

## Youth perceptions of neighborhood hassles and resources: A mixed method analysis

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### ABSTRACT

Empirical investigations exploring the processes and mechanisms of neighborhood influences on child and youth development are needed to contribute to the growing body of research on neighborhood as a context for development. Using a mixed method design, this study examined the relationship between structurally identified resources in three urban public housing neighborhoods, youth perceptions and experiences of resources, and youth report of neighborhood hassles and cohesion. Survey data from 153 ethnically and culturally diverse youth between 6th and 8th grade were analyzed using regression analyses; constant comparative analysis was used to code interviews from a subsample of 22 youth. Results indicated an inverse relationship between the number of neighborhood resources and the level of daily hassles youth report. Analysis of mixed method results further highlights the importance of young people's perceptions of neighborhood influences.

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### 1. Introduction

Ecological theory and research indicate that neighborhood and community transactions play a role in child and youth development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Sampson, 2001). A growing interest in contextual factors in adaptation has recently drawn attention to neighborhood level influences (Cauce, Stewart, Rodriguez, Cochran, & Ginzler, 2003; Wyman, 2003). Specifically, studies point to structural characteristics such as poverty, mobility, and differences in social organization impacting levels of risk for children and youth (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Aber, 1997; Gorman-Smith, Tolan, & Henry, 1999). Youth living in impoverished and unstable neighborhoods are often exposed to a number of related risk factors such as high levels of violence exposure and illegal activity.

With an interest in the adaptive characteristics of neighborhoods, other studies examine the availability of resources and positive opportunities such as education and employment as protective factors for children and youth (Brook, Kessler, & Cohen, 1999; Luthar & Cushing, 1999). Access to resources for basic physical and social needs within one's own community is tied to a range of positive outcomes such as motivation to succeed in school and resisting negative peer influences (Hawkins et al., 2007). Further, collective efficacy, or the idea that extra familial social support and a sense of connection impact child development, is a characteristic of "effective neighborhoods" (Fraser, Kirby, & Smokowski, 2004, p. 44). High levels of collective efficacy may minimize the negative effects of risk exposure for some young people.

Examinations of the neighborhood as a context for development have met formidable challenges. In particular, the specific processes and mechanisms of neighborhood influences are poorly understood (Korbin, 2001). Preliminary studies suggest that understanding how youth perceive and experience neighborhood is fundamental to understanding neighborhood as an influential context (Nicotera, 2007, 2008). However, precisely how youth experience neighborhood influences, and individual variation in perceptions and experience, is understudied. Examination of the complex relationship between structural neighborhood variables,

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subjective experiences of those variables, and developmental outcomes is subsequently hindered by this lack of information. The current study seeks to untangle this complexity by exploring the mechanisms by which neighborhood resources influence youth experiences. Specifically, the study examined the relationship between neighborhood resources, youth perceptions and experience of resources, and youth report of neighborhood hassles and cohesion.

### *1.1. Neighborhood influences on child and youth development*

Of the multiple ecological systems impacting children and youth, the neighborhood context is the least studied and the most poorly understood. Yet, neighborhoods represent an immediate social context for young people. Garbarino, Galambos, Plantz, and Kostelny (1992) note that the neighborhood is an “early and major arena for exploration and social interaction in that it serves as setting for the physical and emotional development of the child” (p. 202). While child and youth adaptation is impacted by broad environmental and social influences such as social norms and laws, neighborhood represents the spatial context of interaction, with various meanings for different young people. One young person might define neighborhood as the block where she/he lives, whereas another might consider the neighborhood to be everyone who goes to the same school. In fact, Burton and Price-Spratlen (1999) point out that children have their own definitions of neighborhood boundaries and meanings related to living and playing within them that do not necessarily match demographic definitions of neighborhoods such as census tracts or block groups.

Research on the effects of neighborhood on child and youth adaptation generally assesses structural characteristics and resources at the neighborhood level. Structural characteristics such as poverty, mobility, and social disorganization interact with family and individual effects in relationship to risk (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1997). For example, Coulton, Korbin, Su, and Chow (1995) found that the following four structural characteristics explained considerable neighborhood variation in rates of child maltreatment reports: 1) impoverishment, 2) child-care burden, 3) residential instability, and 4) proximity to concentrated poverty. Neighborhoods characterized by poverty are associated with a number of negative outcomes for infants, children, and youth including low birth weight (Coulton & Pandey, 1992), externalizing problem behaviors (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994), school dropout (Clark, 1992), and teenage pregnancy, drug arrests, juvenile delinquency, and violent crime (Coulton et al., 1995). Similarly, Shaw and McKay (1942) found that disorganized neighborhoods contribute to risk for children by limiting the opportunities for children to learn skills which enable social, educational, and economic success. Neighborhoods characterized by social disorganization lack important social structures to support children and families in reaching goals and reflect the impact of pervasive poverty and instability.

In contrast, neighborhood resources, both physical resources such as availability of libraries and health care facilities, and socioemotional resources such as social support, contribute to healthy child development. Whereas socially unorganized neighborhoods stifle opportunities, neighborhoods characterized by collective efficacy mobilize social processes to promote opportunities (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Opportunities for young people to engage in positive behavior and supportive and collaborative relationships protect youth from other negative influences (Fraser et al., 2004).

Research on neighborhood influences explores the relationship between certain structural risk characteristics such as poverty and protective factors such as collective efficacy and specific outcomes for children and youth. However, studies also suggest that neighborhood influences on developmental outcomes are more complex and diverse than can be accounted for by structural variables alone (Burton, 1991, 1997; Figueira-McDonough, 1998). Therefore, uncovering the relationship between structural neighborhood variables and residents' lived experiences within a neighborhood is an important step in fully comprehending how neighborhood context influences developmental outcomes. Seidman et al. (1998) point out that “there has been surprisingly little work examining how objective, structural aspects of neighborhoods relate to youths' perceptions or experience of neighborhoods” (p. 260).

### *1.2. The mechanisms of neighborhood influences*

Youth may experience structural characteristics and neighborhood resources in a myriad of ways that existing studies of neighborhood influences do not capture. For example, poverty and lack of opportunity may be operationalized through a set of transactions throughout the day that accumulate into a substantial risk. From this perspective, research on the effect of daily hassles in the lives of children and youth, particularly urban youth, suggests that microsystem-specific transactions in a young person's life impact psychological adjustment (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Rowlison & Felner, 1988). Daily hassles, the “irritating, frustrating, distressing demands that to some degree characterize everyday transactions with the environment,” are pervasive and complicated for children and youth living in urban poverty (Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, & Lazarus, 1981, p. 31).

Moreover, a number of studies suggest that neighborhood resources are not always perceived as theorized. In ethnographic interviews, Korbin (2001) found that objective and subjective perspectives on neighborhood resources are not always consistent. For example, objective criteria suggest that a liquor store in the neighborhood is a risk or deficit whereas subjective accounts from participants indicate that a liquor store selling necessities (e.g., toilet paper, juice, and soda) is a strength. Similarly, Spencer (2001) explains how contextual characteristics negotiate subjective experiences of the neighborhood. For example, police presence in the neighborhood may be perceived as a hassle for boys but possibly a resource for girls. Further, differential perceptions of neighborhood by parents may influence children's perceptions and, in turn, developmental outcomes (Spencer, Swanson, & Glymph, 1996).

Accounts of resilient development in youth living in poverty suggest that individual perceptions of neighborhood play an important role in directing individual behavior (Spencer, 2001). Such findings point to the need to understand both the objective characteristics of the neighborhood and the subjective perceptions and experiences of youth living in the neighborhood.

### 1.3. The current study

The mixed method design of the current study enables examination of the complexity of neighborhood influences on young people's experience. While the literature is unclear about the direction of associations, it is possible to build on prior research that demonstrates variability in youth experiences of neighborhood influences (Figueira-McDonough, 1998; Korbin, 2001) and a relationship between perceptions and behavior (Spencer, 2001). Hence, we hypothesize that structural neighborhood resources influence youth experiences and perceptions which in turn influence a young person's subjective appraisal of hassles and/or cohesion. Specifically, resources available to a young person in the neighborhood were expected to be inversely associated with hassles and positively associated with cohesion. In addition to resources, extra familial support and the young person's sense of fit with neighbors and the neighborhood were expected to be positively associated with cohesion and inversely associated with hassles. These hypotheses were explored through examining the relationships between 3 quantitative variables (structural neighborhood resources, youth reports of daily hassles, and neighborhood cohesion) and qualitative accounts of youth perceptions of neighborhood supports and challenges. Prior studies suggest gender and age differences in reports of hassles (higher levels for girls and older youth) but not for cohesion (Anthony, 2008; Seidman et al., 1998); these hypotheses were explored in our quantitative analysis. Finally, while we recognize that broad social and political structures influence these neighborhood conditions, this study is limited to investigating influences that are proximal to youth's daily experiences.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

All study participants were residents in 1 of 3 urban, public housing neighborhoods in a western city. Study participants ( $N=153$ ) were racially and ethnically diverse; 54% ( $n=82$ ) were Latina/o, 16% ( $n=24$ ) were African American, 19% ( $n=31$ ) were of mixed ethnicity, and 11% ( $n=16$ ) were Asian American. The sample was balanced with respect to gender; 51% ( $n=78$ ) were female and 49% ( $n=75$ ) were male. Youth averaged 11.9 years of age ( $SD=1.3$ ). A subsample of 22 young people participated in the qualitative data collection. This subsample included a nearly equal number of boys and girls (males=10; females=12) ranging in ages from 10 to 13 with 11 as the modal age. The subsample mirrored the ethnicities of the larger sample with Latinas/os, Asian Americans, African Americans, and mixed ethnicities where Latinas/os were the modal group (63%).

### 2.2. Procedures and measures

#### 2.2.1. Recruitment procedure

Criteria for participation included being in 6th, 7th, or 8th grade (or equivalent age) and living within the defined public housing boundaries of 1 of the 3 neighborhoods. One hundred sixty-six youth met the sampling criteria during September to November 2005 based on housing lists, although it became apparent during the data collection that the housing lists were not updated. Therefore, youth were permitted to participate if they met the criteria even if their name was not on the housing list. Extensive efforts were made to interview all eligible participants. Flyers describing the study were distributed throughout the neighborhoods and parents and youth participants were contacted in person by members of the research team. Parental consent was obtained during the recruitment process and youth assent was obtained prior to the interview. Interview questions from the surveys were read aloud and recorded by members of the research team during the individual interview to ensure comprehension due to language barriers and below grade level reading ability and to also minimize missing data. Youth were given the option to complete the survey in Spanish; all youth were English-speaking and bilingual students chose to complete the survey and interviews in English.

A subsample of 22 participants provided the qualitative data for this study through their responses to open-ended questions posed to assess their perceptions of their neighborhoods and neighbors. The subsample was recruited from the Girl's Group and Cub Scout meetings at the after-school program in each of the neighborhoods. Most scholars consider a sample size of 22 to be more than adequate in qualitative analysis. Hill et al., (1997) recommend between 8 and 15 cases for establishing "consistency in findings and providing examples to initially hypothesize about the limits of those findings" (as cited in Franklin & Ballan, 2001, p. 278).

#### 2.2.2. Participant data

We selected measures that were normed on ethnically diverse, urban populations given the ethnic and cultural diversity of the three neighborhoods. The Daily Hassles Microsystem Scale (DHMS) and Neighborhood Cohesion Scale (NCS) (Seidman et al., 1995), were specifically developed and validated as instruments suitable for poor, urban, and culturally diverse adolescents.

The DHMS consists of 28 items that focus on family, peer, school, and neighborhood hassles. Examples of daily hassles items include, "Not having your own room" and "Being approached by a drug dealer in your neighborhood." Responses to DHMS items range from (1) Hasn't happened this month to (5) A very big hassle. The DHMS total scale demonstrated good reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88. The mean score on the DHMS ( $N=153$ ) was 73.85 ( $SD=17.80$ ).

Neighborhood cohesion items specifically focus on the youth's perception of neighborhood dynamics. Participants select a response ranging from (1) Very true to (4) Not true at all to statements such as "If I had the chance, I would like to move out of my neighborhood" and "The relationships I have with my neighbors mean a lot to me." The Cronbach's alpha for the NCS was 0.80. The

Neighborhood Cohesion Scale consists of 11 items; the mean score ( $N=153$ ) was 33.33 ( $SD=5.98$ ). Youth were asked as part of the NCS to describe the area they are thinking of when they think of neighborhood. The majority of youth (84%) selected descriptions of neighborhood that more closely resemble a proximal area such as a census block group rather than tract group (i.e., “several apartments or houses around yours” versus “everybody who goes to my school or the shopping center I go to”). Additionally, conversations with a subset of youth during the qualitative data collection confirmed that they understood the concepts of neighbor and neighborhood to be proximal to their residence.

The qualitative data were derived from participants' written work in response to pre-designed, open-ended questions about their neighborhoods and neighbors, and were collected in the winter and spring of 2005. Participants wrote descriptions of their neighborhoods and neighboring experiences during four time segments of 30–45 min that took place over three to four weeks. Each 30–45 min segment was divided into 10–15 min periods such that participants: 1) spent some time in large group conversations that elicited their understanding of the concepts of neighbor and neighborhood, 2) had opportunities to create colorful drawings of their neighborhoods in reality as well as how they imagined they would like them to be, and 3) completed written responses to the questions noted below. In order to account for difficulties with writing, all participants were offered the opportunity to dictate their ideas in response to each question. In addition, these structured activities were interspersed with game activities to account for the energy levels of the young people.

To simplify the data collection of written responses, each respondent was provided with a brief worksheet for each question. The worksheets presented each question divided into its logical parts followed by blank lines on which he or she could write a response. Responses varied in length from 6 to 10 sentences. The questions posed in the worksheets are: “A place I like in my neighborhood is... I like that place because”; “A place I do not like in my neighborhood is... I do not like that place because”; “A neighbor I like is... I like that neighbor because... Some of the things this neighbor does are...” In addition to these questions, participants were asked to write “letters” in which they could: 1) describe something they would change about their neighborhood and 2) tell a neighbor they like some of the ways they have been helped by them and some of the things they have learned from them. While the atmosphere of the club meetings was not at all similar to a school classroom setting, care was taken to inform the young people that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions.

### 2.2.3. Neighborhood data

The availability of resources in each neighborhood was assessed by the Neighborhood Resources Measure (Nicotera & Anthony, 2006). The idea for this measure is based on the work of Sheidow, Gorman-Smith, Tolan and Henry (2001). We utilized a systematic recording process to survey each of the three neighborhoods. Using U.S. Census information to map the tract and block groups, the survey involved first driving along the outer street boundaries and then the streets within those boundaries while recording each resource (i.e., elementary school, bank, etc.) by name and location, first for the tract and then for the block group of each neighborhood. This process was followed for the 3 census tracts and 3 block groups of the 3 neighborhoods. Despite the fact that census block groups are subsumed in census tracts, driving each as a separate entity allowed for clearer delineation between the number and type of resources in each tract and block group as separate entities. This also provided a check on the consistency of resources found between this overlapping area of each of the 3 tracts and block groups. The general U.S. Census data for these 3 neighborhoods indicates significant levels of unemployment (range from 44% to 56%) and poverty (range from 34% to 51%). The three neighborhoods were somewhat small in comparison to larger city areas based on the number of households. It is also important to note that the public housing units in the neighborhoods consisted of individual, single level apartments rather than a large high-rise complex.

Resources were initially listed without category by name and were later re-coded by resource type such as bank, ethnic market, check cashing service, fast food, etc. Due to the number of different resources, items were collapsed into the following categories:

- (1) Resident support resources (e.g., social service agency, bank, church/temple, medical/dental facility, school, park, recreation facility)
- (2) Resident spending resources (e.g., gas station, auto sales/parts/repair, fast food, liquor store, corner store, restaurant, check cashing, beauty supply/parlor, cell phone store)
- (3) Non-resident resources (e.g., distribution/industry, junk yard, home improvement stores, moving supplies/truck or machine rentals)
- (4) Legal/financial services (e.g., realtor, bail bonds, insurance/financial services, attorney)

Categories were established by combining resources with similar characteristics. When a resource did not fit into an existing category, a new category emerged. With a focus on individuals and families living in public housing, the categories were determined based on utility to local residents. For example, resident support resources consist of services that local residents might utilize for health, social, financial, academic, recreational, or spiritual needs. Similarly, resident spending resources include services or goods that are available to local residents to support daily life activities. In contrast, non-resident resources consist of services located in the neighborhood that either are not likely to be used by local residents or are not for the betterment of the community as a whole. For example, a grocery store distribution center is located in one of the neighborhoods and while it may serve as a place of employment for some residents, there is no major grocery store located in the same neighborhood. Therefore, residents live with the industrial blight of the distribution center, but have to travel outside of the community to get to the stores for consumer use. This is especially difficult for single parents with young children who may have to take one or two buses to reach a grocery store. Additionally, since the families of the young people in this study reside in rental properties with strict housing authority rules they are not likely to access the home improvement stores even though they are located nearby. Lastly, legal/financial services consist of

**Table 1**  
Resources by neighborhood tract and block group

| Resource category        | M    | (SD)   |
|--------------------------|------|--------|
| <i>Resident support</i>  |      |        |
| Tract                    | 24.0 | (8.8)  |
| Block                    | 5.3  | (3.2)  |
| <i>Resident spending</i> |      |        |
| Tract                    | 53.0 | (39.3) |
| Block                    | 9.3  | (7.0)  |
| <i>Non-resident</i>      |      |        |
| Tract                    | 15.0 | (11.1) |
| Block                    | 8.3  | (6.6)  |
| <i>Legal/financial</i>   |      |        |
| Tract                    | 7.0  | (5.0)  |
| Block                    | 0.3  | (0.5)  |

a variety of services located in the community for residents' financial or legal needs. Resources in each category were summed for the tract and block groups for each neighborhood. The mean and standard deviation for each of the resource categories by tract and block group is provided in Table 1.

### 2.3. Analytic approach

Several analytic techniques were employed to address the study hypotheses. Regression analyses examined the relationship between neighborhood resources as they are grouped and youth report of neighborhood cohesion and hassles. The use of raw numbers rather than rates and the analysis of block group rather than tract group reflect the study's focus on young people's proximal experience in the neighborhood. Additionally, whereas older adolescents may have more mobility beyond the block groups, younger youth are more likely to stay within the immediate neighborhood.

The legal/financial resources category was dropped from the analysis given the lack of such resources in two of the three neighborhood block groups. Further, resident spending and non-resident resources were highly correlated ( $r=.94$ ), suggesting these two resources may in fact represent one resource category statistically, even if they represent different qualities for neighborhood residents. Due to this concern about multicollinearity, each resource was entered separately into the analysis. After examining each resource in the model separately, resident spending and non-resident resources were combined to form a category labeled spending resources. While resident spending and non-resident resources are quantitatively correlated, they have important qualitative differences, as we discuss.

All qualitative data were entered into Atlas-Ti 5.0 (Muhr, 2004) for the analysis. Analytic procedures followed the method of constant comparative analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) during which initial codes are developed from the local language (in-vivo codes) of the participants. The initial use of in-vivo codes is especially important in analysis of data produced by youth to avoid placing an adult lens on the young voices. For example, one of the participants noted a neighbor as a resource who teaches him how to "pump a BB gun" and others noted adult rule enforcers as a hassle. An adult lens would not necessarily consider these as a resource and hassle respectively. However, in order to honor the voices of the young participants in the subsample, these were included in their respective themes.

The second coding assessed the in-vivo codes for commonalities across the participants. At this stage of the analysis four general themes emerged: formal resources; informal resources; people resources; and hassles. Further analysis of the in-vivo codes and quotes for support of these initial themes resulted in maintenance of all 4 with the additional division of people

**Table 2**  
Regression of daily hassles on individual characteristics and neighborhood resources

|                     | Model 1         | Model 2     | Model 3      | Model 4         |
|---------------------|-----------------|-------------|--------------|-----------------|
|                     | B (SE)          | B (SE)      | B (SE)       | B (SE)          |
| Age                 | 0.85 (1.0)      | 0.52 (1.1)  | 0.59 (1.0)   | 0.96 (0.99)     |
| Gender (female=1)   | 6.73 (2.8)*     | 5.83 (2.8)* | 6.0 (2.8)*   | 7.0 (2.7)**     |
| Resident support    | -2.19 (0.49)*** |             |              | -2.53 (0.54)*** |
| Resident spending   |                 | 0.38 (0.28) |              |                 |
| Non-resident        |                 |             | -0.28 (0.29) |                 |
| Spending (combined) |                 |             |              | -0.24 (0.17)    |
| F                   | 9.55            | 2.26        | 1.99         | 8.04            |
| R <sup>2</sup>      | 0.13            | 0.04        | 0.03         | 0.15            |

Note. N = 153.

\* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

**Table 3**  
Regression of neighborhood cohesion on individual characteristics and neighborhood resources

|                                  | Model 1       | Model 2       | Model 3       | Model 4       |
|----------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
|                                  | <i>B</i> (SE) | <i>B</i> (SE) | <i>B</i> (SE) | <i>B</i> (SE) |
| Age                              | −0.61 (0.36)  | −0.64 (0.36)  | −0.64 (0.35)  | −0.60 (0.36)  |
| Gender (female = 1)              | 0.61 (0.94)   | 0.53 (0.96)   | 0.53 (0.96)   | 0.62 (0.94)   |
| Resident support                 | −0.20 (0.18)  |               |               | −0.22 (0.19)  |
| Resident spending                |               | 0.05 (0.10)   |               |               |
| Non-resident spending (combined) |               |               | −0.00 (0.11)  |               |
| <i>F</i>                         | 1.69          | 1.32          | 1.19          | 1.26          |
| <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>            | 0.03          | 0.02          | 0.02          | 0.03          |

Note. *N* = 153.

resources into 2 sub-themes, social–emotional resources and instrumental resources. A final round of analysis examined the codes and quotes in each theme for further commonalities across the 22 participants and all four themes remained. These themes are reported in the next section.

### 3. Results

Four models were analyzed for daily hassles and neighborhood cohesion, respectively, allowing examination of each neighborhood resource separately. All models were analyzed with the robust option in STATA 9.0 (StataCorp, 2005) that uses the Huber/White/sandwich estimator of the variance. Table 2 reports the regression results predicting daily hassles with each resource separately and then the final model (Model 4) with the combined category, spending.

Model 4 predicted 15% of the variance in youth report of hassles. As predicted, results indicated a gender effect; females were significantly more likely than males to report daily hassles in the final model ( $B = 7.0, p < 0.01$ ). Particularly given the developmental transition represented by the age of the young people in the study, higher levels of hassles for girls are consistent with prior findings (Seidman et al., 1995). Age (centered at age 10), however, was not significant in the model. While we expected to find higher levels of hassles in older youth, the results may be due to the limited age range in the sample. We might expect older youth to report more hassles due to their developmental period and perception of age-related hassles as compared to the younger youth who compose our sample.

As shown in Table 2, the number of resident support resources also had a significant effect on daily hassles. As predicted, higher levels of resident support resources were associated with lower levels of daily hassles ( $B = -2.53, p < 0.001$ ). Results for non-resident resources, resident spending resources, and the combined spending resource category were non-significant.

Table 3 presents the findings from the regression analyses predicting neighborhood cohesion. Contrary to our prediction, results for resident support resources, spending resources, and non-resident resources were non-significant. Results for age and gender were also non-significant in all models predicting neighborhood cohesion. Table 3 reports results for the final model which included the combined spending category. The qualitative findings assist in further exploration of the results from the regression analyses.

The qualitative analysis uncovered four themes: hassles, people resources, informal resources, and formal resources. The themes are summarized in Table 4 and presented here within the context of the quantitative findings in order to explicate the mixed methods component of the study results. The first theme, hassles, represents social and physical difficulties faced by the participants. Hassles, as measured through the qualitative data, arose from what the youth noted about the presence and absence of particular neighborhood

**Table 4**  
Qualitative results with representative quotes

| Theme  | Characterization   | Quotes  |
|--|--|---|
| Hassles (people and place)                           | Gangs, drunks, prostitutes, beggars, bullies, murders-shootings, mean housing manager, accidents, rule enforcers, graffiti-trash, bad smells, no bank, no mall, no sports center, small apartments | “I would change the murderings, gun shootings, prostitutes, gangs, and fighting.”<br>“My neighborhood is different now because [they] destroyed 10 houses and built a shopping mall next door to me.” |
| People resources (instrumental and social–emotional) | Teaching skills and/or providing service, providing humor and/or a sense of belonging  | “She gave us a plant, let me watch a movie at her house and took us to school.”<br>“They are cool. [We] listen to a lot of rap [and] have dance contests.”  |
| Informal resources                                   | Own yard, friend's home, field or natural area privacy, active fun, lots of kids, place for conversation, place to relax   | “My friend's house. She has 2 rooms that don't have anything but toys and we play in them.”<br>“My backyard. I could play games there, keep my privacy and it's not that noisy.”                      |
| Formal resources                                     | After-school program, Boys and Girls club, learning academics, social skills, technology, freedom, relax   | “We help with homework or read a book with you [at the neighborhood after school program].”<br>“I like the [at the neighborhood after school program] cause I can sit around.”                        |

qualities. This theme unpacks the hassles as measured in the survey, dividing them into hassles that result from people and those that, while also the result of human actions, exist as if outside human identities or actions. Hassles perpetrated by people range from concerns about shootings, prostitutes, and gangs to mean neighbors, mean housing managers and homeless people to local bullies and adults who act as rule enforcers in the neighborhood. Hassles that appear to occur outside of human actions include: trash and graffiti and lack of amenities such as banks, malls, public events, and playground equipment. The range of severity of the people hassles is exemplified in the following two quotes: “I would change the murderings, gun shootings, prostitutes, gangs, and fighting” and “You want to live in my neighborhood now because we have no chores to do... We would have a lot of fun with no one to boss us around.” The range of place hassles is indicated in the following quotes: “I do not like the park. People come and write cuss words on everything,” and “It’s [the neighborhood] different now because I built a sports center — basketball.”

The theme, people resources consists of neighbors that were described as resources in the participants’ lives. The resources associated with this theme can be viewed as instrumental and social–emotional. The instrumental people resources teach some kind of skill or provide some kind of service. For example, one young participant wrote the following about a neighbor, “She taught me how to cook, eggs, pasta, French bread pizza.” Another young person noted a neighbor who “tries to teach my mom English because she knows a little Spanish.” In contrast, the social–emotional people resources are described as part of the participants’ sense of belonging–friendship as well as those which provide humor in their daily lives. This is exemplified in the following quotes about peers “He’s really funny, tells jokes, makes me laugh” and “She’s fun to be around. I like her family, she likes me, I like to sleep over.” While these aspects of people resources are displayed as two separate entities, clearly they can be related in that the young person learning to cook under the tutelage of a neighbor may also acquire a sense of belonging from that same experience. On the whole, this theme provides insight into a type of neighborhood resource not assessed by the structural neighborhood resources measure utilized in the quantitative analysis. The structural neighborhood resources measure does not account for the kind of face-to-face and heart-to-heart resources depicted in the qualitative results, through which the youth develop a connection to neighbors. Additionally, the qualitative data that support this theme uncover more personal details than those assessed in the quantitative measure of cohesion.

The next theme, informal resources, consists of places such as parks, one’s own home or yard and fields or other natural areas. It also represents particular characteristics and opportunities that are made available through the informal resources such as privacy, access to peers for company, fun, conversation, and relaxation. For example, one participant made this statement about her backyard, “I don’t feel lonely there; I can talk to my neighbor; I play around there.” Another young person described a natural area in which he liked to play with his peers, “Big hill in our neighborhood. We roll balls down it and go down it on my body.”

The last theme, formal resources, represents formal, agency–run resources in the neighborhoods such as the Boys and Girls Club. Similar to informal resources, these formal resources are also noted for their characteristics and opportunities. However, the characteristics and opportunities found within them are different from those noted about informal resources. For example, the young people point out the many things they do when accessing formal resources such as attending groups, getting homework help, and playing on computers. While the actual number of formal neighborhood resources, as counted in the neighborhood resource measure, is limited, it is clear that these few resources provide important support for the young people. This is demonstrated in the following quotes: “At the [name of local neighborhood after school program] there is fun stuff to do, girls group, computer, tutor,” and “I like going to that place [Girls and Boys Club] you can do anything you want.” The last 2 themes, informal and formal resources, highlight the young people’s depiction of the numerous advantages and opportunities available to them in their neighborhoods and demonstrate the potential that these resources can play in combating other neighborhood risks or deficits. Additionally, while the formal resources exist as a component of the structural neighborhood resource measure, that measure cannot account for their particular influence on the youth as found in the qualitative results.

#### 4. Discussion

The current study explored the relationships between structural neighborhood resources, youth neighborhood experiences and perceptions, and their subjective appraisal of hassles and cohesion. The quantitative analysis demonstrated a clear relationship between structurally identified neighborhood resources and young people’s self-reported hassles. A greater number of supportive resources are associated with a reduction in the level of hassles youth experience in daily life. Resident support resources include resources catering to parents (i.e., social service agency or medical facility) and resources for youth (i.e., park and school). Based on these different types of resources we speculate that when parents are less hassled, young people are less hassled. This speculation is bolstered by several quotes from the qualitative results in which youth express concerns about hassles that impact a parent, such as the young person who desires “A nice manager who is not so hard on them if they’re poor and the rent is overdue.” The qualitative results also provide the nuances of hassles that cannot be detected from the survey questions and suggest that, in addition to an awareness of how their parents are hassled, these young participants are very much aware of the elements through which they personally feel hassled in their neighborhoods. In contrast, the young people’s description of the advantages and opportunities available to them via both informal and formal resources in their neighborhoods reflects a heightened awareness of the role neighborhood resources play in combating the hassles (or neighborhood risks or deficits) that youth astutely point out in the qualitative findings.

The association between structurally identified resources and young people’s level of neighborhood cohesion was non-significant. Several factors may contribute to this finding. Prior analysis with this sample suggests that neighborhood cohesion cannot easily be understood as a risk or protective factor (Anthony, 2008). In the prior study, attachment to the neighborhood (reporting a high level of neighborhood cohesion) appeared to be protective, except when other risk levels (i.e., individual, family,

and peer) are high. In these cases, high neighborhood risk exposure may lead to weak psychological connections to neighborhood and community for youth with few individual, interpersonal, and family resources. For youth who have a number of protective factors across levels of influence, neighborhood cohesion may be adaptive. Youth who are protected may think of the social support and other protective factors in their lives when responding to questions about their neighborhood. For other youth, however, responding positively to items such as “I feel like I fit in with the people in my neighborhood” and “The relationships I have with my neighbors mean a lot to me” may not be protective. This arises in the qualitative results when one participant notes that a helpful neighbor is someone who assists him in learning to “pump a BB gun.” In neighborhoods where youth are exposed to gang activity and other violent activity as well as drug dealing, it may very well be risky to have high levels of neighborhood cohesion in the absence of other resources.

The fact that the young people in our sample all reside in low-income, public housing neighborhoods combined with the non-significant results for cohesion is consistent with [Zeldin and Topitzes' \(2002\)](#) work. They found that urban adolescents (aged 13 to 18) from families with higher incomes reported a stronger sense of community. This suggests that neighborhood cohesion may serve a different function based on other protective factors and resources related to family and neighborhood socioeconomic status. In addition, preliminary studies suggest that neighborhood attachment, though frequently examined as a single construct, is multi-dimensional ([Woldoff, 2002](#)). Our qualitative results for the theme, “people resources,” certainly attest to the multidimensionality of neighborhood cohesion. Further studies to clarify the role of neighborhood cohesion in the context of other risk and protective factor patterns are needed.

Finally, we examine the quantitative and qualitative results to consider how young people's responses to open-ended queries about their neighborhood and neighbors as resources compare to survey measures of cohesion, hassles, and structurally identified neighborhood resources. The quantitative measure of neighborhood cohesion poses general questions to discover if respondents feel they fit in with those who live in their neighborhood, if relationships with neighbors mean a lot to them as well as perceptions about neighborhood quality (i.e., gotten worse in past 2 years; better place to live than other nearby neighborhoods; there are people who sell drugs in the neighborhood). The qualitative results indicate the presence of relationships and experiences that promote neighborhood cohesion. These also reflect the latent qualities of cohesion posed in the survey items. For example, one participant noted a neighbor who is “nice [because] she gives us things [and] her friend gives us a ride.” Two others suggest closer ties when one notes the following about a neighbor, “She gives us treats, snacks, a free cat, a collar. She lets us play with her dogs. Lets us play inside her house with her kittens. [She] comes to visit us [and] gives us money,” and the other points out a neighbor noting that “He give[s] me food and let[s] me use the phone.” Participants also described relationships through which they develop skills and garner a sense of belonging, which may also be related to neighborhood cohesion. For example one young person wrote, “[These are some of the things I have learned from you] Is sometimes being more mean [assertive] and to listen in school.” Another youth noted the following: “[These are some of the things I have learned from you] How to do things. How to help people with things. [These are some of the ways you have helped me] To take care of K. [a baby]. Helped me with things I can't do.” A sense of belonging is noted by the young people who wrote: “I can also talk to my neighbors that I like;” “He is my friend and hangs out with me;” “[A place I like in my neighborhood is] Playground because there are lots of kids that go there and [I] play with my friend, [I like that place because] They have lot of kids that play on there and I could play with my friend,” and “[She] takes me to the movies, she pays my sister money for babysitting.”

The extra familial social supports and indications of a sense of belonging depicted in the qualitative results along with our quantitative finding that physical resources are not significantly related to neighborhood cohesion, is perhaps an indication that these informal, extra familial resources are more integral to neighborhood cohesion and resulting collective efficacy than tangible neighborhood resources such as access to grocery stores or medical clinics. Future studies that examine the relationship between neighborhood extra familial resources and youth's sense of belonging in neighborhood, along with physical neighborhood resources would assist in untangling this web.

Another layer of the cohesion conundrum can be accessed by considering the neighborhood resources noted in the qualitative results, such as parks and playgrounds that would promote opportunities for cohesion. These resources need to be considered within the context of the reports of hassles related specifically to them and other neighborhood environments. Viewed from this perspective, neighborhood hassles, or neighborhood risk factors, can prohibit the development of cohesion that might ordinarily be accessed through resources such as parks. The qualitative examples that follow reflect the underlying qualities assessed through the quantitative survey items about hassles and how they can prohibit the development of cohesion in places where one would expect it to occur. These hassles are related to school, difficulties with friends, being left out, fears due to presence of unsavory characters in the neighborhood, and lack of spaces for play. For example, a street in the neighborhood where residents can access “resident spending resources” is described by one of the youth in this way, “I don't go their [sic] cause it's scary.” Another youth notes the “hill” as a fun place to roll down, but notes, “The hill gets hot. It's itchy – then when I get wet it itches really bad.” Still another young person stated that he didn't like school or the playground because “I fall everyday and I don't like to play basketball because everybody pushes me. I don't like school because everybody push[es] me.”

There are other more serious hassles that serve to prohibit cohesion such as gangs, shootings, and prostitutes in public spaces like parks and playgrounds. For example, one young person wished to “kick all the bullies out” so that “You won't have to bothered by people who trash your house and put bubble gum on your passenger seat.” Another youth points out why the park is more about hassle than cohesion when he refers to, “The bad people who are always drinking beer are there.” A third youth notes, “[I don't like] Gangs around my projects. Sometimes they get drunk and they make trouble and accidents. A drunk guy got hit in the head with a shovel. He slipped and broke his neck.” In essence, the hassles described in the qualitative results and quantified in the survey items mirror [Garbarino's \(1995\)](#) discussion of the term, social toxicity. He notes the elements of social toxicity to include, “violence,



poverty, economic pressures on parents and their children, disruption of relationships, nastiness, despair, depression, paranoia, alienation — all the things that demoralize families and communities” (pp. 4–5). While the young people in the qualitative subsample readily describe important relationships and environmental opportunities to develop neighborhood cohesion, it may be fair to say that these are outweighed by their experiences of hassles or social toxicities.

The results of this study warrant further exploration of the multidimensional nature of neighborhood cohesion in the context of neighborhood resources and hassles. As noted, our results suggest an association between structural neighborhood resources, a quantitative measure of youth hassles, and their subjective appraisal of neighborhood hassles. However, structural neighborhood resources did not significantly predict youth experiences and perceptions related to neighborhood cohesion as measured quantitatively. The qualitative results, as discussed, assist in unpacking this non-significant result. This variation sets the stage for future research as depicted in Fig. 1. This figure suggests that youth's subjective appraisal of neighborhood resources (qualitative themes: people resources, informal resources, and formal resources) influence their perceptions and experiences of neighborhood life which result in levels of neighborhood cohesion in a nested context. This nested context, as depicted in Fig. 1, proposes that parental access to structural neighborhood resources may reduce their hassles, which may in turn leave them with more energy to engage with neighborhood youth, thereby enhancing neighborhood cohesion among youth. This model proposes the adaptive characteristics of neighborhood influences that may mobilize a chain of positive responses to support both adults and youth residing in poverty-level neighborhoods. Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, and Sameroff (1999) similarly indicate the influence of a neighborhood's social and material resources on family management and, in turn, adolescent success. As Furstenberg et al. (1999) suggest, neighborhood influences do not simply cause family management practices that then impact adolescent behavior. Rather, neighborhood influences and family influences interact in complex ways. The model in Fig. 1 echoes this complexity with an emphasis on the importance of extra familial neighborhood supports and a focus on neighborhood cohesion.

#### 4.1. Limitations and future directions

Drawbacks of this study should be noted. First, participants for the subgroup contributing the qualitative data for the study were recruited from the Girl's Group and Cub Scout meetings at the after-school program in each of the neighborhoods. The bias toward young people who may participate regularly in the after-school program therefore exists in this purposive sample, where it does not exist in the larger sample of 153 youth who were recruited broadly from the neighborhood. Prior analyses, however, indicate that youth were distributed across cluster groups of risk and protective factors regardless of participation in the after-school program, minimizing concerns about differences between the two samples (Anthony, 2008).

The reliance on youth self-report for cohesion, daily hassles, and perceptions of neighbor and neighborhood, with the exception of the Neighborhood Resources Measure, pose a drawback to the study design. The limitations of youth self-report have been described (Vandell & Posner, 1999) however in this study, youth self-report was necessary for examining the transaction between youth perception and the structural characteristics of the neighborhood. Additionally, studies indicate that young people have a unique way of understanding the proximal neighborhood environment that often eludes objective structural descriptions of a neighborhood. As Prout (2000) points out, “...children are social actors, with a part to play in their own representation...” (p. xi). The unique perceptions and experiences of youth living in the three public housing neighborhoods were therefore best captured by the mixed method design and reliance on self-report.

In sum, the current study highlights the importance of young people's perceptions of neighborhood influences and the positive role of formal, informal, and people resources in navigating other neighborhood deficits. Our results reflect the complex and varied nature of daily hassles for youth living in urban poverty. While structural characteristics such as poverty and social disorganization

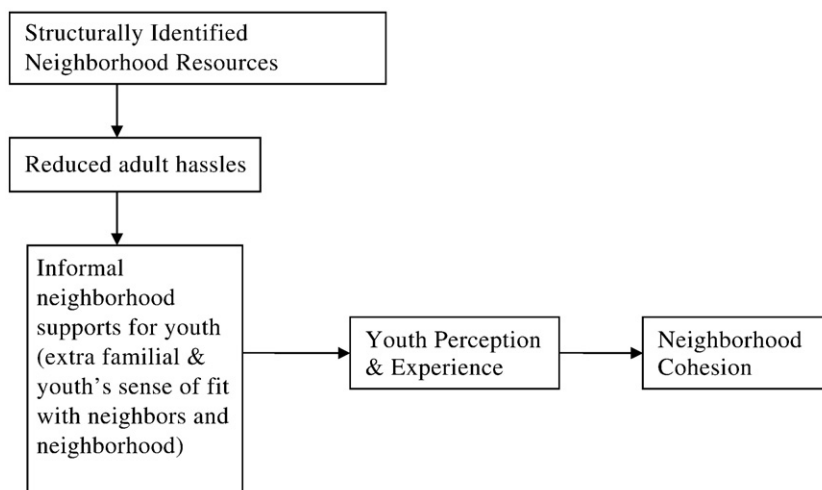


Fig. 1. Mechanisms of influence for future study.

impact risk levels for youth, our results suggest considerable variation in how individual youth perceive these influences. Future studies that examine neighborhood resources from an objective and subjective youth-oriented experience would be enhanced by considering the role of parental perceptions of the neighborhood context. Such studies could examine the nested relationship which suggests that youth of less hassled parents experience less hassles themselves as well as the nested relationships depicted in Fig. 1. Finally, the multidimensional construct of neighborhood cohesion warrants further study.

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