

Census Tracts and Child-Raising: Place-Based Implications for Child and Family Policy Investments and Reforms

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Place matters, and neighborhood is particularly important to young children, whose lives often are largely defined by the few blocks around their homes. While parents remain the most important influence on and determinant of young children's healthy growth, neighborhoods also play a significant role.

This analysis, using 2000 census data, first categorized the country's 65,000 census tracts for their child-raising vulnerability. It then contrasted the most vulnerable census tracts with other census tracts on these vulnerability characteristics and on their child and young adult populations, and the consequent implications for public policy.

Census Tracts and Child-Raising Vulnerability

The census provides different data that represent indicators of a census tract's social, educational, economic, and wealth characteristics that influence child-raising. Research shows that a variety of factors are predictive of child growth and success, across these dimensions. The Child and Family Policy Center constructed ten indicators to use in developing an overall measure of a census tract's child-raising vulnerability. These included:

- three social indicators (percent single parenting, percent adult population of limited English proficiency, and percent disconnected 16- to 19-year-olds as measured by not being in school or employed);
- two educational indicators (percent 25 and over population without a high school diploma, and percent 25 and over population with at least a college degree);
- three economic indicators (percent of households with wage income, percent of families with children in poverty, and percent of heads of household on public assistance); and
- two wealth indicators (percent of owner occupied housing, and percent of heads of household with interest, rent, or dividend income).

Tracts that were at least a standard deviation from the mean in a negative direction for any indicator were scored as vulnerable on that indicator. A vulnerability index with an overall score of 0-10 was created using the number of indicators upon which each tract was determined to be vulnerable. This vulnerability index was used to categorize all census tracts for their child-raising vulnerability.

Overall, the majority of the population of the United States (58.4%) lives in tracts with no vulnerability scores on any of the indicators. A small proportion (6.7%), representing 18.86 million Americans, lives in the most vulnerable child-raising tracts, scoring high on at least six of the ten vulnerability indicators.

Table One provides information on each of the ten indicators used to create the vulnerability index. On nine of the ten indicators, the differences between the most vulnerable tracts and less vulnerable tracts are profound, with rates for the most vulnerable tracts at least double and in some instances as much as nine times greater than for the majority of tracts with no indicators of vulnerability. Only on wage income are the differences smaller; 69.1% of households with wage income in the most vulnerable child-raising tracts compared to 80.6% in tracts with no indicators showing vulnerability. Even in the most vulnerable census tracts, two-thirds of households have some attachment to the work force, although at lower wages and with significantly less stability in employment.

	All Census Tracts	No Vulnerability Factors	1-2 Vulnerability Factors	3-5 Vulnerability Factors	6-10 Vulnerability Factors
Tracts	65,321	35,753	16,185	8,126	5,257
Total Population	281,421,906	164,392,149	66,462,714	31,707,210	18,859,833
Percent of Population		58.41	23.62	11.27	6.70
<u>Vulnerability Indicators</u>					
Percent Single Parent	27.13	20.46	30.62	41.52	53.10
Percent Poor Families with Children	13.57	7.18	15.00	26.54	41.43
Percent 25+ no HS	19.60	13.53	21.02	36.00	48.00
Percent 25+ BA or Higher	24.00	28.67	23.01	13.00	7.14
Percent 16-19 not School/Work	6.00	3.05	1.03	10.41	15.00
Percent HoH on Public Assistance	7.81	4.87	7.75	14.57	25.48
Percent HoH with Wage Income	77.72	80.60	74.08	75.12	69.10
Percent HoH - Int/Div/Rent/Home	35.87	42.31	33.73	18.86	11.05
Percent 18+ Limited English	4.62	1.87	4.82	11.67	17.52
Percent Owner-occupied Housing	60.24	71.00	51.10	42.57	29.62

Source: Geolytics Census 2000 Data from Urban Institute, Washington DC.

The clear message is that there are profound differences, across neighborhoods, on indicators related to a tract's support for raising children. Further, these social, educational, economic, and wealth indicators are interconnected, and compound the challenges in vulnerable tracts in addressing children's needs for healthy growth and development.

Poor Neighborhoods – Rich in Children and Low in Earning Age Adults

In addition to the specific indicators selected to assess child-raising vulnerability, census tracts were examined for the size of their child and working age populations, their racial compositions, and the gender and race characteristics of their young adult (the primary age for parenting young children) populations.

Table Two provides data on the child, and very young child, populations in census tracts by child-raising vulnerability, and also provides a ratio of the working age population (18-64) to the dependent age population (0-17 or 65+). The most vulnerable tracts for raising children have a much larger share of the country's young, and youngest, children

than other census tracts. Nearly one-third of all residents in the most vulnerable census tracts are children, and almost one in ten are very young. Proportionately, these tracts have a 27.3% greater proportion of children (0-17) than census tracts with no vulnerability indicators; and a 50.2% greater proportion of very young (0-4) children. In short, poor, disinvested neighborhoods are rich in children.

Table 2: Child Populations and Working Age/Dependent Age Ratios by Census Tract Vulnerability

	All Census Tracts	No Vulnerability Factors	1-2 Vulnerability Factors	3-5 Vulnerability Factors	6-10 Vulnerability Factors
Children					
0-4 Population Total	19,046,754	10,773,946	4,085,150	2,444,248	1,743,410
Percent of All 0-4 Children		56.57	21.45	12.83	9.15
0-4 as Percent of Tract pop	6.77	6.15	6.42	7.71	9.24
0-17 Population Total	72,142,757	42,312,093	14,908,864	8,741,690	6,180,110
Percent of All Children		58.65	20.67	12.12	8.57
0-17 as Percent of Tract pop	25.64	25.74	22.43	27.57	32.77
Worker Dependent Ratio					
18-64 pop./(0-17+65+)	1.63	1.64	1.68	1.61	1.40

Source: Geolytics Census 2000 Data from Urban Institute, Washington DC.

The policy implications are several.

Clearly, these census tracts have even greater needs for early care and education services, particularly if adults are to be in the workforce to economically support their families. Caregiving currently is likely to be a more significant employment base in these census tracts, with surveys suggesting that this care is more likely to be in home-based and unregistered care than in other tracts. These caregivers are less likely to have early childhood credentials or more advanced educational backgrounds than those in other census tracts.

Early care and education policy needs to take these differences into account. Upgrading the skills and compensation of caregivers currently living in and providing (or capable of providing) early childhood services can have a dual benefit of improving the economy in these tracts and improving children's early childhood development. Alternatively, policies that do not recognize the needs and opportunities in these census tracts and simply seek to expand pre-school or improve the quality of early care and education through education or credentialing standards can have adverse consequences. If they do not provide residents in these neighborhoods with pathways to gain skills and serve as these providers, they run the risk of further depleting the economic resource base and opportunity within these tracts by bringing people from outside the neighborhood in as caregivers, taking employment opportunities away from those in the neighborhood.

Clearly as well, there is need for substantial outside support and resource transfers to these census tracts, simply given the relative absence of a working age base to support

the population. The difference between 1.4 working age adults for every dependent and 1.64 is huge in terms of economic development capacity. This figure actually under-represents the overall challenge, as a greater share of the dependent population in high child-raising vulnerability census tracts is children. Seniors, which are more likely to be represented as part of the dependent population in other census tracts, often have social security and retirement income that contributes to the economy. Even if working age residents in the high vulnerability census tracts worked and earned at a level commensurate with the population within other tracts (which they do not), there still would be a substantial economic gap, without some form of transfer payments or investments.

Finally, the role of the K-12 educational system is critical to the economic, as well as educational, development of these tracts. Again, to the extent possible, educational reforms and investments that provide community building and economic opportunity for residents both can serve educational and economic development roles.

Racial Segregation and Vulnerable Child-Raising Census Tracts

The United States is segregated by both social class and race/ethnicity. The extent of this segregation is shown with respect to vulnerable child-raising census tracts in two ways, the actual racial composition of the census tracts with different child-raising vulnerability indicators and the proportion of different races and ethnicities within different tracts. These are shown in Table Three, with all Hispanic persons included in the percent Hispanic, and all racial categories including only non-Hispanics. As Table Three shows, the most vulnerable child-raising census tracts are largely of color, with only 17.6% of the population White, non-Hispanic. Over three-quarters of the population is either Hispanic or Black, equally divided between the two groups. This is in

	All Census Tracts	No Vulnerability Factors	1-2 Vulnerability Factors	3-5 Vulnerability Factors	6-10 Vulnerability Factors
Racial Composition					
Percent White Nonhispanic	69.78	83.16	66.95	37.41	17.60
Percent Black	12.53	6.25	13.37	28.21	38.03
Percent Asian	4.08	3.67	5.12	4.45	3.35
Percent Hispanic	12.52	6.13	13.27	28.11	39.38
Percent Am. Indian Native Alaskan	0.75	0.52	0.88	1.40	1.24
Percent Native Hawain & Other PI	0.17	0.15	0.22	0.20	0.15
Percent Other	0.16	0.13	0.18	0.22	0.25
Total	100	100	100	100	100
Proportion of Race in Tract					
Percent Total White Non-Hisp	100	69.61	22.66	6.04	1.69
Percent Total Black	100	29.12	25.20	25.35	20.33
Percent Total Asian	100	52.55	29.66	12.29	5.50
Percent Total Hispanic	100	28.59	25.03	25.03	25.30
Percent Total Am. Indian/AK Native	100	40.29	27.59	21.03	11.09
Percent NH & other PI	100	50.58	29.90	13.44	6.08
Percent Total Other	100	47.59	26.65	15.40	10.35

Source: Geolytics Census 2000 Data from Urban Institute, Washington DC.

sharp contrast to the census tracts with no vulnerability indicators, where 83.2% of the population is White, non-Hispanic. In the aggregate, both Blacks and Hispanics represent quite small minorities (less than one in fourteen residents each) in census tracts with no vulnerability indicators.

A tiny percentage of all White non-Hispanics (1.7%) live in high child-raising vulnerability census tracts, but 20.3% of Blacks and 25.3% of Hispanics do. Fewer than 30% of Blacks and Hispanics live in tracts with no vulnerability indicators, compared with nearly 70% of White, non-Hispanics.

The neighborhood reference point for people of different color in the United States varies hugely. Policies that may work for the White, non-Hispanic populations in neighborhoods with no vulnerability indicators may not work at all for populations of color within these same neighborhoods, let alone within more vulnerable child-raising neighborhoods, where people of color in America are much more likely to reside. Policies that do not account for place run the risk of being color-blind and inappropriate in their response to needs to close achievement, employment, and other gaps that exist by race and ethnicity in America.

Young Adults and Missing Males in Vulnerable Child-Raising Census Tracts

Overall declining real wages over the last several decades have been part of the reason behind the entry of more mothers into the workforce. For the majority of families with young children in particular, it requires two incomes to raise a family. Since 1980, there also has been a fourfold increase in the number of people incarcerated in state and federal prisons, largely young men. This has had an impact on families and child-raising abilities and expectations.

Table Four provides data on the ratio of young men to young women (16-34) by census tract type and by race. Overall, there is not a large difference in the ratios by number of vulnerability indicators, with the highest vulnerability census tracts having 99 young men for every 100 young women, compared with 101 young men for every 100 young women in tracts with no vulnerability indicators.

	All Census Tracts	No Vulnerability Factors	1-2 Vulnerability Factors	3-5 Vulnerability Factors	6-10 Vulnerability Factors
Young Adult Race/Gender Ratio					
16-34 M/F Ratio All	1.03	1.01	1.07	1.07	0.99
16-34 M/F Ratio White NonHispanic	1.02	1.01	1.06	1.07	1.06
16-34 M/F Ratio Black	0.94	0.97	1.02	0.93	0.81
16-34 M/F Ratio Asian	0.97	0.92	1.00	1.04	1.04
16-34 M/F Ratio Hispanic	1.16	1.09	1.21	1.21	1.14
Foreign Born Population					
Percent Foreign Born	11.05	7.08	12.96	20.27	23.46
Percent FB US Citizens	4.46	3.57	5.20	6.45	6.26
Percent FB not US Citizens	6.6	3.51	7.76	13.85	17.20

Source: Geolytics Census 2000 Data from Urban Institute, Washington DC.

When broken down by race, however, there is a very different story. The ratio of young Black men to young Black women declines to 81 to 100 in the most vulnerable census tracts, a major deficit. Imprisonment undoubtedly plays a major role in these figures; nationally, 8.7% of the 20- to 34-year-old Black male population is in state or federal prisons. Selected research of different communities has indicated that incarceration rates are substantially higher in poor neighborhoods.

When felony records as well as actual incarceration are considered, the impact of the criminal justice system on Black fathers in these census tracts is huge, adding to the barriers that these young men have in seeking to support the raising of their children. Two major domestic policy changes – tougher criminal justice practices resulting in increased prison populations and welfare reform requiring parents (primarily young and female) to work – have changed the face of these census tracts and made them even more vulnerable from a child-raising perspective. Criminal justice policies have had a pronounced effect on these neighborhoods by depleting them of young Black men, who need to be part of the equation in providing children with necessary economic, as well as social and emotional, support.

Meanwhile, the young Hispanic male to female ratio of 114 young men for every 100 women speaks to the immigration of young men for employment, often to support families in their home country who have not yet immigrated. This presents its own challenges and opportunities for these vulnerable child-raising census tracts. The overall foreign-born population, particularly those who are not U.S. citizens, also is much higher in these neighborhoods, and shows the need for language sensitivity in developing place-based educational and economic development strategies.

Regional and Metropolitan Location of High Vulnerability Tracts

Census tracts with the highest child-raising vulnerability are not distributed evenly across the United States. They are concentrated in metropolitan areas with populations in excess of one million residents, and, with the exception of the South, are very unlikely to be in non-metropolitan census tracts. As Table Five shows, while the Northeast and the West have the highest overall percentages of high vulnerability tracts, the South has the highest percentages in non-metropolitan census tracts. In fact, if Arizona and New Mexico were added to the South states and subtracted from the West states, the percentages for non-metro census highest vulnerability census tracts would rise to 5.79% in the South and fall to 0.75% in the West. With the exception of the South states and Arizona and New Mexico, less than one percent of the non-metro population lives in highest vulnerability census tracts. Overall, while constituting 17.36% of the country's population, non-metro census tracts represent only 7.82% of the highest vulnerability tracts.

Table 5: High Child-Raising Vulnerability Census Tracts by Region and Metropolitan Characteristics

	All Census Tracts	Tracts with 6+ Vulnerability Factors	% Highest Vulnerability Tracts
<u>Metro and Non-Metro</u>			
Midwest	64,391,776	2,717,257	4.22%
Northeast	53,594,378	4,773,454	8.91%
South	100,236,820	6,158,151	6.14%
West	63,197,932	5,210,971	8.25%
U.S. Total	281,420,906	18,859,833	6.70%
<u>Metro</u>			
Midwest	48,858,727	2,622,604	5.37%
Northeast	48,342,406	4,744,172	9.81%
South	78,877,877	4,966,197	6.30%
West	56,499,930	5,052,961	8.94%
U.S. Total	232,578,940	17,385,934	7.48%
<u>Non-Metro</u>			
Midwest	15,533,049	94,663	0.61%
Northeast	5,251,972	29,282	0.56%
South	21,358,943	1,191,954	5.58%
West	6,698,002	158,010	2.36%
U.S. Total	48,841,966	1,473,909	3.02%

Ten States/D.C. with highest percentage of Metro tract population in highest child vulnerability category: D.C. (25.78%), New York (15.81%), Rhode Island (14.17%), California (12.64%), Texas (10.22%), Louisiana (9.25%), Arizona (8.36%), Connecticut (7.94%), Nevada (7.78%), Illinois (7.34%), and Michigan (7.29%).

Ten States with highest percent of Non-Metro tract population in highest child vulnerability category: Kentucky (13.06%), Arizona (12.28%), Mississippi (11.09%), Louisiana (10.0%), New Mexico (6.68%), Texas (6.50%), West Virginia (5.49%), Alabama (5.22%), Georgia (5.12%), and Arkansas (4.30%).

At the same time, it is the census tracts within metropolitan areas with populations over one million that the vast majority of the population living in the highest vulnerability tracts resides. These tracts represent 53.03% of the country's population, but 67.38% of the population in the highest vulnerability tracts. The remaining metropolitan census tracts account for 29.61% of the country's population and 24.80% of the population in the highest vulnerability tracts.

In short, these census tracts are predominantly found in large metropolitan areas, regardless of region of the country. If they exist in non-metro areas, they are most likely to be located in the South, but, at least by these measures of highest vulnerability, both the Northeast and the West have larger proportions of these census tracts to address than does the South.

Conclusion

Statistics alone, however stark, seldom induce calls for major policy reform. Perhaps only demographers are likely to become excited about the significance of the differences, based on geography, race, and ethnicity, that are described here. People

generally are aware that there are differences by place and race, but the magnitude and importance of these differences may go unrecognized.

In demographic terms, however, these are so significant that they cannot afford to be ignored. They need to be considered in shaping policy – in such disparate but interrelated areas as early care and education, school reform, economic development, and justice reform. In particular, they need to be addressed if we are to take seriously a commitment to raise achievement and eliminate the opportunity gap for the country's children.

