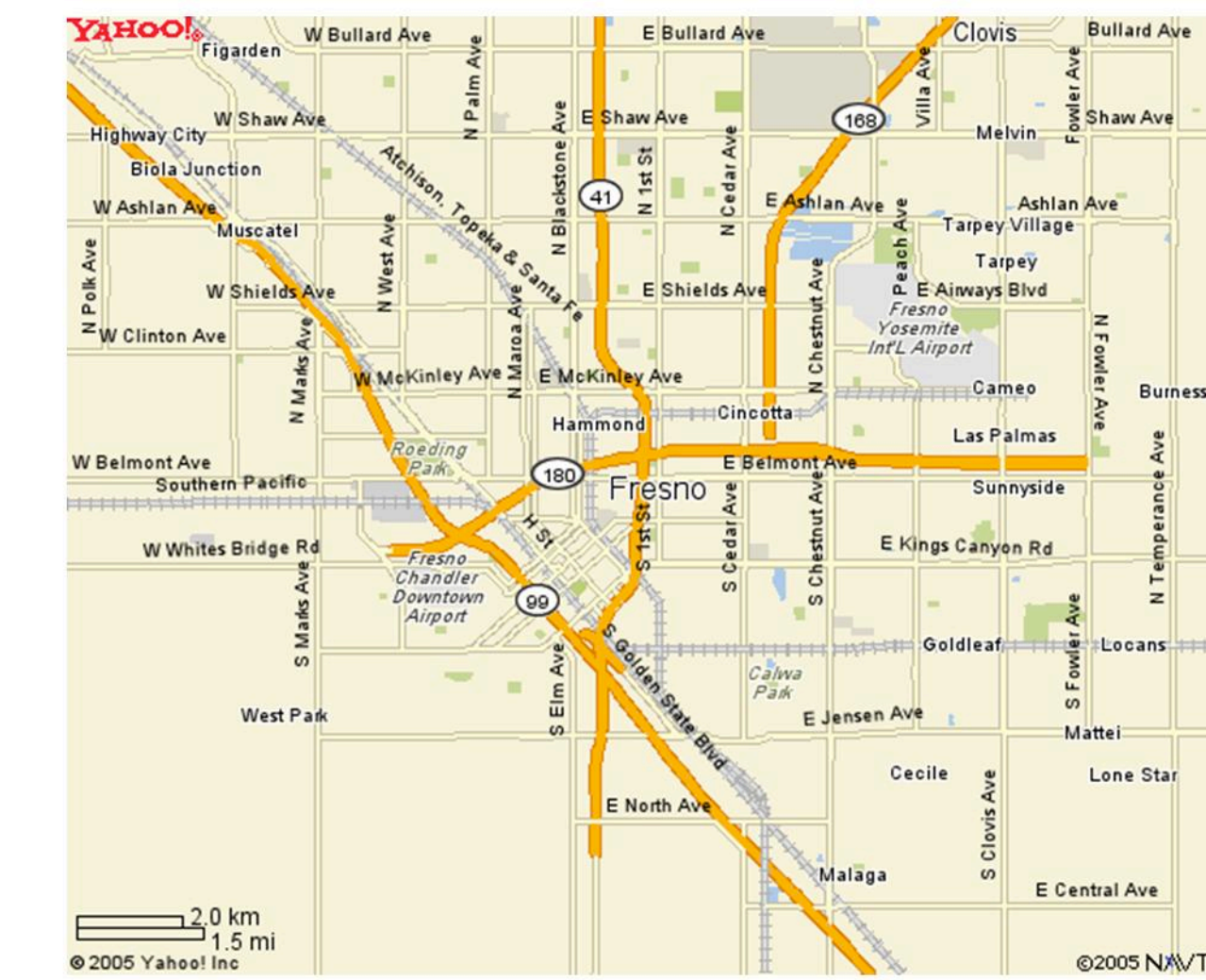


Formal and Informal Group Influences on Women and Young Children Living in Poverty

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Abstract

Urban poverty can be an especially powerful risk factor in the lives of women and children. This research project focused on an area of high poverty in Fresno, California and examined the experiences women had raising young children. Some of the most salient themes that emerged from the research centered on the influence of both formal and informal groups located within the neighborhood. This poster tries to identify community level factors that other women, community groups, neighborhoods, and researchers would find useful.

Introduction

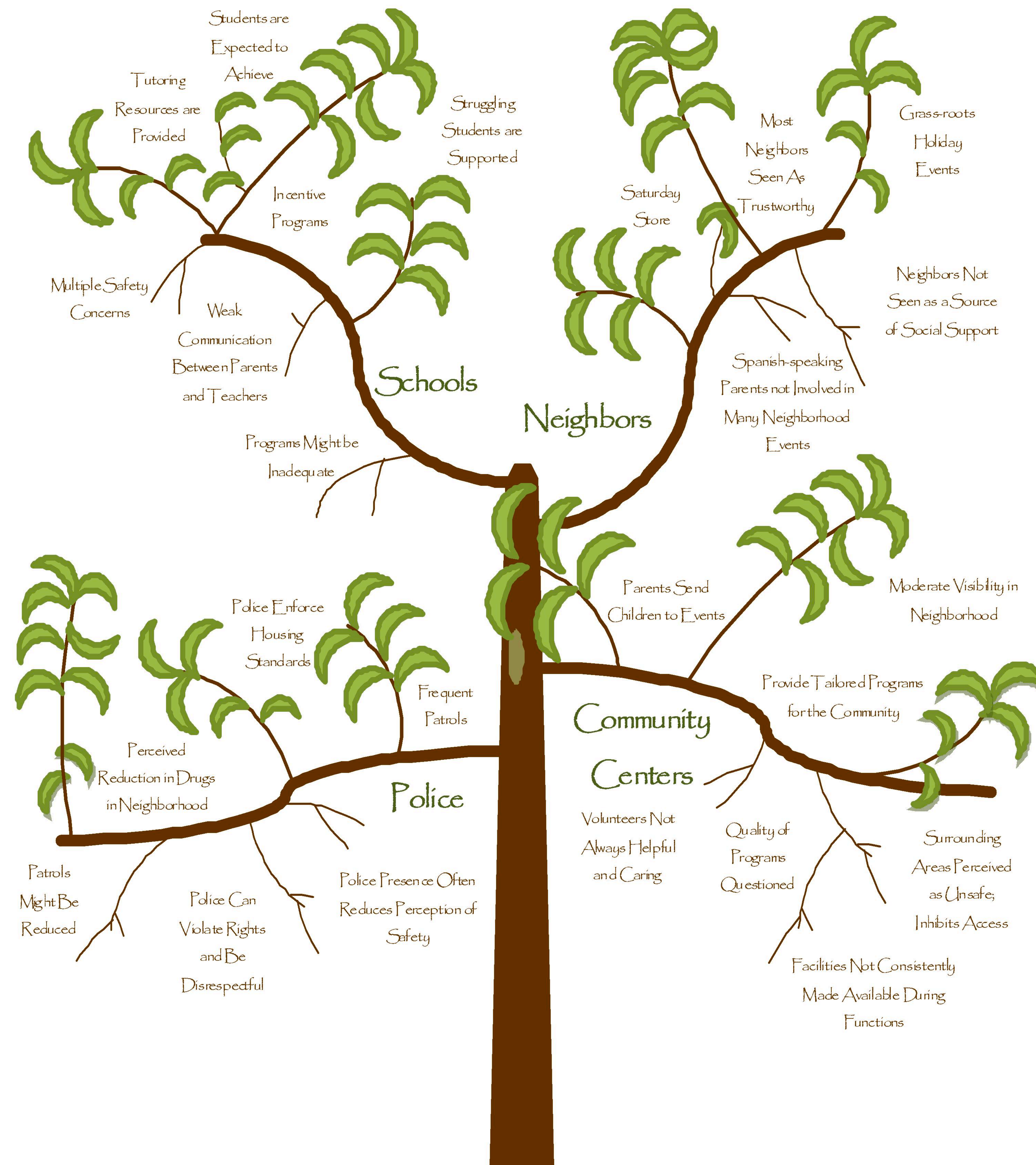
America's urban centers can be environments that cultivate tremendous opportunities for the families that call them home. However, many families living in urban centers face numerous challenges. The goal of the current project is to explore community-level risk and protective factors that influence the lives of young children (under age five) who are living in a specific high-poverty, transitioning neighborhood located in Fresno, California.

Method

Twenty-five individuals participated in three focus groups. Participants were residents of the Lowell neighborhood and parents/primary caregivers to at least one child under age five.

Three focus groups were conducted: two in Spanish ($n=16$), one in English ($n=9$). There were 23 female and two male participants. Both males were in the English focus group. Participants ranged in age from 19-39 ($M=30$, $SD=6$).

Each focus group followed a semi-structured interview format (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The focus groups were then asked a series of questions that assessed community members' perceptions of neighborhood needs and resources, sense of neighborhood belonging, and feedback regarding the revitalization program.



Formal and Informal Groups in the Lowell Neighborhood:
Strengths (leaves) and Weaknesses (bare branches)

Discussion

In a neighborhood of concentrated poverty, groups that are both formal and informal have a tremendous opportunity to impact the community. We found that both formal and informal groups influenced the lives of parents of young children. The formal groups included a community center, two neighborhood elementary schools, and the police. While these are officially recognized groups, other influences in the community without a formal organizational structure might have a strong impact as well. Our data showed that informal neighborhood relationships were important indicators of community strength and also weakness.

In our focus groups two themes emerged: the generalization of experiences and a lack of communication. Past experiences influenced the way the participants perceived and thought about the community resources. For example, one negative experience at the Dickey youth center prevented a mother from returning with her children.

A general lack of communication between neighbors and community partners led to a decrease in the utilization of resources. For example, the communication between the community members and police officers was often adversarial. Therefore, participants were reluctant to perceive police officers as protectors and felt safer when cops were not in the neighborhood.