

The Charlotte Observer

A new look at poverty pinpoints neighborhoods

For black kids, surroundings play a surprisingly strong role.

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It has puzzled many people for years: After legal race discrimination was outlawed, why haven't more black Americans achieved more prosperity? Now comes a new study of economic mobility with an intriguing finding – one that should get policy-makers' and nonprofit leaders' attention here and across the country.

The study from the Pew Charitable Trusts Economic Mobility Project looked at neighborhoods, not just individuals or families. What it found was, in many ways, discouraging.

But the study also points to possibilities for new approaches to solving the stubborn problem of urban poverty, especially among black Americans.

Written by New York University sociologist Patrick Sharkey, the Pew report found that living in a poor neighborhood as a child strongly raises the chances that the child will slip downward on the economic ladder as an adult.

It found that children in middle-class black families are much more likely to be raised in poor neighborhoods, and the poor neighborhood has a negative effect despite the higher family income.

Blacks are far more likely than whites of similar economic levels to end up, years later, lower on the economic ladder, a troublingly persistent mobility gap.

Neighborhood poverty alone accounts for a greater portion of the gap between blacks and whites in downward mobility than factors such as the effects of parent education, occupation and work history.

Finally, the study found that being raised in an extremely poor neighborhood, while rare for white kids, is the norm for black kids. Indeed, it was so rare for white children to be raised in the poorest neighborhoods and black kids in the wealthiest, that some of his analyses from those demographic slices were too small to be statistically valid.

Yet in focusing on neighborhoods and their poverty or wealth as important factors, Sharkey and his research point to the opportunity to work on just that: improving a neighborhood's poverty level.

He found that when the level of poverty in black children's neighborhoods declines over time, their economic fortunes as adults improve notably.

That means, he writes, that focusing on improving poverty levels in whole neighborhoods might be more effective as an anti-poverty tool than many had realized.

Obviously, there's no silver-bullet solution to poverty, discrimination, crime and family dysfunction. But in pointing to the importance of neighborhoods, the Pew project offers a new way of looking at a troublingly persistent problem.