

How Neighborhood Environments Attenuate the 'Marriage Advantage'
in Birth Outcomes among Women in the U.S.

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ABSTRACT

Studies linking social environments to the formation of racial/ethnic infant health disparities have become much more prevalent in recent years throughout sociological, epidemiological, and demographic literatures, yet no study has examined how neighborhood environments may contribute to persistent disparities observed between married and unmarried women in the U.S. This study links publically available data on women's relationship and birth histories with restricted, spatial data from the National Survey of Family Growth (2006-8) to examine if risky neighborhood environments are more weakly related to infant health outcomes among married women compared with cohabiting or single women. Drawing upon fundamental cause theory and the buffering hypothesis, multilevel regression results indicate that mother-father relationship status is one type of interpersonal resource that differentially buffers women from the effects of living within stressful social environments. In neighborhoods characterized by high levels of violent and serious property crimes, cohabitation (and perhaps singlehood) are more risky (compared with marriage) than in neighborhoods with relatively low levels of crime—and this disadvantage exists above and beyond measures of a host of human capital, sociodemographic, family background, and pregnancy characteristics. Overall, results expand our understanding of a persistent and important population health issue as well as identify a subpopulation at particularly high risk.