

Risk, Protection, and Resilience Among Youth Residing in Public Housing Neighborhoods

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Abstract Constructs of risk, protection, and resilience were examined from the perspectives of 20 ethnically diverse elementary and middle school children residing in urban public housing neighborhoods. Participants attended an after-school program at locations in each of the neighborhoods. Analyses generated five themes: (1) *challenges* (community-neighborhood, peer, school, family, and personal); (2) *coping* (behavioral, emotional, spiritual, and cognitive); (3) *health* (community-neighborhood, peer, school, family, and personal); (4) *connection* (relationships that provide companionship, esteem, information, and instrumental support); and (5) *aspirations*. Implications of the findings for preventing problem behavior and promoting healthy development among young people in public housing settings are identified.

Keywords Risk, protection, resilience · Positive youth development · Afterschool programs · Qualitative methods

Introduction

Adverse conditions including violence, drug use, low performing schools, and insufficient living conditions have characterized government subsidized housing

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projects in the US for decades. Numerous policies have been implemented to combat these conditions and to improve the quality of life for public housing residents. Most notable, the 1992 *Housing opportunities for people everywhere* (HOPE VI) initiative allocated \$5 billion to raze distressed neighborhoods and move some residents to privately-owned housing (Popkin et al. 2004). In addition, measures like the Public Housing Drug Elimination Program were enacted to reduce illicit drug use and criminal conduct (Popkin et al. 2004). Evaluations of these and other policies yielded mixed results. Unkempt public housing neighborhoods were demolished and replaced with improved living spaces and some success was achieved in moving public housing residents to communities with mixed income levels (Turner and Briggs 2008). However, concerns persist about the negative conditions and poor individual and social outcomes for individuals and families living in public housing neighborhoods (Popkin et al. 2004).

Approximately 360,000 of the 1.2 million public housing households in the US include children under the age of 18 (Ellen and Horn 2012). Young residents face significant individual, social, and economic challenges. Rates of neighborhood crime, drug abuse, and educational failure often exceed those found in other urban neighborhoods (Sampson and Raudenbush 1999; Valdez et al. 2007). Access to health care and quality schools is lacking (Elliott et al. 1996; Krieger and Higgins 2002). Consequently, youth in public housing communities are at elevated risk for involvement in problem behaviors like delinquency, drug abuse, or school dropout (Jenson et al. 2012; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2003; Valdez et al. 2007).

Fortunately, most children exposed to high levels of risk in public housing communities do not become involved in antisocial behavior. Indeed, many young residents display protective factors characterized by the ability to develop coping skills and acquire supports and resources that reduce their risk for problem behavior (Anthony & Nicotera 2008; Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2003). These youth are often viewed as *resilient* because they possess the ability to achieve positive milestones in the face of considerable risk (Masten 2001). A brief summary of risk, protection, and resilience as they apply to childhood and adolescence follows.

Risk, Protection, and Resilience

Risk and Protection

Risk and protective factors for problem behavior in young people are generally organized by domains of influence that reflect the social ecology in which children interact (Farrington 2001; Huizinga et al. 1991; Rutter 1985).

Neighborhood

Risk factors for problem behavior within the neighborhood domain include poverty, lack of economic opportunity, neighborhood disorganization, weak neighborhood attachment, norms favorable to antisocial behavior, availability of drugs, and presence of adult criminality (Herrenkohl et al. 2000). Conversely, protective

factors include opportunities for education, employment, and involvement in pro-social activities. Social support from caring nonfamily members, involvement in conventional activities such as church or religious services, and opportunities for achievement are additional protective elements (Herrenkohl et al. 2000; Keyes 2004).

School and Peers

Academic failure and lack of commitment to school are important risk factors for child and adolescent behavior problems (Maguin and Loeber 1996). Low school engagement, an indicator of a student's involvement in classroom and extracurricular activities, is associated with school dropout and other problem behaviors (Archambault et al. 2009). Children who experience academic problems early in life are at particular risk for later problems. For example, children who cannot read proficiently by the third grade are four times less likely to graduate from high school on time than other youth (Hernandez, 2011). Finally, having friends who participate in antisocial behavior is one of the strongest and most consistent risk factors for problem behavior (Fergusson and Horwood 2003; Reinherz et al. 2000). Other school-level risks include experiences of discrimination from peers and teachers and victimization by peers (Glew et al. 2005; Nansel et al. 2004; Rosenbloom and Way 2004). In contrast, school-level protective factors include commitment to learning, involvement with positive peers, and healthy bonds with teachers and other adults (Frey et al. 2011).

Family

Family risk factors are among the strongest and most consistent risk factors for child and adolescent problem behavior. Family history of alcohol and other drug use and involvement in criminal activity are significantly related to child and adolescent substance abuse, delinquency, and violence (Biederman et al. 2000). Family management problems—defined generally by inconsistent parental supervision, monitoring, and discipline—are associated with many child and adolescent problem behaviors (Barton 2006; Frey et al. 2011; Herrenkohl et al. 2000). Family conditions such as the presence of child maltreatment and inter-parental conflict pose substantial risks to young people (Frey et al. 2011). Conversely, effective parenting strategies such as consistent discipline, adequate supervision, and healthy communication are protective in nature (Davies 2011). Caring relationships with siblings and low family conflict also provide protective mechanisms to children and youth (Keyes 2004).

Individual

Poor impulse control, sensation-seeking orientation, hyperactivity, attention deficit, and family history of substance use are among the most important individual level risk factors (Barton 2006; Farrington 2001; Fraser 2006; Frey et al. 2011; Herrenkohl et al. 2000). Intelligence, self-esteem, social and problem-solving skills,

and a positive attitude are also key individual-level protective factors (Frey et al. 2011; Keyes 2004).

Resilience

The concept of resilience emerged from longitudinal findings indicating that many vulnerable children exhibit healthy behaviors in the face of risk (Cicchetti and Garmezy 1993; Masten et al. 1990; Rutter 1990; Saleebey 1996; Werner and Smith 1992). Resilience, a complex process that occurs across all levels of social ecology, is often conceptualized as the product of daily interactions between risk and protective influences. From this perspective, high levels of risk are counterbalanced by protective influences that in turn contribute to resilience (Cicchetti and Rogosch 1997). Resilient youth display characteristics such as high self-esteem, effective problem-solving, and the belief that they can positively influence events in their lives (Luthar 2003). Additionally, resilient youth often share a sense of belonging with the greater society and are more likely than other young people to participate in activities like community service (Edwards et al. 2007).

Current understanding of the way in which elements of risk, protection, and resilience interact in the lives of young people in public housing neighborhoods is limited. In addition, prevailing research methodologies examining these constructs are dominated by quantitative methodology. The limitations of relying only on findings from quantitative investigations of risk, protection, and resilience are discussed below.

The Importance of Qualitative Inquiry in Understanding Risk, Protection, and Resilience

Quantitative investigations have produced important knowledge about the presence of risk, protection, and resilient characteristics in children and youth (e.g., Kraemer et al. 2001). Knowledge gained from these studies has led to related advances in preventive interventions and in community-based programs for children and youth. Despite these advances, however, there are several limitations to understanding risk, protection, and resilience from a quantitative viewpoint. For example, concerns have been raised about how risk and protective factors and resilience are differentially conceptualized, operationalized, and measured (Luthar et al. 2000; Masten 2001; Ungar 2003). In addition, the interpretation of findings identifying children as vulnerable or resilient may sometimes be misleading because they are often shaped only by the risk and protective factors and the outcomes that are included in a given tested model (Luthar et al. 2000; Kaplan 2002). Furthermore, the construct of resilience itself can be rather arbitrary and elusive. For example, sometimes youth may demonstrate resilience in one domain but not in another; capturing such patterns in a single quantitative study is challenging (Luthar et al. 2000). The inability of quantitative methodology to adequately account for specific cultural and contextual factors has also been noted as a major limitation (Bottrell 2009; Ungar 2003). To illustrate, Bulanda and

McCrea (2013) found that low-income urban youth who completed quantitative assessments often had difficulty understanding or valuing the importance standardized test scores in relation to academic achievement. According to the authors, participants “regarded the standardized scales as irrelevant and either rejected them altogether or else politely filled them out rapidly and clearly without thinking or valuing the content” (p. 104).

In contrast, a much smaller body of qualitative research on risk and resilience often provides a rich understanding of relevant factors in the lives of research participants, as well as the complexity and dynamics of these constructs within their specific cultural contexts (Bottrell 2009; Ungar 2003). Thoits (1995), for example, examined a hypothesis suggesting that salient risk influences for psychological outcomes would be those that most threatened self-identity in young people. Qualitative data collected in the study allowed the author to better understand the limitations of the hypothesized model. Thoits explained, “The exploratory analyses revealed that people’s life changes were far more complex and nuanced than I had anticipated; my quantitative models did not (and, given my reliance on event checklists), could not reflect those complexities” (p.80). Other qualitative research efforts have demonstrated differential nuances of the same construct, depending on the specific population under study (Beardslee 1989).

The importance of qualitative methodology in adding depth and contextual relevance to current risk, protection and resilience frameworks is clear. Furthermore, the dearth of knowledge gained about risk and resilience from the voices of children and adolescents is a major concern. Current literature reflects limited understanding of the day-to-day interplay among principles of risk, protection, and resilience in the lives children and adolescents. In the present study, we sought to understand the lived experiences of risk, protection, and resilience for children growing up in public housing neighborhoods. Thus, we used qualitative methods to examine the perspectives of elementary and middle school-aged public housing residents to understand how they actually perceive risk, protection, and resilience in their daily lives. Findings from our analyses are intended to support and extend theoretical explanations of risk and resilience and inform interventions that seek to promote resilient development and reduce risk among young people living in poverty.

Methodology

Procedures and Participants

Participants in this study attend an afterschool program located in three urban public housing neighborhoods where they reside. The program offers a variety of academic support, social and emotional learning, and mentoring activities. The current study was part of a larger project about the development and evaluation of the afterschool program. (Details about this larger investigation are available from the first author upon request.) The analysis and findings reported in the current study were not included in the aforementioned publication.

A sample of 20 participants was drawn from a purposive sampling frame of 201 youth who attended the afterschool program. The sampling frame was stratified by elementary and middle school aged youth. The final sample consisted of 10 elementary-age (purposive sampling frame $N = 141$) and 10 middle school-age (purposive sampling frame $N = 60$) youth who attended the afterschool program. Participants included slightly more females (60 %) than males (40 %) and represented a culturally diverse group (Latino/a 65 %, African 15 %, African-American 5 %, Asian 5 %, multi-ethnic 10 %) who were living at or below the poverty level. Youth in the study sample ranged from 9 to 15 years old ($M = 11.9$).

The human subjects' procedures for this study were approved by the institutional review board of the authors' universities. Research interviewers contacted parents to arrange appointments for youth interviews and to establish a plan to obtain parental consent. In some cases, forms were sent home with youth who were recruited at the program sites and expressed willingness to participate in the interviews. In other cases, parents came to the beginning of the youth interview appointments to discuss the research and provide consent for their child(ren) to participate. Youth assents were secured directly before the interviews began. Participants were thoroughly oriented to the project purpose, potential risks and benefits, and advised that their participation was voluntary.

Data Collection

During the summer of 2010 individual interviews were conducted by 4 of the authors, either at the program sites or homes of the participants. Interviews, which lasted 20–30 min, were semi-structured so that the content of the interview schedule was covered, but in a conversational manner that invited open responses from the participants. (The full interview schedule is available upon request from the first author.) The interview protocol posed questions related to concepts of risk, protection, and resilience that were consistent with a social ecological model of youth development. For example, participants were asked to talk about what “being healthy” means to them and to others in their families and communities. Probes addressed mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Questions also elicited information about supportive relationships in the youths' lives. For example, participants were asked who was there for them when they needed to talk to someone, and who they want to be like when they grow up. Participants were also asked to describe the qualities of that person they aspire to be like when they are older, and what they were already doing that would help them be like those people when they grow up. Additionally, participants were asked to describe challenges they experienced and how they handled these challenges.

Analytic Approach

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using ATLAS-ti (6.2.26). Constant comparative analytic methods (Boeije 2002; Lincoln and Guba 1985) were used in conjunction with content analysis (Miles and Huberman 1994). Constant comparison as delineated by Boeije (2002) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) involves: (1)

coding within a single transcript; (2) comparison of codes between transcripts to develop categories; and (3) analysis of how and if each category is connected in order to (4) develop new categories, combine existing categories, and delete others. Data are also simultaneously examined for negative cases as part of this process (Boeije 2002).

The initial phase of analysis used content analysis to examine a priori categories based on the theories of risk, protection, and resilience. Quotes were first categorized according to content that identified domains of the social ecology (e.g., peer group, family, neighborhood). The contexts and relationships within these quotes were then examined and *in vivo* codes, or codes that directly quoted phrases used by the participants, were created for experiences described as risks (e.g., fear of gangs, trouble with academics) and protection (e.g., supportive parents, trusted peers). During this phase, project investigators worked independently from one another. Following this step, investigators collaborated to examine the *in vivo* quotes and codes; commonalities were used to group quotes and codes into low-level inference categories (Seale 1999). Creating categories to reflect the direct phrases (*in vivo* codes and quotes) used by the youth enhanced the ability to develop low-level inference categories and increased the trustworthiness of our findings.

Low-level inference categories were also developed by following the views of the youth in reference to what they described as positive and negative, rather than overlaying the views of investigators on to them. That is, adult researchers might view loud parties at night as a challenge. However, if a youth noted that she liked loud parties she could hear in the neighborhood, then this would not have been included in the challenges category. Similarly, the analysis team might view a quote about having a hard time making friends because others in the neighborhood are younger or older as a quote about the neighborhood context, e.g., census markers about the percentage of different age groups in a locale. However, a youth participant is not likely consider census markers to describe her neighborhood, but may be more likely attuned to a dearth of same age peers as a challenge to making friends. Hence, quotes like this were included in the category for the peer level of social ecology and not the neighborhood level of social ecology. The same type of criteria was applied in coding for the health theme. For example, investigators were likely to consider a particular quote that contains a description of a parent providing discipline as either healthy or unhealthy. However, such quotes were categorized in the challenge or health theme based on the youth's perspective.

The round of analysis that applied these strategies resulted in 9 initial categories that were tentatively labeled: resources; challenges; coping; advice to other kids; culture-ethnicity-values; aspirations; self-concept/image; relationships; and health-physical-emotional-social-nutrition-hygiene. However, these were modified during the second round of analysis in which constant comparison was used to test the 9 categories for a deeper fit with the youth voices. The second round of analysis applied constant comparison to ensure that codes grouped into the 9 categories were grounded in the quotes and data. The 3 authors also conducted this round of the analysis separately and then met as a team to first compare and then coalesce on themes generated from deeper examination of the 9 categories as tested against the data. For example, one initial category was labeled, culture-ethnicity-values. This

was deleted during the second round of analysis because it became clear that the label was a conjecture of researchers' perspectives; that there were not clear lines from what participants reported to discern if indeed they were talking about values either alone or in relation to culture and ethnicity. This process resulted in the formation of 5 themes, each with several sub-themes as reported in the findings.

Results

Study results are represented by five themes: (1) *challenges*; (2) *coping*; (3) *connection*; (4) *health*; and (5) *aspirations*. Each theme is described below and summarized in Table 1.

Challenges

The theme, *challenges*, includes quotes with content that express participants' views of the difficult or negative experiences they face in their lives. Subthemes of challenges denote the range of domains of the social ecology in which these challenges occurred (*community-neighborhood, peer, school, family, and personal*). Some of the challenges mentioned by participants occurred as isolated events within a specific domain of the social ecology. For example, one participant described being the victim of neighborhood crime: "...When I lived in (the neighborhood), I got my other DS (Nintendo system) stolen and my bike stolen and I only had it for a little while...and I don't think it's a really good place..." Other challenges represented constant or daily struggles that youth endured over time, such as ongoing negative neighborhood influences, problems with making friends, having difficulty in school, family dynamics, and behavioral problems. One subject expressed the challenge of having difficult family relationships dynamics by saying: "...because I always had to take care of my siblings and to make it...to make it better. I told my mom to start helping and everything and she started helping...but she also started drinking and everything."

Many subjects reported on-going challenges in school settings. These school level challenges often overlapped with other domains. For example, one youth described not being happy at her school because she had trouble making friends; this response was coded as both a school and a peer challenge. School level challenges in general were fairly complex and represented the interplay of domains and risk factors. The following quote exemplifies this interplay: "Someone at school, they tell on me just because sometimes I get in trouble at school...they like 'um tell on me even though they did it.'" Thus, in the school setting, risks were combined with peer dynamics (getting blamed by a peer for what that peer did) and school dynamics (being labeled a trouble-maker such that school authority figures believe false accusations).

The subtheme of peer challenges includes situations such as conflict with peers, negative influences, and difficulty making friends. In fact, not having friends or being unsure about how to make friends was a common challenge reported by

Table 1 Qualitative themes

Theme label	Description
Challenges	Describes participants' difficult or negative experiences. Subthemes include domains of the social ecology where the challenge occurred <i>Community-Neighborhood, Peer, School, Family, and Personal.</i>
Coping	Describes ways in which participants' responded to the challenges they described. Subthemes include <i>Behavioral coping</i> Action taken to address challenges <i>Spiritual coping</i> Calling on spiritual beliefs or behaviors in response to challenges <i>Cognitive coping</i> Managing a challenge by employing thought processes <i>Emotional coping</i> Emotional responses triggered by challenges
Health	Describes youth perceptions of what is positive or healthy in their lives and communities. Subthemes include domains of social ecology where challenge occurred
Connection	<i>Community-Neighborhood, Academic-School, Family, and Personal Esteem</i> Describes youth's supportive interpersonal relationships. Subthemes include <i>Companionship support</i> Relationships that provide a sense of belonging through shared activities <i>Esteem support</i> Relationships that convince youth of their worth or value <i>Information support</i> Relationships that offer advice or guidance <i>Instrumental support</i> Relationships that offer opportunities for sharing, helping, and pro-social behavior
Aspirations	Describes hopes and dreams for the future, people they want to be like when they grow up, and qualities or efforts they are already doing that are necessary to achieve them

participants. Some youth described peer challenges such as “mean peers”, and some talked about experiences related to gangs. In the following exchange a youth noted the presence of gangs as a challenge and the fear of wearing gang colors.

- I So is that something you worry about, like wearing the wrong colors or being around the wrong people?
- C I don't know...because sometimes my friends like they look at me because I'm wearing red or a blue t-shirt or something...they're like 'that looks like a gang banger...I don't want to get shot or something...' and then they're like 'nah, you look too nerdy to be...' It's...kind of worry...that's why I try to keep track of like the gangs or whatever...and then not to wear and stuff

Personal challenges were illustrated by quotes such as this one where a participant described the difficulty of learning English as a second language. “I would confuse it [words she was reading] with English and Spanish words.” Other personal challenges related to learning were mentioned. For example, one youth reported being forgetful and leaving his homework in school. Personal challenges related to residential mobility were also mentioned, such as having to move and leave friends behind or have friends move and missing them. Still other youth noted personal challenges associated with missing an absent family member.

While the theme *challenges* essentially connotes the essence of what is often measured or implied by common risk factors, there is added meaning when we see it through the eyes of the youth describing the difficulties they face in their lives. We can take any of the quotes representing challenges and explain how it fits within a category of known risk factors that has been identified in the empirical literature. The framework also lends useful structure for thinking about how the various risks occur in different levels of the social ecology and interact with one another. Yet when we listen to children talk about what challenges them in their lives, we also hear specific characteristics about the experiences; about the intensity and amount of exposure to the negative experiences, as well as the role of the youth within the experiences. All of these nuances are specific to the cultural context in which these youth live, and are likely to be part of the explanation for the differential trajectories toward negative or positive development that are still unfolding for these young people. To illustrate, the risk factor of growing up in a neighborhood where crime is prevalent does not adequately illustrate the experience of having a bicycle stolen for a child who is growing up in poverty. Similarly, parental substance abuse is a risk factor, but one could question whether it would influence a child who assumes parenting responsibilities for her siblings in the same way it would impact her siblings.

Importantly, exposure to risk, by definition, increases the likelihood of developing problem behaviors and other negative outcomes, yet we are also informed by the theory that experiencing these challenges is part of what is necessary for developing resilience. In fact, the participants somehow had lived through and responded to the challenges that they described in the research interviews. The theme *coping* emerged from the data in quotes from youth that reflected how they managed the challenges they faced. This theme is discussed next.

Coping

When participants described challenges, they were probed to explain how they managed these situations. Quotes that included content in which participants explained how they responded to challenges make up the theme, *coping*. The subthemes of behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual coping describe the range of coping mechanisms that were used by participants to confront challenges. Behavioral coping refers to descriptions of action taken in response to a challenge. The following quote illustrates this subtheme. In this example, a youth explains that his response to performing really poorly in classes was to ask for help:

“Well when I was doing like bad in my grades. Well...first two semesters I was doing really bad, I got into other types of classes...the ones that help me better and I got really better at my grades. I started asking questions and telling the teacher if they could help me if I had any troubles.”

Spiritual coping, a subtheme found in 2 interviews, refers to use of spiritual beliefs or behaviors in response to challenges. For example, one participant stated, “We [referring to his religion] say that if you want to be healthy you have to be healthy in mind, body and soul and it helps you overcome a lot more things”.

Cognitive coping refers to quotes that described youth applying an internal mental process for figuring out responses to challenges. One participant explained how he responded to the challenge of difficult academic work: “...it’s like sometimes when we have tutors and stuff and I’m trying to figure out a problem I mostly write it down and then I like figure it out step by step.”

Emotional coping, describes participants’ emotional responses to challenges. A middle school interviewee illustrated emotional coping in this interchange about dealing with angry feelings after confronting someone who had just littered in the neighborhood:

- C This dude just walked by and throws a Hot Cheetos bag and a Gatorade on the ground and then I was like ‘Hey, pick that up, I was just cleaning over here’ and they didn’t even care and they just walked off. I just got like...I just get so mad and I have to hold it in and sometimes.
- I So do you feel like you have to hold a lot of that in?
- C Not really because...somehow...like if I do my chores or something... like it just gives out all the pain and whatever that’s called ... like washing the dishes, it gets me relaxed or something

As noted earlier, we view resilience as the outcome of a process in which youth successfully adapt to risk or adversity (Luthar 2003). The explanations youth provided about how they managed the challenges in their lives offer important insight into the process of adaptation. *Coping* in this data represent microprocesses occurring in the daily lives of the youth in which resilience is likely to be developing. Thus, coping quotes reveal the emergence of strengths and capacities in response to adversity. Understanding the coping responses to the challenges they face, from a youth’s perspective, may offer further insight into the processes involved in developing resilience.

The risk and resilience framework further informs us that within these processes of adaptation and resilience, there are a range of protective influences interacting with the exposure to challenging experiences that help promote resilience. Indeed, our findings suggest that the youth participants perceive a range of factors in their lives as positive and healthy. Quotes depicting this were included in the theme *health*, which is presented next.

Health

The health theme includes all quotes in which youth expressed something that they perceived to be positive or healthy, either directly experienced in their lives, or known to exist in their communities. Health quotes represent a range of domains of the social ecology and subthemes were identified accordingly (*community-neighborhood, academic-school, family, and personal esteem*). This quote depicts personal esteem at the individual level as demonstrated by the youth's display of self-efficacy and restraint:

It is easy to stay out of trouble but like you don't want to cause that trouble or be that trouble ... I mean because sometimes people think 'Oh, he's the one that caused it...or something'...and another thing is to just like stay in your area, don't become 'one of those people'...like one of those people that just be gangs or something...like just be straight.

Another youth pointed out an important school-community program that supports health,

They have different activities it's called Beacons and they have break dancing and we can play the Wii...we can go outside and play sports if we feel like it...they have open gym...and we can go to play on the computers...and we can do different things...

The following quote exemplifies family level health as a youth explained how his mother held him accountable: "...and then I tell my mom I accidentally ripped it and stuff and she's all like 'Well, you have work to do to like apologize for it.' So I just basically had to like mow the grass...and like...you know that miracle growth or whatever? I put that on it." A different quote provided an example of health at the school level when he described his view of school,

- C I love school...
- I You love school? What's your favorite subject?
- C Reading and math
- I What makes fun for you?
- C Well you could...like...I like doing multiplication and sometimes we get to do cool stuff."

Similar to the relationship between risk factors and the *challenges* theme, the *health* theme is closely connected to common protective factors. There were a range of positive experiences and influences within the cultural context of growing up in public housing that were described by the youth. All of these experiences can be

connected conceptually to protective factors found in the empirical literature. However, similar to risk, youth perspectives again add important further insight about what they value, what they believe these factors are protecting them from, and purposes and benefits they find in the efforts of others. For example, studies suggest that having an attitude that is congruent with prosocial norms and affiliations with prosocial people are protective factors (Arthur et al. 2002). However, a young person's explanation of how he uses his internal thoughts to stay out of trouble and "not become one of those people" tells us about more than simply his moral code. It relays a concern for being labeled and misunderstood just by being present or associated with negative influences. The earlier quote about the community agency confirms that the youth values being able to access the various activities offered there. In addition, the participant's positive depiction of how his mother punished him reveals an appreciation for his mother's efforts to discipline him.

When analyzing the data to better understand protective and resilient processes, it becomes evident that interpersonal relationships are integral to them all. The data reveal a range of ways in which interpersonal relationships contribute important positive functions in the lives of youth growing up in public housing neighborhoods. The theme *connection* delineates the types of support the youth described.

Connection

The theme *connection* contains all descriptions of supportive interpersonal relationships. All participants mentioned the importance of connections or relationships in their lives. Four subthemes emerged which describe the range of types of positive relationships that the youth described. The content of them illustrate Tietjen's (1989) 4 types of childhood support: *companionship, esteem, information, and instrumental*; therefore we labeled them as such. Note that we did not set up the analysis of this theme in an a priori content search for Tietjen's four types of support. Rather, after the theme of connections was uncovered, we realized that the quotes mirrored her 4 types of support. We, therefore, used them to label the ways in which participants benefited from the relationships they mentioned. One quote illustrates how supports for companionship and information fit with a youth's experience with his father:

...like I always stay up until like 12 or something...just like lay down and just think about life or something. Yeah, me and my dad we always done that...when he was here and we'd talk about like what to do in the future and what did you want to do when he was a little kid and what am I going to do tomorrow and what am I going to do now

Companionship support, as reflected in the quote above, refers to the aspect of the relationship that promotes a sense of belonging through shared activities (Tietjen 1989). The participant's quote above also conveys a quality of information support (Tietjen) in the relationship with his father since he is a source of knowledge for the participant and can provide guidance helpful for coping with problems.

Tietjen (1989) describes esteem support as actions or statements that convince people of their own worth or value. This type of support is portrayed in the quote below as the participant described advice for choosing friends.

- C Um, with the kids that appreciate you and don't do bad stuff
 I Oh...what do you mean by appreciate you?
 C Like they don't care how you look, how you dress... or anything.

Lastly, instrumental support denotes that interpersonal relationships can be harnessed to meet a particular need or what Tietjen (1989) labels as sharing, helping, and other forms of pro-social behavior. For example, one participant talked about instrumental support he received from peers in regard to academics, "...like my grades, I asked friends because like I know stuff that they don't know and they know stuff that I don't so then they help me out and then we like do different problems on that subject."

Recognizing the prevalence and importance of interpersonal relationships in the processes of resilient development is obvious since they are integral to human development (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Even factors that occur at the individual level cannot be understood independent of youth's interaction with people in their environments, both because many internal factors form as a product of interpersonal interactions, and because they manifest through their interactions with others. The emergence of subthemes of connections that depict a range of positive functions of interpersonal relationships helps us better understand how interpersonal relationships contribute to the youth from their perspectives, including what they value as important, supportive, and useful.

Interpersonal connections also provide the context for youth to conceptualize who and what they want to be like when they grow up. The theme *aspirations*, which is discussed next, includes quotes in which youth expressed this type of content.

Aspirations

The fifth theme, *aspirations*, represents quotes from participants that contain content about what they wanted to do in the future, who they wanted to be like when they grow up, and what they are doing already that will help them reach their goals. These quotes were responses to prompts from the researchers. To illustrate, one participant said he wants to be like his father, "...Cause he's a hard worker and he's respectful and he gives us like a lot of things and he gives us what's best for us." Another youth recognized a quality already possessed that will be valuable toward reaching future goals: "... I kind of have this love of fashion...so yeah... I might be a designer." At times youth responses about whom they aspire to be like reflected the complex web of social influences and internal ambivalence through which they must sort. One participant toyed with the idea of becoming a police officer after interacting with one. His response began with a tone of admiration toward the officer who had talked about safety issues such as, "...about not drinking...not cussing at people...not having a gun on you" but shifted into the following conversation with the interviewer:

Interviewer "When you think about being a grown up person... who's a person you'd like to be the most like?"

- Youth "A police".
- Interviewer "Oh, you want to be a police officer when you grow up?"
- Youth "Yeah, but I want to be a police killer".
- Interviewer "Like what?"
- Youth "Shooting people, but in the future, I wanted to be a real policeman, but my friends are telling me not to be a police".
- Interviewer "Oh really, how come?"
- Youth "Cause they might say 'go kill your mom,' the police"

Expressions of aspirations provide clues about the resilience young people have developed by this particular moment in time. The extent of their ability to conceptualize roles they might fulfill, the qualities of role models they intend to be like, and the personal attributes that they believe they possess that will help them attain success are likely to be important ingredients for striving and perseverance. On the other hand, youth such as the boy discussed above who experiences ambivalence between aspiring to be a police officer and hostility toward police, may have considerably more trouble establishing concrete, realistic, and prosocial goals aimed at future aspirations. Young people with such attitudes may also have a limited ability to identify which characteristics they possess that will help them accomplish what they want or expect in life.

Discussion

This study gathered youth's voices and perspectives about their lived experiences of risk, protection, and resilience in the context of the public housing neighborhoods where they reside. The purpose of the study was to use findings accessible through qualitative inquiry to inform current theories and interventions based on risk and resilience perspectives. Key findings and implications are summarized below. Results are both consistent with, and unique from, evidence gained about risk, protection, and resilience from quantitative investigations. For example, the neighborhood challenge of theft corresponds quite closely to the empirically derived risk factors such as presence of neighborhood criminality. A quote exemplifying a school challenge in which a participant explained he was getting poor grades is consistent with risk factors of school performance and academic failure. Likewise, quotes in the health theme correspond closely to known protective factors. For instance, participants' favorable views of the neighborhood afterschool program illustrate common protective factors like the presence of prosocial opportunities in neighborhood and community settings.

The conceptualization of resilience as a process stemming from the interaction of risk and protective factors was also evident in our findings. For example, participants described developing resilient characteristics like academic skills, competencies, and self-efficacy gained by participating in tutoring activities at the afterschool program. In this regard, one can see how interactions among risk factors like low school commitment and protective factors like academic support offer a promising path to resilient behavior and healthy development.

In sum, our qualitative findings comport with knowledge of risk and protection derived from previous quantitative studies. The depiction of risk, protection, and resilience as viewed through the eyes of study participants, however, also provides information not often conveyed in quantitative investigations.

Nuanced Views of Risk, Protection, and Resilience

The specific challenges and healthy influences identified by participants in our sample provide detailed and nuanced information about growing up in public housing neighborhoods. Results also shed light on the values among youth living in public housing settings. A closer examination of the lived experiences of youth in the study increases current understanding of how young people living in underprivileged environments tend to perceive the efforts of others to support their healthy development.

In some cases, our results allow for a richer conceptualization of the unfolding processes of the development of resilience. This is evident in the lived experiences of subjects that reveal dimensions of their coping responses and interpersonal connections not commonly noted in quantitative investigations. In other cases, expressions of aspirations made by participants provide the opportunity to assess the extent of resilient adaptation found among youth living in public housing neighborhoods.

A preponderance of study findings reveals evidence of positive development and emerging signs of resilience among subjects. There were also, however, several specific examples from the data that raise concerns for young people's well-being. Importantly, there may be lessons from key insights offered in these examples that would likely be obscured in quantitative methodology. One such example comes from a discussion noted earlier in the aspirations theme. In this example, a boy expressed ambivalent feelings about police in public housing neighborhoods. The participant's confusion and ambivalence about whether he should grow up to be a police officer or kill police officers reflects both a striving to do the right thing and confusion about what the right thing is. The boy's future well-being may very well hinge on subsequent exposure to risk and protective influences in his life. In such cases, developing interventions that help enhance realistic and prosocial aspirations is important.

Another example comes from a young person who described the difficulty in completing school assignments with limited English language skills. This youth had adequate English language ability to understand and participate in our qualitative interview process. However, the same subject's ability to understand and complete a quantitative survey with a high degree of comprehension or accuracy would be highly unlikely. Furthermore, in a quantitative measure of risk, such a child may likely be identified as someone who is characteristic of a profile that fits academic failure, a well-known risk factor for a host of adverse outcomes. However, specific cultural factors, such as being an English language learner, may place such a youth at a disadvantage that would likely be obscured by cumulative quantitative assessment. When this kind of detail is obscured, implications for intervention might suggest remedial academic supports, such as special education, that fail to

address the specific cultural and language needs of children who have strong cognitive skills, but struggle with school performance because of language or cultural barriers.

A final example of how youth perspectives add to existing knowledge about risk, protection, and resilience is derived from the account of a girl who described experiences that occurred in two separate levels of her social ecology. When the subject described neighborhood challenges, she talked about how she struggled with feeling that she and her sisters are accused of things in the neighborhood that they have not done because of one mistake they had made in the past:

We always get in trouble when kids do bad things and me and my sisters always get mentioned...cause we did one wrong thing. Like for tagging on the slide...they think that was us...and for ahh doing nasty things like kissing boys and...oh and for starting fires

Similarly, she described how she gets in trouble for things she did not do at school because of past behavior. A quantitative assessment of risk would likely categorize this youth as having behavioral problems and miss the youth perspective that illustrates the dynamics of carrying a label of “trouble maker” in spite of other more positive behaviors. In this instance, implications for intervention might include efforts to change individual behavior without attention to the effects of structural issues of labeling on youth.

Practice and Policy Implications

Our results suggest that there are important intrapersonal, family, cultural, and spiritual strengths that young people in public housing neighborhoods use to reduce and navigate risk in their lives. For example, the themes of health, aspirations and connections focus attention on the strengths and resources available in public housing neighborhoods. Many participants named family members and community role models as positive influences in their lives. This is an important finding given the common stereotype that low-income youth do not have healthy role models within their families or their neighborhoods. These strengths are often missing from depictions of youth who live in poverty level neighborhoods. Yet, they represent natural supports that can be drawn on to develop effective prevention and intervention models that emphasize youth and parent engagement. Future studies that explore these areas of strength are needed so that evidence-based interventions can build on these elements of strength.

Our findings reveal a large amount of information from youth perspectives about the content and characteristics of risk and protective factors that occur within the specific cultural context of public housing neighborhoods. There is also content about the norms and values germane to their experiences. Successful implementation of interventions is likely to hinge on the ability for programs to integrate cultural relevance while applying them (Brekke et al. 2007).

Several study limitations should be noted in the context of these implications. Analysis of 20 transcripts from cross-sectional data could not possibly capture all patterns of risk and protection among youth living in public housing neighborhoods.

Additionally, the participants all attend an afterschool program that focuses on promoting positive youth development and may be subject to a selection bias. However, as Bulanda and McCrea (2013) note, while there may be something different about youth who take the initiative to attend and participate in protective community programs, they are still exposed to the daily risks and potential traumas that occur in the urban, public housing neighborhoods where they reside.

Conclusion

Qualitative methodology is an important approach to understanding the constructs and interactive processes of risk, protection, and resilience in young people's lives. Small-scale, contextually-specific studies such as this one should be incorporated into future investigations aimed at understanding these concepts. The results of such investigations should be used to inform prevention and intervention efforts for youth in public housing and disadvantaged neighborhoods.

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