

COVID-19 at the Neighborhood Level: A Missing Link

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Introduction

This note summarizes the findings of field research carried out from 2016 to 2021 by the Observatory on Latin America (OLA) in Buenos Aires. The work began in 2016 as a technical assistance exercise in which the OLA worked with the Instituto de Vivienda (IVC) of the City Government of Buenos Aires to develop a framework for the monitoring and evaluation of a large slum improvement program undertaken by IVC.

The first phase of this project focused on the great emphasis of IVC on using participatory processes to make design and management decisions concerning improvements in infrastructure, water supply, sanitation, housing, and social services in a low-income neighborhood, Villa 20, housing some 27,000 people. The second phase, from March to August 2020, investigated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in this neighborhood, using citywide data to understand the impact of the pandemic in one physical area. A third phase of the research, from September 2020 to March 2021, examined the incidence and impact of the pandemic on three neighborhoods: Villa 20, Villa 15, and Villa 1-11-14.

While this work has benefitted from intensive on-the-ground in a city where the research team has worked before, this exercise is of wider significance because, despite the global impact of COVID-19, there have been very few studies undertaken of the neighborhood impact of the pandemic. It is one thing to assert, based on demographic and health data, that specific population groups, such as Hispanics or African-Americans in the United States, have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. But it is quite another to suggest and then to demonstrate that specific spatial areas felt disproportionate impact. This research effort was a close look at the experience of three vulnerable neighborhoods in the south of the city of Buenos Aires whose trajectories were similar in the first decades, but whose most recent experience and especially during the pandemic have been different. The question is why?

It is also necessary to say upfront that this is a distinctly urban story that takes place in real time and space. The research portrays the formation of barrios created by several generations

¹This study is the product of collective work by the OLA, including its Co-Directors, Margarita Gutman and Michael Cohen, New School graduate students including Lena Simet and Maria Belen Fodde, and the OLA team in Buenos Aires including Ileana Versace, Carolina Maglione, Julia Nesprias, Matias Ruiz Diaz, Carolina Diaz, Daniela Vago, Cecilia Cabrera, and Barbara Mora.

of residents who found no other place to live in the city, settled on secluded and low land, and lived and continue to live in precariousness, both material in their homes, services, and infrastructure, as in their job possibilities.

As in poor neighborhoods around the world—whether in Nairobi, Rio de Janeiro, or the Bronx—these barrios became battlefields in the struggle against the pandemic in areas where the virus attacked vulnerable populations. This study showed that, in each neighborhood, the virus is faced with a varied battery of actions and collective efforts to protect the health and survival of families and individuals. The outcomes are necessarily consequences of multiple patterns of causation.

Comparing the Impact of COVID-19 in Three Poor Neighborhoods in Buenos Aires

This research seeks to explain why some barrios in Buenos Aires have been able to respond more effectively than others to the challenges of COVID-19. It focuses on three low-income neighborhoods, each with roughly 30,000 residents, which have felt significantly different impacts of the pandemic from March to end October 2020. The study examines the public health impacts of COVID-19 and the responses of the national government, Buenos Aires City Government, and community organizations to the virus at the level of the territory of three neighborhoods: Villa 20, Villa 15, and Villa 1-11-14. Three factors affecting these responses have been studied:

- 1) the historical conditions creating each neighborhood and the historic efforts by public institutions and community organizations to improve housing, infrastructure, and social services,
- 2) the pre-COVID-19 material conditions of each neighborhood, from housing conditions, access to water supply, sanitation, public space, health services, and others, and
- 3) the impact of policies and programs by national and municipal governmental institutions in interaction with community organizations.

In March 2020, with the aim of preventing the spread of the virus, the National Government of Argentina established a lockdown called the Social, Preventive and Mandatory Isolation (ASPO), that limited circulation to essential personnel during the health emergency.² In this context, a battery of economic and health measures was announced, with the purpose of transferring income and strengthening subsidies, as well as providing health care. Among these policies, the government created the Strategic Testing Device for Coronavirus in Argentine territory (DetectAr) program whose purpose was the early detection and isolation of suspicious cases.³

From the beginning, living conditions in slums were a challenge to effectively comply with the isolation measures. For this reason, the National Ministry of Social Development

² National decree 297/2020

³ <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/coronavirus/detectar>

designed a program called "The Neighborhood takes care of the Neighborhood" to support community social isolation in informal neighborhoods.⁴

In the case of Buenos Aires City, the Ministry of Human Development and Habitat of the City Government of Buenos Aires identified different axes of action for all informal settlements. These actions aimed at guaranteeing the provision of food, the identification of new cases, the isolation of people with COVID-19 and their close contacts through the DetectAr program, the dissemination of preventive information, as well as the improvement of urban hygiene and the resolution of problems related to basic services connections.

The Ministry decided that the City's Housing Institute (IVC) would be the agency in charge of carrying out these policies in most informal neighborhoods. During the evolution of the pandemic between the months of March and October 2020, some slums in the city, close to each other and with a similar socioeconomic composition, have had a **different response capacity**, registering fewer cases and deaths from COVID-19 than other informal neighborhoods.

This research, therefore, studied the causes that determined the capacity and speed of response to the spread of the virus. Although similar actions were undertaken in the three neighborhoods, the performance of each of them in terms of the evolution of the virus was uneven. More specifically, Villa 1-1 1-14 registered a significant number of cases at the beginning of the pandemic compared to the other two. This research sought to understand which were the factors that determined these differences, analyzing the situation prior to the pandemic and delving into the interrelated actions carried out since March 2020 between the local government and the social, political and community organizations of each neighborhood.

As noted above, this work is based on two previous research projects focused on Villa 20. The first demonstrated the potential of implementing a participatory strategy for decision-making during the Comprehensive Re-urbanization Project (PIRU) developed by the IVC.⁵ A second project on Villa 20 developed during the COVID-19 pandemic allowed observations about how participatory tools created during the PIRU contributed to the work during the crisis.⁶ Based on these experiences, and for the purposes of this analysis, it is argued that the differences in responsiveness in poor neighborhoods have depended on at least three major factors. The first one refers to the **historical development** of each of the neighborhoods. A second factor are the **social conditions when the pandemic started**. Finally, a third factor addresses **the recent interventions of different government agencies in these neighborhoods**, especially considering the networks built with the local stakeholders.

This last factor is particularly important for this work, as the role of the State and the networks built in recent years have been very different in the three villas. At the beginning of the pandemic, Villa 20's redevelopment project was highly advanced, including the construction of houses, the opening of streets and the construction of infrastructure, as a result of the multiple

⁴<https://www.argentina.gob.ar/noticias/carolina-brandariz-el-barrio-cuida-al-barrio-es-un-programa-que-fortalece-las-medidas-de>

⁵ OLA (2020).

⁶ Diaz, C.; Fodde, M.B.; Maglioni, C.; Ruiz Diaz, M.; Vago, D. (2020).

participatory processes. In Villa 1-11-14, there were discussions about an urbanization plan and a census had been carried out. However, convening all relevant actors continued to be a challenge, and no investments had been made in relevant infrastructure work. Finally, in Villa 15, a new approach to the neighborhood had recently been initiated with the move of the MDHYH building to the neighborhood and the execution of small-scale infrastructure works, but no significant actions were carried out towards redevelopment.

This research aims to demonstrate that the **depth of the previous links** between the government and the social, political and community organizations was a key in the **response capacity** of each of the neighborhoods, which affected the **speed of implementation** of the mitigation actions. This difference resulted in a **slower growth in the number of cases**, which allowed **more time** to organize interventions. This could explain why, with similar intervention logics, assistance had a better performance in some neighborhoods than in others.

Towards Some Conclusions

The study concluded that this combination of factors has enabled the capacity of these communities to develop in different ways, with some more able to mobilize more quickly than others to unexpected hazards and risks. This capacity demonstrates what has been termed “collective efficacy,” referring to the internal capacity of groups to recognize problems and to mobilize to find solutions and effective responses.⁷ It is a more specific characteristic of agency than “social capital,” which has also been used to explain the capacity of groups of people or organizations.⁸

In particular the study shows that Villa 20, which experienced a major infrastructure and housing upgrading program led by the IVC, with the intensive participation of community organizations and individuals, was able to strengthen its capacity to respond to the unexpected crisis of COVID-19. This response resulted in fewer cases and fewer deaths, as well as a slower rate of infection.

As noted above, the study is an explicitly “urban” study, focusing on three neighborhoods in Buenos Aires, and seeks to understand collective efficacy as both an outcome of diverse factors and as a potential causal force itself. These factors interact in a process of cumulative causation to produce what Robert Sampson has referred to as “neighborhood effects.”⁹ In this case, the study of the recent history of the three neighborhoods illustrates and explains why Villa 20 has been able to have a lower incidence and impact of COVID-19 than the others. This research, while based on fieldwork and on-the-ground observation, also places these neighborhoods within the broader urban spatial structure of the city.

⁷ Robert Sampson, Great American City: Chicago and the Enduring Neighborhood Effect, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003)

⁸ Robert Putnam, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000)

⁹ Robert Sampson, op.cit.

The research team benefitted from close contact with public health specialists in the city government in Buenos Aires and access to current COVID-19 data for the three neighborhoods. The team was aware of many studies by public health experts in other countries who have examined the many relationships between neighborhood dynamics and public health outcomes. Indeed, there are more than 20 published research review articles about the link between “neighborhood effects” and health outcomes, showing literally thousands of studies in the United States alone on subjects such as obesity, smoking, cancer, and mental health problems each in relation to specific kinds of neighborhoods and their patterns of historical development.¹⁰ This point was made very well two decades ago by Argentine public health expert Dr. Ana Diez Roux who argued that neighborhood differences need to be related to “upstream determinants.”¹¹

There are many studies of the methodologies used in this research area, showing the many technical pitfalls and incorrect inferences which can be made. In Latin America there are some initial studies of the spread of contagion in favelas in Fortaleza, Brazil, as well as studies showing how the demarcation of neighborhoods affects the conclusions about the incidence and impact of disease.¹²

It is worth reiterating that this study is notable, because, while the whole world had been affected by COVID-19 during 2020, there are very few studies of how neighborhoods have actually coped with the many challenges that the pandemic has brought. This lack of attention to collective efficacy or neighborhood capacity is surprising, because while the COVID-19 pandemic is a global experience, it is felt differently at local levels.

It is hoped that this study can offer some insights into areas of public policy that can be strengthened to prepare for unexpected events and dangers in the future.

¹⁰ Mariana Arcaya, Reginald Tucker-Seeley, Rockli Kim, Alina Schnake-Mahl, Marvin So, and SV Subramanian; “Research on Neighborhood Effects on Health in the United States: A Systematic Review of Study Characteristics,” Social Science and Medicine, Volume 168, November 2016, pp.16-29

¹¹ Ana Diez Roux, “Investigating neighborhood and area effects on health,” American Journal of Public Health, Vol.91, No.11, 2000, pp.1783-1789

¹² For example, see Simone M Santos, Dora Chor, Guiherme Loureiro Werneck, “Demarcation of local neighborhoods to study relations between contextual factors and health,” International Journal of Health Geography, June 2010, Volume 9, No.34.