Social Support and Parenting in Poor, Dangerous Neighborhoods

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This study investigated how stressful environmental conditions influence the relation between mothers’ social support and parenting strategies, utilizing interview data from a sample of 262 poor, African American single mothers and their seventh- and eighth-grade children, as well as objective data about respondents’ neighborhoods. In general, the results indicated that neighborhood conditions moderate the relation between social support and parenting behaviors. Specifically, as neighborhood conditions worsened, the positive relation between emotional support and mothers’ nurturant parenting was weakened. In a similar fashion, the negative relation between instrumental social support and punishment was stronger in better neighborhoods. As the surrounding environments became poorer and more dangerous, the relation between greater instrumental support and a lower reliance on punishment was weakened. Thus, on the whole, hierarchical regression analyses indicated that the positive influences of social support on parenting behavior were strained and attenuated in poorer, high-crime environments.

INTRODUCTION

According to Wilson (1987), demographic changes have steadily accumulated and resulted in pockets of poverty throughout the urban and rural United States. In inner-city neighborhoods, these pockets are populated primarily by an isolated, racial minority “underclass.” Such desolate communities are characterized by unemployment, crime, inadequate housing, deteriorating school grounds, and poor medical services. Poor mothers face enormous challenges when raising children in poverty-stricken, high-crime, inner-city neighborhoods; however, relatively few studies have explored how neighborhoods influence parents and parenting behavior (Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, Chase-Lansdale, & Gordon, 1997). The main question addressed by the present study focused on how stressful environmental conditions influence the relation between mothers’ social support and parenting strategies. In other words, will the effects of social support on parenting vary depending on the severity of environmental stressors? This question was explored with an important, underexamined population of poor, African American, single mothers. Since 1970, the proportion of African American children living in never-married, mother-only families has steadily increased (Hernandez, 1997). Moreover, compared with other family structures, the growing number of families headed by single women is, in fact, more vulnerable to longer spells of poverty (Bane & Ellwood, 1986). Hence, in comparison with poor, European American children, African American children are more likely to experience persistent poverty and to live in areas of concentrated poverty (McLoyd, 1998).

Parenting in Poverty

Poor, single mothers face particularly elevated risks for a host of negative mental health factors and are disproportionately exposed to more threatening and uncontrollable life events (Belle, 1990; Brown, Bhrolchain, & Harris, 1975; Demo & Acock, 1996; McLoyd, 1990; McLoyd & Wilson, 1990; Weinraub & Wolf, 1983). Demo and Acock (1996) demonstrated that single mothers, compared with married mothers, tend to be more depressed and to report feelings of lower self-esteem. Some of the distress common among poor, single mothers stems, in part, from their single-handed negotiation of heavy parenting responsibilities. In addition to the elevated risks for mental health problems, poor mothers also tend to be socially isolated and less consistently involved with social contacts (Pearlin & Johnson, 1977; Weinraub & Wolf, 1983). Single parenting and psychological distress are thus linked by an unrelenting succession of negative events, economic hardship, social isolation, and heavy parenting responsibilities.

The present study’s model explored the relation between social support and two types of parental behavior: punitive and nurturant parenting strategies. Given the degree to which poor parents carry the burden of poverty in heavy loads of psychological distress, it is not entirely surprising that their parenting tends to be marked by coercive and punitive strategies. Numerous researchers have reported that parenting under conditions of economic hardship is charac-
terized by the frequent use of restrictions and physical punishment, a high value placed on obedience, and the absence of reasoning when providing discipline (Halpern, 1990; Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1997; Kelley, Power, & Wimbush, 1992; Mcloyd, 1990, 1998). Poor mothers are more likely to use physical punishment, give commands without explanations, and provide less support and verbal rewards than more financially advantaged mothers (Mcloyd, 1990). In the context of poverty, the increased levels of anxiety and depression that arise for parents may serve as a catalyst for more punitive and inconsistent parenting.

Many studies illustrate that parental warmth or nurturance, when coupled with moderate control, fosters children’s healthy development (Baumrind, 1991; Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991). Irrespective of race, social class, and family structure, authoritative parenting, characterized by responsiveness and moderate firmness, was related to higher academic and socioemotional functioning in a socioeconomically and racially diverse sample of approximately 10,000 adolescents (Steinberg et al., 1991). Parental warmth, acceptance, and nurturance have been identified as important components of successful parenting, relating to children’s psychological adjustment and well-being (Baumrind, 1991; Groverant & Cooper, 1985; Powers, Hauser, & Kilner, 1989; Steinberg et al., 1991). Hans, Jagers, and Musick (1991) found that a small group of successful parents, residing in a dangerous Chicago public housing project, stressed the importance of nurturing their children’s sense of competence. Their nurturant parenting strategies consisted of praising, supporting, and communicating respect for their children’s accomplishments.

Social Support and Parenting

This study’s focus on the relation between social support and parenting was, in part, due to the large volume of work that identified social support as a potent influence in parents’ lives. At the most extreme end of the continuum, isolation from social networks and support is repeatedly associated with child abuse and neglect among poor families (Garbarino, 1977; Garbarino & Sherman, 1980; Wandersman & Nation, 1998). Garbarino and Sherman (1980) investigated two neighborhoods that were similar in terms of economic, social, and racial characteristics but varied dramatically in rates of child maltreatment. The neighborhood with the higher risk for child abuse was a socially impoverished setting in which parenting was marked by fewer social exchanges and less use of neighborhood resources. In general, social isolation “reduces the resources available to the family. It diminishes their right to call upon others for assistance. It limits the child’s contacts for help. It allows unstable parenting patterns to develop and continue” (Garbarino, 1977, p. 572). Wilson (1991) similarly posited that the constellation of factors associated with living in poor neighborhoods results in social isolation—from mainstream jobs, values, and norms. In contrast, social networks and support may prevent or alleviate a number of potential familial problems. Several studies have indicated that support systems may serve as protective moderators of negative life stressors, enhancing adults’ psychological well-being and parenting (Campbell & Lee, 1992; Dressler, 1985; Taylor, Casten, & Flickinger, 1993; Unger & Wandersman, 1985).

Emotional and practical support from extended family members and friends may enhance maternal behavior by protecting against depression and fostering positive parent–child relations (Mcloyd, 1990, 1998). Mothers with higher levels of social support are generally more nurturant and consistent in their parenting and less likely to use punitive strategies such as scolding and ridiculing (Mcloyd, 1990; Weinraub & Wolf, 1983). Indeed, mothers who report greater satisfaction with social networks respond more sensitively to their children (Crvinc, Greenberg, Robinson, & Ragozin, 1984). Several researchers note that African American households are frequently embedded in large, extended family systems and kin networks (Jarrett, 2000; Wilson, 1989). With a sample of African American mothers, Mason, Cauce, Gonzales, Hiraga, and Grove (1994) found that the size of mothers’ social networks was positively related to expressions of parental warmth. Likewise, in another sample of African American mothers, kinship social support was related to more sensitive and accepting parental behaviors (Taylor & Roberts, 1995). Instrumental support may enhance parenting behavior by providing parents with additional resources for childcare assistance, emotional guidance, and economic support (Garbarino, 1977; Jarrett, 1995, 2000; Mcloyd, 1990; Unger & Wandersman, 1985; Weinraub & Wolf, 1983).

The Influence of Neighborhood Conditions on Parenting

Although a paucity of research has examined the impact of environmental conditions on parenting, this was precisely the question addressed in the current study: Will the influence of social support on parenting depend on the family’s environmental context and neighborhood stressors? Parenting strategies are most likely influenced by several neighborhood attributes, including the degree of neighborhood
dangers, the community’s social cohesiveness, and the availability of institutional resources (Eccles,uriumberg, McCarthy, Lord, & Geitze, 1993). Neighborhood poverty, for example, was negatively associated with maternal warmth in a sample of 895 families who participated in the Infant Health and Development Program (Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, & Duncan, 1994). Several studies have linked parental use of harsh, disciplinary techniques to neighborhood characteristics, with parents who reside in more dangerous neighborhoods reporting more controlling parental practices. Moreover, other researchers have identified restrictive parental policies as potentially protective and beneficial for poor children in severely impoverished neighborhoods (Baldwin, Baldwin, & Cole, 1990; Elder, Eccles, Ardelt, & Lord, 1995; Furstenberg, 1993; Gonzales, Cauce, Friedman, & Mason, 1996; Jarrett, 1995, 2000; Mason, Cauce, Gonzales, & Hira, 1996). Compared with European American parents, Elder, Eccles, Ardelt, and Lord (1995) found that efficacious African American parents were more involved in parental management strategies and hypothesized that this was due to their decreased ability to rely on neighborhood resources in raising their children. In a review of ethnographic work, Jarrett (2000) summarized several techniques used by parents to cope with neighborhood risks, including intensive parental monitoring and withdrawal from the surrounding community.

The Hypothesized Model

The current model tested the proposition that the beneficial effects of social support on parenting would vary depending on the neighborhood context that families must negotiate. We expected that greater access to social support would be associated with more nurturant and less punitive parenting strategies. This hypothesis is well supported by the literature and was tested with two specific types of social support: emotional and instrumental support. Emotional support refers to expressions of affection and thoughtful listening, whereas instrumental support includes the provision of tangible assistance in the form of goods and services. This study further extended existing research by exploring whether the relation between social support and parenting depended on a family’s environmental context. We hypothesized that neighborhood quality would moderate the relation between social support and parenting behavior.

One could speculate that the resources provided by social networks become all the more important under the most taxing environmental conditions. This theory represents an extrapolation of the buffering model of social support that posits that social resources have beneficial psychological effects only or primarily for persons under stress (Cohen & Wills, 1985). According to this hypothesis, the challenge of successfully raising children in the poorest urban neighborhoods requires as many supportive resources as one can muster. In a comprehensive review of neighborhood research, Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn (2000) proposed that parental relationships may be a primary pathway by which environmental characteristics ultimately influence children’s well-being, mediating the association between neighborhood characteristics and child outcomes. More specifically, they posited that social support may reduce the parental stress experienced with living in dangerous neighborhoods. Poor single mothers may be especially likely to benefit from more material, tangible support such as help with practical family needs, child-care assistance, and economic support.

Conversely, another hypothesis about the relation between social support and parenting in high-risk neighborhoods is quite plausible. Lower neighborhood quality may attenuate the positive effects of social support. That is, parents who live in high-risk neighborhoods may not benefit as much from social networks as do their counterparts who live in more affluent neighborhoods. In poverty-stricken communities, the support provided by highly stressed network members may be compromised by the demands that these same people are also likely to make (Belle, 1982a, 1982b; Brodsky, 1999; Coulton & Pandey, 1992). Consequently, the costs of maintaining social networks in high-risk neighborhoods may outweigh their potential benefits, because many successful parents find that protecting their children from neighborhood dangers involves a physical and social withdrawal from the surrounding community (Jarrett, 2000). As previously noted, the demands of single parenting children under adverse neighborhood conditions are extremely taxing and may leave many parents depleted of the energy needed to screen potential social contacts. In contrast, the social network members available to parents in better neighborhoods are likely to have more personal resources, to make less demands, and to offer more connections to institutional resources for children, such as educational activities and cultural events.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in the present study were 262 single, African American mothers and their seventh- and
eighth-grade children. The families resided in predominantly lower and working-class neighborhoods in Flint, Michigan. Based on FBI reporting of cities with populations over 100,000 in 1991, Flint was among the top 20 cities in highest overall crime rates in the nation (Smith & Doran, 1992). In addition to its extremely high crime rates, the city’s precarious financial situation was characterized by a history of plant closings and workforce reductions in the manufacturing employment industry. Due to the nature of its weakened economy and escalating crime rates, this city was especially appropriate for a study on the effects of urban poverty and violence.

Mother–child pairs were selected via a multiple-step screening procedure. Initially, the names of all African American seventh and eighth graders were obtained from two public middle schools. A letter was sent to all female contact parents describing the purpose of the study and informing them about an upcoming telephone call. Telephone screening interviews were then conducted with the 715 mothers and female legal guardians of these children. Information regarding the women’s marital status, current employment status, educational attainment, and household composition was elicited during the screening. Families in which the mother or female guardian was not presently married (e.g., never married, divorced, separated, or widowed) and not living with a partner were selected for participation in the study. A total of 377 mother–child pairs were eligible to participate following the telephone screening. Of this group, 49 mothers refused to participate, 55 mothers could not be contacted, and 5 interviews could not be completed, resulting in a response rate of 71%. Although not much information about nonparticipants was obtained, we suspect that mothers who declined to participate may have experienced time constraints or suspiciousness about university research projects. Both the mother or female legal guardian and one adolescent child in the remaining 268 families were interviewed between February of 1990 and April of 1991. Four mothers who self-identified as European American, one mother who was married at the time of the interview, and one respondent who was over 65 years of age were eliminated from the final sample. The resulting sample consisted of 262 mother–child pairs.

Procedure

Mothers and adolescents were interviewed in their homes. Two interviewers worked together: one interviewed the mother while the other interviewed the child. Although the interviewers were instructed to conduct the interviews in private, this was not always possible. The interviews were conducted in an average of 2 hr for the mothers and 1 hr and 20 minutes for the children. All of the interviewers were women and those who interviewed the mothers were all African American. About half of the child interviewers were African American and the other half were European American. T tests revealed no significant race of interviewer effects on any of the child variables in this study. For their participation in the study, mothers were paid $25 and adolescents were paid $10.

Measures

With the exception of the neighborhood measure and single-item variables, all variables used in these analyses were scales whose values represent the mean of values for constituent items. Factor analyses were used to construct scales, and items within scales were reverse scored when necessary so that higher scores indicated more of the characteristic named in the scale’s label.

Neighborhood quality. This measure was a composite constructed by utilizing three neighborhood scales: subjective maternal ratings of neighborhood quality, violent crime rates, and percentage of families living in poverty. The composite measure represented an average score of all three scales, ranging from 0 to 100, with higher scores reflecting more negative neighborhood conditions. A detailed description of the three individual scales follows.

1. Maternal ratings of neighborhood quality represented the mother’s overall assessment of the quality of her neighborhood. This scale consisted of 10 items that addressed maternal appraisals of the quality of neighborhood schools, police protection, public transportation, crime, drug activity, and community involvement. All items were rescaled to a uniform 0 to 100 scale so that items ran from positive to negative assessments of the neighborhood. This scale’s α was .84.

2. Violent crime rates were based on statistics provided by the city’s police department on the number of FBI Part I Crimes (murder, rape, robbery, assault, breaking and entering, larceny, auto theft, and arson) for 1990 and 1991. These crime statistics were based on a division of the city into 64 reporting areas. Reporting areas were devised in 1980 to organize the police department’s foot-patrol beats and were based on population numbers and geographical boundaries. The home address of each participant was identified as corresponding to one of the 64 reporting areas. Participants resided in 30 of the 64 police-reporting areas (3 participant addresses could not be located on the police map and 4 participants resided outside of the city limits).
Variables were constructed to represent the annual number of reports for each type of crime in each reporting area. Participants were then assigned a variable for each crime based on their residence in a particular reporting area. The violent crime rate variable used in this study consisted of the total number of murders, rapes, and assaults that occurred in the mother’s reporting area during 1990 and 1991 combined. These counts were similarly rescaled to a uniform 0 to 100 scale, on which 100 represented the greatest number of crimes reported in an area.

3. Percentage of families living in poverty was a variable constructed from U.S. Census data for 1990, the same year during which participants were interviewed for this study. All participants were located on a city census tract map and assigned to one of the city’s 40 census tracts. Participants resided in 20 census tracts (2 participants’ addresses could not be located on the map and 4 participants lived outside of the city limits). This variable reflected the percentage of families in a tract with 1989 household incomes below the official U.S. Census poverty line.

Receipt of emotional support. This measure reflected the mother’s perceptions of how often she had contact with close friends and relatives and her recollection of the amount of emotional support she had recently received from others. The scale consisted of five items with an α of .64. Example items included “How often do you have contact with close friends?” and “How often in the last month have you been able to talk to or confide in people about things that are important to you?” Items had different response categories, but were recoded to a 0 to 1 scale from low to high receipt of support before calculating the average score.

Availability of instrumental social support. This scale represented the mother’s assessment of the degree of instrumental help that she could obtain from others if she needed to do so. A sample question was “How much could you count on someone outside your house to run errands for you if everyone in your house was sick?” Each mother rated her ability to count on others for such practical help on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 4 (some). This scale consisted of three items and had an α of .73.

Maternal nurturance. This measure was based on the mother’s report of the frequency with which she had recently provided her child with support and affection. Each mother rated this frequency on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always). The scale was based on three items that had an α of .60. Items included how often the mother told her child that he or she did something well, showed her child affection, and talked things over with him or her. These items were developed explicitly for this study.

Maternal punishment. This scale measured the mother’s report of the frequency with which she used five methods to punish or discipline her child in recent months. This five-item scale had an α of .67. The five punishments included scolding or yelling, hitting, threatening to hit, threatening to send the child away to live with someone else, or threatening to put the child out of the house. Each mother rated her use of each strategy on a scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (almost always).

Control variables. Six control variables were used in the proposed model. In estimating neighborhood effects, it is important to eliminate potential biases from family-level constructs whenever possible because family variables are typically identified as stronger predictors of family functioning and well-being (Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). In the current model, six family constructs that have been conceptually or empirically linked to parenting outcomes in prior studies were controlled for: maternal education, maternal age, number of children in the home, per capita household income, maternal depression, and adolescent gender.

1. Maternal education was a dichotomous dummy variable that indicated whether the mother had attained a high school diploma (1) or not (0).
2. Maternal age indicated the mother’s chronological age in years.
3. Number of children in the household was calculated as the total number of children (under 18 years of age) reported by the mother as living in the household at the time of the interview.
4. Per capita household income was the family’s 1990 per capita household income. The current annual income reported by the mother at the time of the interview was divided by the number of household members.
5. Maternal depression was assessed with the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). The CES-D was designed to assess current level of depressive symptomatology in the general population. Each mother was asked to rate how often she experienced feelings such as depressed mood, worthlessness, helplessness, guilt, and changes in sleep patterns during the past week. The mothers rated these symptoms on a 4-point scale from 0 (rarely or none of the time) to 3 (most or all of the time). This scale consisted of 20 items with an α of .84. The CES-D has high internal consistency and adequate test-retest reliability and discriminant validity across a wide
variety of demographic characteristics including age, race, and educational level.

6. Adolescent gender was a dichotomous dummy variable that assigned females (1) and males (0).

Model Testing Procedure

To test the hypothesized models displayed in Figure 1, hierarchical linear regression analyses were employed. In Figure 1, Diagram A depicts two regression equations in which emotional social support and neighborhood quality predict parental nurturance in one equation and punishment in another equation. Diagram B depicts two similar equations with the use of instrumental social support and neighborhood quality as predictors of nurturance and punishment. All equations tested for the effects of neighborhood moderation on the relation between social support and parenting. Path coefficients were estimated by using a set of hierarchical regression equations. In the first step, the six control variables were entered as predictors of parental behavior. The controls included in the model were variables that were significantly correlated with certain predictor variables. Family level variables, such as household income and maternal depression, were included in the controls to help eliminate the possibility that neighborhood effects would simply mask the influence of family characteristics. In the second step, social support and neighborhood quality were entered as main effect predictors of parenting behavior. To test for moderation effects, predictor variables were centered (Aiken & West, 1991) and interaction terms were constructed between the social support variable and the neighborhood quality measure. The interaction term was then entered in the last step of the regression. All statistical assumptions for the proper use of ordinary least squares regressions were met.

RESULTS

Description of Participants

Demographic characteristics of the mothers and adolescents who participated in this study are presented in Table 1. Mothers and legal guardians ranged in age from 27 to 65 years, with an average of 37 years. Mothers had an average of 3.4 children, and most had obtained a high school degree or its equivalent. The sample was greatly disadvantaged economically as evidenced by the 61% who were on welfare at the time of the interview and their mean annual household income of $12,232 per year (with a median annual household income of $8,760). Most of the partic-

![Diagram A and B]

Figure 1 Hypothesized models testing the effects of neighborhood moderation on the relation between social support and parenting. Parental nurturance and punishment are predicted by (A) emotional social support and neighborhood quality, and (B) instrumental social support and neighborhood quality.
Table 1  Demographic Characteristics of Mothers and Adolescents

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<tr>
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<th>Mothers</th>
<th>Adolescents</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Highest level of education</strong> (n = 262)</td>
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<tr>
<td>No high school diploma</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>12</td>
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<tr>
<td>High school diploma or equivalent</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>High school diploma and additional schooling</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>64</td>
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<tr>
<td>Associate degree</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>110</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>62</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Age (n = 255)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>27–29 years</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>30–39 years</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>110</td>
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<tr>
<td>40–49 years</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>62</td>
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<tr>
<td>50–59 years</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Over 60 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Mean number of children (n = 259)</strong></td>
<td>3.4</td>
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<td><strong>Household composition (n = 257)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean number of adults</td>
<td>1.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean number of children</td>
<td>2.7</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Income (n = 253 and n = 259)</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean personal annual income</td>
<td>$7,469</td>
<td>$12,232</td>
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<td>Mean annual household income</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage on welfare—AFDC (n = 240)</strong></td>
<td>61%</td>
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**Note:** All values represent number of cases, unless otherwise stated. The number of cases for each variable differs because missing cases were excluded. AFDC = Aid to Families with Dependent Children.

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<table>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Results of Model Testing</strong></td>
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</table>

Two of the four regression models depicted in Figure 1 demonstrate evidence of neighborhood quality moderating the relation between social support and parenting. The results of the first equation with evidence of moderation are presented in Table 3. As hypothesized, receipt of emotional support was associated with mothers’ nurturant parenting. Mothers who reported greater receipt of emotional support used more nurturant parenting behavior with their adolescents, $\beta = .16, p \leq .01$. Moreover, the results indicated that the relation between social support and maternal nurturance did, indeed, vary depending on the quality of the neighborhood. Thus, the interaction term revealed that the relation between receipt of social support and maternal nurturance was moderated by neighborhood quality, such that this relation was weakened as neighborhood quality deteriorated, $\beta = -.22, p \leq .001$. As neighborhood conditions worsened, the positive relation between emotional support and maternal nurturance was attenuated.

To further highlight the evidence of neighborhood moderation, correlations between social support and parenting were conducted for mothers in the “best” neighborhoods versus mothers residing in the “worst” neighborhoods.
Table 2  Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations between Variables in Model

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
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<td>Neighborhoods</td>
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<tr>
<td>1. Neighborhood quality</td>
<td>44.16</td>
<td>12.76</td>
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<td>2. Emotional support</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.05</td>
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<td>3. Instrumental support</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>.48***</td>
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<td>4. Nurturance</td>
<td>4.05</td>
<td>.62</td>
<td>.12*</td>
<td>.17**</td>
<td>.07</td>
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<td>5. Punishment</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>.68</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.15*</td>
<td>-.24***</td>
<td>-.13*</td>
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<td>6. Maternal educationa</td>
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<td>7. Maternal age</td>
<td>37.22</td>
<td>7.53</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.11</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Number of children</td>
<td>2.69</td>
<td>1.35</td>
<td>-.03</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.24***</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Household income</td>
<td>$3,256</td>
<td>$2,635</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>-.27***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Maternal depression</td>
<td>17.75</td>
<td>12.00</td>
<td>.14*</td>
<td>-.21***</td>
<td>-.23***</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.21***</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
<td>-.11</td>
<td>.18**</td>
<td>-.14*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Adolescent genderb</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a1 = High school degree obtained; 0 = no high school degree.  
b1 = female; 0 = male.  
*p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01; ***p ≤ .001.

Table 3  Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Maternal Nurturance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor Variable</th>
<th>β (SE B)</th>
<th>β (SE B)</th>
<th>β (SE B)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal educationa</td>
<td>.02 (.10)</td>
<td>.05 (.10)</td>
<td>.04 (.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal age</td>
<td>-.06 (.01)</td>
<td>-.03 (.01)</td>
<td>-.04 (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
<td>-.10 (.03)</td>
<td>-.07 (.03)</td>
<td>-.07 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per capita household income</td>
<td>.05 (.00)</td>
<td>.04 (.00)</td>
<td>.06 (.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal depression</td>
<td>-.05 (.07)</td>
<td>-.04 (.07)</td>
<td>-.05 (.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent genderb</td>
<td>.00 (.08)</td>
<td>.00 (.08)</td>
<td>.01 (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood quality</td>
<td>.15* (.00)</td>
<td>.12 (.00)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional social support</td>
<td>.14* (.23)</td>
<td>.16* (.23)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support × Neighborhood</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-.22*** (.02)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

R²  =  .02  .06  .11  
F  =  8.81  1.92  3.17  
df  =  6,228  8,226  9,225

*a1 = High school degree obtained; 0 = no high school degree.  
b1 = female; 0 = male.  
*p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01; ***p ≤ .001.

Table 4  Correlations between Social Support and Parenting Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Best neighborhoods</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Instrumental social support</td>
<td>.45***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Emotional social support</td>
<td></td>
<td>.34***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Parental nurturance</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Parental punishment</td>
<td>-.29***</td>
<td>-.18*</td>
<td>-.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worst neighborhoods</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Instrumental social support</td>
<td>.51***</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Emotional social support</td>
<td></td>
<td>.34***</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Parental nurturance</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Parental punishment</td>
<td>-.21*</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-.14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p ≤ .05; **p ≤ .01.
Table 5  Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Maternal Punishment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor Variables</th>
<th>β (SE)</th>
<th>β (SE)</th>
<th>β (SE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal education*</td>
<td>.08 (.10)</td>
<td>.07 (.10)</td>
<td>.07 (.10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal age</td>
<td>-.04 (.01)</td>
<td>-.04 (.01)</td>
<td>-.04 (.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children</td>
<td>.05 (.03)</td>
<td>.05 (.03)</td>
<td>.05 (.03)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per capita</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>household income</td>
<td>.01 (.00)</td>
<td>.01 (.00)</td>
<td>.01 (.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal depression</td>
<td>.24** (.07)</td>
<td>.20** (.08)</td>
<td>.21** (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent genderb</td>
<td>-.16** (.09)</td>
<td>-.16** (.08)</td>
<td>-.16** (.08)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood quality</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instrumental social support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support × Neighborhood</td>
<td>.14* (.01)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Hierarchical Regression Analyses Predicting Maternal Punishment

* β = .08, p ≤ .001; β = -.04, p ≤ .01; β = .05, p ≤ .03; β = .01, p ≤ .001.

their adolescent sons than with their adolescent daughters, β = -.16, p ≤ .01. Instrumental social support was significantly related to mothers’ use of punishment, β = -.18, p ≤ .01. When mothers had access to greater amounts of support, they were less likely to rely on punitive parenting strategies. Once again, neighborhood conditions moderated the relation between support and punitiveness, β = .14, p ≤ .05. More specifically, Table 4 demonstrates that the relation between instrumental support and punishment was stronger in better neighborhoods, r = -.29, p ≤ .001, as compared with worse neighborhoods, r = -.21, p ≤ .05. Thus, as neighborhood conditions worsened, social support was not as strongly linked to a lower reliance on punitiveness.

DISCUSSION

As expected, among the economically disadvantaged single mothers in this study, social support had a beneficial impact on parenting behavior. Emotional support was related to greater nurturance and instrumental support was associated with less frequent use of punishment. Several studies have demonstrated that support systems are linked to enhanced parental satisfaction, greater parental warmth/acceptance, and diminished use of punitive strategies (Crnic et al., 1984; Mason et al., 1994; McLoyd, 1990; Taylor & Roberts, 1995; Weinraub & Wolf, 1983). Further, it is worth noting that support systems may indirectly facilitate healthy functioning in children by enhancing the psychological well-being of mothers (McLoyd, 1990; Weinraub & Wolf, 1983). This is in keeping with studies that identify parental nurturance and the avoidance of punitive strategies as an important component of healthy functioning in children (Baumrind, 1991; Hans et al., 1991; Steinberg et al., 1991; Taylor et al., 1993). Empirical work that explores the interplay of neighborhood conditions and parenting practices is relatively sparse. By investigating the impact of stressful environmental conditions on parenting behavior, the present findings demonstrate that mothers’ ability to make use of the benefits of social support depends, in part, on the severity of environmental stressors that they must contend with. The link between social support and parenting is thus moderated by neighborhood characteristics. In poorer, high-crime neighborhoods, the positive influence of social support in bolstering parental nurturance and reducing punitiveness was diminished.

As neighborhood resources become more depleted, receipt of emotional support was no longer as strongly related to mothers’ nurturant parenting, and the positive relation between social support and mothers’ nurturant parenting was weakened. Likewise, the benefit of having instrumental support linked to a reduction in the use of punitive strategies was similarly diminished as neighborhood conditions worsened. These findings of neighborhood moderation suggest that the positive cushioning provided by social support has clear limitations. In the most desolate, high-crime neighborhoods, social support less effectively enhances parenting behavior. To posit that the ameliorative qualities of social support are reduced in the most taxing of environmental contexts is a caveat similar to the one proposed by Belle (1982a, 1982b). Belle’s research with low-income mothers cautions that receipt of social support is not simply a positive process because, at times, the providers of support also serve as sources of distress. In a qualitative study of single, African American mothers who resided in impoverished neighborhoods, a majority of mothers described relations with friends and extended family as sources of stress; instead, these mothers prized and valued their solitary independence (Brodky, 1999). In keeping with these results, Dressler (1985) reported that social support was less effective in buffering the distress associated with chronic economic hardship, as compared with the distress of isolated negative life events, among young African American women.

The validity of the present study’s finding of
neighborhood moderation was bolstered by the use of a composite measure of neighborhood quality, consisting of a subjective rating of neighborhood quality and objective indicators of violent crime rates and the percentage of families living in poverty. Moreover, the families in this study were severely disadvantaged financially. Although the sample’s restricted income range, as evidenced by the narrow range of mothers’ per capita income, made the detection of neighborhood effects more difficult, it did not invalidate the significant neighborhood effects found. It is important to stress that even among a sample of extremely poor families, there were variations in neighborhood quality. These differences were observable to the first author when visiting the mothers’ homes to conduct follow-up qualitative interviews. Moreover, the majority of mothers’ own subjective neighborhood assessments ranged on a scale from 28 to 68 points, within 1 SD of the mean, 48. Similarly, most of the mothers lived in neighborhoods in which the percentage of families in poverty varied from 23% to 47%, based on 1 SD from the mean of 35%. Although this range may not appear to be significant to neighborhood outsiders, the mothers themselves were quite cogent about the differences that distinguished adjoining sets of neighborhood blocks.

As with all studies, the present investigation was limited in several ways. First, this study relied on a sample of convenience. However, it was precisely such a demographic profile of poor, African American, single mothers who were most likely to contend with dangerous and deteriorating neighborhood conditions, and indeed, several of the expected results were quite keeping with the literature in this area. Second, although regressions suggested that the data conformed to the hypothesized model, they could not prove causality among these relations; further, the cross-sectional nature of this data provided no basis for estimating causality. Third, aside from the inclusion of objective neighborhood variables, this study relied on self-reported data. Fourth, the use of police crime statistics is inherently flawed by the known occurrence of underreported crimes, especially in poor inner-city neighborhoods. Fifth, census tracts are imperfect neighborhood approximations because they are statistically imposed boundaries that may or may not correspond with residents’ own perceptions of their neighborhood boundaries. Sixth, compared with short episodes of poverty, persistent poverty has more negative effects on children’s development (McLoyd, 1998), and it was not possible to address the length of time that families had spent in poverty or in their current neighborhoods. Finally, this study’s analyses, like much other work, relied on a linear statistical approach—hierarchical regressions. Single-level methods are not the most efficient techniques for capturing a “nested” data structure whereby several individuals live in the same neighborhoods. Consequently, the analyses likely underestimated the neighborhood effects found (Burstein, 1980). Hence, the findings presented in this study are preliminary and must be replicated by future research.

Further, a selection bias may also have been present in the current study. Selection effects may be caused by different types of families moving into or out of certain kinds of neighborhoods. For example, single mothers who are not as overcome by depressive affect may be more likely to attempt to move their families to better neighborhoods. Given the cross-sectional nature of this study, it was not possible to control for selection effects; however, attempts were made to limit such effects by controlling for several family-level variables. Few studies of neighborhood influences have tracked families’ changes in residential locations (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, Klebanov, & Sealand, 1993; Dornbusch, Ritter, & Steinberg, 1991).

In conclusion, the findings of the present study underscore the importance of placing parenting practices within an ecological framework to understand why poor parents turn to certain strategies and not others. In studying the impact of social support among poor mothers, it is essential to test the hypotheses with different types of support and to maintain the possibility that environmental stressors will impact specific parenting practices differently. Moreover, we must not simply explore environmental context as a direct predictor of behavior, but as a potential moderator of psychological relations as well. Although such an approach will certainly complicate empirical models, the benefits will provide a more holistic picture of families who are navigating the obstacles of inner-city poverty.

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