quantity and quality of schools and informal learning and recreational institutions that provide enriching contexts for youth. In turn, access to these quality institutions may promote adolescents' motivation and ability to graduate from high school and pursue post-secondary educational opportunities (Jencks and Mayer, 1990; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000). High neighborhood SES also may increase adolescents' exposure to successful adult role models in their communities. Adult community members' educational and professional experiences may shape adolescents' academic aspirations and motivations, and their resource-laden social networks may also increase the chances of teenagers experiencing formative out-of-school educational experiences such as internships and summer camps (Ginther et al., 2000). Furthermore, higher neighborhood SES may be linked to greater high school completion because adolescents in these contexts may have a lower probability of being exposed to negative influences that are often associated with impoverished communities such as delinquency, violence, or drug and alcohol use (Harding, 2003; Sampson et al., 2008).

Alternatively, person-environment fit models argue that neighborhood advantages benefit more advantaged youth only, thus exacerbating the disadvantages experienced by some at-risk youth living in the same communities (Kupersmidt et al., 1995). Sociological theories of competition and relative deprivation argue that neighborhood improvements may lead to negative educational outcomes for some youth due to increased competition for community resources and lowered self-valuation by youth in more advantaged contexts (Jencks and Mayer, 1990). In other words, disadvantaged youth will become even more disadvantaged as the neighborhood around them experiences an elevation in status overall. Person-environment fit models are essentially investigations of differences in the association between neighborhood SES and educational attainment based on the characteristics of the adolescents being studied, and one of the most salient characteristics that moderates neighborhood associations is race. Stemming from decades of residential segregation and social isolation in American cities, differences in neighborhood economic conditions are strongly defined along racial lines (Massey and Denton, 1993). To this end, multiple studies find that black adolescents are more susceptible to the harmful influence of neighborhood disadvantage, whereas whites are often more likely to benefit from high neighborhood SES (Crane, 1991; Crowder and South, 2003; Dornbusch et al., 1991; Vartanian and Gleason, 1999).

1.2. Neighborhood change and educational attainment

It is important to note that the theoretical framework and empirical evidence presented thus far focuses on *static* notions of neighborhood economic conditions. Shifting the analysis to time-varying measures of neighborhood context allows for an

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