Neighborhood Safety and Social Connections: What's the Potential Impact on Caregiver and Child Diet?

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What a child eats is influenced largely by what their caregiver eats. Children look up to their caregiver for direction, and caregivers also typically conduct the meal planning and food shopping for their kids.

Another factor that can impact a child's diet: where they live. More specifically, the neighborhood a child lives in can dictate the availability of nutritious or less nutritious foods and can shape the social conditions they experience.

This influential neighborhood social environment includes perceptions of safety, crime, and collective efficacy, which is a construct that incorporates both the connections between neighbors, such as trust and willingness to help each other, and inclination to intervene to maintain public order, such as bystander intervention during an emergency and neighbor-led conflict resolution.

We know that living in a neighborhood with higher levels of safety and collective efficacy and lower levels of crime can be significantly beneficial to dietary habits. In this post, we'll explore results from our study about neighborhoods and diet, how neighborhoods may impact diet, and why it is important to gain a better understanding of connections between the two.

How is where we live connected to what we eat?

To gain a better understanding of how perceived neighborhood safety, collective efficacy, and crime may impact diet, we designed a study that surveyed mothers of Medicaid-enrolled preschool-aged children. This survey asked questions about the diet of both the mother and the child, as well as their neighborhood's social environment. Our team found that among mothers, higher perceived neighborhood safety and collective efficacy were associated with higher daily intake of fruits and vegetables, and among mothers and children, higher perceived safety was associated with higher whole-grain food intake. However, we found no association between violent crime and any dietary outcome, and no connection between neighborhood social exposures and the intake of added sugars or sugar-sweetened beverages.

Of note, the associations of neighborhood factors with diet were the strongest in mothers, which could indicate that young children's diets are not impacted by their neighborhood social environment until they get older.

Although our study didn't examine specific mechanisms, there are several ways to explain how neighborhood social conditions might impact diet. For example, the concept of feeling safe in a neighborhood could allow a caregiver to visit a grocery store more frequently and, thus, buy more perishable foods such as fruits and vegetables. This could also lead to healthier eating behaviors from lower levels of stress. Having higher levels of collective efficacy could mean that neighbors can count on each other to borrow or share if they are in a bind. Higher levels of collective efficacy may also lead to more food resources, such as community-run fridges.

Understanding how neighborhood factors might impact caregiver and child diet is extremely important because some factors could be modified through interventions to improve dietary outcomes. Effective interventions exist to improve the neighborhood social environment. For example, transforming vacant lots into clean, maintained green spaces has been found to increase neighbors' feelings of safety and social connection. However, it's not yet known if these interventions impact diet. Community gardens might also increase feelings of social connection and improve healthy food access.

Based on our findings, it may be beneficial to focus interventions on caregivers. For example, incorporating classes that teach healthy cooking and food skills into neighborhoods to build connections between neighbors while improving food-related skills might be a worthwhile approach.

Looking at maternal stress & food insecurity

Our team is currently exploring this same survey data to understand how the neighborhood social environment may also be associated with maternal stress and food security. Preliminary findings show that mothers who view their social environment more favorably—meaning safer and more cohesive—report feeling less stress. Additionally, households with lower rates of food insecurity were associated with higher perceived neighborhood safety and social cohesion and lower violent crime rates.

These results are compelling, suggesting that the neighborhood social environment may be an effective intervention for improving child diet, maternal stress, and food security, which can ultimately improve long-term child health outcomes. Additionally, our team is conducting research on how neighborhood conditions may impact other factors like obesity, mental health, and sleep among children and teens.

The neighborhood that one lives in has a strong role in shaping their health behaviors. We hope this body of work adds to the existing literature on neighborhood impacts on child and caregiver diet and, ultimately, helps to inform interventions that can improve family health outcomes.

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