

## **PAA Extended Abstract: Marriage and Cohabitation among Latino and African American Young Adults: Neighborhood Risk and Protective Factors**

### **Background and Current Study**

Spurred largely by Wilson's (1987) *The Truly Disadvantaged*, a robust literature documents the independent causal effects of neighborhood on family formation outcomes such as nonmarital childbearing (e.g., South & Crowder, 1999), teen childbearing (e.g., Crane, 1991, first marriage (e.g., Massey & Shibuya, 1995) and cohabitation (e.g., Kuhl, Warner, & Wilczak, 2012, Zito, 2013, Kroeger & Smock, 2014). Framed by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and informed by social disorganization theory, this study investigates the neighborhood contexts associated with marriage and cohabitation for Latino and African American young adults who resided in subsidized public housing for a substantial period of time during their childhood. The study utilizes data from the *Denver Child Study*, a large-scale, mixed-methods study of current and former residents of the Denver (CO) Housing Authority (DHA). Quasi-random assignment to neighborhoods offers a natural experiment for addressing selection bias in the measurement of neighborhood effects.

### **Data and Methods**

Data include (1) retrospective survey data from parents/caregivers; and (2) administrative data from the Geolytics *National Change Data Base* and the Piton Foundation *Neighborhood Facts* database. Three analysis samples (Ns ranging from 365 to 572), reflecting different levels of exposure to public housing contexts during childhood, are used to test the robustness of results. Study samples are approximately 58% Latino and 42% African American; half are female. We employ logistic regression with clustered robust standard errors to estimate the odds of marriage or cohabitation in young adulthood as well as to examine ethnic and racial differentials of same. Further, we test for non-linearities in the relationships between neighborhood environmental contexts and patterns of marriage and cohabitation. We present normalized values of parameter estimates for neighborhood factors that were statistically significant across two or more analysis samples.

### **Results**

Nearly one out of four young adults in the study had married or cohabitated with someone when they were between the ages of 15 and 24. The mean age at first marriage or cohabitation was 19 years. Females and Latinos were significantly more likely to be married or cohabiting with someone during young adulthood relative to their male or African American counterparts. After controlling for individual- and family-level characteristics, five indicators related to neighborhood ethnic composition, social status, physical context and safety proved statistically significant predictors of marriage/cohabitation in our logistic regression models. The odds of living with a spouse or partner during young adulthood were 61 to 90 percent lower with a one standard deviation-higher percentage of Latino residents in the neighborhood; these odds were 72 to 96 percent lower for a comparable increase in neighborhood occupational prestige. A corresponding increase in the percentage of pre-1940 vintage housing stock was associated with 1.9 to 4.7 times higher odds of living with a spouse or partner in young adulthood. Neighborhood safety produced mixed effects: while neighborhood property crime rates were associated with 3.2-to 11.1-times higher odds of living with a spouse or partner, higher violent crime rates were associated with 76 to 98 percent reduction of same.

We found considerable heterogeneity in size and significance of apparent neighborhood effects on marriage/cohabitation between males and females and between Latino and African American young adults. While the effect of a one standard deviation higher neighborhood property crime rates on the odds of living with a spouse or partner was similar across ethnicity and gender (between 3.1 and 3.4 times increase); the effect of a similar increase in neighborhood violent crime rates resulted in significantly higher reductions in the odds of marriage and cohabitation for male and Latino young adults. Residence in neighborhoods with higher occupational prestige was associated with 70 to 80 percent lower odds of marriage/cohabitation for all groups of young adults. Male, female and African American young adults living in neighborhoods with one standard-deviation higher percentages of pre-1940 dwellings had 2.1- to 2.2 times higher odds of living with a spouse or partner. Finally, we found evidence of nonlinearities and threshold effects for neighborhood property and violent crime rates on marriage and cohabitation during young adulthood.

### **Discussion**

The observed relationship between property crime rates and marriage/cohabitation is expected. Property crime, social disorder and other risky behaviors may be visible indicators of neighborhoods where informal social control is diminished. Increased social disorder has been consistently linked in the literature with higher incidences of risky sexual behaviors among teens (Harding, 2003; Way, Finch, and Cohen, 2006, Kuhl, Warner, & Wilczak, 2012). In turn, higher incidences of pregnancy resulting from these risky behaviors may produce higher pressures for youth to get married or to live with the partners who birthed/fathered their children. The finding regarding violent crime rates might suggest living in more violent neighborhoods might reduce the availability of marriageable partners. Living in a neighborhood with superior occupational prestige served as a protective factor for marriage/cohabitation—these findings might be understood from a local networks, norms and role models perspective. Neighborhoods that surround their youths with higher-prestige neighbors likely expose these youth to norms and role models that discourage risky sexual behaviors and thus early marriage/cohabitation by encouraging educational and occupational success. Higher percentages of pre-1940 vintage housing stock was associated with higher odds of living with a spouse or partner—this finding may be related to the (1) the social disorder evident in the neighborhood; and/or (2) the design, density, and land use mix of the neighborhood that may encourage more interactions among youth that would lead from risky sexual behavior to early marriage/cohabitation.

Results from this study are discussed in terms of their methodological/theoretical contributions to the literature in addition to their policy implications.

## Works Cited

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