

Children's Participation in Out-of-School Activities

Interest in out-of-school activities has grown over the last decade fueled by research suggesting that participation in such activities has a positive effect for children and youth. Research has shown that out-of-school activities improve academic outcomes, foster children's relations with peers and adults, add to their knowledge and skills, and provide supervision for children when school is not in session.^{1,2,3} Moreover, these benefits may extend beyond the child to the family and larger community by contributing to the formation of social and cultural capital as social network connections are established.

Less attention has been paid to the factors associated with participation in out-of-school activities. This is extremely important because to achieve these positive effects, children must take part in activities with sufficient regularity so that they and their communities can benefit.⁴ Especially in low income communities, there may be barriers to engaging children and youth in out-of-school programs. Indeed, concerns have been raised about low levels of participation in programs that have targeted at-risk children.⁵

Unlike school attendance, which is required, participation in organized activities out-of-school is voluntary and typically requires some effort on the part of parents or children to seek activities out and enroll in them. Parents that are socially connected within their communities may be more aware of community activities and may have developed greater trust in local organizations and groups than families that are socially isolated. Neighborhood factors, such as the degree to which the neighborhood is viewed as a safe and orderly place, may also affect attendance in out-of-school activities.

While research has shown that distressed neighborhoods can have a negative effect on children's health and academic achievement,^{6,7} little is known about how conditions in these neighborhoods may hinder participation in out-of-school activities. If conditions in distressed neighborhoods interfere with children's engagement in out-of-school activities, this may be an additional source of disparities in educational attainment for poor children.

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Children's Participation in Out-of-School Activities: The Impact of Family and Neighborhood

Dr. Coulton and Ms. Irwin were interested in learning more about how family and neighborhood characteristics influence children's participation in organized activities outside of school. Specifically, their study sought to answer questions about the degree to which parental involvement in the community and neighborhood safety and disadvantage affected participation in out-of-school activities.

Data for the study came from 2192 households with children ages 5 to 17 nested within 128 low income neighborhoods (defined by census tracts) in 10 cities that were part of Annie E. Casey Foundation's Making Connections Initiative. The study sought to understand the influence of both individual/ household and neighborhood factors on children's participation in out-of-school activities using hierarchical generalized linear models (HGLM).

Started in 1999, Making Connections is a ten-year investment by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and partners to improve the outcomes for families and children in tough or isolated neighborhoods in 10 cities across the U.S. (Denver, Des Moines, Hartford, Indianapolis, Louisville, Milwaukee, Oakland, Providence, San Antonio and Seattle/White Center).

This study was carried out with support from the Annie E. Casey Foundation as part of their *Making Connections* Initiative. Data for the study were collected jointly by the National Opinion Research Corporation (NORC) at the University of Chicago and the Urban Institute.

For more information on *Making Connections*, go to:
<http://www.aecf.org/MajorInitiatives/MakingConnections.aspx>

STUDY RESULTS

Overall, almost 40% of children in the sample did not participate in any out-of-school activities (children in these neighborhoods were almost twice as likely to not participate in out-of-school activities as were children in the surrounding counties). On average, 49% participated in out-of-school activities at least weekly. However, there was considerable variation between neighborhoods in terms of children's participation in weekly out-of-school activities.

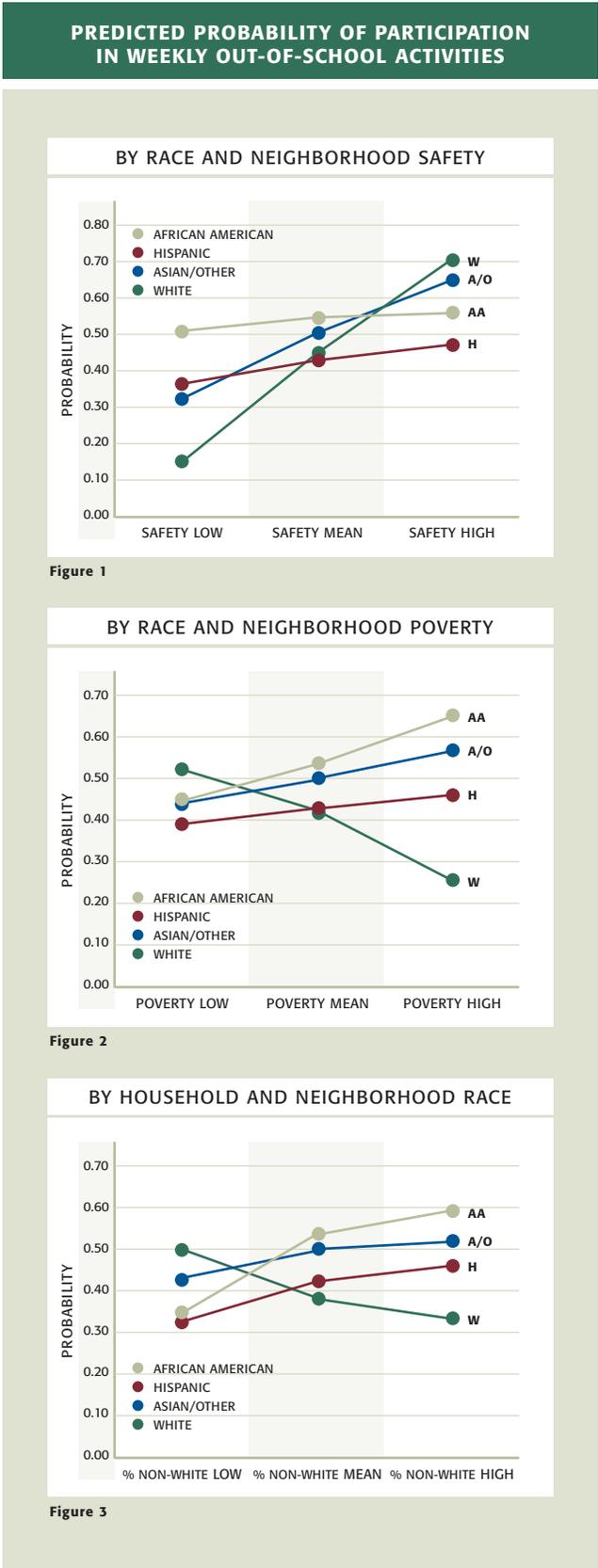
Unlike similar studies in more affluent neighborhoods, African American children were significantly more likely to participate in out-of-school activities than were White children. In fact, their odds of weekly participation were more than 50% higher. (There were no significant differences found in rates of participation between Hispanic or Asian/Other children and White children).

Neighborhood safety had a significant positive effect on participation in at least weekly out-of-school activities. For each unit increase in the neighborhood safety rating, the odds of weekly participation in out-of-school activities increased by almost 40%. Results also show that children whose parents were involved in community volunteering and action were more likely to participate in out-of-school activities.

However, as illustrated in **Figure 1**, African American and Hispanic children were less likely to be dissuaded from participation in out-of-school activities by unsafe neighborhood conditions than were Whites. Additionally, in families that volunteer, safety problems in the neighborhood were less likely to impede children's participation in out-of-school activities.

A similar effect was seen with neighborhood poverty. **Figure 2** shows that as compared to Whites, all of the other racial and ethnic groups were less likely to be affected by neighborhood poverty. In fact, African American, Hispanic and Asian/ other children participated at slightly higher rates if their neighborhood poverty rate was higher.

Figure 3 shows a differential sensitivity of residents to the racial and ethnic composition of their neighborhood. Whites participated in out-of-school activities at higher rates when the neighborhood had a higher proportion of White residents. The opposite was true for all other racial and ethnic groups in the study who participated at higher rates when a higher proportion of residents were African American, Hispanic, Asian or of other races.



IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The findings of this study support the idea that children benefit when their family is engaged with and has social ties in their community and when their neighborhood is relatively safe. Out-of-school activities cannot be viewed in isolation, but must be seen as part of a larger context in which adults are also encouraged to become involved in the community. In fact, efforts to raise parent involvement in out-of-school activity programs could foster both their own increased connectedness to the neighborhood and their children's attendance in the programs.

This study also suggests that out-of-school programs will achieve greater success if they have an understanding of the

neighborhood context in which they operate. Specifically, programs should be mindful of safety in the surrounding communities and whether families and children feel secure. They should include provisions for keeping children safe in neighborhoods where lack of safety is a problem. Additionally, it is important to consider the possibility that various racial and ethnic groups residing in the neighborhood may respond differently to neighborhood conditions. For this reason, it is important for programs to reach out more deliberately to children whose race or ethnicity makes them or their families feel isolated within the neighborhood.

PROMISING PRACTICES: EXAMPLES OF LOCAL AND NATIONAL EFFORTS

Both locally and across the country there are a number of efforts aimed at improving outcomes for children by improving conditions in neighborhoods, strengthening families' connections within neighborhoods, and increasing participation in out-of-school activities. Some examples include:

Nationally, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's *Making Connections* Initiative is working to improve outcomes for children by strengthening families and transforming communities across the United States. Its core strategy helps children succeed based on the belief that the best way to improve outcomes for vulnerable children living in tough neighborhoods is to strengthen their families' connections to economic opportunity, positive social networks, and effective services and supports. (For more information, go to: <http://www.aecf.org/MajorInitiatives/MakingConnections.aspx>)

Here in Cuyahoga County, *The Cleveland Foundation* is planning a comprehensive, county-wide youth development initiative in partnership with other public and private funders and organizations. The vision of the initiative is for all children and youth in the County to live in a safe and caring environment

with access to quality services and developmental opportunities. A 40-member planning task force has been created to consider the scope and design of the initiative. The task force plan includes a strong community building component and will employ three universal strategies to engage all youth in the community, one of which is out-of-school-time programming.

In the Mt. Pleasant neighborhood of Cleveland an effort is underway to build a better, stronger, sustainable community. *Mt. Pleasant Community Zone* (MPCZ) is dedicated to working together to realize its vision of Mt. Pleasant as a healthy, thriving community. MPCZ brings resources together to build on existing community assets and facilitate change. MPCZ offers programs and funding that strengthen, unify, and build the economic, cultural, educational, and social support systems for residents of Mt. Pleasant. It also offers community improvement and capacity building activities including a physical environment and safety strategy aimed at improving, among other things, the sense of safety and level of community investment. (For more information, go to: <http://www.mpcz.org/default.asp>)

¹ Eccles, J. S., Barber, B. L., Stone, M., & Hunt, J. (2003). Extracurricular activities and adolescent development. *Journal of Social Issues*, 59(4), 865.

² Bartko, W. T. (2005). The ABCs of engagement in out-of-school-time programs. *New Dir. Youth Dev.*, 105, 109-20.

³ Mahoney, J. L. (2000). School extracurricular activity participation as a moderator in the development of antisocial patterns. *Child Development*, 71(2), 502.

⁴ Borden, L. M., Perkins, D. F., Villarruel, F. A., & Stone, M. R. (2005). To participate or not to participate: That is the question. *New Directions in Youth Development*, 105, 33-49.

⁵ Lauer, S., Little, P. M. D., & Weiss, H. (2004). *Attracting and sustaining participation in out of school time programs*. No. 6. Cambridge: Harvard Family Research Project.

⁶ Leventhal, T., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2000). The neighborhoods they live in: The effects of neighborhood residence on child and adolescent. *Psychological Bulletin*, 126(2), 309.

⁷ Leventhal, T., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2004). A randomized study of neighborhood effects on low-income children's educational outcomes. *Developmental Psychology*, 40(4), 488-507.