Communities Helping Families

When we talk about the challenges facing kids, and strategies for improving their opportunities, we usually focus first on the role of the family. There are many reasons: Parents and families are the child's first teacher, role model and protector. Families have enormous influence on children—and on the conditions in which children are raised. If we are interested in improving outcomes for children, there is no better place to start than the family.

After family, the discussion often turns to the responsibilities of government. While we may debate endlessly on the extent of the government's role, we generally agree there are things that government and policy makers can do to support families in helping children.

But there is another part of society that plays a crucial role in the lives of children—communities. Strong, stable communities are often the key to fighting poverty and increasing opportunities for children. In contrast, communities with concentrated poverty tend to have problems such as higher crime rates and increased isolation and vulnerability for children and families.

When we examine the impact of communities on children, one of the first challenges we face is defining the idea of community. A community can be an entire city or town, or neighbors living within a few blocks. There are communities of parents, teachers, service providers, advocates, ethnic groups, business leaders, clergy and others. Our sense of community can be based on where we live and work, the schools our children attend, our place of worship, and many different elements.

Defining communities is even harder because most of us belong to several communities, which overlap and interact. And if it is difficult to define communities, it is even more difficult to describe all the ways they can improve the lives of children.

Some communities come together to support their members through local volunteer programs and service organizations. Mother Hubbard's Kiddie Cupboard in Freeport and Students Offering Services in Decatur are just two examples of those programs profiled in this *Illinois Kids Count*.

Communities also get involved through collaborations, like the diverse group—police, probation officers, ministers, social workers, academics and others—who joined together in Boston, Massachusetts to turn back the tide of youth gun violence. From 1990 to 1997, their innovative efforts helped reduce the number of homicide victims under age 24 by nearly 80%.

Sometimes new communities form around common ideals, like the hundreds of people who came together in February 1999 to talk about the responsibilities we share toward the children of our state. They laid the foundation for the new *Charter for Illinois Children*—a tool for uniting communities, organizations and individuals around actions that will help all children thrive and succeed.

While it may not be easy to pin down the nature of community involvement, it is easy to see its importance. Communities have an essential role in the interwoven networks that support our children, improve the conditions they face, and increase their opportunities for success.

This year, the *Illinois Kids Count* attempts to explore some of the work that communities are doing to help children, and to clarify the importance of community in the lives of kids. We've included an interview (on page 3) with John Holton, director of the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods—probably the largest study ever conducted on the impact of local community structures.

This *Illinois Kids Count* also profiles a variety of individuals and organizations that have come together to make a difference for children and families in their cities, towns, counties and neighborhoods. We hope other communities can use these examples as models for similar efforts around the state.

The importance of community involvement is also the reason behind the biggest change in this *Illinois Kids Count*. The indicators of child well-being are presented on pages for each county—so that parents, neighbors and local leaders can more easily see the conditions facing children in their community. (While most counties include many different communities, counties are the smallest unit for which data is readily available.) By concentrating this information on the local level, we hope to help many more groups join together to foster positive change in their communities.

Our focus on communities shouldn't be seen as an indication that they are more important than families or state policy makers. Each of these groups plays an essential role in the lives of children. Families, communities and policy makers have already done a great deal to make kids count in Illinois, but there is much more that needs to be done. By working together, we can meet many of the challenges that still lie ahead.

Why Communities Matter:

The Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods

An extensive—and ongoing—study in Chicago neighborhoods reveals some interesting evidence about why communities matter. The Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods is a multi-year study designed to track the social and behavioral development of children in different neighborhoods.

The researchers surveyed over 8,700 residents in 343 neighborhoods. Participants were asked questions such as whether they thought their neighbors could be counted on to intervene if children were skipping school or showing disrespect to an adult. Other questions involved whether they felt their neighborhood was "close-knit," and whether their neighbors got along.

Illinois Kids Count discussed the study with Project Director John Holton.

Kids Count: What has your study revealed about neighborhoods and communities?

Holton: What this study did is simply ask: Is there something other than census data that can better inform what we know about the relationship between communities and crime? We know that communities are important, but we wanted to know more about why they're important. We wanted to focus on the informal ways that communities are organized, to see what we could learn about the impact of those informal structures.

Our questions were designed to measure different factors—like cohesion among neighbors, trust among neighbors, and reciprocity between neighbors. These factors combine to make what we call "collective efficacy," which is essentially a measurement of how much a group is willing or able to work together.

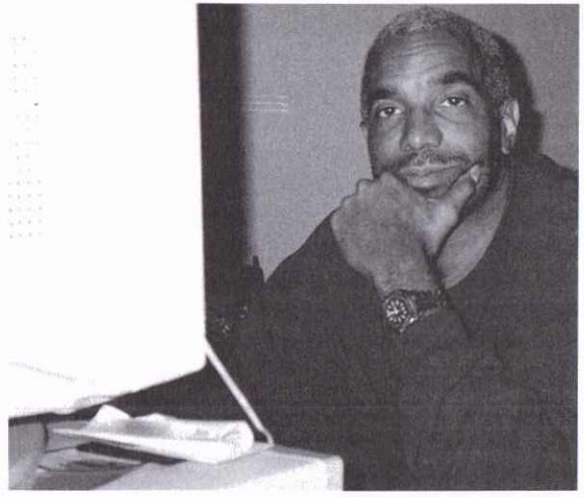
We found that collective efficacy varies considerably across Chicago neighborhoods, and where it is high, rates of street crime and violence are low. In fact, neighborhoods that had high collective efficacy were 40 percent less likely to have street crime and violence than neighborhoods with low collective efficacy.

KC: Are there lessons your study offers for local community leaders, and for people working on issues like education and public health?

Holton: High levels of community efficacy probably have an impact in many ways beyond reducing violence. We already know that community strength is important, because we see examples of how a stable community helps parents nurture, protect and supervise children.

In this study, we've found tremendous variations among neighborhoods in their willingness and capacity to care for the children in the area. Those variations are certainly influenced by factors like residential stability and resources, but they're also influenced by the internal factors like trust and reciprocity.

One clear lesson is that cohesion, trust and reciprocity are essential, and we really ought to be encouraging the informal growth of these factors. Who helps build these things? Does it get done by community organizers? By churches? By CAPS programs and soccer teams?



John Holton

Leaders from all segments of the community can be encouraged to think about the ways we can encourage the growth of informal community strength, especially in neighborhoods undergoing transitions, including those experiencing gentrification, demolition of public housing, or a flux of immigrants. Developers, community groups, local government ... everyone needs to work together to promote the informal factors that foster stability in a neighborhood.

When you have collective efficacy, crime is low. How do we build on each of the three variables that equal collective efficacy? Trust alone isn't enough. Reciprocity alone isn't enough. Neighborhood cohesion isn't enough. I think it's a fascinating equation.

KC: Are there lessons from your study for policy makers and leaders of state government?

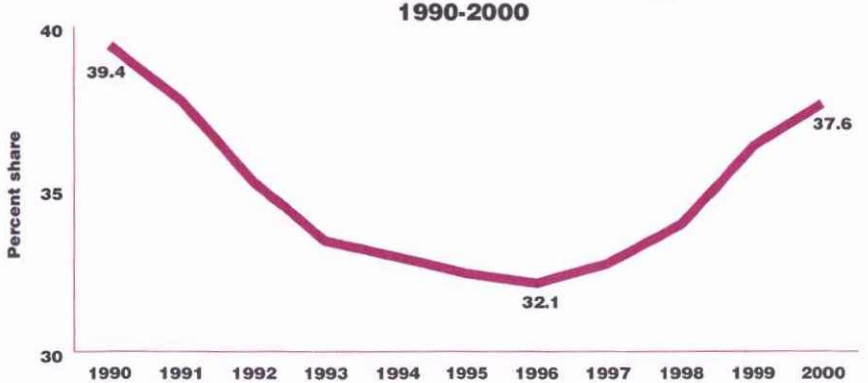
Holton: How do we address collective efficacy in our policy questions? How do we make it a central part of school reform in Chicago, for example? Schools may be thinking in terms of building a community within the school, but are they thinking enough about the school's role in the greater community around it—about their role in the neighborhood?

Also, it's important to note that we found impoverished neighborhoods that had real strengths. It's obviously easier when a neighborhood has resources, but it's crucial that they have stability, regardless of their racial makeup or income level.

We can't let the concept of collective efficacy overshadow other social and ecological factors. At the same time that they should join in the efforts to nurture community trust and cohesion, policy makers need to continue trying to help neighborhoods become economically stable.

For more information on the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods call 312-879-0889, or contact John Holton at 312-663-3520 or jholton@preventchildabuse.org.

Illinois' Falling and Rising Share of Total School Funding
1990-2000



Sources: Illinois State Board of Education data and Metropolitan Planning Council calculations

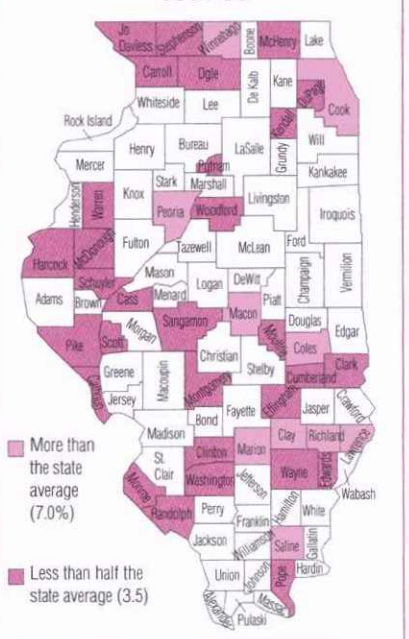
tinues to rely on local property taxes for the majority of public school funding.[12]

HIGH SCHOOL DROPOUT RATES

Graduating from high school does not guarantee a good job or a secure future, but a high school degree is a critical step in the right direction. Teens who drop out of high school are about three times more likely to slip into poverty than their classmates who stayed in school. In addition, as technical skills become increasingly important in the job market, the hurdles facing high school dropouts will only grow larger.

- Nationally, the high school dropout rate for students ages 16-19 has changed very little over the last ten years, holding around 10%. The Illinois rate for that age group has followed the same pattern.[13]
- The dropout rate for all Illinois high school students was 7.0% in the 1997-98 school year, a decrease from 7.3% five years earlier.
- Five counties—Effingham, Jasper, Monroe, Moultrie and Washington—had high school dropout rates below 2.5% in 1997-98.
- Ten counties had high school dropout rates higher than the state average (7.0%) in 1997-98. In three of those counties—Cook, Macon and Marion—the dropout rate decreased since 1993-94. In seven—Clay, Coles, Lawrence, Peoria, Richland, Saline and Winnebago—the rate increased.

High School Dropout Rates
1997-98



Communities at Work: Tutor/Mentor Connection

Chicago's Tutor/Mentor Connection (T/MC) was established in 1993, when Daniel Bassill, president of a tutoring program called Cabrini Connections, saw a way for different tutoring programs to help each other. "In our attempt to establish a program in Chicago's Cabrini Green neighborhood," said Bassill, "we realized we needed support from programs that were already successfully providing tutoring."

This idea has led to a network of several hundred tutoring programs that aim to bring tutors into all areas of Chicago. "Some programs get lots of resources and attention, but we want to see all programs succeed," said Bassill. "It's not about competing for the same pot of resources. It's about working together to get resources for every child, to find ways to get programs started in neighborhoods that are underserved."

T/MC sponsors two annual conferences where tutoring programs network and share ideas. "Each program has their own insights to offer," explained Bassill. "This is an opportunity to build on each other's knowledge and come up with new ideas and models."

Bassill said one key to T/MC's success is participation from all sectors of the community. "Volunteers from businesses, religious groups, and community organizations bring new ideas and resources to our programs," said Bassill. At its annual volunteer recruitment fair, T/MC brings nearly 100 programs together to expand their volunteer base and build public awareness. T/MC has also launched a partnership with the Chicago Bar Foundation that has raised more than $250,000 for one-on-one tutoring and mentoring programs.

"If tutoring and mentoring programs can pool their resources, borrow ideas, and get the public involved, we can reach every neighborhood in Chicago," said Bassill. His vision is to see Tutor/Mentor Connection expand into a statewide network of programs, working together to make sure every child has the opportunity to succeed.

For more information about Tutor/Mentor Connection, call 312-573-8851 or check their Web site at www.tutormentorconnection.org.