

Low-income boys fare worse in wealth's shadow

January 22 2015

Low-income boys fare worse, not better, when they grow up alongside more affluent neighbors, according to new findings from Duke University. In fact, the greater the economic gap between the boys and their neighbors, the worse the effects, says the new article based on 12 years of research.

"Our hope was that we would find economically mixed communities that allowed low-income children access to greater resources and the opportunity to thrive," said Candice Odgers, associate director of the Duke Center for Child and Family Policy. "Instead, we found what appears to be the opposite effect."

The findings appear online January 22 in the *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*: [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ... /jcpp.12380/abstract](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jcpp.12380/abstract).

Odgers and her colleagues followed 1,600 children in urban and suburban areas of England and Wales from birth to age 12. The research team conducted intensive home assessments, surveyed teachers and neighbors and collected additional data including census information and parent reports.

The team also used Google Street View images to gauge neighborhood conditions within a half-mile radius of each child's home. The virtual survey yielded data about housing conditions, parks, the presence of graffiti and more.

The authors found that in economically mixed settings, low-income boys engaged in more [antisocial behavior](#), including delinquent behavior such as lying, cheating and swearing, and aggressive behavior such as fighting.

The effect seems limited to boys, however. For low-income girls, growing up among more affluent neighbors had no discernible effect on behavior. Previous research in the U.S. has also suggested that neighborhood surroundings play a smaller role in girls' development than in boys', perhaps because many parents monitor their daughters more closely and keep them closer to home.

Among the low-income boys, those living in [neighborhoods](#) classified as "hard-pressed," where 75 percent or more of the local area was poor, had the lowest rates of antisocial behavior. Poor boys' behavior was worse in middle-income neighborhoods, and worse still in the wealthiest neighborhoods studied, said Odgers, a psychologist who is an associate professor at Duke's Sanford School of Public Policy. She said the findings held true from ages 5 through 12.

Something called the "relative position hypothesis" may help explain the findings, Odgers said. Previous studies have suggested that children often evaluate their social rank and self-worth based on comparisons with those around them. Simply put, being poor may be more distressing to a child when he is surrounded by others who are better off.

Many policymakers in England and the U.S. have viewed mixed-income neighborhoods as a potential remedy for poverty's toxic effects, which include increased risks of crime and delinquency. But the new research sounds a cautionary note about a policy direction that many have viewed with hope.

Mixed-income neighborhoods are relatively uncommon in the U.S. but are an emerging policy direction. In Britain, by contrast, mixed

neighborhoods enjoy broad support and represent a long-standing policy priority, reflecting a belief that they are socially just and will help struggling families. However, very little research to date has tested that belief. Mixed-income neighborhoods may address some social ills, Odgers said. But the new research suggests mixed-income housing may not be a panacea.

"We are not saying that economically mixed communities are universally harmful," Odgers said. "However, additional care may need to be taken to ensure these communities achieve their intended outcomes for children."

While the study focused on low-income children, the authors also gathered data on working class, middle class and more affluent children, and found that they fared worse when they grew up alongside poverty. As the amount of poverty in their neighborhoods rose, their levels of antisocial behavior rose.

The research draws upon data from the Environmental Risk Longitudinal Twin Study, which tracks the development of a group of 2,232 British children born in 1994 and 1995. Odgers' colleagues on the E-Risk study include Terrie Moffitt and Avshalom Caspi, also of Duke University.

In future studies, the authors plan to examine mixed-income neighborhoods' effects in other spheres, such as educational achievement.

"These findings are troubling given the growing divide between rich and poor," Odgers said. "They suggest that additional supports may be needed for low-income [children](#) who are growing up in the shadow of wealth. "

More information: "Living alongside more affluent neighbours

predicts greater involvement in antisocial behavior among low-income boys," Candice L. Odgers, Sachiko Donley, Avshalom Caspi, Christopher J. Bates, and Terrie E. Moffitt. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, January 22, 2015. [DOI: 10.1111/jcpp.12380](https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12380)

Provided by Duke University

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