Contextual Effects

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Abstract
Social scientists since the original Chicago School researchers find that neighborhoods and other geographic areas exert effects on residents, while people live in those areas and even long afterward. The context effects are net of the individuals composing them, meaning there are cumulative effects that cannot be explained by individual-level characteristics alone. Another way of describing this is to state that the sum is greater than its parts: neighborhoods and other geographic areas, such as counties, states, and nations, combine social resources in ways that can influence the kind of lives that people living in those areas have over time. Contextual effects have a long history in sociological studies, dating back at least to the early Chicago School, and have effects on several types of social outcomes, including: economic, educational and developmental, health and psychological wellbeing, crime and delinquency, and community involvement. Future directions of contextual effects research will account for the objective and structural features of geographic areas, in conjunction with the subjective and perceptual aspects.

Introduction
Contextual effects are spatially bound social resources that culminate in more or less advantaged geographic areas. As a type of social problem, disadvantages embedded in contexts bundle into multiple forms of deprivations that continue to affect people in later life course stages, even after moving out of high poverty areas. Contextual effects are typically studied at the neighborhood level, such as Census tracts, and also at the metropolitan, county, state, and national levels. Particularly problematic is the pensiveness of the outcomes affected by contextual disadvantages.

Intellectual and Social Context
Contextual effects have long been investigated by social scientists, beginning especially with the work of Chicago School sociologists, who focused on concentrations of social problems within the city and paid particular attention to socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity. These scholars described spatial proximity and neighborhood contact as constituting one of the most basic forms of association and conceive of the city as consisting of human processes which relate fundamentally to human nature. From early studies linking context to marriage mate selection and delinquency and crime, the community-level influences of contextual effects have been studied across a number of sociological subfields and related to an array of life outcomes.

Major Dimensions
Types of outcomes linked to social context include: economic, educational and developmental, health and psychological well-being, crime and delinquency, and community involvement.

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**Economic Outcomes.** Economic outcomes of childhood poverty are one of the most well-studied topics in the social sciences. Many scholars investigate neighborhood contexts to analyze the extent to which growing up in disadvantaged neighborhoods results in diminished opportunities for economic success later in life. Scholars have found that growing up in poor neighborhoods seriously diminishes later life chances, across an array of social outcomes, and translate into decreased economic returns, such as lower income levels. Social scientists have widely acknowledged that something particular to the concentration of urban poverty is important for understanding how poor children wind up as poor adults. Sampson (2012) asserts that social problems come bundled together at the neighborhood level. These concentrations of social problems are important for understanding the ways in which social inequalities are embedded in social context and shape later economic outcomes, such as income and poverty.

**Educational and Developmental Outcomes.** Educational and child development outcomes have also been extensively studied as relating to disadvantaged neighborhood outcomes. The plethora of educational and developmental outcomes related to neighborhood contexts includes: lower rates of high school graduation, lower rates of college graduation, poorer school achievement outcomes, worse school attendance, lower childhood intelligence, higher rates of teenage pregnancy, negative identity formation, decreased youth self-efficacy, diminished self-efficacy of teachers, and worsened school quality. The cumulative result is that children from disadvantaged neighborhoods are significantly less likely to be admitted to and to graduate from four-year universities (Berg et al. 2013).

**Health and Psychological Well-Being Outcomes.** Outcomes related to health and psychological well-being have also been linked to neighborhood context. Neighborhood context relates to a range of physical health outcomes, including higher mortality rates and lower birth weights. The cumulative result is that people in disadvantaged neighborhoods have lower self-rated health, a key predictor of other poor health outcomes. Neighborhood context also relates to a range of mental health outcomes: decreased happiness and increased depression and anxiety. Thus, another outcome of disadvantaged neighborhood context is a diminished sense of overall health, as well as decreased happiness and increased depression (Firebaugh & Schroeder 2009).

**Crime and Delinquency Outcomes.** Neighborhood context is also linked to another important social outcome: crime and delinquency. Numerous studies find a relationship between disadvantaged neighborhoods and increased crime rates, including higher rates of violent crimes, such as: homicide, increased rates of youth committing violent crimes, and increased victimization rates. The cumulative result is that residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods often live with a greater degree of fear and have lower sense of safety. Additionally, perceiving neighborhood incivilities greatly contributes to lower sense of safety (Swatt et al. 2013).

**Community Involvement.** Community involvement is another neighborhood outcome that has been shown to be affected by structural factors of neighborhoods and other geographic units. In addition, community involvement has been shown to link to a number of positive social and life outcomes, such as decreased youth violence and increased health benefits, heightened personal wellbeing, increased involvement in other organizations, and more informal helping. Community involvement sometimes moderates effects of disadvantaged neighborhoods, making engagement part of a potential cycle of change to neighborhood characteristics. Thus, community involvement is another outcome that is affected by the type of context in which one lives (Musik & Wilson 2008), which highlights it as a potential key change mechanism.

In summary, social scientists consistently find relationships between disadvantaged geographic contexts and a host of social and life outcomes. Scholars also find that these
contextual effects remain significant after controlling for individual and family characteristics, indicating that there is an independent effect of context. Scholars find that such contextual effects are robust after controlling for selection biases, indicating that neighborhood effects are not simply outcomes of individual residential choices. Thus, sociological literatures consistently indicate the important role of contextual effects in influencing an array of outcomes in social life.

**Future Directions**

Despite this rich sociological theoretical tradition and ample empirical evidence, questions remain regarding how neighborhood contexts affect life outcomes. For example, understudied are the mechanisms by which neighborhood context appears to operate. Scholars need to better understand how residents of various types (with differences in terms of education levels, incomes, race and ethnicity, genders, and other social characteristics) can experience the same disadvantages in neighborhoods and result in worse life outcomes than people who may have less advantaged individual characteristics that reside within more advantaged contexts. To date, sociological literatures have not as thoroughly investigated these issues, perhaps due to previous conceptualizations of social structures as less cultural than the current sociological understanding of social structures such as neighborhoods. However, scholarship has begun to focus more specifically on the role of subjective experiences of contexts.

Community psychology literatures find that subjective experiences of context are important, such as a sense of community and belongingness. These subjective experiences are linked with similar outcomes to those typically found in structural contextual effects. New approaches focus on the ways these two lineages combine. For example, studies can investigate structural aspects of neighborhood contexts along with subjective, perceptual experiences of neighborhoods. Implementing this approach can help to identify potential social and psychological mechanisms of neighborhood contextual effects.

**References**


**Further Reading**


Economic Contextual Effects


Educational and Developmental Contextual Effects


Health and Wellbeing Contextual Effects


**Crime and Delinquency Contextual Effects**


**Community and Cohesion Contextual Effects**


**Community Psychology and Contextual Effects**


