

# Temporal effects of distressed housing on early childhood risk factors and kindergarten readiness☆



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## ABSTRACT

Poor housing quality and housing crises have been linked to adverse outcomes for children. However, few studies have focused on the early childhood period or been able to pinpoint how the timing and duration of housing problems contributes to early educational success. This longitudinal study draws on linked administrative records from housing, education, social service and health agencies to examine the influence of exposure to housing neighborhood conditions since birth on school readiness of all children entering kindergarten over a four-year period in a big city school system. Using marginal structural models that properly account for dynamic housing and neighborhood selection, we find that children exposed to problematic housing and disadvantaged neighborhoods have lower kindergarten readiness scores after accounting for other factors. The negative effects of housing problems on kindergarten readiness are partially mediated by child maltreatment incidences, residential instability, and elevated blood lead levels. Communities are advised to pay more attention to distressed housing as a cause of disparities in early child development and school readiness.

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## 1. Introduction

Socio-economic inequalities in children's cognitive skills at school entry are significantly higher in the US than in the UK, Canada or Australia (Bradbury, Corak, Waldfogel, & Washbrook, 2015). While it is generally acknowledged that the environment in which children spend their early years is crucial, little is known specifically about how housing conditions, both in children's own family homes and the immediately surrounding areas, factor into disparities in early literacy skills and kindergarten readiness. A main challenge in studying the effect of housing and neighborhoods environments on children's development is that housing and neighborhoods are not exogenously assigned to the child's family. Rather, selection into environments is influenced by household characteristics beyond those that are commonly observed by the researcher. A strength of this study is that we are able to leverage our unique longitudinal data to address selection and thus, reduce estimation bias relative to analyses based on survey or cross sectional data. This population-based study has two main purposes: (1) To examine

the cumulative impact of housing distress on early literacy skills for all children entering kindergarten over a four-year period in a big city school system, and (2) To explore the influence of housing problems on selected risk factors for early development including child maltreatment, residential instability and lead exposure.

The focus of this study on housing and early literacy skills as an aspect of kindergarten readiness is justified because there is considerable evidence that exposure to stressful circumstances, environmental hazards and less than optimal early environments negatively affect early cognitive and socio-emotional development (Evans, Gonnella, Marcynyszyn, Gentile, & Salpekar, 2005; Martin, Razza, & Brooks-Gunn, 2012), that these influences are cumulative (Appleyard, Egeland, Dulmen, & Sroufe, 2005; Evans, 2003) and that disadvantages shown at kindergarten entry tend to persist over time (Duncan et al., 2007; Hart, Petrill, Deckard, & Thompson, 2007). Children growing up in low-income households and poor neighborhoods experience these negative conditions at higher rates compared to children living in better circumstances, which contributes to well-documented disparities in educational outcomes. This study adds to our knowledge about the specific role that housing plays in early development because it examines the influence of a wide range of housing exposures on the young child, both in the residential home and from the surrounding properties. These include characteristics of the housing stock and indicators of disinvestment such as foreclosure, vacancy and abandonment. Such indicators of housing distress grew enormously following the mortgage

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crisis in the late 2000's, but the effects on early childhood have yet to be examined, even though >2 million children are estimated to have been touched by foreclosure (Lovell & Isaacs, 2008).

## 2. Background and conceptual framework

Based on a detailed review of the literature on housing and child development, Leventhal and Newman (2010) argue that macro-level forces influence housing and neighborhood conditions, which in turn affect family processes and child outcomes. Additionally, they contend that family background factors play a role in families' selection into housing and neighborhoods and numerous child characteristics influence family processes and child development outcomes. We adapt this framework to focus on housing-related effects on early school readiness and the micro and macro processes uniquely captured in our longitudinal data on children and properties (see Fig. 1).

### 2.1. Housing and early school success: theory and mechanisms

From an ecological-developmental perspective (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000), educational success in the early grades is influenced by a number of factors, including those emerging from the home and neighborhood environments (Duncan & Magnuson, 2011; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Multiple pathways appear to account for the connection between ecological disadvantage in early childhood and markers of school achievement (Dupere, Leventhal, Crosnoe, & Dion, 2010). Of greatest relevance to the current study are those mechanisms that plausibly link the experiences of families with their housing and surrounding properties to early education success: family stress, residential instability, and toxic environmental exposures.

#### 2.1.1. Family stress and child maltreatment

Housing problems can affect early school success through disruptions to adequate parenting (Leventhal & Newman, 2010). It is well documented that attentive, responsive and consistent parenting is critical to early learning and cognitive development (Bradley, Corwyn, Burchinal, McAdoo, & Coll, 2001), but these parental behaviors are often compromised for those in disadvantaged circumstances (Evans, 2004). Housing problems and neighborhood conditions undoubtedly bear some of the responsibility for lapses in parenting through their

impact on parent's stress levels and mental health (Klebanov, Brooks-Gunn, & Duncan, 1994) and the everyday chaos that occurs in difficult housing circumstances (Evans et al., 2005). One of the few housing studies that focused on young children found that elevated levels of behavioral problems could be explained in part by the adverse influence of bad housing conditions on mother's psychological distress (Coley, Leventhal, Lynch, & Kull, 2013).

Child maltreatment, arguably an indicator of extreme parenting failure, might be an additional explanation for the link between housing problems and school readiness. Children that are the subject of child maltreatment investigations have been shown to have diminished chances of early school success (Fantuzzo & Perlman, 2007), and a number of studies demonstrate that neighborhoods with distressed housing have increased rates of child maltreatment (Coulton, Crampton, Irwin, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2007). Housing crises may also contribute to parenting stress and child maltreatment as suggested by a recent study that found an increased risk of child maltreatment investigations in households that were in the process of mortgage foreclosures (Berger et al., 2015).

#### 2.1.2. Residential instability

Another pathway through which housing problems can affect early learning outcomes is the disruptions associated with frequent moves. Though evidence seems to suggest that residential movement per se is not harmful once other risk factors are taken into account (Hango, 2006), frequent mobility has been shown to have negative consequences for child development (Astone & McLanahan, 1994; Pribesh & Downey, 1999; Wood, Halfon, Scarlata, Newacheck, & Nessim, 1993). One of the few studies that focused specifically on early childhood found residential instability to be inversely associated with cognitive and social development at age 5, particularly for children in low-income families (Ziol-Guest & McKenna, 2014). Additionally, research shows that residential instability in the early years has direct effects on parental behaviors that are considered abusive or neglectful and on self-reported parenting stress levels (Warren & Font, 2015).

Housing problems undoubtedly play a role in the high levels of residential instability that have been documented among poor households (Gasper, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2010; Pribesh & Downey, 1999). In particular, housing crises rather than strategic choices to relocate to better neighborhoods or employment opportunities are responsible for a

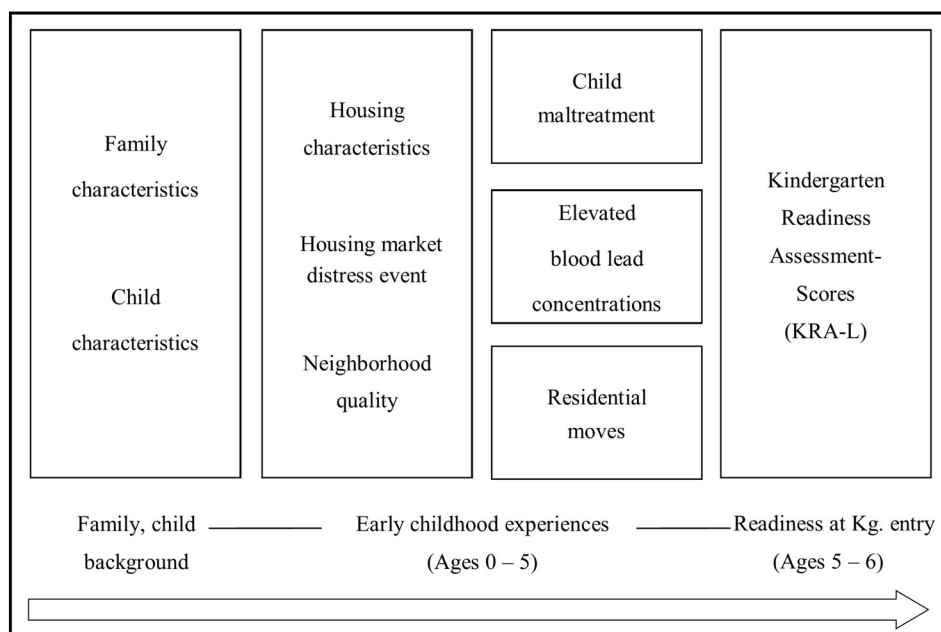


Fig. 1. Hypothesized relationships between housing, mediators, and kindergarten readiness.

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