Collective Socialization and Child Conduct Problems


This article presents findings from research examining the influence of collective socialization, concentration of disadvantage, and prevalence of crime on conduct problems among African American youth residing in small cities and towns. Collective socialization is a process by which adults within a community social network influence children who are not their own by developing common behavioral expectations and sharing responsibility to insure conformance. The authors argue that one of the limitations of previous research on conduct problems has been omitted variable bias. Specifically, there has been a failure to examine community level variables as predictors of conduct problems. Results from the current study suggest a strong relationship between collective socialization and conduct problems.

**Methods**

Data were collected as part of the Family Community Health Study (FACHS) examining the effects of family and neighborhood on the health and development of African American children. The sample included 400 boys and 467 girls ages 10 – 12 (mean = 10.5), living in small cities and towns in Georgia and Iowa. Adult respondents were primary caregivers, the large majority of whom were biological mothers (84%) with an average age of 37.1 (range 23 – 80) and modal education level equivalent to a High School Diploma. Participants were sampled from groups of neighborhood blocks within census tracts that were at least 20% African and where at least 20% of the families with children were poor. Like groups were combined into 46 community clusters based on geographic proximity and demographic homogeneity for comparison.

Trained interviewers recruited from African American members of the community and university students collected data. Caregivers and children were interviewed separately using self-report instruments. The presence of conduct problems was determined using the conduct disorder section of the Diagnostic Interview Schedule for Children version 4 (DISC-IV). Other psychosocial variables assessed parenting effectiveness, family social economic status, and the focal child’s commitment to school and affiliation with deviant peers. Community level variables included collective socialization, community crime, and concentrated disadvantage based on per capita income, family structure, economic status, and use of public assistance.

**Results**

Data were analyzed iteratively using Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM). In level one of the model, being a boy, ineffective parenting, deviant peer group affiliation, and low school commitment were significant predictors of conduct problems within communities, but not between communities. That is, when comparing neighborhoods the relationships between conduct problems and psychosocial variables were the same. Therefore, these variables were controlled for but not allowed to vary across communities in the subsequent model testing neighborhood effects. Ratings of community level variables were high on collective socialization (mean = 4.96, range 3.62 to 6.44) and moderately high in crime (mean = 2.33, range .67 to 4.87). Indicators of concentrated disadvantage included an average unemployment rate of 30%, an average proportion of single-headed households of 19%, and an average poverty rate of 25%. These community characteristics were modeled in level two of the analysis. Collective socialization was the only significant predictor of variance in conduct problems between communities (t=-3.17, p < .01) explaining almost 27% of the variance.

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Discussion and Implications

The authors acknowledge that although concentrated disadvantaged was not a significant predictor of conduct problems, it is often negatively associated with the existence of strong social networks within communities. Nevertheless, the results of this study can encourage small African American communities concerned with reducing the risk of conduct problems among their youth. Results suggest that concentrations of disadvantage and high crime within neighborhoods need not destine youth to involvement in acts that deviate from the social norm. Rather, mutual responsibility among community adults to reinforce prosocial behavior may be a significant determining influence.