Putting Children and Adolescents at the Center of Housing Policy: A Latin American Perspective

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The articles in this symposium build an interesting bridge between housing policy and child and youth development by establishing the direct connections between different dimensions of housing (dwellings, neighborhoods, and communities) and human development. Bringing concerns about the well-being of children and adolescents into the housing policy debate is important because housing is a basic dimension of child well-being that affects other dimensions of development, such as health and education. Yet, many times housing policies are designed and oriented from an adult-centered perspective.

The framework of Sara Anderson, Tama Leventhal, Sandra Newman, and Veronique Dupéré is useful for understanding the way in which residential mobility affects child development and how different contexts of housing (family, neighborhood, peers, and school) affect children and adolescents in varied ways, depending on their stage of development (Anderson et al., 2014). An important contribution of the article is to show that moving, per se, is not necessarily detrimental for children and that it is the change of those housing contexts that affects child development. Changes in the different contexts can go both ways (to a worse or a better context), and, thus, this framework is very useful for understanding how the circumstances of moving and changes in contexts at different levels affect child development.

One dimension of residential mobility the authors mention but do not develop deeply is the reasons for moving. The effects of mobility on child development may differ depending on the circumstances for moving and whether the decision for moving is because of "push" or "pull" factors (Coulton, Theodos, and Turner, 2012). Push factors, such as economic distress or disruptive changes in family composition (for example, divorce, death of the breadwinner) may be accompanied by changes to a worse context (in terms of family distress but also worse quality of housing, neighborhood, or school). By contrast, pull factors, such as a new job opportunity, are more likely to be accompanied by a planned move and will more likely be an improvement in housing and neighborhood characteristics.

A clear push factor in the international context is forced migration, in which families and children are pushed away from their homes and communities. Evidence suggests that moving is detrimental

for children when it is forced or unplanned. In the case of forced migration, research shows that, independent of the exposure to violent events, children who are displaced have worse developmental outcomes compared with those children who are not displaced (Reed et al., 2012).

Consistent with Anderson et al. (2014), apparently it is not "displacement" of moving, per se, that causes these detrimental effects, but rather the dramatic changes in children's developmental contexts. For instance, in the case of Colombia, a country with a high rate of internal forced migration, evidence shows that moving in a forced or emergency situation may bring detrimental consequences through different channels: (1) parental stress related to an unplanned and unwanted move; (2) job loss and income loss, especially when migrating from rural to urban areas, where the skills that parents (especially fathers) bring to the cities are not compatible with the labor market needs, and (3) loss of social and physical capital that was available in their homes (Ibáñez and Moya, 2010).

The "developmental-contextual framework" that Anderson et al. (2014) propose is also useful for understanding in a comprehensive way the link between housing policy in general (not only mobility) and child development and for guiding housing policy interventions to ensure or maximize child development. Within the more proximal contexts of housing, one aspect that is not very emphasized in the article but that is clearly shown by Rebekah Levine Coley, Melissa Kull, Tama Leventhal, and Alicia Doyle Lynch is the quality of the dwelling itself and access to basic services (Coley et al., 2014). In the international context, not only in terms of the achievement of Millennium Development Goals in developing countries (Fay et al., 2005) but also in terms of child poverty elimination in the developed world (Harker, 2007), it is clear that basic infrastructure related to housing quality both inside the dwelling (overcrowding, cooking with solid fuels, dirt floor, and poor quality of roof and walls) and outside the dwelling (access to clean water and sanitation, safety, and access to amenities such as parks and recreation areas) is imperative for achieving child development in terms of nutrition, health, and education outcomes in the long run.

Coley et al. (2014) show how complex neighborhood realties are and the difficulties of labeling neighborhoods as "good" or "bad." An important contribution of the article is to show the potential positive effects of housing and neighborhood quality (in terms of safety and order) on child development when it is accompanied by residential stability. Also, they argue that it is the interaction of different characteristics of housing, neighborhoods, and communities ("housing bundle") that can make a difference in child development.

This argument relates to recent research on multidimensional child poverty, in which different dimensions of child well-being, including housing and neighborhood characteristics, are considered to monitor and design child policy (CEPAL and UNICEF, 2010; Notten and Roelen, 2011). Using this approach, a child's well-being is conceived as the simultaneous achievement of different dimensions, including education, health, nutrition, and housing. Thus, a child is considered to be not poor not only when he or she lives in a decent dwelling (no overcrowding; good quality of floor, roof, and walls) and has access to clean water and sanitation, but also when he or she lives in a safe neighborhood and has access to parks or green areas. This multidimensional approach to child development imposes a challenge in terms of policy design because it requires the delivery of a bundle of services that goes beyond housing or the dwelling and requires the coordination of agencies of different sectors.

Lessons for Policy

Promoting the mobility of families from low-quality dwellings to residences of better quality (an improvement in a proximal context) can have positive effects on child development. If other developmental contexts are not improved (or if they worsen), however, the net effect on child development can be zero. This situation is the case of some public housing projects in Latin America, where culture and traditions were not taken into account; therefore, the spaces provided, although better in quality in terms of construction materials and access to water and sanitation, lacked the physical space that was important for the community in terms of the development of their activities, with a potential destruction of social capital (Mena, 2011). This example in Latin America illustrates the relevance of the developmental-contextual framework that Anderson et al. (2014) propose and the need for accounting for changes in both housing and neighborhood contexts when designing housing policy for families with children.

Another way to have a positive effect on child development through housing policy is to improve housing and neighborhood conditions. In the case of Latin America, these programs to improve housing and neighborhood conditions were originally created to address basic local needs, such as critical housing conditions and access to potable water and sanitation. In some cities, this idea has expanded to include other dimensions of housing and neighborhood quality, such as safety, order, and recreation. Some current pilot projects are under way in Colombia (*Mejoramiento Integral de Barrios*), where, in addition to improving housing conditions and providing access to water and sanitation, the intervention also includes constructing or improving public spaces such as parks, playgrounds, green areas, sports areas, community centers, healthcare centers, and schools. So, rather than improving access to services and to more desirable contexts by moving families to "better" neighborhoods, the intervention aims to improve the existing neighborhoods in different dimensions (order, recreation, education, and healthcare services).

This type of place-based initiative can have two main advantages. First, by keeping families in the same neighborhood, communities can stay integrated and thus social capital remains or can even be strengthened. Second, it avoids the parental and child stress of moving. As the article by Brett Theodos, Claudia Coulton, and Amos Budde shows, however, a potential risk for place-based initiatives is the high level of residential mobility of low-income families and of school mobility of children, even within the same neighborhood or school district (Theodos, Coulton, and Budde, 2014). Therefore, an important lesson of that article is to ensure that the improvement of services is distributed as uniformly as possible within the neighborhood so that a qualitative jump in the quality of services is offered to the community and, therefore, to the development of children.

A final policy lesson of these articles is that housing interventions should be sensitive to child and family characteristics. For instance, different interventions are needed depending on the age of children. For young children, changes in the most proximal context, the family, are more important than changes in the neighborhood. Conversely, for adolescents, they are more easily "permeated" by changes in the neighborhood quality. Also, different interventions may be needed depending on the reasons for moving. If it is a push situation, then families and children need support to ensure they are compensated for the losses that may not be reparable in their home of origin. In addition, if stress is higher, then families need special support to maintain a healthy relationship with their

children. Also, depending on the reasons for moving, changes in other contexts (neighborhood or peers) may vary. It is likely that in a push situation, families move to places where it is more difficult to have and build community ties. In both cases, however, policy must be sensitive to these changes in contexts and ensure that children's environments (home, neighborhood, and school) promote conditions that positively contribute to child development.

Putting children at the center does not mean that housing policy is the only intervention needed to enhance child development. Children also need access to good-quality education, food, healthcare services, and so on. If children are exposed to low-quality housing and neighborhoods, however, not only will their development be at risk, but also the potential effects of other interventions will be deterred.

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