Risk and Resilience in Homeless and Highly Mobile Children

Ann Masten, Distinguished McKnight University Professor at the Institute of Child Development in the College of Education & Human Development and Fesler-Lampert Chair in Urban and Regional Affairs at the University of Minnesota, spoke to a crowd of approximately 75 people at January’s CURA Housing Forum. Professor Masten has worked in the field of child development for more than 30 years, having spent the last 7 years concentrating on the field of risk and resilience research. CURA supported her work in this field with a Faculty Interactive Research Program (FIRP) grant in 2006, and she was named the Fesler-Lampert Chair in Urban and Regional Affairs for 2011–2013.

During the 1980s, Masten identified the need for research on resilience in children, especially those who are homeless and highly mobile. Up to that point, the majority of resilience literature was focused on adults. Masten saw this as an opportunity to engage with People Serving People, a homeless shelter located in downtown Minneapolis that serves families, as a local partner in her research. Working with a group of 8- to 17-year-olds, she found that homeless children were more fearful, experienced more frequent changes in school location, had more recent stressful life events, endured more extreme levels of risk, and experienced more disrupted lives in general compared with children in stable housing. For many homeless and highly mobile children, those types of experiences lead to more distress and behavioral problems. However, Masten found that despite some of these children having very high risk factors, they experienced very little distress. These children were “resilient.”

At the CURA Housing Forum, Masten spoke about protective factors that contribute to resilience in children: good parenting, low levels of stress, and high executive-functioning skills. Executive-functioning skills include self-control, ability to pay attention, good memory, and ability to follow instructions. These skills can be learned and improved upon, and play a major role in resilience and school success. The results of Masten’s research during her time as Fesler-Lampert Chair will be published in a future issue of the CURA Reporter.

The Big Picture Project: Addressing Affordable Housing Along the Central Corridor

The March CURA Housing Forum featured Gretchen Nicholls, program officer for the Twin Cities Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC). Her presentation focused on the Big Picture Project, an effort focused on affordable housing along the Central Corridor Light Rail Transit (LRT) line that is funded by the Central Corridor Funders Collaborative. The Central Corridor runs from Target Field in downtown Minneapolis to the Union Depot in downtown St. Paul. By 2014, a light-rail train will run along this corridor and stop at 18 stations in various neighborhoods along the way. Along with the City of Minneapolis and the City of St. Paul, LISC was charged with bringing together various governmental, nonprofit, and private partners to research how affordable housing fits into the communities located along the future LRT line.

The corridor is home to many unique communities, each with their own identity and nuanced housing market. To understand “the big picture,” LISC and its partners held community forums and listening sessions, conducted case studies of similar transit corridors, and engaged a project team made up of four committees: government, development, finance, and community. With community input, the committees decided on three objectives to address the issue of affordable housing along the Central Corridor: invest in production and preservation of long-term affordable housing, stabilize the neighborhoods and invest in activities that help low-income people stay in their homes, and strengthen families through coordinated investments.

Above all, the Big Picture Project found that building more housing units is just one piece of the puzzle; of utmost importance is creating places of opportunity for people. Because of this larger goal, the Big Picture Project requires a collective-action approach to implementation, meaning that no one partner “owns” the plan. Instead, the goal is to generate momentum from grassroots community members and partner organizations. Nicholls stressed the importance of this approach and the need for partners to come forward and buy into and invest in the plan to move forward. Information about the Big Picture Project and Nicholls’s presentation are available at www.cura.umn.edu/events/2012-03-02/cura-housing-forum-big-picture-project.