Pathways of Youth Development in a Rural Trailer Park*

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Abstract: Limited empirical documentation exists for the developmental pathways available to rural youth growing up in low-resource community settings. Drawing on ethnographic data, this article examines the developmental pathways experienced by youth in a rural trailer park. Findings reveal how various factors, some inherent to working poor class status and others unique to trailer park residence and small town community, challenge youth’s access to a pathway offering broader life chances.

Key Words: mobile home parks, rural community, rural youth, working poor families, youth development.

I did things backwards. I had kids, then got married and then chose a career. I hope my kids do things the other way around.—Mother of two

I hope they can all find a job that will give them the income to support a family. I hope they finish school up to and including college. That they don’t start a family until they’re done [with school].—Father of four

These two parents, like parents in general, hope for a life that offers their children broader choices than they experienced. As parents they have made moves to secure such a life for their children. Both have achieved the status and stability of homeownership. Further, both reside in a small town—a residential setting long equated with all that is good about community for children (Hummon, 1990). Yet, for both parents, a hope of a brighter future for their children is potentially challenged by class factors and residential location, as these are working poor parents who call a trailer park home—a context they readily identify as “second best.”

Despite the achievement ideology of American culture that motivates dreams of social mobility, in reality the vast majority of children in the United States grow up to reproduce the class status of their parents (MacLeod, 1996). Further, whereas a mobile home park offers affordable access to the American dream of homeownership, it comes with social and economic costs attached (Miller & Evko, 1985; Salamon & MacTavish, in press). Historically marginalized to the outskirts of town, mobile home parks have long been subjected to formal and informal stigmatization (Baker, 1997; Salamon & MacTavish). As home to a highly concentrated population of young, poor, and less educated residents (Meeks, 1995), the mobile home park has the potential to function as a rural version of an inner-city ghetto—a community context we know to narrow life chances for children and youth (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Samaroff, 1999; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000).

Based on a field study using qualitative interviews and extensive observations of a small sample of youth in middle adolescence and their parents, this article examines the developmental pathways available to youth living in a rural trailer park. Findings are important for policymakers, program leaders, and practitioners as they reveal how various factors,

*Field research was funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture National Research Initiatives Grant 9801645. The Illinois Manufactured Housing Association (IMHA) generously provided the research team with in-kind support of an office unit in the study park. The park owner supported the research in many ways as well. Marni Basic made a substantial contribution to both project management and fieldwork. Manuscript preparation was supported by a National Institutes of Health—National Institutes of Child Health and Development R03 Grant HD047608-01. Findings were presented at the annual meetings of the National Council on Family Relations held in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, in November 2003. We thank Alexis Walker and Megan Notter for many insightful suggestions during the preparation of this article.

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some inherent to working poor family class status and others unique to trailer park residence and small town life, shape the capacity of youth to realize successful developmental outcomes.

**Background**

**Community and Developmental Pathways**

Renewed interest in the power of community to shape the developmental outcomes of children has swelled across various disciplines in recent decades (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Although researchers differ as to how much context matters, there is growing consensus that specific community traits, particularly deficiencies in trust, responsible role models, and shared norms are critical to shaping the developmental outcomes of youth (Furstenberg et al., 1999; Putnam, 2000; Sampson, 2001; Wilson, 1987). The importance of such traits is seen in the urban ghetto where the power of place to predict compromised development is strong. By concentrating lower income families in an area that socially and geographically reinforces both isolation from resources and opportunities important to children’s development and exposure to risks that compromise development, the community effect of an urban ghetto is particularly pernicious (Furstenberg et al.). Over time, living isolated in a deficient neighborhood such as the urban ghetto is theorized to produce a “culture of poverty” or an “urban underclass” within which the intergenerational transmission of poverty is highly intractable (Lewis, 1965; Wilson).

Small town residence, even in a rural trailer park, is not as likely to expose youth to the threats of concentration of illegal drug trade, street violence, or gang activity inherent to many urban ghettos. Yet, strong parallels exist between the social processes of urban and rural places with respect to poor families. In the countryside, as in the urban ghetto, poor families and children have barriers that prevent access to social and educational resources important to successful development.

To benefit from supportive small town resources that hinge on high levels of trust and a sense that everyone knows everyone, a family must be integrated into the social networks of a place (Elder & Conger, 2000). A small town’s social hierarchy, however, is often close-knit and rigid, making entry difficult once a family is effectively excluded (Duncan, 1999). Social stigmatization as opposed to integration is the daily reality for rural poor families (Fitchen, 1981). As in the urban ghetto, being structurally or perceptually “outside” of a supportive rural community potentially intensifies the effects of poverty and narrows life chances by excluding youth from experiences that would otherwise support social mobility (Duncan; Williams & Kornblum, 1985). Thus, how community social processes integrate or exclude trailer park families has important implications for the developmental pathways available to youth.

**Family Processes and Developmental Pathways**

Family processes, to a great extent, shape how community risks and resources are perceived and experienced by youth (Furstenberg et al., 1999). Ideally, family processes are adapted to mediate contextual influences by maximizing a fit between what a neighborhood or community environment offers and the specific developmental needs of family members (Bowen, Richman, & Bowen, 2000). How family processes are adapted to ameliorate the negative effects of poverty and neighborhood risk and promote social mobility are well documented for urban contexts (cf. Jarrett, 1999).

Parents in risky urban neighborhoods use “bounding” strategies to protect children from risks by limiting interaction in the neighborhood and “bridging” strategies to link children to vital, mobility-enhancing resources and opportunities not available in the immediate neighborhood (Furstenberg et al., 1999; Jarrett & Jefferson, 2003). In combination, such strategies may be highly effective in promoting social mobility among African American youth in the urban ghetto; however, only limited evidence exists for how poor, rural, White families are motivated to adopt such strategies or how effective these strategies are outside of the city (Fitchen, 1981). Further, such strategies require a large investment of family time and energy as well as some degree of “know how” and a pool of potential social connections (Elder & Conger, 2000; Furstenberg et al.). The availability of such resources among rural, working poor parents is challenged by randomly changing work schedules, extended commutes to overcome rural distances, larger (than urban) family size, and limited knowledge or “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1986) concerning how to manage for social mobility (MacTavish & Salamon,
2003; Nelson & Smith, 1999). Thus, how parents in a rural trailer park adapt family processes in response to the community context could be expected to make a difference in the eventual life chances of their youth.

**Individual Attributes and Developmental Pathways**

Individual attributes have been linked with the processes of resilience in youth. Current thinking conceptualizes resilience as the interplay between a child and the contextual features of a community that support a child’s ability to “bounce back” from or withstand negative life events that might otherwise threaten development (cf. Richman, Bowen, & Woolley, 2004). A positive temperament, responsiveness to others, self-efficacy, and even a sense of humor are among the within-individual factors identified as protective in risky situations (Masten et al., 1999). The presence of such individual attributes in part explains why children experiencing similar risks have divergent outcomes. How youth growing up in rural trailer park act on their own behalf to overcome risks and access resources within critical environments of daily life will be important to shaping their developmental pathways.

Accounting for how rural youth navigate developmental pathways in a trailer park must be considered from an ecological perspective as a complex, interwoven process across multiple contexts. Within an ecological framework, the different social resources and opportunities youth experience across the various contexts that define their lives help to explain divergent developmental trajectories despite growing up in similar contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). For rural youth, the contexts of neighborhood, school, community, and home are those identified by research as most meaningful to development and eventual life outcomes (cf. Elder & Conger, 2000).

Indeed, neighborhoods provide working poor families with the valuable social resources or threatening risks that differentially shape youth development (Furstenberg et al., 1999; Sampson, 2001). Schools, as social institutions unique to a town, function as the primary community context in which local values, attitudes, and patterns of behavior are transmitted, particularly for children and youth (Coleman, 1990). Small towns, as that place where youth attend school, make friends, and spend at least a portion of their leisure time, are particularly important to young people (Elder & Conger, 2000). As described above, family processes function to shape the manner in which contextual risks and resources are both perceived and experienced by youth (Furstenberg et al.; Jarrett, 1999). This study’s approach explores social processes within each of these critical contexts.

**Methods**

**Design**

Because we were interested in developmental processes within a relatively understudied context, we employed traditional anthropological methods of participant observation and repeated interviews. By revealing microlevel individual, group, and neighborhood processes often missed by less intensive methods, such qualitative approaches can uniquely situate social processes within context (Burton & Jarrett, 2000). Concentrating on a small number of youth (N = 10) allowed us to conduct the type of in-depth investigation necessary for a thorough qualitative study. A focus on middle adolescence (ages 15 – 17 years), a developmental epoch during which neighborhood and community are increasingly important (Larson & Richards, 1991; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000), strengthened the potential for highlighting the interplay between context and development. Data analysis worked from a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Within such an approach, theory inductively emerges from the data during research and is then refined and extended through a systematic process of constant comparison with new data. We used an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1995) as a sensitizing mechanism and thus focused particular attention on the experiences of rural youth within the contexts most central to their development—home, school, neighborhood, and community. Combined, such strategies offered a distinct advantage for this type of study by focusing attention on specific processes identified in the literature as important, while still allowing for issues and themes to emerge inductively during the course of research (Morse, 1998).

**Site Selection**

“Prairieview,” a small town of just fewer than 5,000 residents in central Illinois was selected as the study
community. Prairieview possesses critical dimensions of community social organization identified in the literature as relevant to child development. The schools, which functioned as the hub of community life, were in a phase of expansion funded by a bond issue supported by voters. Numerous churches, youth athletic programs, and a Boys and Girls Club were all thriving in this community. High school athletic victories and defeats were front-page news and school honor rolls were a regular feature in the local newspaper. Thus, Prairieview appeared to represent the type of small towns portrayed in the literature as potentially resourceful for successful youth development (cf. Salamon, 2003).

Prairieview also offered access to a trailer park population. Two miles from Prairieview’s Main Street, across the highway and just outside the village-zoning jurisdiction is a large mobile home park. Developed over 30 years ago on a section of the owner’s family farmland, the park remains bounded on the backside by cornfields. In the early years, the park was smaller in size compared to its current capacity of over 600 units. With some 1,600 residents in 560 occupied units, the park offered ample access to families with youth.

Sample Selection and Description

Ten youth in middle adolescence (ages 15 – 17 years) and their families were recruited using a snowball sampling technique. Field staff began recruitment by contacting families with youth at the target ages that had already participated in an earlier survey phase of research. These families were then asked to identify additional families with youth of similar age. Families were offered a $125 stipend to participate. Roughly two thirds of the eligible families contacted agreed to take part. Although self-selection into a study potentially biases the results, the 10 families included in the study are not unlike rural working poor families across the United States in terms of employment and earnings, education, and family structure (Nelson & Smith, 1999).

Among these all-White, Euro-American park families, full-time employment outside the home for all adults was the norm. Yet, the jobs these mostly middle-aged (13 of 16 parents were in their late 30s or early 40s) trailer park parents held, such as waitress, truck driver, and receptionist, offered low wages, few or no benefits, and little job stability or financial security. In over half the households (6 of 10), one if not both parents lacked a high school education. For most, formal education ended with early parenthood. One half of the mothers (5 of 10) experienced the birth of a first child before finishing high school. Divorce (affecting 6 of 10 families) and single parenthood (persisting in 4 of 10 families) were common as well.

Struggles associated with a working poor class status were not new for most trailer park parents. Taking into account the socioeconomic features of marital status, educational attainment, occupation, and financial status (Entwisle & Astone, 1994), more than half (7 of 10) of the park parents had socially reproduced the working poor class status of their parents. That is, among participant families, the class status of one generation strongly predicted the class status of the next generation. Still, as heard in the opening statements and confirmed across the sample, dreams of broader life chances for the next generation were solidly entrenched among parents and youth. Our sample offered information-rich cases for examining issues of social mobility among working poor rural youth.

Data Collection

Data collection spanned a full 12 months beginning in the fall of 1998. Through a series of standard interviews, we gathered detailed family background and developmental histories across three generations; documented patterns of interaction in the home, neighborhood, school, and town; and asked about future goals. The use of standard instruments ensured the collection of comparable data across households (Patton, 2001). Parents and youth were interviewed separately to gain multiple viewpoints. These in-home interviews took approximately 10 hr to complete over the course of 6 months and ensured ample opportunities to gather observational data in the home.

The daily lives of youth were further documented through a review of their school records (including grades, behavior, attendance, and standardized test scores), a week-long diary of daily activities, a camera activity recording youths’ visual perceptions of neighborhood and community, a youth-led neighborhood tour, and a series of repeated observations across the context of school, neighborhood, and community. Detailed field notes were recorded immediately following each encounter. Combined,
these methods produced the type of rich, thick data necessary for a thorough qualitative study (Denzin, 1970), and they contributed to the study’s trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

To understand the developmental pathways traveled by youth in a rural trailer park, current and historical patterns of individual development were examined across social, academic, and behavioral domains. Data collected from family and individual interviews, school records, and observations were the basis for constructing a developmental profile of each youth. Field notes and interview responses were read and reread in a case-specific manner. Distinct classifications inductively emerged that revealed whether youth traveled a pathway toward social mobility (flourishing), social reproduction (static), or narrowed life chances (floundering). These divergent pathways were used as a heuristic device to allow for the judicious identification of patterns and processes associated with specific developmental pathways (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Importantly, these labels—flourishing, static, and floundering—refer to the nature of pathways followed by the youth rather than to the youth themselves. Subsequent analysis focused on mapping resources and risks experienced by youth who traveled a flourishing as compared to a floundering pathway. Finally, a static pathway was used as a comparator to distinguish the developmental experiences that separate flourishing and floundering pathways.

Results

Developmental Pathways and Youth

Looking across the developmental profiles of youth, the three distinct pathways that emerged were associated with a cluster of developmental traits. Flourishing youth were those whom parents, teachers, and researchers alike saw as consistently developing better than expected despite the challenges inherent to growing up in a working poor family. Flourishing youth earned high marks in school, were socially successful with both peers and adults, and consistently followed rules at home and school. Thus, on the basis of current and historical performance, such youth appeared well positioned on a pathway offering broader choices than their parents experienced and the possibility of social mobility.

“Trinity,” a 15-year old, represented a flourishing pattern for the youth. Trinity lived with her single mother and recent stepfather in an older singlewide unit. The worn brown carpeting and sleeping bag hung for a living room curtain reflected the family’s precarious financial situation. Her mother often talked of money being tight. Yet, she proudly proclaimed, “Trinity’s not your typical trailer park kid—she’s a straight A student, a cheerleader, and on the dance team.” Thus, among park peers, flourishing youth stood out developmentally.

In contrast, parents, teachers, and researchers saw floundering youth as developing worse than expected or achieving less than they were capable of after taking into consideration their developmental and family histories. Floundering youth faltered academically, were socially marginalized by peers, and consistently engaged in problem behaviors. Floundering youth distinctly traveled a road toward compromised development and narrowed life chances.

A floundering pathway was evident in 15-year old Miranda who lived just one block from Trinity in a doublewide home with both of her parents. Dual incomes made life financially stable in her household as compared to others in the park. Despite this marked advantage, Miranda had a ‘D’ average in school—something her mother attributed to her “lack of effort” that began in late elementary school. Miranda missed almost 70 days or 40% of her freshman school year and showed little interest in attending classes. Miranda bragged about defying parental rules saying, “I break curfew all the time.” Thus, floundering youth stood out among park peers, yet without the shine of success.

In between flourishing and floundering was a static pathway. Static youth achieved at a level expected by teachers, parents, and researchers. Static youth did not stand out among their peers, as did flourishing youth, yet they were by no means faltering developmentally, as were floundering youth. As a group, static youth were neither on a pathway to broader nor narrower life chances. Rather, youth in this category appeared most likely headed toward socially reproducing their rural parents’ class status with the associated educational and financial attributes.

When we examined the distribution of youth across these three trajectories, static youth accounted for almost half of the sample (4 of 10). A minority of youth in the trailer park (2 of 10) were on a path toward a better life. Others (4 of 10) appeared...
headed directly toward narrowed life chances. From an ecological perspective, flourishing youth could be expected to have experienced a more resourceful pathway than did their static or floundering peers despite having lived in the same trailer park neighborhood (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). To examine resources associated with each pathway, we looked closely at the daily encounters of youth in the social contexts most immediate to their lives—the trailer park neighborhood, the school, and the town of Prairievew. Such encounters revealed how these same contexts functioned differently for flourishing than for floundering youth.

Youth Pathways and Patterns of Engagement

Flourishing and floundering youth experience the trailer park, schools, and adjacent small towns in remarkably different ways. Trinity’s daily life was representative of the two flourishing park youth. Trinity purposefully distanced herself from the trailer park, her home for the past 5 years. She explained her choice, “I don’t like living in a trailer park, but really I don’t feel like I’m a part of it. I like Prairieview and that’s where I feel I belong.” Through her extracurricular activities (cheerleading, dance team, church, and a summer job), Trinity’s life was centered on the town of Prairieview rather than her immediate park neighborhood. Asked to identify favorite places in her community, she included only places in town such as her church, the local Dairy Queen, and the city park in the heart of Prairieview. She remarked, “This is just a park in town. We [she and her network of town friends] always go there after we go to Dairy Queen. We go there and swing and play and sometimes just sit.” School was a positive place as well. Trinity included a picture of her school chorus room saying, “Music is really important in my life. I have a lot of good memories in this room.” Trinity had broadened her developmental world to include many middle-class people, places, and activities.

Daily life for Miranda, and other floundering youth, contrasted sharply with that of flourishing youth. Miranda was forthright about her negative school experience, “It’s lousy. I don’t ever go to school. I get in trouble for the littlest things at school. I’ve been kicked out of class 14 times. I got suspended last year.” Daily life for Miranda was centered on the trailer park, her home for the past 6 years. Miranda was up-to-date on the latest trailer park gossip. As she drove her mother’s new truck around the park, Miranda often stopped and talked with friends. Miranda was almost always in the company of trailer park youth ranging from 13 to 21 years of age. Still, she complained about the trailer park saying, “It sucks. There’s nothing out here anymore like there used to be. We used to have fun but now everyone’s moved.” Miranda included photographs of her school to represent a place she would never go. She included a picture of her boyfriend’s car parked on a “No Motor Vehicles Permitted” bike path near her park as a favorite place in her community. Miranda experienced a daily life narrowed to a small set of social ties concentrated in her trailer park. Essentially, she and other floundering youth were alienated from community life outside of the park’s circumscribed boundaries.

The examples of Trinity and Miranda cast light on how a rural trailer park differentially functioned for youth being raised there. Distinct patterns of engagement in school, the trailer park, and town emerged in association with the divergent pathways of youth development. For a flourishing youth, life centered on various structured activities outside the trailer park boundaries. Both flourishing youth participated in school activities such as sports, drama, music, art, or other clubs. They were also involved in community activities, especially through church or a paying job. Flourishing youth distinctively avoided engagement with other trailer park residents. In the opposite way, floundering youth, such as Miranda, reported a contrasting pattern of neighborhood engagement. Daily life for floundering youth centered on socializing with peers in or near the trailer park. They spent considerable time on the streets of the trailer park cruising and hanging out with peers. They expressed strong antipathy for the town and school and distanced themselves from these alternative contexts. At a time when flourishing youth widened their social worlds, floundering youth constricted their social world to experiences only available in the trailer park.

The engagement patterns of flourishing and floundering trailer park youth differentially offered access to, or isolation from, particularly valuable developmental experiences. Examining such experiences more closely revealed the distinctive resources and risks that the different patterns of community engagement used by youth and their families offered.
Youth Pathways, Small Town Resources, and Trailer Park Risks

We know much about the risks and resources associated with pathways of youth development. Resourceful pathways are distinguished by the presence of (a) conventional or rule-abiding peers and adult role models who provide guidance and (b) opportunities to engage in activities that enhance a sense of efficacy and achievement (Elder & Conger, 2000). In contrast, a nonresourceful or risky pathway to development isolates youth from such resources and opportunities and effectively exposes their exposure to risks from unconventional peers and nonproductive activities (Furstenberg et al., 1999; MacLeod, 1996; Wilson, 1987).

Through strong links to the social networks in town and at school, daily life for flourishing youth was structured by opportunities for engagement with conventional peers and adults, and participation in activities that enhanced their development. When asked to identify three people important to their lives, both flourishing youth designated adults from the adjacent town including teachers, ministers, parents of friends, and their employers. The value of varied adult relationships to expanding their social horizons and networks was clear to thriving youth. Referring to her photo, Trinity said, “This is [friend’s] mom. She’s always been there for me. She’s a really good role model. She’s always treated me like a member of the family.” Trinity described a high school teacher important in her life in the following way: “This is my chorus teacher. She’s awesome! She knows everything about life. She gives me the best advice. I can go to her with any problem and she has the right answer. She’s such a good person—she truly makes it her mission in life to care about and help others.”

Melanie, our other flourishing youth, took several photos of people from her church in the nearby metro area that she described as having a great influence on her. The first picture showed an older woman holding a young boy on her lap. Melanie related, “This is [name]. She’s a lady from church that teaches the 5th and 6th grade Sunday school. I was in the 5th and 6th grade class for 5 years. She didn’t care that I stayed. She’s always been there for me and she always knows just what to say.” Melanie’s affection for this woman showed in her use of a sweet conversational tone. Next was a photo of a young man in a suit, standing in a sanctuary. Melanie explained, “This is Pastor [name]. He’s 24 but he acts more like one of us. Whenever we go out and want to do stuff he’s the one we take with us because he lets us have so much fun. He’s a good, strong Christian example for us all.” Melanie next showed a picture of a beautiful young woman holding a baby girl. Melanie told me, “This is [name]. She used to drive the church bus route out here. She would give me all her clothes that were too small for her so I would have something nice to wear to church.”

The relationships each flourishing youth constructed with community mentors were intense. Melanie visited the family of a former minister in another city during her spring break. Trinity traveled the past four summers with her best friend’s family on their vacation. For flourishing youth, such relationships indicated access to social networks of peers and adults across the contexts of church, school, and town. Being incorporated into the social networks of the small town or church adjacent to their trailer park marked flourishing youth as belonging to that community. In this way, flourishing youth accessed the kinds of rich community resources documented as supportive of successful development (Coleman, 1990; Elder & Conger, 2000). As their social worlds centered on town, flourishing youth had obtained relatively limited knowledge of their immediate trailer park neighborhood.

Participation in sports, music, arts, and productive work instills the discipline needed for successful development in adolescence (Elder & Conger, 2000; Larson, 2000). Opportunities for such activities were available to youth in Prairievie. Flourishing youth accessed such opportunities by forging strong links to town. The benefits of these activities were acknowledged by both flourishing youth and their parents. Speaking of her daughter’s involvement in church, Trinity’s mother explained, “She’s doing so well right now. She has so much self-confidence. Last Sunday she said the prayer in front of the whole church. That takes a lot to get up there and do that. Next month she’s going to sing a solo.”

Flourishing youth, over the 6 months of intensive field study, repeatedly displayed a well-defined sense of discipline, responsibility, and accomplishment gleaned from growth through jobs and activities. Flourishing youth fulfilled responsibilities at home and in school. They kept research appointments, completed assignments, and displayed confidence when they shared personal information with the field researchers.
In contrast, floundering youth perceived barriers to accessing nonpark relationships and opportunities. For these teens, peers and pop culture icons were identified as central to their lives. The peers and adults floundering youth associated with were typically deviant. Combined with isolation from resources, such associations presented significant risks to these youth. All the floundering youth engaged in risky activities such as unprotected sex, petty theft, vandalism, or alcohol and drug possession. Every incident involved peers from the trailer park. Speaking of his teenage son’s friends, one father commented, “If he’s hanging out with them you can be sure they’re trouble.” Although several of these youth obtained employment during the study, in each situation the job was temporary because the youth either quit or was laid off. Scheduling appointments and completing various study protocol was difficult, indicating the low level of responsibility felt. Floundering youth exhibited few markers of discipline or sense of accomplishment characteristic of flourishing youth. Rather, truancy from school, unexplained absences from home during the day and overnight, and incomplete assignments and missed appointments as they participated in the research study were the norm for floundering youth.

The developmental importance of community and neighborhood was clear in these contrasting pathways for youth. It is evident that floundering and flourishing park youth travel developmental pathways that shared little other than a common residential neighborhood. An examination of how floundering and flourishing pathways were constructed supported efforts to uncover underlying family or youth strategies that shaped whether youth had access to resources and opportunities or exposure to risks in the community contexts just outside of home.

### Family Strategies and Youth Pathways

**Flourishing youth pathways.** Perceptions about the trailer park life, the neighborhood, and town shaped family strategies. While the busy activity schedules of flourishing youth clearly absented them from the trailer park most of the day, they also held negative perceptions about their immediate neighborhood that hindered active engagement. These negative neighborhood perceptions seemed to derive from the youth rather than their parents. Trinity's mother explained, “Trinity hated riding the bus. You could see it—she would stand off away from the other kids. Here’s Trinity and here’s all the other kids fighting and cussing. She told me, ‘Mom I’m not like those other kids.’ After that, I never put her on the bus again.” The other flourishing youth similarly reported a personal decision to cut off interaction with park peers. Like Trinity, Melanie chose not to ride the bus to school and was never seen on park streets. For their part, both girls’ parents respected their child’s evaluation of the neighborhood and clearly supported their social withdrawal from the park.

Decisions by Trinity and Melanie to disengage from the trailer park coincided with their widening opportunities to forge links with people in the adjacent town. For Trinity, the shift toward town-centered social ties came in seventh grade. Through school, she formed a friendship with a town girl. This new friend asked Trinity to attend church with her family one Sunday. Trinity had been active in that church since. Trinity spent a great deal of time with her friend’s family, vacationing with them and working summers in the family business. Melanie began her move toward stronger community ties in fifth grade with a park friend’s invitation to a church in the nearby small city. Over time, Melanie’s social world became centered on this church community. Starting in 11th grade, Melanie chose to attend a small, private high school run by this church. Thus, two features characterized the construction of a flourishing youth pathway: (a) strong youth-initiated contacts with specific peers and adults in town and (b) youth-led decisions to withdraw socially from the trailer park neighborhood.

Parents of flourishing youth supported the above transition by investing time, energy, and even money. Trinity and her mother lived modestly in a cramped, older singlewide with sparse furnishings. Trinity’s bed was a mattress on the floor. Yet, Trinity was always dressed in the latest fashion, wearing only new-looking, name-brand clothing such as Abercrombie and Fitch. Trinity’s mother selflessly sacrificed personal time during the day to support Trinity’s engagement in town by driving her to various activities. Melanie’s parents reported similar investments to promote their daughter’s successful development. For example, during an interview session her mother commented, “I hope it’s all right if I fold these newspapers while we talk. Melanie has a paper route and I like to have the papers ready when she gets home.” Such parental devotion...
was typical in Melanie’s home. For both Trinity and Melanie, the availability of family time was key to parental investment in youth. Trinity’s mother held a job that allowed for a flexible work schedule that she dictated. Melanie’s mother (actually her biological grandmother) had a disability that kept her home full time, and her father (biological grandfather) was semiretired.

Floundering youth pathways. Floundering youth did not make the successful transition to wider social contexts beyond the family appropriate to their age (Larson, 2000). Rather, for these teens and their parents, a perception that townspeople stigmatized them deterred any desire to form bridges outside the park. In effect, these families adopted protective strategies with regard to the adjacent community. Referring to town, Miranda’s mother said, “They think we’re all trailer trash here. It’s not that bad out here [in the park].” Parents of floundering youth consistently reported stigmatizing treatment: “They treat us like trailer trash in town.” Perceptions of stigma made floundering youth reluctant to participate in town-based activities and their parents reluctant to promote such engagement. Consider Jason, a floundering teen but once a higher achiever. He wanted to continue his football career after moving to the trailer park in Prairieview 4 years ago. His father said, “He wanted to play. But, he just didn’t feel welcome.” Since then, Jason had slipped socially and academically. During the study, he was arrested for vandalizing a Prairieview village police car. Other floundering youth recalled prior participation in town activities nostalgically. Miranda recalled attending the Boys and Girls Club in earlier years: “I loved it there. Sometime I still go back even though I’m too old now.” Miranda had found no replacement for this childhood community resource.

Rather than forging connections with key individuals in town or outside the park like flourishing youth did, floundering youth connected with individuals who accelerated a downward developmental trajectory. Miranda’s closest relationship was with a 21-year-old, single mother and former trailer park resident. During the study, Miranda spent the night at this woman’s house and neglected to inform her parents of her whereabouts. Miranda was grounded over the incident, but her mother explained, “[Friend] is a touchy subject around here right now. Let’s just say we don’t particularly like Miranda hanging out with her.” She was unhappy with where Miranda’s older friend was leading her daughter, a direction reinforced in Miranda’s park-based peer relationships. Miranda and another of her Prairieview park friends both become pregnant in the previous year. Miranda at 15 years miscarried, and her 15-year-old friend had opted for an abortion.

Jason consistently hung out with what his father termed, “the wrong crowd.” Jeremy, another floundering youth, repeatedly sought the company of young park adults his father identified as “drug dealers.” Jeremy’s father reported a 3-day period during the study when he had no idea where his son was. Clearly, if a youth wanted to find risky friends or activities, the potential for both existed in the park. By engaging consistently in such behaviors floundering youth appeared likely to lodge at a lower status than their parents, who at least owned the trailer that was their home. Parents of floundering youth consistently expressed frustration about their inability to muster the resources for strategies that might buffer their children from such negative consequences. Speaking of his deep disappointment about his son’s risky behavior and compromised development, a single father of three declared moving into the trailer park as, “... the biggest mistake I ever made.”

Youth and a Static Developmental Pathway

Thus far, the analysis focused on contrasting flourishing and floundering youth developmental pathways. The theoretical understanding that a community may function either to mitigate or exacerbate the effects of class status has driven this approach (Duncan, 1999; Elder & Conger, 2000). As a residential context for youth, a rural trailer park appeared to generate a largely negative neighborhood effect. For a minority of park youth, the tendency toward social reproduction of class was mitigated by family strategies that promoted access to the adjacent communities and thereby protected youth from negative trailer park influences. For others, who did or could not form bridges to access resources present in the adjacent town, the trailer park meant a community context that compromised development and narrowed life chances. But what of park youth who appeared headed toward socially reproducing the working poor status of their parents? How did trailer park residence account for the developmental outcomes of static youth?

Like flourishing youth, static youth forged ties with adjacent community members. Static youth played on school sports teams, participated in school
clubs, and attended local church youth groups much as did flourishing youth. Static youth, thus, had access to the same opportunities as flourishing youth. Furthermore, parents of static youth did their part to support such engagement by providing transportation, paying fees, and encouraging youths’ engagement. Yet, on closer inspection, differences were evident in the patterns of engagement, quality of resources, and family strategies experienced by static as compared to flourishing youth.

While static youth successfully navigated ties to the local small town, they simultaneously retained strong ties to the trailer park. Then, static youth divided their time between town and the park, whereas flourishing youth focused only on social ties to town. Qualitatively different resources derived from these distinct patterns of engagement that distinguished a flourishing from a static pathway.

Mike exemplified a static youth pathway. Mike was on both the football and wrestling teams at school. He enjoyed taking part in sports and was convinced by the football coach to take a summer farm labor job intended to instill discipline in team members. Mike attended a church youth group, although at his mother’s insistence. The church was located outside town on the edge of the park. Mike willingly participated in these organized activities, but above all he enjoyed riding mountain bikes with his park friends. It is these friends who formed the center of Mike’s social world. A pattern of partial engagement in town activities and fuller involvement in the trailer park was typical of static youth.

Static youth, thus, had contact with potentially important community role models or mentors such as teachers, coaches, and clergy. But, static youth did not develop the intense ties to these community adults that flourishing youth forged. Static youth related no stories of how community figures changed their lives. Compared to their floundering peers, these ties to town appeared to buffer the negative effects of park engagement. Yet, when compared to the social networks of flourishing peers, the links formed through participation in town activities were qualitatively less meaningful to the development of static youth. Supportive small town community resources sufficient for upward social mobility were realized only through the strong relationships flourishing youth formed with middle-class town adults and peers.

Discussion

Through taking what Brint (2001) refers to as a “disaggregated approach” that considers the functional rather than sentimental nature of community, we begin to understand how communities—even seemingly resourceful small towns—truly function for resident families. Within the study population, we see that, above all, rural trailer park parents dream of providing their children with a future rich in the opportunities that provide a chance for social mobility. As parents, they take conscious steps to position their children on a pathway toward a better life than they experienced. These parents achieved homeownership and thereby assured more stability to family life than they had as youth. Through residence adjacent to an upscale small town, they supplied their children with a place to grow that they believed offered the safety, neighborliness, and good schools coveted by rural residents everywhere (Hummon, 1990; Salamon, 2003). Yet, when that home is in a trailer park, few youth realize the potential benefits of small town residence. While not fully approximating a rural version of the ghetto, contextual factors emerge from trailer park residence that increasingly challenges parental hopes for youth as they mature into adolescence.

For these rural youth, a pathway offering a chance for social mobility lays in the small town adjacent to their trailer park. Working poor parents in the trailer park invest time, energy, and money to facilitate youth’s links to town. Both static and flourishing youth are engaged in town through school, community, and church activities. Yet, such parental efforts succeed only in positioning youth tantalizingly close to, but not on, a pathway leading toward social mobility. As in low-resource or risky urban contexts, more extreme efforts are necessary to assure that youth growing up in a rural trailer park flourish developmentally (Furstenberg et al., 1999; Jarrett & Jefferson, 2003; Masten et al., 1999).

To flourish, a trailer park youth had to completely disengage socially from their park neighborhood. A “negative psychological sense of community” (Brodsky, 1996) about the park that developed in early adolescence led both flourishing youth to see themselves as no longer belonging to that neighborhood context. As seen in Brodsky’s urban research, this view of community plays a protective role in buffering flourishing youth from
exposure to a neighborhood context that is risky enough to level the development of their park peers. Unfortunately, spurred by concrete experiences of stigmatization, most youth developed a sense of partial or full exclusion from the town. The limited engagement in town and fuller engagement in neighborhood that followed compromised the development of floundering and static youth alike.

To flourish, youth had to become a member of the community outside of their trailer park. In this process, the individual characteristics of flourishing youth emerge as distinctly shaping their future. Such a pattern fits the elements of resilience—distancing behaviors, adoptability, and agency—presented in Rubin’s (1996) Transcendent Child. While the capacity to employ distancing behaviors relative to their family protects Rubin’s transcendent children, distancing behaviors relative to the trailer park neighborhood protect the development of flourishing youth. Having adoptability relative to adult mentors and agency in seeking out new experiences means that when flourishing youth navigate the community social arenas outside the park, they garner access to resources and opportunities never experienced by their static park peers. Trinity attends a church youth group, as many static park youth do, but she is selected for and steps forward to take a leadership position. Similarly, although static park youth have town friends, Trinity becomes a virtual member of her middle-class friend’s family, vacationing together and working with them. Such adoptability and agency characterized by entrepreneurial efforts on their own behalf, firmly embedded Trinity and Melanie in the middle-class social networks of the adjacent community. Thus, both flourishing youth form links to community with the capacity to provide rich relationships and experiences—essentially the habitus and social capital—that facilitate upward social mobility (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000).

Wondering how Melanie saw her life as different because of these processes, a field researcher asked what she thought the outcome for her would be if she had continued her park friendships and had not developed the intense involvement in her church. She emphatically replied, “Bad! Horrible! With all the druggies right down the street I’m sure I would have been into that. I wouldn’t be who I am without the church in my life.” Interestingly, Melanie’s prediction is reality for her floundering peers. The relationships such youth maintain with park peers led to narrowed life chances through involvement in drugs, unprotected sex, and delinquency.

Believing in an ideology of social mobility and the benefits of a small town living, Midwestern working poor, trailer park parents attempt to steer their youth on a pathway leading to a better life. Yet, only a small minority of youth realizes the benefit of their parents’ efforts to stabilize family life and provide new options to them. Given the challenges of working poor status, there seems little most trailer park parents are able to do to manage the neighborhood and community context in a way that would alter a youth’s static or floundering trajectory.

**Implications**

While this study focuses on only one trailer park community in a single distinct region of the United States, it takes a step toward understanding how place matters in the complex equation of youth development. Future comparative research will strengthen our understanding of this particular community form. Our findings, however, have clear implications for how policies and programs at each level of social organization examined can work to promote successful development among youth growing up in a rural trailer park.

At the community level, policies and programs should address the social distance between working poor trailer park families and small town resources (Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, & Vidal, 2001). Outreach efforts such as training teachers, coaches, and clergy in the art and importance of developing positive relationships with lower income youth and their families would go far to strengthen the social capacity of small towns like Prairieview to support successful development among youth of all classes (Bowen, Martin, Mancini, & Nelson, 2000; Richman et al., 2004).

Within the neighborhood, developing opportunities for youth to engage in productive activities like sports, art, and work would make the trailer park a more developmentally resourceful context (Larson, 2000). For example, allowing youth to enhance the park through constructive work such as a cleanup or publishing a park newsletter would go far to give them a sense of ownership and accomplishment. Other neighborhood efforts should work toward building a sense of trust and mutual support between park residents, so working poor parents,
such as those in our study are not left alone to manage the task of parenting an adolescent (MacTavish & Salamon, 2001).

At the family level, helping parents who struggle with managing floundering youth to develop more effective parenting strategies would shore up the development of such youth (Richman et al., 2004). Stigma resistance training would work to prevent disengagement from the community as park children enter adolescence. While sustained engagement does not ensure social mobility, it has the potential, as seen in the findings, to protect youth from a floundering pathway—an outcome no parent wishes for his or her child. Intervention efforts such as these would allow working poor, rural families owning half the American dream in a trailer park to realize fuller benefits from their homeownership investment in this now characteristic rural neighborhood form.

References


