



# Children's reasoning about poverty, physical deterioration, danger, and retribution in neighborhood contexts<sup>☆</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined children's moral, social and personal reasoning patterns about different neighborhood contexts. Three hundred and seventy-seven participants were selected from grades 2, 4, 6, and 8. Participants were shown 2 sets of photographs depicting the *exact same houses and neighborhoods*. One photograph displayed higher levels of physical incivilities and the other displayed higher levels of territoriality and place attachments. The vast majority of participants made strong social attributions of both danger and poverty towards physical contexts, depending on the level of incivilities depicted in the photographs. Moreover, an overwhelming majority gave justifications that fell into the moral domain. For most of the participants, the immorality of retribution overrode the negative attributions surrounding context. However, for those that approved of retribution behaviors, the physical setting appeared to influence their judgments. The findings suggest that the concept of extreme poverty (as represented by physical incivilities) and danger are fused at the cognitive level through linked interpretations of the same environmental cues.

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## 1. Introduction

Violence occurs in all segments of American society and in all socio-economic contexts. However, from an epidemiological perspective, the strong associations between high rates of inner-city poverty and high rates of childhood aggression are perhaps one of the most consistent findings in social science research (American Psychological Association, 1993; Case, 2004; Farrington & Loeber, 2000; Gauthier, 2003; Jackson, 2003; Leadbeater, Hoglund, & Woods, 2003; Raver & Spagnola, 2003; Serbin & Karp, 2004). For the past 30 years, architects, criminologists, and urban planners have gathered empirical evidence suggesting that the most *physically deteriorated urban neighborhoods* also tend to be both our society's poorest and most dangerous settings (e.g., Caughy, O'Campo, & Muntaner, 2003; Newman, 1973; Perkins, Meeks, & Taylor, 1992; Skogan, 1976; Taylor, 1997, 1999). Given this, it is reasonable to suggest that neighborhoods with high levels of physical incivilities serve as implicit markers for both poverty and danger. As such, examining how children and youth raised in these deteriorated neighborhoods make sense of their

environments could be an important first step in elucidating the role that the physical context plays in their reasoning about poverty and violence. Nevertheless, children and youth's understandings of the relationship between the physical deterioration of neighborhoods, poverty, and perceived community danger have rarely been examined in empirical studies (for an exception that includes youths' views of poor neighborhoods see Weinger, 1998).

We suspect that this gap stems from the current definitions of childhood poverty, which are often narrowly operationalized in many studies as "family income." In this study we contend that *one important aspect* of children and youth's conceptions of "urban poverty" is associated with the physical decay of neighborhoods. By conceptualizing poverty in this manner, we are better able to explore the ways children and youth identify and think about the physical decay of neighborhoods. For example, when describing severe urban and inner-city poverty the mass media commonly displays extreme images of abandoned houses, uncollected trash, graffiti, crack or methadone houses, empty lots filled with abandoned cars, dilapidated storefronts, and forsaken public housing units. How children and youth perceive and attribute meaning to these types of images may influence their views on other social transactions that occur in those same neighborhoods. In neighborhoods with extremely high levels of physical incivilities, we believe it is likely that children and youth make attributions about potential danger, the quality of schools, and the nature of relationships between members of those communities.

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Nevertheless, rather than assess how they conceptualize and reason about poverty, most studies exploring the effects of childhood poverty on children and youth use family income as the primary independent variable (see Eron, Gentry, & Schlegel, 1994; Farrington & Loeber, 2000; Gauthier, 2003; Guerra, Huesmann, Tolan, Van Acker, & Eron, 1995; Metropolitan Life Insurance Company & Harris Poll (1993–1994); Molitor, 1996; Serbin & Karp, 2004). In this study we are interested in exploring how children and youth raised in environments with high levels of physical incivilities think about neighborhood decay as a form of poverty, and especially in how these variables relate to their sense of safety and potential danger.

Children and youths' belief that specific contexts are potentially dangerous could influence their willingness to act in a preemptive capacity (i.e., as self defense) or perceive provocation/danger with minimal or no behavioral cues (e.g., Astor, Meyer, & Behre, 1999). Social information processing researchers have used the term "hostile attribution" to refer to a bias that aggressive children and youth display when evaluating violent acts (e.g., Crick, Grotpeter, & Bigbee, 2002; Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1990). We contend that this "bias" may not be directed at behaviors alone. For some children and youth, a neighborhood with a high level of physical incivilities may represent a context fraught with hostile attributions. Thus, aggressive children and youth may have a different theory of "place" that contributes to their perceptions of provocation, and in turn, allow for more retribution. This pattern may be stronger in areas that have high levels of incivilities (including unmonitored/unsupervised areas within school buildings). If some groups of children interpret these contexts as potentially provocative and dangerous, they may be more likely to approve of retribution in response to slight transgressions in those contexts. In this study, we hypothesize that deteriorated physical environments will have an additive effect on children's attributions of harm. Thus, it is expected that aggressive children will be more approving of violence that occurs in settings that have high levels of physical incivilities and less approving in settings that have a higher level of territoriality and place attachment.

### *1.1. Theoretical background: Harm informational assumptions, moral reasoning, and physical contexts*

There is currently a large body of social-cognitive domain research that supports the proposition that children and youth reason about socially complex issues using three domains of reasoning: moral, social conventional, and personal (Astor, 1994, 1998; Astor & Behre, 1997; Behre, 1998; Pitner, Astor, Benbenishty, Haj-Yahia, & Zeira, 2003a, 2003b; Smetana, 1985; Tisak & Turiel, 1988; Turiel, 1983, 1994, 1998; Wainryb, 1991). Moral reasoning pertains to judgments about harm, justice, and fairness; social conventional reasoning focuses on social norms, rules, laws and consensus; personal reasoning pertains to judgments about pragmatic or personal concerns. More recently, social-cognitive domain researchers have begun to take into account the role that the social and physical context plays in children and youths' evaluations of violence (e.g., Astor & Meyer, 2001; Astor et al., 1999; Behre, Astor, & Meyer, 2001; Meyer, Astor, & Behre, 2002; Meyer, 2000; Pitner et al., 2003a, 2003b).

The concepts of poverty, neighborhood physical incivilities, and violence also carry potential moral, social/organizational, and personal meanings. Children and youth may make moral, social conventional, or personal attributions about neighborhood incivilities that influence how they judge violent behaviors that occur in those settings. Although there appears to be an implicit association between poverty, potential danger, and environments with high levels of physical incivilities, there is no empirical

evidence that these associations exist in children and youths' thinking patterns. Thus, it is not empirically clear if children and youth being raised in such environments ascribe moral, social, or personal meanings to physically deteriorated urban environments.

Research in urban planning, architecture, social psychology, environmental psychology, criminology and public health has maintained that the physical environment can profoundly affect adults and children's physical and mental health (e.g., Brantingham & Brantingham, 1981; Eck & Weisburd, 1995; Gifford & Lacombe, 2006; Perkins, Florin, Rich, Wandersman, & Chavis, 1990; Perkins et al., 1992; Skogan, 1976; Taylor, 1997; White, 1990). This literature, however, has not examined whether these environments influence an individual's thinking patterns about harm. Ample evidence suggests that environments with high levels of incivilities lack place attachments and social control, and tend to be violence prone (Astor et al., 1999; Astor, Benbenishty, & Meyer, 2004; Bechtel & Churchman, 2002; Brown, Perkins, & Brown, 2003; Colquhoun, 2004; Day, 1994; Goldstein, 1994; Greenberg, Rohe, & Williams, 1982; Newman & Franck, 1980; Perkins et al., 1992; Proshansky, Ittelson, & Rivlin, 1970; Taylor, 2002). The urban planning literature characterizes these areas as locations that promote avoidance and fear because the physical cues nested in the deterioration are also interpreted as potentially dangerous and lack communal care (e.g., Brown, Perkins, & Brown, 2004; Felonneau, 2004; Harris & Brown, 1996; Perkins et al., 1992; Perkins, Wandersman, Rich, & Taylor, 1993; Robin, Matheau-Police, & Couty, 2007). Would these physical cues affect children's moral, social conventional, and personal reasoning about potential harm? We predict that children and youth will have assumptions about the potential immorality that surrounds locations with high levels of physical incivilities. These assumptions, we contend, will involve the belief that unprovoked acts of psychological and physical harm are more likely to occur in those environments. Thus, we hypothesize that children will make more hostile attributions about physically deteriorated areas, and will be more likely to believe that violence occurs in those areas.

This inquiry examines several related hypotheses. (1) Respondents will associate neighborhood physical incivilities with poverty, and will make more harm attributions about these contexts. (2) Respondents will focus on neighborhood care and monitoring when describing safe neighborhoods. (3) Respondents' use of moral, social conventional, and personal justifications will be contingent upon whether or not they are making judgments about settings that have high levels of physical incivilities. (4) Respondents will be influenced by the setting in which violence occurs, and thus, will be more approving of violence in the physically deteriorated setting. We predict that this would be particularly true for aggressive respondents. (5) The majority of respondents will feel that violent retribution would be worse if it occurred in a neighborhood that has high levels of physical incivilities.

Would different groups of children and youth (male/female, aggressive/non-aggressive, children at different ages) perceive physical incivilities, poverty, and danger in different ways? Practice and research literatures are inconclusive about the ways these different groups may have selective ways of responding to these cues. Hence, this study sought to examine these issues.

## **2. Methods**

### *2.1. Participants*

The students that participated in this study were selected from five elementary schools ( $N = 222$ ) and two middle schools ( $N = 155$ ) located in two urban cities within a large Midwest,

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