

Three-Block Fathers: Spatial Perceptions and Kin-Work in Low-Income African American Neighborhoods

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Few studies offer a contextual examination of how fathers experience and perceive local environments, and develop subsequent strategies to enhance paternal involvement. In this qualitative analysis of participant observation and life history interview data on 40 low-income African American fathers in Chicago's South Side, I consider how risky physical and social spaces situate low-income fathers' participation in kin-work systems. I observe ecological processes—including gang activity, police presence, and poverty—that shape men's daily routines in local neighborhoods. Further, I examine how, based upon their perceptions of these processes, fathers delineate dangerous spaces and grow increasingly wary of certain social relationships. Finally, I observe that fathers develop kin-work strategies to secure paternal involvement, which include constructing "three-block" safe spaces for family interaction, relying on paternal kin, making use of neutral spaces, and managing complex negotiations with their children's mothers and maternal kin.

Concern over the absence of fathers from family households has prompted researchers to consider the whereabouts and activities of men on the margins of family and work. Almost 25 percent of all children under the age of 18 in the United States currently live in mother-only families (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2002). However, low-income minority fathers may remain tenuously connected with children and other family members, despite increasingly frequent transitions into and out of family relationships, employment, and residence (Eggebeen 2002; Mott 1990). Few studies have examined physical and organizational contexts that may promote or discourage such transitory relationships in low-income families (Marsiglio and Cohan 2000).

This study emerged out of two years of daily interactions and individual interviews with low-income African American fathers in a community-based parenting program in Chicago. As a researcher and case manager, I was struck by the narrow geographic boundaries of men's daily routines as they traveled to the program, searched for jobs, and cared for their children. In this article, I explore how ecological processes in low-income urban neighborhoods constrained fathers' opportunities to provide and care for their children, and how perceptions of these processes shaped paternal involvement through interaction with kin networks.

"Situating" Low-Income African American Fathers and Families

Physical and social spaces seem to have been more common focuses of anthropological and geographic research than of sociological research (Gieryn 2000; Hopper 2003), though

This study was conducted with support from the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (5 R03 HD 42074-2), the Purdue Research Foundation at Purdue University in West Lafayette, and a dissertation grant from Northwestern University. The author would like to thank the fathers and families who participated in this study. Direct correspondence to: Kevin Roy, Department of Child Development and Family Studies, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN 47907-2020. E-mail: kroy@cfs.purdue.edu.

Social Problems, Vol. 51, Issue 4, pp. 528–548, ISSN 0037-7791, electronic ISSN 1533-8533.

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notable exceptions in the ethnographic work of Elijah Anderson (1987), Elliot Liebow (1967), and William Foote White (1943) do indicate the importance of “street corner” contexts in understanding social relationships. Recently, family researchers like Kerry Daly (2003) have noted how a family socially constructs a meaningful space, such as a family home. Over the course of transitions in and out of homes and into communities, individual and family routines emerge and family members develop perceptions of space. Building on explorations of the confounded nature of social and physical space, fatherhood researchers have begun to consider how men’s parenting may be “situated” (Marsiglio, Roy, and Fox forthcoming).

Ecological Processes

Studies of urban neighborhoods have identified relevant ecological factors and processes in low-income families’ daily experiences. The six South Side neighborhoods where men in this study (and the others in the fatherhood program) resided reflect the high degree of segregation in Chicago (Massey and Denton 1993).¹ Throughout a period of economic restructuring between 1954 and 1982, the city lost 63 percent of its manufacturing jobs and half of its industrial plants, many of which were located in African American neighborhoods on Chicago’s South Side (Wacquant and Wilson 1989). Unemployment rates for black men in Chicago more than doubled to 29 percent by 1982 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 1979–1994), and unemployment rates in these neighborhoods remained high through the end of the 1990s, ranging from 15 to 26 percent (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000). Families in these neighborhoods had lower incomes and up to twice the rate of poverty as other Chicago neighborhoods.² Chicago public schools have offered few resources and poor preparation for work (Johnson 2000), and many young men do not know “where to begin” with the erosion of job networks and limited information about new technologies or job requirements (Young 2000).³ As a result, many young minority men on the South Side have supplemented sporadic work in mainstream jobs with part-time informal work or illegal activities in order to secure income, respect, and status (Levitt and Venkatesh 2000).⁴

In particular, the introduction of crack cocaine relegated the economies of Chicago’s South Side neighborhoods to menial employment and underground work, and reconfigured the spatial map of gang activity (Levitt and Venkatesh 2000:763). In the midst of these changes, the federal Mandatory Sentencing Act of 1984 and the subsequent war on drugs altered the racial composition of the prison population (Cole 1999; Hallinan 2001).⁵ Through

1. Citywide, 37 percent of all families were African American, whereas in these neighborhoods, 95 to 98 percent of the families were African American. Three of the neighborhoods were relatively similar to average Chicago families in terms of size of household, family, and presence of related family members under the age of eighteen, but average families and households in the other three neighborhoods were slightly larger, with higher percentages of young family members in the household (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000).

2. Median family incomes in these areas, ranging from \$18,000 to \$31,000, were lower than the average family income in Chicago, at \$42,000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000). Similarly, the citywide poverty rate in Chicago (26.4 percent) was lower than the rates in these South Side neighborhoods (35–60 percent) (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000).

3. Percentages of those with higher education degrees are two to five times lower in these neighborhoods (5–12 percent) than in the city at large (26 percent) (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000).

4. See Bourgois (1996), Hagedorn (1994), and Sullivan (1989), as well. These six communities had among the highest rates of burglary, theft, aggravated assault, arson, homicide, and robbery on the South Side of Chicago (City of Chicago 1998). However, these crime rates were all lower than communities on the West Side of Chicago during the same period. Gang-related homicide rates throughout the city declined at the end of the 1990s, although in 2003, Chicago was declared the homicide capital of the United States with 599 murders, 40 percent of which were gang-related (Butterfield 2004).

5. The number of drug arrests nationwide has tripled since 1980 (Federal Bureau of Investigation 1999), and African American men represent a disproportionate number of prisoners due to these arrests (58 percent of all drug offenders) (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics 1996). One in eight black males between the ages of 25 and 29 were in prison or jail in midyear 2002, compared to 1 in 23 Latino males and 1 in 63 white males in the same age group. Black males have a much greater chance of serving time in prison at some point in their lives (32 percent), compared to Hispanic males (16 percent) and white males (6 percent) (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics 1996).

the mid-1990s, law enforcement responded to emerging business structures of gangs in Chicago neighborhoods with mass arrests and surveillance of public spaces, utilizing gang-loitering ordinances that predominantly affected African American and Latino men (Roberts 1999; Venkatesh and Levitt 2000).⁶ Robert Sampson and William Julius Wilson (1996) argue that the intersection of race, place, and poverty has led to uniquely dismal odds of exposure to crime in the streets and risk of incarceration for young African American men. The convergence of these ecological processes—segregation, poverty, unemployment, poor-quality schools, gang activity, and enhanced law enforcement—has constrained opportunities to secure good jobs and “step up” as responsible parents who provide resources and care for their children (Wilson 1989).

Transitory Fathers

Most studies with national survey data on low-income minority fathers focus on changes in family structure and couple relationships, not on ecological processes and parent-child relationships. Similar to other low-income minority communities across the country, rates of households headed by unmarried mothers with young children in these South Side neighborhoods are higher than citywide or national rates.⁷ Results from the Fragile Families Study, based on national data from over 4,700 unwed couples, show that most fathers were highly involved at the onset of birth of their children (Carlson and McLanahan 2003) and that involvement was enhanced by men’s positive attitudes toward fathering, commitment to a couple-relationship, and stable, full-time wages (Carlson and McLanahan 2002; Johnson 2001). Twelve months after the birth of children, multiple disruptions—including relationship conflict and financial instability—contributed to fathers’ departures from households (McLanahan, Garfinkel, and Mincy 2001).

Other studies also indicate that involvement with children decreases when unwed or divorced fathers move out of households and terminate couple relationships (Lerman 1993; Lerman and Sorensen 2000; Seltzer 1991). Involvement with nonresidential fathers specifically is enhanced by frequent quality father-child interactions (Amato and Gilbreth 1999), consistent financial contributions (McLanahan et al. 1994), amicable relationships between mothers and nonresidential fathers (Coley and Chase-Lansdale 1999), and voluntary changes in street-oriented “lifestyles” (Nelson, Clampet-Lundquist, and Edin 2002). Close proximity is also a consistent predictor of greater paternal involvement among nonresidential fathers (Manning, Stewart, and Smock 2003; Veum 1993), although average distances between fathers and children in these previous studies (35 miles, for example) indicate that participants did not reside in densely-populated urban neighborhoods.

However, assumptions of father absence may conceal men’s transitions in and out of residence, a modal pattern especially common among young black families (Mott 1990). Multiple sets of residential and nonresidential children complicate men’s parenting responsibilities (Manning et al. 2003). African American fathers often spend less time in residence with their biological children and more time in residence with non-biological children, although some findings suggest that they become more involved with biological children as they age (Eggebeen 2002). These patterns point to the centrality of role flexibility in dynamic family rela-

6. Anderson (1990) suggests that police “become willing parties to this general color-coding of the public environment” (p. 190). Roberts (1999) cites Chicago Police Department statistics that between 1992 and 1995, police issued over 89,000 orders to disperse and arrested over 42,000 people for disobeying their orders. These arrests were part of the gang-loitering ordinance, and most took place in minority neighborhoods.

7. Census data indicates that 7.5 percent of households in the United States, and 17 percent of households in Chicago, are headed by unmarried mothers with young children. In these South Side neighborhoods, single mothers account for between 31 and 44 percent of all families (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000).

tionships, as well as to cycles of engagement and disengagement of low-income African American fathers with their children (Jarrett, Roy, and Burton 2002).

Recent qualitative studies of fathers in Trenton (Waller 2002), Philadelphia (Edin and Nelson 2001), and multiple urban sites in the South and Midwest (Hamer 2001) illustrate how a range of ecological processes—including low-wage jobs, racial discrimination, lack of educational opportunities, illicit activities, poor housing, and violent neighborhoods—shape men's transitory participation as providers and caregivers.⁸ Mary Pattillo-McCoy's (1999) study of the Groveland community in Chicago traces how the departures of local employers, maintenance of family residences, and networks of criminal and gang activity have changed parent-child interaction. In Groveland and similar communities (Anderson 1990), men negotiate decent behaviors and street behaviors, integrating middle-class aspirations as good providers and "family men" with an ability to gain respect and survive in risky neighborhoods. Risky environments may also be related to an atmosphere of gender distrust among mothers and fathers (Furstenberg 1995). According to Kathryn Edin's study of marital beliefs (2000), unwed low-income mothers often believe potential partners are untrustworthy and unprepared to commit to long-term relationships because of their sporadic employment and involvement in illegal activities.

As potential marital partners and parents, fathers must try to meet mainstream cultural expectations for the package deal of marriage, career, fatherhood, and home ownership (Townsend 2002). Although some studies indicate that nonresidential fathers make efforts to provide and care for their children (Danziger and Radin 1990; Stier and Tienda 1993), they are commonly found lacking in resources to successfully fulfill provider and caregiver roles of fatherhood (LaRossa 1997). As a result, public discourses and social policies tend to characterize poor minority fathers as invisible, irresponsible, and unmotivated parents (Burton and Snyder 1998).

The kinscripts framework (Stack and Burton 1993) identifies ecological factors and neighborhoods as integral sites for interaction with children and with kin networks that offer support for daily survival, social mobility, and child care (Dominguez and Watkins 2003; Jarrett and Burton 1999; Stack 1974). Assumptions from the life course perspective emphasize both the temporal nature and interdependence of lives of kin network members. Extended child-focused networks are maintained by parental figures who perform kin-work tasks "to regenerate families, maintain lifetime continuities, sustain intergenerational responsibilities, and reinforce shared values" (Stack and Burton 1993:160). The kin network's shared understanding of when and in which sequence kin-work should occur guides expectations of family networks and the ways in which mothers advocate for kin involvement with children. Typically, women and older children are summoned and recruited through a process of kinscription. Fathers may be perceived as renegade relatives in risky neighborhoods with few potential contributions as parents and rather as likely targets of—and/or participants in—crime, limited job markets, and gang activity or police presence (Burton and Jarrett 2000; Roy and Burton 2004).

In summary, few studies have examined how ecological processes in risky neighborhoods shape father-child relationships and family networks. In particular, we know little about how men experience and perceive their local environments, and how these experiences and perceptions are linked to subsequent strategies to enhance paternal involvement. In this qualitative analysis I utilize participant observation and life history interview data on 40 low-income African American fathers in Chicago to consider how low-income fathers' participation in systems of kin-work is situated in risky physical and social spaces. I examine ecological processes in local neighborhoods that shape men's daily routines, including gang

8. See also Duneier (1999), Fine and Weis (1998), and Sullivan (1992). Jankowski (1991) offers insight into the defiant individualism and competitive nature in gang activity that lead to low-income men's potential wariness in social interaction with others.

activity, police presence, and poverty. Based on their perceptions of these processes, fathers mentally delineated dangerous spaces and grew increasingly wary of some social relationships. Fathers and families developed kin-work strategies to secure paternal involvement in risky neighborhoods, including construction of “three-block” safe spaces for family interaction, reliance on paternal kin and neutral spaces, and complicated negotiations with mothers and maternal kin.

Methods

Sample

To build relationships with and gather data about low-income fathers and their families, I worked as a researcher and case manager in a fatherhood program in Chicago. Over 400 non-custodial African American fathers whose children received public aid voluntarily enrolled in the program.⁹ These men were distinguished from peers not involved in such programs by their efforts to become more involved with their children and to access employment training and placement, parenting classes, educational, housing and drug treatment referrals, and co-parental counseling.

Program staff referred regular participants in program sessions for my study. I explained to fathers that I was conducting research on paternal involvement, and if they agreed to participate, they signed written consent forms. These 40 men reflected the demographic variation of all fathers enrolled in the program, and they were not different from other low-income African American men in Chicago beyond their involvement in the fatherhood program. I selected men from a wide age range in order to capture a variety of experiences over time: 15 men were 35 years or older, 15 between age 24 and 34, and another 10 men between age 17 and 23. Twenty of the 40 fathers were ex-offenders, and the same number had completed high school. Slightly over half of the fathers had been affiliated with local gangs, although most men were involved during adolescence as “foot soldiers” (Levitt and Venkatesh 2000) in drug dealing and protection of local territory. Six of the fathers (15 percent) were employed at the time of the interview. The large majority were unemployed (60 percent; $n = 24$) or underemployed (25 percent; $n = 10$) and seeking job placement services at the time of enrollment in the program. Based on two years of job history reports from all 40 participants, the fathers earned a mean of \$204 per week, usually in part-time, short-term jobs; they earned only about one-third the income of other full-time working men in Chicago (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2000).

Almost three-quarters of the fathers (72 percent; $n = 29$) never had married, with another 13 percent ($n = 5$) married and 15 percent ($n = 6$) separated or divorced. Seven (18 percent) lived with their partners and children, and 33 (83 percent) were nonresidential fathers. Of these 33 nonresidential fathers, nine were still involved in romantic relationships with the mothers of their children. The fathers had an average of 2.3 children, and 30 percent ($n = 12$) had three or more children. Just over one-third of the sample ($n = 14$) had children in multiple households, and their paternal involvement varied from child to child.¹⁰

9. Fathers in the study were referred to the program by friends or family ($n = 18$; 45 percent), the state child support enforcement agency ($n = 14$; 35 percent), the state child welfare agency ($n = 3$; 7 percent), social service agencies ($n = 4$; 10 percent), or substance abuse treatment programs ($n = 1$; 3 percent).

10. As a result, descriptive data on contact with children accounted for men’s interactions with more than a single child. At the time of the interview, 35 percent of the fathers ($n = 14$) resided with some of their children and interacted with them daily. Seven fathers (18 percent) did not reside with their children, but interacted with them daily, and 16 men (40 percent) were nonresidential fathers who saw their children once or twice each week. Nine fathers (23 percent) were a bit more removed, interacting with their children once or twice each month. A final group of 11 fathers (28 percent) saw their children a few times per year, due to strained family relations or prison sentences. One father had never met his child.

Data Collection and Analyses

Some fatherhood researchers have suggested that naturalistic qualitative methods can promote “a rich understanding of cultural context and interpersonal processes associated with . . . how fathers are directly or indirectly involved in their children’s lives” (Marsiglio et al. 2000:1179; see also Coley 2001).¹¹ In this study, I used three naturalistic methods for data collection. First, I took detailed ethnographic field notes of social interaction in the local neighborhoods where fathers lived. This method provided data on ecological processes, such as activities of law enforcement, gang presence and territorial control, and conditions of poverty. Second, my role as a staff member allowed me to observe men’s interaction with their children on-site and to participate with them in program activities and case management. Through participant observation, I initially discovered men’s perceptions of their spatial mobility and their strategies to become involved fathers by shifting spatial arrangements for family life. Finally, during two-hour sessions at the program site or in men’s homes from March 1997 through March 1998, I used retrospective life history interviews to gather more insight into spatial boundaries and kin-work strategies.

I began each interview by asking men to describe their homes and local neighborhoods. Protocol questions addressed the men’s own contact with police and the justice system, their past gang affiliation and its effect on parental involvement, and their perceptions of danger and safety. Men discussed common interaction with family members and indicated where the interactions occurred. I recorded the timing and sequencing of transitions and life events on calendar grids, such as employment and school histories, changes in residence, and shifts in paternal involvement across multiple families (using techniques found in Freedman et al. 1988). The grids provided precise documentation of important life transitions in paternal involvement, including family deaths, the men’s own physical health problems, dissolution of intimate relationships, and transition to fatherhood. I also used a range of methods to enhance the trustworthiness of data (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Credibility and dependability of the data were enhanced by the use of multiple sources of data and multiple methods of data collections, as well as prolonged engagement in the field. I used in-person discussions with fathers some weeks after their interviews (i.e., member checks) to validate my initial understanding of ecological processes and family interaction.

Expanding the sample to the point of redundancy (Lincoln and Guba 1985), I recruited and interviewed 40 fathers, to the point at which no new information was forthcoming. Daniel Bertaux (1981) refers to this technique as saturation, in which common life course themes and experiences emerge across several cases. Interviews were recorded on audiotapes and transcribed. Including interviews and field notes, over 730 pages of text were coded using QSR NUD*IST software. Pseudonyms and ages were noted for participants. I adapted a constant comparative method of analytic induction from basic elements of grounded theory research (Strauss and Corbin 1998).¹²

11. Distinct from ethnomethodological or other qualitative approaches, naturalistic methods emphasize a social phenomenology of men’s daily rounds and everyday worlds (Ambert, Adler, Adler, and Detzner 1995; Gubrium and Holstein 1997). They are especially sensitive to issues of context, dynamic processes, and subjective perspectives (Burgess 1982; Denzin and Lincoln 1994) and can reveal micro-level individual, kin network, and ecological processes and patterns that shape parenting and family relationships (Jarrett 1992; Jarrett and Burton 1999). In particular, some naturalistically-inclined qualitative researchers remain attuned both to the content of informants’ experiences as well as to how experiences are represented and perceived by informants themselves. This balancing act, which Gubrium and Holstein (1997) describe as analytical bracketing, allows researchers to move beyond examination of situated experiences and explore how men’s perceptions of these contexts shape social and personal meaning systems that undergird the paternal role.

12. Data were open-coded with emergent codes for new processes and concepts, as well as with sensitizing concepts, which served as starting points to orient my thinking about data (van der Hoonaard 1997). For example, “mental map” was a sensitizing concept that guided my exploration of how fathers noted which areas in their neighborhood were dangerous. Axial coding followed, in which I explored and compared patterns of coding within and across individual cases. In the final phase, selective coding, I integrated specific patterns with the core categories of spatial boundaries and strategies, in order to tell “stories” about these concepts (Strauss 1990).

My own background and experiences influenced each step of data collection and analysis. As a middle-class European American researcher, I checked my own assumptions and interpretations by repeatedly asking many staff and fathers about their perspectives. As a case manager I could step out of the strict role of researcher—which would have generated distrust with fathers—and build rapport over time in personal interactions during classes, program celebrations, and home visits. When men deemed individual interviews to be safe spaces for interaction, they felt comfortable talking about concerns for themselves and their families. Few conflicts emerged between these two roles. Although I advocated for paternal involvement in the program, I encouraged men to tell their own stories, as part of a separate activity from case management or program sessions. In general, fathers wanted their experiences and their narratives to be heard by others, particularly by policymakers. Many months of home visits in neighborhoods also permitted me to spend time in these neighborhoods and to understand more about dynamic spatial contexts.

Paternal Involvement in Risky Neighborhoods

My analysis of participant observation and life history interview data illustrates the following: first, the ecological processes in local neighborhoods that limited men's daily routines and shaped their roles as providers and caregivers, including poverty, gang activity, policing, and lack of opportunities for jobs and education; second, how men's perceptions of these ecological factors became "mental maps" of dangerous terrain, and how their related wariness of certain social relationships influenced interaction with children; and finally, how fathers and mothers used kin-work strategies to fulfill parenting obligations and to enhance paternal involvement with children in risky neighborhoods, including drawing a three-block boundary of safe space for family interaction.

Daily Routines with "An X Over My Head": Ecological Processes

The conditions of poverty limited daily movement to fulfill work and care obligations for families throughout these South Side communities (Roy, Tubbs, and Burton 2004). Some of the largest public housing projects in the country were juxtaposed with renovated lakefront Victorian townhomes throughout the communities. Local businesses included take-outs, hair salons, liquor stores, and currency exchanges, as well as some store-front churches. There was sparse vehicular traffic, with consistent presence of patrol cars in the late afternoon when children returned from school. Spatial arrangements to maintain family interaction were often flexible and improvised, with multigenerational families sharing residences and piecing together public and private means of transportation. Both housing concerns and limited mobility affected Kelvin's parenting; the 28-year-old father of four girls was forced to ride buses and walk to move between his mother's apartment and his wife's family's house each day after their family apartment was condemned.

We complained and stopped paying rent and told them that they had to fix things. The water, you had to let it run because if you didn't it was brown, and I guess that's how the kids got lead poisoning . . . She moved to her family's house and I moved to mine. We don't have our own place. I want to be with my children, like before.

Gang affiliations anchored fathers to a small area of the city where they became "known" to local families.¹³ Fathers had developed complex affiliations with gangs over time,

13. These "sections" of specific neighborhoods were similar to Levitt and Venkatesh's (2000) spatial maps of gang activity. Local neighborhood sections—akin to a 12-square-block area—included gang monopoly over some small businesses, such as car repair and taxi services (Venkatesh and Levitt 2000).

and many men found social support through involvement in gangs. Asante, 35, believed that gang involvement was less about committing crimes and more about protecting one's home from those who threatened local neighborhoods.

We was just us, protecting our little building; I mean, you could call it a gang, but . . . there wasn't any recruitment, just "don't come over here in this building." I fell into a gang, didn't get initiated. Just said, "OK, man, I got your back if you got mine."

Gang affiliation started with getting to know local families and establishing a presence on the streets with peers. Kelvin "used to run around with gang bangers," but his gang "was only about two blocks—and the rest of the whole area was another gang." Doc, 35, looked at his list of acquaintances as a job network: "I really don't have no trouble because I know all of the guys. I make money off of them—I work on their cars, and they're my customers."

Gang activity restricted daily rhythms of family life as well. When presence with peers on the streets became problematic in early adolescence, fathers moved into other neighborhoods or even out of state, and often with other family members. Wesley, 21, moved to his sister's house in Mississippi for a year because "people with guns" were looking for him. On return to Chicago, he became frustrated by what he described as limited options for housing and jobs.

You can't just move anywhere you want to in Chicago. It isn't that simple. The police protect an area, but a gang governs the area. It doesn't matter what anybody tells you. If one person catches you, he hollers to the next one. It is like bumblebees: you come close to the hive and you will get stung.

Fathers felt that it was not safe to gather in public spaces with their families. For example, Isaiah, 41, noted, "when drugs started coming around, things changed. People started putting value in self and material things . . . they hung out in groups, not families." When fathers began to recognize symbols, like clothing and graffiti, they avoided specific main thoroughfares where gang members congregated. During one stretch of summer weeks, program classes were cancelled, and when we reached fathers by phone, most said that gang activity was high and that they could not travel to class. Even passage through neighborhoods left men at risk for random violence. In the two years prior to the study interviews, four of the fathers suffered from bullet wounds as bystanders to gang activity.

Heavy policing also constrained fathers' daily routines. Fathers and members of extended family networks who did not have prison records or outstanding warrants felt the sting of increased police presence through stereotyping (see also Roberts 1999). Police presence made young men targets for searches and suspicion, the first steps in acquiring a criminal record. During summer weeks of high gang activity, police sweeps also increased. Eddy, 24, who avoided contact with gang members and stuck to his studies, argued that he could not travel to his girlfriend's house in a nearby neighborhood without getting stopped in transit.

Being young right now, you have a lot of problems with the police. They're always thinking you're doing something wrong. I can't even go out on the porch, the police are taking me to jail for walking outside the front gate: disorderly conduct, [returning] twelve hours later. They get you again as soon as you get back out.

Men with records or pending cases carefully chose when and where to move in order to avoid contact with law enforcement. Half of the fathers ($n = 20$) had some kind of prison record in their past. A prior arrest for Curt, 36, led to the loss of a union job that supported his 9-year-old daughter, and he asserted that his record marked him "with an X over my head." Some could not visit neighborhoods where they had committed previous crimes, even if their family members still lived in these areas. Chris, 28, acknowledged that "I guess I'm running" from an outstanding arrest warrant. He searched for jobs at nearby fast food restaurants, helped his children with their homework, and walked to the grocery store only after nightfall, for fear of being picked up by the police during the daytime. Marcus, 25, had done time in the past and discussed a run-in with the police from the previous night.

I walked past the police last night and they were shaking people down. Three detectives, and they had four or five guys spread on the car. Me and my homies were coming home from the store, and one detective was holding a flashlight, and asked us what we were doing walking up on an investigation. Patting us down, I'm like, "man, I don't go for this type of stuff." I knew I should have walked across the street.

Men were truly at-risk when they ventured out of their neighborhoods to deal with legal matters of paternity establishment, child support, and custody. For example, documentation of past gang activity during court-ordered psychological assessments led judges to limit or deny visitation access. In spite of prior convictions, fathers could often negotiate informally with family members for involvement with children. In the legal process, however, prison records could influence decisions about potential paternal involvement (see also Roy 1999).

Each of these ecological factors—poverty, gang activity, and police presence—further limited opportunities to fulfill their families' expectations for paternal providing and caregiving. In conjunction with the departure of industries from urban communities, these risk factors pushed minority fathers "underground" into informal, irregular, and unregulated jobs (Edin and Nelson 2001). Safe passage to school and work was the first obstacle for many young men. They only traveled into risky neighborhoods at certain hours of the day and left the areas by late afternoon, placing them at a disadvantage for securing jobs or attending classes. Being "street-smart" also strained trusting social interaction with employers (Roy forthcoming a). Commitment was minimal to their short-term part-time minimum-wage jobs, particularly when fathers figured in the high costs of working in local neighborhoods. Andre, a 19-year-old journalism major with an infant daughter, worked in pizza delivery because he owned a car. The job fit with his schedule of classes and weekly visits with his daughter, but he contended that it added "too much stress" to deliver pizza to rival gang territories.

Delivering pizzas was a nice job because I got paid off commission and could decide how much I wanted to make. I quit that because some guy pulled a gun on me one time. I was delivering to gang houses, members who know that I've got money. You have to go out on those streets, you can't just keep yourself away from everything. It's like your life is in other people's hands.

In sum, the ecological processes in these South Side neighborhoods consistently shifted men's daily routines. For fathers, one of the most important goals of daily routines was finding and working good jobs in order to provide for themselves and their children. As such, neighborhood-specific factors seemingly unrelated to parenting could influence men's opportunities to be involved fathers.

"Who's Over There?": Mental Maps and Wariness about Relationships

Fathers' experiences with and perceptions of gangs and police did not determine whether men interacted with family members or not. Instead, ecological processes had a complex effect on how men interacted with families. Based on their perceptions of local neighborhoods, fathers constructed mental maps of how particular physical spaces were dangerous and risky. These spatial perceptions led to a general wariness of relationships in and around these territories, even with family members. They also affected common routines that were the basis of relationships with young children.

Fathers assessed different neighborhoods by asking peers a common question. For example, when the fatherhood program physically relocated to an adjacent neighborhood, one father responded, "I don't know if I can go there. Who's over there?" Men considered whether an unknown area was dangerous based in part on what they knew of any families in the area. When men moved just beyond their residential blocks, social interactions became more unpredictable and often risky. Nelson, 36, perceived constantly-shifting boundaries of safety and danger.

I could see [the neighborhood] was changing. On the block itself it was decent, but three blocks around you would see some gangs. You can always live in a block, and go a block off and it's a whole new world. It kind of moves and pulls everyone in.

Fathers developed heightened vigilance and overwhelming concern for their own well-being. Younger men in particular indicated that "staying out of trouble" was a goal that organized their mobility through physical and social spaces. Bear, a 20-year-old father of an infant daughter, had a prison record and little money, so he felt constrained to leave his apartment to look for better opportunities. He said, "I just need a new environment. I know me and these projects—if I'm around too long, I get attracted to the same old [stuff]." In the name of self-preservation, they limited their movement through certain Chicago neighborhoods and main boulevards, and they changed how they interacted with others. During an interview, Marcus grew frustrated as we talked about his efforts to come across the city to attend class.

It takes most of my time just to keep out of trouble. Do you know what it's like to look over your shoulder all the time? I bet you don't. You ever worried about walking down the street, or standing [on the platform] waiting for the El train, hearing footsteps? [Waves his hand, dismissing]. Man, I don't think so.

Some spatial properties became more relevant as well. Fathers carefully distinguished between being "inside" and "outside" in public settings. Tremaine, 22, witnessed violence on the street outside the windows of his house. He explained, "it would seem like an action movie, but it was real life. I just stay inside." Fathers closely monitored temporal dimensions of space, such as when they could spend time "outside." Joe, 40, lived in "a don't-walk-on-the-streets-at-night kind of place." His fear was not police presence, but gang activity and unpredictable violence. Joe noted men's concern with their own well-being but contended that spatial mobility is shaped primarily by men's ages.

You have to be tough enough to take care of yourself. It is worse now because not only do you have to be tough, but you have to be quick enough. Man, I would not want to be a teenager for nothing in the world.

Fathers made reference to their own perceptions of daily-updated mental maps of safe and risky areas. They mentioned specific streets and train platforms to avoid, and most fathers also developed a general wariness of "being in the wrong place at the wrong time." Random risks convinced them to travel through neighborhoods "as if" they were dangerous and to interact with others "as if" anything could happen. Cory, a 27-year-old father of two boys, had just signed a contract as an amateur wrestler. Although he had little involvement with gangs or police, he feared "getting shot before making my big wrestling career, just getting out of the car one day." Men could not wander without a purpose, without an intended destination. Jelani, 23, staked his sense of control over his daily movement on such a mental map.

My greatest fear is walking out of my house someday and getting shot or robbed. I mainly fear things that I can't control. I don't hang out in front of anyone's house. I try not to go outside when it's late. I don't go anywhere without a certain plan.

In unpredictable contexts, men often pulled back from intimate interaction, which could contribute to a distrust of fathers in family or intimate relationships. Joe found that "people run away from you when you can't be responsible for your own daily life." Some of the most common comments about friendships and family relationships were echoed by Ruben, 32, who noted, "I'm pretty much complacent. Other people hardly know I'm there." Malcolm, 35, did his best to avoid too many strong bonds in his immediate neighborhood: "I know a couple of people in the building, speak to them when I pass by, but I stay to myself. It keeps confusion out of the house." After years of gang involvement and a short stint at a correctional boot camp, 25-year-old Oscar still remained wary of blind commitments to any personal relationships.

I took the bus last week with a guy from the fatherhood program. He is cool and he is telling me I'm cool. But I still don't trust this guy. I don't know if he's going to take me in the alley and see how much money I have. I'll talk to [him] but I can't trust [him]. I don't want to waste my time trying to figure out if I can trust [him]. We had a good time, kicking it, talking. But I'm still leery of him.

Men stressed that distancing themselves from family and other intimate relationships was the result of lessons learned in the street—directly related to a recognition of spatial risks and boundaries. For example, Rich, a 35-year-old father of four children, tried to resolve an addiction and reestablish relations with his parents, his wife, and his children. “The only thing I learned on the streets,” he said, “is that nobody cares for you, nobody's your friend—can't trust nobody.”

Fathers were challenged to curb their sense of wariness when it came to relationships with their children. Lessons learned on the streets about relationships shaped fathers' first steps toward interaction with their children. Isaiah traced his ability to pick up “feeling tone” from life on the streets. He felt that fathers and their children could share an ability to detect honesty and emotion.

A person can pick up more on emotions than anything. That's how I was on the streets. I picked out the people I would talk to, deal with, who I could and couldn't trust. And I never went wrong. When I first picked [my daughter] up, I wondered how long it would take for her to accept me as her father, and after she did, I just said, “Thank you, Jesus.”

When neighborhood events held men back from the type of relationships that they wanted with their children, fathers took action to preserve their involvement as parents. When gang affiliations curtailed his ability to cross into a rival gang's territory to see his daughter and her mother, Jamal, 22, discussed ending his involvement with the gang. These delicate negotiations hinged on shared appreciation of fathers' responsibilities toward their children. When Jamal talked with a friend at the same rank and from the same gang, he “let them know that I had a shorty to take care of. They respected me because they knew what kind of person I was.” Negotiations were not always possible, however, in areas with unpredictable interaction with gangs and police. On the way to his girlfriend's apartment to see his baby, Jelani was shot in the hand from a random drive-by car when he paused on the street to speak with a friend. He subsequently lost a union job with a shipping company. The wound also affected his ability to interact physically and emotionally with his child and his girlfriend's older daughter.

And I'm depressed constantly, not able to do things for myself, let alone my children. If I had a job, I could get back on track. The [rehab doctors] had me go see a psychiatrist. I was real stressed out and depressed about my arm and the job. [The shooting] happened right after my child was born. I'm unable to even pick her up.

The most difficult challenge was to ensure both their own and their family members' well-being and physical safety. Physical safety of children could not be guaranteed in dangerous neighborhoods. The possibility of one's children becoming victims of violence was evident in the men's accounts. Malcolm protected his children with precautions in traveling on certain main boulevards in a bus after church on Sunday.

We witnessed three people getting murdered in broad daylight on a Sunday. I had to put my kids on the floor [of the bus]. We pretty much saw a lot as parents and children. Just to think that my wife and children is on a bus in some of these areas, knowing how these guys is with guns.

Children could also be endangered simply by their father's presence. After ending his gang affiliation, Jamal feared he would compromise his daughter's safety if he became a target of gangs or police. He refused to drive or be seen with her in his neighborhood, and as such, he could not see her on a regular basis during the week.

It was real bad. I couldn't bring my daughter or my girlfriend's son over [near my place]. Half of the time they were having shootouts and other times the police would be coming through so much that they would just pick anybody up. So if I wasn't at work, I would be at my mother's.

In an effort to protect their children from harm, many fathers tried to relocate their children from dangerous neighborhoods before they encountered trouble. Craig, a 28-year-old divorced father, assessed his daughters' local neighborhood and remarked, "this is not where I want my kids to grow up." Lamont, a Gulf War veteran at 27, felt insecure traveling by public transportation to see his daughter and her mother: "I don't like taking the bus over to those projects. I don't like her staying [there] anyway, but I'm more secure with her staying in those special buildings, where the police stay."

The inability of fathers to anticipate or contain sporadic violence, to consistently protect their children from harm, and to relocate them to safer environments suggested that both perceptions and realities of ecological processes directly affected father-child relationships. Men explicitly indicated dangerous areas on their mental maps. They were concerned over their own well-being and mentioned a general fear of travel and wariness of close relationships. This host of concerns challenged most fathers' abilities to build a relationship with their children by themselves. In response, they turned to kin networks to help manage and maintain relationships with their children.

"They Come Over to My Block": Kin-Work in Safe Three-Block Spaces

Although risky neighborhoods could lead to inconsistent providing and sporadic caregiving, many of the men did live in close proximity and could regularly spend time with their children. These fathers accepted kin-work responsibilities through three different kin-work strategies, while carefully maintaining the spatial boundaries that they themselves created.

First, fathers and their families delineated a small "known" space in their residential neighborhoods in which family interaction was comfortable. This perceived boundary distinguished the small area from more dangerous surrounding streets, and it prompted a gathering of resources that helped to integrate fathers into their own families of origin. Men consistently described their residential blocks as "familiar"—"a place where neighbors know each other," "full of older people, with not too many problems." Fathers felt that they were insiders in the neighborhood and could "let down their guard." As families grew up together in nearby residences, intergenerational networks emerged and offered men places for involvement. Kelvin described, "I have lived around here forever, since I was born, for 28 years. Around my grandmother's house, it's very tight—everybody knows each other. Ain't no place like home." Familiar family spaces required their own type of vigilance. Men did not want to jeopardize peer and neighbor relations or easily introduce new intimates into the community. For sixteen years, Lamont had lived on the same block, where his backyard intersected with his grandmother's backyard. He said, "Everybody knows each other, and keeps it that way—that's how I am. Not being in one thing, making enemies or burning bridges."

Fathers' social interactions were defined by their status as insiders from the community, or as outsiders with "unknown" intentions. Fathers often spoke of keeping an initial distance from "associates," or their peers, from outside their neighborhoods. Bear described why he still stuck so close to his mother's home: "I feel safe because I know who's from around here. And if I see a strange face, all the folks I know are going to say, 'Who is he?' He might try to stick up or shoot somebody." Kelvin noted how "outsiders will try you . . . I'd say 'I don't know you, and you ain't got no reason to come here.'" Other fathers had to negotiate safety in unfamiliar neighborhoods. Tyrell, 20, moved into a territory "under an opposite gang." Passage in and out of the neighborhood to see his young son was difficult, although he managed to secure his safety through careful attention and negotiation.

These guys never heard my voice for a year. I never gave them any eye contact. I told them “I don’t want anything from y’all . . .” Instead of showing them I’m a thug, I showed them I’m a decent guy. If you’re trying to do something positive, and they tried to break you down and it was impossible, they respect you.

Drawing a boundary around a three-block family area was a kin-work strategy that benefited children as well. Just as familiar spaces and gathering of resources could protect fathers, it could protect their children and promote a child-focus among a kin network. When Oscar moved into his own mother’s new household in an unfamiliar neighborhood, he became attuned to his role as a “three-block” father. He also began to shift his focus from his own well-being to concern for his daughter.

I walk around and see how far I can go and see what is around—there is a park, so I can take my daughter there. Where I actually live, a three-block radius is OK. And I know where to go at a certain time, at night, I know not to go to this store. It’s alright for me. I know how to conduct myself in certain situations. I know I won’t be messed with. I am just there to live.

The large majority of men turned to their own mothers to help manage relationships with their children. Nineteen of the forty men (48 percent) lived with their mothers, fathers, or grandparents in safe “three-block” areas. Men’s co-residence with their mothers and extended family often allayed the concerns of maternal kin about dangerous neighborhoods and unknown individuals. These shared residences were also regular sites of intergenerational family gatherings. Lamont had lived with his mother, sister, nieces, and nephews since he was a small boy, and he had earned the trust to take care of his daughter on a weekly basis.

The way my weekend is set up, if I’m not at school on Saturday, either I bring my daughter to the college or she’s at home with my moms. We talk a lot. She plays with my niece and nephew a lot, because they’re at my moms’ too.

If fathers and their mothers did not live together, paternal grandmothers’ homes continued to serve as the preferred location for father-child interaction. When a mother assessed a neighborhood, she too would ask, “Who’s over there?” She deemed a space safe for children when the father’s family members were trustworthy. Joe was completing a treatment program, but his son had lived with Joe’s mother for three years. He said, “His mother knew what kind of people my family were, and she felt safe leaving the child over there in that neighborhood, in my family’s care.” The choice of paternal grandmothers’ homes was also a direct recognition of mothers’ wariness of fathers’ new partners and friends. As Doc mentioned, “The kids’ mother will bring them to my parents’ house so that I can see them. This has been going on for years. She don’t want her kids around my wife.”

A second kin-work strategy involved close negotiation with children’s mothers and maternal kin, and ecological processes shaped these negotiations. Men who worked and attended school were likely to describe how mothers recruited them into kin networks. For example, Rashan and Fenton, two young fathers of infant sons, were completing their associate’s degrees at community colleges. They sought and obtained jobs in concession at Cubs and White Sox games, in neighborhoods that would prove risky to other fathers. They regularly visited their sons despite travel into different areas of the South Side, and mothers often brought their children to the paternal grandmothers’ homes.

For these men, romantic relationships with children’s mothers facilitated involvement with their children, but about one-third (3 of 9) of nonresidential fathers found external romantic relationships could be obstacles to paternal involvement. Damon, a father of two preschool-age sons, was proud of his ability to co-exist “on the street and in the classroom.” He held down two part-time jobs as a successful provider. However, his current relationship was jeopardized by a prior unresolved relationship with one of his son’s mothers. Intimacy could be risky, leaving both partners vulnerable to reliance on one another. Of the 24 fathers

not involved in romantic relationships with children's mothers, about 25 percent ($n = 6$) had built reliable arrangements for paternal involvement. Again, these fathers tended to have stable employment, trustworthy paternal kin networks to care for children, and even temporary custody of children.

Men's affiliations with local gangs could damage negotiations for paternal involvement. Marcus had been involved in gang activity, so his daughter's mother and her family did not trust his motives. Visits to see his daughter were difficult on unfamiliar streets, and Marcus visited his child "only at night, when I could slide through to see her, then I'd jet back out." At these late hours, he avoided meetings with her maternal grandmother, "who's into everyone's business, sitting at the window in her chair, focused dead on me and my homies." In the end, both families agreed that his visits to his daughter's house were not appropriate.

I just can't stand the place where they live—it's not adequate for humans to live there. I try to read books to both girls when I'm there. I want to take both of them with me, get them away from there. I don't go visit usually—they come over to my block.

However, men's intensive efforts to be involved with their children could compensate for prior gang affiliations and even incarceration. Miles, 30, had served five years in prison and was active in a work-release correctional facility, which allowed him to travel short distances during a few hours each week to see his children. The two mothers of his sons recognized his persistence and arranged for him to see his children, even while their own living situations were unstable.

I'm on a tight time schedule every day, and I can't take the time to track down my kids if they're everywhere all over town. With my past, it's hard to catch up with the mothers. I can't go to their houses. It's easy to find them on the weekends, though—I just go to their grannamas' houses.

Children's mothers understood these ecological factors because they faced the same risks. Like men's shifting status as parents, fifteen of the mothers of the men's children (38 percent) were transitory parents due to poverty, gang involvement, substance use, and criminal records. Jelani and his mother were entrusted with child custody and care when his older son's mother suddenly contacted him with a need for support.

I don't know where [my son's mother] is. I think she's in a [state prison]. I had been taking him on the weekends and summers, and she called me up and asked me to take him for three years. I haven't heard from her since. I just know that she's been having some problems over there where she lives.

When mothers encountered extreme risks, fathers and their families offered an alternative space for care of their children. In this way, relocation of children into safe family spaces was an effective strategy among a child-focused kin network.

Finally, as a third kin-work strategy, men turned to neutral spaces apart from maternal or paternal kin where they could interact with their children. Fathers with children in multiple households faced long travels through different neighborhoods to see each of their children during holidays or birthdays, and with few resources to provide transportation or entertainment, they spent little time with their children. When program staff provided cars to pick up men's children in two or three different homes, the potential to gather children together with their fathers became a reality. For example, Jerome arrived at a Kwanzaa celebration at the program facility with his four children and together with his partner and their two children. He got permission from two mothers to bring his children, both of whom trusted the program to be a safe event for their kids. They sat at a round table, and the children played quietly with the gifts bought by the program. Jerome said it was the "only time that I've got my entire family together before."

Other nonresidential fathers in South Side neighborhoods did not have access to safe spaces like the fatherhood program. Over time, fathers like Jalen, 32, began to value shared stories about coping with daily neighborhood risks and wariness over new relationships.

It's hard when you walk around the streets and keep so much inside. You just want to explode. It is hard to get men to open up and talk about things, like their kids or their [prison] record. Because they seem scared. Maybe bad things could happen, but it feels good to talk. . . . When I start talking, I just let it go.

The constant reworking of kin-work strategies reflected the transitory nature of low-income fatherhood. The experiences of two men in particular illustrate how these strategies played out over time. Over the course of six years, Chris and his mother had consolidated his kin system by moving closer and closer to his wife and daughters, who lived with her parents, which allowed him daily visits in safe neighborhoods. He had aged out of gang activity and participated in "positive" institutions, including volunteering at his children's school, working at a burger joint, and attending the fatherhood program. Despite these changes, he remained wary of public identification by state or local authorities, for fear of reopening a pending case from years earlier. Ruben also aged out of gang activity. Along with his wife and three sons, he moved out of one of Chicago's largest housing projects and into mixed-income housing units in a distant neighborhood. He realized that "it's time we got the kids out of the projects, because they're getting to the age where down there, phew, they were apt to feed into the lunacy [with local gangs]." Although he had secured a small, safe family space, Ruben and his sons came into confrontations with unfamiliar Asian and Latino gangs. Moving away from extended kin-work systems on the South Side, they were challenged to hold their family together amid the new risks of an unfamiliar environment.

The real consequences of ecological processes on father's lives became apparent when they used their perceptions of risky neighborhoods to draw boundaries and to create safe three-block areas for family interaction. These mental maps provided men with a location for regular and normative interaction as parents. They also set the stage for their limited entry into kin networks as providers and caregivers for children. However, most fathers still coped with inevitable ecological risks that shaped father-child relationships. Fathers and families "made do" wherever they were, recreating ways to recognize and address risks in local environments.

Discussion

Ecological factors on the South Side of Chicago, such as poverty, gangs, police, and limited job opportunities, directly shaped men's relationships with their families and children. These factors also informed men's perceptions of neighborhoods and the people inhabiting them. These forty fathers' efforts to manage space and to construct kin-work strategies—despite wariness of risky urban spaces—illustrate how fathering is contextual. Attention to spatial experiences and perceptions may move research on low-income fathers beyond a focus on individual personality traits and toward examination of contextual influences. Situating men's parenting in physical space also may identify crucial class and race differences that structure the experience of fatherhood (Eggebeen 2002).

Three themes frame how low-income African American men's parenting experiences were situated in physical and social spaces. First, physical and social spaces for fathering were conflated and unmistakably linked. Men's experiences with structural inequalities in local environments influenced their family relationships. Ecological factors—such as law enforcement and gang-loitering ordinances, gang hierarchies and conflicts, or lack of good jobs—marginalized fathers through explicit or implicit rules about how they could navigate within South Side neighborhoods. Men's provision of resources for children was an urgent need, and mothers often tailored opportunities for paternal involvement around fathers' success records as providers. However, fathers in these South Side neighborhoods did not have access to resources and could not pursue opportunities or relationships spontaneously, within or

outside their residential areas. Many fathers developed a parallel street orientation in order to survive in risky neighborhoods.

Distrust among low-income African American men and women may be closely related to men's perceptions of their immediate environments and of unfamiliar persons who reside in them. Potential relationships required a calculation of risk, an assessment of a new partner or peer's family network and neighborhood affiliations. Without this assessment, fathers had learned that "I can't trust nobody." As is evident from men's accounts of their experiences and perceptions of local ecologies, a heightened concern for their own physical safety was necessary. Concern over children's safety only added to fathers' wariness in dangerous neighborhoods. To secure their children's physical survival, mothers also developed a sense of distrust in dangerous neighborhoods (Collins 1999; Puntteney 1997). Particularly for residents living with high levels of crime, vandalism, graffiti, danger, noise, and drugs, trust plays a vital role in maintaining safe communities and economic prosperity (Ross, Mirowsky, and Pribesh 2001; Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997). In risky neighborhoods, trust can become a process at the heart of common social interaction, not just of couple relationships.

Second, fathers reacted to structural inequalities in local neighborhoods and resisted marginalization as absent fathers or irresponsible providers. Control of physical and social space was not an all-or-nothing proposition, and men negotiated some control over their own daily routines. Fathers were not completely physically and socially isolated from jobs by local systems of stratification, and they could choose to interact with their children in risky neighborhoods. They were not constrained in terms of who or where they could interact; rather, the nature of that interaction was constrained. In this way, participation in any situated system of support remained complicated for fathers (Dominguez and Watkins 2003). For example, gang affiliation supported and protected many fathers, yet men found their mobility for family relationships and jobs restricted by the same affiliations. Thomas Gieryn (2000) argues that space is not synonymous with place, and in this study, it was the agentic act of drawing perceived boundaries that turned urban space into intimate places—locations for play with children, blocks with familiar family friends, or risky train platforms and housing projects—and gave fathers some control over how to interact with families and peers.

Men's efforts to manage risk in dangerous spaces constituted kin-work in itself. The kin-work of caring and providing for children unfolded in small, familiar spaces for family interaction. The "three-block" boundary was a perception, and it distinguished safe spaces from dangerous elements in nearby areas that complicated and at times foreclosed on relationships with children. Men's families of origin played central roles in fathers' abilities to create safe family spaces (Johnson 2000). Fathers returned again and again to the "known" neighborhoods where their own mothers lived. These residential arrangements allowed men to live without exhausting negotiations with strangers or monitoring by local "insiders," gang members, and police. Households of their families of origin became the sites in which men learned to be fathers, as opposed to the residences of their own children.

Few studies have explored how local ecologies may promote or discourage involvement in kin networks. When fathers and families assessed local spaces by asking "who's over there?," they equated physical and social spaces; where there were trusted families, there were safe spaces for children. While many men appeared motivated and mothers wanted to recruit them into their networks, negotiations over parenting obligations proved difficult. Paternal involvement could break down over a sense of mutual distrust that emerged as much from ecological risks as from relationship dynamics.

Third, physical and social spaces had important temporal orientations. For daily routines, men strategically chose either daytime or nighttime public exposure to avoid gang and police activity (also see Burton 1991). Younger fathers faced more challenges to their daily routines than older fathers. Many men left home in early adolescence when they perceived real dangers to their public presence. Confrontations with police, incarceration, and rejection from the labor market were pronounced during men's late teens and early twenties, and the effects

of these circumstances continued to mark men's daily parenting routines for many years, even as they aged out of risky relations with law enforcement and local gang networks. The approximately-15-year window of restricted spatial mobility has implications for development across the life course. It may be difficult for young African American fathers to fulfill pivotal kin-work obligations for their children, and they may return to fulfill these obligations later, when local risks to their participation have diminished. These age differences in spatial mobility may also reflect unique cohort effects related to social change in Chicago communities, including the departure of manufacturing jobs in the 1980s that has led to divergent perspectives on men's narrative identities (Roy forthcoming b).

Limitations in this analysis call for new methodological approaches for research on men's participation in kin-work activities. Focused network analyses, including consideration of the size, relational context, spatial distribution, density, and reciprocity of men's networks (see Oliver 1988), would strengthen understanding of the actual structure of men's social support networks. Comparison of fathers' and mothers' reports on contextual barriers to paternal involvement would be insightful. Finally, analyses of transitory fatherhood in diverse cultural contexts and physical environments would allow for comparison with low-income African American men in a large urban community.

Transitory fatherhood is of particular concern for low-income families in which employed and caregiving fathers could make a real difference in moving out of poverty. Recent policy alternatives seek to readdress transitory fatherhood through child support enforcement. However, fatherhood programs like the project in this study may offer unacknowledged benefits (Curran and Abrams 2000). This study suggests that younger fathers may have difficulty participating in such programs. To ensure successful outcomes, such programs may need to establish multiple satellite facilities for classes and services, as well as systematic use of home visits and reliable transportation for fathers and children, like vans or buses. Program staff should continue to target paternal kin as recipients of services as well, given their roles in providing residence and support for paternal involvement. Finally, fatherhood programs may serve the vital function of serving as a safe space for father and child interaction.

Men's separation from jobs, school, and even close relationships with peers or partners may mean that these fathers are increasingly unable to provide vital social capital linkages for their children who live in poverty. As this study suggests, limited paternal involvement of "renegade relatives" may be shaped by factors in local environments as well as men's and families' perceptions of these factors. Attention to changing these ecological processes—such as creating of alternative jobs to drug dealing, safe neighborhoods, and stable, affordable family housing, as well as checking gratuitous surveillance and incarceration of minority youth—would reallocate resources through new social policies to promote active paternal involvement (Orloff and Monson 2002). Without attention to ecological risks in poor neighborhoods, the focus remains on levels of personal motivation of low-income and minority fathers afforded few opportunities to become involved parents for coming generations of children (Gerson 1997).

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