

Studying the Spaces around Families: Critical Considerations for Neighborhood Research Methods Related to Child Protection Involvement

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Risk of involvement with child protection systems increasingly is understood to relate to “ecological” factors beyond families. Studies focusing on neighborhoods are one way in which researchers operationalize this understanding of child protection risk. Research demonstrates that indicators measured at the neighborhood level, particularly those related to socioeconomic disadvantage, can increase risk

of involvement in child protection systems. To some extent, these factors may help explain disproportionate involvement with child protection for some marginalized groups in certain neighborhoods. However, neighborhoods are an incomplete lens of focus for understanding the varied ways that the spaces around families may shape outcomes. Through a review of critical commentary related

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to neighborhood-focused research, we propose considerations for child protection research to: (a) deepen theorization of the notion of the “neighborhood”; (b) recognize opportunities beyond fixed geographic spaces; (c) integrate analysis of temporal indicators; and (d) increase mixed methods in neighborhood child protection studies. We consider implications of this discussion for policy and practice and identify some limitations.

Children and families become involved with child protection systems due to concerns about a parent or caregiver being unable to provide for a child’s healthy development, safety, or well-being, often labeled as abuse or neglect (e.g., Canadian Bar Association, 2021; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). Neglect, which may entail parental “acts of omission” rather than abusive actions taken by parents (Garbarino & Collins, 1999, p. 2), constitutes the vast majority of child protection cases in North America (Semanchin Jones & Logan-Greene, 2016; Trocmé et al., 2014; Wildeman et al., 2014). Neglect often refers to unmet supervisory, material, educational, and health needs (Trocmé et al., 2010)—or the risk thereof (Friedman & Billick, 2014). Empirical findings demonstrate that families experiencing poverty face higher risk of child protection involvement,¹ often due to the presence of chronic, unmet needs (Cancian et al., 2013; Fauske et al., 2018; Rothwell & de Boer, 2014; Rothwell et al., 2018; Trocmé et al., 2014). A narrow definition of child protection concerns that treats conditions of poverty as *individual* risk is particularly ill-suited to families whose needs go unmet due to a lack of resources beyond the individual household. When the environments in which families live

1 In this paper, we favor the term “child protection involvement” rather than “child maltreatment” in reference to families because available data on child abuse or neglect in a particular jurisdiction may over- or under-represent the extent of this situation due to differential reporting practices, bias in perceived risk of certain families, or other factors that increase or decrease the likelihood of becoming involved with child protection authorities.

constrain their abilities to meet a minimum legislated standard of caregiving, an individual conceptualization of child protection risk obscures the range of mechanisms through which families may become involved with child protection systems. While there is a clear link between family-level socioeconomic vulnerability and child protection involvement (driven by neglect cases), empirical findings demonstrate that the availability of social and economic resources beyond the household also are important for understanding how and when families are most at risk of being flagged for child protection concerns (e.g., Bywaters et al., 2016; Coulton et al., 2007; Esposito et al., 2017a; Freisthler et al., 2006; Lefebvre et al., 2017; Maguire-Jack & Font, 2017a, 2017b; Mason et al., 2019; Webb et al., 2020a). Child protection researchers warn that “pathologizing” poverty through a narrow lens that views poverty as risk (Gupta, 2017, p. 22) both obfuscates the role of the broader environment in shaping family situations and distracts from what children and families actually need (e.g., Hyslop & Keddell, 2018).

Recent findings suggest possible differential impacts of neighborhood-level socioeconomic factors on the risk of child protection involvement as they interact with membership in racialized groups, population density, and measures of neighborhood inequality (Bywaters et al., 2015; Esposito et al., 2020b; Webb et al., 2020b). In many North American jurisdictions, the association of poverty with child protection involvement is particularly strong for some populations experiencing historical and ongoing discrimination and marginalization, such as Black and Indigenous children (Antwi-Boasiako et al., 2020; Blackstock, 2009; Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2020; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020; Jonson-Reid et al., 2012; Kim & Drake, 2018; Sinha et al., 2013; Wildeman et al., 2014). In contrast, White and Asian children are underrepresented in child protection systems compared to their proportion in the general child population (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016), and findings regarding Hispanic or Latinx families vary depending on the focus of study (Maguire-Jack et al., 2015; Maguire-Jack et al., 2019;

Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016).² Findings of increased risk of child protection involvement for certain racialized groups may relate to disproportionate need, perceived risk impacting worker decision-making, a lack of appropriate preventative support for families, or other factors in the local geography of families (Ards et al., 2012; Ards et al., 2003; Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2020; Ben-Arieh & Haj-Yahia, 2006; Dettlaff et al., 2020; Drake et al., 2020; Fluke et al., 2011; Jonson-Reid et al., 2009). The chronicity of poverty has been shown to interact with neighborhood characteristics to impact children and caregivers and is associated with risk of child protection involvement (Pachter et al., 2006; Rothwell et al., 2018; Santiago et al., 2011).

While a link between neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage and child protection involvement is clear, the empirical evidence explaining—and, importantly, contextualizing—mechanisms leading families experiencing poverty to become involved with child protection systems remains ambiguous (Drake & Jonson-Reid, 2014; Freisthler et al., 2006; Maguire-Jack et al., 2021), compromising the extent to which policy and practice can be evidence-based. While socioeconomic circumstances may relate more strongly to risk of child protection involvement than does membership in racialized groups (Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013), understanding how these relate to one another in context can support much more integrated analysis of mechanisms leading to this risk. Existing child protection research is limited in illustrating subjective family experiences of poverty, which may be compounded by intergenerational trauma, historical and ongoing oppression, racialization, discrimination, and displacement, that are not adequately captured in descriptive statistical studies using only aggregated data derived from particular geographies (see: Maguire-Jack et al., 2021). Accordingly, there are opportunities for deepening the ways child protection involvement is understood and contextualized through neighborhood studies such that policy and practice decisions can better serve the complex goal of supported families and communities.

2 These categories are nowhere near sufficient to reflect the range of families' ethnic, racial, or cultural backgrounds, but they are often the categories according to which data are collected.

In domains well beyond child protection, the significance of place is widely assumed for numerous long-term social, health, and financial outcomes (e.g., Galster & Sharkey, 2017; Graham, 2016; Yang et al., 2013). While the “neighborhood” is a rich, salient unit of analysis to try to analyze the role context can play in explaining these outcomes, it is also an amorphous and subjectively defined entity whose assumed form and function can vary widely according to who defines it. In a 2009 study, Spilsbury and colleagues documented children’s definitions of their residential neighborhoods, finding such charmingly vague descriptions as “someplace that you live,” and “where people get together to do things” (p. 120). More concretely, in child protection research the notion of neighborhood has been described as the place “where one finds the conditions of life that can conspire either to compound or to counteract the deficiencies and vulnerabilities of parents” (Garbarino & Barry, 1997, p. 58). When neighborhoods lack the social and economic resources that the families living within them need, they may become a source of risk and begin to explain disproportionate involvement of children from some communities in child protection systems (Maguire-Jack et al., 2021). However, because “neighborhoods” are an imprecise category, their significance can vary greatly from family to family, and even from parent to child within the same household (Spilsbury et al., 2012). Accordingly, which places are studied and *how* is a topic of theoretical and practical debate (e.g., Harvey, 2006; Matthews & Yang, 2013).

Due to variation in how families interact with their residential neighborhoods and the mutability of neighborhoods on fixed maps and over time, the metric of the “neighborhood” will vary widely in its scope and utility in capturing what shapes family experiences (Madden, 2014; Matthews et al., 2005; Matthews & Yang, 2013; Noah, 2015; Sharkey & Faber, 2014). Critical discussions of geographical spaces, such as neighborhoods, note a distinction between *absolute* space, which entails a fixed, bounded area and a collection of objects within that space, and *relative* and *relational* space, which acknowledge relationships

between spaces and among the objects within them (e.g., Harvey, 2006; Jones, 2009; Whitworth, 2019). The former is well established in the child protection literature although in some cases hindered by a lack of robust data, while the latter could be further deepened methodologically. Studies of a bounded neighborhood may capture some *absolute* characteristics but miss the *relative* and *relational* aspects of physical and social spaces that are most salient for a given family. For example, a fixed (absolute) map of a neighborhood allows for studying various indicators (e.g., income level) linked to residents within the population which can be analyzed according to risk of child protection involvement. However, smaller clusters of vulnerability within that defined geography (e.g., a crowded, under-resourced apartment building) will not necessarily be understood in relation to child protection risk, nor will the perceptions and experiences of residents within that space. An absolute approach may also ignore historical patterns and changes over time which, for many families, remain relevant for an ongoing situation.

Critical commentary in child protection literature includes calls for more nuanced attention to intersections of poverty and marginalization that can help situate these risks in context (e.g., Caldwell & Sinha, 2020; Drake et al., 2011; Hyslop & Keddell, 2018; Jonson-Reid et al., 2012; McCartan et al., 2018; Mason et al., 2019; Swift, 1995, 2000; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2020; Smith & Pressley, 2019). These critiques can be helpful in thinking about how (and by whom) neighborhood boundaries are defined in research, and how (and for whom; Minh et al., 2017, p. 155) neighborhoods may create or alleviate risk for families in various socioeconomic situations (Sharkey & Faber, 2014). A critical approach to understanding *neglect*-driven child protection involvement of families in certain neighborhoods with high levels of poverty can undergird meaningful inquiry about the broader societal reasons certain families become subject to child protection intervention due to a lack of needed resources (e.g., Gupta, 2017; Howell, 2019; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2020; Swift, 1995, 2000). Because relational processes playing out in both physical and social geographies may

exacerbate or fill gaps for families, studying these spaces can open a multifocal lens to better understand mechanisms of child protection involvement such as connection (or lack thereof) to needed resources, material goods, social support, stable housing, or employment – and how individual characteristics of a family interact with the neighborhood (e.g., Ma, 2016). Conversely, not critically examining these mechanisms risks reinforcing them (Madden, 2014; Swift, 2000).

While there are many critical analyses related to poverty and child protection involvement, and there are important empirical studies looking at neighborhood processes and child protection involvement (e.g., Freisthler & Maguire-Jack, 2015; Korbin & Coulton, 1996; Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016; Molnar et al., 2016), we are not aware of critical commentary integrating an explicit neighborhood lens into an extended discussion of opportunities for child protection research approaches. In this paper, we consider conceptual and methodological elements of neighborhood studies—and the attendant assumptions of framing research this way (Goodchild & Janelle, 2010)—to expand analysis in child protection research in order to more precisely highlight possible mechanisms explaining how and why some families experiencing poverty become involved in child protection systems. To do this, we sought recent theoretical and empirical examples from within and beyond social work, including critical commentary in geography and sociology. We initially found relevant articles through keyword searches³ in academic databases, and then using a snowball method included additional articles which either (a) were cited within articles initially included, or (b) had subsequently cited those initial articles. In the following sections, we review ways in which neighborhoods are conceptualized and operationalized in child protection research, summarize our findings on critical neighborhood research approaches and consider their application to the realm of child protection, and discuss implications and limitations of

3 For example, combinations of (a) “spatial,” “geospatial,” “neighbo(u)rhood,” (b) “critical research,” “critical methods,” “critical analysis,” and (c) “child protection,” “child welfare,” “child maltreatment,” “neglect.”

the present paper. In doing this, we hope to illustrate opportunities to deepen the ways family risk, need, and disproportionate involvement with child protection systems are contextualized through academic research.

The Role of the Neighborhood in Child Protection Research

Acknowledging that individuals and families may be influenced in complex ways by the contexts of which they are a part, researchers turn to an ecological-transactional theoretical framework to better understand the disparities in child protection intervention for families experiencing poverty and marginalization from supportive connections. This theoretical lens, grounded in the work of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological theory of human development, assumes that gaps or resources around children and families—rather than simply those within the household itself—may contribute to the risk of child maltreatment (Belsky, 1980; Belsky, 1993; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Bywaters, 2019; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Dubowitz et al., 2004; Garbarino, 1980; Garbarino & Collins, 1999; Korbin et al., 2000; Lacharité, 2014). Within this paradigm, maltreatment is understood to occur when “stressors outweigh supports and risks are greater than protective factors” (Belsky, 1993, p. 427; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993). Recent commentary on Bronfenbrenner's model (Xia et al., 2020) proposes there is ample opportunity to operationalize this theoretical framework in ways that emphasize the interactions *among* numerous ecological variables that can help explain human outcomes.

To operationalize an ecological-transactional conceptualization of child protection involvement, researchers increasingly utilize geographical units of analysis such as the “neighborhood” (e.g., Barczyk et al., 2016; Beatriz et al., 2018; Esposito et al., 2017a; Klein & Merritt, 2014; Molnar et al., 2016; Sedlak et al., 2010). Neighborhood-focused research on child protection involvement suggests that a number of

neighborhood characteristics and processes beyond the family household can create or alleviate risk through connection to, or alienation from, needed material or social support (e.g., Coulton et al., 2007). Neighborhood *characteristics* encompass a range of measurable indicators related to the population and physical environment of a given neighborhood, while neighborhood *processes* relate to trends or patterns of interaction among the population, physical space, and institutions and policies that impact the local setting (Coulton et al., 2007).

Empirical child protection studies rely on several different definitions of neighborhoods, largely informed by existing jurisdictional definitions and available data (e.g., Maguire-Jack et al., 2021). Many quantitative child protection studies have operationalized the concept of “neighborhood” by aggregating data within fixed geographies defined by a ZIP or postal code, census block, program or service delivery area, or a combination thereof (Barboza, 2019; Coulton et al., 1999; Coulton et al., 2007; Esposito et al., 2017a; Esposito et al., 2017b; Freisthler & Maguire-Jack, 2015; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1992; Gracia et al., 2017; Lery, 2009; Maguire-Jack & Font, 2017a; Merritt, 2009; Molnar et al., 2016; Morris et al., 2019a; Vinson et al., 1996). These defined spaces benefit from having demographic, socioeconomic, or administrative data associated with them, providing structure upon which quantitative research methodologies can build. By contrast, in some qualitative studies, neighborhoods are defined subjectively by study respondents who live in them (e.g., Coulton et al., 2001; Spilsbury et al., 2009). These definitions depend on residents’ perceptions of neighborhood boundaries, which may be dynamic across time (Billingham & Kimelberg, 2018; Coulton et al., 2001; Hwang, 2015; Matthews & Yang, 2013). Members of individual households might define their neighborhood differently than their immediate next-door neighbor would and, crucially, differently than researchers themselves (Basta et al., 2010; Coulton et al., 2001; Spilsbury et al., 2009).

A number of neighborhood factors may relate to risk of child protection involvement. *Absolute* neighborhood characteristics related to

demographic measures of the population, structural features of the environment, and availability of services are common indicators employed by studies aiming to contextualize risk of child protection involvement. Indicators of socioeconomic challenges aggregated to the neighborhood level are found to increase risk of child protection involvement (e.g., Coulton et al., 2018; Drake & Pandey, 1996; Esposito et al., 2017a; Esposito et al., 2020a, 2020b; Farrell et al., 2017; Fong, 2019; Gracia et al., 2017; Maguire-Jack & Font, 2017b; Merritt, 2009; Slack et al., 2004). Among these, structural aspects such as housing can have a variety of implications for risk of child protection involvement: in a recent review Chandler and colleagues (2020) found that numerous facets of housing challenges can increase child maltreatment risk, including homelessness, foreclosure, unstable housing, unaffordability, inadequate housing, physical housing risk, and crowded housing. This in turn can impact child maltreatment risk through increasing parental stress (Marcal, 2018) and can increase risk of investigation for neglect reasons due to physical dangers in homes in poor condition, overcrowdedness, and findings of parental inability to provide safe and secure housing (e.g., Dworsky, 2014; Shdaimah, 2009). Access to formal support such as direct family services and child care, income support, or health, mental health, and substance use treatment can prevent initial and ongoing child protection intervention (Fong, 2017; Negash & Maguire-Jack, 2016; Shuey & Leventhal, 2017). A lack of fit between available services and local population needs may muddle how effective they actually are in preventing families' involvement with child protection systems (e.g., Maguire-Jack et al., 2018).

Neighborhood processes—the literal physical and social activities taking place day to day—have implications for family functioning. These *relational* factors include parental perceptions, stress, and sense of internal control, and children's developmental and behavioural outcomes, all of which may conspire to lessen or compound risk of child protection involvement (e.g., Cao & Maguire-Jack, 2016). Informal social connections within residential neighborhoods can

prevent child protection involvement in a variety of ways (Barnhart & Maguire-Jack, 2016; Cao & Maguire-Jack, 2016; Freisthler & Maguire-Jack, 2015; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1992; Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016; May et al., 2018; Riina, 2019; Vinson et al., 1996; Yonas et al., 2010). For example, neighbors can support logistically through providing informal childcare, but may be less effective in alleviating substance use or mental health challenges (Haas et al., 2018; Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016; Pawson & Herath, 2017). Child maltreatment studies examining relational social neighborhood processes find that social cohesion or collective efficacy (the presence of social connection and trust among residents) reduces the risk of maltreatment while the lack of these conditions (often framed as “social disorder”⁴) contribute to the risk thereof (Freisthler & Maguire-Jack, 2015; Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016; McLeigh, McDonnell, & Lavenda, 2018; Molnar et al., 2016). Residential instability in a neighborhood (more likely for families with low income; Phinney, 2013) can mean families have less time to develop connections to neighbours, and is associated with child protection involvement in neighborhoods with high poverty levels (e.g., Ben-Arieh, 2010; Gracia et al., 2017; Vinson et al., 1996; Vinson & Baldry, 1999).

Residents’ (*relative*) perception of both neighborhood characteristics and processes seem to matter for risk of child protection involvement in their neighborhood (Guterman et al., 2009; Kim & Maguire-Jack, 2015). Guterman and colleagues (2009) found that parents’ perception of processes in their immediate environment (social disorder, informal social control, and social cohesion) indirectly influenced risk of child protection involvement for both abuse and neglect concerns by increasing parental stress and decreasing parental sense of control. Conversely, a mutually reinforcing effect may be at play when

4 A recent review of how “disorder” at the neighborhood level is measured in empirical research (Ndjila et al., 2019) emphasizes that this is a highly subjective concept, measured according to more than 70 different indicators documented in self-report instruments—who defines this has repercussions for research findings and implications.

parents have positive perceptions of the place where they live, which in turn may prompt involvement in the community which then reinforces positive perception of community social control and internal control (Cao & Maguire-Jack, 2015; Kim & Maguire-Jack, 2015).

While distinctions among individual characteristics, neighborhood characteristics, and neighborhood processes are meaningful in how they begin to explain disparities in child protection involvement, they may be limited in their application across different neighborhoods, which all have their own politics, cultures, and histories. Attention to additional features of specific *contexts* is needed to more fully examine the ecologies around families who become involved in child protection systems. For example, based on findings of disproportionate involvement of Black anglophone families in child protection in the Canadian province of Quebec, Boatswain-Kyte and colleagues (2020) suggest this may relate to a lack of appropriate support from government-run services while services informed and run by the community could better provide needed assistance. The overrepresentation of Indigenous children in North American child protection systems, along with the high levels of socioeconomic challenges, cannot be adequately understood without consideration for colonial state actions that have historically separated children from their families and codified unequal funding in policy to the present day (Crofoot & Harris, 2012; First Nations Child & Family Caring Society of Canada et al. v. Attorney General of Canada, 2016; Johnston, 1983; Trocmé et al., 2006; Sinha et al., 2011). Recent findings in the United Kingdom propose child protection risk for socioeconomically vulnerable families may relate more to *inequality* in a given neighborhood than to absolute measures of neighborhood poverty (Bywaters et al., 2015; Bywaters et al., 2018; Featherstone et al., 2019). In Israel, Ben-Arieh and Haj-Yahia (2006) found that Arab children, who are more likely to live in socioeconomic precarity than non-Arab residents, were *underreported* to child protection, explained by their lack of trust in making these reports to state authorities rather than families not needing support. In all of these examples,

patterns of involvement of certain groups in child protection may relate to ongoing and historical dynamics of colonization, racism, and power which continue to shape family needs in varied ways in context – none of which is easily captured in an aggregated dataset from a well-defined segment of a map but may well be shaping the conditions and spaces in which families live.

Considerations for Neighborhood Child Protection Research

While many aspects of the contexts around families long have been understood to contribute to mechanisms of child protection involvement, they may be obfuscated by the limits of neighborhood study designs despite their aims of situating social problems in context (Coulton et al., 1995; Ernst, 2001; Garbarino & Crouter, 1978; Korbin & Coulton, 1996; Madden, 2014). Several critiques of neighborhood research approaches are helpful in identifying limits and opportunities for child protection research to reflect the lived experiences of families in context. Perhaps most salient is the ecological fallacy critique, the notion that neighborhood studies are limited in identifying local mechanisms that can explain outcomes (Howell, 2019; Madden, 2014) because they do not constitute comprehensive inquiry into ecological factors affecting individuals and families within them (Logan, 2016; Petrović et al., 2018; Spicker, 2001). Selection bias—the notion that outcomes within a neighborhood population may result more from the factors that lead someone to select a neighborhood rather than the neighborhood itself—is another challenge of neighborhood studies (Hedman & van Ham, 2012; Sampson et al., 2002). However, these broad critical points themselves may not go far enough in deepening substantive neighborhood analysis (e.g., Logan, 2016; Sampson et al., 2002). At best, empirical documentation about children and families can only reflect the extent of the questions that have been asked and the studies that have been conducted about them (Andenaes, 2014; Parton

et al., 1997). In this section we propose several considerations that may expand the ways neighborhoods can be studied to broaden this scope of inquiry by collating more granular critiques of neighborhood study elements, both from within and beyond child protection literature. The considerations below relate to: (a) deepening theorization of the notion of the “neighborhood”; (b) recognizing opportunities beyond fixed geographic spaces; (c) integrating analysis of temporal indicators; and (d) increasing mixed methods in neighborhood child protection studies. These points illustrate certain limitations of research on spaces around families and highlight opportunities for empirical inquiry to contextualize and illuminate mechanisms through which families may become involved in child protection systems.

Deepening Theorization of Spaces

While the amount of neighborhood-focused literature has expanded in many fields due to increasingly available data and improved technology to collect, store, and analyze them (Noah, 2015), several authors note a dearth of robust theorization in studies examining neighborhoods and other geographic spaces (e.g., Madden, 2014; Sharkey & Faber, 2014). In existing child protection literature, theorization of neighborhoods according to an ecological–transactional framework informs meaningful findings regarding neighborhood characteristics and process indicators. However, critical theorization of how these indicators can differentially play out and how they interact with each other to impact child protection risk can be further developed to examine mechanisms in context. Many important in-depth studies examining child protection involvement through a neighborhood lens rely on available census or administrative data (e.g., Esposito et al., 2017b; Freisthler & Maguire-Jack, 2015). These rigid boundaries constrain neighborhood research questions to be informed by existing data rather than being grounded in theoretical underpinnings that would explicitly describe why a certain boundary was salient in the first place (Matthews & Yang, 2013;

Petrović et al., 2018; Sharkey & Faber, 2014). Recent studies show vast variety in how residents may see, name, and experience their neighborhood depending on their vantage point, identity, socioeconomic situation, and relationship to the space over time (e.g., Colburn et al., 2019; Hwang, 2015). Measures of neighborhood process indicators, such as collective efficacy, can result in different findings depending on whether a neighborhood is defined according to residents or census data (e.g., Pratt et al., 2020). Available data may vary in terms of how well certain communities are reflected, both related to the salience of studied indicators for different groups in the population, and the response rate within certain geographies and demographic groups⁵ (and, indeed, how these groups are defined). Further, available data may perpetuate bias in how family vulnerability is seen in research and in practice, muddling research findings and future research questions.⁶ The way these aspects of spaces are theorized and hypothesized as relevant for families can shape how studies are conducted.

Precisely because there is no objective definition of a “neighborhood,” theoretical frameworks informing methodological choices are important for how empirical results are gathered and analyzed. Robust theorization of the “neighborhood” (e.g., what it means and for whom vis-à-vis child protection-involved families) going beyond administratively defined spaces might lead to more granular empirical findings (e.g., Chaix, 2009; Coulton et al., 2007; Galster, 2012; Maguire-Jack et al., 2021; Noah, 2015; Petrović et al., 2018; Sharkey & Faber, 2014). Proposing what the neighborhood itself is (the *absolute*) and what may be happening within and beyond it (the *relational* and *relative*) regarding vulnerable families can undergird research questions relating to

5 Census instruments can have lower response rates from people who are living in urban settings, are visible minorities, and/or are on government assistance (e.g., Rotondi et al., 2017; Westra & Nwaoha-Brown, 2017).

6 Available child protection datasets also inform construction of indicators of child protection risk and vulnerability, which can be used to predict likelihood of future outcomes without necessary contextualization (e.g., Choate & McKenzie, 2015; Cuccaro-Alamin et al., 2017; Gillingham, 2006; Munro, 1999; Shlonsky & Wagner, 2005).

mechanisms of child protection involvement. Looking to illustrations of how this has been done in other domains may support such an exercise.⁷ Theorizing neighborhoods in child protection research ought to incorporate a relational view of social dynamics, public policy, economics, governance, civic engagement, and history (Gieryn, 2000; Noah, 2015). Understanding the mutually dynamic influences of neighborhoods on families—and families, other residents, institutions, and governments on neighborhoods—can create more space for seeing how they can be a source of both strength and vulnerability. For example, a parent may not think of the place they live as ‘home’ or see locally available services as appropriate or desirable for their family even if they are geographically close and affordable—all of which may make the neighborhood a less salient unit of study for that parent than another who seeks and relies on several locally available forms of support. Particularly when neglect reports may reflect gaps in needed resources, a broad theoretical framework incorporating absolute, relative, and relational neighborhood factors can guide novel research questions. A wide theoretical lens understanding “extra-local mechanisms” (Sampson et al., 2002, p. 473) as salient for the local, individual level, along with an understanding of the scale, scope, function, and subjective meaning of that local setting for families, may support theoretical framing of spaces around families that supports research goals (Gieryn, 2000; Matthews & Yang, 2013; Massey, 1994; Sharkey & Faber, 2014; Vallée et al., 2014).

Recognizing Opportunities beyond Fixed Geographic Spaces

Studying child projection trajectories and outcomes through the lens of fixed spaces such as a ZIP code area or census block, “cannot adequately capture all relevant characteristics of the socio-spatial context which might influence people” (Petrović et al., 2018, p. 1; see also Freisthler

7 For example, Carpiano (2006) proposed a conceptual model in which complex neighborhood social capital processes are illustrated to theorize mechanisms related to individual health outcomes (see p. 169).

et al., 2006; Levin, 1992, Matthews & Yang, 2013). This “local trap” (Cummins, 2007, p. 355; Vallée et al., 2014) may mean family situations and characteristics do not aggregate to produce meaningful research conclusions. Further, analysis of data from fixed geographic scales may obscure the variety of ways individuals and families experience the spaces around them (e.g., Kwan, 2002a; Noah, 2015; Sharkey & Faber, 2014; Vallée et al., 2014; van Ham et al., 2012).⁸ If drawn too large, fixed boundaries might “dilute” concentrated areas of child protection involvement being studied (Vinson & Baldry, 1999, p. 2). If drawn too small, fixed geographic scales can neglect the extent to which factors beyond the neighborhood are important for explaining individual or family outcomes (Massey, 1994; Sharkey & Faber, 2014). Critical sociologists propose that neighborhoods are not “inherent” (Gieryn, 2000, p. 472), and critical geographers note that absolute space—seen from a bird’s-eye view—is limited in supporting dynamic, relational analysis (Harvey, 2006; Jones, 2009; Kwan, 2002a). The nested, hierarchical maps that enable institutions and governments to easily manage and represent spaces on paper (e.g., Statistics Canada, 2011) obfuscate and deprioritize the multidimensionality—and non-linearity—of these spaces in terms of social experience (Maguire-Jack et al., 2021; Marston, Jones, & Woodward, 2005; Springer, 2014). Further, some note that an ecological (hierarchical) conceptualization of space in its relation to families (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979) privileges a focus on individuals that may ignore families in collectivist cultures (e.g., Bermúdez et al., 2016).

Studies going beyond fixed neighborhoods can better document a family’s exposure to relevant but distant geographies, family ties well beyond home or the relationships and distances among significant non-residential locations (Basta et al., 2010; Freisthler et al., 2016;

8 For example, census blocks and municipal districts may not adequately capture the ways structural economic, policy, and demographic factors (e.g., local unemployment, available services, population density) interact with family-level characteristics (e.g., family structure, mental health and substance use challenges, household income) for different families.

Galster, 2012; Golledge & Stimson, 1996; Logan, 2016; Matthews, 2011; Matthews & Yang, 2013; Petrović et al., 2018). Particularly when risk of neglect relates to family need, research design considering a broad range of places where these needs may be met may better document family risk. For example, a family living near the boundary between two studied neighborhoods may find needed formal or informal support in a non-residential neighborhood because the bus is more convenient or they have friends or family in that neighborhood. Similarly, measures of support available in a family's residential neighborhood may not be a helpful indicator of possible risk alleviation if much of the population spends much of their time elsewhere (e.g., commuting far away for work). Without finding ways to reflect the varied ways families interact with and experience their environments, neighborhood-focused child protection research will fail to acknowledge the function of these spaces themselves which may extend beyond the political or administrative labels assigned to them (e.g., Marston et al., 2005; Papanastasiou, 2017), and will struggle to identify mechanisms leading families to be involved with child protection. Further, studying the "interconnectedness of [geographic] scales" can have implications for understanding varying ecologies around families such that policy can better respond (Papanastasiou, 2017, p. 52).

Analysis incorporating multiple scales can allow research to go beyond a given residential neighborhood and avoid assumptions that the neighborhood is identically relevant for all families (Vallée et al., 2014), acknowledging the potential importance of residential and non-residential spaces, as well as the fluidity of both (Petrović et al., 2018). Recommendations for neighborhood research to focus on multiple geographic or spatial scales within the same study design may be helpful particularly for analysis of child protection involvement (e.g., Galster, 2008; Kwan, 2002a, 2002b; Lee et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2019; Matthews et al., 2005). Prior child protection studies using multilevel analysis are a meaningful way researchers have optimized available data from fixed geographies (Esposito et al., 2014; Esposito et al., 2017a; Esposito et al., 2017b; Esposito et al., 2020a, 2020b; Lery,

2009; Molnar et al., 2016; Vinson et al., 1999). In a decades-old multi-level child protection study using two geographic scales within one U.S. county, Garbarino & Crouter (1978) found that for the larger neighborhood areas, socioeconomic factors accounted for more variance in reported child maltreatment than they did in the smaller census tracts. Lery (2009) studied foster care entries in California at three scales (ZIP codes, census tracts, and smaller census block groups), confirming similar associations with residential instability, child care burden, and poverty at each scale. More of this kind of study may help validate findings or unearth mechanisms seen only at certain scales for further analysis (Sharkey & Faber, 2014).

Expanding Analysis of Temporal Indicators in Neighborhood Inquiry

Attention to elements of time are crucial for studies whose aim is to contextualize human outcomes (Xia et al., 2020). In child protection studies, there are opportunities to contextualize family trajectories by including a number of temporal elements beyond longitudinal studies and those attending to developmental and age factors (Freisthler et al., 2006). Longitudinal neighborhood studies are effective in providing population-based analyses of child protection involvement, but they do not easily contextualize the subjective experiences of families in ways that can explain different pathways leading to their involvement in child protection systems (e.g., Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2020; Cheng & Lo, 2015; Coulton et al., 2018; Esposito et al., 2017b; Fluke et al., 2008; Gracia et al., 2017; Mowbray et al., 2017). And while child protection studies integrating age and developmental timing of parents' or children's involvement in child protection systems (e.g., Esposito et al., 2014; Guterman et al., 2009) begin to illustrate ways in which patterns of child protection involvement can develop, the ways that people experience the space(s) they occupy over time, and in turn how these spaces are shaped historically, are important areas of additional inquiry for situating child protection involvement in context.

Because individual and family experiences of neighborhoods may relate to the time spent within them, doing what, and with whom (Galster, 2012), it is fundamental to attempt to study these experiences multidimensionally to understand mechanisms leading to family involvement with child protection systems. The duration and frequency of exposure to the people, spaces, and conditions around them, as well as families' intergenerational and epigenetic patterns over time, may also be important for understanding outcomes (Galster, 2012; Hedman & van Ham, 2012; Matthews & Yang, 2013; Petrović et al., 2018; Sampson et al., 2008; Sharkey & Faber, 2014). Further, deeper inquiry regarding many dimensions of mobility—such as daily movements, frequency of moving house,⁹ length of time living in a neighborhood, and forced displacement—are also salient for understanding how individuals might be impacted by and interact with spaces (Hedman & van Ham, 2012) in the course of their “lived lives” (Andenaes, 2014, p. 263). Deeper inquiry more precisely measuring chronicity, longevity, and exposure to indicators of economic challenges¹⁰ in child protection studies could extend analysis of family difficulties in context. Efforts to contextualize individual and family experiences in research ought to consider these various dimensions of time as a studied indicator where possible (Gieryn, 2000), and as a limitation where data or resources cannot accommodate such analysis.

As existing research on families' use and experience of neighborhoods suggests wide variation among residents living in the same area (Matthews et al., 2005), research incorporating attention to how families experience spaces around them across time can provide some explanation for variation in child protection involvement when analysis of birds-eye views of spaces cannot. “Activity spaces” are one method of

9 For example, prior findings that housing instability and insecurity in particular may impact risk of neglect by increasing maternal stress (Warren & Font, 2015) can be contextualized through further inquiry regarding the causes and context of that instability.

10 In a prior review, Rothwell and De Boer (2014) note that child protection studies define economic hardship according to a number of disparate variables, suggesting that more specific definitions of these variables would also improve research findings.

documenting differences in quotidian movement of study participants within and among the neighborhood(s) where they live, work, and visit, and have been used to study a number of social outcomes related to children and families (Maguire-Jack et al., 2021; Matthews & Yang, 2013; Noah, 2015).¹¹ This approach to integrating attention to family experiences measured temporally (e.g., chronicity, frequency, longevity) may support contextualized findings regarding family challenges beyond what can be seen through cross-sectional or longitudinal studies using existing data.

Beyond situating individuals and families in spaces and time over their life course, contextualizing their experiences and neighborhoods in historical time is crucial for deeper examination of child protection mechanisms that may remain otherwise unexamined. For example, situating family displacement from a neighborhood within a broader pattern of gentrification can illustrate much more than a point-in-time measure of socioeconomic factors can. Moments in historical time, such as nationally or globally experienced shocks to economic or health systems—including the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic—have implications for risk of child protection involvement and differentially impact individuals and communities already experiencing disadvantage (Gaynor & Wilson, 2020; McLaughlin, 2017; Morris et al., 2019b; Schneider et al., 2017; Sistovaris et al., 2020). When the research goal is to contextualize outcomes—as is often the case for neighborhood studies—it is necessary to consider historical processes within spaces being studied. For example, discussion of poor housing conditions in American cities in the present may be incomplete without mention of discriminatory state-sanctioned housing policy marginalizing Black Americans in the 1930s that still have ramifications

11 Activity spaces methods have been implemented in research related to social welfare participation (Matthews & Yang, 2013), adult mental health (Vallée et al., 2011), parenting (Freisthler et al., 2016; Freisthler et al., 2019; Freisthler et al., 2020; Wolf et al., 2017), children's distance travelling from home (Villanueva et al., 2012), adolescent substance use (Mason & Korpela, 2009; Mennis & Mason, 2011), children's literacy (Nichols, 2011), and mental health in adults who experienced maltreatment as children (Friedmann et al., 2020).

for neighborhoods today (Aaronson et al., 2020). Efforts to contextualize social and economic challenges in Indigenous communities related to overrepresentation in child protection systems today are incomplete without acknowledgment of the impacts of forcible and discriminatory colonial policy over the past centuries (e.g., Dippel, 2014). Presently, the social and economic upheaval related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has hit certain communities with pre-existing structural inequities harder (Yellow Horse et al., 2021). The pandemic is having immediate and uneven impacts on family mental health and child maltreatment risk (Sistovaris et al., 2020; Usher et al., 2020). In the medium- and long-term, reference to the pandemic and the varied policy efforts to lessen its harm on vulnerable families will be relevant to the task of contextualizing a number of factors such as child development, educational outcomes, family financial situations, and shifting housing and employment opportunities.

Incorporating Mixed Methods in Neighborhood Child Protection Studies

The considerations above related to theorization, multi-scaled methods, and temporal indicators can all be deepened through mixed methods approaches (e.g., Matthews & Yang, 2013; Milbrath & DeGuzman, 2015; Noah, 2015; van Ham et al., 2012; Galster, 2001, 2012; Spilsbury et al., 2012). Because of the complexity of family studies (Walsh et al., 2019), qualitative inquiry can complement findings from administrative child protection datasets. Researchers ought to center caregivers, children, and other family members themselves in qualitative research design through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and open-ended surveys to consult directly with them about how they understand their trajectories toward involvement with child protection systems (e.g., Fong, 2017). In a recent mixed methods study on inequalities and child protection involvement in the United Kingdom, Mason and colleagues (2019) illustrate that mixed methods research design is well suited to

document intricate relationships between child protection involvement and inequality in particular geographies. In particular, family *strengths*—which may not be explicitly clear from quantitative measures of poverty at a neighborhood level alone—might be better understood through mixed methods (e.g., Kwan, 2002a; Mason et al., 2019; Matthews et al., 2005; Matthews et al., 2001; Noah, 2015; Sameroff, 2009). Mixed methods neighborhood studies also allow for comparison of objectively measurable neighborhood indicators with corresponding subjective perceptions, which can both cross-validate quantitative findings and identify new research questions (Bagheri, 2014; Chaix, 2009; Jung & Elwood, 2010; Matthews et al., 2005; Spilsbury et al., 2012). Relational and historical processes within neighborhoods and for families can be clarified and validated through qualitative inquiry much more richly than can be done with quantitative data alone. Further, mixed methods make possible a more critical research approach to elevate marginalized voices, include various cultural perspectives and identities, and question positivist assumptions of bounded data (e.g., Bermúdez et al., 2016;¹² Nadan et al., 2015), particularly those of the researchers themselves.

Creating space for various definitions of what is uniquely meaningful for different families—for example, what does “nearby” mean? (Lee et al., 2008, p. 787)—and integrating this with quantitative analysis of neighborhood-bounded data holds potential for understanding how and when families seek and obtain needed support, and when (and why) they may not. Qualitative elements of study design can further illustrate diverse approaches to caregiving (e.g., Neckoway et al., 2007) that may be important for understanding overrepresentation of certain groups in child protection systems but are difficult to capture in analysis of large datasets. Integration of ground-up qualitative knowledge into bird’s-eye analysis of spaces can help paint a fuller picture of

12 Bermúdez and colleagues (2016) propose a decolonizing approach to reduce the epistemological hegemony of western assumptions in family studies—through questioning normative nuclear family models and incorporating research questions and methods which come from the families involved in the research—both to improve research findings and support policymaking.

how local needs interact with broader policy landscapes (Kwan, 2002a; Preto et al., 2016; Yoon & Lubienski, 2017). Qualitative methods can support incorporation of temporal factors into analysis, including patterns of mobility or displacement, or time spent in a given geography (and for what reasons), to contextualize ongoing family challenges. Resource limitations and privacy concerns are potential challenges to collecting rich data through mixed methods approaches, but they also present an opportunity for generative collaboration across jurisdictions and among diverse practice and policy domains (Matthews et al., 2005; Spilsbury et al., 2012).

Beyond activity spaces (described previously), numerous mixed methods approaches have been applied in social sciences to unearth varied experiences of residential space (Gieryn, 2000). Methods incorporating qualitative geographic information systems (GIS) and geo-ethnography, such as “egohoods” (individual-centered neighborhood radiuses; Petrović et al., 2018; see also Pinchak et al., 2020), hand-drawn sketch mapping, and activation dioramas (similar to activity spaces) have been used to study a variety of social issues such as food insecurity, education policy, marginalized women’s use of public spaces, social welfare receipt, and employment support services (see: Bagheri, 2014; Boschmann & Cubbon, 2014; Dennis, 2006; Jones & Evans, 2011; Jung & Elwood, 2010; Kwan, 2002a, 2002b; Preto et al., 2016; Tate, 2018; Whitworth, 2019; Yoon & Lubienski, 2017). We propose the notion of a “family footprint” which would integrate both individual and shared activity space pathways to illustrate family trajectories in research related to risk of child protection involvement. For example, an activity space map indicating the logistical path a single parent might travel to keep the family running on a given day (Matthews et al., 2005), which might include child care, multiple jobs or school, extended family caregiving, and the grocery store—all of which could be in various neighborhoods and entail interaction with mandated child protection reporters—could reveal particular ways that families manage well or struggle, and how they may become subject to a child protection report

(see also: Skinner, 2005). Such qualitative inquiry could also support studying varied mechanisms leading to specific kinds of child protection involvement (e.g., supervisory neglect related to parental substance use vs. a parent not being home due to long working hours) that are too granular to show up in administrative data sets.

Conclusion

In research regarding the disproportionality of families in poverty involved in child protection systems, linking the neighborhood (the *absolute*) with what is happening both within and beyond it (the *relational* and *relative*) may add important theoretical grounding and rich empirical findings situating intersections of poverty and family need in context. At once, the “neighborhood”—however defined—may be too large and too small a unit of analysis to illustrate complex ecological mechanisms driving child protection involvement. As Matthews and Yang (2013) note, “there is no correct scale to measure” neighborhoods (p. 1060; see also Levin, 1992). Taken together, the considerations underlined in this article—deepening theorization of neighborhoods, recognizing opportunities beyond fixed spaces, integrating temporal indicators, and incorporating mixed methods approaches—have the potential to support research that expands understanding of the ways in which families become, sometimes chronically, involved with child protection systems. When a large proportion of child protection cases relate to neglect concerns, critically studying and contextualizing the ways in which family needs may go unmet is fundamental to improving outcomes. Our discussion has further implications for research, policy, and practice.

We suggest that the considerations in this article could inform research design and data collection when resources allow, and contribute to critical discussion of implications, limitations, and possible future research when they do not. Our discussion can support other recent calls for more nuanced attention in research to the context of

families at disproportionate risk of involvement with child protection systems (e.g., Maguire-Jack et al., 2021). Given existing limitations of available child protection data, neighborhood-focused research can be further supported through agency-university partnerships and integration of data beyond child protection, including those from other service delivery systems (Fallon et al., 2017; Fischer et al., 2019; Saleminck et al., 2019; Sinha et al., 2018; Trocmé et al., 2016; Trocmé et al., 2019). More data collection, particularly from “data poor” areas (Matthews & Yang, 2013, p. 1070), can increase potential analyses related to the context of child protection involvement, as can studies of neighborhoods with low levels of child protection involvement to better capture a full range of family ecologies (see: Howell, 2019; Mason et al., 2019). Indeed, outcomes of families with relatively high socioeconomic resources could also be better understood within a geographic, social, and historical context of reduced vulnerability to child protection intervention. Collaborative and community-based research efforts, particularly regarding children who are overrepresented in child protection systems, will lead to more meaningful data that can better contextualize family experiences (e.g., Castleden, Morgan, & Lamb, 2012; First Nations Information Governance Center, 2014; Sinha, Delaye, & Orav-Lakaski, 2018).

Within the absolute bounds of local or national jurisdictions where policymaking takes place, child protection policy attuned to poverty and family needs can benefit from research methods attending to the relative and relational ways that families function both within and beyond neighborhoods. When child protection policy lacks a robust base of empirical evidence (e.g., Trocmé et al., 2019), data drawn from multiple geographic scales using mixed methods may support policymaking that incorporates subjective family experiences in different contexts. The considerations in this piece can support contextualization of empirical findings regarding family need and child protection risk that could contribute to ongoing conversations in social work regarding optimal policy approaches to reduce child poverty and support

families (e.g., Moffitt, 2020). Within the field, researchers propose wide-ranging policy solutions, including advocacy to support increased funding for existing child protection services, diversion of existing funding toward more community-based services, and redirecting funding toward universal cash payments directly to families with children (e.g., Boatswain-Kyte et al., 2020; Dettlaff et al., 2020; Hamilton & Martin-West, 2019; He et al., 2018; Hyslop & Keddell, 2018; McCartan et al., 2018; Wiederspan et al., 2017). When budgetary resources are inevitably limited, an improved evidence base attending more fully to the contexts around families can inform and optimize policy-making. In some contexts, empirical findings¹³ may suggest that existing policies and programs are misaligned with local needs, resulting in support for alternative approaches to child well-being (e.g., Dettlaff et al., 2020).

At the practice level, critical, multi-scaled, mixed methods research that includes temporal dimensions in analysis of family trajectories may inform richer training on case analyses and risk assessments viewing child protection within context. A critical approach to contextualizing families in poverty can go beyond a paradigm of risk and pathologization (Gupta, 2017) to reshape how frontline workers integrate attention to poverty in practice (Gross-Manos et al., 2019; McCartan et al., 2018; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2020) and broaden assessment to include not only parental capacity but societal factors influencing families (Garbarino & Collins, 1999; Swift, 2000). This may also bolster evidence that child protection systems interact with families whose needs go well beyond the mandate of these systems, particularly when child protection involvement recurs (e.g., Esposito et al., 2020a). Findings from critical neighborhood child protection research may be more fundamentally integrated into social work pedagogy regarding families involved with child protection, preparing frontline workers to go beyond building trust and empathy with clients, and enabling more complex case analysis acknowledging structural and historical aspects

13 For example, a prior study found that families may see their neighbors as more helpful than government agencies when they seek support (Korbin & Coulton, 1996).

of individual family situations.¹⁴ This in turn may support more meaningful assessment of child protection reports and differential responses to families with higher levels of material need, which require resources to be allocated to help meet those needs (Delaye & Sinha, 2017; Fluke et al., 2019; Loman, 2006). The recommendations in this paper can support future empirical findings to inform training of workers to actively reflect on the possibility of structural biases within the institutions where they work (Dettlaff et al., 2020) and the contexts where families live, particularly when socioeconomic need intersects with racial disparities in child protection reporting.

While this article offers a number of tangible considerations for research to contextualize child protection involvement more deeply, limitations must be noted. Our review of child protection literature focuses on studies mostly from urban or suburban settings, limiting the breadth of applicability for our discussion. Much more focused critical analysis of how child protection involvement in rural settings is studied, particularly for populations such as Indigenous communities on-reserve or located remotely, would deepen knowledge related to child maltreatment risks and geographical spaces (Beatriz et al., 2018; Maguire-Jack et al., 2020). Finally, we have drawn from several critical analyses of how child protection involvement is constructed and framed in research, and implications for families experiencing poverty and marginalization (e.g., Gupta, 2017; Hyslop & Keddell, 2018; Mason, 2019; McCartan et al., 2018; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2020; Swift, 1995, 2000), but have not considerably deepened this analysis ourselves in this theoretical article. However, it is our hope that the considerations for research methods herein can inform future critical empirical research design that does.

14 Sheppard and colleagues (2018) found that newly qualified social workers generally scored highly on interpersonal skills but showed wide variability in their critical thinking capacity, indicating that some assessments of family situations may not be well attuned to a variety of contextual factors.

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