

BUSINESS

Neighborhoods Can Shape Success—Down to the Level of a City Block

A small but intriguing study done in West Philadelphia points to the importance of what researchers call microenvironments.

ALEXIA FERNÁNDEZ CAMPBELL MAY 23, 2016



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Social scientists and economists have been fascinated by the idea that a city—even a neighborhood—can shape someone’s economic success in life. Until last year, research linking neighborhood conditions to economic mobility was hardly conclusive. Then, a group of Harvard economists made a compelling case that poor children who grow up in more affluent neighborhoods (with better schools, less crime, and larger public budgets) end up earning more money later on than if they had stayed in a poor neighborhood.

A group of researchers from The University of Pennsylvania is now taking that idea a step further, showing that a similar pattern might even apply on the level of the city block. They studied West Philadelphia, which is largely made up of poor, African American families and where poverty is passed on from one generation to

the next. Yet even within West Philadelphia, poverty, crime and education levels vary from block to block. These areas are what researchers are calling “micro-environments.”

“We knew there was a lot of literature on how neighborhood conditions affect a child’s academic performance,” says Laura Tach, the report’s main author and a former sociology fellow at the University of Pennsylvania, who now teaches at Cornell University. “We thought maybe the same type of issues might play out for adults who are pursuing an education.”

The new study, published in the journal *Housing Policy Debate*, analyzes the outcomes of a program called ACHIEVEability, which requires low-income families in West Philadelphia to enroll in college in exchange for subsidized housing. Unlike other subsidized-housing programs, which merely require a participant to work, the hope is that a college degree or vocational certificate will break the cycle of poverty. Researchers followed 84 participants living in 30 different neighborhood-block clusters in West Philadelphia, each area with varying levels of crime, poverty, and educational attainment. (Participants in the program did not choose where to live—they had to take the first unit that opened up on the waiting list.)

To measure each participant’s success in the program, Tach and her colleagues counted how many educational credits they earned during the school year. They found that those who lived on blocks with higher poverty and violent crime, and lower education levels, were more likely to drop out of college or take longer to accumulate college credits. For example, those who lived in city-block clusters where 15 percent of residents lived in poverty earned an average of 27 college credits after two years; those who lived in clusters where 45 percent of people lived in poverty only earned an average of 18 credits.

The researchers also wanted to see if adults with more educated neighbors would do better in school. It turns out that they did, slightly. After two years in the program, participants in city-block clusters where 5 percent of residents had bachelor’s degrees earned about five fewer college credits than participants in clusters where 12 percent of residents had degrees.

There were, however, two factors that appeared to have no impact on a participant’s success: the incidence of property crimes and the amount of vacant

housing in the surrounding blocks. The study also has several limitations, such as its relatively small sample size, and the fact that most participants were working adults and single mothers, who might have been more highly motivated to go to school than a sample of subsidized-housing enrollees selected at random.

But it does show a link between a person's immediate neighborhood and their success in completing college courses. Does this mean poor families have a better chance of advancing if they are surrounded by people who are better off? Those Harvard economists' research suggests this, as they found that merely moving a child to a better neighborhood was enough to improve their later success in life. Raj Chetty, one of that study's authors (and now a professor at Stanford), showed that children who moved before they were teenagers earned 31 percent more than those who stayed in poor neighborhoods. The older a person was when he or she moved, the smaller these benefits tended to be (and in some cases, the move had a negative effect for teenagers).

But the University of Pennsylvania researchers interpret their study differently. Sure, it would help to move subsidized housing units to wealthier, safer neighborhoods. But that's not practical, and would only make bad neighborhoods worse, says Therese Richmond, a professor of nursing and one of the report's authors. She says a better policy solution would be to focus on improving what she and her colleagues call microneighborhoods.

"There is a potential that we can change people's lives block, by block, by block," says Richmond. "The microneighborhood liberates people to say, 'Hey, we can do something within a small space,' so it empowers people who live within these environments."

The photo caption in this article originally misstated the location where the photo was taken. It's an image of central Philadelphia. We regret the error.

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