



## WHERE PLACE MATTERS MOST: YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR FUTURE

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*Abstract: In the United States, race, place, and poverty are highly intertwined. This is especially important to recognize in early-childhood systems building. This resource brief shows, through an analysis of the country's census tracts by their rates of child poverty, that the poorest census tracts are also the "richest" in young children; are highly segregated by race; are the places where a large portion of African American, Native American, and Hispanic children start their lives; and are characterized by other educational, social, employment, and wealth characteristics that impact young children's physical, social, emotional, cognitive, and economic environment. The brief concludes that early-childhood systems building efforts need to place special emphasis on developing resources for young children and their families within these neighborhoods through both individual services and community-building resources that are culturally and linguistically responsive.*

*Place Matters: Metropolitcs for the Twenty-First Century*<sup>1</sup> represents an exhaustive analysis of the problem of rising inequality across neighborhoods in American's metropolitan communities and the necessity of focusing on place in fashioning new urban policies. *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*<sup>2</sup> provides a wealth of family experiences, augmented with data, to show that place makes a profound difference in an individual's opportunities for realizing the American Dream. Both emphasize that physical, economic, social, and human capital are intertwined and that realizing the human potential is dependent not only on personal ability and perseverance but on the opportunities – social, economic, and physical – that are available and that such opportunities are often geographically bounded. These works should be essential reading for anyone engaged in urban demography and metropolitan planning and developing approaches to poverty reduction that extend beyond individually based services. Both also point to the damage produced by segregation and marginalization of families – by race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status (which highly intertwine). The Equality of Opportunity Project has focused on

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<sup>1</sup> Dreier, P, Mollenkopf, J, & Swanstrom, T (2014). Dreier, P, Mollenkopf, J, & Swanstrom, T (2014). *Place Matters: Metropolitcs for the Twenty-First Century. Third Edition, Revised.* University Press of Kansas.

<sup>2</sup> Putnam, R (2015). *Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis.* Simon & Schuster.

place as a factor as related to healthy child development, including original research on relocating families from high-poverty to lower-poverty neighborhoods and the impacts on children.<sup>3</sup>

None of these works, however, focuses much attention on what place means for young children – and for developing early-childhood systems in particular. *Village Building and School Readiness: Closing Opportunity Gaps in a Diverse Society*<sup>4</sup> provided an overview of how community-building as well as individual service strategies need to be a part of state and community early-childhood systems development work, but its demographic analysis of “high child vulnerability neighborhoods” – based on the 2000 census – is now dated.

This report updates the demographic analysis in *Village Building and School Readiness* and confirms the profound differences, by geographic location, that young children – and particularly children of color – face not only in terms of their family’s own socio-economic position but that of their neighborhood. It draws on available census data and tract-level information to categorize all U.S. census tracts in terms of child-poverty rates. It is reported here for the nation as a whole, but is available for every state and for the District of Columbia.

This report is based upon a well-known fact. **Place matters most for very young children – first in the safety and security of their home environment and, as they begin to explore the world outside their home, in their immediate environment and neighborhood.** Particularly when children are birth-to-2, there is compelling research from many disciplines (the P.A.R.E.N.T.S. Science, see appendix) that the most foundational element to physical, cognitive, emotional, and social health and development is a safe, stable, and nurturing home environment. Before children reach school age, it is particularly critical that they have safe and supportive environments – within and beyond their immediate home – to explore their worlds. While the census does not provide information on the proximity of parks, recreation programs, community centers, and family- and child-friendly places, in particular, it can provide sufficient proxies to point to tracts and neighborhoods where special attention is warranted.

The following are key findings from this report:

**Poor neighborhoods are rich in young children.**

Children are the age group in American society most likely to live in poverty, with the highest rates of poverty among very young children. Since the start of the War on Poverty a half century ago, the poverty rate among seniors has been reduced by two-thirds, but child poverty has actually risen. In 1966, poverty among those over 65 was 28.5 percent, but declined to 9.1 percent in 2012. Meanwhile, child poverty in 1966 among children was 17.6 percent, and rose to 21.8 percent in 2012. The young child (0-4) poverty rate is generally about 3 percent higher than overall child poverty rate.

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<sup>3</sup> Chetty, R, Hendren, N, & Katz, L (forthcoming). “The Effects of Exposure to Better Neighborhoods Upon Children: New Evidence from the Moving to Opportunity Project,” *American Economic Review*. Retrieved at: <http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/index.php/papers>.

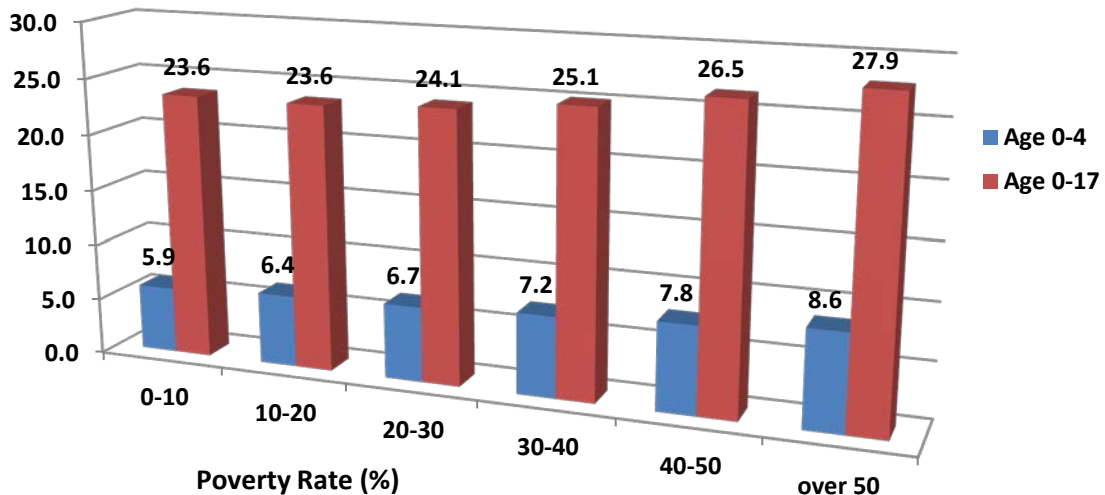
<sup>4</sup> Bruner, C (2007). *Village Building and School Readiness: Closing Opportunity Gaps in a Diverse Society*. State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network.

Poverty, and particularly child poverty, is not spread evenly across states and communities. Some neighborhoods have much greater rates of child poverty. As census tracts increase in their child poverty rates, they have larger proportions of children, and young children in particular.

This means, at a very basic level, they need that many more parks, playgrounds, early-childhood programs and services, and family- and child-friendly gathering spots than other neighborhoods. Willie Sutton said, “I rob banks because that is where the money is,” and this in itself is a reason for focusing attention on poor census tracts and neighborhoods in early-childhood systems building.

As Chart One shows, as census tracts move from rates of child poverty below 10 percent to rates of child poverty above 50 percent, the proportion of young children goes from 5.9 percent of the total population to 8.6 percent of the total population – an increase of 46 percent. This means, on average, at a minimum, the country’s poorest neighborhoods require half again as many early-childhood services and supports on a per capita basis as the least poor ones.

**CHART ONE**  
**Children Age 0-17 and Young Children Age 0-4**  
**as Proportion of Population**  
**by Census Tract Child Poverty Rates**



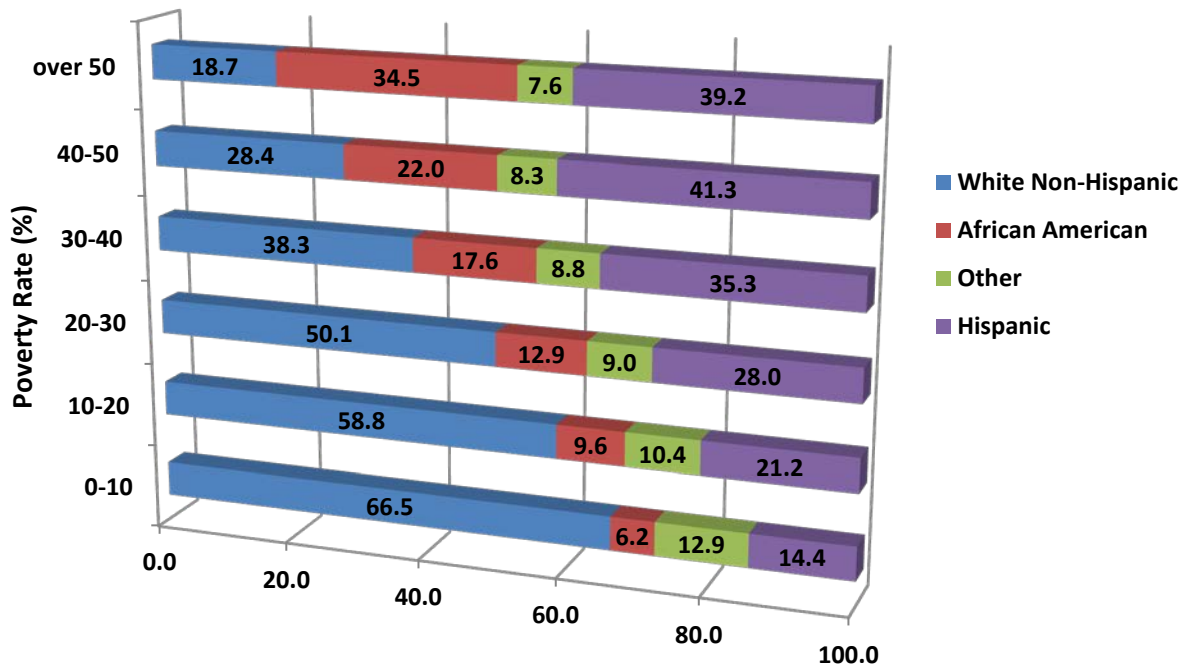
**Poor neighborhoods are very disproportionately where children of color live.**

While it is important to focus on poor neighborhoods when developing early-childhood systems simply because they have large proportions of young children, the responses also need to reflect the different ethnic, cultural, and language composition of the children and families in these neighborhoods. There is substantial segregation in American society not only by socio-economic status and poverty levels, but also by race and ethnicity.

As census tract poverty rates increase, they shift from being populated primarily by white, non-Hispanic individuals (and children and young children) to being populated by individuals and children of color. While some affluent neighborhoods are diverse, most have a clearly dominant culture make-up (white, non-Hispanic), both among the adult population and the child population. Neighborhoods with the highest proportions of child poverty, however, are very disproportionately of color – particularly African American, Native American or Hispanic.

Chart Two shows that the racial and ethnic composition of census tracts vary greatly by levels of child poverty. Over 82 percent of young children in the nation’s poorest of the census tracts are of color. While individual census tracts may be largely African American, Hispanic, or Native American, these tracts consist of young children growing up within a non-dominant culture community – and doing so with much less economic capital and many more challenging meeting basic needs.

**CHART TWO**  
**Young Child Population (under age 5)**  
**by Race/Ethnicity and Child Poverty**

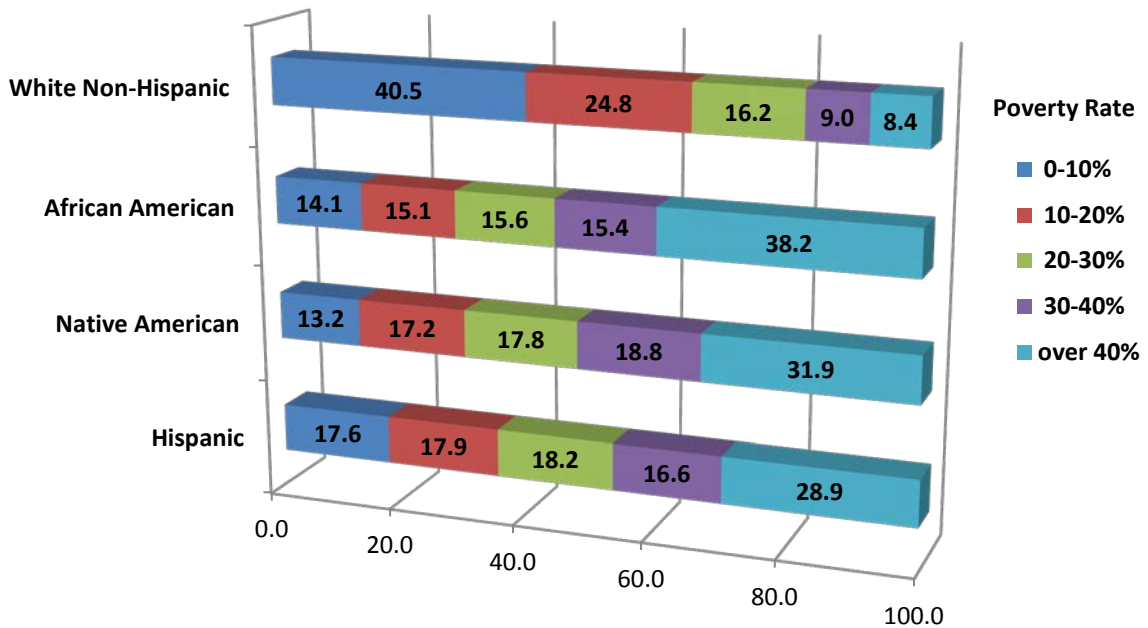


In poorer neighborhoods, it is critical that there be cultural reciprocity and additional efforts to support and develop early-childhood leadership and service provision from within those neighborhoods.

In terms of proportions, closing current health, education, wealth, and other disparities by race and ethnicity requires particular attention to addressing the needs of children in the poorest census tracts. Chart Three shows the overall share of the young child population, by race and ethnicity, living in different settings – to show that, if racial and ethnic disparities are to be

reduced, it will require reducing disparities that exist by neighborhood. While 8.4 percent of white, non-Hispanic children live in census tracts where the poverty rate is above 40 percent, 38.2 percent of African Americans, 31.9 percent of Native Americans, and 28.9 percent of Hispanics do. More than half of all children of color, but only one in six white, non-Hispanic children, live in neighborhoods where child poverty exceeds 30 percent, often considered a key threshold when comparing broad neighborhood effects on individual growth and development.

**CHART THREE**  
**Proportion of all Young Children Living in Different Tracts**



**Differences in terms of income, wealth, education, and social structure are profound and require community-building as well as individual service attention.**

While innate human capital exists in all communities, that human capital is developed and realized in the context of the opportunities that exist. For young children they are focused around the neighborhood. Place-based research and analysis has shown that poorer neighborhoods are characterized by much less physical, economic, and social capital than more affluent ones. The census largely includes information about people living in a given census tract and not the tract’s physical conditions, but it is sufficient to provide a picture of income, wealth, and education levels and some aspects of structural make-up (family structure and home ownership). It even includes a little information about young children (family-reported participation in preschool).

There is some discussion of a “tipping point” in terms of the fabric of a neighborhood or community: the point when the conditions themselves present barriers to any child’s growth and opportunity. The more distressed a neighborhood, the more the daily toll of seeking to get by and stay safe produces stress and impacts resiliency. The more disinvested a neighborhood,

the fewer models or reference points for success exist on which children and their families can pin realistic hopes for their own likelihood of becoming successful. At some point, there must not only be a focus on individually based services and supports for young children and their families, but for community-building activities to support and strengthen the community’s overall capacity to support its children. Whether this is at 20 percent, 30 percent, or 40 percent of poverty, there is a point at which there is a need to recognize that the experienced “norm” within a neighborhood is outside the bounds of the American dream and actions have to be taken that involve community-building as well as providing individual services and supports.

While there is no individual measure from the census directly tied to the social, physical, and economic capital in neighborhoods, there are sufficient indicators that, taken together, can shed light on the differences that exist by neighborhood in this respect. Table One provides a set of indicators that provide a starting picture for these differences (their selection is explained more fully in *Village Building and School Readiness*<sup>5</sup>).

**TABLE ONE**

**National Average Tract Rate by Child Poverty Category for Vulnerability Factors**

	Census Tracts by Child Poverty Rates (%)					
	0-10	10-20	20-30	30-40	40-50	50+
Pct. families with children that are single parent	24.6	32.4	38.4	43.9	49.5	60.1
Pct. youth age 16-19 not working or in school	5.4	7.8	10.0	12.1	13.8	16.4
Pct. households with interest, dividend or rent income	30.1	22.1	17.7	14.3	11.2	8.2
Pct. households with wage income	78.3	75.6	73.6	72.2	70.9	66.4
Pct. households receiving public assistance	1.5	2.4	3.2	4.0	5.2	7.2
Pct. adults over age 25 with no high school degree	7.3	12.2	16.5	21.1	25.2	28.8
Pct. adults over age 25 with college degree	41.1	27.0	21.0	17.6	14.9	12.7
Pct. adults over age 18 with limited English	5.7	7.4	9.5	12.9	15.8	15.2
Pct. owner-occupied housing	75.2	69.4	64.1	57.6	50.9	41.4
Pct. children age 3-5 in preschool	49.1	41.7	38.8	37.0	36.5	37.3
Pct. of children in poverty	4.1	14.8	24.8	34.7	44.5	62.0

While they can be augmented by additional administrative data, these indicators, all available from the census, together provide a picture of the characteristics of neighborhoods across the various capitals (economic, physical, social, and human) that constitute the elements of a “village” needed to support families in raising their children.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 13-14.

**Every state has such disparities, but states differ in the composition of their poor neighborhoods and the young children most affected.**

While this report provides data at a national level, it also is available by state. There is wide variation across states in their child population's racial and ethnic composition, child poverty levels, and prevalence of tracts and neighborhoods with very high rates of child poverty, but the contrasts across census tracts and neighborhoods in terms of the above data all hold.

Moreover, it is at the state and community levels that this information can best be actually mapped – identifying the physical boundaries of high child-poverty census tracts and augmenting this information with other available administrative data on social, physical, and economic capital. The *School Readiness Resource Guide and Toolkit*<sup>6</sup> offers some guidance to state and community advocates and policy makers to produce that analysis. Ultimately, this is critical to early-childhood systems building, as the development of new or additional services and supports for young children must give consideration to their location and be accessible by those who most need them.

**Achieving equity of opportunity for young children requires attention to place and to the intertwined issues of poverty, place, and race.**

There is increasing attention within the early-childhood world to equity and to designing culturally and linguistically appropriate, responsive, and reciprocal services and countering bias (personal, institutional, and structural) when it appears in the lives of young children and their families. As this analysis shows, poverty, place, and race are intertwined. The diversity of America's population, and its child population in particular, can and should be a strength – particularly in an increasingly international economy. This will not occur, however, unless explicit attention is focused on developing equitable responses starting in the earliest years.

*From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*<sup>7</sup>, a seminal work in the early-childhood field linking brain science with early-childhood systems, has an apt title that speaks to the need for both “thinking globally and acting locally.” It also presents both an opportunity and a challenge to early-childhood advocates and systems builders in terms of these critical issues of responding to poverty, place, and race:

*[C]hildren in families of European origin [soon] will make up less than 50 percent of the population under five. These demographic realities suggest both promising opportunities and potentially sobering challenges. The opportunities offered by a multicultural society that is cohesive and inclusive are virtually boundless – including the richness that comes from a broad diversity of skills and talents, and the vitality that is fueled by a range of interests and perspectives. The challenges posed by a multicultural society that is*

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<sup>6</sup> Bruner, C (2007). *School Readiness Resource Guide and Toolkit: Using Neighborhood Data to Spur Action*. State Early Childhood Policy Technical Assistance Network and National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership.

<sup>7</sup> Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development (2000). *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. National Research Council: Institute of Medicine.

*fragmented and exclusive are daunting – including the wasted human capital that is undermined by prejudice and discrimination, and the threat of civil disorder precipitated by bigotry and hatred.*<sup>8</sup>

Note: This resource brief was developed by the Child and Family Policy Center in partnership with the National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership of the Urban Institute. The Urban Institute conducted the census tract data compilations on which the tables and charts are based. These are available at both the national level and for every state, with further information on the specific census tracts within each state at each level. It is based on an earlier analysis of 2000 census data by Charles Bruner.

Charles Bruner is the lead author of this brief. Leah Hendey and Shiva Kooragarala produced the data and contributed analysis.

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<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p. 65.



## **Appendix**

### **P.A.R.E.N.T.S. Science**

The P.A.R.E.N.T.S Science brings together research across different disciplines to help advocates, providers, and policy makers better understand that to ensure children’s healthy development there must be an ecological approach that includes services and supports to the child’s family and community. In the earliest years of life, the safety, stability, and nurturing in the home environment is absolutely essential to ensuring a positive health trajectory throughout life.

**Protective Factors.** *Drawing from the risk and protective factors research, the Center for the Study of Social Policy has identified five key protective factors to prevent child abuse and neglect and support healthy development in young children: (1) concrete services in times of need, (2) knowledge of child development, (3) resiliency, (4) social ties, and (5) supportive child environments and activities.*

**Advverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs).** *Drawing on adult reports of adverse experiences in childhood, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has shown a strong relationship between those adverse experiences in childhood and health morbidity among adults across both physical and mental health.*

**Resiliency.** *The research on resiliency—at the individual, family, school and community level—has shown the importance of fostering resiliency to ensuring healthy development. The American Academy of Pediatrics has established a working group to further promote resiliency in health practice.*

**Epigenerics.** *Recent findings from the science of genetics show that early childhood experiences can even affect genetic make-up and therefore transmission to the next generation.*

**Neurobiology.** *While there is a great deal of plasticity in the brain, neurobiology has shown the critical importance of the first years of life to not only set the foundation for cognitive development, but establish the basis for healthy social and emotional development.*

**Toxic Stress.** *The Harvard Center for the Developing Child has identified persistent, unrelieved and unmitigated stress as “toxic” to the development of the infant and toddler brain at the its most critical period of development – and the need for early interventions to ensure that stresses in early childhood do not produce toxicity.*

**Social Determinants of Health.** *The World Health Organization and Healthy People 2020 both describe the primary contribution that social determinants—as opposed to bio-medical determinants—have on child development and adult morbidity and mortality. For young children, addressing these social determinants requires addressing stress, discrimination, and social and economic disadvantage.*