

# Housing, Contexts, and the Well-Being of Children and Youth: Guest Editors' Introduction

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*The opinions expressed in this guest editors' introduction and in the following articles and commentaries are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official positions or policies of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, or the U.S. government.*

From time to time, most families with children carefully consider the consequences of their housing and neighborhood choices for their children. Policymakers allocate many billions of dollars to a wide variety of housing and neighborhood-based activities in the hope that these activities will foster the healthy development of the next generation. When parents and policymakers look to the social sciences for hard evidence in support of their decisions, however, they will find much of the literature disappointingly inconclusive. This symposium is intended to help build a better evidence base.

This symposium examines the relationship between housing and neighborhood contexts and the well-being of children and youth. The articles are based on the premise that time-invariant, family- and individual-level factors are not alone in affecting child and youth development, but that the contexts in which children grow up also independently influence outcomes. Thus, the articles reflect both an ecological framework that considers multiple levels (the individual child or youth, the family, the context in which they live or spend time) and a developmental perspective that asks how risk and protective factors vary by age and development stage. The articles highlight important issues and provide lessons for policymakers, practitioners, and researchers about how best to serve children and families, strengthen the communities in which they live, and advance research in this area.

This symposium demonstrates several types of cross-fertilization. The guest editors are affiliated with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and with the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The articles reflect multiple disciplines and bring together distinct literatures in new ways. For example—

- A large literature links moving, or residential mobility, with adverse outcomes for children and youth. The articles in this symposium take this literature further by exploring how the effects of mobility may vary by age and across outcomes.
- A large and growing research base examines neighborhood effects on children and families. These articles advance understanding of what neighborhood means and of what really matters in neighborhoods by critically assessing the concepts of housing and neighborhood and the tools we use to study them.
- A large literature discusses family homelessness. This symposium explores how homelessness is associated with child development and how service providers might ameliorate its negative effects.

## Articles in the Symposium

In “Residential Mobility Among Children: A Framework for Child and Family Policy,” Sara Anderson, Tama Leventhal, Sandra Newman, and Veronique Dupéré encourage the field to adopt a developmental perspective that takes into account the interaction between developmental period and exposure. Applying this approach to residential mobility, they argue that “moving may not be an equivalent experience for all children during all developmental periods.” They review existing research and report on an exploratory analysis of their own to show how qualities of families, neighborhoods, peers, and schools vary in salience for children of different ages; they also describe how moving might affect these contexts in ways that influence development.

In “Profiles of Housing and Neighborhood Contexts Among Low-Income Families: Links With Children’s Well-Being,” Rebekah Levine Coley, Melissa Kull, Tama Leventhal, and Alicia Doyle Lynch propose that the variables defining housing contexts do not exist as independent factors in the real world. Instead, they argue, “we must identify how housing and neighborhood factors are linked together in particular patterns.” Their analysis reveals four particular housing profiles that are associated with children’s academic skills and emotional and behavioral problems. Counterintuitive results, they argue, suggest that modeling the effects of housing and neighborhood characteristics as if they function in an independent and unrelated way might obscure the true effects of housing and neighborhood on children’s development.

Place-based initiatives to improve the quality of neighborhoods, including schools, are a policy outgrowth of the theory that neighborhood contexts matter. In “Getting to Better Performing Schools: The Role of Residential Mobility in School Attainment in Low-Income Neighborhoods,” Brett Theodos, Claudia Coulton, and Amos Budde examine the interactions of residential and school mobility—both known to be related to children’s school performance—within the context of a place-based initiative. Their analysis finds that only 49 percent of the children studied were in schools inside the target area, that residential and school mobility were often independent, and that on average switching schools did not get children to better ranked schools. Focusing investments in small geographic areas, the authors conclude, may not achieve desired results, partly because so many children move in and out of any target area. In fact, they argue, “[r]educing unproductive school and residential churning may be a key to the success of both in-place investment approaches and mobility strategies.”

In “Coercive Sexual Environments: What MTO Tells Us About Neighborhoods and Sexual Safety,” Robin Smith, Megan Gallagher, Susan Popkin, Amanda Mireles, and Taz George highlight the importance of what they term the “sexual environment” as a dimension of neighborhood quality. Although ample, diverse, and wide-ranging bodies of research have established the critical role of gender in structuring the life chances of both boys and girls, neighborhood effects research has left largely unexamined the influence of gender relations on aspects of neighborhood quality that are important for the development of children and youth. Smith et al. argue that experiences of sexual harassment can produce a culture greater than the sum of its parts: a *coercive sexual environment* that inhibits girls and women from inhabiting public spaces with confidence and undermines the chances of developing mutually supportive relationships with men in their neighborhoods.

One of the most important housing contexts is the lack of housing. Two articles in the symposium review the developmental consequences of homelessness and the implications of a developmental framework for relevant policies and programs. In “Promoting Resilience for Children Who Experience Family Homelessness: Opportunities To Encourage Developmental Competence,” J.J. Cutuli and Janette E. Herbers review the literature on homelessness as a risk factor in child development and “identify two ordinary but powerful adaptive systems that help children avoid or bounce back from the negative effects of homelessness on development—positive parenting and child self-regulation.” Furthermore, they offer suggestions for how “policymakers and homeless services providers can enhance, support, and facilitate these systems.”

In the second article on family homelessness, “Healthy Start in Housing: A Case Study of a Public Health and Housing Partnership To Improve Birth Outcomes,” Emily Feinberg, Bricia Trejo, Brianna Sullivan, and Zhandra Ferreira-Cesar Suarez adopt a medical and public health perspective to explain the significance of housing as a social determinant of healthy pregnancy and childbearing. The article describes how life-course theory helped the Boston Public Health Commission convince the Boston Housing Authority to design and implement an intervention for women with high-risk pregnancies who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless, despite initial opposition from advocates for the homeless. This article provides a case study of how this work might be implemented in the field.

We bookend this symposium with “Moving Beyond Neighborhood: Activity Spaces and Ecological Networks As Contexts for Youth Development,” in which Christopher R. Browning and Brian Soller argue that neighborhood effects research needs the tools of network analysis. Browning and Soller propose that routine spatial exposures, or “activity spaces,” can be viewed as parts of larger wholes, which they term “ecological networks” and “ecological communities.” They detail how new data collection methods allow for empirical analysis of ecological networks and communities. Such analyses, they argue, will illuminate the processes linking neighborhood structural features to youth development in disadvantaged neighborhoods and will enhance the capacity for effective youth-oriented interventions.

Finally, to provide an international perspective, we include commentary from two scholars of housing, mobility, and child and youth well-being who have studied these processes extensively outside the United States: Sandra Garcia Jaramillo (Colombia) and Roger Andersson (Sweden).

## Conclusion

The articles in this symposium contribute to understanding the relationship between the contexts in which children and youth live and spend time and their well-being. Although the articles vary in the aspects of context and child well-being that they address, common themes and lessons emerge. This set of articles pushes us to better define and measure the contexts that matter for children and to expand our methods and analytic tools for studying these contexts and their relationship to child well-being. They also point to the fact that the effects of context may vary by age, developmental stage, and outcome—and push us to consider this fact as we plan and study programs and policies. This symposium suggests the need to broaden our thinking and perhaps better coordinate policy and practice. This lesson is timely. Considerable effort and investments are being made at the federal, state, and local levels to improve the environments in which children and youth live and spend time and to ameliorate the negative effects of suboptimal environments. Research and theory development, like that highlighted in this symposium, can help to better direct those efforts and ultimately improve outcomes.

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