Overlapping and Disconnected Social Spheres: A Multi-contextual Model of the Link Between School Choice and Neighborhood Effects on Adolescents

By

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Abstract

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Because of the rise of public school choice programs, children who share a neighborhood are increasingly going to different schools. I explore the effects of overlapping and disconnected neighborhood and school spheres via two linked questions; first, whether and how the conjuncture/disjuncture of neighborhoods and schools affects the types of friendship opportunities available to students both at school and within their residential areas; and second, whether and how the conjuncture/disjuncture of neighborhoods and schools mediate children’s exposure to neighborhood disadvantages like violence. What I find is that school choice amplifies the disadvantages that children encounter in their neighborhoods by fragmenting local adolescent community networks and exacerbating the violent conditions that children face at their neighborhood schools.

My data consists of 74 in-depth interviews with students from five public high schools in Philadelphia. Of these students, 45 attend a public magnet high school; the remaining 29 student interviewees live in the same neighborhoods as my magnet school sample but attend neighborhood schools in their local areas.

My findings suggest that school choice policies concentrate the advantages of children who are able to exercise choice while leaving behind a substantially larger population of children who are consigned to local schools that contend with a disproportionate load of student misconduct and school violence. Instead of closing educational gaps for all, these reforms further stratify poor neighborhoods by creating a new class of even more disadvantaged children who are becoming increasingly disconnected from positive peer role models both within their neighborhoods and at school.
In loving memory of my brave and visionary parents,
Tai Tran and Hia Quach,
and
To Kyle, keeper of my heart
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Chapter 1: Introduction

One hot summer evening in a neighborhood in West Philadelphia, Tamicka and her friend stepped outside to get some relief from the oppressive humidity. Propped against her backyard fence with a water ice in one hand, her cell phone in the other, she and her friend waved and smiled at her neighbors in the adjacent yard. They chatted about this and that when suddenly gunshots pierced the air.

I was just talking and the next [thing] I know they start shooting. It was so loud. We didn’t know where it was coming from. Everybody was just looking around. We didn’t know which way to run because you know it’s loud. … And then it was like guys behind me shooting at people that were in front of me. So then I turned this way to go run and then it just hit me. And I was like, oh my god, I’m shot.

One of those bullets tore through Tamicka’s thigh. The bullet went in one side, out the other. She says she feels lucky to have survived, “It’s like 30 something shots, and I was the only one that got shot. And I only got shot one time.”

Violent episodes like this one do not happen regularly in Tamicka’s neighborhood but neither are they rare: “I can’t really say it’s really too bad around my neighborhood. It’s just like when something happens, it’s really bad.” Still, Tamicka would rather live elsewhere: “I would really want to move. My mom, she really wants to move…now when I go outside, she’s like, she needs to know where I’m at. And how long I’m going to be there. And when I’m going home.” Despite a heightened sense of fear, Tamicka and her family—too poor to move—still live in the same neighborhood, in the same house, where she got shot.

But unlike her neighborhood peers who go to the equally dangerous local school, Tamicka gets a reprieve from violence at Center City Magnet [CCM], a highly selective high school located in a safe, quiet area much different from the one in which she lives. She also gets a break from danger because she spends most of her time in after-school activities located outside of her neighborhood.

It [getting shot] actually did change me. Because it made me feel like wow, like I really can leave here anytime now. You know like, it’s kinda like a wakeup call. Actually pushed me to do more actually. Do more in terms of everything. Like being involved. Just in general. Extracurricular activities. … Just building experience.

Going to a school located beyond her home area and spending time in extralocal activities after school means she spends less and less time in her neighborhood.

Conjuncture/disjuncture of neighborhoods and schools

Tamicka is one of a growing number of students who exercise school choice. Indeed, the traditional link between neighborhoods and schools is increasingly being broken. The rise of public school choice programs—from voucher, controlled choice desegregation, and transfer programs to magnet and charter schools—is giving students the option of attending schools outside of their home areas. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the number of students enrolled in public charter schools more than quintupled, from 0.3 million to 1.6 million, between 1999 and 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics 2012). Additionally, major

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1 Water ice is what Philadelphians call sorbet.
recent school closures in cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington D.C. are forcing a rising number of students to attend schools outside of their neighborhoods. Whether by choice or by force, the end result is the same: increasingly, students sharing a neighborhood are going to different schools. Does this conjuncture/disjuncture of neighborhoods and schools matter?

Children are, in fact, exposed to two environments, the neighborhood and the school. We need to understand how children’s selection into different school contexts amplifies or weakens the disadvantages, like exposure to violence, which children living in poor urban neighborhoods encounter. Indeed, the school choice movement rests on the premise that we can reduce the social isolation of poor, segregated communities and buffer children from distressed neighborhoods by giving them access to high-quality schools with rich peer environments. But critics challenge this assumption, asking questions like, who gets to exercise choice and does choice result in better educational outcomes (e.g., Fuller et al. 1996; Gamoran 1996; Lareau and Goyette 2014; Patillo et al. 2014; Saporito 2003; Saporito and Sohoni 2007)? While certainly important, these questions have overshadowed other equally important concerns about the fundamental relationship between schools and communities and how these two contexts work together to reproduce, intensify, or ameliorate spatial and educational inequities.

Unintended, negative consequences of school choice

Large questions, for example, still remain about the repercussions of choice for poor neighborhoods and the local schools that get left behind. This study argues that school choice may have unintended, negative consequences such as fragmenting local adolescent community networks and exacerbating the violent conditions that children face at their neighborhood schools. I argue that these policies concentrate the advantages of children who are able to exercise choice while leaving behind a substantially larger population of children who are consigned to local schools that contend with a disproportionate load of student misconduct and school violence. Instead of closing educational gaps for all, these reforms further stratify poor neighborhoods by creating a new class of even more disadvantaged children who are becoming increasingly disconnected from positive peer role models both within their neighborhoods and at school. Indeed, this study redirects attention to the fundamental questions about the relationship between schools and communities.

Neighborhood effects: refocusing stalled debates

In examining the interaction between schools and neighborhoods, I also seek to refocus stalled debates about whether neighborhoods matter and nuance our understanding by considering how other social contexts—like schools—moderate neighborhood effects. As Sharkey and Faber (2014) note, because of persistent skepticism about neighborhood effects (NE), scholarship is now preoccupied with a single question—do neighborhoods matter? This one question has moved the debate forward by addressing theoretical and methodological issues about selection bias. However, it has also confined researchers to very narrow approaches seeking only yes/no answers (Sharkey and Faber 2014). Either neighborhoods matter or they do not.

More recently, NE scholars have moved towards asking more targeted questions about the conditions under which neighborhoods might matter, including why, how, and for whom (Burdick-Will et al. 2011; Harding et al. 2011; Sampson 2012; Sharkey and Faber 2014; Small and Feldman 2012). This scholarship argues that whether neighborhoods matter or not depends on many factors and cannot be understood with questions that look for simple dichotomous
answers. This approach suggests that residential context effects may be transmitted differently for different subsets of individuals who share the same neighborhood. As Ellen and Turner (2003) note, “the average effects of neighborhood conditions across all households could appear small even though the effects for some subgroups are large” (858). These scholars maintain that inconsistent and mixed results within the literature do not rule out the importance of neighborhood effects. Rather, these findings highlight the need to explore why, how, and for whom results might vary.

Indeed, only focused encounters with adolescents living these experiences can show us how neighborhoods and educational inequality are linked. Certainly, the extant NE literature is rich with data connecting residential context to educational outcomes like childhood IQ, school readiness, test scores, and educational attainment (Ainsworth 2002; Brooks-Gunn et al. 1993; Elliott et al. 1996; Ensminger et al. 1996; Ludwig et al. 2003; Sampson 2008; Sharkey 2006; Sharkey and Elwert 2011). This work—which is primarily quantitative—contributes much to our understanding of the extent to which residential context might influence educational outcomes. However, the bulk of this research remains underspecified (for exceptions see Briggs et al. 2010; Harding 2010; Small 2006). Thus, despite progress in estimating and quantifying neighborhood effects, we still lack empirical data on how neighborhood and educational inequality are connected.

My study provides this empirical data. Drawn from in-depth interviews, my research captures the complexities of neighborhood effects for students who live in the same and/or similar residential areas yet attend different schools. More specifically, my multi-contextual model of neighborhood effects looks at how neighborhood and educational inequality are related by investigating how the conjuncture/disjuncture of neighborhoods and schools moderates 1) the opportunities for children to make and maintain friendships with peers who are both school oriented and stay out of trouble and 2) children’s exposure and behavioral responses to violence at school. When these contexts overlap (as is the case for children who go to local neighborhood schools), children face greater difficulties finding peers who are good role models because alternative schools like magnet schools skim these high-performing students while leaving behind children who do less well in school and who are more apt to get into trouble. Conversely, when these contexts diverge (as is the case for children who go to nonlocal schools), children find reprieve from danger and discover new opportunities to befriend peers who do well in school.

Bridging neighborhood effects and school choice scholarship

Finally, my study seeks to bridge the gap between scholarship on residential effects and school choice (SC). Given the plethora of studies within NE scholarship connecting neighborhood to educational inequality, it is remarkable that school choice remains largely underspecified (for exceptions see Briggs et al. 2010; Harding 2010; Small 2006). Thus, despite progress in estimating and quantifying neighborhood effects, we still lack empirical data on how neighborhood and educational inequality are connected.

For example, Brooks-Gunn et al. (1993) find mixed results on the effects of having affluent neighbors on childhood IQ, teenage births, and school leaving for white vs. black teenagers. In contrast, Ensminger et al. (1996) find that living in a poverty census tract has no effect on the likelihood of high school graduation or school leaving over and above family and individual traits.
unexamined. I argue that schools, not just neighborhoods, structure the way children daily interact in their residential areas by shaping the decisions that children and parents make about how, with whom, and where they spend time. My study seeks to better understand how market-oriented school reforms have disrupted the spatial formation of positive peer networks. Thus, whereas the NE literature is rich with data on how neighborhood context influences the development of peer networks, I find that school context also plays a critical role in shaping the types of friendship opportunities available to students within their residential areas. Understanding how peer networks develop and connect across social spheres like schools and neighborhoods can shed light on how and why neighborhood effects vary for individuals who share a residential context.

Theoretical Overview

How schools moderate neighborhood effects

This study asks, does the conjuncture/disjuncture of schools and neighborhoods moderate the disadvantages that children encounter in their neighborhoods? I answer this question in two parts. First, I consider whether and how the conjuncture/disjuncture of neighborhoods and schools affects the types of friendship opportunities available to students both at school and within their residential areas. Then, I consider whether and how the conjuncture/disjuncture of neighborhoods and schools moderates children’s exposure to neighborhood disadvantages like violence.

Underlying these questions is the idea that children who share a neighborhood receive different dosages of neighborhood disadvantage because they diverge in school contexts. I use the heterogeneity framework put forth by Harding et al. (2011) as a starting point. Harding et al. (2011) hypothesize that the dose of different neighborhood characteristics that an individual receives could vary because of differences in the following:

1) Family resources: Effects vary because families differ in their ability to access resources and to shield their children from negative aspects of their environment.

2) Behavioral adaptations: Youth adopt different responses to neighborhood conditions. These different choices and adaptations can have different consequences.

3) Peer networks: Youth and family make different decisions about how, with whom, and where time is spent. Effects vary depending on who those peers are, the strength of their attachments, and what is transmitted through peer networks.

4) Differences among cities: Effects may vary across cities due to important economic, social, and geographic differences.

My study refines Harding et al.’s model by exploring the role that schools play in moderating the “dose of different neighborhood characteristics that an individual receives.” My model of the relationship between contextual effects and school choice considers: 1) how school and family selection effects result in distinct peer environments at schools for magnet school (MS) and neighborhood (NS) students; 2) how the conjuncture/disjuncture of neighborhood and school shapes the types of friendship opportunities available to students within their residential areas by influencing how, with whom, and where children spend time in their neighborhoods; and 3) how

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3 The few studies that examine this connection focus primarily on how housing considerations often limit school choice decisions (DeLuca and Dayton 2009; Rhodes and DeLuca 2014).
the conjuncture/disjuncture of neighborhood and school exacerbates or weakens children’s flight or fight responses to dangerous school environments.

Research Methodology

Sample

My data consists of 74 in-depth interviews with students from five public high schools in Philadelphia. Of these students, 45 attend Center City Magnet (CCM), a public magnet high school known for its racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity. The remaining 29 student interviewees live in the same neighborhoods as my MS interviewees but attend neighborhood schools (NS) in their local areas. Table A.1 in Appendix A provides basic demographic characteristics of the adolescents who participated in this study.

CCM makes an ideal case because it draws students from diverse residential areas. In 2009, approximately 1,500 students from over 60 feeder schools (including public, private, parochial, and charter schools) applied to CCM. See Appendix B for information on how school choice works in Philadelphia and Appendix C for admission criteria for CCM. The neighborhood schools—Banks, March, Juniper, and Shelley—are located in various parts of the city. Table 2.1 presents data on basic student demographics for all schools.

Defining neighborhoods

The dilemma over how to define neighborhoods has long plagued community researchers. Even the term neighborhood itself has proven contentious. In their review of neighborhood studies, and writing almost a half century apart, Keller (1968) and Sharkey and Faber (2014) find substantial variation in the ways researchers understand the concept of neighborhood. Keller contends that scholars generally define neighborhoods by either physical

4 The names of students, schools, and neighborhoods are pseudonyms. In some instances I have further altered identifying features to protect the anonymity of the participants.
5 The School District of Philadelphia’s magnet school program is part of its efforts to achieve “maximum feasible desegregation,” ordered in 1968 by the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission (a state-authorized, eleven-member panel with legal authority to enforce state statutes prohibiting discrimination). Formally, the magnet school programs aim to integrate schools racially by attracting students from “white” parts of the city and also from private schools. As such, magnet schools do not serve a set catchment area. (Saporito 2003)
6 Sharkey and Faber (2014) prefer the terms residential context and residential environment. They argue that the term neighborhood suggests that the most critical elements of one’s environment are the space and neighbors immediately surrounding one’s home.
7 The bulk of research uses census tracts as proxies for neighborhoods. Census tracts generally contain between 2,500 and 8,000 persons and are designed to be homogeneous with respect to population characteristics, economic status, and living conditions. Thus, while census tracts may reasonably capture the physical dimensions of a neighborhood, they do less well describing its social dimensions. Small and Newman (2001) argue that census tracts may be inadequate proxies because the perceptions of local residents regarding the contours of their neighborhoods may determine how the neighborhood affects them. Additionally, Sampson et al. (2002) point out that defining neighborhoods based on census tracts or using higher geographical aggregations may be problematic when the object of interest involves children. Children’s daily activities usually occur on a smaller scale because they have more spatial constraints.

Other strategies include block group and street pattern analyses (Grannis 1998; Sampson et al. 1997). Both methods look at a narrower geographic area of socialization that can then be aggregated to more closely match what locals identify as actual neighborhoods. For example, Grannis uses GIS to define residential units called “tertiary communities” or street blocks that are accessible by pedestrians (i.e., pedestrians can walk through the area without
or social components. Approaches that stress physical components usually view the neighborhood as an area or a place within a larger entity. This perspective maintains that boundaries—either physical (e.g., streets, railway lines, or parks) or symbolic (e.g., historical and social traditions) and sometimes both—distinguish one neighborhood from another. In contrast, analyses that highlight the social components of neighborhoods focus on how culture determines local boundaries. This approach examines how “shared activities, experiences, values, common loyalties and perspectives, and human networks” define a sub-area (Keller 1968:91). Indeed, as Keller shows, researchers have defined neighborhoods according to their physical and social elements to achieve greater conceptual precision. Yet this operation is risky because it may obscure the relationship between these two elements. Such an approach fails to ask: When do the physical and social components of neighborhoods overlap?

To avoid conflating the physical and social dimensions of neighborhood, I do not impose a strict definition of the term. Instead, I ask students open-ended questions about where they live. Oftentimes, what one student thinks of his or her neighborhood may not match what another student thinks, even if they live just two blocks from each other. Similarly, two students may call their neighborhoods by the same name even though they live in different census tracts. These differences in how individuals define neighborhoods pose considerable theoretical and methodological challenges. This is particularly true for neighborhood comparison studies like this one which tries to move beyond simply linking compositional measures of neighborhood with educational outcomes to understanding how students vary in how they relate to, experience, and respond to their residential environments.

In grouping students into neighborhoods, I thus use several different strategies. First, I match students who overlap in what they define as the borders of their neighborhood. Second, I ask students to name their neighborhoods. Third, if I am unable to match students using their definitions of neighborhood, I match students according to comparable census tracts and school catchment zones. Because my study looks at why and how MS and NS students differ, it is important that my student groupings compare individuals who not only live in comparable census tracts but also within the same neighborhood school catchment zones. In my analysis, I refer to neighborhoods that are much larger than what students identify. I widen the geographic scope largely to protect their anonymity.

**Recruitment**

I first recruited students from CCM. I obtained my student sample four different ways: 1)
flyers disseminated by key school personnel; 2) flyers posted on school-wide and classroom bulletins; 3) announcements made before extracurricular clubs; and 4) snowball reference. Data collection occurred during the 2011-2012 academic year.

I then asked my CCM interviewees to refer a peer who lives in their neighborhood but who attends their local neighborhood school. However, because many of my MS interviewees were not familiar with the other teenagers who both live in their neighborhood and attend their local NS, I obtained very few NS student referrals from them. Ultimately, I recruited the majority of my NS comparison group via the same strategy used to obtain my MS sample. That is, I recruited from within each of the NS school sites. The NS schools in my study are those schools that my CCM interviewees would have attended had they chosen to go to their local school.

Interviews

I began each interview with unstructured questions about friendship, school success, and neighborhood and school safety to allow the respondents’ concerns to emerge. By using open-ended questions, I aimed to give respondents more chances to bring in topics and modes of discourse that are familiar to them. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and took place in a private room at school or at a local café chosen by the subject.8

I coded and analyzed data using Atlas TI qualitative software. I conducted two types of analyses: subject-base (to interrogate each case) and cross-case (to determine relationships and patterns across individuals within particular domains). Coding schemes include: 1) student neighborhood context; 2) student relationships with school peers/teachers/school system/neighborhood adults and peers; and 3) student academic and career ambitions.

Philadelphia

My research questions are particularly relevant for large urban school districts like the School District of Philadelphia (SDP), which has significantly diversified its educational offerings beyond the traditional neighborhood school over the last decade. The district—the eighth largest in the nation—operates on a theory of school reform known as the portfolio or diverse provider model. Under this framework, public education is managed both publicly (e.g., traditional neighborhood public and magnet schools run by a central office) and privately (e.g., charter schools, autonomous schools, and public schools that are privately managed). In 2002, SDP operated just 38 large, comprehensive high schools (PEW 2010). In ten years, the district added 14 high schools, many of which are special-admission schools open to students citywide (SDP High School Directory 2013). Add to these educational options 32 taxpayer-funded charter high schools, the fastest growing educational sector within the city. While the city has lost 26 percent of its K-12 student enrollment since 2003, charter schools (including cybercharters) have experienced considerable growth in student enrollment, up 219 percent over the same period (PEW 2013). Approximately 55,000, or 38 percent, of the city’s total population of school-age children attend these schools. This figure represents the highest proportion of charter school

8 I also invited students to participate in a second interview. I asked students to take digital photographs and/or draw a map of their neighborhood before coming to this interview. During this second interview, I asked students to describe the pictures they took or drew. In particular, I asked them to explain what kinds of things I could learn about their neighborhoods by looking at these pictures. Because the school year was coming to an end, I was only able to conduct a second interview with a small subset of my students (N=8).
students in any district in the nation. Almost one-third (29 percent) of district schools are charter schools.

In addition to facing pressure from alternative schools, the district has closed 30 schools since 2012 in response to severe budgetary crises. The SDP, which is run by five governor- and mayor-appointed officials, is unable to meet the $81 million budget deficit because state law bars non-elected officials from raising taxes. Philadelphia—which faces municipal debt, a dwindling tax base, and obligations to fund pension and healthcare for retirees—is likewise financially crippled and unable to help the cash-strapped SDP (Lyman and Walsh 2013). In 2013, the superintendent borrowed $50 million just so schools could open on time.

In recent years, the district has made drastic cuts to school personnel (including assistant principals, teachers, teacher’s aids, counselors, school police, and school cleaners) and reduced transportation services to avoid financial insolvency. Cuts in basic personnel to ensure student safety and learning and widely-publicized and criticized accounts of how the SDP handles reports of school violence fuels parental concern and exit from the city’s public schools (PEW 2010).

The large exodus of students from neighborhood schools (a report commissioned from the Boston Consulting Group by the SDP estimates that 40 percent of the district’s students will be educated in charters by 2017) thus makes Philadelphia an ideal study site to examine different school contexts—i.e., local vs. nonlocal schools—moderate neighborhood effects.

Organization of Study

This study asks, does the conjuncture/disjuncture of schools and neighborhoods moderate the disadvantages that children encounter in their neighborhoods? I answer this question by first examining whether and how the conjuncture/disjuncture of neighborhoods and schools affects the types of friendship opportunities available to students both at school and within their residential areas. Secondly, I look at whether and how the conjuncture/disjuncture of neighborhoods and schools moderates children’s exposure to neighborhood disadvantages like violence. This study proceeds as follow:

In chapter 2, I examine how school and family selection processes produce different peer environments for MS and NS students. The majority of students at magnet schools follow the school norms set by selective admissions standards; they apply themselves academically and abide by school rules. The more relaxed admissions criteria at NS schools result in a more heterogeneous peer environment; thus, the choice of who to befriend and who to follow becomes murkier at NS schools. I further argue that school choice amplifies the difficulties that NS students face in trying to find peers who are good role models because MSs skim these high-achieving students while leaving behind children who do less well in school and who are more likely to get into trouble. Moreover, I find that small but important differences in family resources—such as, the support of additional family members, better parental mental and physical health, and stable parental employment—sort students into different educational contexts. Youth with additional resources land coveted spots at magnet schools even if they are less academically inclined than their NS peers. This finding suggests that school choice reproduces existing social inequalities.

In chapter 3, I find that extralocal schools help MS children form ties to other academically oriented peers in other neighborhoods, thus concentrating the advantages of these
students. By generating networks outside their neighborhoods, MS youth will often socialize outside their neighborhoods, thereby reducing the chance that they can form ties to other neighborhood kids. The decisions that MS youth and their parents make about how, with whom, and where they spend time consequently reduces the “pool” of high-achieving residential peers available to NS youth, thereby concentrating their disadvantage.

In chapter 4, I examine how variations in responses to violence in school—i.e., whether children decide to isolate from or confront violence—partly depends on the conjuncture and disjuncture of school and neighborhood contexts. I find that NS students are more likely to adopt street-oriented behaviors in school (i.e., fight back and confront) because the violent conditions at school replicate violent conditions at home. In contrast, MS students are less likely to fight in school because school selection effects produce an environment with less student misconduct (as discussed in chapter 2) and because the safe school environment does not replicate violent neighborhood conditions. Thus, my model of how neighborhood violence affects children considers how other contexts—like schools—exacerbates or weakens children’s flight or fight responses to danger.

In chapter 5, I revisit the central argument of this study that the conjuncture/disjuncture of schools and neighborhoods matter because schools moderate children’s exposure to neighborhood disadvantage by concentrating advantages for MS youth while concentrating disadvantages for NS youth. I also explore some of the policy implications of this study.
Chapter 2: School and Family Selection Effects

This chapter looks at the roles that schools and families play in determining what types of school environments children are exposed to. Children who share a neighborhood could be exposed to different school environments when schools intentionally select students with specific profiles (e.g., good grades and no history of misconduct). Moreover, children’s access to these schools could depend on family resources as some families may be better equipped to connect their children to these schools.

What I find is that in school choice systems like Philadelphia—where admission to high-quality, nonlocal schools depends on superior academic and behavioral records—schools choose students and not the other way around. School admission standards and the limited number of seats at these schools inevitably exclude the majority of students. These excluded students end up in neighborhood schools whether by choice or default. Thus, MS and NS students who share a neighborhood are exposed to substantially different peer environments because these schools differ in their selection criteria.

I also find that children’s access to schools depends on subtle but important differences in family resources. Despite living in the same or similar lower-class neighborhoods, MS students benefit from family resources that NS students often do not have. These family resources include smaller households, older siblings, involvement of more than one parental figure, better parental mental and physical health, and parental employment stability. Families with these additional resources are more equipped to connect their students to better schools.

Thus, partly because of school and family selection effects, children who share a neighborhood end up going to schools with drastically different peer environments. As I discuss in more detail later in chapter 4, this conjuncture/disjuncture of neighborhood and school contexts has important consequences for the magnitude of neighborhood effects; children who attend neighborhood schools find themselves doubly exposed to neighborhood disadvantage as they face the same type of violent conditions within their neighborhoods and at school.

Background

The importance of school and family selection

School and family selection matter because they critically determine the types of school environments that children encounter. Indeed, debates on school choice center on the idea that we can reduce social isolation—a key feature of life in poor, segregated neighborhoods—by giving individuals access to more resource-rich communities and by limiting their exposure to distressed environments. However, if differences in both school admission criteria and family resources affect children’s ability to access better schools, then choice is not universal. Such a system fails to ameliorate educational inequities as only some children will benefit from exposure to richer school environments while others remain consigned to the same subpar schools.

School selection
Do students who attend magnet schools experience different school environments because these schools lure the best students away from local schools? Opponents of school choice say yes. They critique alternative schools, like charters and magnets, for skimming off the “cream” of students. They argue that under school choice, schools choose students, not the other way around. These schools select the top students from traditional public schools—or at the very least have little incentive to encourage matriculation of weak students—while leaving behind the disadvantaged students that school choice purports to serve (Bifulco et al. 2009; Epple et al. 2000; Epple and Romano 2002; Lareno-Paquet et al. 2002; Lankford et al. 1995).

In contrast, advocates of school choice point to the potential of market-oriented policies to allow all children access to high-quality schools and peers (e.g., Chubb and Moe 1990; Coons 1970; Coons and Sugarman 1978; Nathan 1996; Viteritti 1999). They maintain that children who live in poor areas should not be forced to attend low-quality schools assigned to their neighborhoods. Instead, young people should have access to the same high-quality school environments enjoyed by the affluent, who have the resources to move to more expensive school districts.

**Family selection**

Even if schools do not discriminate among students, school choice opponents charge that class disparities prevent the free exercise of choice. This research consistently finds that big differences in family resources (i.e., high- vs. low-income) leads to big differences in which schools students select into (e.g., Goyette 2008; Kimelberg 2014; Lareau 2014; Neild 2005; Reay and Ball 1998; Rhodes and DeLuca 2014). Students from poorer, minority families or with less educated parents are underrepresented in public choice programs because they lack the capacity and knowledge to navigate the school choice process and do not have access to reliable information about which schools are good (e.g., Gold et al. 2010; Haxton 2011; Henig 1990, 1995; Kao 2004; Lareau 1989; Schneider et al. 1997; Wells 1993). In contrast, high-resource families are better able to advocate for and broker their children’s access to resources beyond the neighborhood (Burton et al. 1996; Furstenberg 1999; Jarrett 1999).

**Findings**

**School selection: skimming the cream**

The creation of selective admission magnet schools like CCM in Philadelphia emerged from desegregation lawsuits in the 1970s. As white and middle-class students fled to the suburbs, the School District of Philadelphia (SDP) became increasingly segregated. To help attract and retain these students, the city created highly-selective, top magnet schools. Thus, magnets schools arose out of concerns for educational equity (i.e., more racially integrated schools). However, they now contribute to an increasingly tiered school system as not all students who want admission are guaranteed access (see Appendix B for how school choice works in Philadelphia).9

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9 In their analysis of eighth grade applications to district-managed Philadelphia high schools for the 2007-08 school year, Gold et al. (2010) find that most district eighth graders participated in the high school selection process, but fewer than half of them were admitted and enrolled in any of their chosen schools.
Indeed, CCM, which bills itself as a college prep school, awards seats via a careful selection process. Considered a highly-selective school, it routinely attracts top students from across the city. For the 2011-12 school year, it had an acceptance rate of approximately 30 percent and a waitlist of 500. To achieve admission, students must meet several academic and behavioral requirements (see Appendix C for complete description of criteria). These include stellar grades (mostly As and Bs, with the possible exception of one C) and standardized test scores. CCM students must also have exemplary attendance, punctuality, and disciplinary records.

The selection process at CCM produces a student body quite different from those found at NS schools. Table 2.1 compares student demographics across all the schools in my sample. CCM far outstrips local schools in terms of academic achievement. To illustrate, CCM students on average score between the 40th and 44th percentile for verbal SAT scores (476) compared to Shelley (377 or between the 11th and 14th percentile), the next highest-scoring school in my sample. Compared to NSs, almost twice the proportion of CCM students graduate within four years (91 percent compared to 50 percent on average across NSs in my sample). More than 2.5 times the proportion of CCM students (80 percent) attend college compared to NS students (30 percent on average).

Apart from these numbers, students’ accounts reveal two very different types of peer environments at school. Most CCM students describe their classmates as academically motivated students who take their school work seriously. Students carefully pick peers so that they can do well on group projects. They form independent study groups to help keep up with AP classes and help each other on difficult homework assignments. When CCM students encounter classmates who do not do well in school, they complain bitterly about them not belonging at the school. Tamicka, a black junior, says, “Some of the students that’s here are kids that belong in the neighborhood school. That’s just my personal opinion. And then it’s like kids in here getting Fs and things like that. Didn’t you have to have some kind of grades before here to get in here?” Thus, while certainly not all CCM students share the same commitment and approach to school, the student body as a whole projects an air of academic seriousness.

Unlike CCM, which carefully screens out students, NS schools must admit any student who lives within or attends feeder schools within the school’s catchment area. As a result of this more relaxed admissions process, NS schools have more diverse peer environments. Whereas the general consensus at CCM is that students work and try hard, NS students depict their peer environments as more varied. They describe smart classmates who excel in their AP classes and complain about immature peers who take playing “to a whole other level.” They describe peers who try hard and others who routinely disrupt class. NS students like Tyson, a black junior at Juniper who likes school and tries to do well complains about “loud talking, playing, running around, joking and messing.” Indeed, many more NS than MS students describe peers who regularly
Table 2.1 Student demographics by school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Interviewees</th>
<th>Total enrollment</th>
<th>Low income students (%)</th>
<th>Special education students (%)</th>
<th>English language learners (%)</th>
<th>Average student daily attendance (%)</th>
<th>Total suspensions</th>
<th>Average score SAT verbal</th>
<th>Average score SAT math</th>
<th>4-year graduation rate: class of 2011 (%)</th>
<th>College-going rate: class of 2011 (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Center City Magnet Banks</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>664</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>476</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banks</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>590</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>343</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>731</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>215</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Juniper</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1,129</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>481</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shelley</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1,633</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>387</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>382</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: The Philadelphia Public School Notebook. Enrollment, demographic, attendance, and suspension data are from School District of Philadelphia (SDP). Enrollment and demographic data are for 2011-12. Attendance and suspension data are for 2010-11. SAT scores: for the class of 2011 from the PA Department of Education. Graduation rates: based on the cohort of entering 9th graders from Fall 2007, from SDP. Students are attributed to their 9th grade school. College-going rates: for 2011 high school graduates entering college in Fall 2011; National Student Clearinghouse data via SDP.

1Numbers are approximately the correct ones, slightly adjusted to maintain confidentiality.
misbehave, from arguing with teachers, harassing and fighting each other, to cutting classes. Dave, a junior at Banks, says, “In one class, my sixth period class, we had 32 of us in the beginning. Coming down to the end of the month, now it’s only four. Yeah, so dropping out is also a big thing.”

Thus, because of school screening processes, children who live in the same area but go to different schools are exposed to very different peer environments. School selection ensures a more homogeneous peer environment for MS students. Here they meet students who for the most part are focused on doing well in school. In contrast, NS students encounter a more heterogeneous set of peers; thus, they must work harder to sort among the different types of available peer role models. Unlike MS students, NS students are more likely to encounter the same types of peers both at school and in their local areas. Indeed, school selection processes increase the likelihood that NS students will meet peers who do not do well in school and who break school rules because many of the best students have left their local schools for higher-quality ones located elsewhere.

Family selection

Do differences in family resources determine selection into schools? Moreover, how are these family selection effects connected to disparities in the types of peer environments at school? In this section, I explore whether NS environments may be more heterogeneous than MS environments because limitations in family resources make it difficult to connect otherwise high-achieving students to magnet schools.

We already know from the SC literature that family resources play a critical role in whether or not students have access to high-quality schools. However, most of these studies focus on how selection into schools differs for low-income and high-income families. Thus, these theories are unable to explain variations in school selection among individuals of comparable SES who live in the same resource-deficient areas (i.e., areas with low-quality neighborhood schools). In contrast to between-class analyses, I explore whether within-class family differences affect which schools student select into. In particular, I look at variations in family structure, parental education, parental mental and physical health and parental employment stability.

Variations in the family resources of MS and NS students

Two- vs. one-parent households

Table 2.2 shows data on family structure by school type. The majority of MS students (60 percent) live with both of their original parents. In contrast, a smaller proportion of NS students (38 percent) live with their birth parents. The majority of NS students (55 percent) are raised by a single parent. This is true for a little less than a third of MS students (29 percent). Additionally, more than double the proportion of MS students with single parents have regular contact with their second parent (31 versus 13 percent for NS students with single parents). The data thus suggests that MS students come from more resource-rich families than NS students because they generally live in households with two, as opposed to one, potential adult income earners.
Table 2.2 Family structure by school type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Magnet (%)</th>
<th>Neighborhood (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=45</td>
<td>N=29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two-parent¹</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single-parent</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Among single-parent, those who have regular contact with other parent</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blended family²</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grandparent/guardian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of children</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹Not all columns total 100% due to rounding error.
²Blended families include single-parent and two-parent households in which a parent has remarried or there are other live-in adults who are romantically involved.

**NS students from two-parent households**

If variations in family resources matter in whether students have access to resources beyond the neighborhood, then two-parent households should be more successful at helping their children access nonlocal resources. Yet my data show that a considerable proportion (38 percent) of NS students in two-parent households go to their local schools. Here I explore factors—such as immigrant status, poverty, parental mental and physical health, large households, and differences in family resource allocation—that set these students apart from their two-parent MS peers.

**Immigrant parents**

Consistent with the literature, I find that NS students with immigrant parents who have no formal American education have a difficult time navigating the school choice process. Among my sample of NS students with two-parents, I find that 40 percent are the eldest child of immigrant parents. Cindy, a second-generation Asian senior at Banks, says that she automatically enrolled in her default neighborhood school. Cindy explains that after her parents sold their Chinese restaurant they moved to be closer to her grandparents. She says that her family did not research other school possibilities. She simply enrolled in the neighborhood school in their designated catchment area.

**Poverty and mental and physical health**

Two-parent NS students also tend to deal with two hardships: poverty and poor mental health. For example, Carl, a white junior at Banks, has two nonworking parents, one of whom is disabled. His father suffered a crippling back injury in his job as a deliveryman. His mother quit her job as a cashier at a supermarket to tend after his father. Carl explains that his father’s disability has diverted most of his mother’s attention. His father has been in and out of hospitals the past few years because of addiction to painkillers.

He’s been on heavy medications for years. He’s prescribed OxyContin, Xanax, Valium, all of them basically. Sometimes he abuses them a little. And from all the years of taking pills his mind is like out there. It’s more stressful for my mother than it is for me. Me, I have the option of going into my room and drowning everyone out with TV and just sitting there.
Carl says he ended up going to Banks because “my grades were bad and I didn't think I would be going anywhere else. …In my mind, I already knew I was most likely going to Banks.”

Similarly, Zaketa, a black junior at Banks, says schooling matters get put on the backburner because of more immediate concerns like family illness and the accompanying financial worries:

It was just like hard times. Money, we can’t get a mortgage and you know she [Zaketa’s mother] just trying to do everything. She just tryin’ to get more hours. And plus she has her son’s hospital bills [that] had to get paid. So she was going back and forth with that and now that I’m trying to help her, I got a little job…. I could’ve dropped out of school. Like 8th grade, like I really did want to drop out but I didn’t in 8th grade. I could’ve dropped out in 9th grade if I wanted to but I’m still going. And I’m gonna keep on going.

Interviewer: What do you mean you could’ve dropped school?

Everybody was in a depression so nobody would’ve cared.

Zaketa explains how larger, more immediate family worries resulted in her missing the deadline for making school selections:

I wasn’t there to put an application out. I was absent that day. I was at the hospital with my brother and my mom. And then when I came back, I’m like, did they fill the application out? And they [school administrators] was like, yeah, you missed it. I was like, can I fill mine out? They was like, no. And I was like, fine. And they said, you gonna go to Banks. And I said, okay, my sister went there and she dropped out of here.

As the examples of Carl and Zaketa show, two-parent households that have to contend with more pressing matters like poverty and family mental health issues have a lower capacity to help students manage the school choice process.

*Large households*

The data also suggest that there are more resources to go around in MS families because their households are smaller than NS households. On average, NS families have 1.1 more children than MS families. For example, Cheree, a senior at Banks, has seven siblings and Kymbrea, a sophomore at Banks, has ten.

Unlike their two-parent MS peers, NS children from large families have less parental guidance in choosing schools. The youngest and only girl in her family, Kymbrea says that while her parents want and expect her to do well (“Oh, [they expect me] to get As and Bs. Cuz they know I’m smart. So they don’t expect any less.”), they were not involved in her high school selection. She says she listed five different schools but did not get into any of them.

Kymbrea says her mother, who used to work as a security guard but is now retired, encourages her to do well but is happy if she matches the achievements of her older siblings. Kymbrea’s mother wants her to follow in her older brothers’ footsteps. All of them graduated high school and pursued paths in the military:

They’re really military based now. Cuz my other [oldest] brother Devon, he put that there. All my brothers they followed his footsteps because he got in the military…. Everybody is in military. I’m not in the military. My mom said, ‘I want you to go to the military.’ I said, ‘No, I’m not doing military. I want to do it the regular way. High school. College. A career. I don’t want to do high school, military, then my career.

Interviewer: Why does she want you to do that?
Cuz my brother is doing it. And I guess they’re doing really well with it. And she want me to do it so I can be well off like them. But I don’t want to. I don’t need it. And I’m not into military things. I’m not a military brat. I don’t want that. She understands. But she gonna keep saying it.

As Kymbrea’s example shows, NS children of two-parent households who come from large families generally have less support than their two-parent MS peers in managing the school choice process.

**Differences in resource allocations**

Two-parent NS parents also make different decisions in how they allocate resources. Dave, a junior at Banks, attended a private Catholic school until his parents could no longer afford to do so. “The main reason I had to transfer was tuition got too high,” he explains. Calling Banks a last resort, he says his mother tried unsuccessfully to get him into various special admit high schools. “My mom and I searched all through the summer for a good school to replace [Dave’s previous school]. But in the end we chose here because it’s pretty much the last option. No school would take us because I was from a Catholic School.”

Likewise, Vanessa says March High was not her top choice. Vanessa’s mother had homeschooled her and her siblings for the majority of her life. However, she recently returned to work to help pay for Vanessa’s older sister’s college education. Vanessa made it on the waiting list of several special admit high schools but got no further. “It was already September now and two days until the school year so we just had to find some place. So we went to March. My mom was really uneasy about it. Like she just did not want me to go there. She was worried.”

The examples of Dave and Vanessa illustrate how two-parent NS families try to expose their children to richer school environments by dedicating resources to help their children access nonlocal schools. However, when money runs out or when families take on additional financial burdens, these students find themselves in local schools they were trying to avoid in the first place.

**Social class and parental education**

Table 2.3 shows the social class and highest level of parental education by school type. The vast majority of MS students (84 percent) come from working-class households. Less than one-tenth of MS students are either middle-class or poor (7 and 9 percent, respectively). Like their MS peers, the majority of NS students come from working-class (59 percent) families. However, many more NS students are poor (34 percent) compared to MS students. The data thus suggest that NS students face more family resource limitations than MS students.

The majority of MS and NS students have parents who have not graduated high school (51 and 57 percent, respectively). Additionally, a little over one-third of MS (33 percent) and NS students (36 percent) have parents who have a high school degree. Nearly three times the proportion of MS students have parents with a college or graduate degree (15 percent) compared to NS students (6 percent). Although a small proportion of MS students have parents with college degrees or higher, the data surprisingly shows that the majority of MS and NS students come from families of similar levels of educational attainment. Many MS students explain that parental regret over their own low levels of educational attainment motivated their commitment to school. Despite low levels of cognitive skills, these parents understand the importance of education and push their children towards the best schools.

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10 Many schools would not transfer course credits Dave earned at his Catholic school.
Table 2.3 Social class and highest level of parental education by school type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Class</th>
<th>Magnet (%)</th>
<th>Neighborhood (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=45</td>
<td>N=29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle-class¹</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working-class²</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor³</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest level parental education⁴</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹Middle-class are households in which at least one parent is employed in a position that either entails substantial managerial authority or that depends upon highly complex, educationally certified (i.e., college-level) skills.
²Working-class are households in which neither parent is employed in a middle-class position and at least one parent is employed in a position with little or no managerial authority and that does not depend on highly complex, educationally certified skills. This category includes lower-level, white-collar workers.
³Poor are households in which parents receive public assistance and do not participate in the labor force on a regular, continuous basis.
⁴N=28 for neighborhood school students because of missing data; Not all columns total 100% due to rounding error.

How do variations in family resources affect selection into schools?

This section takes an in-depth look at how these small yet important differences in family resources—although not in parental education—can substantially affect whether or not students, who seemingly meet CCM’s admission criteria, are able to access resources beyond their local area. In the first paired case of John and Natalie, I examine how differences in family structure within single-parent households (i.e., whether students have regular contact with the second parent or whether students have older and younger siblings) results in differential access to nonlocal institutions. John and Natalie both live in Wayland. John is a black junior at Banks while Natalie is a second-generation Mexican senior at CCM.

In the second paired case of Alyah and Tina, I analyze how parental employment stability affects the extent to which parents can become involved in their children’s schooling. I show how larger concerns over getting and maintaining work divert parental energies from helping their children secure the best schooling possible. Alyah and Tina both live in Highdale. Alyah is a black senior at CCM while Tina is a second generation Asian senior at Banks.

Natalie and John

Study area: Wayland

Wayland, the South Philadelphia neighborhood where John and Natalie live, teems with activity during the day. Four major thoroughfares bound the neighborhood. Two of these run diagonally, throwing off Philadelphia’s predictable grid-like street pattern. Auto repair shops, laundromats, churches of many religions, large-chain drugstores, restaurants, beauty and barber shops make parking on these main streets challenging. It is not unusual to see a line of cars double parked along the busy corridors.

But the hectic traffic and commercial hustle die down as you approach the residential side streets. Most of the two-story row homes, so familiar throughout the city, sit tightly packed. An
abandoned lot with overgrown weeds occasionally breaks the line of houses. Residents modestly maintain their homes, many of which are decorated with wrought-iron screened front doors. Litter collects on cracked sidewalks, alleyways, and streets in need of repair. Chinese take-out spots and corner convenience stores attract some activity. Otherwise, the neighborhood streets are quiet during the day.

Considered a distressed area, the neighborhood has experienced some growth in recent years. Developers have torn down some of the dilapidated row homes and replaced them with three-story contemporary residences. Young and new homeowners unable to buy into the nearby, coveted real estate of Center City—located a little more than a mile away—have moved into this primarily working-class neighborhood.

Low rent has also attracted a substantial proportion of Asian immigrants. Additionally, the neighborhood continues to support a large population of working-class blacks and whites. The racial diversity of the area reflects settlement patterns dating back to the late 1800s when Eastern European Jews first moved into the area, followed by Italian and Irish immigrants, and then blacks during the Great Migration. Table A.2 in Appendix A presents data on the social and demographic characteristics of present-day Wayland.

**Differences within single-parent, working-class households**

Natalie and John share many similarities. They live in the same neighborhood within four blocks of each other. Additionally, they both live in single-parent households. Both of their mothers dropped out of high school and now hold working-class jobs. Natalie’s mother is a waitress at a local Mexican restaurant. John’s mother is part of the janitorial staff at a major hospital in the city. Both have held these positions for the last five years. Natalie’s mother emigrated at a young age from Mexico and has no formal American education. John’s mother dropped out of high school once she became pregnant with him. Both Natalie and John rarely see their mothers due to long work hours.

For Natalie, living with just her mother is still relatively new. Five years ago, she was living with both of her parents in a quiet, working-class suburb in South Carolina. Her parents separated when she was in the 7th grade. Following their separation, her mother moved Natalie and her older sister to Wayland (they had previously lived in a different section of South Philadelphia). However, her father, who works as a line cook, stayed in South Carolina.

Unlike John, who has never met his father, Natalie continues to have intermittent contact with hers. Most of her interactions with him revolve around school. Even though Natalie’s father has no formal, American education, he regularly talks to her about the importance of school. In contrast, Natalie’s mother does not pressure her when it comes to school. “She’s [Natalie’s mother] like, oh, go to school [said in a blasé way]. But my dad is like I have to get good grades and stuff like that [said in a stern voice].” She shares an example of one of her dad’s “lectures” on school:

> I remember in [South Carolina], my parents were talking about school. Well, my older sister she was talking about it too. And I told my dad, I don’t feel like going to college. He got so mad at me. And then ever since I never really say that and tell people. And even at school, they’re like, who wants to go to college? Everybody raises their hand. And I feel like I have to raise my hand too or else feel like an outcast and they start questioning you.

Although both have single, working-class mothers, John and Natalie vary in the amount of contact they have with their second parent. Like many of his NS peers, John has no second parent. Although he lives in another state, Natalie’s father still maintains regular contact with
her. This contact proves valuable in reinforcing the importance of school on Natalie. He keeps track of her schooling and insists that she does well. Thus, Natalie has a resource that is often not accounted for in school choice and neighborhood effects studies that separate families using broadly-defined compositional measures.

*Place in the family structure*

*Responsibilities of the eldest*

As the eldest, John is in charge of his two younger siblings, a 14-year-old brother and 3-year-old sister. He says being the eldest is “hard cuz all the responsibility is put on me. My mom’s gotta go to work. I need to babysit, be in charge. Make sure everybody eat. Gotta clean [them].” He rattles off a list of chores his mother expects of him: “You know I sweep down the steps and take out the trash and clean the bathroom. …You know, just home chores and get my school work done. Come home, do my school work, do chores, go outside for a little bit, come in the house, eat, and do it all over again.” John steps in because his mother expects him to “be in charge.” Yet he also downplays his parent-like duties: “But it’s not hard because they [his siblings] listen. It’s only sometimes [that they don’t]. You know every once in a blue moon. But when [they don’t] I get a whiff of that life [as a parent].” Thus, family responsibilities mean that John spends a considerable amount of time after school at home in the neighborhood.

Though John does not always see his mother, he understands that there are rules he must follow. “I can’t sit outside all night,” he says. “Cuz I got a curfew. I gotta be in the house 10 o’clock. It’s kids out there that’s younger than me just out there all night just doing nothing, running up and down the street. Yeah and their mom be in the house.”

John also understands that as the eldest, he needs to be a role model for his younger siblings. He tries to do this and meet his mother’s expectations by bringing home As and Bs on his report card.

But John has not always done well in school. “In middle school, no,” he says. “I had the potential to, but I chose not to.” He says “being a class clown” and “playing around” got him into trouble a few times. When it came time to apply for high schools, this hurt him. He explains:

In 8th grade I got in trouble I think three times. One time I was fighting. Other two I was just getting in trouble and my grades wasn’t all that. And the schools I applied to had higher academic standards than what I had so I had two options to go to either [March, another neighborhood school] or here [Banks]. But when this school came to my school…they was telling their academics and stuff like that [and] it seems like this school had more opportunities than [March] so I chose to go here [Banks] instead of [March].

He says that his mother gets “on top” of him if he brings home anything lower than a C. She takes away his phone and video games until she sees an improvement.

*The youngest follows*

Unlike John, Natalie has no younger siblings to look after. Instead, responsibility for her has mainly fallen on Natalie’s older sister, Carla. “My sister has played a big part in my whole life because my parents weren’t really around. They were like doing their own thing and so she raised me in a way.” She continues, “She’s [Carla] like the person I look up to even though I don’t admit it or tell her. I always look for her approval if I want to do something. …I try to follow in her footsteps.”
Just as Carla went to CCM, so too did Natalie even though her test scores did not meet the admission criteria. “I know this is bad to say, but I skipped the whole criteria and they just took me in because my sister came here,” she admits. Though considered a well-behaved student, Natalie’s standardized test scores did not meet CCM’s benchmark. Natalie’s mother wanted her to attend the local Catholic school but she refused and insisted that she be able to attend the same school as her sister. “I’m like I don’t want to go to Catholic school. I protested. So then I made my mom come here [CCM].”

Natalie also participates in many of the same extracurricular clubs as her sister. Unlike John who goes home directly after school, Natalie spends her time practicing with a variety of sports teams throughout the year. Often, it is already near dinner time when she finishes with practice and arrives home.

Thus, Natalie has another family resource that the school choice literature generally overlooks—an older sister who has already successfully navigated the high school selection process in Philadelphia. Even though Natalie has no college aspirations, she finds herself at CCM, a school specifically billed as college-preparatory. In contrast, John finds himself at the NS even though he has already chosen an undergraduate major (marine biology) and researched potential colleges. John fits the profile of a CCM student in terms of academic achievement and aspirations but limitations in family resources (i.e., family selection effects) and disciplinary troubles in the eighth grade (i.e., school selection effects) bars him from admission. Natalie even admits that she did not meet all the criteria that the magnet school usually expects. But she is able to capitalize on family resources to make up for shortcomings in her academic record. Taken together, small family resource differences—such as another parent to remind her of the value of school and an older sister who successfully negotiated the school choice process—landed Natalie a spot in the magnet school. In the following paired example of Alyah and Tina, I show how MS students also get a boost of parental support when parents are able to secure stable employment.

_Alyah and Tina_

**Study Area: Highdale**

Alyah and Tina, seniors at CCM and Banks, respectively, both live in Highdale. Easily bypassed by most Philadelphians, the neighborhood sits tucked in between two major freeways. Two large factories—a now abandoned plastics manufacturer and an active shipping facility—dominate the neighborhood landscape. Despite sharing the same physical space, the shipping facility remains apart from Highdale. Most of its employees come from elsewhere. A large concrete wall surrounding the facility further divides it from the area. On the other end of the neighborhood, Highdale’s younger children scale the broken fence at the plastics factory. Here they play chase in the empty parking lot.

Most of Highdale’s residents—a mixture of South Philadelphian white Italians and longterm-resident blacks—are either unemployed or work in low-paying jobs. Struggling residents live closer to the freeways in shabby two-story row homes or in newly built subsidized housing that border this community. Most of Highdale’s white residents live in only slightly larger homes located furthest from the freeways and factories. During the day, retired residents often sit outside chatting on their modest front porches while the neighborhood’s young men stumble in and out of the neighborhood’s corner bar. The neighborhood noticeably lacks
amenities like grocery stores and places to eat. A convenience store and Italian deli sandwich shop, now shuttered and boarded up, suggest that the area once had more vitality. Table A.2 in Appendix A presents data on the social and demographic characteristics of Highdale.

**Parental employment stability**

Both Alyah and Tina have moved multiple times over the course of their childhoods. Originally from the suburbs of New Jersey, Alyah has moved to and from Philadelphia more times than she can count. “My mom was extremely young when she had me so my uncle [in New Jersey] took me in,” she explains. When she turned eight, Alyah moved to West Philadelphia to live with her father, who she had never met. That living arrangement lasted only two years before Alyah decided she wanted to live with her mother. “My mom was like, come live with me because we’ve been trying to work that out since forever.” Since then, Alyah has lived with her mother but in several different places:

My housing was all over the place…we were in a shelter. You know [at least] I had a house I could go to. My mom always had to struggle throughout her life. She’s young so she ended up dealing with a guy or whatever and we ended up just going to a shelter. We were in this shelter for two years. Then we branched off to like a housing system.

Alyah’s mother dropped out when she became pregnant in the 10th grade and spent a large part of Alyah’s young childhood struggling with drug addiction. Her mother continued to face difficulties finding stable housing and work while Alyah was in grade school.

Despite long periods of unstable work, Alyah says her mother was always trying hard to change their living situation by making contact with people who could help: “She was always, even though she had a hard time, she was always the woman doing extra, working for the store, volunteering, helping out the homeless.” This extra work eventually paid off when one of Alyah’s mother’s contacts connected them to subsidized low-income housing in Highdale. “She had uh—what’s the word?—connections to branch her off to better housing. Yeah, she’s like a little respected for all that she does.” Once their housing stabilized, Alyah’s mother also landed work as a nurse home health aid, a position which she continues to hold.

Like Alyah, Tina has also moved multiple times across multiple states. She has lived in California, Delaware, Florida, New York, and now Philadelphia. Tina is a second-generation Asian. Both her parents immigrated to California when they were adolescents—her mother from the Philippines, her father from Korea. Like Alyah’s mother, Tina’s parents started but did not finish high school.

Tina explains that each time she and her family moved it was because the family business failed. In conjunction with her aunts and uncles, her parents have operated a number of businesses: a cell phone store, convenience store, several restaurants, and most recently a food truck. Tina describes her family as entrepreneurially linked: “It started off with my uncle moving, and they’re like doing businesses and stuff. My dad, my other uncle, my grandparents, me, my sister, everybody, we all just moved up here. And that’s why I’m here [in Philadelphia]. So I guess it’s business.” Her grandparents, aunts and uncles also currently live in Highdale.

**Picking schools**

After securing stable housing and work, Alyah’s mother focused intensely on her schooling. Alyah credits her mother with helping her land a spot at CCM. Throughout middle school, her mother vigilantly tracked her academic progress by regularly checking in with
teachers. Even at CCM, her mom will often drop by at school unannounced to ensure that Alyah arrived at school on time and to get updates from teachers.

But school is not a top priority for Alyah. She does not look forward to it and would rather pursue acting after graduating from CCM. She is frequently late because she lingers in bed, trying to delay the inevitable start of the school day. “The way I wake up in the morning is my mom dragging me up, dragging my blankets.” Alyah says her mother insists that she does well in school and be the first one in her family to graduate and go to college. She explains:

My grandmother never graduated either. My grandmother never passed eighth grade. She just feels it’s her duty as a mother she don’t want me going down the same path as her. And I mean I don’t want the same path they went neither so it’s understandable. Yeah, but she’s crazy. She goes over the top though. I’m serious. I remember one time I was late for school, she flipped the bed over. I was like, what the—?

The level of her mother’s current involvement in her schooling contrasts sharply with earlier periods of Alyah’s life when her mother devoted most of her energy to finding stable housing and work.

Fitting in at Center City Magnet

Alyah describes her reluctance towards school as atypical:

My GPA is a 2.7, not that I’m apathetic, but I’m just not as enthusiastic as like a lot of students [at CCM]. I focus. I have my good and bad moments where I’m enthusiastic about my homework, hand it in on time. And then I have my moments when I don’t care. But I still like [do it] slowly by the skin of my teeth. I don’t know it’s like a habit from where I come from because…it’s always been my focus to finish school for my mom.

Even though Alyah would rather be at local clubs performing skits, she wants to fulfill her mother’s wish to see her go to college. “My mom is really hard on me. If I was to go to my mom right now and say I was not going [to college], she would kill me. She would go berserk.” Her academically-focused friends at school also help her keep her sights on getting a higher education.

The majority of kids are like, we’re going [to college]. It’s like already in their mindset where they come from, we’re going. We have to go college. We have to make something of ourselves. That’s the majority of my friends when I say we have to go to college, we have to be the best that we can regardless of what comes our way. And hard tribulations we’re gonna do this. So that’s really where the majority of my friends [are at]. And I have those friends who are like top notch. Like GPA, you know 4.0. Straight As. Scholarships. National Honors Society. In their mindset, it’s just a brawl. We’re gonna go to Harvard. …Like I mean education is always going to be a priority for me regardless if it’s convenient or not I need a backup plan. …Regardless of whether you like it or not, you have to take the responsibility and go to school.

The combined pressure from both her mother and peers at school keeps Alyah focused on school as a goal. Despite her own lackluster grades and low academic motivation, Alyah has high-achieving friends at school with ambitious goals. Her exposure to these peers, facilitated by her mother’s successful attempts to get her a spot at CCM, reminds her of the practicality and importance of school.

“Choosing” the default

Tina says the first time she saw Banks was when she came in with her uncle to enroll. She and her family arrived in Philadelphia late in the summer, too late to choose any school but
their default school. Tina says that Banks looked like a “prison.” Compared to her old school in Florida, Banks does not have many resources: “My old school in Florida, the library was probably two or three [times the size] of the auditorium [at Banks]. And it was full of books. There was a computer center in there and it was just really nice, you know. And then you come to this and like whatever. It’s kinda sad.” Like Banks, Tina’s old school was also a neighborhood public school. She has always attended schools associated with her neighborhood.

Tina says her parents expect her to become successful: “They want me to graduate high school, go to college, you know the normal parents stuff. And of course I want that for myself as well. So it’s not only I’m doing it for myself. I’m doing it for my parents.” But unlike Alyah’s mother, Tina manages her own schooling. She does not see much of her parents because both work long hours trying to establish the family’s latest business. Most of her academic pursuits, like applying to college and getting financial aid, she has accomplished on her own:

They’re proud of me because I did the whole FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid]. I already have my class schedule. I’ve had that all done. I got everything done on my own. I didn’t ask anybody for help. So they were really proud of me that I did that myself. And they’re proud of me that I’m graduating high school and starting college. Any parent would be proud of their kid for that. That’s a big step because a lot of people don’t even graduate high school. They drop out or get their GEDs or work at McDonald’s for the rest of their life.

The eldest in her family, Tina sees herself as setting an example for her two younger siblings. She understands that work occupies much of her parents’ time and has learned to rely on herself when it comes to school.

Unlike Alyah, however, who is mainly surrounded by academically motivated peers, Tina says the disruptive atmosphere at Banks sometimes gets in the way of learning. She has an easier time focusing in her AP classes, where most of the other students are like her and want to do well. However, she notes that teachers at Banks spend a lot of time trying to manage student behavior and consequently less time on teaching: “There are kids I would want to slap them if I was a teacher. The things they say. It’s just no respect.” But Tina insists that this is not a problem unique to her school:

But there’s always good and bad students no matter where you are. You could be in the Upper East Side of New York and those snobby kids will give you attitude because they think they’re better. So it doesn’t matter if you’re in the ghetto or if you’re in the top dollar place, every kid has a different personality.

Tina notices and encounters a greater variety of students at Banks than Alyah does. Some students are like her and committed to school. However, others routinely break school rules and disrupt classroom learning. She concludes that all schools contain both “good and bad students.” However, had Tina had the family resources that Alyah has then she might have secured admission to CCM and increased her chances of meeting mostly peers like herself. Because Tina has both parents, she seemingly has an advantage over Alyah in terms of family resources, who is being raised by a single mother. In actuality though, Tina has less parental support than Alyah as both her parents are preoccupied with larger concerns like securing a stable source of income. Thus, even though students may meet school admission criteria, differences like stable parental employment play a big role in whether or not students can access these better schools.

General patterns
John, Natalie, Alyah, and Tina are not unique cases. I often find that NS and MS students who live in the same or similar neighborhoods and who have roughly the same class situation differ in subtle but important family resources. Many MS students benefit from the support of additional family members, better parental mental and physical health, and stable parental employment. MS students with single parents usually have someone else—e.g., distant but involved second parents; concerned grandparents, uncles, aunts, and godparents; or older siblings and cousins—who help guide them through the school choice process. The support and guidance of these additional adults give students like Natalie and Alyah, who do not meet the profile of the typical CCM student, an extra boost. MS parents who cannot find stable jobs and living arrangements also worry less about household responsibilities and can devote more time and energy to schooling matters. These parents steer their children, even ones who fall short academically and behaviorally, toward better school environments.

Many NS students, on the other hand, have parents who value education but are unable to offer both the practical guidance and motivational support needed to help their children access better educational opportunities. These overworked parents are preoccupied with more immediate concerns like earning a living and taking care of sick and/or disabled loved ones. Educational priorities fall to the wayside as parents scramble to meet basic needs like housing and employment. Many NS students step in to help their parents meet household responsibilities by caring for younger siblings or taking part-time jobs after school. These efforts help stabilize their home environment but sometimes at the cost of their school goals. NS students like John, who have to manage both themselves and younger siblings, are more likely to get into trouble both at home and at school. These students struggle without the focused attention of a parental figure. Despite sharing—and in cases like John and Tina even surpassing—the same educational aspirations as their MS peers, these students find themselves at lower-quality schools.

Discussion

School and family selection processes produce different peer environments for MS and NS students. Schools with stricter admission standards like CCM construct more homogenous peer environments than NS schools like Banks. The majority of students at CCM follow the school norms set by selective admissions standards; they apply themselves academically and abide by school rules. When doing well in school and following rules are the norm, even students who do not have strong educational aspirations fall in line. Alyah and Natalie do not have college ambitions, but going to CCM, where the majority of students do well and pursue college, exerts pressure on them to do the same.

The more relaxed admissions criteria at NS schools results in a more heterogeneous peer environment, as many more different types of students have access to these schools. As long as students live in designated catchment areas, they are ensured a seat at their local school. Vying for a place at CCM, on the other hand, requires complex negotiations because the demand far exceeds the number of available seats. Small schools like CCM, with a total enrollment of less that 650 and an acceptance rate of 30 percent, are indeed rare public goods. As the case of Tina shows, having good grades and exemplary behavior is not enough to land one of these seats. Without the additional support of family resources, academically-motivated students like John and Tina find themselves sharing the same environment with disruptive classmates who do poorly in school.
Indeed, children have the best chance when families help them navigate the school choice process. In fact, children like Alyah and Natalie can even circumvent school choice hurdles with the aid of high-capacity family members. Low standardized test scores and poor grades prove surmountable when children have the help of determined parents and knowledgeable older siblings. Yet not all families, even ones who share seemingly similar class situations and live in the same neighborhoods, are equally able to provide children with this support. Students with strong school attachments like John and Tina end up at neighborhood schools, not necessarily by choice but by default. This finding—that small but important differences in family resources sort students into different educational contexts—challenges the idea that school choice ameliorates educational inequities.

Thus, both school and family selection processes result in distinct peer environments for MS and NS students. The types of peers that students encounter at school matter because—as a rich literature on peer networks largely inspired by Coleman (1961) consistently show—high-quality peers can help students circumvent spatial and educational inequities. When children have “access to high-status institutions and the powerful social networks within them,” they have better educational outcomes (Wells and Crain 1994:531). However, in NS schools with more diverse peer environments students encounter many more different types of peers. The choice of who to befriend and who to follow becomes murkier. Arguably, school choice amplifies the difficulties that NS students face in trying to find peers who are good role models because MSs skim these high-achieving students while leaving behind children who do less well in school and who are more likely to get into trouble.

The types of peers that children encounter at school also matter because peer networks can importantly shape how, with whom, and where students spend time in their neighborhoods. As I show in chapter 3, although school and neighborhood environments may be distinct spheres of social interaction for MS students, for NS students these social contexts overlap. The development of friendship ties across multiple, interrelated spheres (i.e., the conjuncture of school and neighborhood context) has the potential to exacerbate and reinforce neighborhood disadvantage as peer groups at schools and within neighborhoods become increasingly interchangeable.
Chapter 3: Peer Networks

Studies find that as children age, they become increasingly concerned with their peers while steadily losing interest in adults like parents and teachers (Duncan et al. 2001; Eccles et al. 1993; Steinberg and Morris 2001). Indeed, the voluminous literature on peer effects show that peers matter for a range of outcomes, from the negative like drug use and delinquency to the positive like school achievement and prosocial behaviors (Coleman 1961; Mounts and Steinberg 1995; Wentzel and Caldwell 1997). Much of what we know about adolescent friendships and their effects come from studies on how peer networks form within separate social contexts like families, neighborhoods, and schools.

Despite substantial research on how peer networks develop within specific social contexts, we still do not understand fully the interplay between peer networks and multiple, interrelated settings like neighborhoods and schools (for exceptions see Carter 2005; Dance 2002). Moreover, we lack information on how peer networks vary for students who live in the same residential area but go to different schools.

I seek to fill this gap by considering how friendships that develop in one context (e.g., school) may reinforce or weaken friendships in other contexts (e.g., neighborhood). I examine how school choice affects children’s peer groups within their neighborhoods by making it more likely for MS students to befriend extralocal peers who are good role models (i.e., ones who stay out of trouble and are academically-oriented) and consequently making it more difficult for NS students to meet and befriend such students. That is, I argue that the conjuncture/disjuncture of neighborhoods and schools matters because it restructures the types of friendships available to children within their home areas.

Background

This section presents key findings on how specific domains like schools, neighborhoods, and families shape adolescent networks. I argue that despite a rich literature on adolescent friendships we still lack a firm grasp on how multiple, interrelated social contexts—such as schools and neighborhoods—interact to shape children’s friendships.

School ties

Explanations for how adolescents form ties at school are generally organized around individual traits like race, class, and gender.11 Scholars like Willis (1977) and Hollingshead (1949) established early ideas about the reproduction of adolescent social hierarchies via class. Subsequent work like Eckert’s (1989) ethnographic study of “jocks” and “burn-outs” in a Michigan high school further confirm this relationship. Research also highlights how adolescents’ own-race friendship choices are more common than other-race choices (Epstein 1986; Moody 2001; Shrum et al. 1988). In addition, Kao and Joyner (2006) argue that individuals make friendship choices not just based on race but also ethnicity. Finally, gender structures adolescent school friendships. Gender segregation, which begins early, gradually beings to decline, beginning in junior high (Shrum et al. 1988). While the school-based literature on youths’ friendships acknowledges that the school population determines what sort of

11 For an excellent summary of the literature on homophily, see McPherson et al. (2001).
friendships can develop, the bulk of research has focused on choices within this constrained choice, but viewed ties as predominantly, or even only, determined by school. Yet another body of research emphasizes the importance of neighborhood, independent of school, in generating friendship pairings.

**Neighborhood ties**

Within the neighborhood effects literature, social disorganization models focus on how certain attributes of place like violence shape how students select friends and the types of friendship opportunities available to them (Case and Katz 1991; Crane 1991; Harding 2010; Haynie and Osgood 2005). Harding (2010), finds that in violent communities youth befriend older adults, who are often also gang members, in search of protection. In contrast, collective socialization models focus on why adolescents who live in more advantaged neighborhoods are more likely to befriend peers who pursue conventional goals such as academic achievement and are less likely to engage in problem behaviors. Scholars generally apply collective socialization models to understand how high-status adults act as role models for neighborhood youth (Ainsworth 2002; Brody et al. 2001; Brooks-Gunn et al. 1993; Crowder and South 2003; Ensminger et al. 1996). For example, Wilson (1987) contends that inner-city neighborhoods lost critical adult role models when middle- and working-class blacks left the inner-city following economic restructuring in the 1970s. Collective socialization models have also been extended to explain adolescent peer groups within advantaged neighborhoods (Elliott et al. 1996; Hirschi 1969; Liska and Reed 1985). However, other research points out that adolescents and their friends are often similar, not via influence, but because they choose friends with similar behaviors, attitudes, and identities (Akers et al. 1998; Hartup 1996; Haynie et al. 2006; Hogue and Steinberg 1995). Thus the debate is whether neighborhoods have an independent effect on the availability of peers, and the norms generated from social interactions, or whether people merely self-select into friendships based on pre-existing orientations and attitudes.”

**Parental management of adolescent friendships**

Ethnographic research shows that parents living in distressed neighborhoods manage students’ exposure to risky peer networks by monitoring closely, enforcing curfews, adopting in-home learning strategies, and/or instituting orderly family routines (Burton et al. 1996; Furstenberg 1999; Furstenberg Jr. and Hughes 1997; Jarrett 1997, 1999; Jarrett and Jefferson 2004). However, other researchers point out that what appears like parental monitoring is actually the willingness of well-behaved youth to disclose and share with their parents (Fletcher et al. 2004; Stattin and Kerr 2000; Yau et al. 2009). Additionally, research suggests that parents may have less control of youth’s friendships as youth age and become less interested in adult-controlled domains like home and school. They increasingly spend less time with caregivers and more time away from home (Eccles et al. 1993; Larson and Richards 1991).

**How peer networks develop across multiple, interrelated contexts**

I seek to build on this rich literature on adolescent friendships by investigating how residential context and schools interact to shape adolescent friendships. More specifically, I look at how these separate domains mutually influence how, with whom, and where students spend time. I also examine whether there are multiplicative contextual effects when school and neighborhood overlap (as is often the case for NS students). Indeed, there are compelling reasons to look at how neighborhoods and schools work together to organize friendship ties. There may
be concentration/spatial effects that are not adequately captured when researchers analyze adolescent networks in isolated social spheres. When contexts overlap, they may have reciprocal and/or magnifying, effects. As Galster (2011) points out, neighborhood effects mechanisms (in this case, peer networks) should be thought of in terms of their “dosage.” For example, NS students may have a higher dosage of neighborhood because their school and neighborhood peers overlap. It may be that going to the local school makes it more likely that students will befriend neighborhood peers who do not do well in school and are more likely to get into trouble. Conversely, going to a magnet school may limit students’ opportunities to make friends with such local peers while increasing their chances of forming extralocal ties with peers who are “good” role models. The increasing withdrawal of “good” peers like MS students from their neighborhoods would thus further decrease the chances that NS students will be able to befriend positive peers within their local areas. Understanding how peer networks develop and connect across these social spheres can thus offer insight into how and why neighborhood effects vary for individuals who share a residential context.

**Findings**

To understand how peer networks vary for students who live in the same residential area but go to different schools, I first explore differences in how, with whom, and where MS and NS children spend time. The way children organize their time has important implications for their friendship opportunities because if MS students mostly spend time outside of their local areas in extracurricular activities or sheltered within their homes, then these students are unlikely to meet and form friendships with local peers. Thus, despite sharing a residential area, MS students would likely not belong in the same peer networks as NS students. In the following section, I discuss variations in how, with whom, and where MS and NS spend time after school.

**How time is spent**

MS and NS students vary greatly in how, with whom, and where they spend time after school (see Table 3.1). About 1.5 times the proportion of MS students spend time in a structured activity with an adult presence (71 percent compared to 45 percent for NS students). This finding supports collective socialization models that show that youth have better outcomes when they have access to groups that often have adult leaders or facilitators (Ainsworth 2002; Brody et al. 2001; Brooks-Gunn et al. 1993; Crowder and South 2003; Ensminger et al. 1996).

Indeed, the majority of MS students spend time in after-school extracurricular clubs like team sports, peer mediation, robotics club, science leadership, and ROTC. Many students also participate in enrichment programs like language class at the local college and citywide writing programs. MS students, who participate in after-school clubs also frequently hold leadership roles, which means even more structured time away from neighborhoods. Melissa, an Asian junior, says she coordinates many of the activities for Reach Higher, a citywide community service club:

I’m the officer…. We do a lot of service work throughout the city. We do like community cleanup at houses, well not houses, but neighborhoods…. And we go to collect cans for the homeless and then there’s people that were fundraising for kids in Haiti. We do a lot of donations.
Melissa’s active role in her service club means that she often spends many hours away from her neighborhood in the presence of adult club organizers. “Because Reach Higher, most of the projects during the school year, it’s on Saturday. So I have to give up my Saturday. Not every Saturday, but the majority of it.”

Table 3.1 How, with whom, and where students spend after-school time: by school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How time is spent</th>
<th>Magnet (%)</th>
<th>Neighborhood (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N=45</td>
<td>N=29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured¹</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal²</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With whom after school time is spent predominantly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alone or with siblings</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Among MS students who spend time with friends³</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School peers</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood peers</td>
<td>38</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where time is spent⁴</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own neighborhood</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend’s neighborhood</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other parts of city</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹Structured time includes time spent in an activity that is monitored by adults or time routinely set aside for a particular activity. Examples include time spent doing homework and chores and time spent in after-school extracurricular clubs (e.g., team sports, peer mediation, robotics club, science leadership, ROTC), enrichment programs (language class at local college, citywide writing program), and jobs.

²Informal time includes time spent in an activity that is usually not monitored by adults and/or time that is not routinely set aside for a particular activity. Examples include time spontaneously set aside for playing pick-up basketball and socializing with friends.

³N=32 because sample includes only MS students who report spending time with peers. Calculated only for MS students because these peer groups remain distinct whereas NS students have tight overlap in school and neighborhood friends. Column does not total 100% due to rounding error.

⁴Column does not total 100% because students were asked to list all that apply.

MS students are involved in so many structured activities that they often talk about competing pressures for time. Harper, a white junior at CCM, rushed from my interview to her Italian class at Drexel University. Other MS students like Darnel and Jackson, who came on separate occasions dressed in team uniform, each worried about how long my interview would last because they needed to make practice. Cristina, a Latina senior, came almost an hour late to our scheduled interview because runway practices for her modeling and fashion show ran overtime.

In contrast, while NS students certainly also participate in after-school activities, their schedules are not as tightly packed as those of MS students. No NS student, for example, worried that my interview would run long and interfere with other scheduled activities. In fact, NS students like La’Tosha, Cheree, Henry and Shaniqua even spontaneously scheduled interviews and waited patiently after school until I was free to speak with them. The differences in how MS and NS youth organize their time after school—more densely packed schedules in adult-supervised activities for MS students and more flexible, unstructured free time for NS students—
finds support in other work (e.g., Lareau 2003) that documents how children who succeed in school predominantly spend their leisure time in highly-organized, adult-structured activities. MS students like Tamicka, a black junior, explain that their parents’ reluctance over children spending time alone after school motivates their extracurricular involvements:

You know like she [Tamicka’s mother] doesn’t want me to be like at home after school and not doing anything. …I also attend the Sheldon School of Arts on Cypress Street. Yeah, I take pre-college classes there. My mom, she found out about that. And I got a full scholarship to go there.

Like Tamicka, Judah, a black junior, gets involved in extralocal activities because of his mother’s efforts:

My mom found the program… Tomorrow’s Leaders, it’s like a family. They definitely are a support team and everybody generally cares there. That and I’ve done Big Brothers Big Sisters which was a good organization and they care. Summer church. I’ve been very lucky and blessed to do the things that I’m able to do.

With the help of adults, MS students have access to more extralocal opportunities. As discussed in chapter 2, compared to their NS peers, MS youth generally come from families with more resources, which boost their abilities to access extralocal institutions.

With whom time is spent

Consistent with the literature that finds that children spend more time with friends as they transition to adolescence, I find that the bulk of MS and NS students organize most of their time after school socializing with peers (71 percent for MS, 79 percent for NS) (Eccles et al. 1993; Larson and Richards 1991). However, as mentioned above, MS youth spend this time with peers under the supervision of adults. Of the MS students who report spending time with peers after school, 63 percent say they spend it with school peers while 38 percent say they spend it with residential peers. I discovered this disconnection from neighborhood peers early on during the recruitment phase of my study; because many of MS interviewees were not familiar with other teenagers who both live in their area and attend the local school, I obtained very few NS student referrals from them.

The data do not distinguish between school and neighborhood peers for NS youth because for the majority of these young people their peer groups tightly overlap. NS students often speak of their school and neighborhood peers interchangeably. Sitting in the library at Banks, Shaniqua, a black junior, points out two fellow classmates chatting at the far end of the library. She tells me “them two over there” are her closest friends who also live “up the street, a couple blocks away.” Stephanie, an Asian senior, explains: “My friends in Banks High, like some of them surprisingly live around the corner. And I did, like some of them, most of them I met in East Elementary…. And it feels good to be reunited with your old friends because you know that’s the ones you stick it. And it feels so good to graduate with them again.” Mercedes, Shaniqua’s classmate, says, “Well, I know mostly everybody here. But one of my best friends…she’s here. She’s in the same grade as I am. …We’ve been friends since elementary school and we came in here together and we’re still friends.” Mercedes appreciates the close overlap between school and neighborhood ties:

Some of the people that go here live around my way. And if not around my way, they live like a couple blocks away. 10 [blocks] maximum so that’s not far from where I live at. So most of the kids that go here live around my way.
Interviewer: How do you feel about that?

I like having teenagers around me because I can always, you know, go talk to somebody that’s my age or you know sit in their house with them or come over to my house or whatever so I like having teenagers around me. Because you don’t have to worry, oh, it’s nothing but adults around here and you know, nobody here to like talk to. But I like having teenagers live around me because you always can come together, talk, chill, whatever you want to do. So I think it’s a good thing.

Nysha, a sophomore at Banks, enjoys drawing her neighborhood and school peers from the same pool: “For me, it was fun because when I graduate from [elementary school], all the kids [from the elementary school went to the] neighborhood high school. And like I felt comfortable because I had all my friends with me. Everybody I knew. Of course, it was other schools, kids I didn’t know. But I clicked with them easily. Because we all had the same background. The same type of school.” Amy, a black senior at Shelley, says she never has to choose between socializing with school or neighborhood friends because her “friends outside of school are the same friends. [laughs] There was no, oh hey, I’m going to hang out with such and such. Do we know them? No.” Amy’s core group of school friends also grew up with her in the same neighborhood. Jaquaan explains that he gets to know school and neighborhood friends because of the shared commute to and from school. “We might walk to school together or walk home together or catch the bus.”

The data suggest that peer groups tightly overlap for NS youth because they encounter the same group of individuals within their neighborhoods and at school. These young people form and maintain friendships because of continuity in contexts, i.e., friends who grew up alongside them in the neighborhood become friends in elementary school and continue on through high school. These friendships solidify because of repeated contact in the streets (like Mercedes who sits on her front stoop and gossips with neighborhood peers who also happen to be school friends) and at school (like Nysha who runs into neighborhood peers at her locker and in the hallways and classrooms of Banks). Thus, because peer groups overlap for the majority of NS students, the data does not distinguish between school and neighborhood friends for these students. The overlap between school and neighborhood friends does not mean, however, that everyone within a relatively wide “neighborhood” are friends; the local schools also contain strong divisions between students based on geography and race, as I discuss more in the next chapter.

Where time is spent

When asked to list all the areas where they socialize, many more NS youth say they spend time in residential areas—either their own neighborhood (79 percent) or their friends’ neighborhood (59 percent)—than MS youth (49 and 27 percent, respectively). However, most MS students say they are inside when in their own neighborhoods (doing activities like watching movies, talking on the phone, or playing video games). Tomas, a Latino junior at CCM, explains, “I spend very little time in my neighborhood because my school is here and Center City [downtown Philadelphia where most MS students socialize] is right there…. I usually don’t get home until 6 or 7 and I’m just like, oh I’m gonna sit in my house and hang out.” MS students like Tomas, who spend time in afterschool activities and who live far away from their school, often do not get home until late. Having already socialized with school peers, he would rather stay inside and focus on his school work. NS youth, on the other hand, spend more time outside. These young people catch up with friends on their front stoops or play a game of basketball at
the local park. Tyrone, a black junior at Banks, says “Everyday we [his neighborhood/school friends] hang out after school. All we do is play ball.”

Large proportions of both MS and NS students are highly mobile when it comes to hanging out with their friends, though more so for MS (69 percent) than NS students (55 percent). These mobile students report traveling to various parts of the city to hang out with friends. For example, they catch a movie and window shop in Center City (downtown Philadelphia), eat meals at restaurants in Chinatown, or meet up at popular recreational centers and parks. MS youth explain that they spend time near the school or in commercial areas of the city because these students, who come from different parts of the city, often have to find locations that offer things to do without requiring any one person to travel far from home. Betty, an Asian junior, explains, “So we will just hang out sometimes in school talking and then like if it’s friends that live in South Philly we just go to Center City. And just walk around from there. Most of the time we hang around Center City because there’s more stuff to do and more stores to go into.” These findings corroborate the existing literature which finds that adolescents increasingly spend less time with caregivers and more time away from home (Eccles et al. 1993; Larson and Richards 1991). Additionally, the data suggest that the spatial location of friendship interactions vary by whether someone is in a NS or MS. And given higher rates of violence in the NS, which I discuss further in chapter 4, youth are safer hanging out near the school or in commercial areas of the city like Center City.

Parental management

The data thus show large disparities between how, with whom, and where MS and NS children spend time. MS children are more likely than NS children to spend time after school in adult-supervised activities with school peers while NS children have more relaxed, open schedules and are more likely to socialize outside in their neighborhoods with neighborhood/school friends. As I argued in the previous chapter and as the wider literature supports, part of this variation could stem from the additional resources of MS families—i.e., high-resource families more successfully connect their children to institutions located beyond their local community (Kimelberg 2014; Lareau 2014; Reay and Ball 1998). However, the data also suggest limits to the influence of families, particularly when it comes to parental management of children. Table 3.2 shows that comparable majorities of MS and NS students say their parents know how, with whom, and/or where they spend time after school, 58 and 62 percent, respectively. Thus, contra the literature on parental management, these differences in how, with whom, and where MS and NS children spend time cannot be accounted for simply by differences in parental monitoring (Burton et al. 1996; Furstenberg 1999; Jarrett 1997, 1999; Jarrett and Jefferson 2004). Additionally, the lack of difference in parental management between MS and NS parents suggest that NS parents are equally engaged in the management of their children as their MS parents.

| Table 3.2 Parents know how, with whom, and where child spends after-school time: by school |
|-------------------------------------------------|--------|--------|
|                                                  | Magnet (N=45) | Neighborhood (N=29) |
| Parents know how, with whom, and where spends time |         |       |
| Yes                                              | 58     | 62     |
| No                                               | 42     | 38     |
How the conjuncture/disjuncture of schools and neighborhoods affects peer ties

The way children organize their time has important implications for their friendship opportunities because if MS students mostly spend time outside of their local areas or sheltered within their homes, then these students are unlikely to meet and form friendships with local peers. Thus, despite sharing a residential area, MS students would likely not belong in the same peer networks as NS students.

I now consider how neighborhoods and schools work together to organize friendship ties. More specifically, I examine how friendships that develop in one context (e.g., school) may reinforce or weaken friendships in other contexts (e.g., neighborhood). My interviews indicate that NS students may have a higher dosage of neighborhood because their school and neighborhood peers intersect. Partly due to family and school selection effects, NS schools contain a higher proportion of children from local areas who do not do well in school and who are more likely to get into trouble. Attending local schools therefore makes it more likely that children will befriend peers who are not good role models. (Later in chapter 4 I discuss how the combination of violent neighborhoods and violent neighborhood schools also increases the chances of befriending students who misbehave.) Conversely, going to a magnet school may limit students’ opportunities to make friends with such local peers while increasing their chances of forming extralocal ties with peers who are “good” role models. The retreat of “good” peers like MS students from their neighborhoods would thus further decrease the pool of positive peers available to NS students. Understanding how peer networks develop and connect across these social spheres can thus offer insight into how and why neighborhood effects vary for individuals who share a residential context.

How school context affects strength of peer ties

Table 3.3 illustrates the 3-category coding scheme I use to describe the strength of students’ ties to their neighborhood peers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weak</th>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>Strong</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hi-bye relationships</td>
<td>Stop and chat</td>
<td>Dense interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discomfort, wary</td>
<td>Childhood friends, now friendly</td>
<td>Generational roots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>acquaintances</td>
<td>Deep familiarity, trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Limited to specific activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.4 compares how ties to neighborhood peers change as youth transition from elementary/middle school to high school for NS and MS youth, respectively. Similar proportions of NS students report having strong ties to their local peers during elementary/middle school (54 percent) and high school (50 percent). In contrast, MS students say their ties to neighborhood peers weaken in the transition from elementary/middle to high school. While 59 percent of MS students describe their ties to neighborhood peers as strong during elementary/middle school, only 20 percent say they now (i.e., in high school) have strong ties to neighborhood peers. The data suggests that while the strength of ties to neighborhood peers weakens in the transition to high school, these ties do not completely deteriorate as a greater proportion of MS students describe their ties to local peers as medium now that they are in high school compared to just 5 percent during elementary/middle school.
Table 3.4 Strength of ties to neighborhood peers: elementary/middle vs. high school

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strength of ties</th>
<th>Neighborhood School (%)</th>
<th>Magnet School (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Elementary/Middle</td>
<td>High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Differs from larger study sample (N=29) because of missing data.
2 Differs from larger study sample (N=45) because of missing data.

Nyla and DeShawn

In the section, I explore in-depth how the disjuncture of school and neighborhood contexts makes it more difficult for MS students like Nyla to maintain ties to local peers while the conjuncture of school and neighborhood contexts for NS students like DeShawn facilitates friendships even among young people who have since graduated from their local schools.

Study area: Dorland

Nyla, a black sophomore at CCM, and DeShawn, a black junior at Juniper High, live in West Philadelphia. Their neighborhood, Dorland, is a solidly black working-class community. Once considered a streetcar suburb, Dorland was settled by wealthy whites in the early 1900s. The large Victorian-style homes with extensive wraparound porches, second-floor balconies, large bay windows, and small front and back yards are evidence of this past affluence. Most are single-family dwellings that were converted to multi-dwelling units to accommodate increased pressure for housing following the Great Migration. Rapid racial turnover and demand for living space in Dorland, as in many other Philadelphia neighborhoods, lasted up until the 1960s.

Today, Dorland is largely residential though there are some mixed-used commercial buildings. The neighborhood also has many churches. Vacant buildings and empty lots signal hard times. During the past decade, however, the area has come under immense gentrification pressures. Close to the University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University, two institutions that have invested heavily in neighborhood revitalization, Dorland is becoming increasingly attractive. The Penn Alexander School—a collaboration between the University of Pennsylvania, the School District of Philadelphia, and the teachers’ union—is a highly sought-after elementary school built in 1999. Originally conceived as a neighborhood school, Penn Alexander now admits students based on a lottery system to the dismay and anger of many of its longtime residents. The influx of new residents—mostly white liberal academics and recent college graduates—has also generated tension within the area. Many of these residents have moved into newly converted artisan lofts and studio spaces that were once unused industrial buildings. Table A.2 in Appendix A present data on the social and demographic characteristics of Dorland.

Time away from home and new friends: Nyla

Nyla has lived in Dorland with her two parents, older sister and brother all her life. She says there are two parts to Dorland; an upper part and the part that’s closer to Drexel University. “I (emphasis) associate myself with [Drexel University] because I don’t associate myself with the upper part,” she explains.
For elementary and middle school, Nyla stayed local. She says this put her at a
disadvantage when she came to CCM. “It’s [her middle school] like not the best teaching
environment. And for me to come from there to CCM. That’s why it was so hard on me my
freshman year.”

Nyla also struggled during freshman year trying to balance school, extracurriculars, and
friendships. Like many other CCM students, she has a demanding courseload (two math
courses—advanced algebra and geometry; biology, advanced English; Chinese; African
American history; and philosophy) and participates in numerous extracurricular activities. Some
of these activities are school-sponsored and take place at school, like the running and chess
clubs. Others are citywide youth initiatives that require travel around the city. As a leader in a
program that works to empower and recruit students to become active in school politics, Nyla
often campaigns at high schools throughout the city. She decided to join these clubs because her
older brother, who goes to a different magnet school, is a member.

“I do a lot of outside school activity so it was kinda hard to balance it [last year],” she
shares. “I prefer to go to an after-school program than to go home to do my homework. After-
school programs are more fun.”

But this involvement came at a cost. Nyla’s grades as a freshman suffered. She brought
home a 2.7 GPA to which her mother responded with a slow, displeased, “Uh hummmmmm.”
Many of her friends at school, mostly upperclassmen she met doing extracurriculars, also
disapproved. “When they heard about my report card, they’re like, Nyla, really?! You know you
can do better than this. And I’m like, right, that’s true. Okay, okay.”

With the exception of one C, her sophomore grades of mostly As and Bs are a big
improvement. Nyla explains that she pulled up her grades by simply doing the work. She also
stopped socializing with some of her Dorland neighborhood friends.

Interviewer: Are you friends with anybody who goes to your neighborhood school?

We were friends when I was there [at the local middle school]. But because I go to school [at CCM], I’m
usually down here [not in her neighborhood]. It’s this term people call Hollywood when you know you act like
you don’t know them anymore. And everybody says that about me. But I say I’m not Hollywood because I’m
just doing different things. Like my world does not revolve around [Dorland].

Interviewer: So some of your old neighborhood friends say that?

A lot of people are like, “Yo, you’re like Hollywood now. You’re so Hollywood. Like you’re such a stranger.
You’re so Hollywood.” It works both ways. When I left, you didn’t keep up the friendship. My freshman year, I
used to try to go back up to my middle school and hang out with some of my old friends. But now… like I don’t
have time to do that especially pertaining to try to do that last year and noticing how it affected my grades. Me
not doing it this year definitely is a plus. And you know me focusing more on school than on my past is helping
me progress in school.

Nyla only keeps in touch with one of her neighborhood friends, Michael. She has known him
since the second grade. He goes to a different magnet school but the two have stayed close.
“He’s also been one of the people to really get me through school because we’ve always helped
each other. If I didn’t understand anything, he’d help me and vice versa. If he didn’t understand
something, I’d help him and we’ve just always had that really close relationship,” she explains.

She points out how he’s different from her other neighborhood friends who she has
drifted apart from:

He didn’t do a lot of the same things the [other] guys did. In school, he’d talk to them, maybe talk about sports.
Maybe play some games, maybe you know just run around in the school yard at recess, but other than that, outside of it, he doesn’t smoke, he doesn’t drink or anything.

Yet Nyla still has one foot in Dorland. Her old friends will sometimes invite her to house parties. She likes the invites even though she rarely accepts. She also keeps up with the neighborhood gossip. She says she notices that some of her old friends have run into trouble:

My friend Malik, I used to chill with him and his sister and his mom. They all liked me. They all thought I was a really positive person to be around. It showed to be true. He’s 14, 15 [years old] when I was around him. He seemed to not get into as much trouble. When I was around him, he wouldn’t be with all his guy friends. He’d just chill with me and my cousin Monica. But then when I wasn’t around, he wound up going to the juvenile detention center and all this other stuff. And he doesn’t live with his mom any more. He now lives with his dad and then he came back down here to West Philly. And it was just like really weird when you’re not in people’s lives, how they seem to change versus when you were there with them before that.

Nyla says most of her socializing now happens through extracurriculars, where she feels she meets “a lot of positive role models.”

Our teachers have always said that, “You guys are gonna be really successful in life. I don’t know what you’re gonna do, but you’re gonna be really successful in life.” I’m not saying my other [middle school] classmates won’t be successful, but it’s like looking to be true with him [Nyla’s friend Michael] and I. We’re the ones who are staying out the hood, staying out of trouble, trying to find new people, and trying to find new crowds to hang around. You know trying to associate ourselves with more positive people. You know rather than sticking around the same people who you know you were in school with. I was in school with you, had a good time, might not have had such a good time, but now it’s my time to go.

Understanding that her neighborhood friendships are not as strong as they once were, Nyla has shifted her energies to friendships she has made via school and extracurriculars.

When neighborhood and school intersect: DeShawn

In contrast, DeShawn has strong ties with his friends from Dorland. “I grew up with all of them. They live on [my] street and went to the same school,” he says. Most of his friends have since graduated and/or dropped out from Juniper High. Some “do nothing” while others are now working. Among his closest friends, one works in construction, one sells speaker systems, the other works in landscaping, and another friend is a plumber. DeShawn says after high school, he plans to learn the trade from his friend and become a plumber. He admires his friend’s ability to earn enough to support himself. He says his mother, who raises him with the help of his grandmother, supports his goals. “She knows college is not for everybody.”

DeShawn and his friends often socialize locally. They meet up at a basketball court nearby or gather at someone’s house to watch TV and simply hang out. When he’s not with his male friends, DeShawn says he walks around the neighborhood and “spends a lot of time talking to girls.”

DeShawn, who is the oldest and has two younger siblings in grade school, goes to Juniper High, the local school. “[I]t’s [the school] mixed with everything,” he describes. “Some people are alright. Some people are weird. [Some] run around doing dumb stuff all day. They don’t go to class. They go to little spots to smoke [cigarettes and marijuana]. [S]ometimes they [the school] try to crack down but it doesn’t work.” He says he thinks Juniper is the same as any other high school. “[Other] schools are probably the same, just a little different.”

His mother does not like Juniper High. “She be worried,” he explains, “She wants me to
just stay away from it [students who break rules]. She doesn’t want me to go to the school. She never liked the school. She knows what goes on in there. She asks me, ‘What’s going on [at school]?’” His mother works long hours as a home health aide so she keeps track of him mainly via phone. Generally, though, she’ll only call to remind him of his curfew. “I don’t stay out too late. If I do, my mom gonna call me 10 or 10:30. She gonna call and ask when I’m coming home.” DeShawn says she knows the friends he hangs out with, having seen them grow up together, and likes them.

Even though most of DeShawn’s social bonds are in Dorland, he’s curious about other areas. “I want to experience something else,” he shares. “Another place that I’ve never been [but] not specifically to college.”

**Peer networks in disconnected and overlapping spheres**

As the comparison of Nyla and DeShawn reveals, MS youth face tensions in trying to maintain their neighborhood friendships. While the transition from primary to secondary school has not affected DeShawn’s friendships, Nyla increasingly finds it difficult to find time to spend with her old friends. Extralocal activities take her away from her residential area, where she meets and befriends other academically-oriented peers. Her neighborhood friends point out how she has changed. She in turn notices how a former neighborhood friend is now pursuing a path quite different from her own.

In contrast, DeShawn maintains close ties with friends even though many of have since graduated high school. He spends most of his time socializing in his neighborhood. Whether in local settings like the basketball court or walking around the neighborhood chatting with girls, DeShawn is frequently outside interacting with his neighborhood peers. Just as Harding (2010) finds that youth in poor neighborhoods have diverse friendships, DeShawn has a heterogeneous group of friends. Because he attends the local school, DeShawn’s peer group is even more diverse than Nyla’s. Some of his friends have dropped out of school and now spend their days doing “nothing” while others have graduated and are now working. DeShawn sees one of his friends doing well as a plumber and wants the same for himself.

**Cheree and Jesus**

This next comparison shows the challenges that NS students like Cheree face when local MS students like Jesus withdraw from the neighborhood. Going to the local school makes it more likely that youth like Cheree will befriend neighborhood peers who do not do well in school and are more likely to get into trouble. These effects are compounded when “good” peers like Jesus withdraw from their neighborhoods, thus further decreasing the chances that Cheree will be able to befriend positive peers within her local area.

**Study area: Spellmont**

An open-air market lies in the heart of Spellmont in South Philadelphia. Merchants dress in thick layers and burn up cardboard boxes, crates, and pallets in steel drums to stay warm in the winter. Stands of reduced price fruits and vegetables share real estate with stores hawking fancier fare, like imported Italian cured meats, chocolate pizzelles, and bronze-cut pasta. Hole-in-the-wall Vietnamese soup and sandwich shops, affordable taquerias, and a tiny upscale French restaurant draw an eclectic crowd of bargain hunters and hipster foodies.
The streets surrounding the market are well-maintained. Residents proudly and appropriately decorate their row homes for each seasonal holiday. In the spring, the predominantly Catholic residents draw aside their front living room curtains to reveal large, plush Easter bunnies holding chocolate baskets alongside the statue of the Virgin Mary. Come winter, the displays change to reveal mangers and tinsel-ed, plastic Christmas trees.

Most Philadelphians associate Spellmont with blue-collared Italian Americans with deep roots and even deeper neighborhood pride (Table A.2 in Appendix A present data on the social and demographic characteristics of Spellmont). And while this is mainly true, the area has pockets of racial diversity. Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Mexican immigrants are relatively recent newcomers. There are also blocks where mainly poor and working-class blacks live. These areas too are known for strong neighborhood cohesion.

Challenges of overlapping neighborhood and school spheres: Cheree

Cheree, a black senior at Banks High, lives on one such block in Spellmont. This is the same block that her parents, aunts, and uncles grew up on. “I can honestly say that block is a crazy block because it’s like my whole block, it’s like we’re all related in some type of way. It’s crazy. We all get along. Family. We all look at each other like family. It’s nice.” Even though she has seen some racial and ethnic change on her block, she says her neighborhood is still strongly united. “We’re supposed to be having like a block reunion. It’s like now we got Asians, like every ethnic in there, everybody. It’s mixed. We all get along well.”

Despite strong roots in the neighborhood and even though all of Cheree’s five older siblings attended Banks, Cheree’s parents originally wanted her to go to a Christian private school in another neighborhood. They even scheduled a tour of the school. Cheree says she didn’t like how “small” the school felt and told her parents she wanted to go to Banks instead.

I like to go to schools where you can look at stuff, observe, and learn from… I mean looking at bad things and learning from them so you won’t make that mistake is also good too. And I just wanted to be in that type of environment so I can observe and learn from. And I learn a whole lot from this school. Like I really did. Growing, 9th grade, seeing students what they was going through and what they was getting into, until now, it really, really helped me. When it came to boys, just getting into other crazy stuff, it helped me because I looked at people that actually did the things and it wasn’t good. The outcome wasn’t good at all. So I observe like that. I look, I watch other people do what they do and then go from there.

Interviewer: What do you mean getting into things? Like doing drugs? Getting pregnant? Cutting classes?

All that. All that.

She insisted on Banks even though she knew that fighting could be a problem there:

When my brothers and sisters and them used to go here, they was always fighting. Getting kicked out of school, doing this, had to get transferred. I come, it was a couple of fights but it wasn’t how it used to be…. When my brothers and sisters was going there, my dad had to come here like everyday, like most of the time everyday for my brother, my sisters.

Headed off to a 3-year accelerated, in-state college next year, Cheree is unlike most of her classmates at Banks. In 2011, a little less than half of Banks’ students graduated within four years. Only 29 percent were headed to college.

Cheree realizes that not all of her friends have the same goals as her, and she does not mind this. “They was always on their own path. They would do them, and I would do me. I just
wouldn’t take it to the extent that they’ll take it too. They had good [things about them too].”

She explains that even though most of her peers don’t share her desire for college, they
do not try to derail her from her goals. “They’re not really supportive. They’re not bad friends
either. They don’t bash me. They be like, ‘Oh you going to school? You know, do that. If that’s
what you want to do, do it.’ They don’t try to bash me.”

However, Cheree’s path to college has not always been smooth or certain. She once got
into a fight on behalf of a friend because a squabble that started in the neighborhood made its
way back to school:

I was at the wrong place at the wrong time. I wasn’t supposed to fight. I was just supposed to be with my friend
because my friend was supposed to fight, and I didn’t want everybody to jump on her you know if she wanted
to fight that one person. I’m not gonna let nobody jump her. …I don’t know why, but I wind up fighting.

Even though the disagreement started at home, the fight took place near the school.
Consequently, Cheree was suspended.

But Cheree says she has largely avoided what has happened to many of her friends, like
dropping out of school and getting pregnant, because her mother has always closely monitored
her:

Me and my mom always had a good relationship but I just hate it because she can be very controlling
sometimes. And I just hated that because I’m getting older now. I’m not going to always be five. Come on. I’m
getting older now. And it’s like she keep thinking I’m a baby.

Interviewer: Does she like to know where you are all the time?

Yeah, she know. Everything. It’s not a problem. When I was younger actually growing up, I’m kinda happy that
she was like that in a way. Even though I wasn’t thinking about going the path that my friends actually took, I
was still happy that she did that because at the end of the day my friends, their outcome wasn’t good at all.

The combination of watching her friends struggle and the constant reminders and close watch by
her mother have helped Cheree avoid some of the larger problems that have befallen her
neighborhood and school peers.

**Niche-specific neighborhood interactions: Jesus**

Two blocks from Cheree lives Jesus, a sophomore at CCM. Born in Mexico, Jesus
emigrated to the U.S. with his parents, older brother, and younger sister while still an infant.
Unlike Cheree, he and his family are still relatively new to the neighborhood. This year marks
their fifth year in the community, the longest they’ve stayed in any one area of the city.

His dad, who has no formal American education, started as a potato peeler, was promoted
to bus boy, and finally as a chef at a diner. His mom, who also has no formal American
education, has alternated between staying at home and selling costume jewelry independently.
When they accrued enough capital, Jesus’s parents opened a convenience store in Spellmont.

Unlike Cheree who sees Spellmont as one large “family,” Jesus describes the
neighborhood as “kind of segregated.” He explains: “My family we live on one of the corners. And then the other four corners, they are mixed but people don’t really hang with other people of
other race. But my parents since they’re really religious and Christian they want to be neighbors
with everybody. But the majority of the neighbors who like us are Mexican neighbors and elder
Latinos.”
Despite differences in perceptions of neighborhood cohesion, Jesus, like Cheree, feels strongly attached to Spellmont. However, unlike Cheree who is friendly with many of her peers, most of Jesus’s attachments are to the neighborhood adults who frequent the family’s business. Jesus’s family had to sell the store when his dad became sick and disabled. But the goodwill from relationships formed with neighbors when the store operated lingers. He says his neighbors treat him and his family well because they see them as positive fixtures in the community. He explains:

We were there when people needed diapers and stuff. We were in their lives so often. When we first opened the store, people told us they were so happy because usually they went all the way to North Philly to get their products that were Mexican and stuff like that. And some people they didn’t want to go all the way to Walmart or 7-Eleven to get their milk so they were happy that it was closer.

Jesus says he took partial responsibility for the store for a short time when he father was sick.

Since my brother was busy with school and stuff and my sister was too young, I kinda handled the whole thing by myself. I opened the store. I made phone calls. I talked to people about bringing more stuff in. I manned the cash register. I did money transfers. I learned how to do everything. And I still had to juggle school with that because that was 7th grade, the grade for high school counted.

Jesus’s neighbors helped out during this difficult time. “[T]hey would bring us food and stuff because my mom and dad couldn’t cook because they were sick… Sometimes people would buy a 75 cent soda and give us a 10 and just walk out without getting the change.”

Not only have Jesus’s neighbors provided material support during hard times, they have also expressed enthusiasm at the academic achievement of his little sister Nina, who recently received admission to a highly-selective magnet school (not CCM).

She’s [Nina] kinda famous in our neighborhood because like September she’s going to [the magnet school]. She got accepted there. And like that’s really good because that’s a really good school. So like lots of people are proud of her. Our Mexican neighbors are so proud of her because she hangs out with their kids.

Because most of his interactions with his neighbors occur within the specific context of his family’s store, Jesus has mostly positive views of his residential community. Even though he knows his neighbors engage in illegal activities, he generally views them in a good light and believes his neighbors would not wish harm upon him: “I’m not worried that me or my family gets in trouble or like mugged or anything because the people there are nice even if they like sell drugs and stuff. They respect us.”

The mutual feelings of goodwill, however, do not delude Jesus from the other realities of his neighborhood. He says he avoided the neighborhood school because “it’s not really that good.” He is familiar with the “stories about how like people can easily pass school throughout the year without actually coming to class.” Even though he does not have any neighborhood friends and does not know anyone who attends Banks, he says that his own experience at a neighborhood public middle school showed him that many of his classmates are not interested in school. “Everybody else wasn’t interested in school so they goofed up in class. I was one of the few kids that actually graduated school but wanted to continue high school,” he explains.

Even though Jesus lives only two blocks away from Banks, he does not have any firsthand contact with his neighborhood peers who go there. Neither does he have contact with neighborhood adults as the family store is no longer in business.
Closing the store has freed up Jesus’ time considerably. Still, unlike Cheree, he spends very little time socializing in his neighborhood. Neither does he spend his time in extracurriculars with his school peer as Nyla does. Instead, he organizes most of his free time around helping his mother with household tasks. “My mom doesn’t have a [cell] phone, and my dad is working again. So I usually stay with my mom or if my mom needs to go somewhere I go with her. So depending on my mom, I stay in my neighborhood but mostly in my house.” Thus, Jesus only interacted with his neighborhood through the specific context of his family store. Now that the family has closed the store, he spends most of his free time inside with his mother.

Discussion

My data suggest that school choice is restructuring peer networks in much the same way that economic changes restructured urban neighborhoods in the 1970s. However, whereas Wilson’s theory of social isolation/collective socialization posited an actual physical departure of “good” role models from urban neighborhoods, I find, consistent with the heterogeneity hypothesis, that these neighborhoods still contain a diverse array of individuals (Harding et al. 2011; Sharkey and Faber 2014; Small and Feldman 2012). My data show that students who follow conventional norms and aspire to achieve in the world of work and school live alongside students who have low school attachments and engage in delinquent behaviors.

Contra the literature which finds that disadvantaged neighborhoods lack good role models, “good” adolescent role models have not left these neighborhoods (Ainsworth 2002; Brody et al. 2001; Brooks-Gunn et al. 1993; Crowder and South 2003; Elliott et al. 1996; Ensminger et al. 1996; Hirschi 1969; Liska and Reed 1985). However, the patterns of their daily social interactions have changed. As the data show, MS and NS students and their parents make different decisions in how, with whom, and where they spend time. The majority of MS students spend their free time in structured activities that take place outside their local areas. Extralocal involvements in extracurricular activities mean less time spent in neighborhoods and fewer opportunities to engage with local peers. MS students like Nyla and Jesus who still spend most of their time in the neighborhood carve smaller worlds within their residential areas by carefully selecting how, with whom, and where they spend their free time. Oftentimes, this means spending more time indoors at home or within specific niches in the neighborhood, as Jesus’ example shows. Just as Park (1925) famously described the city as a “mosaic of social worlds which touch but do not interpenetrate,” MS and NS students live in worlds that touch but remain apart from one another.

The consequences of limited neighborhood exposure are both positive and negative. As Nyla and Jesus’ respective stories show, MS youth who spend less time socializing with neighborhood peers limit their exposure to neighborhood disadvantage. Nyla benefits from meeting and befriending positive peers who participate in similar extracurricular activities. These peers serve as role models, reminding her of the importance of school. Likewise, Jesus limits his exposure to neighborhood disadvantage by engaging primarily with his neighbors from within his family’s store. Here, he builds positive relationships with neighborhood adults who are grateful for the store’s presence. When his family runs into hard times, Jesus experiences firsthand the support of neighbors who pitch in to help. Thus, while Jesus is aware that many of his NS peers engage in illegal activities like selling drugs, he does not feel threatened by it and views his neighbors as good people.
Seen from a different perspective, Nyla’s retreat from her neighborhood counts as a loss for her residential peers. She no longer spends as much time with her childhood friend Malik, who she observes has run into trouble with the law over the years. Instead, she selectively chooses to only maintain contact with Michael, a peer who is also high-achieving and attending a nonlocal magnet school (not CCM). She improves her grades when she reorganizes how, with whom, and where she spends her time. Jesus’s absence from his neighborhood also means a lost friendship opportunity for Cheree, who feels as if she’s alone in her peer group in terms of educational achievement. Thus, while school choice may expand the opportunities for students like Nyla and Jesus to meet and be inspired by academically-motivated peers, these policies may be simultaneously gutting neighborhoods and their local schools of positive peer role models and thereby increasing the “dosage” of neighborhood disadvantage for students like DeShawn and Cheree (Galster 2011).

Whereas Harding (2010) finds that neighborhood context importantly shapes how adolescents form peers, I find that school context also plays a critical role in shaping the types of friendship opportunities available to students within their residential areas. Understanding how peer networks develop and connect across social spheres like schools and neighborhoods can shed light on how and why neighborhood effects vary for individuals who share a residential context. The disjuncture of neighborhood and school contexts results in increased exposure to high-quality peers for MS students. These children increasingly spend time away from local peers, thus further deteriorating the quality of home peers available to NS children. The conjuncture of neighborhood and school environments—in addition to school and family selection effects discussed in chapter 2—reinforces the likelihood that students from poor neighborhoods will befriend peers who do not do well in school and who misbehave.

My data suggest that instead of erasing educational inequities, school choice policies are further stratifying poor neighborhoods by creating a class of individuals who are able to access high-quality public goods (i.e., magnet public schools) with rich peer environments while leaving behind a much larger proportion of individuals with no such access. Children who go to NS schools receive a higher dosage of neighborhood disadvantage than they otherwise would in the absence of school choice policies because the quality of their peer groups suffers when good students leave their local schools for magnet schools.
Chapter 4: Violence in the Streets and School

Violence in young people’s environments, and fear of it, shape their experiences and coping strategies (Chesney-Lind and Jones 2010; Clampet-Lundquist et al. 2011; Dance 2002; Harding 2009, 2010; Jones 2010; Madriz 1997; Mateu-Gelabert and Lune 2003, 2007; Miller 2008; Popkin et al. 2010; Sharkey 2010; Tran et al. 2012). But, which environment? Children spend the majority of their time in two—the neighborhood and school. How does experiencing violence at both home and school affect how children respond to danger? This chapter looks at how residential danger and students’ fear of it generally results in two responses: flight or fight. I examine how variations in these responses to violence in school—i.e., whether children decide to isolate from or confront violence—partly depends on the conjuncture and disjuncture of school and neighborhood contexts. I find that NS students are more likely to adopt street-oriented behaviors in school (i.e., fight back and confront) because the violent conditions at school replicate violent conditions at home. Even NS students who respond via isolation strategies experience a heightened sense of fear when unregulated school violence erupts throughout the school. In contrast, MS students are less likely to fight in school because school selection effects produce an environment with less student misconduct (as discussed in chapter 2) and because the safe school environment does not replicate violent neighborhood conditions, a point which I develop further in this chapter. Thus, my model of how neighborhood violence affects children considers how other contexts—like schools—exacerbates or weakens children’s flight or fight responses to danger.

Background

A gap in the literature exists on how multiple contexts—like schools and neighborhoods—work together to affect how adolescents respond to violence at school. What little research there is focuses on the clash between school and street culture (Carter 2005; Dance 2002; Mateu-Gelabert and Lune 2007). This work examines how the competing norms of school and neighborhood trap students, particularly low-income black males, in damaging stereotypes. As Anderson (1999) documents in his seminal ethnography of life in inner-city Philadelphia, black youth who live in disadvantaged, high-crime communities adopt a “code of the street” for survival. In the absence of protection from formal institutions like the police, black youth oftentimes must ensure their own safety; thus, they apply a street-justice code focused on the three Rs—reputation, respect, and retaliation—to deter potential victimization. However, youth who adopt this street-oriented code in schools are sanctioned for breaking school rules. Indeed, schools fail to engage students and may alienate them when schools misinterpret “code of the street” behaviors as oppositional, antisocial, and/or undisciplined (Carter 2005; Dance 2002; Jones 2010; Mateu-Gelabert and Lune 2007).

My research builds on this scholarship by exploring how unsafe schools mirror the threats that students face in their neighborhoods and exacerbates the likelihood that they will respond to violence in school by either fighting back or retreating further. When contexts overlap—as in the case of local schools and neighborhoods—they may exacerbate how students respond to danger. While recent studies (e.g., Mateu-Gelabert and Lune 2003) document the
permeable boundary between violence at home and at school (i.e., how violence from one context flows into another), we do not have comparison data on how students who live in the same area but go to different schools experience and manage the boundaries between violence at school and violence in the street. That is, we do not understand how school choice structures students’ behavioral adaptations to violence encountered at school. If NS youth face the same dangerous conditions at school as they do in their neighborhood, then they may experience a higher “dosage” of violence compared to MS peers who live in their neighborhood (Galster 2011). This constant exposure to violence—that is, both at school and within their neighborhoods—has the potential to increase students’ vulnerability to danger and thus make it more likely they will attempt to safeguard their wellbeing by fighting back. My research thus takes into account Arum’s (2000) critique of neighborhood effects scholarship for failing to consider variations between school environments (e.g., in their disciplinary climates and practices) and Elliot et al.’s (2007) call for multi-contextual models of neighborhood effects.

**Fight or flight**

A substantial literature exists on how children respond to violence in their communities. Anderson’s influential work (1999) has inspired a large body of scholarship on street-oriented responses to violence (e.g., Baumer et al. 2003; Brezina et al. 2004; Harding 2010; Matsueda et al. 2006; Mullins et al. 2004; Oliver 2006; Stewart et al. 2006; Stewart et al. 2002). Research finds that urban blacks, in comparison to other racial groups, face unique perils because they live in areas marked by extreme segregation and concentrated disadvantage (e.g., Drake and Cayton 1962; Massey and Denton 1993). Scholarship, for example, finds that immigrants differ from their native-born peers in how they respond to violence—notably by avoiding further engagement in violence—because of important differences in neighborhood conditions. For example, consistent with Alba et al.’s (2000) model of spatial assimilation, Tran et al. (2012) find that whites, Chinese and Filipinos grow up in the most advantaged neighborhoods (i.e., peaceful environments with safe streets) whereas blacks, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and Mexicans grow up in the least advantaged neighborhoods (i.e., high levels of crime and violence). Thus, black youth, more so than their immigrant counterparts, are more likely to respond to violence by enacting “the code” because they live in substantially more dangerous and segregated communities.

In addition to responding to violence by fighting back, research finds that youth work hard to protect themselves via avoidance strategies. Clampet-Lundquist et al. (2011) show that boys try to escape violence by intentionally altering their daily routines (e.g., routes to and from school) and/or investing time in other, less dangerous neighborhoods (e.g., the neighborhood of a relative). Females also use an array of strategies to avoid violence, including isolating themselves, altering their personal appearance, looking for guardians, and ignoring fears (Chesney-Lind 1997; Jones 2010; Madriz 1997).

**How schools moderate fight or flight responses**

The literature thus well documents that adolescents of various racial, gender, and immigrant backgrounds use an array of strategies—from avoiding to confronting—in response to and because they fear violence. Additionally, scholarship shows that neighborhood factors—i.e., the degree of racial segregation and the extent of actual violence committed in these communities—moderates whether children will respond via fleeing or fighting back. However,
we know less about how multiple contexts—like neighborhoods and schools—work together to condition children’s fight or flight responses to danger.

My research extends this scholarship by exploring how unsafe schools replicate the threats that students face in their neighborhoods and thus exacerbate the likelihood that students will respond to violence in school by either fighting back or further retreating, just as they would in their neighborhoods. I compare how different school conditions—e.g., safe magnet schools vs. violent neighborhood schools—exacerbate or weaken the likelihood of children’s fighting behaviors at school. My model of neighborhood factors (i.e., violence) and its effects on children (i.e., fight or flight) thus considers how other contexts (i.e., schools) exacerbate or weaken how children respond to danger in their school environment.

Findings

Violence in Philadelphia

Violence and crime in Philadelphia—as Goffman’s (2014) contemporary ethnography vividly portrays—exact a toll on a limited number of poor neighborhoods. During the time that I collected data for this study (2011-2012), 10 out of 22 police districts accounted for almost 69 percent of violent crime citywide (PEW 2013).12 The number of violent crimes per 100 residents in these districts was 2.28 compared to 1.39 in all other districts (see Table 4.1). Moreover, the city’s violent crime rate surpassed that of many other major cities like Chicago and Washington, D.C. Philadelphia’s homicide rate, for example, ranked first among the nation’s 10 largest cities (PEW 2013).

Table 4.1 shows the distribution of my study sample across police districts ranked by violence. Almost a third of MS students (30 percent) live in the top ten most violent police districts compared to a fifth of NS students (21 percent). Overall, a little over a quarter of my student sample (26 percent) live in the top ten most violent police districts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Police district rank</th>
<th>Violent crimes per 100 residents2</th>
<th>Crime (%) N=17,943</th>
<th>Magnet3 (%) N=44</th>
<th>Neighborhood (%) N=29</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Top 10 most violent</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All others</td>
<td>1.39</td>
<td>30.8</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
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1 Police districts ranked by number of most violent crimes committed in 2012 (PEW 2013).
2 Population counts based on 2010 Census.
3 N=44 because one student lives outside city boundary.

Efforts to avoid violence by seeking safer schools partially explain why more MS than NS students come from violent areas. Compared to zero NS students, one-quarter of MS youth cite safety concerns—second only to educational quality—as the primary reason for their schooling decision (see Table 4.2). Students like Betty, an Asian junior at CCM who lives in a dangerous neighborhood, explains: “It seemed violent because the middle school I went to is right next to Sunrise [her neighborhood school]. So like everyday when I would come out of school I would see people beating each other up as soon as they get out of school. And so I was

12 Violent crimes include homicide, rape, aggravated assault, and robbery.
like I don’t want to go there.” Similarly, Nadia, a white sophomore at CCM, says she wanted to
go to a high school different from the dangerous environment of her middle school: “Actually,
my middle school, there was a lot of fights. That was the whole thing. Fights, fights, fights.
Water fight. Food fight. Like people, oh my god, it was so bad over there. Fights everywhere.
People hit other students in the head. Oh my god. That was horrible. That was my worst
experience there.” Alyah, a black senior, explains that she and her mother sought a spot at CCM
because of safety concerns:

I just didn’t want to deal with the kids [at the local school]… I don’t like fighting. I don’t like drama…even
though school is not on a high pedestal… I knew I had to [graduate]. So I didn’t want any distractions, so I knew
if I went to school [at CCM], I get out of fighting. I wouldn’t be doing stuff that I’d regret and that could’ve
 messed up my career even more, so I definitely didn’t want to go to a neighborhood school.

Exposure to violence in grade school consequently drives many MS students to seek alternatives
to their local schools.

The majority of both MS and NS, however, live in areas of relatively low violence, 70
and 79 percent, respectively. These areas account for less than five percent of the city’s total
number of violent crimes. The fact that most of my student sample live in areas of low violence
is unsurprising given that the majority live near their schools, which—with the exception of
Juniper and Shelley—are also located in low-crime police districts. As Lauen (2006) finds in his
analysis of school choice in Chicago, many families consider distance, commute times, and
public transportation routes to and from home when choosing schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.2 Primary reason for school selection</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Educational quality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maintain social ties to school/neighborhood peers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Safety concerns</td>
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<tr>
<td>Default</td>
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1 Column does not total 100% because of rounding errors.

Violence at school

Table 4.3 shows data on the disciplinary and safety climate across all schools for 2011-
2012. Among the five schools, CCM has the lowest number of suspensions (1) and the lowest
rate of serious incidents per 100 students (1.1). In comparison, Juniper has the highest number of
suspensions (47); Shelley has the highest rate of serious incidents per 100 students (8.9, over
eight times that of CCM). Even when serious incidents are disaggregated, CCM has the lowest
number of incidents across all five categories (i.e., assaults, drugs, morals, weapons, and theft).
CCM has the lowest number of suspensions and serious incidents per 100 students even among
comparably small-sized schools like Banks and March.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.3 Serious incidents by school1</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>CCM</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enrollment2</td>
</tr>
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</table>

1 Column does not total 100% because of rounding errors.
As a frequent visitor to the schools, I also observed marked differences in the disciplinary and safety climates. Even the school buildings themselves—CCM had arched, Art Deco window flourishes and warm, yellow interior lighting while March, for example, had a plaza-like front entrance, a modern steel and concrete exterior, and half-darkened halls—conveyed the relaxed atmosphere at CCM and the more grim approach toward discipline and safety at the neighborhood schools.

At all the neighborhood schools, I could not gain entrance without first going through metal detectors and checking in with school police. For the first several weeks at Banks, I was stopped by two no-nonsense school guards and brusquely asked the purpose of my visit. Even when I cleared the metal detectors, one of the guards insisted that I take off my coat and place all my personal belongings in a plastic bin to be hand-inspected. The other guard radioed the front office to verify that I was expected on official business. Confirmation from the front office was not enough; the guards also insisted that I write my full name, date, and time in the black sign-in binder. They wrote my name with a thick black marker on a white tag and instructed that the identification sticker be clearly displayed at all times. If I left the school midday, I had to go through the same procedure upon return. The process often took several minutes, giving me a chance to make small talk with the guards, learn their names (Tashira and Reginold), and eventually small details of their lives. Only after I had become a familiar face, was known on a first name basis, and had made an effort to get to know the guards did they eventually relax the formal sign-in procedures. By the conclusion of my study, Tashira would even ask me how my interviews were going and casually wave me in. Tashira, who was the most unfriendly of the guards at the beginning, even offered to share her birthday cake with me one day.

I encountered this laborious sign-in procedure even at larger schools like March and Shelley. School police meticulously screened individuals no matter how long the line of students. On my first visit to Shelley, I waited more than 15 minutes—late to my own meeting with the vice principal—with approximately 50 students all anxious to make it through the metal detector before the first bell. Students griped and cursed about being late but the guards ignored them.
At CCM, I could sometimes walk in without encountering school police. I also found that I could enter the school through multiple, sometimes unguarded, entrances. In their interviews, a couple of CCM students joked about the large, people-sized gaps flanking the metal detector, making it easy for students to slip past inattentive school police. Shani, a black senior at CCM, describes the futility of the screening process:

During the morning, you’re supposed to go through the metal detector and go through a riser or whatever but sometimes kids like, if they know it’s really no point, they kinda just go up the other steps, I’m like, whatever to that. But the metal detectors are there from 8 to 8:30 and after that you can basically walk in and not really be found or searched or whatever. So I kinda feel like, okay, kids are walking up like 8:02 without going through the metal detectors but the person who walks through like 8:32 can just walk in school without. I’m like what’s the point of that metal detector there if it’s really not searching everyone?

Like Shani and many other students at CCM, I quickly learned how easy it was to evade CCM’s screening process. Although I visited CCM on more occasions than the other schools, I was never screened and my personal belongings never checked. A few times I encountered an elderly guard nodding off on a chair by the entrance. I walked quietly by him with no problems. It was up to me to make sure that I signed in at the front office at CCM. Many times the secretary, with the phone cradled between her ear and shoulder busily scribbling messages, did not even notice my presence. For the first few weeks, I diligently recorded my comings and goings in the sign-in book. But as time passed, I stopped. I would skip the front office, breeze up the stairs to the second floor and straight to the room where I conducted the majority of my interviews.

School police at NS schools also regularly walked the halls to make sure students did not cut classes or hide in corners, smoking. More than once, I would turn a corner at March and be surprised to find school police. I tried to avoid these encounters because once spotted I would have to explain yet again the purpose of my visit. NS students were also aware that they were being monitored via cameras. In their interviews, many shared how video cameras made them feel safer; no CCM student mentioned such surveillance. At all the NS schools, school administrators (e.g., principals and assistant vice principals) and police regularly walked the halls in between class bells. They pointed out violations in dress codes and chid ed students for rowdiness. The principal at Banks also regularly urged students, over the PA system, to ask school adults for help in mediating disagreements. Outside of each bathroom entrance at Banks a list of school rules written in marker on poster board reminded students that restrooms were not places to socialize.

In contrast, CCM made no such public displays of discipline and safety enforcement. If disciplinary and safety measures were taken, it usually happened quietly and behind closed doors. A few times I saw either the vice principal or disciplinarian—with serious expressions—tap students, who were roughhousing in the hallways, on the shoulder. They pulled them aside and reprimanded them in low voices. I would also occasionally see agitated students sit in chairs in the front office, waiting for their turn to be called in by the vice principal. Lips pulled tight in displeasure, she’d curtly call their names, usher them into her office, and firmly shut the door. CCM students like Henry, who sat in detention a number of times, say they had many second chances. “Ms. Baumer [CCM’s disciplinarian], she know I’m the class clown. [She’ll say] Henry, I know what you do but you got to calm it down. She’ll give me a little bit of leniency.” Students like Alyah notice the soft punishments doled out at CCM; she complains about how school administrators give “slack” and treat students “like a baby.”

Karen, Kendrick, and Adrian
This next section explores in-depth how the conjuncture and disjuncture of neighborhood and school contexts moderates children’s fight or flight responses to violence. I compare Karen, Kendrick, and Adrian, who all live in Owenston, and discuss how the safe environment at CCM gives students like Karen and Kendrick a reprieve from neighborhood danger and lowers their fight or flight responses at school. At the same time, unsafe conditions at March heightens Adrian’s vulnerability to danger and intensifies his fighting responses at school.

**Study area: Owenston**

Owenston has the unfortunate reputation of being one of Philadelphia’s deadliest neighborhoods. Local Philadelphians recognize the area as host to one of the city’s largest and most lethal open-air drug markets. Street hustlers, prostitutes, and pimps compete for space on the neighborhood’s street corners.

Once considered an industrial powerhouse, Owenston today looks like an industrial wasteland. Abandoned factories and warehouses attract drug dealers, stray animals, debris, and waste. The absence of trees and greenery contribute to the area’s bleakness. The commercial corridor—with its mix of auto shops, car sale lots, and salvage yards—adds to the neighborhood’s grittiness. Local convenience stores with their bulletproof glass reveal the high level of gun violence in the area.

The residential streets of Owenston boast surprisingly impressive three-story brownstones and mansions. The large homes hint at Owenston’s distant, wealthier past. Today, many of the families in Owenston live in mansions that have been carved into multi-dwelling apartment units. The derelict mansions sit next to row homes, equally in need of repair. Successful Polish and Italian immigrants once lived here. Now Owenston is a racially diverse neighborhood; mostly blacks and Latinos of Puerto Rican and Columbian ancestry reside here. Table A.2 in Appendix A shows the social and demographic characteristics of Owenston. Abandoned homes and overgrown lots full of trash are common throughout the neighborhood.

**Neighborhood race wars**

When Karen, a Latina senior at CCM, shows me pictures she has taken of her neighborhood, she points out one abandoned house. The windows are broken and shuttered; the front porch rails are missing; the exterior paint is peeling off in large chunks. Karen points out the crumbling house and surrounding litter with little fanfare. She is accustomed to the neighborhood’s structural decay. Except for a brief stint in Florida when she was in grade school, Karen has lived in Owenston all her life.

In Florida everything was just like beautiful. It was so nice in there. Like green grass. It was grass that came up green! [laughs] And the air was clean. We had put a piece of trash on the [sidewalk] one day. Me, my brother and sister were like, let’s see if it’s here when we get back home from school. And it’ll [the trash] be gone! It’ll be like the hot, humid days and it’ll just be like gone. We’re like, what happened to it?! It was just a lot cleaner, no stepping over needles. No stepping on used condoms. …where I am at now, it’s just like the hood. I consider it the hood, the ghetto. And like it’s just, I find it just to be dirty. Just walking outside, like you get that feeling [shudders]. The dirtiness.

Interviewer: Why did your family move to Florida?

My parents wanted to move down there because they wanted to have a different scenery, but it was just too quiet. There would be nights where we would actually hear crickets. We could look at stars and my mom would be like, I’m going crazy. We would [go] crazy too because we were used to police sirens and ambulances…. It’s
like our lullaby when we go to sleep. Like it was just too country. Florida was way too country. It would bother me. I would be so mad. I would be, it’s so nice but oh my god, I can’t hear anything.

Karen tells me she prefers her racially diverse neighborhood of Owenston over the predominantly “white, blond hair, blue eyes” neighborhood in Florida. Although her Florida neighborhood fit the bill of an idyllic, clean community, she says “you paid for it in the people. They were really racist and mean. And they didn’t like us. And here [Owenston] we sort of fit in because we fit in with the, you know, the races, the different cultures.”

Despite fitting in culturally and racially in Owenston, Karen fears the violence that pervades the area. Among the most dangerous and explosive episodes she describes are the racial skirmishes between Latino and black residents:

There’s a rivalry, because it’s a mixture between African American and like Hispanic…. This one year they were just like at it. Like black and Hispanic would just go at it, with baseball bats.

Interviewer: So gangs?

Sort of like gangs. Like a racial war, like they would have a race war and then they would be like cool with each other or it would go back to normal.

Amy, a senior at Shelley who lived in Owenston for three years, describes the difficulty of being black but living in a predominantly Latino section of Owenston:

Eh, [living in Owenston was] horrible. Well you would think it would be racially diverse but it’s not, it’s actually a lot of Latinos there. And it’s like oh yeah you better learn a little Spanish here or you’re not going to be able to do anything there...I hated it...Most of them [her neighbors] were friendly but then there was the other group that were just ignorant, and I hated them. They were just rude for no reason at all. That was just how they live. They were just angry and bitter all the time.

Indeed, the racial tensions and skirmishes that Amy and Karen depict typify descriptions of neighborhood violence offered by many other students in my sample. Both MS and NS youth explain how different racial groups living in close proximity, as close as one block away, clash frequently over residential boundaries. James, a white junior at CCM who lives in a predominantly white Irish Catholic neighborhood, says that the teenagers in his neighborhood often battle the teenagers a few blocks down: “The Cambodian kids that are down toward Dirks Street they for some reason like to come and fight with the white kids. I don’t know why. They just do. They just come, big groups, knives, whatever, and want to jump and kill kids.” Cristina, a Puerto Rican senior at CCM, says she lives on a street that divides black and white residents:

They [black part, white part] really don’t mix. 10th street and 12th street so called have a beef with each other so it’s basically always fighting. And then on 12th, no on 16th and Bellingham, there’s a library there. Some of the people around there are racist. So it’s like the black people can’t be in that park behind the library.

Interviewer: So it’s the white people who have a problem with black people?

Yes, and it’s like the black people want to retaliate. And the white ones retaliate. It’s just chaos.

Interviewer: Is it gangs?

There’s gangs around the black part and there’s gangs in the white part. But I don’t think it’s the gangs be fighting. It’s just random fights. If the blacks have to go past there to go to Target or something and the white
people, there’s like groups of white people and they don’t like them, there’s just problems.

Interviewer: Does it ever get really violent?

There’s usually fights and shootings.

Students like Karen, Amy, Cristina and James say that the most violent crimes in their areas are often rooted in racial animosity and turf battles. Some students like Vanessa, a black junior at March, marvel at the extent of violence driven by racial differences. “You would think how integrated everything is here [Philadelphia] that people [wouldn’t] be so close-minded but you find that there really are some places that are.”

Even students who try to avoid affiliating with neighborhood street gangs sometimes become entangled. Carl, a white junior at Banks, says he is often mistakenly identified as a local gang member because of his whiteness:

These kids named Cronos, they’re like a gang on Blossom Street, they’re majority white and they don’t like a lot of black people. … Sometimes when I go up neighborhoods down there [where blacks live predominantly], some black kids say you’re Cronos to me and I’m not even in them… They just started messing with me. When I go past those buildings, that’s when I’m in like their area. That’s why I don’t normally go up there anymore.

As James explains, residents often divide neighborhoods on such a small scale that turning a corner or crossing a particular street “spells disaster” for someone who does not belong in the area. On my way to interview Stephanie, an Asian junior at Banks, at her home, I noticed how easy it is to find oneself in an area where you do not belong because of your race. I made several loops around Stephanie’s neighborhood in my rental car trying to find parking. Each time I turned a block I noticed how quickly the neighborhood transitioned from one race to another. I did not have to drive very far before the scene changed from young black men talking, laughing, and leaning against the wall of a corner store to Asian teenagers sitting on front stoops, smoking, and people watching. Indeed, as many of my interviewees reveal, in some Philadelphia neighborhoods residential boundaries are often defended on such a micro level that transgressions by outsiders can lead to violence.

Good people live here too

Areas like Owenston frequently make the nightly news because of violent crimes like gang warfare, armed robberies, and assaults. However, as Kendrick and Adrian reveal, these areas also support a diverse network of law-abiding residents, gangs, drug dealers, and working families (Pattillo-McCoy 2000; Stack 1974). Kendrick lives just four blocks from Karen but on the other side of a major thoroughfare that transects Owenston. Similar to Karen, he has lived in the neighborhood all his life. He describes how normalcy coexists alongside violence in Owenston:

Everybody ask me, Kendrick, where you live? I’m like Owenston. Oh, I don’t know how you survive in there?! I guess when people hear Owenston, they think, you automatically part of a gang. You’re either running from getting shot or you’re gonna shoot somebody if you live in Owenston. I’m like it is not like that. I mean I’m not gonna lie. Parts of Owenston are bad. At the part I live in, it’s not really that bad.

Interviewer: But you also said sometimes things do happen?

Yes, you would hear about it on the news. I think about two weeks ago my neighborhood was on the news for a shooting that happened I think two, like I would say a block and half away from me, or like two blocks, like
around the corner from my house, a shooting. Cuz a guy who looked at someone’s girlfriend wrong and some
guy killed another guy. That was like the most recent thing that happened. But for the most part, it is a quiet
neighborhood.

Similar to Kendrick, Adrian, a Puerto Rican senior at March, describes his neighbors as good,
hardworking people. He observes his neighbors helping each other with small daily tasks, such
as unloading groceries, sweeping sidewalks, and looking out for each other’s children. He speaks
about neighborhood block parties, impromptu cookouts, and children playing in the park.

There’s positive neighbors where they have real jobs. There’s also a lot of people who sell drugs, stuff like that.
But around there, they actually, they’re kind people. They really respect the environment where you live. They
respect you as long as you don’t disrespect them. So around there it’s all about respect. It’s pretty good up there.

Adrian says his neighbors watch out for each other and step in to help even during potentially
dangerous situations. He shares an example of when a neighbor came to the aid of his cousin,
who was being threatened by an ex-lover:

He came up and try to start with her. I guess try to hit her. And he’s very abusive. And one of the neighbors he
deals drugs, he said, do you need [help]? Is he a problem? Do you need me to handle him? And we was like, no,
it’s okay. He’s a nobody. And they do look out for each other.

Adrian explains that his neighbors intervene and offer help because of mutual respect. He does
not have trouble with his drug-dealing neighbors next door because he does not interfere with
their activities. In return, his neighbors do not pressure him to become involved. “It’s all about
respect. It’s like if you want to do it as a grownup, it’s your choice. They can’t make you.
They’re not gonna make you do it… it’s a lot of bad people up there but it’s certain people that’s
actually mindful and respectful towards others even though they doing something that’s really
bad.”

Flight or fight
Children who live in violent areas—like Karen, Kendrick, and Adrian—respond to
violence by using an array of strategies. Consistent with the literature, I find that these responses
generally fall into two categories: flight or fight (e.g., Baumer et al. 2003; Brezina et al. 2004;
Harding 2010; Jones 2010; Mullins et al. 2004; Stewart et al. 2006)

Warding off danger through isolation
Karen manages her fears—from “female fear” like sexual harassment, coercion, and
assault that Gordon and Riger (1989) describe to fear of being hurt because “a bullet can travel
anywhere”—with an array of strategies, from isolating herself to adopting a “code of the street”
posture. She says her parents and in particular her mother instructed her early on to avoid trouble
in the neighborhood by staying inside.

They put me on lockdown a lot. Like I would be, mom, can I go out this weekend with my friend? She’d be
like, no. Just like you have to study, stay home and do your work. And I’m just like, okay, alright. Maybe next
time. And from that, I didn’t really get to make a lot of friends.

Karen explains that her parents discourage active socializing with the neighbors. Although her
parents trust that their neighbors would do no harm, they view them as negative influences. Her
mom dropped out of school in the 6th grade and had her first child when she was 16. Karen’s
oldest sister also dropped out of high school when she became pregnant at 16. Her brother graduated high school but “doesn’t care” about college.

My mom grew up on that block. Like she grew up across the street when she was a kid. So she knew the people on the block. They haven’t really changed. They are the sons and daughters of the people that she knew. And like they didn’t want us outside. They always told us, you don’t want to be the girl down the block. You don’t want to be like that. So we were really protected from that. And like when we started to play double dutch or jump rope or whatever, we would sometimes come back in, my mom would be like, just be careful who you talk to. You know, that girl’s blah blah blah. We would always be reminded be careful. Just don’t become that person’s friend.

This finding supports other work that finds that parents try to safeguard their children from danger and exposure to negative influences by cloistering them in the house (Burton and Jarrett 2000; Burton et al. 1997; Furstenberg 1999; Furstenberg Jr. and Hughes 1997; Harding 2010; Jarrett and Jefferson 2004). Not until Karen turned 14 did her parents allow her to venture alone to the corner store to pick up groceries. Like many of the other students I spoke with who live in dangerous areas, Karen chooses avoidance as her first line of defense. Valentina, a black junior at Banks, uses the same approach: “I avoid going outside every chance I get. If somebody’s on the corner [and] I need to go that way, that’s the only way I need to go, I will find any other way just not to walk past them.” Students like Valentina and Karen know that staying inside is their first best option. If they have to venture out, they strategically choose their routes.

Similarly, Kendrick’s “protective” parents caution him about the friends he chooses and closely monitor his activities. When his parents hear about violence on the streets, Kendrick says “they put their foot down. No, they are not letting [me] go anywhere.” However, Kendrick, like many other boys I interviewed, faces fewer parental restrictions than their female peers (Gager et al. 1999; Hagan and Foster 2001; Madriz 1997; Morash 1986; Zahn et al. 2010). Many more boys than girls say they are free to choose with whom they socialize. Additionally, among students who dislike their parents’ management styles, boys were more likely than girls to talk about arguing with their parents.

Adrian responds to violence in much the same way as Karen. He understands that many of his neighbors are involved in illegal and potentially dangerous activities; thus, he prefers to keep them at arm’s length: “I don’t intend to know anybody because it’s a lot of trouble up there. Like we have people sell drugs down the block and stuff like that. …it gets to the point where it’s dangerous and they try to shoot and you hear gunshots all over.” Adrian maintains his distance from his neighbors for his own safety. “The only time I get into like business, it’s just for my own safety. I listen, hear out what’s going on just in case something happens, I know where to go, where not to go. That’s pretty much it. Just enough to keep me protected.” Similar to Karen, Adrian fears becoming enmeshed in the violence that pervades the area. These fears put him on high alert: “I always look behind my back when I walk. Every time I’m walking, even with friends, I could walk and five minutes later, I look behind me.” But rather than retreating in fear, Adrian copes by maintaining some relations with his neighbors. He does so to ensure his safety. “We grow up to be book smart but we have to know what’s going on in the streets,” he explains. “You don’t have to completely know. Oh, you get your nose in something, like a drug dealer way, you just gotta know how to survive your surroundings. If something happens, how you can avoid getting in the way.”

“The code”

Like so many other students in my study, who feel vulnerable to neighborhood threats,
both girls and boys, Karen relies on a tough stance to ward off trouble. She understands that if she portrays weakness then she leaves herself open to being “tested.” I ask her how she responds to potential threats.

Interviewer: So how do you try to handle it?

Yeah, just like nonchalant. I have what I call my Septa [Philadelphia’s public transit system] face. [laughs] I take my Septa face with me if I leave the house. I’m just like, look I’m going from A to B and I’m coming back. That’s it. So I’m not trying to start trouble. I don’t have any like gang sign on me. That’s it. From A to B. Go home.

Interviewer: What does your Septa face look like?

It shows that you’re not in the mood. You’re not happy. You’re not sad. You’re just, you’re on a mission to go to point A to point B without dying. So it’s just like the neutral face to show that I’m not on your side. I’m not on their side. I’m just going from here to here. It’s just like [makes a stone face], you know chill. And you have to do that on Septa too because if you’re not, you have to be careful because guys try to talk to you. Girls try to hate on you. You just got to sit there. Oh my stop, alright. And you get up and go. That’s it. It works every time.

Valentina, a black junior at Banks, also displays a cold, mean demeanor when out and about in her neighborhood: “My face just go—whooo [makes a sweeping motion across her face]. Turns into rock. And I don’t see nothing.”

Students who do not enact the code fear that real physical harm lurks behind the angry looks. Darnel, a black senior at CCM, shares: “I don’t feel comfortable. It’s mostly the people. They’re more like, aggressive type, look at you, stare at you. Where it’s a big group of girls and it’s just like [pauses] what are they doing here, do you want to start something, so to avoid that, keep it inside.” In contrast, students who do enact the code believe that it offers real protection. Harrison, a black senior at CCM, explains:

Say you’re walking down the street and there’s a bunch of guys on the corner and they would all stare at you. And if you play it cool and just walk and not really worry about them, it’s like really the way you carry yourself and walk around. Like if you walk around you’re like scared and looking at them scared something’s gonna happen, most likely they will try to beat you up, like start messing with you. But just if you know how to carry yourself.

I find that students—like Karen and Harrison—who live in high-crime areas, consistently refer to “the code” as an effective means of real protection. They project this street demeanor even if they have no intention of fighting and even if they fear retaliation.

Karen explains that the residents of Owenston are particularly keen on enacting the code and establishing their pecking order on the block given the lack of protection from institutions like the police. Oftentimes, the police do not respond to reports of neighborhood skirmishes unless it involves extreme violence.

We’re monitored when things happened, like when there’s like a gun or like when there’s blood spilled or we need an ambulance. But when there’s like an argument on the street, the cops don’t come til hours later because we’ve had that problem where we’ve called the cops on the people down the block, and they don’t come til two hours later. We’re just like, really? Like we called you because there’s a problem down the block, you have to come. But like they’re really like that, like the police they know if there’s no blood shed, if there’s no like somebody about to kill another person. They won’t come, they’ll take their sweet time coming here because they don’t want to have to deal with a domestic violence problem or just problems within the neighborhood.
They don’t want to deal with that because they probably think it’s petty. Or it’s typical of us. Cuz it really is typical of us. Or typical of the neighbors to have them like arguing or fighting all the time.

Indeed, my data consistently show that students who adopt “the code” are also skeptical of getting support from the police. “Yeah, you run the risk of getting arrested but pizza comes to people’s houses faster than the cops nowadays,” says Jazleen, a black junior at March. In the absence of formal protection, students turn to the code.

*How schools moderate responses to danger*

Youth’s reliance on the code for protection become especially salient when they encounter unsafe conditions in other contexts, like schools. As I discuss in the next section, schools either weaken children’s flight or fight responses when they provide safe learning environment or exacerbate these responses when they emulate the same violent conditions found in neighborhoods.

*Leaving “the code” at home*

The demeanor Karen adopts in her neighborhood contrasts sharply with the bubbly personality she portrays at CCM. When she demonstrates her “Septa” face, I see how easily she is able to transform her bright, smiling face. Her expression taut, eyes narrow, she looks like a different person. Karen leaves this toughness behind while at school and when she is with her school friends. She says most of her friends at school do not deal with the level of neighborhood violence that she faces. In fact, some of them have such limited exposure that she refrains from inviting them over to her house out of concern for them. As a result, Karen spends most of her time socializing with her friends in South Philadelphia:

> When I visit South Philly [where most of her school friends live] sometimes, if I go to my friend’s house, it’s the one [neighborhood with] tough people. It’s like I’ve seen them before. I took the subway one day, I was going down South Philly and there were these kids, they were like the Italians and they were like beh beh beh, I’ll fight you! I’ll fight you! And then these two black people got on and they got really quiet like they didn’t say anything. It’s just like they sort of, they’re probably real bad in their neighborhood because it’s people like them, but it’s sort of like they feel out of place if somebody steps in that they feel like is tougher. And that’s how I think South Philly is. Sort of like a play. They don’t know how tough it can get. I know South Philly is not so great but you know it’s not on the news all the time.

When she travels outside of her neighborhood, Karen usually finds that she has no need for the code. Outside of her neighborhood, she rarely encounters the same threats that she faces at home.

This idea of knowing when to enact the code is a common refrain I heard from CCM students who live in dangerous areas, particularly among black boys. Judah, a black junior at CCM who used to live in the same neighborhood as Karen, says that although he mistrusts the police like his neighborhood friends, he modifies the way he acts to avoid trouble with the law:

> Once in a while a cop will stop me and harass me. And even then I get very professional... They’re kinda taken back most of the time at how approachable and how just everything I am. I don’t do extra stuff.... Because I’ve always has been taught that there is a place and time for everything. By everybody. All my mentors, my parents. People that actually care, so for me I’ve been in environments where you need to be professional. And I’ve been in environments where you need to show that you’re from the streets or you know how the hood acts or whatever. It’s like I just, I’m a good manipulator. It’s not manipulating a situation. But it’s more of like conforming to my environment.
Indeed, black boys at CCM frequently say they run into trouble outside of their neighborhoods. Kendrick says strangers project aggression onto him because of his race:

We’re walking down the street, maybe a white couple or like a Hispanic couple or a like an Asian couple be walking near us and then like I would see them make eye contact with us. I’m like, why would they make eye contact with us like that? My friends like, I don’t know. Then we see them like cross the street. Like really? What weapon do I have on me right now? I don’t know. They see black. …I’m not gonna sit and be mad because I’m not gonna lie. Some people they have sort of like, set a reputation. Some people they do fulfill the stereotypes of a black person. Some people do. But I guess you know those people who have like fulfilled the stereotypes, I guess they set the reputation for all [emphasis] black people. Oh, if I’ve seen him do this, maybe his friends doing it, maybe his friend, maybe all [emphasis] black people are like that.

Thus, even when black male students do not project a fearsome stance, they are treated as individuals to be feared. Students like Judah and Kendrick manage these situations by conforming to norms acceptable to the situation at hand. However, it would be a mistake to suggest that MS students are more strategic than their NS peers in knowing how, when, and with whom they choose to enact the code. As I discuss in the next section, CCM students, by virtue of the fact that they spend the majority of their waking hours in a safe school environment, spend much less time worrying about their safety than their NS peers. Unlike their NS peers, who attend schools with far more disciplinary and safety problems, MS students encounter far fewer threats to their personal wellbeing. NS students, who go to unsafe schools, find themselves exposed to dangerous conditions in multiple, overlapping contexts.

Changing contexts: from dangerous neighborhoods to safe schools

Karen’s reprieve from danger is especially apparent at CCM. The generally orderly and safe environment at the magnet school strongly contrasts with the flare-ups of racial violence, shootings, and armed assaults found in her neighborhood of Owenston. As I argued earlier in chapter 2, school selection effects partially explain the calm at CCM. Because CCM intentionally chooses students with superior academic and disciplinary records, the school contends with a student population that is less disruptive and less prone to misconduct than NS schools, which have substantially more relaxed admission policies. Time and again, students like Shani say they have nothing to fear at CCM: “Well, I feel safe here because I don’t really think anyone at school has a reason to threaten anyone or whatever.” Jamal, a black junior, says, “We barely have fights here. Probably a little bit of name calling but that’s it.” Lower incidences of student misconduct mean that school adults at the CCM do not face the same pressures and demands that staff at neighborhood schools face. That is, CCM has the capacity to handle student misconduct simply because they deal with a much lower load of violent student behavior (see Table 4.3).

CCM students also trust school staff to handle incidents expediently. While they gripe about teachers who do not challenge them academically or who grade them unfairly, they do not complain about teachers and administrators who stand aside and do nothing to break up student fights. In fact, many CCM students talk fondly about Ms. Baumer, the school disciplinarian, and name her as the school adult with whom they most often confide. They comment on her ability to form personal connections with students while doling out punishment fairly and consistently. Cristina describes how Ms. Baumer handles student misconduct:

When they get caught, it’s fair. Some teachers do come down harder. Some teachers that aren’t really high in power in this school kinda give you a talk. Teachers like Ms. Baumer. She’s a dean, so she’ll like give you a
pep talk. You would have detention for your first warning. Instead of just giving you a warning, it’d be like detention, warning, call home. Third warning, suspension. So it’s just like I wouldn’t want to get in trouble with her.

Like Cristina, Shani notes that students who consistently misbehave must deal with increasingly severe consequences:

If it’s a habitually out of control kid, they gonna be dealt with more harshly because they did it before. But if it’s like your first time, it’ll be like the set detention I guess you would get but then it would be just like a little warning as well. It won’t be like as hard core as somebody who does it everyday. So it’s fair, it’s fair. Your punishment fits your crime.

Thus, students at CCM abide by school rules because they trust Ms. Baumer, the school disciplinarian, and understand that student misconduct will not be tolerated.

The safer school environment allows students like Henry, a black senior at CCM who lives in a dangerous neighborhood, to leave the code behind. When I ask him how things would be different if he attended his neighborhood school, he says:

I probably would get into a lot more fights.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Cuz I’m very protective of myself. Like if somebody was to approach and step to me, I’m pretty sure I would be fighting. But nobody really do that here. I expected it though. But it just didn’t happen.

Interviewer: How does that happen?

If they see any kind of weakness, they’ll probably attack. Like when I was in elementary school, I used to get picked on a lot. But as I got older, they tried to pick on me and it just didn’t happen. I got into fights and they never messed with me again. It was like, whoa.

Interviewer: So you think if you had let it happen—?

It probably would continue.

Henry explains that he’s ready to fight to thwart danger. But unlike at his neighborhood elementary school, he does not face the same type of challenges to his safety at CCM. He leaves the code behind because the environment at school offers safety and security. Terrell, a black junior at CCM, also explains that the “disciplined” environment at CCM means that he does not worry about having to protect himself.

We’re a more disciplined school. But if I was going to a less disciplined school, like a neighborhood school, it would be way more pressure because everybody would be like doing what they want. Everybody would be stepping all over the faculty and the higher power. Nobody would care about anything. They’ll be doing what they want. They be trying to get other people to do what they want so they can get everybody under them or whatever. …I probably would succumb to more stuff, just trying to survive. So I don’t get swallowed up.

Terrell does not have to worry about getting “swallowed up” in unregulated violence at CCM because school selection processes and school authorities ensure his well-being. Like Henry, he speculates that he would resort to fighting behaviors if he attended a school where “everybody would be stepping all over the faculty and the higher power.” Youth like Henry and Terrell
understand that individuals have to do what they must “to survive” in dangerous environments where a system of formal protections is not guaranteed. However, in safe school contexts, these students readily leave the code behind.

Some CCM students like Sovann, an Asian junior, even discover that safe school settings can even neutralize neighborhood threats. He reports how his classmate Ricardo, previously an “enemy” from a nearby neighborhood, became his best friend in the school context:

[Ricardo] used to go to my old block a lot. Back then I used to walk to home. Me and him used to give each other dirty looks cuz I usually get into fights and be mad. Then after that he moved out. Because we was about to fight too. But then I never knew it was him. We happen[ed] to meet in the same [class] and he was standing next to me and we started talking like, where you from? Hey, what’s up? And ever since we started hanging out more because we have classes and stuff. We just chilled and I guess I don’t know how we went from there. We always hanging out and walk[ing] home together. We always talk about it, dang, I would’ve felt bad if I would’ve fought you. It’s like, yeah, I know.

Sovann, who regularly gets into neighborhood scraps, has no need for the code inside CCM. “It’s more easier than out there. After that [getting into CCM], I stopped worrying about getting into fights and stuff.” He says trouble at CCM is rare: “In this school, everybody’s just chilling cuz everybody been through their own stuff and then they know how everybody else feels cuz they been through it.” But in his neighborhood, he says, “My instincts is just to kill or be killed I guess.” Sovann has only the code to rely on for protection in his neighborhood; thus, he treats other unknown males with suspicion. However, within the safe context of CCM where students trust that school adults will ensure their wellbeing, unlike absent police in the neighborhoods, Sovann drops his defenses. In this new context, he has repeated contact with Ricardo not as a potential threat but as a fellow classmate who can be trusted.

**Overlapping contexts: unsafe neighborhood, unsafe schools**

Most of Adrian’s troubles occur at school. He describes his transition to high school as “a challenge.” “I have enemies but I also have friends,” he shares. “It used to be a lot of gang-related stuff in the school. Separate gangs colliding, fighting each other. Everybody in the school was pretty much in the middle of it. So they’ll probably come out of nowhere and try to start trouble.”

He describes the porous boundary between the school and the outside community. Many of the fights at March originate from outside the school: “People came in this school. And also people from outside this school came in. People like open the doors, let them in and that’s when a big robbery would go. And everybody in the school would be fighting.” His classmate Jaqueline concurs, “There are conflicts that come from the street and work their way inside the school.” Vanessa, a black junior at March, describes the reciprocal exchange of violence between school and the streets:

That was the one time I was kinda scared cuz I was in ROTC with one of my friends and then like the principal called over the intercom, saying our school was on a lockdown because like fights had broke out at the lunchroom before us. Before I was about to go to lunch, I realized like people started running back and forth. And I was like what the heck is going on? So my army instructor told us to close the door to stay out the hallways. So we closed it and looking out, we see fights breaking out in the lunchroom, everywhere. So apparently some boys they called down boys from Diamond Street and they got into the school with guns.

Interviewer: How did they get in?
Because they were holding open the side doors. We have side doors and you can’t lock those cuz they’re a fire hazard. So they weren’t coming through the front, they were coming through the side doors. So we just had a swarm of police trying to clear the hallways. And some teachers would lock their students in the classroom and it’s just like, then they had a problem again. Cuz it’s like, oh, Diamond Street was in March. And then Crest Street had a problem cuz Diamond Street went in there. Then Pike Street had a problem with Crest Street. They had a problem. It was just like there was one thing and butterfly effect. All I wanted to do was go home. But then we had a softball game so I’m glad we got out early because I wanted to get out of school because I had no idea what was going on. I just heard guns were in the school and Diamond Street was up here.

Interviewer: So it sounds like there are problems outside the school that get brought into the school?

Yeah, mostly that’s the case. Outside school problems they get brought into school and then like they don’t stop. They don’t stop on that block. Trouble can get started in school cuz like he knew him and he knew him and they were there.

The violence at school that several March students describe closely matches their descriptions of violence in the neighborhood. Just as they blame outside perpetrators for violence in the neighborhood, students at March see school outsiders as mainly responsible for violence at school. Additionally, just as conflict in the streets happen because residents transgress firmly established neighborhood boundaries, conflict at school happens when students affiliated with different, warring neighborhoods come into contact.

School violence is not unique to March. Tanya, a black senior, says she transferred to Banks when the city turned over her more violent neighborhood school, Meadowdale, to private management. She says uncontrolled violence at Meadowdale often resulted in complete school lockdowns:

Cuz usually when everybody come up to school, there’s always fights. And [at] Meadowdale, there’s fights almost every single day. And there’s always like lockdowns. Because the kids are outrageously violent.

Interviewer: What do you mean by lockdowns?

Lockdowns mean everybody got to stay, okay, the windows got to be shut. The shades gotta be shut. The doors gotta be locked. Nobody can be in the hallway at all. Cuz lockdown is when a free-for-all fight happens. And everybody will start fighting. And they gotta separate it. And they got to put the whole school on lockdown.

Tanya says going to Meadowdale and a “very bad elementary school” (“It was always fights there too.”) taught her to defend herself by fighting back: “I was never used to people actually like physically or verbally bullying me without me not saying something for myself. I can never sit there and let them attack me. Like I can’t, I don’t know, I can never do that. I never let that happen. I always react to it.” When schools like March and Meadowdale replicate violent neighborhood conditions, they increase the likelihood that students like Tanya will respond by fighting back. Students who feel vulnerable to danger resort to street-oriented behaviors that have proven effective in the neighborhood.

Indeed, whereas NS students like Adrian say they can manage to thwart trouble in the streets because they trust that neighbors will not harm them as long as they abide by the code, they have a harder time remaining above the fray at school because they have no system of protection upon which to rely. Students risk punishment if they express code-like behaviors because these street norms violate school norms (Carter 2005; Dance 2002). Yet if they ignore challenges and threats posed by other students, they risk being further “tested” and harmed. Indeed, students turn over their protection to school adults and administrators when in the
enclosed space of school. When school staff meet these safety needs, as in the case of CCM, students trust that school rules will protect them and do not resort to their own means of protection. However, in many NS schools, which face a higher proportion of student misconduct, school adults face enormous challenges in maintaining safety and order. The higher proportion of student misconduct increases students’ feelings of vulnerability to danger at school. Some, like Adrian, respond by safeguarding themselves by fighting back. Even students, like Vanessa, who I discuss below, who do not fight back risk getting caught in violence that erupts throughout the school. These NS students who do not fight back have a heightened sense of fear.

Adrian has been involved in a number of school fights. He explains that in most of these situations he acted out of “self defense.” Jazleen, Adrian’s classmate, who has a number of marks on her disciplinary record, says fighting in school is sometimes necessary because “people will walk all over you and I’m not about to have anybody walk all over me.” Students like Vanessa tread carefully to avoid getting swept up in the violence at school: “It’s just silly to me but it’s something they take really seriously. Especially if like the block thing, what street you’re repping thing, they take that super serious. So like you have to be careful what you say about what street you going on. It could be the difference sometimes if you get hurt or not. I just rather not say.”

The relationship between school violence and school ability to meet those challenges are especially apparent in the stories that students tell about March’s transformation. They note how a new principal, Mr. Peterson, dramatically altered the climate at March. Jaqueline says that prior to Mr. Peterson’s arrival “kids were doing whatever they want. They’ll be in the back hall smoking or whatever and there weren’t that much [video] camera up. And kids were just doing whatever, and I felt like the principal wasn’t doing anything about it.” Jorani says her older brother, who attended March ten years ago, worried about her safety at school. But she says March is different now that Mr. Peterson is in charge. “But when he [Jorani’s brother] went here, there were no cameras and the principal wasn’t that strict.” Adrian notes, “it [fighting] started to calm down ever since we got Mr. Peterson for the principal. It actually got way better than what it used to be.”

Interviewer: Why do you think that changed?

Mr. Peterson, he actually does his job. He makes sure all the students are doing their work. He actually takes time to do his job, which is to make sure all his students are safe.

Interviewer: So what does he do actually?

Walks down the hallways. Visits some of the classrooms. Look around, talk to teachers, talk to the students. We do like fire drills. Practice lockdowns. Safety precautions. Make sure we know how to do it. Yeah, his number one priority is student safety.

Interviewer: Before he came, what was it like?

People did get in trouble. That’s because they pretty much got caught. Sometimes the principal just be in the office, yeah check on some students but it wasn’t like she really wanted to. She just did it just to do it. Like she has to do it. And a lot of kids get hurt.

Adrian says he feels safer with Mr. Peterson in charge even if it means that he now gets away with less. He was suspended for his involvement in a fight but acknowledges that “he [Mr. Peterson] did it in a fair way. You can’t do nothing about it.” Jaqueline, who is a member of the
peer mediation club at school, notices a decline in school conflict. She says that students now “rather leave it on the street. Just jump someone on the street and let no one know about it. They don’t want to bring it inside the school to where the security guards would hear about it, the principal would hear about it, and you know get the police involved.” Students like Jazleen say she would rather leave conflicts in the street:

I just always think, at least for fights, I just always think, all you have to do is go home, touch your front doorstep and then you can go do whatever you want. Why get suspended? Miss a week of school, three days of school, two days of school for something like that when you can do it outside of school? …When you can just fight outside of school and you go home and they go home and be over. That’s just how I look at it.

Even students like Tanya, who fought in her more violent previous school at Meadowdale, moderates her fight response in the much safer climate at Banks:

My school, we didn’t tolerate it. For me, it’s kinda weird for somebody, say somebody shoved you in the hallway, and somebody just walk by. In my school, it’s like, somebody shoved you in the hallway. You look back like, say excuse me. Questioning you. Here’s it’s like, oh, let me keep walking. I don’t care. Maybe they didn’t mean it. Over there, it’s like they retaliate. So I’m just used to it. But I don’t do that here. I’m not [a] violent person.

As the above examples show, just as poor neighborhoods that cannot rely on police for formal protection turn to alternative means like violence, students who lack formal protection resort to fighting back. However, when students know they can depend on schools for protection, they do not resort to violence. Thus, school context plays an important role in moderating students’ responses to danger.

With better enforcement of school rules, violence at March noticeably declined. In fact, March dropped off the state list of persistently dangerous schools in Pennsylvania following Mr. Peterson’s arrival. The importance of strong school leaders who are committed to ensuring school safety is a theme repeated by numerous students in my NS sample. Carl says that Banks used to be a more dangerous school before Mr. Egard became principal:

Banks has changed over the years. It has actually gotten better. Before in the old days, it used to be fights. The principal didn’t used to care. But when Mr. Egard came, he cleaned all that up. Got new computers in, new technology, things that just made everything better. Plus a lot of people who used to go to Banks remember it as being a bad school. A violent [school]. I’ve been to a school where the bathroom stalls in the boy’s bathroom, the walls came up to here [signals to his chest] and there were no doors because apparently back in the old days so many people were doing drugs in the bathroom that they had to remove all doors and keep the walls low. If you looked over, you’d be looking at someone right in the eyes.

Cheree agrees that Mr. Egard’s enforcement of school rules dramatically reduced the number of serious incidents at Banks: “And I think Mr. Egard he did a good job of changing the school around. He really did. He really helped the school a whole lot. He was a lot stricter behavior wise and what he expected. It’s not how he used to be.”

Discussion

My model of violence in young people’s environments takes into account how multiple contexts condition children’s behavioral responses to danger. I show how the
conjuncture/disjuncture of neighborhood and school contexts has important consequences for the magnitude of neighborhood effects. When schools replicate the violent conditions of neighborhoods, they increase the chances that students will misbehave to safeguard themselves and/or increase students’ fear of getting hurt. These students essentially receive a higher dosage of neighborhood disadvantage because local schools reinforce and magnify the disadvantages they already face at home.

When schools fail to guarantee a safe learning environment, students rely on themselves for protection. Some students inevitably turn to strategies—like fighting back—that have proven effective in the neighborhood. Just as individuals employ a street justice code in neighborhoods that lack police protection, students resort to defending themselves in schools where they feel unprotected by school adults (Anderson 1999; Carter 2005; Dance 2002; Jones 2010). Even students who try to avoid trouble like Vanessa find it difficult to do so when school violence goes unregulated. Just as stray bullets do not discriminate in violent neighborhoods, school violence that goes unchecked has the potential to escalate into school-wide conflicts and involve all students. Students like Adrian who both live in high-crime neighborhoods and attend unsafe schools (as is true for the NS schools in this study) are thus constantly exposed to violence. This unremitting exposure reinforces behavioral adaptations that students use to survive in dangerous neighborhoods.

In contrast, schools like CCM offer students like Karen a reprieve from their violent communities by guaranteeing a safe learning environment. Partly because of school and family selection effects, children who share a neighborhood end up going to schools with drastically different peer and safety environments. Unlike NS schools which contain a higher proportion of children from local areas who do not do well in school and who are more likely to get into trouble, MS schools select students who are academically oriented and unlikely to misbehave. Thus, even though schools like CCM have more relaxed safety screening procedures, they contend with lower rates of student misconduct. The lower proportion of student misconduct means that school adults at CCM, unlike their counterparts at neighborhood schools, are better able to manage and thwart violence at school. Safety at school and trust in the ability of school authorities to offer protection allow students like Henry and Sovann to let down their guard and to curb their fighting behaviors. Students at March and Banks experience this protection too when school leadership prioritizes the safety of their students.

Students deserve the basic right to safe learning environments. However, when schools like CCM heavily weight students’ disciplinary records in their admission decisions, they inevitably stack the cards against students who come from violent neighborhoods and who rely on “the code” as a strategy for survival. When structured in this way, school choice penalizes students for the violent conditions in which they grew up. Moreover, these school choice policies exacerbate the violence that local schools have to contend with because leave behind students who view the code as an effective means of thwarting violence at school. Thus, while school choice may offer a small portion of students a much-needed exit from violent communities, they do not ultimately address the problem of educational inequity. For a large majority of students who live in poor, violent communities, these policies exacerbate the dangerous conditions they face at school.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

Children spend the majority of their time in two environments—neighborhoods and schools. Debates about the importance of these two social contexts in the lives of children often boil down to a single question: which environment matters more, neighborhoods or schools? While important, this framing has detracted attention from other equally important concerns regarding the connections between these two contexts. This study seeks to refocus debates about neighborhood and school effects by looking at whether and how the conjuncture/disjuncture of these two environments matters in the lives of children. This framing thus interrogates the premise underlying school choice policies: that we can circumvent the educational challenges that children living in poor neighborhoods face by severing the link between neighborhoods and schools and giving them access to extralocal high-quality schools.

I explore the effects of overlapping and disconnected school and neighborhood spheres via two linked questions; first, whether and how the conjuncture/disjuncture of neighborhoods and schools affects the types of friendship opportunities available to students both at school and within their residential areas; and second, whether and how the conjuncture/disjuncture of neighborhoods and schools mediate children’s exposure to neighborhood disadvantages like violence. What I find is that school choice amplifies the disadvantages that children encounter in their neighborhoods by fragmenting local adolescent community networks and exacerbating the violent conditions that children face at their neighborhood schools.

In tiered school choice systems like Philadelphia—where access to the best public schools depends on superior academic achievements, clean disciplinary records, and family resources to help children navigate and gain admission—schools choose students, not the other way around. These school and family selection effects create an inequitable system where children have to compete for rare, high-quality public goods. Certainly, these market-oriented reforms benefit those who have the knowledge and resources to secure coveted spots. However, school selection processes concentrate disadvantages for the majority of children (i.e., those who go to their local schools) by poaching the “cream” of students from poor neighborhoods—those students who do well in school and stay out of trouble—and leaving behind children who do less well in school and who are more likely to get into trouble.

I do not mean to suggest that local schools are devoid of students who are academically-oriented and abide by school norms or that students who are not school-oriented are “bad”. Rather, in contrast to MS schools that have more homogenous school-oriented peer environments because of rigid school selection processes, relaxed admission standards create more diverse peer environments at NS schools, thus increasing the likelihood that children will encounter many more different types of peers. Just as children encounter multiple, conflicting frames and scripts regarding schooling and career in poor neighborhoods, children who encounter a more heterogeneous set of peers in local schools face greater difficulties adjudicating between peer role models (Harding 2009, 2010). Thus, my data suggest that school choice changes the composition of peer groups at local schools by skimming the “best” students and decreasing their numbers at local schools. Indeed, these school selection processes further concentrate the disadvantages of youth who attend local schools.

The effects of choice extend beyond the school setting by also altering the way children and parents manage day-to-day decisions about how, with whom and where children spend time...
in their residential areas. The disjuncture of neighborhood and school contexts helps MS children generate ties to school and career focused peers who live in other neighborhoods. These extralocal friendship opportunities mean that MS youth increasingly spend less time outside in their own neighborhoods. This spatial disruption of peer networks within neighborhoods means children who attend local schools face even greater difficulties befriending and maintaining friendships with positive peer role models. Thus, school choice fragments and changes the composition of local adolescent community networks.

Lastly, my findings show that the conjuncture/disjuncture of neighborhood and school contexts has important consequences for the magnitude of neighborhood effects by looking at the critical role that schools play in moderating children’s behavioral responses to violence. Children who attend local schools face greater exposure to violence because school choice concentrates student misconduct at these schools, thus making violence more difficult for school staff to manage. When schools replicate the violent conditions of neighborhoods and fail to safeguard children’s wellbeing, they increase students’ fear of getting hurt and/or the likelihood that students will attempt to thwart danger via street-oriented fighting behaviors that have proven effective within their home areas. These students essentially receive a higher dosage of violence than their residential peers who go to safe magnet schools because local schools reinforce and magnify the dangerous conditions they already face at home.

**Implications for Theories of Neighborhood Effects on Adolescents**

My results have several important implications for the study of neighborhood effects on adolescents. First, my data suggest that NE scholarship cannot fully attend to the question of neighborhood heterogeneity for adolescents (i.e., why neighborhood effects vary for subsets of young people who share an area) without also seriously considering how other social contexts like schools, in which students spend a substantial amount of time, influence the way children experience their local settings (e.g., by affecting the types of friendships available within their neighborhoods). Instead of treating multiple contexts like neighborhoods and schools as distinct environments that separately and independently shape the long-term developmental and academic trajectories of children, my results suggest that in order to move scholarship forward, our theoretical models need to consider interaction effects among different social contexts. As I have suggested throughout this study, schools play a critical role in moderating the dosage of neighborhood disadvantage adolescents receive. School choice, for example, can intensify or weaken the way adolescents respond to structural neighborhood conditions like violence. By considering interaction effects with other social settings in our models, we can more fully understand effects heterogeneity among children who share a residential area.

Second, my findings suggest that a new class of even more disadvantaged, poor youth has emerged as a result of school choice policies. Just as Wilson (1987) maintained that a new underclass emerged when middle- and working-class blacks left the inner-city following economic restructuring in the 1970s, my data show that school choice policies are further stratifying poor neighborhoods, creating a new class of the same in-need children who are now even more underserved. School choice compounds the challenges that young people in local schools face in befriending and meeting positive peer role models by diverting the high-performing students from their local schools and reorganizing how, with whom, and where they spend time within their neighborhoods. Just as inner-city neighborhoods lost critical adult role
models following deindustrialization, school choice policies are depriving children who live in poor communities and go to neighborhood schools of critical peer role models by helping a small population of children who do well in school replace locally based friendships with extralocal ties formed with youth who live in other neighborhoods. These adolescent role models have not left their neighborhoods; however, choice policies are supporting a reorganization of their daily life such that these children are spending less time socializing with neighborhood peers within their residential settings. School choice consequently creates a new class of in-need children by inequitably redistributing access to positive adolescent networks. Certainly, students deserve positive friendship opportunities. However, the collective social costs of concentrating advantages for the small number of students who are able to exercise choice are enormous as already hard-hit communities and local schools, who serve the majority of students, suffer disproportionately.

My research also refines our understanding of the role that institutions play in reorganizing the social networks of youth. While much has already been written on the importance of institutions in helping individuals form and sustain social networks (e.g., Guthrie et al. 1971; Jencks and Mayer 1990; Jencks 1972; Small 2004, 2006), less is known about the unintended, negative consequences of strengthening the social networks of only a subset of the population. My work supports broad findings within the literature that institutions like high-quality schools act as important brokers for the urban poor by helping them access resource-rich networks. However, my research also suggests that the positive benefits of these networks—at least in the case of youth and school choice—remain confined to a small subset of the population as these individuals eventually withdraw from or exit their local community networks. Indeed, the overall health of a community’s network suffers when institutions, like magnet and charter schools, discriminate and select from only a specific pool of individuals. These institutions accelerate the declining health of poor communities by spatially disrupting the formation of positive adolescent ties.

Policy implications

This study is certainly not a policy evaluation and implementation study. I do not analyze or adjudicate between various school choice policies, of which there are many. However, the issues that I raise—such as fragmentation of local adolescent community networks and the concentration of violence in local schools—are deeply connected to educational policy and as such can shed light on future directions for policy. Indeed, the central idea undergirding this study is that educational policy powerfully shapes the interplay between schools and communities. My findings suggest that in our attempts to “rescue” kids from “bad” schools via school choice—however heroic and just these efforts may seem—we have lost sight of the intimate connection between schools and communities, that the vitality of one depends on the other. The recommendations I offer below—however modest or improbable (when considering political will)—stem from this core premise that the fates of schools and communities are tied.

Equalize chances of school admission

Schools receiving public funds should equalize chances of admissions among all students by eliminating admission standards and running lotteries when demand exceeds supply. While some may consider this recommendation radical, my results suggest that eradicating admissions
criteria is a just solution since these criteria discriminate against students with fewer family resources and/or who have poor disciplinary records because of behavioral adaptations for survival in violent communities. If schools are truly public goods, then all students deserve equal chance to access such goods.

**Offer universal choice through neighborhood schools**

To address the growing public clamor for choice, policies should also consider how choice can be structured into neighborhood schools. This can be accomplished by reinstituting small learning communities (SLCs), which existed for a brief time in Philadelphia in the 1980s. These SLCs are essentially smaller schools within larger neighborhood schools. They are similar to some interest-based charter schools in that each one focuses on a particular academic or vocational interest, such as science and technology, language immersion, or the culinary arts. To avoid replicating a tiered school system, SLCs should reflect the desires of the community and should not carry admission criteria.

**Fund schools in need**

School funding should return to the original idea behind the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965; schools should receive funding proportionate to the needs of their student population. This means that we should send additional resources—such as increasing staffing to reduce student-to-teacher ratios, hiring adequate support staff like counselors and social workers—to support schools that enroll large numbers of poor and minority children.

**Peer mediation programs at schools and local community centers**

Schools like March, with a history of violence, are turning to novel solutions like peer mediation to increase school safety and to prevent violence before it happens. These student-run efforts give youth a way to resolve conflicts without fear of “snitching” and formal disciplinary school actions. Oftentimes, fellow students hear about conflicts before school adults, so training youth to mediate conflict in peaceful ways can help resolve disagreements before they erupt into school-wide violence. These peer mediators should also receive support and training via community centers that offer neutral neighborhood spaces to resolve conflict.

**Locally-based extracurricular activities**

Invest in high-quality community recreational centers that provide youth programs, from additional academic support to sports, music, and art. Programs should target all youth, from young children to adolescents, and should aim to give young people the opportunity to form prosocial ties with a diversity of youth who live in their area.

**Concluding Remarks**

When middle- and working-class blacks left for the suburbs, many inner-city neighborhoods lost important institutional resources like churches, banks, and grocery stores that catered to these families (Wilson 1987). Indeed, local public schools are one of the last remaining institutions that serve poor neighborhoods. Yet as my interviews with CCM students reveal, many students and their parents are dissatisfied with their neighborhood schools and want
access to better quality schools located outside of their neighborhoods. Surely, social justice demands that these young people, and the many who annually participate in choice programs across the nation, receive the quality education that they so desperately want and deserve.

As Markus and Schwartz (2010) point out, “Americans live in a political, social, and historical context that values personal freedom and choice above all else” (344). But, as my findings show, this exercise of choice, in this case school choice, exacts social costs that are disproportionately born by local students who go to their local schools. While choice may confer benefits for a few, they concentrate disadvantages for the majority of youth who live in poor, minority communities. It is difficult to imagine how such educational reforms, that destabilize local public schools and the neighborhoods with which they are linked, are moving us towards a more just and equitable society. Thus, “even when choice can foster freedom, empowerment, and independence, it is not an unalloyed good” (344).


Saporito, Salvatore and Deenesh Sohoni. 2007. “Mapping Educational Inequality: Concentrations of Poverty among Poor and Minority Students in Public Schools.” *Social Forces* 85(3):1227–53.


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### Supporting Tables

#### Table A.1 Basic demographic characteristics of research subjects

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## Table A.2 Social and demographic characteristics of study areas compared to city, state, and national data

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Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2010 Census.  
\(^1\)Proportion of households.  
\(^2\)For individuals 25 and older.  
\(^3\)For individuals 20 to 64.  
\(^4\)For individuals 20 to 64.
Appendix B

School Choice in the School District of Philadelphia (SDP)

Each fall, district eighth graders who wish to apply to a school outside of their catchment area make their selections. To provide students and parents with information regarding prospective schools, SDP publishes a high school directory and runs an expo. The high school directory details admission criteria for each of the high schools. At the expo, students can meet and direct questions to representatives from public and charter high schools.

Students have four different school options:

1) Neighborhood: Admission to these schools is open to any student who lives within or attends feeder schools within the school’s catchment area. Students can also apply to other neighborhood schools not located in their catchment. These schools select students via lottery only after they have admitted all students from feeder schools. SDP runs 21 neighborhood schools. Banks, March, Juniper, and Shelley High fall into this category.

2) Citywide: These schools do not weight test scores as heavily as special admission high schools. However, they still consider other factors like grades, attendance, and discipline. Some of these schools also require an interview or audition. All students who meet the criteria are selected via lottery system. Citywide schools run subsequent lotteries for waitlisted students once slots from round one have been filled. SDP run 13 citywide schools.

3) Special admission: These schools impose the strictest standards of admission. They heavily weight test scores, grades, attendance and discipline. In these schools, principals decide who to admit. Depending on the school, students and parents may increase their chances of admission if they are able to secure an interview with the school principal or if they have counselors lobby on their behalf. However, it is up to students and parents to figure out which schools/principals are amenable to this. SDP runs 20 special admission schools of which CCM is one.

4) Charter: Each charter school has its own application process and deadline which students and parents must navigate independently. If there are more applicants than space, charter schools are required to run lotteries. The city has 36 charter high schools.
CCM Admission Criteria

CCM is considered a highly-selective school with an acceptance rate of approximately 30 percent. For the 2011-12 school year, it had a waitlist of 500. The school has six different requirements for admission:

1) Grades: A’s and B’s with the possible exception of one C in major subjects on most recent final report card
2) Writing Sample: One page essay answering the following questions: Who am I? What do I hope to accomplish in high school? and What can I contribute to my high school?
3) Standardized test scores: Advanced/Proficient scores in both reading and math (88th percentile or higher)
4) Attendance and punctuality: Exemplary
5) Disciplinary record: Minimal
6) Interview: Required for some students
## Glossary

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>CCM</td>
<td>Center City Magnet</td>
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<td>NE</td>
<td>Neighborhood effects</td>
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