

How Neighborhoods Matter for Immigrant Adolescents

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In the United States, school-age children spend an average of only 180 days in school. During the school year they spend at least three after-school hours per day either in supervised activities of some sort, at home by themselves, or simply hanging out with friends—often on the streets. Children are most at risk of being crime victims during the hours of 2:00 and 8:00 p.m.—when most juvenile crime takes place. Nationwide, at least 8 million—and up to as many as 15 million—children are left alone and unsupervised in after-school hours. Such children are more likely to receive poor grades and drop out of school than those who are involved in supervised, constructive activities.

Immigrants are highly concentrated in the big cities of America and, within them, in the inner-city neighborhoods. In these neighborhoods, children often live in families with both parents working full-time—some at several jobs on different shifts. Aside from juggling work and household responsibilities, many immigrant parents have low levels of education and job skills, lack familiarity with the host society, and speak little or no English.

Today, many immigrant neighborhoods are plagued with poverty, inadequate schools, family disruption, single parenthood, teenage pregnancies, youth gangs, violent crimes, drug abuse and alcoholism, and anti-intellectual youth subcultures. Such unsettling environments put immigrant children of the inner city at greater risk than those living elsewhere.

We studied the space between home and school in three immigrant neighborhoods in Los Angeles—Chinatown, Koreatown, and Pico Union—to

examine ways in which neighborhood-based social structures influence immigrant children's after-school life. We focused on three specific questions:

- ▶ What types of social structures exist at the neighborhood level, and how do they vary by race and ethnicity?
- ▶ How do neighborhood-based social structures interact with one another, as mediated by race and ethnicity, to contribute to community building?
- ▶ What types of social relations—with peers, parents, coethnics, neighbors, and local leaders—do different neighborhood-based social structures foster and how may these social relations affect children's belief in education, occupational aspirations, and sense of direction and purpose?

Research Methods

We considered neighborhood-based social structures to be organizations or institutions that include churches, cultural centers, and other nonprofit community-based organizations, as well as various private businesses serving children and youths, such as after-school tutoring, SAT preparation schools, and karate studios. We also regarded economic institutions—restaurants, bookstores, arcades, beauty salons, barbershops, credit unions, and doctors offices—as part of social structures to the extent that they play a role in the social life of local residents and their communities.

We defined neighborhoods geographically by census tracts, taking into account



city boundaries, some community-based organizations, and the opinion of local residents. We use the term “community” to suggest an interlocking system of social structures based on a shared identity, a sense of cultural heritage, as well as shared values and norms.

Our fieldwork included four components: pre-arranged, one-on-one interviews with adolescents and adults with teenage children; numerous random interviews with parents, local leaders, social workers, and business owners; nonintrusive participant observations of structured activities and random gatherings; and participant observations with researchers doing volunteer work in selective publicly funded programs for children and parents, private after-school services, and cultural centers. We also analyzed various data from the U.S. census, the California Department of Education, the Los Angeles Unified School District, and the mainstream as well as ethnic media.

Findings

Three demographic patterns—racial makeup, nativity, and poverty—stand out. First, as of 1990, all three neighborhoods were minority-dominant. For example, even though Chinatown is Chinese-dominated (60% Chinese and 15.6% other Asian), many of its residents were ethnic Chinese from Vietnam and Southeast Asia. The Latinos in Chinatown were mostly Mexicans.

Between 1980 and 1990, Chinatown experienced only modest growth. The growth of the Chinese population seemed to be offset by the decline of other Asians (primarily Japanese and Filipinos). Chinatown’s non-Latino white population grew during this period, but it was unclear whether this gain was due to gentrification or the influx of non-Latino white immigrants.

Latinos dominated the Pico Union neighborhood, but they were a mixture of Mexicans (45%), Salvadorans (31%), and Guatemalans (14%). Most of the Latinos were recent immigrants, and undocumented immigrants were overrepresented. Central Americans in this neighborhood were the fastest-growing group, at a rate of 90% between 1980 and 1990. Pico Union’s Asian population also grew fast, at a rate of 73%, and its non-Latino white population was diminishing.

Koreatown was shared by Koreans, Mexicans, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and other Asians (mostly Filipinos, along with some Chinese and Southeast Asians). Although Koreans experienced impressive population growth—(164%) between 1980 and 1990—they made up only one-fifth of the neighborhood’s population (about two-thirds of the Asians were Korean, and other Asians were mostly Filipinos). Not surprisingly, more than half of the residents were Latinos, among whom 28% were Salvadorans, 16% Guatemalans, and 40% Mexicans. Like Pico Union, Koreatown was also losing its non-Latino white population.

All three neighborhoods are overwhelmingly dominated by foreign-born populations, especially recent arrivals. In Pico Union and Koreatown, about two-thirds of the immigrants arrived in the United States after 1980.

Public schools reflect these demographic patterns. In the high school serving the three neighborhoods, 88% of its 4,888-member student body are Latino and 9% are Asian. Forty-five percent of the students are classified as “English learners” (formerly limited-English proficiency), and more than 75% are qualified for receiving free or subsidized lunches—an indicator of poverty. In one of the neighborhood middle schools, 95% of the 3,193-member student body are Latino and 4% are Asian. Fifty-five percent are classified as English learners, and 85% received free or subsidized lunch.

Residents of these neighborhoods are generally poorly educated, low skilled, and poverty stricken. About two-thirds of adults in Chinatown and Pico Union lack high-school diplomas and very few have college degrees. In Koreatown, the proportion without a high-school diploma (44%) is comparatively lower, but still twice as high as that of non-Latino whites (22%). Although twice as many Koreatown residents have college degrees (16%) compared to the other two neighborhoods, the number is significantly lower than that of non-Latino whites (21%).

Ethnic Businesses and Social Structures

A wide range of retail businesses thrive in the three neighborhoods. Upscale restaurants, coffee shops, and retail stores are found in Chinatown and Koreatown, but not in Pico Union. The upscale businesses

in Chinatown tend to attract suburban coethnics and non-Latino white families, urban professionals, and tourists, while those in Koreatown tend to attract predominantly suburban middle-class Korean families and a weekday lunch crowd of multiethnic professionals.

All three neighborhoods also have various ethnically specific businesses and professional services (e.g., herbal doctors, medicine stores, acupuncture clinics, legal offices, financial institutions, barbers, groceries, and ethnic bookstores). But such businesses in Koreatown or Chinatown are mostly owned by coethnics, while those in Pico Union tend to be owned by entrepreneurs of various national origins.

There are noticeable differences between the two Asian neighborhoods. The variety of commercial businesses in Koreatown is quite similar to that in Chinatown, but its density level is much higher. The most distinctive feature is its ethnic retail and recreational entertainment industry, featuring a colorful nightlife and a focus on golfing

Many suburban Korean families from as far away as Orange County regularly attend church, shop, and entertain friends in Koreatown. Parents send their young and teenage children to after-school academic services in Koreatown while they themselves play and practice at the golf ranges, not only for the low prices but also for coethnic socialization.

In Pico Union, commercial activities appear to thrive. Except for one large Latino supermarket, however, businesses are mostly small retail shops and restaurants owned and run by South Americans, Middle-Easterners, Koreans or other Asians. Unlike Chinatown and Koreatown, Pico Union does not seem to have achieved the kind of cultural status that attracts tourists and suburban middle-class coethnics. Ethnic businesses in Pico Union are less interconnected with one another and with nonprofit community-based organizations (CBOs) than those in Chinatown and Koreatown.

In comparison to the two Asian neighborhoods, we observed few suburban middle-class Latino families visiting Pico Union regularly. Latinos do go to the neighborhood from elsewhere in Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley, but most of these coethnic members are from working-class rather than middle-class backgrounds.

Non-English language TV stations, newspapers and periodicals are important sources of information for all three neighborhoods. While all ethnic media similarly cover national and international news, business and commerce, entertainment, and sports, there is a clear distinction between the Chinese- or Korean-language media and the Spanish-language media in education-related coverage.

Chinese- and Korean-language media have regular and substantial forums and information sessions on education and local schools, such as the timing and preparation of various standardized tests, school (college and high school) ranking, scholarships, private tutoring, and various private educational institutions and services. Such coverage is lacking in the Spanish-language media.

Child and Youth Organizations and Afterschool Services

Formal organizations and institutions with specific programs serving children or youths exist in all three neighborhoods. The numbers and types of both nonprofit CBOs and the programs they offer do not vary drastically. Many of them depend primarily on public funds or on a combination of funds from various levels of government, private foundations, and individual or organizational donations.

The functions and services of nonprofit CBOs are similar across ethnic neighborhoods, but inequalities exist in the availability of private services oriented toward youths. Korean children in Koreatown have easy access to a wide variety of after-school tutoring and extracurricular activities offered by private Korean businesses. Chinese children in Chinatown also have such access, primarily in the suburban Chinese-immigrant community in Monterey Park, eight miles to the east. However, Latino children in the same neighborhoods are kept out of these private ethnic institutions because of cultural and language barriers, a lack of familiarity and comfort, and a lack of economic resources.

We find that children and adolescents who are involved in supervised afterschool activities in their neighborhoods tend to do better in school, be more ambitious and articulate about their college plans and future careers, and have a clearer sense of purpose than those who are not so involved. We also find that the Asian-Latino difference in school

performance and college preparation is largely due to this unequal access to neighborhood-based resources, such as privately run afterschool activities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Neighborhood-based social structures vary by ethnicity, differing primarily in the coethnicity of ownership and the level of middle-class involvement. Koreatown seems to have the highest density and variety of coethnically owned or run businesses and social or cultural institutions, and Pico Union the least, with Chinatown in between.

One significant source of such variation is the level of development of the ethnic-enclave economy, which is determined by various broader structural factors such as premigration socioeconomic status and modes of incorporation of the groups. Ethnic-enclave economic activities tend to interconnect with other ethnic social-service organizations and attract suburban middle-class coethnics, hence reducing social isolation in inner-city neighborhoods.

Social institutions are the key to reproducing or interpreting new forms of relations and generating new mechanisms of support and control. But they can become more resourceful when they are connected to local economic institutions. However, they can also affect group members in paradoxical ways—to help disadvantaged group members get ahead in mainstream society, or to reinforce intra-group and/or intergroup divisions.

Publicly funded school-based and community-based after-school programs are instrumental but insufficient in inner-city neighborhoods. Nonprofit and religious organizations have the experience and infrastructure to implement such support for immigrant families, yet they are severely underfunded and understaffed.

The role of ethnic entrepreneurship is critical for community building, as is the case of private supplementary educational establishments for facilitating the flow of information and enhancing intergenerational relations.

For these reasons, we make the following policy recommendations:

- ▶ While long-term after-school programs should start from grade school, adolescents and youths

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who are severely underserved need particular attention.

- ▶ Children who are economically disadvantaged and culturally marginalized would benefit from access to alternative private after-school programs, but would need financial assistance to gain such access.
- ▶ These children would also benefit from extracurricular ethnic-language schools, but would require financial support in order to attend.
- ▶ The state should provide multilingual educational materials to inform immigrant communities (e.g., about college preparation and options).
- ▶ The state should encourage intergroup relations and coalitions by providing incentives to neighborhood businesses that provide services to more than one ethnic group, and put resources into building public-private partnerships.
- ▶ The state should provide incentives to entrepreneurs to develop educational enrichment and other educationally related programs (such as tutoring, music, sports, etc.).

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