



# ACE, Place, Race, and Poverty: Building Hope for Children

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## ABSTRACT

Adverse childhood experiences research has focused attention on the importance of family safety, stability, and nurturing in ensuring healthy development. This safety, stability, and nurturing can be compromised by family poverty, discrimination and marginalization, and geographic location. Drawing upon census data, this report shows that place, race, and poverty are intertwined concepts with particular implications for young children. Examining census tracts according to their levels of poverty shows that the poorest census tracts also: 1) are the “richest” in the proportion of young children, 2) have the least realized social, physical, and educational, as well as economic capital, and 3) are highly racially segregated and separated from many sources of economic opportunity. The implications are that the country’s poorest neighborhoods require substan-

tially more supports for young children but currently have many fewer. This includes individual services to young children and their families but also publicly available services and voluntary supports, such as parks, playgrounds, and libraries. These data suggest that improving child health trajectories and reducing health disparities according to race and socioeconomic status therefore will require concerted individual service as well as community-building efforts directed to poor and usually racially segregated neighborhoods and communities.

**KEYWORDS:** adverse childhood experiences; childhood trauma; children; neighborhood; poverty; race; social determinants of health

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THE SEMINAL ADVERSE childhood experiences (ACEs) research<sup>1</sup> has focused new attention on going beyond providing access to medical care to address health disparities and paying greater attention to children’s healthy development and the social determinants of health (SDH) to improve overall population health. At the same time, the focus on ACEs, particularly the set of indicators generally used to show associations between adversity and health, can lead to a set of responses around incident-specific diagnoses and trauma-informed care that only scratch the surface in responding to health disparities that are the consequence of ACEs and the absence of other supportive factors in the child’s life.<sup>2</sup> Above all, this report calls for a much broader emphasis on the influences of the family, community, and SDH on healthy child development, particularly at the neighborhood level.

The World Health Organization defines SDH as “...the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age. These circumstances are shaped by the distribution of money, power and resources at global, national and local levels.”<sup>3</sup> Because of the foundational effect of SDH on the health of children and families, combined with the “new science of thriving”<sup>4</sup> and new knowledge on epigenetics and social-emotional neurocognitive development, it is not surprising that Healthy People 2020 has

incorporated goals for economic stability (poverty), social and community context, and neighborhood and the built environment to improve population health.<sup>5</sup>

In this article we first examine census data to show disparities among and the intertwined relationships between race, place, and poverty. Importantly, this national-level information can be disaggregated and used by states and communities to begin to determine what community-building steps to consider as they work to produce needed change. We next examine how these SDH increase the risk of childhood adversity, with a particular focus on race, place, and poverty, drawing upon a larger body of research than is generally referenced when ACEs are discussed in policy circles. This places a greater emphasis on building social and economic capital and community assets as primary strategies for improving child health. We conclude the analysis with recommendations to reduce ACEs at the local level by focusing on family, neighborhood, and community factors.

## ACTIONABLE DATA ON RACE, PLACE, AND YOUNG CHILDREN

Making use of the 2000 census, Village Building and School Readiness<sup>6</sup> provides an analysis of the characteristics of all census tracts in the United States according to

their child-raising vulnerability, as well as describes needed and successful strategies to improve children's healthy development and readiness for school. This part updates that analysis, examining and categorizing census tracts according to their levels of child poverty. It confirms the profound differences, according to geographic location, that young children—and particularly children of color—face not only in terms of their own family's socioeconomic position but in terms of the neighborhoods in which they live. Although the census cannot provide information on the proximity of parks, recreation programs, community centers, and family- and child-friendly places, it can provide sufficient proxies for these to point to tracts and neighborhoods where special attention is warranted.

The following are key findings from the census tract analysis.

1. Poor neighborhoods are rich in young children.

Children are more likely than other age groups in American society to live in poverty, with the highest rates of poverty among very young children. Child poverty, however, is not spread evenly across states and communities. Some neighborhoods have much greater rates of child poverty. As census tracts increase in their overall child poverty rates, they also have larger proportions of children, and young children in particular. As Figure 1 shows, as census tracts move from rates of child poverty below 10% to rates of child poverty above 50%, the proportion of young children goes from 5.9% to 8.6% of the total population, an increase of 46%. This means, at a minimum, the country's poorest neighborhoods require half again as many early childhood services as the most affluent neighborhoods. At a very basic level, they also need more parks, playgrounds, and family- and child-friendly gathering spots to promote healthy social and emotional development.

2. Poor neighborhoods are very disproportionately home to children of color.

Although it is important to focus on poor neighborhoods when developing early childhood systems simply because they have large proportions of young children, the re-

sponses also need to reflect the different ethnic, cultural, and language composition of the children and families in these neighborhoods. Figure 2 shows that the racial and ethnic composition of census tracts varies greatly according to their levels of child poverty. The nation's poorest census tracts are disproportionately of color—for example, 81.3% of children living in census tracts with poverty rates greater than 50% are children of color. Further, Figure 3 shows that although 8.4% of white, non-Hispanic children live in census tracts where the poverty rate is >40%, 38.2% of African American children, 31.9% of Native American children, and 28.9% of Hispanic children do. More than half of all children of color, but only 1 in 6 white non-Hispanic children, live in neighborhoods where child poverty exceeds 30%, often considered key in comparing neighborhoods for their broader neighborhood effects on individual growth and development.<sup>7</sup> Although individual census tracts might be largely African American, Hispanic, or Native American, these tracts consist of young children who are growing up within a nondominant culture community—and doing so with much less economic capital and many more issues related to meeting basic needs. In such neighborhoods, it is critical there be cultural reciprocity and additional efforts to support and develop early childhood leadership and service provisions from within those neighborhoods.

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

Although innate human capital exists within all neighborhoods, that human capital is developed and realized in the context of the opportunities that exist. Place-based research and analysis has shown that poorer neighborhoods are characterized by much less physical, economic, educational, and social capital than more affluent ones.<sup>8–10</sup> The census largely includes information about people, and not physical conditions, but it has sufficient information to provide a picture that relates to a census tract's income, wealth, educational levels, and some aspects of structural makeup such as family structure and home

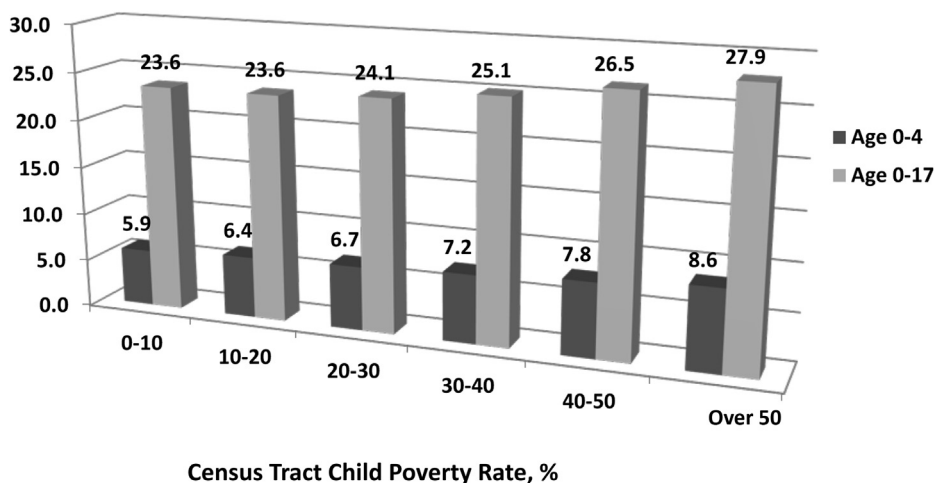


Figure 1. Children age 0 to 17 years and young children age 0 to 4 years as a proportion of population according to census tract child poverty rates.

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