Housing, Contexts, and the Well-Being of Children and Youth: A European Perspective

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I have spent many years analyzing issues concerning urban segregation dynamics and effects from a demographic, social class, and ethnic perspective. Although my work focuses mostly on Sweden, U.S. scholars have provided much inspiration for me and other Europeans engaged in researching such issues. While I acknowledge that the urban scenes used to look very much different, with less presence of ethnic minorities, less segregation, less severe urban poverty, less violence, and more social cohesion in the European societies, urban realities are now gloomier in many European cities, including those in the northern European welfare states. It is still the case that phenomena such as racial segregation, homelessness, and poverty take on other, more severe proportions in the United States and that institutional differences are still profound, but research and policy issues addressed on both sides of the Atlantic seem to have converged; see, for instance, van Ham et al. (2012) and Manley et al. (2013) on neighborhood effects and related policy issues; Andersson and Musterd (2005) and van Gent, Musterd, and Ostendorf (2009) on urban area-based interventions; and Flouri, Mavroveli, and Midouhas (2013) on residential mobility and children's behavior. I hope for and also foresee a development in which more research will continue in the footsteps of, for instance, Wacquant (2008) and engage with cross-Atlantic comparative studies related to different aspects of urban segregation processes and policy interventions.

A European outsider has many reasons to welcome the contributions comprising the symposium in this issue of *Cityscape*. First, the authors raise fundamentally important issues concerning re-production of unjust social conditions: What does it mean for the opportunities and development of children to live in poverty, in inferior and unsecure housing, and in poor and segregated neigh-borhoods? What does it mean to be geographically mobile under such conditions? Second, the focus is on making research policy relevant; all contributors have this ambition. Third, the empirical analyses reported do not deny the challenges facing social science in finding causal relationships between individual trajectories and sociospatial contexts. The analyses employ statistical techniques that hopefully underestimate rather than overestimate contextual effects. Fourth, taken together, the research articles offer a generous reading list for younger researchers trying to grasp and enter this research field. Last, but not least, the authors also demonstrate the need for addressing our knowledge gaps. It is unfortunate, in my opinion, that those gaps identified are no better covered in European research.

Being a social and urban geographer by training, I should immediately say that some of the articles concern research fields in which I feel less at home; for instance, psychology. These contributions, however, such as the articles by J. J. Cutuli and Janette E. Herbers and by Rebekah Levine Coley, Melissa Kull, Tama Leventhal, and Alicia Doyle Lynch, are easy to read and have helped to further my own understanding of the substantive topics (Coley et al., 2014; Cutuli and Herbers, 2014). The latter of these two articles is closer to my own interest in neighborhood effects and inspired me to provide some reflections in this commentary. Coley et al. (2014) both confirms and advances existing knowledge about neighborhood effects on children's well-being. The four neighborhood profiles do not distinguish between good and bad neighborhoods; instead, they compose, for low-income people, a set of often-occurring housing and neighborhood characteristics in an interesting and realistic way and therefore open up possibilities for drawing more nuanced conclusions. I hope their article will be widely read because of their choice of empirical research strategy, the way they conducted the multivariate modeling, and the way they presented the final policy discussion in such a clear and well-balanced way. Only one thing disturbs me about the Coley et al. article, and that is the opening line: "Low-income families face numerous constraints but also opportunities in accessing affordable, decent, and stable housing in safe neighborhoods" (Coley et al., 2014: 37). If anything, poor families in the United States and elsewhere face severe constraints but often very little opportunity. This article shows that none of the four most common neighborhood profiles identified is characterized by this full set of positive attributes.

For those studying children's well-being and opportunities, school issues are naturally of key interest. The article by Brett Theodos, Claudia Coulton, and Amos Budde explicitly addresses this topic and is a very welcome contribution to the literature on an important but often overlooked topic; that is, how residential mobility affects a child's academic performance (Theodos, Coulton, and Budde, 2014). Although I have some problems understanding how much "choice" low-income neighborhood children in fact have, and what the "structural barriers to reaching high-quality schools" (Theodos, Coulton, and Budde, 2014: 81) are, I definitely share the conclusion that selective area-based interventions alone cannot solve the problem of structural injustice, unequal opportunities, and residential segregation. The statement "if the areas nearby are not experiencing similar improvements ... gains as a result of the initiative may be lost" (Theodos, Coulton, and Budde, 2014: 81–82) is crucial and points in the direction of the need for a much broader structural reform of urban housing and school systems (which probably is easier said than done). It is a well-known fact that area-based interventions, albeit often well motivated and sometimes partially fruitful, are undermined by displacement effects and are thus potentially creating problems elsewhere.

The article by Sara Anderson, Tama Leventhal, Sandra Newman, and Veronique Dupéré also addresses childhood residential mobility (Anderson et al., 2014). Although many studies have addressed residential mobility in many countries, the studies tend not to explicitly focus on residential mobility's effect on children. The way the authors approach child mobility—that is, by applying a developmental perspective separating children into different developmental stages and linking these stages to proximal contexts (family, school, and neighborhood) is, I think, especially rewarding. Findings suggest that family instability co-occurs with residential moves. This finding is not surprising because such instability, per se, tends to generate moves and most families prefer not to move neighborhoods or schools while they have middle childhood or adolescent aged children. It is nevertheless of interest to analyze the effects of child mobility in a systematic and rigorous way. The United States

is certainly not the only country that lacks (federal or Central State) specific policies that could mitigate the negative effects for children of moving families, so simply bringing this issue to the table for discussion is productive. As the authors correctly point out, however, we do need further research to know better in what way moving families and children should be assisted in different stages of a child's development and whether such assistance should be general or targeted toward particular categories (nonvolunteer moves; immigrants, refugees, poor families, and so on). In my own research, I have demonstrated that ethnic minority households move much more often than do native Swedes and that this pattern cannot be explained by demographic or socioeconomic group-varying individual attributes (Andersson, 2012). The same research indicates that some of the most mobile minority groups are those who are the least integrated in the labor market and have the lowest employment incomes. This observation points in the direction of a similar conclusion as the one I read out from Anderson et al. (2014): that high mobility is very often an indicator of social marginalization and can further reinforce and reproduce social exclusion.

Unfortunately, a couple of the articles included in this volume appeared somewhat too late for me to give comments. Simply scanning the Robin Smith, Megan Gallagher, Susan Popkin, Amanda Mireles, and Taz George article leads me to a final reflection, however (Smith et al., 2014). Something like the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) for Fair Housing Demonstration program is difficult to find in Europe, be it because European social policies are more seldom developed by applying selective social experiments or be it because "hypersegregation" (Massey and Denton, 1993) or the level of "concentrated disadvantage" (Sampson, 2012) is still not comparable. As a research program, MTO has been used for addressing a range of important issues by applying quantitative and qualitative research techniques. One remaining issue is, of course, how to design social welfare and housing policies that minimize negative externalities, including neighborhood effects that reproduce different kinds of social inequalities. One thing is certain—it cannot be accomplished by upscaling the MTO idea by moving millions of disadvantaged households from one place to another.

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