Research Brief
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Collective Efficacy and Student Achievement

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1 INTRODUCTION

Schools and organizations that address inequities in academic achievement lean primarily on directly addressing shortcomings in learning proficiency, which are more prevalent among students of color and low-income students, populations that have been historically underserved. However, a great deal of impact can be made at the neighborhood level by improving the sense of efficacy in the communities where these children live.

This brief report lays the research groundwork for understanding the relationship between collective efficacy or community activation and traumatic community conditions, such as violence, that impede youth development and academic progress. This brief synthesizes the academic literature on collective efficacy as a driver of youth development through reductions in community violence. Additionally, this brief provides a sound research-based case for the value of systems transformation work in communities.

It is our hope that the brief motivates partners to further explore the research and, by doing so, identify opportunities for impact in the lives of children and learners through a community-level, systems transformation approach.

2 BACKGROUND

Collective efficacy has been defined as the social cohesion among neighbors and the extent to which they are willing to intervene for the common good\(^1\). Collective efficacy could be characterized as the extent to which communities maintain social control from within as opposed to external sources, such as through the police. An example of this is the way that adults might monitor children and teens on a community level as they play and socialize in public space to generally maintain social order.

**Neighborhoods with high rates of renter occupancy or high residential mobility experience lower levels of collective efficacy\(^1\).** This is in part due to rapid population change reducing the overall formation of social ties that take time to develop. In fact, three dimensions of which neighborhoods are often stratified have been found to account for 70%
of the neighborhood variation in collective efficacy: residential instability, concentrated disadvantage, and immigration concentration.

Concentrating families who face economic disadvantage into a handful of neighborhoods means that a small number of neighborhoods absorb the brunt of economic shocks\(^2\). Living paycheck to paycheck means being one major disaster away from falling behind and facing the threat of eviction. Even worse, those with an eviction or felony on their records face discrimination in the housing market, leaving them to settle for poorer quality housing in more economically depressed neighborhoods\(^3\). The result is that the most vulnerable live in the poorest quality housing, concentrated in the most disadvantaged communities. These communities often experience higher levels of violence, in part, because the overall instability of the neighborhood leads to lower levels of collective efficacy.

Research shows a direct relationship between collective efficacy and the density of neighborhood associations and community-based nonprofit organizations working in and on behalf of communities\(^4\). Whereas neighborhoods with high residential mobility and low collective efficacy experience lower average neighborhood tenure rates, community associations and nonprofit organizations are thought to be a static social infrastructure that facilitates collective efficacy networks to which individual residents can connect\(^5\).

Additionally, research has shown a strong relationship between collective efficacy and a reduction in community violence\(^6\). A longitudinal study looking at 264 cities over the course of 20 years found that each 10 additional community nonprofit organizations working with a focus on crime and community in a city of 100,000 residents results in a 9% reduction in the murder rate, a 6% reduction in the violent crime rate, and a 4% reduction in the property crime rate over time\(^6\).

\(^2\) Massey and Denton 1993  
\(^3\) Desmond 2016  
\(^4\) Sampson 2012  
\(^5\) Browning and Soller 2014  
\(^6\) Sharkey, Torrats-Espinosa, and Takyara 2017
A landmark study found that when children were assessed within a week of a homicide occurring in their neighborhood, they showed lower levels of attention span, impulse control, and pre-academic skills\(^7\). This means the cognitive bandwidth with which children walk through the doors of their school can be greatly reduced if they are coming from a neighborhood experiencing violence. In other words, levels of neighborhood violence exacerbate inequities in academic outcomes based on where students live.

3 CONCLUSION

A great deal of attention has been focused on addressing disparities in academic achievement by treating the symptoms that children bring to school with them within the school environment. However, a network of community associations and organizations focused on community building and support can effectively address the causes. This highlights why neighborhood-level, systems transformation work is essential to addressing learning inequities that limit the achievement of children of color and low-income students.

\(^7\) Sharkey, Tirado-Strayer, Papachristos, and Raver 2012
REFERENCES


