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5. Watch out for the neighborhood trap! A case study on parental perceptions of, and strategies to counter, negative neighborhood influences on child development

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Abstract

Neighborhood is seen as one of the many social contexts that shape children's cognitive, emotional and social development. However, the neighborhood context does not simply 'imprint' itself on children, but can be mediated or moderated by other social contexts, in particular the family context through parenting practices. Based on a case study in a low income neighborhood in The Hague, The Netherlands, this paper addresses the question of which negative neighborhood influences parents identify as risk factors to child development and which strategies they develop in response to the perceived negative neighborhood influences.

Key words: *parenting strategies, child development, neighborhood effects*

5.1 Introduction

An important topic in the field of neighborhood effects is whether growing up in a disadvantaged neighborhood hinders child and adolescent development. This is related to the fact that young people's lives are to a large degree constrained to the family home and its direct surroundings and to the fact that children are viewed as particularly vulnerable to potential negative influences in the neighborhood. Research on neighborhood effects and child development indicates that there is a correlation between neighborhood disadvantage and children's educational achievement, problem or antisocial behavior, youth delinquency, dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy and even adult employment opportunities (Brooks-Gunn et al. 1997, Holloway and Mulherin 2004, Ingoldsby and Shaw 2002, Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000). Living in disadvantaged neighborhoods is therefore associated with numerous unfavorable short-term and long-term development outcomes.

The neighborhood is, however, just one of the social contexts that can influence child and adolescents outcomes. A wide range of literature in the fields of sociology, psychology and criminology focuses on the various other social contexts that shape child development, such as the family, school and peer context. It is generally acknowledged that these contexts are stronger predictors for youth outcomes than the residential context. However, there are relatively few studies that com-



bine the different perspectives, despite the fact that these social contexts are - in part - nested within and interact with neighborhoods. When studies do consider how residential context interacts with other social contexts, they often use proxy indicators of neighborhood disadvantage and (in) stability to predict child development patterns (i.e. Beyers et al. 2003, Caughy and O'Campo 2006, Rankin and Quane 2002). Unfortunately, this often does not provide insight into the specific social mechanisms within disadvantaged neighborhoods that shape child development (Caughy and O'Campo 2006). In order to acquire a better understanding of how children's development process is shaped within specific neighborhood contexts, there is therefore a need to study the interplay between neighborhood conditions and other social contexts, such as school, family or peers, from a qualitative perspective (Rankin and Quane 2002).

This paper aims to address the question of how neighborhood effects are related to, and mediated by, other social domains in which children grow up, specifically the family context. The assumption is that neighborhood does not simply 'imprint' itself on children, but that it is moderated or mediated by the family contexts due to the fact that parents adapt their parenting strategies to the social conditions in their neighborhood. Because there is very little empirical evidence to support this premise (Kohen et al. 2008), the following research questions are addressed. First, to what degree do residents in a low income neighborhood regard their neighborhood as a problematic place to raise their children and which negative influences do they identify? Second, to what degree are these negative influences moderated or mediated through parental strategies? These questions are explored using interviews with residents living in a low income neighborhood in the Netherlands about their perceptions of and experiences as regards the extent to which the neighborhood forms a risk factor in children's lives. There are several reasons to choose for this approach. Interviews with residents can provide an insight into the possible mechanisms that drive neighborhood effects (Galster and Santiago 2006). They can also show whether and how their perceptions of negative influences in the neighborhood might lead to parental strategies to protect their children from dangers in public space (Furstenberg et al. 1999, Valentine 1997). The following section provides an overview of the literature on the relationship between residential context and parenting techniques. The next section describes the research context and case study design. This is followed by two sections on the findings with regard to parents' perceptions of negative influences at neighborhood level and with regard to the way in which they deal with these neighborhood processes. The last section discusses the degree to which parents mediate or moderate neighborhood effects through a variety of parental strategies.

5.2 The interplay between neighborhood and family context

The extent to which parents perceive their neighborhood as a potential risk to child development is relevant because parents (might try to) manage the degree to which children are exposed to and influenced by the neighborhood context. A study by Galster & Santiago (2006) shows that a solid majority of parents in high-poverty neighborhoods perceive the neighborhood as an important and potentially corrupting influence on child development. They identify different social mechanisms that might negatively affect their children. These mechanisms have been reviewed extensively by

other authors (Ingoldsby and Shaw 2002, Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn 2000, Sampson et al. 2002, Small and Newman 2001) and are therefore only summarized here. Parents identify a variety of mechanisms that relate to the quality of social interaction in such neighborhoods. First, the low levels of social control and collective monitoring in the area (Sampson and Raudenbush 1999) are seen as problematic because they make it more difficult for parents to consistently enforce desirable social norms. Second, parents worry that children might develop deviant norms, values and anti-social behavior, for example with regards to employment, criminal activities or teenage pregnancies, through interaction with undisciplined peers (Jong 2007) and 'bad' adult role models (Briggs 1998). Third, they also worry that exposure to violence and crime could lead to high levels of stress and possibly victimization. By contrast, Galster & Santiago reveal that parents were not concerned about negative influences to child development through local institutional resources and public services, stigmatization or a lack of social resources in their network. However, the parents in this study were only allowed to identify one mechanism, and that might underestimate the occurrence of such negative neighborhood mechanisms on child development.

Parents' perceptions of their social surroundings help shape their parenting practices. Valentine (1996), for example, has shown that parental fears about potential threats to their children's innocence have increasingly led them to shield their children from public space. This is not only due to concerns about traffic safety, violence and abuse by adults - referred to as stranger-dangers - but also concerns about their own child's exposure to other children. While parents tend to perceive their own children as vulnerable and innocent ('angels') when they venture out in public space, they view other people's children as potential threats ('devils') to the moral order in society and they then fear that their children might be harmed by their contemporaries. These concerns might consequently lead parents to restrict their children's activity patterns outside the home. A similar conclusion was reached in two Dutch studies. A study on the changing nature of children's daily lives concluded that playing outdoors has become less common since the 1950s because parents and children perceive the streets as unsafe, opportunities to play outside have become restricted and middle-class culture has favored the acquisition of cultural resources through adult-organized activities (Karsten 2005). Another Dutch study on socio-spatial networks of adolescents shows how parents use protective and restrictive measures to structure a 'safe adventure' for their children when they venture out into public space (Emmelkamp 2004).

Parents thus create socio-spatial boundaries for their children based on their perceptions of dangers in public space, even in relatively problem-free residential environments in the above mentioned studies. By comparison, parents in neighborhoods with high neighborhood poverty and/or residential instability carry a much heavier burden (Furstenberg et al. 1999, Furstenberg 2001). The lack of collective monitoring at the neighborhood level and a wide range of social problems in the close vicinity of their home increases the burden on families to structure and organize the daily routine of their children's life (Beyers et al. 2003). Parents can respond to the burden of raising a child in a high-risk environment in different ways. Some parents try to compensate for, or moderate, the negative influences in the neighborhood. Depending on the level of risk, they shift the balance between the need to monitor and restrict their children's behavior and the need to stimulate

their children by providing them a certain degree of autonomy (Furstenberg et al. 1999). In general, parents in disadvantaged neighborhoods use preventive strategies more often than parents in more affluent neighborhoods, particularly in the form of restrictions outside the home (Fauth et al. 2007, Furstenberg et al. 1999). Paradoxically, such restrictions might in turn hinder children's development by limiting their involvement in social activities.

Jarrett (1997), for example, has described four specific parenting strategies that families in disadvantaged neighborhoods might use to moderate negative neighborhood influences. The first two strategies are examples of preventive strategies, while the last two can be viewed as promotive strategies. Family protection strategies include avoidance of dangerous areas or specific places after dark and limiting interaction with neighbors. Child-monitoring strategies include banning children from playing outside or strictly supervising such activities. Parents also use in-home learning strategies that “play a critical role in keeping children attached to school authority, classroom routines, teacher directives and conventional peers” (p. 56). Lastly, parental resource-seeking strategies are aimed at finding additional or better resources to foster children's development. These can include informal social resources inside and outside the neighborhood, in particular through (extended) family relations, to protect their children against unwanted neighborhood influences. They can also include the use of additional resources through formal institutions, such as community centers and religious organizations. Specifically, parents in disadvantaged neighborhoods might choose to send their child to a (private) school outside the neighborhood (Furstenberg et al. 1999). There can be different reasons for such a decision. Parents might be worried about the quality of education in local schools. There is considerable evidence that a disadvantaged school composition is associated with lower levels of educational attainment. This relationship between school composition and school performance has also been demonstrated in the Netherlands (for an overview see Karsten et al. 2006). Another, non-academic reason for parents in low income neighborhoods to choose non-neighborhood schools might be that the school is not just a place of learning, but also a place to develop friendships with peers. Thus, choosing a non-neighborhood school might also provide access to social resources that are unavailable in the neighborhood. Furstenberg et al suggest that such a strategy is closely tied to social class and ethnicity: often the better educated and non-minority parents tend to opt for non-neighborhood schools.

In contrast to parents who respond to neighborhood risk by using a variety of parental strategies to monitor their children's lives outside the household, other parents adapt their parenting behaviors to neighborhood norms and monitor their children less (Anderson 1999, Chung and Steinberg 2006, Jarrett 1997). It has been hypothesized that strong social ties amongst parents accompanied by collective socialization in relation to child-rearing practices might result in lower levels of parental monitoring and might thus lead to problem behavior such as substance abuse and anti-social behavior, particularly amongst teenagers. For example, Valentine (1997) found that mothers in working class neighborhoods experienced social pressure from other parents to grant their children the freedom to play outside. These studies therefore introduce an interesting contradiction in the relationship between residential context and parenting, namely that living in a disadvantaged neighborhood context might negatively influence parenting strategies even though

parental monitoring in such a residential environment is more important than in more affluent neighborhoods.

In short, a review of the literature on parenting in low income neighborhoods shows that there is a mutual relationship between neighborhood and family management practices. On the one hand, families can buffer or moderate neighborhood effects through parental monitoring. On the other hand, parental behavior is negatively influenced by neighborhood characteristics, in particular the degree of social organization in the neighborhood and exposure to crime. Indirectly, a neighborhood might therefore negatively influence youth outcomes through parenting behaviors.

5.3 Research design

The question of how neighborhood effects are mediated or moderated by the family context is addressed using empirical data from a case study in a low income neighborhood in the Netherlands. Most empirical evidence for negative neighborhood effects on child development has been found in the United States and there is only limited evidence of such an effect in the Netherlands (i.e. Drukker et al. 2003, Kalff et al. 2001). In Dutch studies on neighborhood effects, an important question is to what degree social conditions in the relatively heterogeneous low income neighborhoods meet the necessary threshold to evoke neighborhood effects and their underlying mechanisms. Levels of socio-economic and ethnic segregation are relatively low (Bouma-Doff 2007, Musterd 2003) as a result of a large supply of social housing, extensive national welfare programs and active state involvement at local level to avoid neighborhoods with extreme poverty concentrations. With this in mind the present research was conducted in an extreme case in Transvaal-Noord in The Hague. It was expected that if neighborhood effects and their underlying social mechanisms occurred anywhere in the Dutch context, Transvaal might be a likely location. At the same time, from an American perspective, Transvaal is actually a moderate case and it is therefore interesting to see whether neighborhood effect mechanisms also occur here.

The neighborhood of Transvaal-Noord has the lowest median income of the city and the share of households with an income below the poverty line is more than twice as high (see Table 1). The neighborhood has been popular with immigrants since the late sixties and now has one of the highest proportions of minority residents in the country. The area houses a relatively large number of families with children and almost half of all the residents are younger than 25.

Transvaal-Noord does not have a favorable reputation. The area has considerable crime problems, from drug dealing and prostitution to problems related to petty crime and intimidation by groups of young male residents. The largely social housing stock is of low quality and the apartments are small. The open staircases of multi-family housing blocks make it easy for local youths, junkies and prostitutes to ‘hang around’ without being seen, which exacerbates the safety problems in the area. The maintenance of the public spaces in the area is also a problem. Streets are often littered with trash, old newspapers and plastic bags, and there are problems relating to vandalism and graffiti. In view of these difficulties, Transvaalkwartier has been designated an urban restructuring area by the Ministry of Housing.

Table 1: Demographics in percentages (Statistics Netherlands, 2005)

	Transvaal-Noord	The Hague
Residents (N)	4,220	472,090
Social housing	76	35
Median disposable income (per person in euro per year)	8,300	12,400
Families with income below poverty line, of which...	33	14
On unemployment benefits	53	42
Families with income in highest income group (top 20%)	5	20
Working population without job	50	25
Family structure		
Single	47	48
Couple, no kids	16	23
Family with kids	37	29
Residents under 25	43	30
Ethnic background		
Native-Dutch	11	55
Surinamese	25	10
Turkish	25	7
Moroccan	17	5
Immigrant non-developed country	20	14
Immigrant developed country	2	9

The fieldwork was carried out over a period of nine months. It included formal interviews with neighborhood experts and low income residents as well as many chance conversations with other residents, for example in the local public park and on playgrounds, and attendance to numerous neighborhood meetings, child-related activities and local festivities. The interviews with 19 neighborhood ‘experts’ provided insight into the informal social structures within the neighborhood and the social problems in the area. Experts were professionals, such as neighborhood officials, local social workers, local educational workers and law enforcement, as well as ‘professional’ residents, such as neighborhood representatives, members of informal neighborhood organizations, cultural organizations, volunteer workers and other informal key figureheads. The expert interviews were followed by 46 interviews with residents of Moroccan, Turkish and Surinamese-Hindustani origin of the first and second generation¹³. One of the topics in these semi-structured, in-depth interviews was the degree to which those interviewed considered the neighborhood to be a good place to raise children. Respondents were asked to explain why they considered the neighborhood a good or bad place to raise children, with particular attention for their own experiences. Subsequently, parents were asked how they dealt with perceived negative influences in the neighborhood. The respondents were approached at local playgrounds and parks and through various formal and informal organizations, quite often with the help of informal key persons or other respondents. Most respondents have children, but some are young adults (18 – 25 years) who have grown up in the area and still live with their parents (see Table 2). Although they don’t have children themselves, they are all actively involved in raising younger brothers and sisters. The interview material and field notes were analyzed using the qualitative data-analysis software Atlas.ti.

¹³ In the rest of the paper, residents with a minority background will be described as, for example, ‘Turkish’ residents if they are first generation immigrants and as ‘of Turkish descent’ if they are second generation immigrants.

Table 2: Number of children by ethnic background of respondents

	1-2	3-4	> 4	Young adults w/o children	Total
Moroccan	3	5	7	4	19
Turkish	8	4	3	2	17
Surinamese	5	5	-	-	10

5.4 Perceptions of the neighborhood

Despite the substantial social problems in Transvaal-Noord, a recent survey indicates that the majority of social housing residents (79 %) feel attached to the neighborhood and that the proportion of residents who want to move away is similar to adjacent middle-class areas (Pinkster forthcoming). An important reason for this is that a lot of residents have friends and family in the area and that they appreciate the neighborhoods’ central location, good accessibility and the considerable number of ethnic shops and services in the area. In this respect, there are no significant differences between families with children and other household types. However, perceptions about the quality of the neighborhood are very different if one compares adult and child perspectives. In the interviews, most residents are negative about the neighborhood as a place to raise children and they describe a variety of negative neighborhood influences on child development.

Exposure to crime

The most important reason why parents consider Transvaal to be a problematic place in which to raise their children is that the streets form a place of danger due to crime in the area. To some degree, this reflects the stranger-danger anxieties that were described by Valentine (1996) about parents who worry about their child falling victim to crime in public spaces. However, in the case of Transvaal, the dangers in public spaces do not necessarily take the form of strangers. A lot of parents know quite well which residents pose a threat to their children. These ‘strangers’ are often children or adolescents themselves, as a single mother of Turkish descent explains:

“A few weeks ago, the police was at my door. My oldest son – he’s fifteen – was caught shoplifting when coming home from school. I just didn’t believe it at first, he’s a good kid. Really, he is... never any trouble, never any disrespect. He told me and the police that he was bullied by some kids into stealing for them. They had said that they would kill him, if he told anybody. He was so scared, he didn’t know what to do”.

In addition, parents worry about emotional stress suffered by their children due to the presence of drug addicts, prostitutes and young dealers in area. Some children are afraid to play outside. Others have trouble getting to sleep at night due to the noise. A Turkish father with two children, age 7 and 4, explains:

“My kids are afraid to play outside because of those junkies. You know, sometimes they really go crazy and scream and yell. I worry when they’re outside, because there are needles lying around... everyone knows what you can get from dirty needles”.

Socialization mechanisms

Parents are not only worried that their children might become victims of crime, but also that they might become victims in more figurative terms: they worry that their children will become morally ‘corrupted’ through interaction with others. As a Moroccan resident states:

“This neighborhood is a breeding ground for criminals. If you’re a teenager, you’re not going to work for a few bucks as a clerk in a grocery store if you see these youths with an expensive scooter in the newest sport shoes across the streets earning ten times as much by dealing drugs. They hear about how they can earn some extra money, and that’s how it starts”.

This phenomenon of describing one’s own child as innocent (‘angels’) corrupted by others can be observed even amongst parents of youths who are described as ‘devils’ by the rest of the neighborhood. These parents describe their children’s ‘fall from grace’ as a process of victimization by other, corrupted neighborhood youths. Such a process of negative socialization, whereby traditional values of respect and education are exchanged for illegal activities and dropping out of school, is not only associated with hanging out in the street, but also with the context of local schools. Some parents see the school as a place where their children make the ‘wrong’ friends. As a young father of Moroccan descent explains:

“The biggest problem is that kids develop wrong friendships in school. If you’re friends are skipping classes, you end up doing the same. I have been there. And then you’re out there – on the streets – hanging out with your friends and everyone knows what goes on there”.

The worries about acquiring the ‘wrong’ friends on the street and in school start at a relatively early age, when children begin elementary school. When parents talk about the composition of the student population of local schools, their main concern is the school as a source of potential playmates rather than the negative consequences of a minority school composition for their child’s cognitive development. Although they often refer to the low level of language acquisition amongst children in local schools, they refer to this as a symbol of corruption via peers rather than an example of the low quality of education in the classroom. Their worry is that their child will learn the language of the street during breaks and in the hallways. “I don’t want my child speaking Moroccan Dutch”¹⁴ was a comment heard frequently during the interviews.

Negative socialization is not only mentioned in relation to peers but also in relation to the

¹⁴ Even though street slang is a multicultural product, including many Surinamese and Antillean words, parents generally associate street slang with a Moroccan Dutch accent, because in Transvaal problem youths are mostly, although not exclusively, of Moroccan background. A Moroccan Dutch dialect is thus viewed as a sign of corruption.

type of role models that children might encounter in the neighborhood. A young woman of Moroccan descent explains why she understands that her brother moved to another neighborhood when his first child was born:

“This is not a place to raise children. The guys who hang around the neighborhood are a bad influence on kids. Kids think they are so cool, but they are involved in nasty business. They set a bad example. You don’t want your kids anywhere near those people”.

Parents therefore worry about the bad example set by young criminals with their lack of respect towards the police, other residents and even younger children.

According to residents, the risk of ‘moral corruption’ not only stems from concrete social interactions, but also from the more general social climate in the area. A lot of residents and professionals complain about the lack of monitoring of children’s behavior in public places, by parents as well as by the general community. A native-Dutch woman, who has lived in the neighborhood for 35 years and volunteers at an organization that coordinates outdoor activities for children in neighborhood playgrounds, complains:

“Kids run around without any supervision. Where are the parents? If it wasn’t for the children’s activities we organize, the kids would be bored and would start misbehaving and breaking things. They play soccer until late at night, make a lot of noise and write graffiti on our door. I have seen it happen”.

Some residents point out that it is not so much the lack of monitoring per se, but rather the lack of shared norms and values amongst residents of very different backgrounds about what is considered to be ‘proper’ behavior for children in public space. As a father of Moroccan descent with a three year old daughter explains:

“Parents are very important when it comes to keeping kids on the right track. Of course, everyone wants what is best for their child, but when you are raising kids, you have to start with the little things.... For example, in the square here, when kids eat ice cream they throw away the wrappers and nobody corrects them, not the parents, not anyone. One might think that it is just a piece of paper but before long the square is littered with junk. In this neighborhood, it is just very difficult to get people to enforce rules like that. Now if you teach your child to clear up after themselves, they will also start correcting other kids. So you have to start small”.

Such expressions of social disorganization and limited collective efficacy have been described by Sampson, Raudenbush and Earls (1997). They suggest that a lack of social cohesion amongst neighbors combined with their willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good opens the door to anti-social and criminal behavior. In the case of Transvaal residents clearly identify such a lack of collective efficacy. As a result, they also indicate that they themselves are hesitant to correct children’s

behavior in public space. A Surinamese-Hindustani father with two adolescent children explains:

“Last Saturday I was on my balcony and saw a mother walking by with two children, maybe 7 or 8 years old. The kids were spitting on the cars and the mother didn’t say anything about it at all! And then I wonder... why should I say something if even the kids own parents don’t correct such behavior?”

The consequence is that residents tend to turn a blind eye, even in situations where most residents actually disapprove of children’s behavior. This is also demonstrated by a recent experience of a young woman of Moroccan descent:

“What I will never forget... I was eating an ice cream across from the playground.... A few guys started throwing rocks, even though kids were close by. When I said something about it, they got really aggressive and when another woman tried to intervene, they shoved her against her car. Nobody else did anything to help and all the kids saw that. I decided right then that I would never raise my kids in such an environment, even though I grew up here myself”.

To summarize, residents worry about mechanisms of negative socialization, as a result of concrete relations with peers and adult role models, but also as a result of the more general social climate which opens the door to antisocial or criminal behavior. The experiences of residents are such that these negative social influences are largely intertwined and reinforce each other.

5.5 How families avoid risk

To deal with the described negative influences at the neighborhood level parents adopt different strategies to ‘protect’ their children. The most extreme version of this is to move out of the area when their children get into trouble or even before they have children. One such example of ‘voting with one’s feet’ was provided by a Moroccan resident whose son at the time of the interview was living in a judicial youth institution. The father had just started looking for a house in the new suburbs, so that when his son had fulfilled his sentence, he would no longer be able to hang out in the neighborhood with his crime buddies: *“If we stay here amongst his friends, he doesn’t stand a chance of improving his life”*. Most parents, however, do not go to such lengths. Some indicate that they do not have the financial means to leave the neighborhood, but, more importantly, a lot of parents do not want to leave for reasons such as being close to family and friends. These parents nevertheless develop various strategies to limit their children’s exposure to the negative influences described above. As a Moroccan father of five children explains:

“Look, the fact is that as a parent in Transvaal you have to work extra hard to raise your kids right. The neighborhood matters for how they grow up and because of the crime, the street kids, the drugs, parents have to work extra hard”.

Spatial restrictions

One way to actively try to avoid exposure to the negative influences described above is to construct specific socio-spatial boundaries for children in public space. A lot of parents put restrictions on where and when their children are allowed to play outside. The severity of such restrictions differs. For example, some parents allow their children to play outside without supervision, but only during the daytime in certain playgrounds or in front of their houses. Other parents only let their children play outside under supervision and some parents will ban their children from playing outside altogether. A mother of Moroccan descent with two children, aged 5 and 3 says,

“You get the wrong friends if you hang out in the neighborhood, everyone knows that. I saw it happen to my brother. That’s why I keep a good eye on my children. They are no allowed to go to school by themselves or play outside without me. I make sure I always know where they are so they don’t hang out with those kids.... They are trouble”.

A Turkish mother with three children, aged 11, 8 and 6 says,

“In Transvaal, the streets are dangerous. People can’t be trusted here. They are trouble. That’s why I never send my kids out on errands or let them play outside in the neighborhood. When they get home from school, they can watch TV. And if they really want to play outside, we take the car to Zuiderpark, where the playgrounds are safer”.

Some parents indicate that their children themselves realize the dangers of the streets and develop their own strategies to avoid specific places. For example, a Turkish mother describes the reason why her fifteen year-old daughter has been cutting school recently:

“When I confronted her, she told me that she’s afraid to go out by herself. See, I leave for work at five in the morning and come back late afternoon. So she has to go to school by herself. But she’s afraid, because there are these guys hanging around the neighborhood who are up to no good. Everyone knows they deal drugs and they harass other residents. My daughter is afraid to run into them”.

In addition to setting spatial boundaries in public space, parents also try to keep their children away from specific private spaces in the neighborhood, most notably schools. A number of parents worry about their children getting the wrong friends through neighborhood schools and choose a non-neighborhood school, specifically with a more native-Dutch student body. Often, a decision like this has a considerable impact on the daily routines of parents, who have to drive 20 minutes to suburban schools willing to accept their children. Some parents also depend on help from extended family, such as uncles or brothers who make financial contributions to ensure the children get into a private school that the parents could otherwise not afford. For example, some parents will send their children to Muslim schools in Rotterdam, organizing the half-hour car ride to school col-

lectively by hiring minibuses. As a single mother of Turkish origin explained, such a school choice serves the purpose of getting her eleven-year old son away from the neighborhood and teaching him the norms and values of their Muslim background.

Social restrictions

Parents also use various strategies to shape their children's social identity and social lives. A first strategy to limit the possibility of negative peer influences and role models through neighborhood peers is by actively managing their children's circle of friends. For example, a Turkish single mother background with four children explains why she actively chooses 'proper' playmates for her children:

"The neighborhood has changed in the last few years. I used to have nice neighbors, but they have all moved away. I can understand that. If I could move, I would too. The people who have taken their place are different. They never say hello and they don't think about anybody but themselves. There have been several fights in the last year, for example between parents because a child accidentally kicked the soccer ball against someone's window. It's not good for my kids to be around such people. So my kids are only allowed to play with the neighbors children. They are good people, not unlike the rest of these antisocials."

A Moroccan father also explains how he tried to influence his sons' friendships:

"When they were small I didn't have the money to send them to a school outside the neighborhood but I made sure that they were involved in sports activities outside the neighborhood, like soccer and tennis, so that they didn't have time to hang out in the neighborhood too much and would develop other friendships. And when they would played outside, they were only allowed to play with reliable, good kids and only under our supervision".

Another strategy used by parents to structure their children's social life is not just to choose their friends, but also to emphasize the difference between themselves and other residents and thereby mentally distance their children from youths in the neighborhood. A Turkish mother talks about the way in which she used to talk to her son, now 17 years old, about children from their street:

"Listen, Zeckin", I would say, "We are neighbors, so you can always talk to them. But we are not the same, we are different from them. We come from a different background. They don't go to school. They smoke pot and that's not good. You know that, right? But don't make them feel small because you are much smarter than them".

Finally, many residents indicate that they routinely enlist the help of friends and family when it comes to monitoring their own children. Dependence on local contacts for various forms of social support is a widespread phenomenon in the neighborhood of Transvaal and the interviews suggest

that such local social resources are particularly important in raising children in what parents consider a high-risk environment. A young mother of Turkish descent explains how dependent she is on her neighbors when it comes to protecting their children from the dangers on the streets:

"Our neighbors are Kurdish, just like us. We help each other out. For example, my husband and I, we work long hours. So our neighbors pick up our children from school. I would never let them come home by themselves. There are always troublemakers hanging around the neighborhood. I don't know what we would do without our neighbors"

Some parents emphasize that the presence of friends and family in the area has a positive influence on children because they help to reinforce their cultural, religious and ethnic identity. They indicate that the negative neighborhood influences described do not apply to them because their own community can cushion their children from the problems of the streets. In a way, therefore, these parents distance themselves from public life in the neighborhood altogether. A Turkish resident illustrates how collective monitoring in his community leaves little room for neighborhood influences on child development:

"If we catch them trying to sell stolen goods, we make sure that their families know about it. My nephew was working in a grocery store and was caught trying to sell a stolen mobile phone by his boss. Well, his boss is a friend of his father and called him immediately. The family decided that the boy should get away from here and stay in Turkey for a while. So you see, we take care of our own. Not like Moroccans, who always look away. That's why you see so few Turkish youths on the streets and so many Moroccans."

Parents therefore adopt both spatial and social strategies to protect their children from negative neighborhood influences and to monitor their behavior. While some parents use a variety of strategies, other parents lack the time and resources to monitor their children so strictly. This partly explains why, on an average afternoon, there are always considerable numbers of unsupervised children and youths hanging around the streets of Transvaal. As mentioned above, a lot of respondents explicitly portray these children and the lack of monitoring by their absent parents as one of the social dangers of the neighborhood. However, the absent parents and even parents of problem youths often share the same concerns about negative neighborhood influences as the 'good' parents, but they feel powerless to do anything about it.

The story of the single mother of Turkish descent, whose fifteen year old son was recently arrested by the police for shoplifting, provides a striking example of the way in which parents' social positions limit their options to protect and monitor their children. As divorce is still frowned upon in her own community, her social support network is small. She suffers from back problems, which makes the climb to her third floor apartment difficult. As a result, she is often unable to accompany her children outside. Having had little education and being unemployed, she tried but failed to send her son to a non-neighborhood school:

“I went to that school... it was horrible. I saw those kids. They have no manners. I saw how they disrespected their teacher. They don’t want to study and their Dutch is so bad. They all talk like rappers, with Moroccan words.... And then I had to enroll him there. It was the only place close to home where they accepted him. I didn’t have a choice.”

As a result, although she has a similar socio-economic background to many of the other respondents in this study, her household situation, health and the size of her social network negatively influence the degree to which she has succeeded in developing spatial and social strategies to shield her children from unwanted influences at the neighborhood.

Although one has to be careful about generalizing on the basis of a limited number of in-depth interviews in a qualitative case study such as this, the interviews do provide some insight into variations between parents in terms of parental strategies as a result of different backgrounds. Although the low income and minority parents in this study have similar socio-economic backgrounds in terms of income, differences in terms of educational background nevertheless influence the degree to which they create spatial and social restrictions for their children. For example, parents who are slightly better educated are more likely to choose a non-neighborhood school. They are also more likely to distance themselves from other residents and to select their children’s friends. Less educated parents, on the other hand, often hold less secure, unskilled jobs involving evening or night shifts. Struggling to make ends meet, they are simply not at home to supervise their children or restrict their venturing out into the neighborhood.

Household characteristics also shape parenting practices. In relation to the previous example, there seems to be a marked difference between single parents and couples with children in the degree to which they succeed in monitoring their children. Some single mothers indicated that being home to structure their children’s lives and protect them from unwanted neighborhood influences was an important reason to stay on welfare rather than to try and find a job. As one Surinamese-Hindustani single mother with two adolescent children explains:

“I got a job when my youngest son was 12. I figured I had done my job well. I raised my kids from when they were small. I showed them how the world works. For example, my son.... I never let him go to school by himself. It is just not safe here. And then when he started high school and taking the tram, I would walk him to the tram stop and wait for him there when he came back. But when I started work, I worried. What if something happened on his way home? What if he got into trouble? So every day I made him call me when he got home.”

Moreover, larger families seem to experience more problems in monitoring their children. In the relatively small apartments in the area, parents with four or five children simply do not have the space to keep them indoors all the time and they have to divide their attention between them. As a result, their adolescent children often hang around outside unsupervised. This is partly related to ethnic differences, as Moroccans or Turks tend to have larger families than Surinamese, but there are more ethno-cultural differences in parental strategies. For example, although a lot of respon-

dents depended heavily on informal support from friends and family to raise their children, Turkish residents are the ones who most strongly emphasize this as a strategy for positively socialize their children.

5.6 Discussion

To summarize, the case study in the low income neighborhood of Transvaal shows that residents’ concerns about negative neighborhood influences on child development are overwhelmingly social in nature. They refer either to the risks associated with interaction with specific social actors (‘corrupting’ peers, negative role models, dangerous strangers) or to more general social problems in the area, such as a lack of shared norms and values and low collective efficacy. While this last mechanism of low levels of monitoring and social control might seem a less direct or extreme form of negative neighborhood effects, the findings of this study suggest that it is in fact the lack of social organization that opens the door to the more direct negative effects through peers, role model and exposure to crime. This is supported by Sampson and Raudenbush (1999) who found that a lack of social cohesion and common values is an important factor when explaining crime and disorder. It can therefore be hypothesized that, rather than being inherently different mechanisms, the explanatory models for neighborhood effects of social disorganization, exposure to crime, negative socialization through peers and role models continuously reinforce each other and actually involve the same people. For example, the criminal behavior of which children might become victims is the same behavior of peers or role models that might ‘corrupt’ children in a moral sense. In Transvaal the stranger-dangers described by Valentine (1996) therefore do not really involve strangers but other local youths or adult residents whom many parents and children know by sight. Interestingly, residents are much more explicit about negative neighborhood mechanisms than about the outcomes of such mechanisms. They vaguely refer to short-term consequences of immorality such as antisocial or criminal behavior, dropping out of school or simply behaving like ‘those’ undisciplined youths. Rarely do they discuss long-term consequences for educational achievement, employment opportunities and social mobility, which have been found in quantitative neighborhood effect studies in the Netherlands (Bouma-Doff 2005, Klaauw and Ours 2003, Musterd et al. 2003, Pinkster 2007, Sykes 2008).

It is important to mention some of the limitations of the chosen research approach. An important question is to what degree residents are able to see and understand the more subtle or indirect ways in which the neighborhood context might hinder child development. Second, as a result of the chosen research approach it is also difficult to determine decisively the extent to which both the consequences of the described social mechanisms and the mechanisms themselves are imagined or real. Residents’ perceptions about negative social influences might be based in part on local ‘ghost’ stories and on negative stereotyping of local youth problems by the media. On the other hand, interviews with professionals of local welfare, youth and law enforcement institutions support parents’ perceptions about risks of victimization and negative socialization. Third, an important question is to what extent parents overstate the importance of the neighborhood context in child development and thereby externalize problems that might originate at the individual or fam-

ily level. However, even if parents unjustly ‘blame the neighborhood’, their perceptions of negative neighborhood influences are real in their consequences through the parental strategies they adopt to protect their children from the neighborhood.

Parental strategies in Transvaal include both social and spatial restrictions. First, parents restrict the degree to which their children can move around freely in the public domain. To varying degrees, specific places are “off-limits”. This not only includes public places but also neighborhood schools, because in the perceptions of many parents the neighborhood and school context are inextricably linked as places that involve the same mechanisms and the same actors. To some degree, the spatial restrictions described are similar to the socio-spatial strategies used by parents in other neighborhood contexts to negotiate a ‘safe adventure’ for their children in public space (Emmelkamp 2004, Karsten 2005, Valentine 1996). What differs, however, is the fact that the ‘dangerous’ spaces that parents identify are right outside their front door, in their own street and on their way to school. Second, some parents also use a variety of social strategies to limit exposure to unwanted neighborhood influences, such as choosing ‘proper’ friends for their children, creating social distance between themselves and the ‘other’ residents and enlisting social resources to deal with the day-to-day reality of raising children in a high-risk environment.

If we look at these parenting practices in light of the distinction between promotive and restrictive strategies (Furstenberg et al. 1999, Jarrett 1997), it appears that parents in Transvaal tend to use restrictive rather than promotive strategies. Even strategies that might help to promote children’s development are often motivated by restrictions. An example is the choice for a non-neighborhood school. While such schools are often of a higher educational quality, the decision is almost exclusively formulated in terms of separating the child from negative peers in local schools. Moreover, what is remarkable about these restrictions is that they are applied at a very early age. It is often claimed in the research literature that neighborhood influences are greater for adolescents who venture more outside the home (i.e. Fauth et al. 2007, Ingoldsby and Shaw 2002). However, in the case of Transvaal a lot of parents worry about negative peer and role model influences at a much earlier stage when children enter elementary school. A number of parents emphasize the importance of enforcing rules and placing restrictions at an early age. Many suggest that if it goes wrong at the age of eleven or twelve, it is too late to intervene.

Finally, some differences were found between parents in the degree to which they use social and spatial restrictions to protect their children from negative influences within the neighborhood. Some parents appear to do very little to limit neighborhood risks for their children. These ‘other’ parents are seen as part of the problem by the parents who actively monitor their own children’s lives and are accused of mediating or reinforcing the negative neighborhood mechanisms. Indeed, it can be hypothesized that youths in poor neighborhoods such as Transvaal, who go to a neighborhood school and are not monitored in their socio-spatial activities, are most likely to be vulnerable to victimization or negative socialization. At first glance, the lack of monitoring by their parents might seem to be the result of different (lower) standards about parenting practices, as often mentioned in the research literature. However, ‘bad’ parents in Transvaal share the same concerns about their children’s development as the ‘good’ parents and identify similar mechanisms of peer influ-

ences and negative role models as risks for their children’s development. In fact, even parents of ‘devils’ (Valentine 1996) attribute their child’s problems to negative neighborhood influences. At the same time, a lot of parents feel overwhelmed by, and powerless in the face of, the substantial social problems so close to their home and they do not have the social and financial resources to effectively develop strategies to deal with these problems. Consequently, the lack of monitoring by these ‘bad’ parents is not so much the result of negative socialization amongst parents with regard to monitoring and parental strategies, but rather the result of parents’ struggle with their own marginalized social position.

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