

ADVANCING RACIAL EQUITY THROUGH NEIGHBORHOOD-INFORMED EARLY CHILDHOOD POLICIES: A RESEARCH AND POLICY REVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

Scientific research makes clear that children need consistent stimulating, nurturing, and responsive interactions and experiences in their daily lives in order to develop and grow up healthy. Meanwhile, scores of research show that children have systematically unequal chances of getting the experiences they need to grow up healthy due to insurmountable forces that lie outside of a family’s control, like systemic economic inequalities, racial segregation, and soaring cost burdens for raising a family (including housing, transportation, and child care) (Acevedo-Garcia et al., 2020). Because children develop more rapidly during their early years (birth to age four) than any other time in their lives, what happens during the critical early childhood development period lays the foundation for later health and development and has lasting effects into adulthood. Unfortunately, not all children in the U.S. are getting the early experiences they need to grow up healthy and to reach their full potential, disproportionately leaving children growing up in the dynamics of family poverty, and Black, Hispanic and Indigenous children with an unfair lack of opportunities for healthy development.

Recognizing the systematically unfair playing field that our youngest children face, U.S. early childhood policies intend to respond to this problem by helping children—especially developmentally vulnerable children who face unfair yet avoidable barriers to healthy development—gain access to the full web of nurturing, developmentally rich early care and learning experiences they need to thrive. And while many factors come together to influence whether children get the crucial experiences they need, this report focuses on one important factor that shapes children’s development and their access to early childhood services, resources, and programs: the neighborhood where a young child grows up.

While the idea that children’s family contexts shape their development is intuitive and well understood, a child’s *neighborhood* context—in its own right—is also a contributing part of a child’s developmental risk and resiliency profile. A child’s neighborhood shapes their developmental experiences in multiple ways and plays a role in their access to early care and educational services, resources and programs. Research shows however that many children face obstacles in their neighborhoods that put their developmental health at risk, while others have access to neighborhood conditions and opportunities that help them flourish. Moreover, despite the aspiration of our U.S. early childhood policies, not all developmentally vulnerable children in the U.S. have access to a robust network of early care and educational services, resources and programs in their immediate neighborhoods or nearby areas.

Since neighborhoods shape children’s vulnerability levels and their access to early care and learning, we may expect that U.S. early childhood policies systematically account for children’s neighborhood risk factors and neighborhood-level access to early childhood resources, programs and services. However, no policy reviews to date have examined how federal early childhood policies account for neighborhood factors, and whether “neighborhood-informed early childhood approaches” (see definitions, pp. 10-11) are frequently or consistently used.

We seek to fill this gap because considerable research indicates that neighborhood-informed approaches may advance the primary goals of U.S. early childhood policy: to ensure vulnerable children’s access to the early

experiences they need to grow and thrive. Research indicates that early childhood policies that fail to account for children's neighborhood-level risk factors operate on incomplete assessments of their developmental risk. Accurately assessing risk is central to early childhood policymaking, shaping the scope of and eligibility criteria for policies and programs, program design and implementation, and resource allocation and targeting, especially when resources are scarce. Likewise, policies that fail to account for children's neighborhood-level access to early childhood resources, services and programs lack a picture of what's truly accessible within families' geographic reach.

On both fronts, neighborhood-informed approaches offer policymakers a tool to assess more robustly children's vulnerability and to evaluate more precisely children's access to the early childhood supports and resources they need. Moreover, policies that account for children's neighborhood factors also function as a lever for addressing issues of racial equity, since children's neighborhood risk factors are systematically unequal by race, and neighborhood-level access can also be unequal by race.

This report synthesizes existing research and presents the findings of a novel policy review that together point to neighborhood-informed approaches as a potentially valuable tool for advancing the goals of U.S. early childhood policies. Neighborhood-informed approaches are not a silver bullet, and alone they cannot address the overarching policy challenges in the field, including insufficient investment, high unmet need, and the fragmentation of a mixed delivery system. However, our research synthesis indicates that neighborhood-informed approaches could play a role in improving policy efficiency, effectiveness and racial equity if more systematically integrated into federal early childhood policies. Particularly as the early care and learning field continues to expand and to rebuild and reform in the post-COVID-19 era with unprecedented investments from the American Rescue Plan, the findings of this report suggest that neighborhood-informed approaches warrant increased consideration from leaders and decision-makers in the field.

REPORT ROADMAP

Section 1 of this report summarizes research evidence about how a child's neighborhood shapes their early development, and in particular, how neighborhood factors can both increase a child's developmental risk and provide needed resources. We highlight research about inequalities in children's neighborhoods and outline how those neighborhood inequalities can translate into racial inequalities in developmental risk. Section 1 concludes by summarizing the research on how neighborhoods shape children's access to early care and education services, resources and programs. The research synthesis distills insights about how early childhood policies may be made more effective, efficient and equitable by accounting for children's neighborhood factors.

Section 2 brings together the two strands of research evidence discussed in Section 1 to envision and define what a research-based, systematic approach to neighborhood-informed early childhood policymaking may look like in the U.S. federal policy landscape. The framework we outline in Section 2 guides our policy research review in Section 3.

In Section 3, we examine existing levers that support neighborhood-informed early childhood policy and programmatic approaches. We conducted a policy review of several major U.S. early childhood policies and programs, including Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) program, Maternal Infant and Early Childhood Nurse Home Visiting Program (MIECHV), Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), Head Start/Early Head Start, and Title I Preschool. The purpose of the review is to identify levers within existing early childhood policies and programs to account for children’s neighborhood factors. We discuss the potential of these levers for advancing the goals of U.S. early childhood policies, and in particular, for advancing racial equity.

In Section 4, we offer discussion of our findings, outline ways that neighborhood-informed approaches may strengthen U.S. early childhood policies and offer recommendations for next steps and future directions.

Who should read this report?

This report is intended for early childhood policymakers (federal, state, and local), researchers, administrators, advocates, funders and practitioners (including program directors and local grantees). Below we summarize highlights and key takeaways from the report.

KEY RESEARCH REVIEW TAKEAWAYS

Neighborhood-informed approaches hold potential for advancing U.S. early childhood policy goals

Neighborhoods contribute to children's developmental risk (which is the target of policy solutions)

- The neighborhood where a young child lives is a contributing part of their developmental risk profile (i.e. a child's mix of risks/barriers to healthy development vs. facilitators of development), pointing to the importance of accounting for child-, family- *and* neighborhood-level risk factors when assessing children's developmental risk.
- Children's neighborhoods are not equal and leave many children at increased developmental risk. This is true even among poor children.
- Policies that assess risk based solely on family income: 1) rely on an incomplete assessment that ignores the added risks some children face in their neighborhoods, and therefore 2) fail to differentiate between children with higher and lower risk levels.
- Due to the forces of economic and racial segregation, neighborhood inequalities systematically translate into racial inequalities, even among poor children. Once child-, family- *and* neighborhood factors are assessed in combination, we find that poor Black, Hispanic, Indigenous and immigrant children face the highest levels of developmental risk.

Neighborhoods shape children's access to early care and learning

- Neighborhood availability of early care and education (ECE) services, resources and programs is an important dimension of 'access.'
 - Neighborhood availability influences whether a child gains access to early care and learning experiences (or not), and shapes the options that families have and the choices they make.
 - While policymakers and practitioners often use definitions of "community" that include counties, regional service areas, or cities/towns to define local ECE availability, research shows that neighborhoods, and the surrounding areas, are a closer approximation to the reality of families' ECE options.
- Neighborhood availability of ECE has been shown to vary widely, leaving many children in (often extremely) underserved neighborhoods.
- Poor children who face high levels of neighborhood risk and low neighborhood access to early care and learning face a 'triple threat': the challenges of growing up in family poverty, a neighborhood that lacks opportunities for healthy development, *and* poor neighborhood access to early care and learning. These children face increased vulnerability and warrant priority attention for services.

Some preliminary studies find that Black and/or Hispanic children are more likely to face this 'triple threat,' contributing to racial inequities. Policy implications of existing research include:

- Early childhood policies that account for children's developmental risk at the individual-, family- *and* neighborhood-levels hold the potential to more effectively and equitably assess and meet children's needs.
 - Policymakers require a complete picture of children's developmental vulnerability and service need in order to effectively advocate for the necessary levels of resources.

- More comprehensive risk assessments (based on child-, family- *and* neighborhood factors) more effectively identify the most vulnerable children, informing policy decisions, especially in the context of scarce resources.
- Early childhood policies that account for neighborhood availability of ECE better ensure that children have access to what they need within their geographic reach. Accounting for neighborhood availability of ECE can identify and target children facing the highest levels of developmental risk—those facing the ‘triple threat’ of family poverty, neighborhood risk and low access to ECE.
 - Given extremely high levels of unmet need for early care and learning across major U.S. policies and programs, many children lack access to a robust network of early childhood supports within their geographic reach. Without examining neighborhood availability, policymakers would fail to identify children with relatively better or worse access to robust ECE systems within geographic reach.
- Existing research suggests that advancing *comprehensive early childhood systems* of care and learning (prenatal to pre-K) for vulnerable children, *based on where they live*, could improve children’s opportunities for healthy development, and advance racial equity.
 - The research therefore points to the potential value of a systematic federal approach to neighborhood-informed early childhood policymaking.

KEY POLICY REVIEW TAKEAWAYS

Numerous existing policy levers support neighborhood-informed approaches. These levers are not systematically found across policies, but there are timely opportunities for increasing their use:

- There are existing policy levers to advance neighborhood-informed approaches within every U.S. early childhood policy and program reviewed (PDG B-5, MIECHV, CCDF, Head Start, and Title I Preschool).
- However, neighborhood-informed approaches are not systematic across current federal early childhood policies and programs, and in no policy nor program are they required, prescribed, predefined or incentivized in federal regulations or guidance.
- The Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five Program presents a timely, research-aligned opportunity to integrate comprehensive ECE systems and neighborhood-informed approaches. States must develop definitions of ‘child vulnerability’ and conduct needs assessments looking across the mixed delivery early childhood system. States can account for children’s neighborhood risk factors when defining vulnerability, and they can incorporate neighborhood availability in needs assessments, and indicators of progress.
- There are also levers that support neighborhood-informed approaches in each of the individual policies and programs examined that can be employed by state departments of early care and learning, state lead CCDF agencies, maternal and child health bureaus/departments of health, Head Start/Early Head Start grantees, and school districts. However, the extent to which neighborhood-informed early childhood approaches are used has not been systematically studied or documented.
- While research points to the potential value of neighborhood-informed early childhood policies, we lack systematic evidence about how these approaches may improve policy outcomes. Future research is

needed in order to identify and document uses of neighborhood-informed early childhood policies and summarize evidence of their impact.

How can neighborhood-informed approaches improve early childhood policymaking?

Neighborhood-informed early childhood approaches can:

1. **Bolster the case for additional investment in the ECE sector.** Policymakers can more precisely estimate the investment levels required to meet policy goals with more complete information about children's developmental risk (based on child, family *and* neighborhood factors).
2. **Provide a tool for more effective and equitable resource targeting when resources are *scarce*.** By providing complete information about children's vulnerability, and access to ECE from the perspective of families, neighborhood-informed approaches help to differentiate children's needs and access in ways that inform efforts to target and prioritize scarce resources to the most vulnerable children.
3. **Provide a tool for more equitable targeting when resources are *expanding*.** In the coming era of potentially unprecedented ECE investment, equitable system expansion will give first priority to the most vulnerable children, with the goal of reaching all vulnerable children over time. Neighborhood-informed strategies can help ensure an equitable distribution of expanding resources by helping to identify children at the highest levels of risk (e.g. children facing 'triple threat').
4. **Strengthen accountability.** If policymakers have a goal to ensure that every vulnerable child in the U.S. has equitable access to a robust, comprehensive ECE system within a few miles from home, that system will require accountability tools to monitor progress to that end. Neighborhood-level assessments increase accountability by showing, in no uncertain terms, how many (and which) vulnerable children remain unreached by the federal early childhood system *as a whole*.

Recommendations

1. **Use the levers you have.** We recommend that policymakers, administrators, and practitioners take advantage of the levers that currently exist (several are outlined in this report) to integrate neighborhood-informed approaches where they expect the greatest potential to improve assessment, planning, administration, service delivery, and monitoring/evaluation.
2. **Systematically account for children's neighborhood-related developmental risks in federal ECE policies.** Research clearly supports a strong rationale for using a systematic approach to account for children's neighborhood-based developmental risk in determining eligibility and prioritization for federal early childhood policies, programs and services.
3. **Work towards a national information system about children's neighborhood risks and neighborhood-level access to comprehensive ECE systems.** Neighborhood-informed approaches require information about children's neighborhood factors and neighborhood-level access to early childhood resources, across the prenatal to pre-K continuum. Many of these data points already exist within specific agencies, and they could be integrated into a national ECE information system to support implementation of neighborhood-informed approaches.
4. **Gather and share evidence of neighborhood-informed approaches.** While research indicates that neighborhood-informed early childhood approaches hold promise, the field requires more evidence of

neighborhood-based strategies in early childhood and their potential for improving vulnerable children's lives.

5. **Support neighborhood-informed approaches in Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five.** PDG B-5 provides a timely opportunity for federal policymakers to support, and incentivize states to use, neighborhood-informed early childhood policymaking approaches through federal guidance and support (e.g. through technical assistance), or by incentivizing these approaches in new and renewal grant competitions.
6. **Continue breaking down the silos:** Support cross-agency visioning, planning and coordination to support comprehensive neighborhood early childhood systems. We recommend increased federal efforts to support innovation around inter-agency planning and information systems, and systematic exploration of ways to support neighborhood-informed approaches to building comprehensive ECE systems, including opportunities to blend and braid funds at the state and local levels.

Implications for racial equity

- Neighborhood-informed early childhood policy approaches have the potential to advance racial equity by more effectively assessing and targeting the needs of children facing the greatest risks, who are disproportionately Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, and immigrant children.
- While these strategies are not explicitly race-based, strategies that confront differences in children's neighborhood risk confront racial/ethnic inequalities that are rooted in neighborhood inequality.
- Neighborhood-informed approaches alone cannot address the major policy barriers to more equitable early childhood opportunities in the U.S., including insufficient ECE sector investment, high unmet need, and policy fragmentation. However, if early childhood policies continue to reform and advance towards comprehensive systems approaches, a strong neighborhood focus holds the potential to advance racial equity by ensuring equitable access and improving early childhood policies that can confront racial disparities in children's developmental health.

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Ecological model of child development: Children’s physical health, along with their cognitive, emotional, and social skills are collectively shaped by all of the proximal interactions they experience (positive and negative), in the multiple contexts or settings where they develop (for example, family, child care, neighborhoods). Settings are interconnected and embedded (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007).

Early childhood care and education (ECE): Used interchangeably with “early childhood care and learning,” ECE includes the full spectrum of caregiving, education, and services that children need from the time they are born until they go to kindergarten, including maternal and child health services and programs (including nurse home visiting), infant and toddler care (center-based, family-based, paid and unpaid relative care, paid nannies/babysitters), and public and private 3-K and pre-K programs, including Head Start programs.

ECE Access: ‘Access’ to high quality ECE depends on four factors: 1) affordability, 2) ‘reasonable’ effort to find, enroll and attend a program, 3) alignment with parents’ needs (e.g. hours of operation), and 4) programs/services that support a child’s developmental needs (e.g. linguistic needs) (U.S. Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation, 2017).

Neighborhood: In this report, a child’s neighborhood is the immediate geographic area surrounding a child’s residence, typically measured as the census tract or census block group where a child lives.

Neighborhood ECE access zone: The area within a family’s geographic reach for selecting and enrolling in ECE. Emerging research indicates that this area includes a child’s immediate neighborhood (census tract, block group), plus an outer radius of a few miles (roughly 3 to 5 miles of the neighborhood).

Neighborhood ECE system: All of the early care and learning resources, services and programs along the prenatal through pre-K continuum within a child’s neighborhood ECE access zone.

Neighborhood early childhood ecology: Includes two interrelated components: 1) contextual factors in a child’s immediate neighborhood (socioeconomic mix, physical/environmental and social factors, and institutions), and 2) a child’s neighborhood ECE system.

Equity (vs. equality) in child health: Children can access the opportunities (i.e. services, treatment, educational experiences) *they need* to reach their full potential, free from bias or discrimination. Equity is distinct from the notion of equality in child health which emphasizes receiving the same (i.e. equal) opportunities, regardless of differing needs.

Double jeopardy or double threat: Children facing double jeopardy or double threat are those experiencing developmental risk factors at both the family and neighborhood levels. For example, a child experiencing the double threat of family poverty and neighborhood poverty.

Triple jeopardy or triple threat: Children facing triple threat are those experiencing risk factors at the family and neighborhood levels, plus a third threat of low neighborhood ECE access. For example, the triple threat of family poverty, neighborhood poverty, and a weak neighborhood ECE system that lacks sufficient quality and capacity to ensure children thrive.

Neighborhood-informed early childhood approaches: Policy and programmatic approaches that account for children's neighborhood factors in assessments of children's developmental risk and ECE access in needs assessment, policy design, planning, implementation, service delivery and monitoring/evaluation.

SECTION 1. RESEARCH EVIDENCE INDICATES THE VALUE OF NEIGHBORHOOD-INFORMED EARLY CHILDHOOD POLICIES

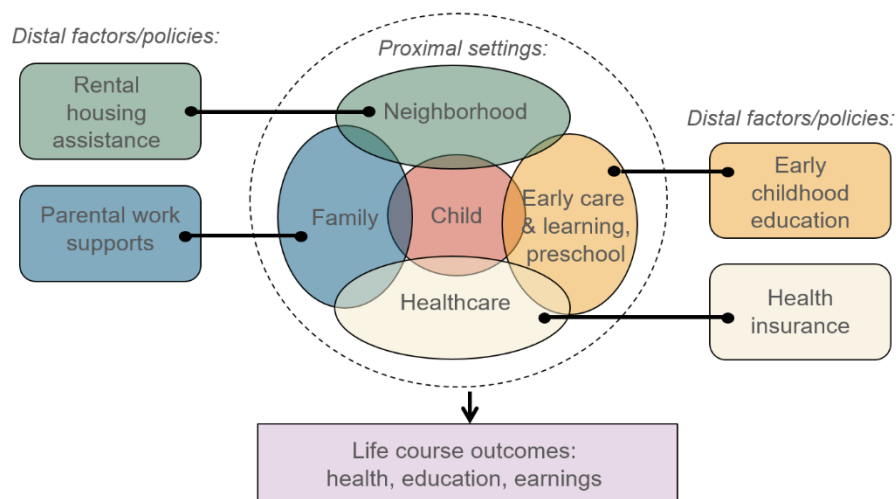
A. Children's neighborhoods, developmental risk, inequality and race

How is a child's early health and development shaped by the neighborhood where they live?

Children develop more rapidly during the early years (birth to age 4) than any other time in their lives. A child's brain is about one quarter the size of an adult brain at birth, growing to nearly 80% by age 2 (Knickmeyer, 2008). What happens during this early period of development has lasting implications into adulthood. Brain science and developmental research tell us that children's brains grow and mature in response to the people and things that they interact with in their daily lives. When a baby cries and an adult responds with eye contact, words, or a hug, new neural connections are built in the brain, shaping a child's communication and social skills. When a baby picks up a new toy and explores cause and effect, new connections are made to support cognitive growth. These back and forth, or "serve and return," interactions shape the brain's architecture over time (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

Children experience serve and return interactions in their "proximal settings"—i.e. the settings where they are stimulated by interactions with people and things in their daily lives. Therefore, a child experiences developmentally crucial interactions in *all* of their daily settings: their homes and families, their child care programs, preschools, caregiving arrangements, and their neighborhoods. All of these settings together form a child's developmental ecology (Figure 1), and children's physical health, along with their cognitive, emotional, and social skills are collectively shaped by all of the different interactions they have (positive and negative), across all of their proximal settings over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007).

Figure 1.
Children develop in the multiple settings they travel through in their daily lives



The multiple settings where children grow and learn—their families, daycares, and neighborhoods—are interconnected and embedded, and this is central to understanding how children’s neighborhoods shape their development. An expansive research base points to three main ways that a child’s neighborhood can shape their early health, growth, and development.¹

First, neighborhoods themselves serve as a setting where children spend time, where they directly interact with people and things in ways that shape their development. A child playing on a climbing structure at the neighborhood park is interacting with a physical feature of her neighborhood setting, and in turn developing her gross motor skills. A child also experiences social (serve and return) interactions with neighbors that influence her communication and social skill development.

Second, the institutions located in children’s neighborhoods (e.g. businesses, child cares, preschools, libraries, parenting/play groups, health centers) can shape the interactions children experience in their daily lives. Neighborhood institutions provide children with opportunities to interact with people and things that matter for their development. A child attending a child care center in their neighborhood interacts intimately with the center’s caregivers/early educators, other children at the child care, and also with the physical characteristics of the center (e.g. learning materials). These interactions directly shape children’s physical growth, and their cognitive, social, and emotional skills.

Moreover, even neighborhood institutions that children do not directly interact with can shape a child’s experiences, by either supporting or hindering parents’ capacity to care for their children. A parent receiving timely, high-quality medical care for a chronic condition at a neighborhood health center avoids frequent disruption of their childrearing routines and activities. In this way, by supporting parents, a neighborhood institution increases time and opportunities for responsive parenting, which in turn promotes a child’s cognitive and social development.

Third, the social composition, or social structure, of a child’s neighborhood “forms a backdrop that frames and shapes more proximal processes in and with which residents directly engage in their daily lives” (Leventhal et al. 2009, 2015, 2018, 2019). A neighborhood’s social composition—i.e. the socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of its residents—influences how children grow and develop in several different ways.

The socioeconomic composition of residents shapes the physical and social characteristics of the neighborhood that children (and their parents and caregivers) interact with in their daily lives. Neighborhood features, like parks where young children play, learn and grow, may be funded by local tax dollars or through local fundraising efforts, which will garner either more or fewer resources, depending on the economic makeup of neighborhood residents.

¹ For recent reviews see: Leventhal and Dupéré (2019), and Minh et al. (2017).

Also, the socioeconomic composition of a neighborhood can influence levels of collective efficacy, which is how neighbors view cooperation on shared goals, like clean streets and keeping each other safe. Collective efficacy can either strengthen or weaken the social environment that children grow up and develop in. The level of economic advantage or disadvantage amongst residents in a neighborhood impacts trust and social connections (Sampson 2019, Sampson et al. 1997). And when collective efficacy, trust and social connections are low, neighborhoods face more challenges with social behaviors that can harm children—for example, being exposed to or witnessing violence or crime (Sharkey 2010, Sharkey et al. 2012). And importantly, parents are also greatly impacted by the neighborhood social environment. Parents raising children in neighborhoods with issues of safety or social disorder face higher levels of stress and depression, which can affect responsive parenting (Shuey & Leventhal, Blair et al. 2014, Ludwig et al. 2012, and Molnar et al. 2016). While restricted socioeconomic conditions and collective efficacy are associated, on average, with neighborhoods' increased risk, that is not to say that these factors are deterministic of parents' health and children's outcomes. Positive social capital is still built in neighborhoods, for example, at churches, child care centers and schools, but these factors that increase risk make it much more challenging to do so.

Finally, the socioeconomic mix of residents can influence which institutions are found in a neighborhood and their quality along dimensions that matter for children. If institutions that directly influence children or parents (e.g. schools, libraries, recreational centers) are funded by local economic resources, then neighborhoods with more middle- and high-income residents have more resources available to ensure high-quality experiences for residents. Moreover, many institutions that are important in neighborhoods (e.g. child care centers, businesses) are not publicly funded, and their livelihood and ability to serve children or parents depends on the economic buying power of local residents. So again, the level of socioeconomic resources among residents can profoundly shape the availability and quality of institutions that matter for children's development.

Three ways that neighborhoods shape children's early health and development:

1. **Neighborhoods are a setting** where children and parents interact with people and things in ways that matter for how children learn and grow.
2. **Neighborhoods are home to institutions** that children interact with directly, and that parents interact with in ways that can shape their capacity for responsive parenting.
3. **Neighborhood socioeconomic mix of residents** shapes the social environment, and the neighborhood physical features and institutions that are important for children and parents.

Across the three pathways, neighborhood socioeconomic status (SES) is the characteristic of children's neighborhoods that has been studied the most, with fewer (albeit still many) studies of neighborhood physical

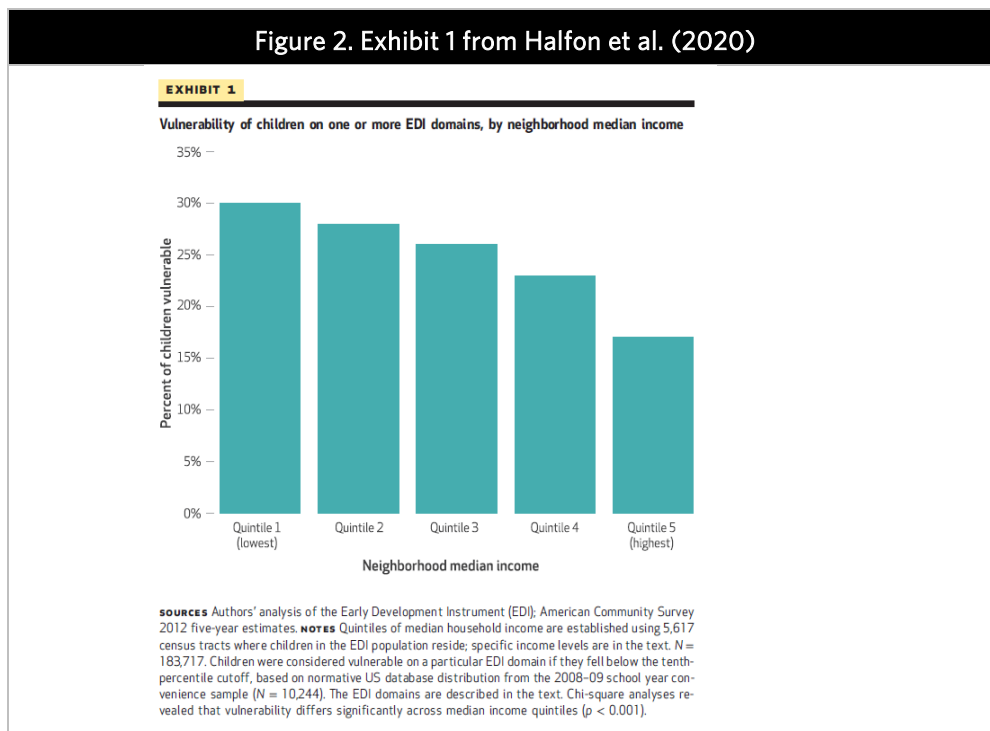
features and institutions (Leventhal & Dupéré (2019), and Minh et al. (2017)). Across the studies, the strongest evidence points to the importance of neighborhood SES for shaping the neighborhood social climate in ways that matter for children and parents. While social climate may be one of the most important factors, other studies provide evidence that physical features of neighborhoods (building characteristics and upkeep, traffic, green spaces, walkability, water sources), and institutions also play a role. More research is needed, but there is clear evidence that neighborhoods shape children’s development through multiple pathways.

In summary, children’s brains develop in response to serve and return interactions that they experience in the multiple settings where they learn, play and grow in their daily lives. These settings are interconnected and embedded. There are at least three main ways to think about how a neighborhood influences early child development, and they are all related and reinforcing. First, the neighborhood itself is a setting, with people and physical objects/features, where children experience crucial interactions that shape their health and how their brains change and grow. Second, a child’s neighborhood is home to important institutions that children either spend time in directly, or that serve their parents, indirectly shaping child health and development. Third, a neighborhood’s residents make up its social and economic composition or structure, and this structure profoundly shapes the physical and social features of the neighborhood, and the institutions that matter for children and for parents’ capacity to support and raise their children. While existing evidence points to neighborhood SES as a profound force that shapes neighborhood social climate, physical features and institutions, the evidence also makes clear that neighborhoods shape children’s development through multiple pathways.

What does the research evidence tell us about children’s neighborhood contexts and their developmental risk?

U.S. early childhood policies work to improve health and developmental outcomes for young children, especially those facing developmental risk. Children that lack sufficient opportunities for the serve and return interactions that support their development face the highest level of developmental risk. Per the Harvard Center on the Developing Child, “The persistent absence of serve and return interaction acts as a ‘double whammy’ for healthy development: not only does the brain not receive the positive stimulation it needs, but the body’s stress response is activated, flooding the developing brain with potentially harmful stress hormones” (Center on the Developing Child, 2007).

It is well documented that children growing up in poor families are at increased developmental risk, revealing that a key consequence of family poverty is fewer opportunities for stimulating serve and return interactions between adults and children, and a higher likelihood that children will experience recurring adverse interactions that stifle their development (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012; Blair & Raver, 2016). Research shows that the stress and dynamics of growing up in a poor family can cause structural changes in children’s brains that hinder their cognitive skill development and coping skills, and increase their levels of anxiety, fear and emotional distress and disorders (JAMA, 2015; Luby et al., 2013; Kim et al. 2013; Noble et al., 2015). U.S. early childhood policies primarily target children in poor and low-income families due to the increased developmental risks they face due to family poverty.



It is also well documented that children growing up in poor neighborhoods are at increased developmental risk, suggesting that children in poor neighborhoods have fewer opportunities for the crucial serve and return interactions they need to grow and thrive. Recent research reviews of neighborhood effects on child development summarize the extensive evidence linking children's neighborhood contexts and their early developmental outcomes.

Minh et al. (2017) summarized over 30 studies showing an association between neighborhood poverty or low neighborhood socioeconomic status (SES) and poor child developmental health, looking at a wide range of outcomes including cognitive development, language development, early literacy skills, verbal ability, early math academic skills and letter knowledge, school readiness, behavioral and social and emotional functioning including prosocial behaviors, internalizing/externalizing behaviors, social skills, and measures of physical health and wellbeing. In this and other reviews (Leventhal and Dupéré, 2019), low neighborhood SES was most commonly linked to worse social, emotional, and behavioral outcomes, while high neighborhood SES was associated with traditional academic-achievement related outcomes (for example, early language and cognitive development, as measured by children's vocabulary and reading scores in Grade 1 (Dupéré, 2010)).

A recent study shows the dramatic relationship between neighborhood SES and children's early developmental outcomes. Halfon et al. (2020) show that 1 in 3 children growing up in the lowest income neighborhoods in the U.S. (based on median income quintiles) are vulnerable on one or more domain of the Early Development Instrument—an index of crucial early childhood health and developmental outcomes measured at kindergarten

entry. This compares with roughly 1 in 6 children in the highest income neighborhoods, revealing that children in the lowest income neighborhoods are twice as likely to experience vulnerability during their early development.

Another recent study found that young children growing up in concentrated poverty neighborhoods (poverty rate 40% or more) had substantially lower school readiness scores at kindergarten entry (age 5) in math and reading compared with children growing up in moderate and low poverty neighborhoods (poverty rate below 14%) (Vinopal and Morrissey, 2020). The differences were substantial. For example, at kindergarten entry, the gap in average math scores between children from low poverty neighborhoods and those in high poverty neighborhoods was about 0.6 (standard deviation units), or over half a year of learning.

One final important piece of evidence from a seminal study on children's school readiness is that neighborhood socioeconomic conditions can help to explain between 5 to 10 percent of the variation that we see in children's school readiness outcomes (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn 2000), after accounting for child- and family-level characteristics. Studies that examine the importance of other key contexts where children develop (for example, their families and schools) have found results of similar magnitude (e.g., Dupéré et al. 2010).

The connections found in research between a child's neighborhood SES level and their outcomes is in part due to the fact that a child's family SES and their neighborhood SES can be closely related. In other words, knowing that children in poor families are at risk, we would expect neighborhoods with more poor families to have more children at risk. And if family SES were the only factor at play in children's development, then children with the same family SES level would have similar developmental outcomes (on average), regardless of whether they grew up in a high or low SES neighborhood.

But research reveals that the link between neighborhood SES and children's development is not simply the influence of family SES in disguise. Instead, experimental research comparing poor children growing up in different types of neighborhoods showed that poor children living in higher SES neighborhoods had better outcomes than poor children growing up in in poor neighborhoods. Chetty et al. (2016) found that poor children growing up in higher SES neighborhoods had higher adult earnings (31% higher), were more likely to attend college, and less likely to be single parents in adulthood. Also, children who moved to higher SES neighborhoods at a younger age (living there for more of their lives) had even stronger adult outcomes.

A key policy implication of this research is that children's neighborhood contexts—in their own right—are a contributing part of a child's developmental risk profile. Poor children growing up in poor neighborhoods face two distinct (albeit, interrelated) sets of risks at the family and neighborhood-levels. On the flipside, poor children growing up in higher SES neighborhoods, while still facing the risks associated with family poverty, may receive protective and promotive benefits from growing up in a neighborhood with more opportunities for healthy development.

Therefore, assessments of children’s developmental risk at the child-, family-, *and* neighborhood-levels hold the potential to better inform the design, targeting, resource allocation, and evaluation of policies aimed at improving outcomes for children facing developmental risk.

What does the research evidence tell us about children’s neighborhood contexts, their developmental risk, inequality, and race?

The neighborhoods where children grow up in the U.S. are not equal, and they are unequal along key dimensions that matter for children’s development—neighborhood socioeconomic structure, neighborhood social environment, physical features (parks, buildings), and institutions.

The Child Opportunity Index 2.0 (COI) provides a vivid picture of how unequal children’s neighborhoods are across the U.S., along key dimensions that matter for children (Acevedo-Garcia et al., 2020a, 2020b). The Child Opportunity Index is a composite of 29 different factors in children’s neighborhoods. It divides all neighborhoods in the U.S. into five balanced categories based on their index scores (each category includes 20% of the U.S. child population), ranging from very low-opportunity neighborhoods up through very high-opportunity neighborhoods.

The COI reveals stark differences in children’s neighborhood socioeconomic conditions, institutions, and physical and social environments. Children in very low-opportunity neighborhoods face a range of obstacles to opportunity and wellbeing, including high child poverty rates (over 40% on average), elementary schools with low student achievement levels in math and reading, adults in the neighborhood who have low levels of education, employment and poor economic prospects, physical signs of community distress like vacant housing, and lack of access to green play spaces and healthy food outlets, to name a few.

At the other end of the spectrum, children in high opportunity neighborhoods experience favorable neighborhood conditions that are well aligned, across the board, for supporting children’s healthy development. These children are surrounded by neighbors with economic security and prosperity, they attend elementary schools with high student reading and math levels, and they are surrounded by adults with high levels of education (college or more) who work in high-skill, good paying jobs. Homeownership is nearly universal, and there is an abundance of neighborhood amenities, including green space and access to healthy food.

Since children grow up in vastly different neighborhood conditions in ways that matter for their development, neighborhood differences translate to differences in children’s developmental risk profiles. In the U.S., policies aimed at improving outcomes for children at risk primarily target children in poor and low-income *families*. It is important to know that even children in poor and low-income families face differences in their neighborhoods, and therefore different levels of developmental risk.

Close to half (44%) of poor children ages 0-4 live in very low-opportunity neighborhoods based on the COI, and those children face the most obstacles and barriers to healthy development. For example, young child neighborhood poverty rates in very low-opportunity neighborhoods average 45% (Table 1). Based on this level of

poverty concentration, these neighborhoods are categorized as “extreme poverty neighborhoods” (Jargowsky & Bane, 1991), and pose the highest level of risk for children (Leventhal et al., 2015; Sampson, 2019). The other 56% of poor children live in neighborhoods with poverty rates ranging from 28% (still considered high, but not extreme), down to 4% (considered low). So, while the vast majority of poor children face neighborhood poverty concentration and related risks, we find that the degree and extremity of obstacles facing poor children in their neighborhoods are not always equal.

TABLE 1. NEIGHBORHOOD CHARACTERISTICS FOR POOR CHILDREN (AGE 0-4) IN THE U.S.

Neighborhood opportunity level	Percent of poor children in each neighborhood type	Child (0-4) neighborhood poverty rate
Very low	44%	45% (extreme)
Low	26%	27% (high)
Moderate	17%	17% (moderate)
High	9%	10% (low)
Very high	4%	4% (low)
	Total: 100%	

Source: Author’s calculations of Child Opportunity Index 2.0 and American Community Survey, 2014-2018.

These systematic neighborhood differences also have implications for issues of racial inequality. The degree and extremity of obstacles that poor children face in their neighborhoods is not always equal by race/ethnicity. While nearly one-quarter of poor White children live in very low-opportunity neighborhoods, almost half live in moderate-, high- and very high-opportunity neighborhoods. While still vulnerable, poor White children living in neighborhoods with healthier conditions face *relatively* lower levels of risk, and they are more likely to benefit from neighborhood conditions that are protective and promotive.

Meanwhile, patterns for poor Black children are very different. Close to 70% of poor Black children live in very low-opportunity neighborhoods, making them three times more likely than poor White children to face the highest levels of neighborhood risk, and very few (5%) have access to a high- or very high-opportunity neighborhood (poor Black children are four times *less* likely than poor White children to live in high- or very high-opportunity neighborhoods).

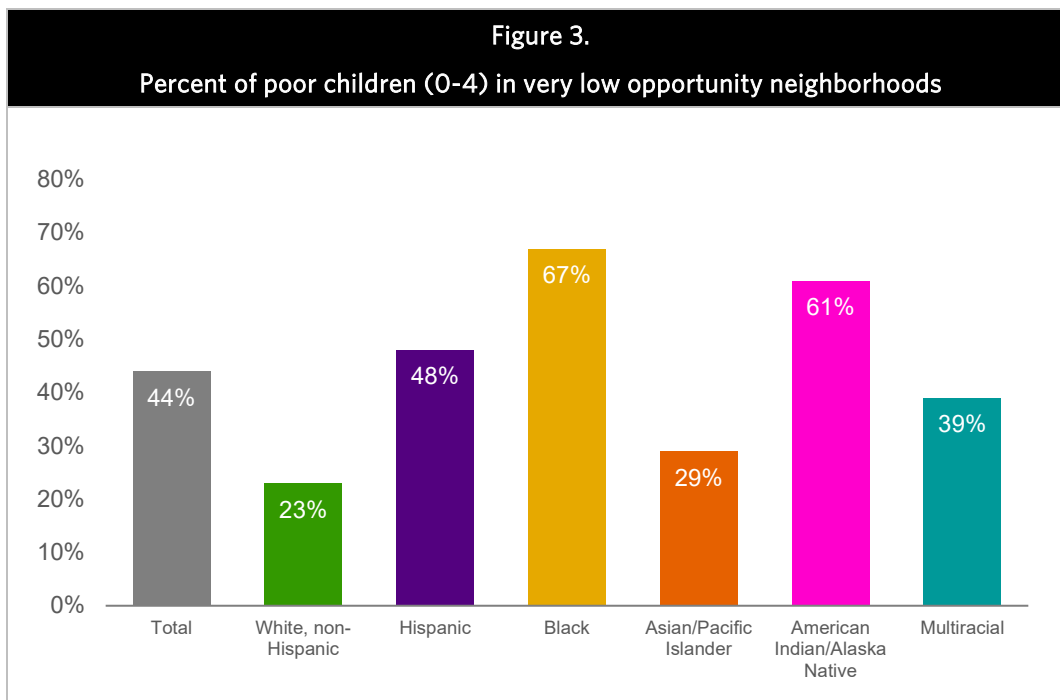
TABLE 2. NEIGHBORHOOD CHARACTERISTICS FOR POOR CHILDREN (AGES 0-4) IN THE U.S. BY RACE/ETHNICITY

Neighborhood opportunity level	Percent of all poor children in each neighborhood type	Percent of White poor children in each neighborhood type	Percent of Black poor children in each neighborhood type
Very low	44%	23%	67%
Low	26%	30%	19%
Moderate	17%	25%	9%
High	9%	16%	4%
Very high	4%	6%	1%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Source: Author's calculations of Child Opportunity Index 2.0 and American Community Survey, 2014-2018. See Appendix Table 1 for data for children in additional racial/ethnic groups.

These neighborhood differences by race—even among poor children, who have similarly low family incomes—are a direct consequence of racially discriminatory housing and economic policies that have historically systematically separate children of different race/ethnicities into distinct neighborhoods. And these separate neighborhoods prove to be unequal in the conditions they offer for healthy child development.

These racial inequalities in children's neighborhoods translate into racial inequalities in children's levels of developmental risk. On average, when considering both family and neighborhood risk factors together, poor Black, Hispanic, and American Indian/Alaska Native children across the U.S. face the highest levels of developmental risk due to the increased challenges they face in their neighborhood contexts. (Figure 3).

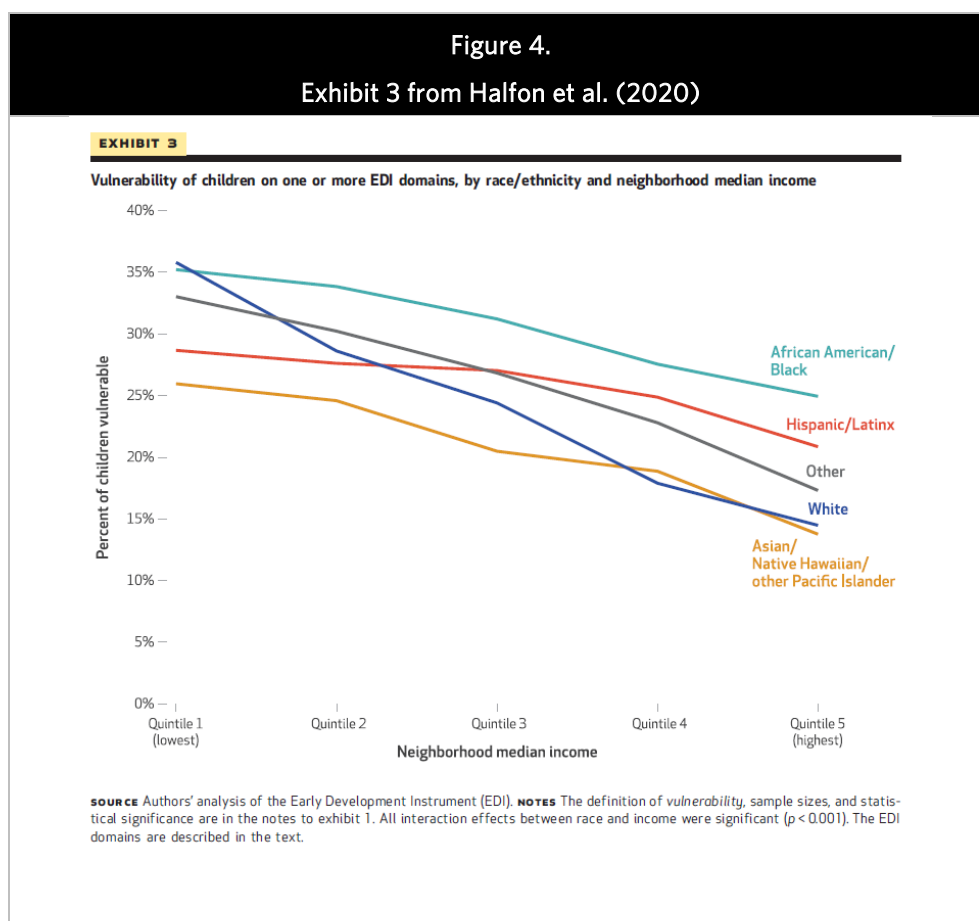


Source: American Community Survey, 2014-2018, Child Opportunity Index 2.0.

Finally, recent research suggests that assessing a child's family factors, neighborhood factors, and their race/ethnicity simultaneously may offer an even more comprehensive and nuanced assessment of a child's developmental risk profile.

Halfon et al (2020) found that children of some racial and ethnic groups living in poor neighborhoods are more vulnerable than others. They found that just over 35% of White and Black children who live in the poorest U.S. neighborhoods are vulnerable on at least one dimension of the Early Development Instrument. Meanwhile, notably smaller shares of Asian and Hispanic children living in the poorest neighborhoods are vulnerable (26% and 28%, respectively).

The study does not resolve the underlying drivers of these racial differences, but the findings are still informative for policy. These patterns suggest that when focusing on children in the lowest resourced neighborhoods in the U.S., children of some racial/ethnic groups may be at even greater levels of developmental risk. This research points to the potential value of considering how a combination of risk factors may differentially harm children of different race and ethnicities.



Summary

Children across the U.S. are growing up in vastly unequal neighborhoods. Because neighborhood contexts shape children's developmental health, neighborhood inequalities translate into inequalities in children's developmental risk profiles, when assessing risk at the child-, family-, *and* neighborhood-levels. Since children in poor families are the most likely to face unfavorable neighborhood conditions, policies that target poor children will reach many of the children most severely impacted by the double threat of family and neighborhood risk. However, the research shows that even among poor children, there can be vast inequalities in children's neighborhood conditions, translating into inequalities in children's developmental risk profiles.

This information is relevant to policymakers seeking to comprehensively assess developmental risk in order to best inform policy advocacy, targeting, design and implementation. The research makes clear that assessments of risk based on children's individual and family factors alone are incomplete. Early childhood policies that account for children's developmental risk at the child-, family- *and* neighborhood-levels hold the potential to assess and meet children's needs more effectively and equitably.

These findings are also relevant for policymakers working to advance racial equity, since poor Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous children face the most extreme levels of risk and vulnerability, on average. And finally, race-conscious policymakers can benefit from the increasingly nuanced research showing that from a developmental perspective, neighborhood poverty may harm children of some racial/ethnic groups more than others.

B. Children's neighborhoods and access to early care and learning resources, services and programs

What does the research tell us about neighborhood availability and children's ability to access early care and learning?

U.S. early childhood policies aim to improve outcomes for children facing developmental risk by expanding access to affordable, high-quality early care and learning resources, services and programs. Per the federal Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE), whether a family can 'access' high quality early care and learning for their child depends on four factors: 1) whether a family can afford it (i.e. it is low cost, free, or financial assistance is available to cover tuition/costs), 2) whether a 'reasonable' level of effort is required to enroll and consistently use/attend a program, 3) whether the program is aligned with parents' needs (e.g. hours of operation, care for multiple children), and 4) whether a particular program or set of services supports their particular child's developmental needs (e.g. high quality, linguistic support). (U.S. Office of Planning, Research & Evaluation, 2017).

Neighborhood availability of early care and education (ECE)—i.e. the mix, quantity, quality and capacity of caregiving arrangements and early learning programs, supports and resources in a child's neighborhood and the nearby areas—shapes what families can access with 'reasonable effort.' Nationally, families with children ages 0-6 travel less than five miles to child care arrangements, on average, and over half of families (55%) travel less than three miles to their child care providers (NSECE, 2012).² A family living in a neighborhood with an

² Statistic includes families with children ages 3 to 5.

abundance of programs and providers that offer affordable, high-quality early care and learning services can access developmentally rich experiences for their children with lower levels of effort than a family that lives many miles from high-quality ECE. In this way, greater neighborhood availability increases the chance that a vulnerable child can gain access to high-quality ECE with 'reasonable' effort.

In fact, neighborhood availability may be of particular importance for the most vulnerable families. Neidell and Waldfogel (2009) found that immigrant children and children in families without car access were more likely to attend Head Start when the center was located in their immediate neighborhood (census tract). Participation rates for immigrant children with a center in their neighborhood were 10 percentage points higher (which was a 50% increase over those children without a center). This was an important finding given that immigrant children have historically low enrollment rates in Head Start, despite being among the most developmentally vulnerable groups of children eligible for Head Start.

Neidell and Waldfogel's study suggests the importance of neighborhood availability for reducing barriers and effort levels required to participate in ECE, particularly for vulnerable children facing multiple risk factors (like those that tend to converge for children in immigrant families). It also suggests that neighborhood availability is of increased importance for children in transportation-vulnerable families, again pointing to its increased salience for children facing multiple risks and increased vulnerability.

Other studies have examined the importance of ECE availability not only within a child's immediate neighborhood, but also within an outer radius/distance of a child's immediate neighborhood. These studies make an important contribution by considering what is available from the perspective of the family, because we know that families are not constrained by an arbitrary neighborhood boundary and certainly travel outside of their immediate neighborhoods for ECE. They also help to address two related unresolved questions: What geographic area around the home DO parents consider to be within their geographic reach? And within the geographic area that parents consider within their reach, how much does proximity to child care influence their decision-making and their effort when accessing early care and learning?

Davis and Borowsky (2021, forthcoming) examined how the availability of subsidized child care providers within different distances/radii of children's neighborhoods shaped parents' child care options and decision-making in Minnesota. They found that families chose child care providers within 3 to 6 miles of home, on average, and the distance threshold varied, depending on whether the family lived in an urban, suburban or rural area. In urban areas, families chose child care providers within 2-3 miles of home, compared with rural areas, where families traveled farther. They also found that parents' selection of a child care provider was extremely sensitive to distance. For every one additional mile of distance between a family's and a provider's location, the likelihood that the family selects the provider drops by half. Distance was the strongest predictor of whether a family selected a particular child care provider, even more important than quality, cost and other salient factors for child care decision making.

The study also conducted a policy analysis that evaluated ECE availability within the immediate neighborhood (census tract) that yielded relevant results. They found that the type of child care arrangement a parent selected (e.g. center-based care versus family child care) was a direct result of what was available within a family's immediate neighborhood. Black families were found to select almost exclusively center-based child care, compared with White families who were likely to select a mix of center- or family-child care. This difference was almost entirely explained by the fact that Black families lived in neighborhoods with almost exclusively center-based care, compared with White families, who lived in neighborhoods with a mix of center- and family-based care.

These two studies together indicate that neighborhood availability can influence whether a family accesses a particular ECE resource, support or program (or not). It also influences the level of effort required in different neighborhoods, with parents more likely to access ECE resources closer to home. Neighborhood availability also profoundly shapes the nature and set of ECE options that families access and the choices they make.

Importantly, these studies tell us that it is not only the ECE resources located inside a child's immediate neighborhood that shapes their access in practical terms, but also a broader area beyond the neighborhood boundary. However, the area that parents consider to be within their geographic reach is still relatively small and very proximal to where a family lives (within a few miles). Therefore, analyzing ECE availability for larger geographic units, like cities or towns, counties, or school districts does not yield relevant information about ECE access from the family perspective. These larger areas may have relevance for market or other policy analyses, but they do not provide relevant insights into a family's level of access to ECE. What's relevant to families is what is located within their geographic reach.

The availability of ECE within a child's neighborhood and in the nearby areas is a function of a complex set of both policy and market-based factors.

The socioeconomic and employment characteristics of neighborhood residents shape the buying power and level of government investment in different neighborhoods, which can shape the ECE institutions located in a neighborhood and the nearby areas.

On the policy side, resource availability, and prioritization decisions (when resources are scarce), guide which families get access to financial assistance and ECE resources. The families that are reached/served are spread or concentrated across different neighborhoods, and this can influence the ECE institutions in the neighborhood. For example, if a neighborhood has a large concentration of families receiving child care assistance through vouchers, a child care provider located in this neighborhood may have a more stable source of income than a provider located in a neighborhood with many low-income families without child care assistance.

Policy decisions can also directly shape where ECE resources and programs are located (e.g. Head Start centers, locations of providers receiving grants or contracts to provide subsidized child care slots), and those decisions

can result in some neighborhoods having more or less capacity (for example, a trained neighborhood-based workforce) for expanding neighborhood ECE availability.

So while neighborhood availability of ECE shapes children's access to the crucial early experiences they need, the root cause analysis of gaps in neighborhood availability, and the resulting strategies for increasing neighborhood ECE availability, require consideration of this complex set of policy and market-based factors.

What does the research tell us about neighborhood availability, access to ECE, and inequality?

Finally, from an inequality perspective, recent studies have shown that neighborhood availability of ECE can be very unequal, and many children live in areas that are extremely underserved. The Center for American Progress finds that over half of children in the U.S. live in a child care desert (neighborhoods with child care shortages). Child care deserts are more common in low-income areas, particularly low-income urban neighborhoods, and low-income rural neighborhoods where they are ubiquitous (Malik and Hamm, 2017).

Moreover, due to the forces of economic and racial neighborhood segregation, these neighborhood inequalities often translate into racial inequalities in many localities across the U.S. Hispanic and Indigenous children are more likely to live in child care deserts. And while Black children tend to live in neighborhoods with more licensed child care supply than other groups, this is not a monolithic trend. For example, Detroit—comprised of 80% Black residents—is a vast child care desert spanning the entire city. Meanwhile, the surrounding suburbs of Detroit, which are mostly white and high SES, have abundant licensed child care (Malik and Hamm, 2020).

Another study found that, in Massachusetts, Black and Hispanic subsidy income-eligible children are four and five times, respectively, more likely than White subsidy income-eligible children to live in “extreme subsidized child care deserts”—regions/clusters of neighborhoods with the highest relative concentrations of children eligible for subsidized care, but the lowest supply of subsidized child care (Hardy, 2019).

These studies tell us that neighborhood ECE availability can vary substantially for poor children depending on where they live, raising the possibility of many vulnerable children facing the ‘triple threat’ of family poverty, neighborhood risk and low neighborhood ECE availability.

Summary

U.S. early childhood policies aim to expand access to affordable, high-quality early care and learning so that developmentally vulnerable children can gain access to the stimulating early experiences needed to grow and learn. An important dimension of ‘access’ is whether a family can gain access to ECE with ‘reasonable effort.’ Research shows that greater neighborhood availability of ECE increases the likelihood that a child gains access to ECE, and this is particularly true for some of the most vulnerable groups of children that face multiple risk factors (for example, immigrant children and children in transportation-vulnerable families). In this way, greater neighborhood availability increases the chance that a vulnerable child can gain access to high-quality ECE with ‘reasonable’ effort.

Emerging research indicates that the proximity of ECE may be one of the strongest influences on parents' ability to access a particular ECE resource for their child. Research suggests that low income parents consider a radius of 3-6 miles as within their geographic reach, suggesting that policymakers should consider the availability of both ECE located inside children's immediate neighborhoods and in the close nearby areas, within 3 to 6 miles (depending on urbanicity) of the neighborhood. Finally, when we consider neighborhood availability of ECE from a family's perspective (i.e. what's available within 3-6 miles of the neighborhood), studies find that neighborhood availability of ECE is not always equal, and also raise concerns that neighborhood inequalities can translate into racial inequalities in access to ECE in some localities. Because neighborhood availability can be influenced by policy decisions—at least in part—neighborhood-informed early childhood approaches provide a lever for improving vulnerable children's access to ECE and making it more equitable.

SECTION 2. NEIGHBORHOOD-INFORMED EARLY CHILDHOOD POLICIES

Research suggests that accounting for children’s neighborhood factors can inform and improve assessments of both children’s developmental risk and their access to early care and learning. Because early childhood policies aim to expand and ensure equal access to high-quality early experiences for developmentally vulnerable children, assessing risk and access are central to the development of policy goals, and to policy design, implementation, and evaluation/monitoring.

In this section, we describe some of the key elements of neighborhood-informed early childhood policies suggested by the research.

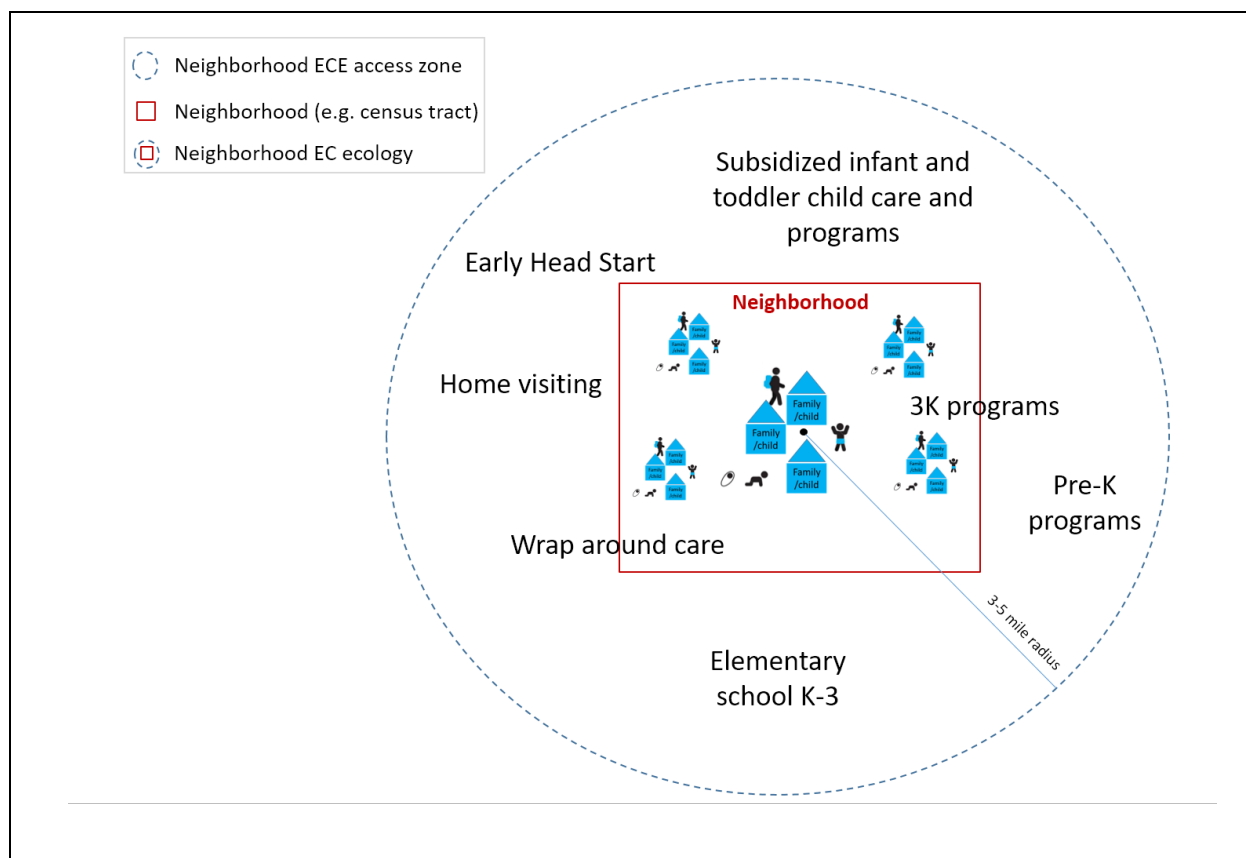
First, neighborhood-informed early childhood policies would account for children’s neighborhood characteristics related to developmental risk, including neighborhood socioeconomic status (SES), physical and environmental attributes, social factors and institutions. When considering neighborhood factors that shape developmental risk, the research supports focusing on children’s immediate neighborhoods—i.e. the area most proximal/close to home (i.e. children’s census tracts or block groups).

Second, policies would account for the neighborhood availability of ECE when assessing ECE access. Neighborhood availability assessments would consider not only the ECE resources located in a child’s immediate neighborhood (census tract, block group), but also the availability of ECE within an outer radius of a child’s neighborhood (within 3 to 6 miles of the child’s home, depending on urbanicity). We refer to this area as a family’s “neighborhood ECE access zone” (Figure 5).

Finally, given that children develop in an “ecology” comprised of the multiple, interconnected settings where they spend time, including their homes, child cares, early learning programs, neighborhoods, schools, etc., policies would account for what we term a child’s “neighborhood early childhood ecology,” which includes two main (interrelated) components:

- 1) Neighborhood contextual characteristics of a child’s immediate neighborhood (SES, physical/environmental, social, and institutions), and
- 2) The ECE network or system located in a child’s neighborhood ECE access zone (i.e. within a few miles of the neighborhood). A child’s “neighborhood ECE system” is comprised of all the early care and learning resources, services and programs along the prenatal through pre-K continuum.

Figure 5. A child's neighborhood early childhood ecology



Ecological models of child development tell us that children need to experience consistently nurturing, developmentally rich experiences in their daily lives, in all of their settings, from birth to age 4, when the brain is rapidly developing. Children's neighborhood contextual factors shape their risk and protective factors. And for children facing neighborhood risk, a robust and comprehensive neighborhood-based ECE system can serve as a protective resource that can improve their developmental outcomes.

The most robust, coherent and effective neighborhood-based systems would ensure that children have access to high-quality experiences in every ECE setting they spend time in, from birth to age 4 (infant and toddler care, 3-K, pre-K, etc.). They would also ensure that parents have the supports they need for responsive childrearing as they raise children in the complex dynamics of family and neighborhood poverty. If an ECE system has accessible, high-quality pre-K for 4 year olds, but lacks high-quality infant and toddler programs, the system is insufficient and ineffective, since all parts of the prenatal to pre-K continuum work together.

FIGURE 6. FRAMEWORK FOR ASSESSING CHILDREN'S NEIGHBORHOOD EARLY CHILDHOOD ECOLOGIES

		Component 2: Neighborhood ECE System	
		Robust	Weak
Component 1: Neighborhood contextual factors	High SES	High SES, Robust	High SES, Weak
	Low SES	Low SES, Robust	Low SES, Weak

Figure 6 is a simple framework for considering how poor and low-income children's neighborhood early childhood ecologies differ in ways that can shape their developmental risk and ECE access levels simultaneously.

Existing data and research tell us that poor and low-income children live in both low and high SES neighborhoods. Low SES neighborhoods can pose developmental risks, and higher SES neighborhoods can be promotive. We have less information about how many children live in low SES neighborhoods with robust versus weak neighborhood ECE systems.

The research indicates that children's outcomes may improve with expanded access to robust, comprehensive neighborhood ECE systems. Yet, we don't have a systematic picture of how robust or weak even the federally-supported parts of neighborhood ECE systems are. What we do know is that large numbers of developmentally vulnerable children remain unserved by federally-supported ECE programs, including, for example, Head Start (36% of eligible children are served), Early Head Start (11% served), and Child Care Development Fund Assistance (14% served, based on state income eligibility limits).³ These high levels of unmet need mean that there are many children living in low SES neighborhoods with incomplete or weak neighborhood ECE systems. If a goal of policies is to ensure that all vulnerable children have neighborhood access to the continuum of ECE supports they need, then we require a baseline understanding of how many vulnerable children live in neighborhoods with robust vs. weak comprehensive ECE systems. This baseline is required to set clear goals and to estimate and advocate for the resources needed to realize the goal of every child in the U.S. growing up in a neighborhood with a robust ECE system.

Systematic information about vulnerable children living in neighborhoods with robust vs. weak ECE systems is also important for: 1) policy targeting—policymakers can identify children in low SES neighborhoods with the weakest ECE systems, 2) reducing duplication or inefficiency—policymakers could see if children in a given neighborhood have an overabundance of 4-year old programs, but not enough infant/toddler programs, for example, and 3) identifying and addressing racial inequities that can emerge when things are unequal at the neighborhood level. From a targeting and racial equity perspective, the research base indicates that children

³ Early Head Start and Head Start service rates (2018-2019), National Head Start Association, retrieved: <https://www.nhsa.org/national-head-start-fact-sheets/>, 1/1/21. CCDF service rates: ASPE FY17, <https://aspe.hhs.gov/system/files/pdf/264341/CY2017-Child-Care-Subsidy-Eligibility.pdf>.

living in low SES neighborhoods with weak ECE systems should receive priority. These children face the ‘triple threat’ of family poverty, neighborhood risk and weak neighborhood ECE systems.

NEIGHBORHOOD-INFORMED EARLY CHILDHOOD POLICIES

- Account for children’s neighborhood factors in developmental risk profiles
- Account for neighborhood-level access to comprehensive ECE systems
- Account for children’s neighborhood early childhood ecologies (risk + access)

Neighborhood-informed approaches can advance comprehensive ECE systems

The fragmented U.S. early childhood federal policy structure poses a major challenge to even gathering systematic information about the relative robustness and gaps in children’s neighborhood ECE systems. Our policies were not designed to start with a child or family and ask: What is the complete set of early childhood supports, resources and programs that this child needs to reach her full potential along the prenatal to pre-K continuum? Policies were also not designed to assess whether children have access to all required supports based on where they live. Instead, we have many different early childhood policies and programs, each with their own eligibility criteria, each serving a particular age group of children, and each with their own purpose and focus.

There is apparent movement to account for “local” availability in early childhood policies as reflected in the provisions of PDG B-5 and CCDF that guide states to assess issues of local supply. This signals a recognition that what is available locally is relevant, since that availability reflects families’ lived realities under our existing early childhood policies and programs. There is also a concurrent movement to advance comprehensive early childhood systems, which require more child-centered and comprehensive assessment, strategic planning and policy/program coordination across the mixed delivery ECE system (as reflected in the newest federal early childhood policy, PDG B-5, and at the center of many Birth to Three, Maternal and Child Health, and Child Welfare advocacy efforts).

A challenge is that “local” availability is most commonly assessed, if at all, at the county, service area, service region, or school district level, which doesn’t provide a relevant picture of availability and access from the perspective of families. Families living in different neighborhoods within the same county may have very different neighborhood ECE availability, but that information is obscured if “local” availability only considers aggregate conditions across a county.

A consistent definition of local availability across federal early childhood policies that more closely reflects a family’s neighborhood ECE access zone offers more accurate and relevant information about families’ access to ECE, and about the functioning, robustness and gaps of the publicly-supported ECE system as a whole.

In sum, the research on ecological child development, neighborhoods and development risk, and neighborhood availability together point to the potential added value of combining neighborhood-informed and comprehensive

ECE systems approaches in early childhood policymaking. And as we will discuss in the next section, despite the fragmentation of early childhood policies, there *are* timely opportunities to integrate neighborhood-informed approaches and comprehensive ECE systems approaches to improve early childhood policy outcomes.

SECTION 3. POLICY REVIEW: EXISTING POLICY LEVERS FOR NEIGHBORHOOD-INFORMED APPROACHES

In this policy review, we analyze selected federal early childhood policies that account for children's neighborhood factors and identify existing policy levers for using neighborhood-informed approaches.

The review analyzes five major federal early childhood policies and programs: Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five Program (PDG B-5), Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV), Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), Head Start/Early Head Start, and Every Student Succeeds Act /Title I Preschool. While these five policies and programs do not encompass everything in the U.S. public early childhood system, they do collectively serve millions of children and represent a vast majority of the publicly-supported early childhood care and education system in the U.S. Moreover, the policy levers identified here are not meant to be exhaustive, but to spark discussion and ideas in these and other early childhood policy and programmatic areas.

This section is intended to speak directly to state departments of early education and care, state home visiting lead agencies, state CCDF lead agencies, Head Start and Early Head Start grantees (and their consultants/technical assistance providers), state departments of education and local school districts, and the broader set of policy, advocacy, research and philanthropic stakeholders that support the work of these groups.

It also speaks to federal agency leaders and staff, including Administration for Children & Families, Office of Head Start, Office of Child Care, Maternal and Child Health Bureau, Health Resources and Services Administration, Department of Education, and legislative analysts, advocates and philanthropy whose visioning, planning and coordination is required to more systematically integrate neighborhood-approaches into the U.S. early childhood policy landscape.

The regulatory structures that govern the U.S. early childhood system are highly fragmented across jurisdictions (federal, state, local), programs, agencies and even sectors (child services, education, health). In line with the current fragmented nature of the sector, we take a policy-by-policy approach to discussing levers in different federal policies and programs. It is important to acknowledge, however, that this fragmentation is a limiting factor for advancing comprehensive, neighborhood-informed approaches to ECE system building. One notable exception is the Preschool Development Birth through Five Grants that provides pathways for early childhood policymakers to act across agencies, programs, and sectors. We also highlight, in Section 4, comprehensive systems approaches happening at state and local (city and county) levels that can inform federal strategies and also benefit from federal support.

A. Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5)

The Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) grants present a timely and promising existing policy lever for using neighborhood-informed approaches. PDG B-5 reflects movement in the field to advance child-centered policymaking that incorporates comprehensive assessment, strategic planning and

policy/program coordination across the mixed delivery ECE system, and ensures that early education policies attend to children in infancy and toddlerhood, not just the preschool years.

The PDG B-5 grants differ significantly from the previous Preschool Development Grants (PDG) that focused solely on expansion of access to high-quality preschool programs for low- and moderate-income children. The Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (PDG B-5) grants are authorized by the U.S. Department of Education Every Student Succeeds Act, and overseen by the Administration for Children & Families (ACF). Grants are made to states to first systematically analyze their early childhood “mixed delivery” system, through a statewide birth through five needs assessment; and second, to engage in in-depth strategic planning for changes to the early childhood system to improve young children’s access to high-quality care and early learning, streamline administrative structures, and create funding efficiencies. The statewide needs assessment serves as a planning document that informs the proposed system changes and implementation approach. States also develop and track progress indicators.

Grants were awarded in December 2018 to 46 states for initial planning grants. In December 2019, 20 states were awarded three-year renewal grants to implement their strategic plans, and another six states and territories were awarded initial first-year assessment/planning grants.

The PDG B-5 framework is ripe for bringing together comprehensive systems approaches and neighborhood-informed approaches. Recall the three elements of neighborhood-informed approaches indicated by the research: 1) account for children’s neighborhood factors in assessing developmental risk/vulnerability, 2) account for ECE availability (across the full mixed delivery, prenatal to Pre-K continuum) within children’s neighborhood ECE access zones (within a few miles of home), and 3) consider how neighborhoods shape vulnerability and access *simultaneously*.

Under the PDG B-5 framework, a state could, for example, 1) comprehensively assess the vulnerability of poor and low-income children (ages 0-5) based on child-, family- *and* neighborhood-factors, and also 2) identify vulnerable children living in underserved neighborhoods based on ECE availability across the full prenatal to pre-K continuum) in children’s neighborhood ECE access zones.

By including these two elements, policies could more comprehensively account for a child’s neighborhood ECE ecology, including their neighborhood contextual factors and the robustness of the ECE system within geographic reach of families in the neighborhood.

PDG B-5’s program structure allows states to take comprehensive systems approaches and to make neighborhood-informed strategies central, if they choose to do so. States can take a neighborhood-informed approach throughout the entire PDG B-5 statewide needs assessment, planning and implementation, and progress monitoring process.

Starting with the assessment phase, states must define key terms including “quality early childhood care and education,” “availability,” “vulnerable or underserved” children, and “children in rural areas.” States must identify the current quality and availability of early childhood care and education, including for vulnerable or underserved children and children in rural areas, and identify gaps in local availability, using their own approach to defining local availability.

When defining ‘vulnerable children,’ a child’s neighborhood risk level can be a dimension of vulnerability, such that ‘vulnerable children’ include those living in neighborhoods with contextual factors that pose risks (for example, low SES, adverse social conditions, unsafe or unhealthy physical attributes, and low quality or lack of child- and parent-supporting institutions). In this application, neighborhood factors would be assessed in the child’s immediate neighborhood (census tract or block group, for example), following the research.

For ‘local availability’ measures, states can define availability based on what is available within children’s neighborhood ECE access zones, defined as within a few miles of the child’s immediate neighborhood (for example, within 3 to 6 miles, depending on urbanicity). States have the flexibility to assess local availability at the neighborhood level rather than using larger areas, like counties, cities, or school districts. These local availability measures are used to determine children living in areas that are ‘underserved.’ These measures are then used in assessment, planning, implementation and progress monitoring, allowing for neighborhood-informed approaches to play a central role in a state’s early childhood policymaking.

These opportunities within PDG B-5 offer a policy lever that more completely assesses children’s vulnerability, and accounts for how developmental vulnerability intersects with access to robust ECE systems, at a geographic level that is relevant and within reach of families. From there, policymakers can take action to target or prioritize children facing double threat and triple threat (family poverty, neighborhood risk and weak neighborhood ECE systems) using policy levers within individual policies and programs (e.g. CCDF child care assistance, Head Start, etc.). These approaches align with the research principles outlined in Section 2, revealing a potentially promising and timely opportunity for neighborhood-informed early childhood policies in PDG B-5.

Finally, while PDG B-5 allows for neighborhood-informed approaches, it is important to note that it does not require these approaches. No policy reviews have yet documented states’ use of neighborhood-informed approaches in PDG B-5 (a possible future research direction). Accordingly, we also lack evidence of whether and how neighborhood-informed approaches in early childhood policy assessment, planning and implementation improve children’s outcomes. PDG B-5 presents an opportunity to pursue approaches indicated by the research and gather evidence of their added value and effectiveness for improving children’s lives.

B. Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program, Title V

The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program makes grants to states to administer evidence-based home visiting services to at-risk pregnant women and parents with young children through kindergarten entry. Through the program, nurses, early childhood educators, social workers and other

trained professionals visit parents and children in their homes to support child and parent health and wellbeing during the critical period of a child's development.

At the federal level, the program is run by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), in coordination with the Maternal and Child Health Bureau, and overseen/evaluated by U.S. Health Resources & Services Administration (HRSA). States receive grants under Title V of the Social Security Act, Maternal and Child Health Block Grant to operate MIECHV programs in at-risk communities within their states.

By law, statewide needs assessments must be conducted and updated periodically in order to receive funding. The last update was due October 2020.

There are clear opportunities within the MIECHV program to incorporate the elements of neighborhood-informed early childhood policies indicated by the research. The program targets eligible children who are deemed 'at risk' based on living in an 'at risk' community. So, in this way, if states use children's neighborhoods or neighborhood ECE access zones when defining 'community,' or when targeting areas *within* at-risk communities (if using counties to define 'community'), then policies are accounting for neighborhood-risk factors when assessing children's vulnerability and their access to home visiting services.

States are required to develop a method for identifying communities with concentrations of risk, and then develop plans to target and tailor their services in those communities. While risk factors are statutorily defined (9 Social Security Act, Title V, § 511(b)(1)(A), see Figure 7), states have flexibility to determine how they define 'community.' States can use what is called "the simplified method," which uses counties as the definition of 'community.' HRSA provides index data for community risk factors to states. States that are concerned that county level data may not appropriately capture conditions at the neighborhood level can supplement the simplified method data with additional measures at smaller levels of geography.

There are therefore several ways to incorporate neighborhood-informed approaches into MIECHV. A state could define communities based on children's neighborhood ECE access zones (the area within a few miles of a child's immediate neighborhood). States are also allowed to target and prioritize children and families in areas located within the identified 'at-risk communities.' This provides another lever for using neighborhood-informed approaches for assessment, targeting and monitoring and evaluation. Finally, states can also choose an "independent method" where they design the indicators and the geographic units. This approach is recommended by HRSA for states with access to a wider pool of data and epidemiologic capacity. In its needs

FIGURE 7. STATUTORILY DEFINED COMMUNITY RISK FACTORS UNDER MIECHV:

Communities with concentrations of—

- premature birth, low-birth weight infants, and infant mortality, including infant death due to neglect, or other indicators of at-risk prenatal, maternal, newborn, or child health
- poverty
- crime
- domestic violence
- high rates of high-school drop-outs
- substance abuse
- unemployment
- child maltreatment

assessment guide, HRSA lists recommended neighborhood level data sources, encouraging and validating neighborhood approaches (Health Resources & Services Administration Maternal & Child Health, 2019).

While a comprehensive ECE systems approach is not central to the MIECHV state needs assessment like it is in PDG B-5, there is flexibility for states to use their needs assessment process to look across the mixed-delivery system when determining local capacity for providing nurse home visiting services, and for efforts to coordinate and strengthen local ECE systems holistically. In its guidance to states, HRSA “anticipates MIECHV awardees may use their needs assessment updates to identify opportunities for collaboration with state and local partners to establish appropriate linkages and referral networks to other community resources and supports and strengthen early childhood systems” (Health Resources & Services Administration Maternal & Child Health, 2019). This guidance suggests that there may be opportunities through the MIECHV program to assess the robustness of children’s neighborhood-based early childhood systems (across the prenatal to pre-K continuum), and not just the network of nurse home visiting services.

In sum, states have room within the MIECHV program to incorporate neighborhood-informed approaches for assessment of children’s development risk, and access to ECE resources that can inform targeting, implementation/service delivery and monitoring. However, states are not required to incorporate neighborhood-informed approaches. Counties are the default definition of community that states are required to use for ‘community’ in HRSA’s “simplified method.” And to date, no policy review has documented states’ use of neighborhood-informed approaches in MIECHV (a possible future research direction). Accordingly, there is no evidence that neighborhood-informed approaches necessarily result in improved policy and child outcomes. A comprehensive systems approach is not as central to the MIECHV needs assessment as it is in other policies (e.g. PDB B-5), but states may have enough flexibility to incorporate assessments of a fuller set of ECE resources in children’s communities, beyond just home visiting.

Given that a needs assessment update cycle recently concluded, this may be an opportune time for HRSA to consider exploring the potential of strengthening the use of neighborhood-informed approaches in the MIECHV program, to inform its requirements and guidance for the next required state MIECHV needs assessment updates.

C. Child Care and Development Block Grant / Child Care Development Fund

The Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) provides states with block grants to provide child care assistance (subsidies) to low-income working parents with children ages 0-13, and to fund child care and early education quality initiatives. Child care includes infant and toddler child care and learning programs (center-based and family-based), private 3-K and pre-K programs (excluding Head Start and public pre-K programs), kith and kin care, and before and after school and summer care for school age children. The Child Care Development Fund (authorized by CCDBG) is a federal child care assistance program that is administered by state agencies. States must comply with federal rules and regulations, but also have flexibility to implement and administer child care assistance policies and practices within their states. Unlike Head Start, children’s eligibility is linked to

parental work status and hinges upon at least 20 hours of parental employment or participation in job search or education and training activities.

CCDBG was reauthorized in 2014 for the first time in 18 years, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services released accompanying new comprehensive child care regulations in 2016. There were four key provisions to the new regulations: 1) protecting health and safety of children in child care, 2) helping parents make informed choices and access information about child development, 3) supporting equal access to stable, high-quality child care for low income children, and 4) enhancing the quality of the early childhood workforce. These new requirements opened numerous opportunities for states to use neighborhood-informed approaches in CCDF policymaking and program administration.

States administer child care assistance through one, and sometimes two modes: vouchers (a family receives a voucher that can be used at any subsidy-accepting early care and education program/provider), and contracts (the state agency contracts directly with selected early care and education providers to serve a specified number of subsidy-supported children). Vouchers give a family a geographically mobile voucher for accessing high quality early care and education. Contracts connect children to child care slots with specific providers that have availability. The locations of contracted providers are, at least in part, determined by decisions made by the state or local CCDF agency. Providers must decide to apply for a contract with the state, and the state must decide which providers to select for contracting. So, the location of contracted slots is partially driven by the dynamics of the local child care market, and also by policy decisions made by the state or local CCDF agency. Many states administer their child care assistance programs through local or regional service areas within the state, e.g. counties or Child Care Resource & Referral (CCR&R) regions, such that the state allocates vouchers to the regions, and then administrators at the regional level make decisions about voucher distribution.

There are several levers within CCDF that offer opportunities to use neighborhood-informed approaches, including but not limited to:

1. Contracts
2. Tiered/differential reimbursement
3. Targeted supply-building strategies
4. Equal access assurance
5. Priority groups; subsidy prioritization and allocation

The first three levers can be used to expand access to high-quality subsidized child care in children's neighborhood ECE access zones. These strategies can be used to target expansions and supply building for children facing the highest levels of risk (based on child, family and neighborhood factors, combined). The fourth lever—equal access assurance—is a cross-cutting lever that states can use to incorporate neighborhood-informed approaches into their assurance and monitoring of equal access. The fifth lever can be used to account for the increased developmental health risks some children face in their neighborhoods when prioritizing and targeting children for CCDF services.

Contracts. States can (under CCDF Plan Section 4.1.3) prioritize contracts with high-quality providers that serve: 1) children who live in neighborhood ECE access zones with low subsidized child care access; (2) children growing up in the highest risk neighborhoods, or, (3) children facing 'triple threat' (family poverty, high neighborhood risk and low subsidized ECE access).

Tiered reimbursement. States can use tiered or differential reimbursement strategies (CCDF Plan Section 4.3.2), where they reimburse certain subsidized child care providers at higher rates, based on certain criteria such as providing child care outside of traditional 8 am to 6 pm hours. States could offer higher reimbursement rates for high-quality providers serving children meeting the three criteria suggested above, including children in neighborhood ECE access zones with low ECE availability, in high risk neighborhoods, or both (i.e. children who face the triple threat of family poverty, low neighborhood ECE access and high neighborhood risk).

Supply-building strategies. States are required to evaluate the need for (systematically with data) and implement targeted supply-building strategies to meet the needs of certain populations that are defined in the law (CCDF Plan Section 4.6; 45 CFR § 98.16 (y)), including children in underserved areas, infants and toddlers, children with disabilities, and children who receive care during non-traditional hours. Within these strategies, lead agencies are required to prioritize investments for children of families in areas that have significant concentrations of poverty and unemployment. Federally supported strategies to build supply for these priority populations include the use of vouchers/contracts, family child care networks, technical assistance, provider recruitment, tiered payment rates, and/or business development supports. Under this mechanism, states can use children's neighborhood ECE access zones when assessing the most underserved areas and targeting areas for supply-building efforts. They can also account for children's neighborhood risk factors when prioritizing and targeting investments.

Equal access assurance. By law, states are required in their CCDF state plans to assure progress towards 'equal access' (45 CFR § 98.45), defined as "ensuring eligible children have the same access to child care services that are comparable to services provided to children whose parents are not eligible to receive child care assistance." States must account for eight different factors related to equal access, including "a choice of a full range of providers is made available." States that account for access to a full range of providers within children's neighborhood ECE access zones, rather than in their counties, for example, will more accurately assess ECE access from the perspective of families. Assessments of the range of providers in a child's county holds low information value since children, in practice, access providers within their geographic reach, i.e. within their neighborhood ECE access zones. In this way, neighborhood-informed approaches provide a more accurate tool for monitoring progress towards equal access.

Prioritize vulnerable groups. While the other levers identified emphasize the supply side of neighborhood early childhood systems, states also have openings to prioritize and target services for children facing increased developmental health risks in their neighborhoods. States are required to prioritize the needs of children experiencing homelessness, special needs, and children in families with very low incomes (45 CFR § 98.46 "Priority for Services"). States are allowed to identify additional priority groups, which could include 'children

facing neighborhood risk' as a named priority group of children. The state can support these children by prioritizing them for enrollment, allowing them to bypass wait lists, waiving co-payments, paying higher payments for high quality care, using grants or contracts to reserve slots, or other strategies determined by the state.

Finally, as a practical matter, some states allocate their subsidies on a statewide basis, and some allocate subsidies based on estimated need in sub-state regions (for example, counties or CCR&Rs). For states that allocate subsidies through sub-state regions, another strategy could be to increase allocations to regions with larger concentrations of children facing neighborhood developmental risk, and/or the 'triple threat' of family poverty, high neighborhood risk and low neighborhood ECE access.

There are numerous opportunities within CCDF state policies and program administration to account for children's neighborhood risk factors, their access to subsidized child care within their neighborhood ECE access zones, and the intersection of the two. However, like PDG B-5 and MIECHV, these approaches are not required, and there is little systematic information about states' use of neighborhood-informed approaches, nor evidence of their value for improving outcomes for children and families. There is also a lack of emphasis on comprehensive ECE systems development within CCDF specifically, but like MIECHV, CCDF is one of the main programs that is part of PDG B-5 comprehensive systems development. Therefore, if a state wishes to more systematically integrate neighborhood-informed approaches across birth to five early childhood policies, CCDF lead agencies have room under existing regulations to integrate these approaches in CCDF policy and program administration.

D. Head Start and Early Head Start

Head Start is a federally-funded preschool program primarily for poor three- and four-year olds. Early Head Start serves primarily poor infants and toddlers, ages 0-2, and pregnant mothers. The federal Office of Head Start makes grants directly to local Head Start programs (grantees), who operate a single or a network of Head Start centers in a grantee-defined service area (e.g. a county, a school district, a city/town). Funds for Head Start do not pass through state agencies, they go directly from the federal agency to the local Head Start grantee. In some states, the state government provides supplemental funding to add capacity to Head Start programs.⁴

Under existing regulations there are numerous openings for Head Start and Early Head Start grantees to prioritize children facing increased developmental risk (i.e. the 'double threat' of family poverty and neighborhood risk), and children facing the 'triple threat' of family poverty, high neighborhood risk and low neighborhood ECE access. The primary mechanism for implementing neighborhood-informed approaches in Head Start is the communitywide strategic planning and needs assessment required under Head Start Performance Standards.

⁴ For list of states providing supplemental state Head Start funding, see: NIEER State of Preschool, <https://nieer.org/state-preschool-yearbooks>.

Head Start Performance Standards/Communitywide strategic planning and needs assessment

The Communitywide strategic planning and needs assessment is a requirement under Head Start Performance Standards (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services), and is the central mechanism through which Head Start and Early Head Start grantees develop and set short term objectives and long term goals, justify their decisions about where to locate centers, and demonstrate that they have designed programs that are responsive to the needs of the most vulnerable children in their service areas. In other words, the strategic planning and needs assessment process results in a central roadmap that Head Start programs use to carry out their mission—to ensure that Head Start families and children in their service areas are receiving the best services and support possible. It also plays a central role in Head Start performance management. Lower performing Head Start grantees are required to re-apply and compete for funding in cities and communities at the end of their 5-year grant cycles under the Head Start Designation Renewal System (45 CFR § 1304).

Communitywide needs assessments are required once during each 5-year grant cycle, and grantees are required to update the needs assessment annually if there are any significant changes or new findings that occurred during the year.

In connection with the communitywide strategic planning and needs assessment requirements, grantees can incorporate neighborhood-informed approaches under:

- Head Start Performance Standards, 45 CFR § 1302 Subpart A, 1302.11: Determining community strengths, needs, and resources; Short term objectives and related long range goals
- Head Start Performance Standards, 45 CFR § 1302 Subpart J, 1302.102: Achieving Program Goals, which requires grantees set “Strategic long-term goals for ensuring programs are and remain responsive to community needs as identified in their community assessment as described in subpart A of this part”, and
- Head Start Performance Standards, 45 CFR § 1302 Subpart A, 1302.14: Selection process.

Under “Determining Community Needs” and “Achieving Program Goals” provisions, grantees can account for children’s neighborhood factors when demonstrating need and justifying center locations. Grantees are required to define their own service areas, and provide their own approach to demonstrating need, justifying Head Start locations, and to set related short-term objectives and long term goals. Grantees typically oversee service areas that span a county, a city/town, a school district, or sometimes one or a few neighborhoods. Service areas can be very large and include a large number of neighborhoods, which can differ greatly even within the same service area.

For demonstrating need, grantees are only technically required to demonstrate service area-wide need, and justifications for where they locate centers do not require specificity around the rationale for locating services in certain neighborhoods or locations based on neighborhood data. While not required, grantees certainly can (and some do) consider how need for Head Start varies in neighborhoods across their service area to better understand the extent of need, and how needs vary by neighborhood, and can then use this information to request additional funding to meet need, and/or to prioritize and tailor services in certain neighborhoods.

For example, Head Start grantees could choose to locate services in the highest poverty neighborhoods within their service area. Or, they may prioritize neighborhoods that have high levels of need *and* a lack of Head Start and other public preschool programs, or they may tailor services to meet the needs of a large concentration of English Language Learners in a particular neighborhood, for example.

Under “Selection Process” provisions, grantees can account for children’s neighborhood factors when justifying how to select and prioritize participants, and when determining recruitment areas. Head Start grantees have the ability, under existing regulations, to prescribe how the program will select and prioritize participants in a way that is responsive to the needs of the community. Grantees could justify prioritizing children facing ‘double threat’ (family poverty and neighborhood risk), and ‘triple threat’ (family, poverty, neighborhood risk and low ECE access).

Grantees can also define “recruitment areas,” which are smaller areas within their service areas where they may prioritize recruitment efforts. Grantees could assess neighborhood risk factors and ECE availability *simultaneously* in eligible children’ neighborhood ECE access zones (within a few miles of each neighborhood within the service area), and prioritize children facing the conditions of double and triple threat.

Leverage transportation policies to support neighborhood-informed approaches. Head Start grantees are not required to provide transportation, and decisions to provide transportation are made at the local grantee level. However, many grantees do use transportation policies to make their programs more responsive to the need of families in their service areas.

Grantees can use transportation policies to prioritize connecting children in the highest need neighborhoods to high-quality Head Start programs if those programs are located outside of children’s immediate neighborhoods and neighborhood ECE access zones (i.e. within a few miles of their immediate neighborhood).

It is important to note that while each of the actions identified are allowed under existing regulations grantees, none are required. So, while grantees have the room under existing standards to ensure that Head Start services are reaching children in the most vulnerable neighborhoods, and are equitably allocated across their service areas, they are not required to do so.

Early Head Start Opportunity Zone Priority Provisions

In connection with the third round of Early Head Start Expansion and Early Head Start Child Care Partnership Grants (HHS-2019-ACF-OHS-HP1386)—one goal of which was to increase the community supply of high-quality early learning environments and infant/toddler care and education—ACF reserved the right to prioritize funding for applicants who proposed services in Qualified Opportunity Zones.

Opportunity Zones are economically distressed neighborhoods (census tracts) that have been designated for public-sector investment by the federal government under the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, to incentivize private sector investment and job creation (through tax incentives), with the goal of promoting sustainable economic

growth. In some localities, neighborhoods that are designated as Opportunity Zones may overlap with neighborhoods where children face the highest risks to their developmental health, and where neighborhood early childhood systems require strengthening.

This approach can be especially impactful in Opportunity Zone neighborhoods where neighborhood economic investment decisions have a community benefit (for example, increased transportation options, health-care facilities, healthy food retail, quality education services) that will improve conditions for children and families. While community benefits are not a requirement for Opportunity Zones, social impact investment funds (which seek both financial returns and positive social impacts for their investors, and play an important role in spurring private sector investment in Opportunity Zones) often include community benefit requirements in their Opportunity Zone portfolios (Abello, 2020). In these Opportunity Zone neighborhoods, children stand to experience the multiplier effects that come with increased access to high quality early childhood programs *and* other neighborhood investments that improve conditions for families and children.

We are unaware of systematic information or analysis of the extent to which grantees and Office of Head Start utilized this lever in past or ongoing grant award competitions, and/or whether this language will remain part of future grant competitions.

Under existing Head Start and Early Head Start policies, there is ample room for grantees to make neighborhood-informed approaches central to their assessment, goal setting, planning, program design, and service delivery. Like other policy areas reviewed (MIECHV and CCDF), these approaches are not required, nor strongly incentivized, and we also lack models and evidence of grantees using these approaches to improve outcomes for children. In many cases, Head Start grantees may be reaching the most vulnerable children in their service areas, but without comprehensive assessment of children’s risk factors and children’s access to Head Start and other ECE resources within their geographic reach (i.e. at a neighborhood level), grantees cannot assure they have met their primary goal—to design and deliver Head Start programs that are responsive to the needs of the most vulnerable children in grantees’ service areas. Increased incentives and technical assistance supports (including neighborhood data) for Head Start grantees to incorporate neighborhood-informed approaches holds potential for advancing the goals of Head Start to deliver programs responsive to the needs of children facing the greatest developmental risks.

E. Title I Preschool

Title I, under the U.S. Department of Education’s Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), is the primary source of federal funds for local education, providing extra resources to school districts serving high numbers or shares of students in poverty. Funding is allocated based on a formula based on need (i.e. numbers of low-income children). Title I schools can use their Title I funding to support students in all grade levels, including preschool.

While all Title I programs must serve low-income children by definition, Title I preschool programs often have universal eligibility (over 60%) where all children are eligible, while some have targeted eligibility where only low-income children can attend (30%).⁵

In their state ESSA plans, state education agencies have to identify underperforming districts and schools. Responsibility then shifts to the local school district to conduct a needs assessment to develop school improvement plans. As part of the needs assessment process, school districts can integrate neighborhood-informed approaches by assessing the strength of the existing early childhood systems and the neighborhood risks children are facing for children served by each Title I school in the district. That assessment can then inform school improvement efforts that target Title I preschool programs, including adding a new preschool program with Title I funds (if there is none at the school), increasing the capacity of the preschool program at the school, lengthening the preschool day of existing programs, and/or improving preschool quality for schools serving children facing increased challenges to development based on neighborhood context.

In sum, neighborhood-informed approaches may help school districts better target often limited Title I funds to ensure that funds are supporting actions that will reach the most vulnerable children in the district (considering family, neighborhood and school contexts together), and that will better target investments to schools serving children who also face a lack of early educational opportunities in their neighborhoods.

Policy review conclusions: Neighborhood-based approaches are possible in all policies, but not required or incentivized

We have identified numerous openings for using neighborhood-informed approaches in existing federal early childhood policies. However, a central finding is that neighborhood-based approaches are not required nor incentivized in any of these programs by statute or regulation. Therefore, any states, grantees or school districts using neighborhood-informed approaches are doing so proactively, and these organizations are motivated by reasons other than compliance with federal requirements or incentives.

Also, because they are not required, the extent to which neighborhood-informed approaches are used is not systematically documented within or across these programs, which limits knowledge of the extent to which these existing policy levers can advance U.S. early childhood policy goals.

At the same time, the openings found across all programs and policies reveals a foundation for neighborhood-informed approaches for policymakers to build on, if they chose to systematically integrate these approaches across federal policies.

Finally, there are two key contextual issues to consider for any effort to more systematically integrate neighborhood-informed approaches across federal early childhood policies.

⁵ The remaining roughly 30% of Title I preschool programs are in districts that restrict preschool programs to serving children with special needs. (Piazza & Frankenberg, 2019).

The persistence of racial segregation. Given the prevalence of racial and economic residential segregation in the U.S., neighborhood-based early childhood systems will result in racially and economically segregated early childhood programs. Segregation in our K-12 educational system has a long track record of being unequal and harming poor Black, Hispanic, Indigenous and immigrant children (i.e. children of minoritized groups).⁶ There is evidence that programs that serve predominantly poor children, or children of minoritized groups are high quality and highly effective when they are geographically targeted and well-resourced such as our two most touted exemplar programs, Abecedarian and Perry Preschool that served predominantly low-income African American children (Schweinhart et al., 2005; Campbell & Ramey, 1995). However, a segregated system increases the potential for an unequal system. If our national ECE system remains neighborhood-based while expanding against the backdrop of neighborhood segregation, then heightened scrutiny and monitoring are required to ensure that programs are equitably resourced.

Macro policy challenges limit the potential of ECE policies to advance racial equity. Neighborhood-informed early childhood policies alone have limited potential to improve early childhood racial equity and need to be part of a larger effort to address macro policy challenges in the sector, including underinvestment (which results in high unmet need, low quality and an undervalued workforce), and fragmentation. Without confronting these larger macro policy challenges, neighborhood-informed approaches can only incrementally increase racial equity by informing a more equitable distribution of scarce resources for vulnerable children. While this does technically improve racial equity by ensuring resources are reaching the relatively most vulnerable children, it still leaves many vulnerable children unserved.

The goal of U.S. early childhood policies is to ensure that all vulnerable children—not just the most extremely vulnerable—have access to the high-quality early experiences they need to grow up healthy. Therefore, while neighborhood-informed early childhood policies can be used today to make incremental gains in terms of racial equity, they hold much greater potential for improving efficiency, effectiveness and equity if integrated into efforts to reform and expand investment in the U.S. early childhood system. One of the most tangible benefits that neighborhood-informed assessments may offer in this moment is their ability to more comprehensively and robustly quantify the scope of children’s developmental vulnerability in the U.S., and the scope of unmet need and lack of access that so many vulnerable children in the U.S. face. Armed with this information, policymakers and advocates can bolster their case for additional investment in the system, and have an additional tool for advancing equitable expansion goals.

⁶ Smith (2016) states that “groups that are different in race, religious creed, nation of origin, sexuality, and gender and as a result of social constructs have less power or representation compared to other members or groups in society should be considered minoritized.” People who are minoritized endure mistreatment and face prejudices that are forced upon them because of situations outside of their control. <https://www.theodysseyonline.com/minority-vs-minoritize>

SECTION 4. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion

An established and still expanding evidence base suggests that a young child's neighborhood is a contributing factor to their developmental health and can also shape their access to a robust set of early childhood supports. Yet, prior to this report, no policy reviews had evaluated how federal early childhood policies account for children's neighborhood risk factors, and children's neighborhood-level access to a full continuum of high-quality prenatal to pre-K resources.

In reviewing five major federal early childhood policies and programs, we find numerous timely opportunities for policymakers, administrators and practitioners (program directors/grantees) to use neighborhood-informed approaches in assessment, planning, implementation, service delivery, and monitoring and evaluation. Perhaps the most timely and research-aligned opportunity is the Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five Program. This program would allow states to integrate a comprehensive early childhood systems approach with neighborhood-informed strategies. States can account for children's neighborhood risk factors when defining "vulnerable children" for prioritization, and can assess, plan for, and monitor children's neighborhood-level access to comprehensive ECE systems. Policymakers need tools to ensure the efficient, effective and equitable use of the unprecedented levels of investment coming into the U.S. early care and learning system under the American Rescue Plan, making neighborhood-informed approaches a timely tool for building more robust and equitable systems for vulnerable children.

While existing policy opportunities abound, there are no federal policy requirements or incentives to encourage neighborhood-informed approaches in any of the five policy areas reviewed. More evidence is needed to understand the added value of neighborhood-informed approaches. However, the strong evidence on how neighborhoods shape children's developmental health and access to ECE, together, support consideration of more systematic use of neighborhood-informed approaches in federal ECE policies and programs.

Four ways that neighborhood-informed approaches can strengthen U.S. early childhood policies

Neighborhood-informed approaches could improve early childhood policies in four key ways, by providing a tool that can:

1. Bolster the case for additional ECE investment
2. Support more effective and equitable targeting and prioritization of scarce resources
3. Support more equitable distribution of expanding resources
4. Strengthen accountability

Bolster the case for additional ECE investment: Policymakers and advocates are required to determine, justify, and advocate for the investment levels needed to achieve policy goals. The goal of U.S. early childhood policies is to expand and ensure equitable access to high-quality early experiences for vulnerable children. Accounting for children's neighborhood factors provides a more comprehensive assessment of children's developmental vulnerability, and a more complete understanding of what children can access within their geographic reach.

Assessments of need that miss an entire set of risks that children face in their neighborhoods may yield inaccurate (under) estimates of investment levels needed to achieve policy goals.

Guided by the research, “met need” would mean that every vulnerable child in the U.S. lives in a neighborhood with a robust comprehensive early childhood system located within a few miles. Neighborhood-based assessments show, in no uncertain terms, how many (and which) vulnerable children remain unreached by the federal early childhood system *as a whole*, and how truly vulnerable those unreached children are (based on a comprehensive assessment that considers child-, family- *and* neighborhood-factors). Neighborhood approaches therefore offer a robust assessment of children’s vulnerability levels, and the reach and potential impact of our existing ECE investments.

In this way, neighborhood-informed approaches help motivate the case for the investment levels needed to meet children’s needs (assessed comprehensively). Also, these approaches implicitly center racial equity, since Black, Hispanic, Indigenous and immigrant children systematically face increased neighborhood risks, and are therefore most harmed when we underestimate the investments required to achieve policy goals.

While a majority of the unprecedented \$52.5 billion of funding coming into the system under the American Rescue Plan is allocated to restoring the early care and learning infrastructure lost due to COVID-19, the level of resources needed to build and sustain expanded access to high quality early care and learning over the longer term remains an open question. Neighborhood-informed approaches provide visibility about the true reach of the system and can inform the need for maintaining (or reducing) these higher levels of investment in the system over time.

Provide a tool for more effective and equitable targeting (when resources are scarce): While all children growing up in poor families are vulnerable, and they all need high-quality ECE, high levels of unmet need reflect the scarcity of resources available to support vulnerable children in the U.S. By providing complete information about children’s vulnerability, and access to ECE from the perspective of families, neighborhood-informed approaches help to differentiate children’s vulnerability levels in ways that can inform policy decisions.

For example, neighborhood-informed assessments can be used to identify which children face the double threat of family poverty and neighborhood risk, and/or the triple threat of family poverty, neighborhood risk, and access to an incomplete or weak neighborhood-based early childhood system. In this way, neighborhood-informed approaches offer an additional tool for policymakers responsible for the targeting and prioritization of scarce resources to the most vulnerable children. They can also be used to prevent inefficiencies (which are especially perverse when resources are scarce), where, for example, an overabundance of ECE resources go unused in one neighborhood, while children wait in need in another neighborhood.

While neighborhood-informed approaches alone cannot resolve the difficult decisions that policymakers face in the context of scarce resources, they can contribute to a more robust information base and framework for decision-making.

Provide a tool for more equitable targeting (when resources are expanding): As the early childhood system rebuilds and reforms in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the sector will experience unprecedented investment. Those expanded resources will roll out to children over time, with the goal of eventually reaching all vulnerable children who can benefit from expanded access to high-quality early care and learning. While resources are being rolled out, neighborhood-informed strategies can help ensure an equitable distribution of those expanded resources, by prioritizing children at the highest levels of risk—for example, children facing the ‘triple threat’ of family poverty, neighborhood risk and poor ECE access.

In the context of an unprecedented expansion of resources under the American Rescue Plan, policymakers have unrepresented opportunities and challenges to ensure that resources are used effectively, equitably and efficiently, increasing the need for robust racial-equity centered resource targeting tools, including neighborhood-informed approaches.

Strengthen accountability. Our existing set of federally-supported early childhood policies and their supporting information systems were not designed to assess access to a range of federally-supported ECE resources from the perspective of the child (or family). Neighborhood approaches offer a tool that can change that. They offer a much-needed unifying tool to help assess, plan for, and monitor children’s access to comprehensive early childhood systems. We lack information about how the resources associated with major early childhood policies and programs (home visiting, CCDF, Head Start/Early Head Start, and Title I preschool) land “on the ground,” in relation to where vulnerable children live. Without measuring how the different pieces of the system come together at the neighborhood level, we are unable to systematically examine whether some children are surrounded by an abundance of resources while others may face a dearth.

Neighborhood-informed approaches offer an accountability tool that can provide literal pictures (maps) of how resources, across policy and programmatic areas, are distributed, and therefore how they are reaching (or not reaching) vulnerable children and families. By providing more family-centered information about ECE resource availability, about potential inefficiencies in how resources are distributed across neighborhoods, and about inequities in access, neighborhood-informed approaches can contribute to the set of accountability tools we need to monitor progress towards policy goals. Again, with unprecedented investment coming into the system comes an unprecedented scale for transparent resource monitoring and accountability, both of which neighborhood-informed approaches can support and bolster.

Recommendations and Future Directions

We end this report with four recommendations for next steps and two suggestions for future directions based on our review of the existing research and the results of this policy review.

Recommendations

1. Use the levers you have. Policy opportunities to use neighborhood-informed strategies to improve assessment, planning, administration, service delivery, and monitoring/evaluation abound. We recommend that

policymakers and practitioners take advantage of the levers that currently exist to integrate neighborhood-informed approaches where they see the greatest potential for impact.

2. Systematically account for children’s neighborhood-related developmental risks in federal ECE policies.

The established evidence base provides a strong rationale for accounting for children’s neighborhood-based developmental risk factors in determining eligibility and prioritization for federal early childhood policies, programs and services. Some federal policies already have provisions that aim to account for this (for example, the requirement within CCDF that states prioritize increasing access for children living in areas with high poverty concentration and low supply of high-quality child care, 45 CFR 98.16(y)). However, these provisions could be systematically applied across federal ECE policies, services and programs. Importantly, to align with the research evidence, these provisions would offer a clear and consistent definition of neighborhood based on the close area around a child’s home (e.g. their census tract and/or the close surrounding areas), rather than using broader community, county or city definitions.

3. Work towards a national information system about children’s neighborhood risks and neighborhood-level access to comprehensive ECE systems to inform policymaking.

A national information system with data on children’s neighborhood risks and neighborhood-level access to comprehensive ECE systems may advance the goals of U.S. early childhood policies—to expand and ensure vulnerable children’s equal access to the early care and learning experiences they need to thrive.

Research indicates that children’s development is accumulative, which means they need access to supports along the full prenatal to pre-K continuum, without any gaps. The research also suggests that ECE availability within a few miles of a family’s neighborhood plays a major role in what they can and do access in practice. Therefore, if the goal of U.S. early childhood policies is to ensure vulnerable children have access to a robust continuum of ECE services and supports within their reach, to set policy targets and to monitor progress, we require robust information about how many (and which) children have access to a robust comprehensive ECE system, *based on where they live*. The research also supports a system that integrates information about children’s neighborhood ECE access with information about their individual, family *and* neighborhood-level risk factors.

A more robust base of information for early childhood policymaking can support the justification for additional investment in the sector, improve effectiveness, efficiency and racial equity in resource targeting and prioritization (in the context of both scarce and expanding resources), and provide another accountability tool to ensure progress towards policy goals.

Recent technological advancements in the field to assess local child care systems in response to COVID-19 reveal both the value and the feasibility of developing a more comprehensive early childhood information system that captures children’s individual, family, neighborhood risk factors, alongside their neighborhood-level access to robust ECE systems. For a reform-minded field that is working to advance its information infrastructure, the current moment provides a timely opportunity to develop systems that support neighborhood-informed early

childhood policies, by equipping policymakers with policy-relevant information about children’s developmental risk and access to comprehensive ECE systems.

4. Support neighborhood-informed approaches in Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five.

PDG B-5 provides a timely opportunity for federal policymakers to support and incentivize states to use neighborhood-informed early childhood policymaking approaches. While ESSA established the PDG B-5 program in statute, funding for the program remains contingent on the annual Congressional appropriations process. States will come to their renewal period in December 2022, and until then they will be working to implement their state plans and lay the groundwork for the next round of statewide needs assessments in 2023. If this program continues, it will become one of the main mechanisms through which states assess, plan for and monitor their early childhood systems in a comprehensive way. This makes the PDG B-5 a crucial early childhood policy tool for policymakers seeking to combine comprehensive systems approaches with neighborhood-informed approaches.

Through its technical assistance, ACF could provide guidance for clear and consistent definitions of children’s neighborhoods, recommended indicators related to children’s neighborhood risks, and data and information resources for states to support the integration of this information into state PDG B-5 information systems. ACF could go one step further to provide incentives to grantees seeking new grants or renewal grants for using neighborhood-informed approaches when defining vulnerable groups of children, assessing local availability, and informing locally-based efforts to support coordination across the mixed-delivery ECE system. Supporting neighborhood-informed approaches in PDG B-5 will also facilitate the gathering of evidence of how states are using these approaches to improve outcomes for children and to advance racial equity.

Future Directions

1. Gather and share evidence of neighborhood-informed early childhood approaches.

While the research indicates that neighborhood-informed early childhood approaches hold promise, the field requires more evidence of the potential for neighborhood-based strategies in early childhood to improve vulnerable children’s outcomes. We envision a project to identify examples of neighborhood-informed early childhood approaches, gather information about what problem they were used to address (for example, how to equitably locate new preschools across a city, or how to structure recruitment or targeting strategies to increase ECE access for underserved groups), and collect evidence of their effectiveness, vis-à-vis other proposed approaches (for example, would strategies based on child and family characteristics alone have resulted in the same or different outcomes?). While we intend to gather some preliminary examples as a next phase of this research, a more robust study would benefit the field.

2. Continue breaking down the silos: Support cross-agency visioning, planning, and coordination opportunities to support comprehensive neighborhood early childhood systems.

The PDG B-5 grant provides an unprecedented opportunity for state policymakers to look across the entire mixed-delivery early childhood system within a state, and to identify the gaps and needs for children living in every neighborhood across a state. It also affords opportunities for instrumental coordinating bodies—like State

Advisory Councils on Early Childhood, Children’s Cabinets or Early Childhood Councils—to bring together policymakers across Head Start, CCDF, public preschool and maternal and child health programs to leverage many of the policy levers identified in this brief to implement neighborhood-informed approaches to policy, planning and practice. But along with a vision of what it would take to meet children’s needs across all neighborhoods in a state, policymakers need tools and supports to develop and implement cross-agency and intergovernmental plans to ensure that every part of the neighborhood early childhood system in the state is equipped to meet children’s needs.

Policymakers need a mechanism for coordination, and federal policies can play a role in requiring and supporting these coordinating mechanisms, like they do through State Advisory Councils on Early Childhood Education and Care under the Head Start Act (Section 642 B(b)(1)(A)(i)). There are other models as well, including Children’s Cabinets and inter-agency planning groups used in many states, counties and localities that allow stakeholders from different agencies and different levels of government to come together. In Colorado, for example, there are 34 legislated local Early Childhood Councils that coordinate statewide through a Statewide Early Childhood Council Leadership Alliance. Children’s Cabinets are also found in several states and cities, (for example, Virginia, Maryland, New York City) where government and non-government representatives (e.g. non-profits and local businesses) coordinate around local needs assessments, mobilize resources, and facilitate opportunities to innovate around holistic approaches to meeting children’s needs at the local level.⁷

A coordinating body can bring together policymakers within a state that work across CCDF, Head Start, public PreK, and MIECHV to collaboratively leverage the policy levers identified in this brief. This coordination alone is a major step forward by having policymakers and practitioners across programs develop shared strategies for getting all children the early childhood neighborhood resources they need. Federal policies can further strengthen these coordinating mechanisms by supporting neighborhood-informed approaches as a more central part of the cross-agency and cross-sector work of these bodies.

While state level and within-state coordination are essential, there are limits to the progress they can make to advance comprehensive neighborhood early childhood systems. Because some federal early childhood programs are administered by state agencies through block grants, while others are administered directly by federal agencies (for example, Head Start), intergovernmental coordination at the federal, state and local levels is needed. We recommend increased federal efforts to support innovation around federal early childhood inter-agency planning and information systems, and systematic exploration of ways to integrated neighborhood-based approaches for greatest impact, including opportunities to blend and braid funds at the state and local levels to support comprehensive neighborhood ECE systems. Without federal efforts, state and local coordinating bodies face limits to improving neighborhood early childhood systems, and efforts will continue to be fragmented by state and locality without federal leadership.⁸

⁷ For more discussion, see: Butler, Higashi, & Cabello (2020), and The Forum for Youth Investment (n.d.).

⁸ Ibid.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Research suggests that neighborhood-informed early childhood approaches hold promise for advancing the goals of U.S. early childhood policies—to expand and ensure vulnerable children’s access to high-quality early care and learning opportunities. With increasing attention on racial equity at the federal level in response to the Biden Administration’s Executive Order to Advance Racial Equity, these approaches offer another tool for policymakers to advance issues of racial equity in early childhood. Integrating neighborhood-informed approaches alone will not address the larger policy challenges in the ECE sector (underinvestment and fragmentation), but they offer a potentially valuable supporting strategy to bolster the case for increased investment in the sector. Neighborhood-informed approaches also have the potential to make policies more effective, to make resource targeting and prioritization more equitable (in the context of both scarce and expanding resources), and to strengthen accountability across the federally-supported early childhood system as a whole.

As the early care and education sector rebuilds, expands and reforms after COVID-19—with unprecedented levels of new public investment in the American Rescue Plan—it is a logical and opportune time to consider using neighborhood-informed approaches. These frameworks can reimagine and ground our policy goals to ensure that every vulnerable child in the U.S. grows up surrounded by the vibrant network of early childhood supports, resources and opportunities they need to reach their full potential.

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