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The Relative Importance of Mothers' and Youths' Neighborhood Perceptions for Youth Alcohol Use and Delinquency

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Abstract

Prior studies have examined the influence of neighborhood perceptions on youth outcomes, but few studies have examined whose report of neighborhoods, parents' or youths', are most important in predicting youth outcomes. This study addresses the relative associations of youths' and mothers' neighborhood perceptions with youth alcohol use and delinquency. The sample includes 499 mother-child dyads (youth age: 10 to 16 [mean = 13.3; SD = 2]). Structural equation modeling showed that youths' perceived neighborhood problems were significantly associated with their delinquency but not their alcohol use. However, mothers' perceived neighborhood problems were not related to either youth alcohol use or delinquency, suggesting that youths' perceptions are better indicators of youth behavior. Youth reports may reflect their activities in the neighborhood and their exposure to different forms of deviance, so youths' reports would be better indicators of exposure to neighborhood risk. Challenges for prevention are discussed.

Keywords

neighborhoods; perceptions; youth alcohol use; delinquency

A growing body of research indicates that neighborhood disorganization is linked to problem behaviors for youth (e.g., Lambert, Brown, Phillips, & Ialongo, 2004). Neighborhood disorganization is defined by residents' inability to control the social and physical environment in their neighborhood (Shaw & McKay, 1942). Based on this conceptual framework, Sampson and Lauritsen (1994) describe how structural characteristics of neighborhoods (e.g., residential instability) impact the ability of residents to form stable social networks and to enforce shared norms. Further, neighborhood

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disorganization may be linked to problem behavior for youth because it undermines parental efforts to establish healthy, normative behaviors for youth.

Conceptualizing the Neighborhood: Physical Site & Perceptions

Most studies of neighborhood effects on youth outcomes conceptualize the neighborhood as a physical site (e.g., census tracts, zip codes) (Burton & Jarrett, 2000). Studies defining neighborhoods in this manner frequently use census-based indicators of neighborhood settings, which are associated with indicators of youth well being, such as educational achievement, internalizing and externalizing problems, and delinquency (Briggs, 1997; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Peeples & Loeber, 1994). The use of designated (and typically standardized) boundaries to demarcate neighborhoods allows for the calculations of neighborhood characteristics across a standard physical area, and permits the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) techniques. Designated boundaries also permit direct comparisons of neighborhood factors across a large number of neighborhoods and families.

Alternatively, other studies have used residents' perceptions of neighborhoods to determine neighborhood borders and characteristics (Burton & Jarrett, 2000). This approach is consistent with contextual theories that emphasize the individual's active interpretation of and interaction with the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; Jessor, Van Den Bos, Vanderryn, Costa, & Turbin, 1995). Residents' perceptions of their neighborhood boundaries often differ from researchers' perceptions. However, residents' perceptions may be better predictors of outcomes. For example, census tracts are commonly used by researchers to designate neighborhood borders, but they are often much larger than youths' definitions of their neighborhoods' boundaries (Burton & Price-Spratlen, 1999). Therefore, using census tracts may reflect a neighborhood area far larger than youth consider as reflecting their neighborhood. Another advantage of using residents' perspectives is that important conceptual domains are not available in traditional archival databases. For example, neither collective efficacy nor social control (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997) can be assessed easily through archival databases. However, parental perceptions of neighborhood social control (i.e., mutual respect, institutional controls, neighborhood bonding) are associated with lower levels of youth problem behavior and higher levels of prosocial competence and conventional friends (Elliott, Wilson, Huizinga, Sampson, Elliott, & Rankin, 1996). Thus, defining neighborhoods through residents' perceptions, rather than through externally designated boundaries may give a more accurate view of relationships between neighborhood characteristics and behaviors.

Despite the advantages of using residents' perceptions of neighborhood characteristics, there is not consistency across studies regarding the correlation between adolescent substance use and perceptions of neighborhoods. In some studies, adolescent perceptions of neighborhood disorganization are associated with more adolescent use of tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana, with the association mediated by attitudes about drug use for females (Lambert et al., 2004). Likewise, adolescent perceptions of neighborhood stress (i.e., perceived neighborhood toughness) are associated with greater alcohol use, independent of individual factors (e.g., ethnicity) (Scheier, Botvin, & Miller, 1999). In contrast, parental reports of neighborhood

attachment (e.g., whether neighbors help each other out) are associated with higher rates of youth lifetime alcohol use. (Ennett, Flewelling, Lindrooth, & Norton, 1997). These contrasting findings may reflect different dimensions of the neighborhood at work in influencing youth outcomes. Alternatively, they may be due to methodological differences or the use of parents', rather than youths', reports of neighborhoods.

Whose perception matters?

Few studies have addressed whose report of the neighborhood-- parents' or youths'-- is most important in predicting youth outcomes. In general, agreement between parents and youth on a variety of behavioral and environmental measures is low, even for issues that would seem "objective," such as life events (Feinberg, Neiderhiser, Howe, & Hetherington, 2001). For example, youth tend to report more life events and greater extent of exposure to violence than their parents report them experiencing (Howard, Cross, Li, & Huang, 1999; Johnston, Steele, Herrera, & Phipps, 2003). These discrepancies could reflect interpretational differences between parents and youth as to which events are considered significant, or they may reflect parents' lack of knowledge of their children's life experiences.

Comparatively few studies of neighborhood perceptions include youths' perceptions, with studies frequently assessing only adult reports of neighborhood features (Shumow, Vandell, & Posner, 1998). Assessing only adult reports carries the implicit assumption that adults' perceptions are more important than youths', but few studies have examined this issue. Among the studies including both youth and adult perceptions, Duncan, Duncan, and Strycker (2002) reported that, despite adult perceptions of higher levels of both social cohesion and neighborhood problems, both adult and youth perceptions of lower social cohesion were associated with higher neighborhood levels of youth alcohol and drug use. The authors suggested that adults' perception of greater neighborhood problems and cohesion may reflect a higher level of awareness of neighborhood issues and highlights the importance of using multiple respondents to assess neighborhood perceptions. In another study, Shumow et al. (1998) measured youth and parent perceptions of neighborhood danger (i.e., perceptions of crime and feelings of fear) as mediators of the relation between archival record indicators of neighborhood risk and youths' outcomes. Neighborhood risk was related to youths' perceptions of neighborhood danger, which were related to youths' reports of greater distress. Neighborhood risk was also related to parents' perceptions of danger, which were associated with parental reports of greater levels of both youth misconduct and youth distress. The authors interpreted the latter finding to mean that parents increase monitoring of their children's behavior in dangerous neighborhoods, and so are more aware of any misconduct.

As demonstrated in prior studies, parent and youth descriptions of the same neighborhoods are quite different. These different neighborhood perceptions may be important in understanding the links between neighborhood characteristics and youth outcomes. For example, if parents feel that their neighborhood is a "good" neighborhood, they may be less likely to monitor the youth (Kling, Liebman, & Katz, 2005). However, if youth report more problems in the neighborhood it may reflect their interactions with more deviant groups within the neighborhood, and these associations may lead to more negative youth outcomes.

Although several studies have examined the influence of neighborhood perceptions on outcomes (e.g., Lambert et al., 2004; Plybon, Edwards, Butler, Belgrave, & Allison, 2003), few have examined the comparative influence of mothers' and youths' neighborhood assessments on youth outcomes. These few studies have focused on the differential influence of perceptions of narrow aspects of the neighborhood, such as danger and neighborhood rates of youth substance use problems; however, differential influences of perceptions of other features of the neighborhood have remained unexplored.

Hypotheses

The conceptual model guiding analyses is depicted in Figure 1. This article addresses the following four aims: (1) to examine the relationship between perceived neighborhood problems and youth alcohol use, (2) to examine the relationship between perceived neighborhood problems and delinquency, (3) to examine the relative importance of youths' own perception of their neighborhood, compared to mothers' perceptions, in youths' alcohol use and delinquency, and (4) to assess the association of individual background factors with youths' outcomes and mothers' and youths' perceived neighborhood problems.

Based on neighborhood disorganization theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942) and prior research (Elliott et al., 1996; Lambert et al., 2004; Scheier et al., 1999), it was hypothesized that perceived neighborhood problems would be associated with higher levels of youth alcohol use and higher levels of delinquency. Because the current sample includes mothers who were selected from alcohol treatment facilities and from the community, treatment status and mothers' level of heavy drinking were also included in the model to control for these influences. It was expected that perceived neighborhood problems would be related to youth outcomes even with mothers' treatment status and heavy drinking included in the model.

Consistent with prior work showing that youths' and parents' perceptions of the same construct vary significantly (Howard et al., 1999), it was hypothesized that youths' and mothers' perceptions would be differentially related to youth outcomes. In addition, as youth grow into adolescence, they are likely to have opportunity to move about through their neighborhood without parental supervision (Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984), so it is possible that they are exposed to characteristics of their neighborhood of which their parents are not aware. Thus, it was hypothesized that youths' perceptions would be more strongly related to their outcomes, as compared to mothers' perceptions.

Previous studies also suggest that individual background characteristics may be important factors in youth alcohol use and delinquency. For example, socioeconomic status (SES) is related to higher rates of youth general problem behavior (Barry, Dunlap, Cotton, Lochman, & Wells, 2005), although findings regarding SES and youth alcohol use specifically are mixed (Geckova, van Dijk, Groothoff, & Post, 2002; Karvonen & Rimpela, 1996). Studies report that ethnicity is associated with delinquency, in that minority youth are more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system (Iguchi, Bell, Ramchand, & Fain, 2005). Similarly, ethnic differences in adolescent alcohol use have been reported. Specifically, White and Native American adolescents report the highest levels of use and African-Americans and Asian-Americans report the lowest (e.g., Neumark-Sztainer, Story, French,

Cassuto, Jacobs, & Resnick, 1996; Vega, Zimmerman, Warheit, Apospori, & Gil, 1993). Adolescent gender is also associated with problem behaviors, in that boys report more delinquent behaviors (Calvete & Cardenoso, 2005), but findings regarding gender differences for alcohol use are inconsistent (Donovan, 2004; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 1996). A relationship between older child age and increased alcohol use and delinquency has been documented (e.g., SAMHSA, 2005). Maternal age is also associated with youth outcomes, with children of older mothers displaying fewer problem behaviors (Brooks-Gunn & Furstenberg, 1986).

In addition to the relation of individual background factors to youth outcomes, these characteristics might also be important in shaping neighborhood perceptions, as experiences and interpretations may vary according to these factors. For example, being lower income, older age, unmarried, and female is associated with greater neighborhood fear (Will & McGrath, 1995), while being younger, female, separated or divorced (as compared to widowed), and a minority is associated with perceptions of greater neighborhood disorder (Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004). Therefore, it was hypothesized that individual background factors would affect youth outcomes both directly and indirectly, by affecting neighborhood perceptions, which in turn are related to youth outcomes.

Methods

Sample and Procedures

As part of a larger study originally designed to assess the effects of mothers' alcohol use on their children's behavior, 499 mother-child dyads in western New York provided information about perceptions of their neighborhood, alcohol use, and delinquency through separate in-person interviews (Miller, 2004). Mothers in the sample were selected from outpatient alcohol treatment facilities and from the community. Community recruitment proceeded in two ways: (1) recruitment from newspapers and (2) recruitment from random digit dialed households matched to treatment and heavy drinkers. These women were then screened to determine whether they had sufficient alcohol involvement to be placed into a community heavy drinking group who were not in treatment for drinking problems or whether they were placed in a community comparison group that had low alcohol and drug involvement. Women who called the study were screened to determine whether they drank four or more drinks one or more times per week, drank three or more drinks at least five times per week, screened positively on the TWEAK (Russell, 1995), a brief screening instrument used to assess the risk of drinking and alcohol abuse or dependence, and to confirm that they had not received alcohol treatment in the past 3 years.

Eighty-four mothers were recruited from outpatient alcohol treatment facilities and 415 mothers were recruited from the community (175 were heavy drinkers and 240 had low involvement with alcohol or drugs). As part of the criteria for each of these groups, women had to have at least one child aged 10 to 16 who was willing to participate in the study. This child was eligible if he or she had been living with his/her mother over the past 6 months, or had had regular and consistent contact with her (defined as at least one contact per week, with a minimum of one hour per contact). If there was more than one eligible child residing

with the mother, one child was randomly chosen. A total of 499 youth were included in the study. Separate face-to-face interviews were conducted with youth and their mothers.

Slightly more than half of the youth (56%) were female. Their ages ranged from 10 to 16 (mean = 13.3; SD = 2). They were 42.2% African-American, 40.1% non-Hispanic white, 3.5% Native American, 2.9% Hispanic, and 11.3% other ("other" included other races and multi-ethnicity). Mothers' ages ranged from 26 to 56 (mean = 39.0; SD = 5.8). Thirty-six percent of mothers had less than a high-school education, 3.9% completed 12 years or had graduated from high school, 45.1% had 13 to 15 years of education, 8.4% completed 16 years or a 4-year college degree, and 7.2% had more than 16 years. Family income, on average, was \$31,505 (SD = \$28,427).

Measures

Youths' alcohol use—Responses to six questions were used to assess youths' alcohol use in the past 6 months. Youth were asked three items about their frequency of drinking beer, wine/wine coolers, and liquor in the past 6 months, with responses ranging from "never" to "daily" along an 8-point scale. They were also asked three items about their usual quantity consumed for each alcoholic beverage per drinking day, with responses ranging from "none or less than one can a day" to "over eight cans a day", on a 10-point scale. Although data was also collected regarding lifetime alcohol use, use during the past 6 months was used for analyses in order to correspond as closely as possible to the "present" timeframe of the neighborhood perception scale. Quantity-frequency indicators were computed for beer, wine/wine coolers and liquor and were summed to indicate an overall level of alcohol use in the past 6 months. This alcohol use measure was log transformed prior to analyses because of skewness.

Delinquency—Delinquency was measured using questions adapted from Elliott, Ageton, Huizinga, Knowles, and Canter (1983). Youth indicated whether they had participated in any of 23 behaviors, including delinquent acts and status type offenses. These items were further broken down into seven types: status type offenses (skipping school), relatively minor theft (e.g., shoplifting), serious theft (e.g., trying to steal a car), interpersonal violence (e.g., threatening someone with a knife), destruction of property (e.g., vandalism), disorderly conduct (getting in trouble for loud or rowdy behavior in public), and drug-related behaviors (e.g., selling alcohol or other drugs). A count of the types of delinquent behavior reported in the last 6 months (ranging from zero to seven) was generated to indicate an overall level of delinquent behavior.

Perceived neighborhood problems—Measures of perceived neighborhood problems were adapted from Elliott et al. (1983). The original instrument asks about the "neighborhood where you live" and consists of 31 items that ask "whether you think each is a problem in your neighborhood," with responses ranging from "not a problem" to "big problem" along a 3-point scale, so that responses provide a rating of current problems in the neighborhood. For the present study, 26 items from the Elliott et al. instrument regarding the following neighborhood dimensions were assessed: social disorganization (seven items, e.g., ethnic/cultural groups who don't get along with each other), structural or system problems

(six items, e.g., city officials ignoring problems), physical disorganization (three items, e.g., abandoned buildings or houses), and crime/victimization (10 items, e.g., burglaries and thefts in the neighborhood). Two new items relating to criminal activities (drive-by shootings and drug houses/crack houses) were added. Both mothers and youth were asked to provide their own perceptions of the neighborhood. These items showed high internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .95$ for youth and $.96$ for mothers). For both mothers and youth, latent variables were constructed for perceived neighborhood problems in the data analyses.

Mothers' substance use—The Time Line Follow Back (TLFB) method (Sobell, Maisto, Sobell, & Cooper, 1979; Sobell & Sobell, 1992; Sobell & Sobell, 1996) was used to measure mothers' heavy drinking. Using a calendar timeline method to increase accuracy of recall, respondents were asked to report their alcohol use over a 6-month period. Mothers were asked to write on a calendar how many drinks they had each day during the past 6 months. Measures indicating the total number of days of heavy drinking *per month* during the past 6 months were obtained. Heavy drinking was defined as four or more drinks in one day. Across the 6 months, Cronbach's α was $.96$ for number of heavy drinking days each month. Thus, a mean score for monthly heavy drinking days was calculated and log transformed (due to data skewness) prior to analyses.

Mothers' illicit drug use was measured using questions adapted from the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (Office of Applied Studies, SAMHSA, 1997). Frequency of use of 11 non-prescribed illicit drugs over the past 6 months was obtained, with responses ranging from "0 days in the past 6 months" to "Every day or almost every day" along a 9-point scale. A sum score was computed across the 11 drugs to indicate an overall level of illicit drug use for the past 6 months. This measure was then log transformed due to data skewness.

Background variables—Background variables include mothers' reports of family income, age and educational achievement (high school or less = 1, some college or more = 0) and youths' reports of age, sex (male = 1), and ethnicity (White = 1). Family income was log-transformed.

Data Analysis Plan

Descriptive statistics provided an overview of mothers' and youths' characteristics, alcohol use, delinquency, and mothers' substance use. Measures of perceived neighborhood problems were examined using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Youths' and mothers' models were first solved separately. Multi-group analyses then tested the invariance of the latent mean structure of perceived neighborhood problems across mothers' and youths' models. A structural model was then constructed to examine the relationship between perceived neighborhood problems and youth alcohol use and delinquency, taking into account background information reported by mothers and youth (e.g., family income, mothers' and youths' age) Considering that mothers' involvement in treatment might have a significant impact on youth behaviors that may not be captured by measures of mothers' substance use behavior, a variable indicating "in treatment" was also included in the model as one background variable. All analyses were conducted using maximum likelihood

method implemented with EQS (Bentler, 1985–2004). Missing data were replaced through the expectation-maximization imputation missing data procedure implemented in EQS. Lagrange Multiplier (LM) tests and Wald test were used to help solve the models. Per Hu and Bentler's (1999) recommendation, the ML-based comparative fit index (CFI) and root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) were used to evaluate model fit. A CFI value close to .95 and a RMSEA value close to .06 are considered as an indication of good model fit. Because the data were not normally distributed, robust estimates of the standard errors were obtained.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

Youths' alcohol use and delinquency—About one-fifth (21%) of youths reported using alcohol in the last 6 months. About two-fifths (41.5%) of the youths reported engaging in an overall index of delinquency in the last 6 months. Specifically, 16% reported skipping school, 6.2% reported engaging in minor theft, 6.8% in serious theft, 18.4% in interpersonal violence, 4.8% in the destruction of property, 20.4% in disorderly conduct, and 3.4% in drug-related problem behavior.

Mothers' substance use—Most mothers (80.5%) reported alcohol use in the past 6 months. On average, mothers reported 5.25 (SD = 7.58) days of alcohol use and 3.04 (SD = 5.90) days of heavy alcohol use per month over the last 6 months. About three-quarters of mothers (76%) reported lifetime illicit drug use and 21% used illicit drugs in the past 6 months.

Mothers' and youths' perceptions of neighborhood problems—For both mothers and youth, responses to all items ranged from one to three ("not a problem" to "big problem"). The characteristic the youth found to be the least problematic in their neighborhoods was feeling "unsafe being on the streets during the day", with 16.7% reporting that this was somewhat or a big problem. In contrast, youth felt that two items were the biggest problems in their neighborhoods: 1) "drunks/winors and/or junkies" and 2) "groups of teenagers hanging out in public making a nuisance of themselves." About half (52.4%) of youth felt that drunks/junkies were somewhat or a big problem and 56.7% said that teens making a nuisance were somewhat or a big problem in their neighborhood.

The characteristic that mothers found to be the least problematic in their neighborhood was "organized crime," with 10.6% feeling that it was somewhat or a big problem in their neighborhood. On the contrary, mothers considered "unsupervised children" to be the biggest problem in their neighborhoods with over half (56.9%) reporting that this was somewhat or a big problem.

Measurement Model for Perceived Neighborhood Problems

Four latent variables representing the four dimensions of perceived neighborhood problems (as described in the measures section) were constructed using CFA. This four-factor model fit the youth data well (CFI = .93; RMSEA = .045 [90% CI = .040 – .050]). The high

correlations between the four factors ($r = .85-.98$), however, suggested that a one-factor model may fit the data as well, which was later confirmed by a one-factor model ($CFI = .92$; $RMSEA = .047$ [90% CI = $.043 - .052$]). Similarly, CFA with mothers' perceptions showed that the four-factor model fit mothers' data well ($CFI = .92$; $RMSEA = .050$ [90% CI = $.046 - .055$]); the four factors were highly correlated ($r = .91-.98$), and the one-factor model fit the data as well ($CFI = .92$; $RMSEA = .051$ [90% CI = $.046 - .056$]). One latent variable each was constructed to represent youths' and mothers' perceived neighborhood problems in further data analyses.

Testing for Invariant Latent Mean Structures

Multi-group analyses tested the invariance of the latent mean structure of perceived neighborhood problems by placing equality constraints on indicator factor loadings and indicator mean scores across mothers and youth. The fully-constrained model fit the data reasonably well ($CFI = .90$; $RMSEA = .040$ [90% CI = $.038 - .042$]). LM tests indicated that 24 equality constraints (out of 55) were not reasonable. Releasing these 24 constraints significantly improved the model fit by a χ^2 difference of 328.26 and $CFI = .91$, $RMSEA = .035$ (90% CI = $.033 - .038$). Results from the multi-group analyses are presented in Table 1.

The analyses indicated that two items loaded more strongly in the mothers' model. Conversely, nine items loaded more strongly in the youths' model. An examination of item means showed that 13 item means significantly differed between mothers and youth. On average, mothers considered one item (high unemployment) more of a problem in the neighborhood than did their children. In contrast, youth considered 12 items to be more of a problem than did their mothers. Although the mean scores of these items significantly differed between mothers and youth, the difference in the overall mean scores for the latent variable did not differ significantly ($Mean_{mother} - Mean_{youth} = .02$, $S.E. = .04$, $z = .60$).

The correlations among key variables were investigated next. As shown in Table 2, mothers' and youths' perceived neighborhood problems were moderately correlated ($r = .45$). The correlations between perceptions and other variables were similar for youths and mothers. Mothers' perceived neighborhood problems, however, were not significantly related to either youths' alcohol use or delinquency. In contrast, youths' perceived neighborhood problems were significantly related to delinquency, but not to alcohol use.

Structural Equation Modeling Analysis

The structural model was then specified wherein youths' alcohol use and delinquency were predicted by youths' and mothers' perceived neighborhood problems, which were predicted by background variables. All background variables were allowed to covary with each other. In addition, the disturbance terms for the latent variables of mothers' and youths' neighborhood perceptions were allowed to covary. Similarly, the residuals of youths' alcohol use and delinquency were allowed to covary. Consistent with the bivariate analyses, neither mothers' nor youths' neighborhood perceptions were significantly associated with youth alcohol use. However, youths' perceptions of neighborhood problems were significantly related to delinquency (unstandardized coefficient = $.702$, $z = 4.110$), while mothers' perceptions were not (unstandardized coefficient = $-.451$, $z = -1.424$). These two

path coefficients were statistically compared and results indicated that they were not statistically equal. Subsequently, nonsignificant predictors were dropped from the model. Figure 2 depicts the final structural model. The model fit the data well. Table 3 presents the standardized and unstandardized coefficients and the standard error for this model. Youth alcohol use was significantly predicted by (youth) age, whereas delinquency was significantly predicted by youths' age and perceived neighborhood problems. Further, three youth neighborhood perception indicators had additional significant contributions to delinquency: poor schools, drug use or dealing in the open, and drug/crack houses.

Discussion

Our findings indicate that youths' perceptions of neighborhood problems were more important in predicting delinquent behavior than were mothers' perceptions of neighborhood problems. Youth who perceived more neighborhood problems reported higher levels of delinquency. In addition, three indicators of youths' neighborhood perceptions were related positively to delinquency: higher neighborhood levels of poor schools, more awareness of drug use/dealing in the open, and more reports of drug/crack houses. In contrast, mothers' neighborhood perceptions showed no significant relationship to any youth delinquent behaviors.

Youths' perceptions of the "big problems" in their neighborhoods included the presence of drunks/winors and/or junkies, and groups of teenagers hanging out in public places making a nuisance of themselves. Consistent with early work by Lerman (1967), we postulate that youth who are aware of these deviant groups may be so because they have already begun to engage in problem behaviors that bring them in contact with these groups. If this is the case, then awareness of these groups in the neighborhood may be a good non-obvious indicator for greater potential problem behavior for the youth, such as delinquency and alcohol use.

Given that maternal neighborhood perceptions were unrelated to youth delinquency or youth alcohol use, our findings underscore the importance of assessing youths' perceptions of neighborhoods. Although the overall measure of perceived neighborhood problems did not significantly differ for mothers and youths, almost half of the individual items did significantly differ. In all but one case, items were perceived as greater problems by youths than by mothers. Although these findings contrast Duncan et al.'s (2002) findings that adults perceive greater neighborhood problems, they are consistent with prior work showing that children rate more life events and greater extent of exposure to violence than their parents (Howard et al., 1999; Johnston et al., 2003). This discordance might result from differing parental and youth interpretations of the same neighborhood features. Even if adults view a neighborhood as a low-problem area, if youth interpret their neighborhood negatively, their behavior may be influenced. Alternatively, discordance might result from exposure to different aspects of the neighborhood. Because adolescents tend to spend less time under parental supervision (Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984), they may be exposed to pockets or features of their neighborhood unknown to their parents.

Perhaps it is not surprising that youths' perceptions of their neighborhood, rather than mothers' perceptions, are related to their own reports of their behavior, given possible bias

due to common method variance (Doty & Glick, 1998). This relationship could reflect the tendency for the same person to respond to multiple scales in the same way, since youth assessed both their neighborhood perceptions and behavior. However, although common method variance often inflates observed relationships by the same respondent, it can also deflate observed relationships depending on the scale used to measure each construct (Doty & Glick, 1998). Moreover, different ratings by different respondents could be due to substantive differences in the personal experiences of raters (Avolio, Yammarino, & Bass, 1991).

Although these findings point to the importance of including youths' assessments of neighborhoods, they also highlight challenges for prevention. One of the most consistent findings across numerous studies is that greater levels of parental monitoring are associated with lower levels of problem behaviors among youth (e.g., Parker & Benson, 2004; Reifman, Barnes, Dintcheff, Farrell, & Uhteg, 1998). Awareness of neighborhood problems among parents might increase the monitoring behavior of parents. However, if parents are not aware of environmental features that cause problems for their children, it is difficult to intervene by encouraging parents to increase protective behaviors in problem environments. Perhaps prevention programs should focus on helping parents to understand how their children perceive their surroundings and becoming aware of the stressors and negative role models their children may be exposed to in their neighborhood. The extent to which parents talk to their children about neighborhood issues and problems is unclear. However, emphasizing parent-child communication in prevention programs may be beneficial for assisting youth to stay clear of sources of neighborhood dangers. Awareness of youth stressors is related to increased protective parenting strategies and better youth adjustment (Hartos & Power, 1997).

Neither youth nor maternal neighborhood perceptions were associated with youth alcohol use. This finding contrasts with prior studies that have found perceptions of neighborhood problems to be related to greater substance use (e.g., Duncan et al., 2002; Lambert et al., 2004; Scheier et al., 1999). However, levels of alcohol use in the current sample were low and youth in this sample may be too young for this pattern to have emerged. Results may differ from previous studies because different definitions of neighborhood problems were used. For example, Duncan et al. (2002) assessed perceived neighborhood problems by asking about drug use or availability in the neighborhood, while the current study used a composite measure of neighborhood problems. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the specific influence of those neighborhood characteristics.

Although Lambert et al. (2004) defined neighborhood problems in a way similar to the present study, their study included minorities only, as did Scheier et al.'s (1999), making it difficult to compare findings. In addition, although perceived neighborhood problems were not associated with youth alcohol use, their association with delinquency is important, because prior research has shown that general problem behavior is related to the later development of substance use problems (Taylor, Malone, Iacono, & McGue, 2002; van den Bree & Pickworth, 2005). Although mothers in treatment and mothers not in treatment differed on demographic variables, these differences were not significantly related to youth outcomes. Mothers' drug use and heavy alcohol use were not related to youth outcomes in

this study, in contrast to prior studies showing that youth whose parents frequently use alcohol or drugs or are substance abusing/dependent are more likely to report drinking more frequently (Chalder, Elgar, & Bennett, 2006) and to report behavioral and emotional problems (Christensen & Bilenberg, 2000). Since youth in the current sample were on average only 13, it is possible that problems related to maternal substance use have not yet manifested.

Demographic variables included in the model were associated with youth outcomes and neighborhood perceptions. As expected, child age was associated with youths' alcohol use and delinquency, with older youth reporting higher levels of each, as has been previously documented (e.g., Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2005). Consistent with prior research (Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004), mothers' older age and non-minority status were related to youths' perceptions of fewer neighborhood problems. Youths whose mothers were more educated also perceived fewer neighborhood problems. Prior studies have shown that higher educational levels of residents are associated with lower levels of neighborhood problems (Datcher, 1982).

The findings of this study should be interpreted with its limitations in mind. Not all aspects of the neighborhood were assessed, including some organizational features such as social capital and collective efficacy. Such features of neighborhoods have been found to be related to youth substance use (Ennett et al., 1997) and other problem behavior (Elliott et al., 1996; Rankin & Quane, 2002). Another limitation of the current study is that the length of time residing in the neighborhood was not assessed. Some families might have lived in their neighborhood for many years, while others might be new residents. Greater duration of exposure to a stressful environment is related to greater behavior problems (Grant, O'Koon, Davis, Roache, Poindexter, Armstrong et al., 2000). The cross-sectional nature of the data presented is another limitation, as causality cannot be determined. Future work should include examining these relationships across time to allow a better understanding of causal ordering.

Despite its limitations, this study demonstrates the importance of youth perceptions of neighborhood problems in youth delinquency. These findings suggest that youths' own views of their environments are more important than those of mothers in determining involvement in delinquency. Future research should examine the factors that determine youths' perceptions of neighborhoods. For example, certain life experiences or specific interactions in the neighborhood, such as time spent with deviant neighborhood peers or personal victimization experiences may be important in influencing how youth view their surroundings.

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Figure 1.
Conceptual Model of Neighborhood Perceptions, Youth Alcohol Use, and Delinquency.

Figure 2.

Final Structural Model of Neighborhood Perceptions, Youth Alcohol Use, and Delinquency. Standardized coefficients are shown. Not shown in the figure are the covariances between constructs on the far left side and the associations of three specific neighborhood problems with delinquency. Model fit: CFI = .92; RMSEA = .04 (90% CI = .036 –.043). * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Table 1
Testing Latent Mean Structural Invariance between Mothers' and Youths' Perceptions of Neighborhood Problems

	Mother Model				Youth Model			
	Unstandardized factor loadings	Standardized factor loadings	Item Means	Unstandardized factor loadings	Standardized factor loadings	Item Means	Item Means	
a. Ethnic/racial groups don't get along	<u>.32</u>	.36	1.25	<u>.71</u>	.54	1.42	1.42	
b. Little respect for rules, laws, & authority [†]	1.00	.75	1.72	1.00	.67	1.72	1.72	
c. Drunks/winors, junkies	1.12	.80	1.64	1.12	.71	1.78	1.78	
d. Prostitution	.75	.69	1.26	.75	.64	1.26	1.26	
e. Transients, street people	.73	.70	1.29	.73	.60	1.41	1.41	
f. Unsupervised children	.87	.64	1.74	.87	.61	1.74	1.74	
g. Teens hanging out in public making a nuisance	<u>.94</u>	.69	1.69	<u>.81</u>	.55	1.78	1.78	
h. High unemployment	<u>1.00</u>	.69	1.75	<u>.72</u>	.54	1.51	1.51	
i. City officials ignore problems	.99	.70	1.62	.99	.66	1.62	1.62	
j. Public transportation not available	<u>.17</u>	.19	1.22	<u>.61</u>	.52	1.34	1.34	
k. Police do not care about our problems	.88	.73	1.44	.88	.65	1.44	1.44	
l. Poor schools	<u>.64</u>	.50	1.46	<u>.83</u>	.61	1.46	1.46	
m. Police are not available	<u>.67</u>	.62	1.33	<u>.85</u>	.67	1.33	1.33	
n. Vandalism	<u>.93</u>	.72	1.60	<u>1.07</u>	.72	1.68	1.68	
o. Abandoned buildings or houses	.95	.74	1.44	.95	.66	1.60	1.60	
p. Rundown buildings, poorly kept yards	.99	.78	1.50	.99	.68	1.60	1.60	
q. Sexual assaults or rapes	<u>.42</u>	.52	1.19	<u>.79</u>	.65	1.32	1.32	
r. Burglaries and thefts	.80	.67	1.54	.80	.61	1.54	1.54	
s. Illegal gambling	<u>.74</u>	.70	1.27	<u>.97</u>	.70	1.44	1.44	
t. Organized crime	<u>.42</u>	.53	1.14	<u>.73</u>	.66	1.25	1.25	
u. Assaults, muggings	.86	.80	1.33	.86	.72	1.33	1.33	
v. Delinquent gangs	<u>.76</u>	.66	1.36	<u>1.04</u>	.75	1.52	1.52	

	Mother Model			Youth Model		
	Unstandardized factor loadings	Standardized factor loadings	Item Means	Unstandardized factor loadings	Standardized factor loadings	Item Means
w. <u>Drug use or drug dealing in the open</u>	1.16	.82	1.64	1.16	.74	1.64
x. <u>Selling of stolen goods</u>	1.04	.85	1.42	1.04	.77	1.42
y. <u>Unsafe out along at night</u>	.96	.72	1.66	.96	.67	1.66
z. <u>Unsafe out on the street during daytime</u>	.59	.66	1.21	.59	.59	1.21
aa. <u>Drug/crack houses</u>	1.19	.85	1.56	1.19	.80	1.56
bb. <u>Drive-by shooting</u>	.71	.67	1.24	.71	.66	1.24

Note.

[†]Unstandardized factor loading was fixed at 1.0.

The underlined factor loadings are not statistically equal between mother and child. The bolded mean scores are not statistically equal between mother and child. For better model fit, the measurement models also contained the following error covariances: (b,n), (f,g), (i,k), (k,m), (l,m), (o,p), (q,bb), (r,u), (t,bb), (w,aa).

Table 2

Bivariate Correlations among Key Constructs

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Family income												
2. Mothers' age	.06											
3. Mothers' education (H.S. = 1)	-.30 [‡]	-.17 [‡]										
4. Youths' gender (male =1)	-.03	-.05	.05									
5. Youths' age	.01	.25 [‡]	.02	-.21 [‡]								
6. Youths' ethnicity (White = 1)	.25 [‡]	.24 [‡]	-.20 [‡]	-.03	.03							
7. Mother in treatment	-.31 [‡]	-.13 [‡]	.19 [‡]	-.05	-.00	-.23 [‡]						
8. Mothers' heavy drinking	-.15 [‡]	-.14 [‡]	.13 [‡]	-.02	-.06	-.19 [‡]	.23 [‡]					
9. Mothers' illicit drug use	-.26 [‡]	-.17 [‡]	.19 [‡]	-.08	-.05	-.17 [‡]	.52 [‡]	.46 [‡]				
10. Mothers' perceived neighborhood problems	-.19 [‡]	-.19 [‡]	.21 [‡]	-.03	-.02	-.43 [‡]	.10 [*]	.20 [‡]	.25 [‡]			
11. Youths' perceived neighborhood problems	-.18 [‡]	-.22 [‡]	.18 [‡]	.05	-.08	-.36 [‡]	.16 [‡]	.13 [‡]	.16 [‡]	.45 [‡]		
12. Youths' alcohol use	-.01	.12 [‡]	-.06	-.01	.28 [‡]	.03	.04	-.04	.00	-.03	.01	
13. Youths' delinquency	-.00	-.02	.06	-.00	.22 [‡]	-.09 [*]	.07	.09	.12 [‡]	.02	.19 [‡]	.39 [‡]

*
 $p < .05$,[‡]
 $p < .01$,[‡]
 $p < .001$.

Table 3

Results from the Final Structural Model of Neighborhood Perceptions, Youth Alcohol Use, and Delinquency

Dependent Variables/Predictors	Standardized Coefficient	Unstandardized Coefficient	S.E.
Youths' perceived neighborhood problems			
Mothers' age	-.134 [†]	-.009	.003
Mothers' education (H.S. = 1)	.095 [*]	.072	.033
Youths' ethnicity (White = 1) ($R^2 = .16$)	-.313 [‡]	-.237	.035
Youths' alcohol use			
Youths' age ($R^2 = .08$)	.278 [‡]	.037	.007
Youths' delinquency			
Youths' perceived neighborhood problems	.173 [‡]	.528	.140
Youths' age	.190 [‡]	.106	.023
Poor schools	.110 [*]	.220	.092
Drug use/dealing in the open	.115 [†]	.235	.091
Drug/crack houses ($R^2 = .12$)	.151 [‡]	.358	.105

Note. Model fit: CFI = .92; RMSEA = .040 (90% CI = .036 – .043).

^{*}
 $p < .05$,

[†]
 $p < .01$,

[‡]
 $p < .001$.