

Youth Sexual Behaviors, Contraceptive use and pregnancy in urban neighborhoods

Andrea Collado and Rhina Cáceres

University of Costa Rica

In the last ten years, the interest in the role of neighborhoods in shaping a variety of outcomes for families, adults, and children has been increasing. This growing body of research has demonstrated that youth's environment (neighborhoods, place of residence, places where youngsters interact) affects many aspects of teenagers' growth and development, including sexual behavior (Brooks-Gunn et al., 1993; Duncan & Aber, 1997; Massey & Denton, 1993; Massey, 1998).

This study examines the role of the different urban neighborhoods on risky adolescent behavior, it focuses on initial age of sexual activity, pre-marital sex, failure to use contraception and teen pregnancy. Previous research on the determinants of teen pregnancy (e.g., Herold et al., 1988; Morris, 1988; Samara, 1997; and Wulf and Singh, 1991) has not generally considered the environment effects.

Although most research on these effects has been conducted in the United States (Sucoff & Upchurch, 1998; Upchurch et al., 1999). this study will extend current research to urban environments in Central America (Main Urban Areas of Costa Rica and El Salvador).

The University of Costa Rica, the Evangelical University of El Salvador and the University of California, Los Angeles are conducting this study. The study will also generate one of the first comparative studies between urban areas in Central America and Los Angeles, California.

Despite substantial differences in standards of living between Central-American cities and Los Angeles, there are strong parallels in the pace and patterns of growth, city structure, social problems types, and the difficulty of providing services to rapidly expanding outlying areas.

Central American cities are also linked to the city of Los Angeles through a migration network. El Salvador, in particular, sends substantial numbers of emigrants to Los Angeles and receive large numbers of return migrants from Los Angeles each year. Needless to say, urban places of Costa Rica also are sending areas.

Due to families and social networks, social and demographic patterns in these cities are often closely linked. It is clear that the experience in Los Angeles is changing demographic patterns in closely linked urban areas in Central America and vice versa. For example, US music preference and social behavior (e.g., gangs, dating behavior, adolescent independence) has become very common among teens in San Salvador because of the large return migration of Salvadoran teenagers from Los Angeles.

In each city, ten neighborhoods were selected, for a total of 30 neighborhoods across all three cities. The neighborhoods in Los Angeles are census tracts. Further more, thus neighborhood are predominantly poor and immigrant conformed, including immigrants from Central America. In the two Central American cities neighborhoods were chosen among in poor or extremely poor areas of recent in-migration and neighborhoods that are major sending areas for migrants to the United States. In each Central-American city 210 surveys (21 per neighborhood) were carried out for teenager-girls with ages 15-17. Neighborhood observation questionnaires were also applied to measure neighborhood levels as a perception of the enumerators.

The information from Los Angeles comes from Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Study (L.A.FANS), that is a survey of children, families, and neighborhoods in Los Angeles County (Sastry et al., 2000). The information from Costa Rica and El Salvador was recently collected in May and September of the present year (2003). The fieldwork and data processing stages are already completed. These stages were conducted by the authors of this proposal at the University of Costa Rica in conjunction with the Evangelical University of El Salvador.

The questionnaire was based on standardized questions from previous adolescent surveys in the United States and Latin America. Both English and Spanish versions were used in the Los Angeles survey before using the Spanish-adjusted version in Central America. Central-American questionnaires were applied only to girls age 15-17, and more questions related to neighborhood girl's perception and sexual behavior were added in comparison with L.A.FANS.

The research hypothesis assumes that teens living in "socially disorganized neighborhoods" and those who receive less attention and support from their families are more likely to engage in risky sexual behaviors. Neighborhoods with high turnover rates, those in which few neighbors know each other, and those with poorer infrastructure are classified as more "socially disorganized."

In order to prove this hypothesis, neighborhoods' social constructs such as poorer infrastructure, social networks, social control and collective efficacy will be tested following previous evidence (Sampson, Morenoff & Earls, 1999; Sampson, Raudenbush & Earls, 1997; Drukker et al., 2003; Wen, Browning and Cagney, 2003). Other variables like the scales of youth satisfaction and insecurity in the neighborhood, family relations and girls' socio-demographic characteristics will be combined with the youth's neighborhood perception to see if the neighborhoods social environment contributes to explain differences in their sexual behavior across countries. According to the differences in the social environment it is expected that in poorer neighborhoods, where crime rates are higher and social cohesion is less and where the beginning of sexual experience includes pre-marital sex, failure in contraceptive use and pregnancy rates will remain higher.

References

- Brooks-Gunn, J., G.J Duncan, P. Kato and N. Sealand (1993) "Do Neighborhoods Influence Child and Adolescent Behavior?" *American Journal of Sociology* 99: 353-395.
- Drukker, M.; Kaplan, C.; Feron, F. and J. Os. (2003) "Children's health-related quality of life, neighbourhood socio-economic deprivation and social capital. A contextual analysis. *Social Science & Medicine*. 57: 825-841
- Duncan, and J.L. Aber eds (1997.) *Neighborhood Poverty*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.; Sampson, R.J., J.D.
- Herold, J.M.; Monterroso, E.; Morris, L.; Castellanos, G.; Conde, A.; Spitz, A. (1988) "Sexual experience and contraceptive use among young adults in Guatemala City." *International Family Planning Perspectives*, 14(4): 142-6.
- Massey (1998) "Back to the Future: The Rediscovery of Neighborhood context". *Contemporary Sociology*. 27: 570-572
- Massey, D.S. y N.A. Denton (1993) *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

- Morris, Leo. (1988) "Young adults in Latin America and the Caribbean: their sexual experience and contraceptive use." *International Family Planning Perspectives*, 14 (4): 153-158.
- Samara, Renee (1997) "Adolescent Motherhood in Guatemala: A Comparative Perspective" in Anne R. Pebley and Luis Rosero-Bixby (eds.) *Demographic Diversity and Change in the Central American Isthmus*, Santa Monica, California: RAND Books.
- Sampson, R.J., J.D. Morenoff and F. Earls (1999) "Beyond Social Capital: Neighborhood Mechanisms and Structural Sources of Collective Efficacy for Children". *American Sociological Review*. 64:633-660
- Sampson, R.J., S.W. Raudenbush and F. Earls (1997) "Neighborhoods and Violent Crime: A Multilevel Study of Collective Efficacy," *Science*, 277 (August 15, 1997): 918-924
- Sastry, N., Bonnie G-D., John A. and A. Pebley (2000) "The Design of Multilevel Longitudinal Survey of Children, Families, and Communities: The Los Angeles Family and Neighborhood Survey," RAND L&P *Working Paper 00-18*. DRU-2400/1-L.A.FANS.
- Sucoff, C.A. y D.M. Upchurch (1998). "Neighborhood context and the risk of childbearing among metropolitan-area black adolescents". *American Sociological Review* 63:571-585.
- Upchurch, D., C.S. Aneshensel, C.A. Sucoff and L. Levy-Storms (1999) "Neighborhood and Family Contexts of Adolescent Sexual Activity". *Journal of Marriage and the Family*. 61:920-933
- Wen, M.; Browning, C.R; and K.Cagney.(2003) "Poverty, affluence, and income inequality: neighborhood economic structure and its implications for health". *Social Science & Medicine*. 57: 843-860
- Wulf, D. and S. Sigh,(1991) "Sexual activity, union and childbearing among adolescent women in the Americas" *International Family Planning Perspectives*, 17 (4): 137-44