

Community Inequalities and Children's Life Chances in the United States

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Abstract

This piece discusses the growing empirical evidence that the communities where American children spend their formative years—not just the households they are raised in but where those households are located—matter for their prospects of success in subsequent stages of their lives. The authors explore the various community characteristics—including social capital, family structure, school quality, and income—associated with educational attainment, health, teen pregnancy, social mobility, violence, crime victimization, and more.

Keywords

Americans, Chetty, children, communities, concentrated disadvantage, educational attainment, environment, family structure, GIS, gun homicides, health, incarceration, income, inequality, intergenerational, IRS, life chances, MTO, neighborhoods, New York City, opportunity, Opportunity Insights, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, place, poverty, Putnam, racial inequality, Sampson, segregation, Sharkey, single parenthood, social capital, social mobility, stratification, teen pregnancy, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, United States, violence, wealth, Wilson, working class

“The influence of individuals’ residential environments does not disappear when they enter adulthood and form their own households, but lingers on to affect various dimensions of their adult lives, with consequences that extend to the next generation.”

—Patrick Sharkey & Jacob W. Faber⁵

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⁵ 2014, p. 569.

FIGURE 1. Scene From a Struggling American Community.

Camden, NJ. Courtesy of Wikipedia (2023).

Introduction

Many poor and working-class American children face challenges that more-advantaged youths do not, increasing the probability that these different groups of children will have unequal outcomes in adulthood across a variety of measures.

Some of these disadvantages are experienced at the household level.⁶ As an example, University of Maryland economist Melissa Kearney estimates that 9% of White children and 34% of Black children live with unpartnered mothers (mothers who are neither married nor cohabiting) if their mother is college educated, numbers that jump to 20% and 60%, respectively, if their mother has only a high school degree (2023, p. 33). And as Kearney's research demonstrates, these differences contribute to the more limited life chances of poor and working-class children (see Table 1).

This paper is not about disadvantages at the *household* level, however, but about the growing empirical evidence that the *communities* where poor and working-class children spend their formative years—not just the households they are raised in but *where those households are located*—also matter for their prospects of success in subsequent stages of their lives.

⁶ Such as having only one parent instead of two, or being in a family with fewer important resources like money, social connections, cultural/educational capital, etc.

TABLE 1. Children’s Long-Term Outcomes by Mother’s Education and Marital Status.

Mother’s Education	Mother Married	Mother Not Married
	% of children over 400% poverty level at age 25	
High School Degree	37.4	16.5
College Degree	54.1	29.1
	% of children with college degree by age 25	
High School Degree	18.0	4.8
College Degree	57.0	28.6

Note: “High School Degree” does not include HS graduates who have some college experience.

Source: Kearney & Levine (2017, p. 35).

Research into the impact of communities has existed for some time—for instance, a seminal book by William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*, was released all the way back in 1987. In the past decade or so, however, there have been particularly important developments in this literature, such as the innovative big data efforts of researchers like Harvard University economist Raj Chetty and his colleagues (see Chetty et. al., 2014, 2022a, & 2022b).⁷

This large and growing body of evidence suggests that, irrespective of individual- and household-level characteristics, place⁸ seems to matter for children’s life chances:

“Where a child grows up shapes their future. . . Research across social science disciplines concurs that social contexts outside of the family or the home—neighborhoods and schools in particular—shape children’s educational outcomes and the distribution of inequality in their chances of upward mobility” (Rich & Owens, 2023, p. 297).

Princeton University’s Patrick Sharkey, distinguished scholar on this topic and author of *Stuck in Place* (2013), explains that “Taken together, the empirical evidence strongly suggests that children’s life chances are heavily influenced by the communities where they grow up” (personal

⁷ Chetty summarizing the main findings from his groundbreaking 2014 study where he and his colleagues used big data to document the geography of upward mobility across the U.S.: “[S]egregation [is] the first of five major factors that are strongly correlated with [upward social] mobility. The second factor we explore is inequality. . . [Communities] with larger Gini coefficients have less upward mobility, consistent with the ‘Great Gatsby curve’ documented across countries. . . Third, proxies for the quality of the K-12 school system are also correlated with mobility. . . Fourth, social capital indices—which are proxies for the strength of social networks and community involvement in an area—are very strongly correlated with mobility. . . Finally, the strongest predictors of upward mobility are measures of family structure such as the fraction of single parents in the area. . . Children of married parents also have higher rates of upward mobility if they live in communities with fewer single parents” (2014, pp. 5-6).

⁸ Scholars have used a variety of geographic units of analysis when investigating the importance of place, including neighborhoods, Census tracts, ZIP codes, counties, and commuting zones. When referring broadly to the fact that place plays a role in Americans’ life chances, we will often use the words “community” and “place” in this paper. When precision is required, we will refer to the specific unit of analysis in question.

communication, March 1, 2022).⁹ Emeritus Harvard University scholar Robert Putnam, author of *Our Kids* (2015), notes that evidence of the importance of communities has been growing in recent years: “[R]esearchers have steadily piled up evidence of how important social context, social institutions, and social networks—in short, our communities—remain for our well-being and our kids’ opportunities” (2015, p. 206). And as University of Michigan economist Justin Wolfers explains “[T]he relentless accumulation of evidence is now so compelling that I believe it will sustain a new consensus. That consensus, simply stated, is that place matters” (2015).

Communities impact various aspects of children’s lives—both while they live in those communities and long after they leave them behind—including cognitive and behavioral development, academic performance, educational attainment,¹⁰ employment, economic productivity, social mobility, physical and mental health, substance abuse, sexual behavior, teen fertility, crime victimization, aggression and violence, and involvement in crime (Sharkey & Faber, 2014; Eppard et. al., 2021; Eppard & Nelson, 2022; Rich & Owens, 2023).

How do communities impact children’s likelihood of later adult success? Various community characteristics have been recognized as exerting influence, including the economic (such as income and wealth), social (such as social networks), and cultural (such as educational attainment) resources of residents. Other important community factors include predominant family structures, institutions (such as schools, police departments, social service providers, childcare centers, and churches), peer networks, prevalence of violence/gangs/drugs, availability of adult role models/mentors/supervision,¹¹ local labor markets, degree of income inequality, degree of racial segregation, social norms, social cohesion (such as levels of trust and support), stability of neighborhood populations, local marriage markets, environmental burdens,¹² and features of nearby neighborhoods (Sharkey & Faber, 2014; Eppard et. al., 2021; Eppard & Nelson, 2022).

The extent of the negative impact of growing up in a disadvantaged community seems to hinge on a variety of factors, including the severity of community disadvantage, the stage of childhood in which one is exposed,¹³ the duration of exposure, which specific community characteristics the

⁹ Elsewhere Sharkey argues that the “American system of stratification is organized, in part, along spatial lines” and “the spatial dimension of American inequality plays an important role in the maintenance and reproduction of inequality across multiple dimensions” (Sharkey & Faber, 2014, p. 572).

¹⁰ A notable 2011 study found that “exposure to concentrated disadvantage over the course of childhood reduces the probability of high school graduation by 20 percentage points for black youth, and 10 percentage points for all other youth” (Sharkey & Faber, 2014, p. 568).

¹¹ Robert Sampson explains that “Seemingly banal acts such as the collective supervision of children and adult mentorship add up to make a difference” (2019, p. 12).

¹² Sharkey and Faber note that “[A]n expanding literature provides persuasive evidence that exposure to air, water, and noise pollution may have substantively large effects on children’s health, cognitive development, and academic achievement” (2014, pp. 563-564). Robert Sampson explains the empirical connection between the racial composition of Chicago neighborhoods and exposure to lead: “Drawing on comprehensive data from over one million blood tests administered to Chicago children from 1995 to 2013 and matched to over 2,300 geographic block groups, we found that black and Hispanic neighbourhoods exhibited extraordinarily high rates of lead toxicity compared with white neighbourhoods, in some cases with prevalence rates topping 90% of the child population” (2019, p. 14).

¹³ “[D]ifferent neighborhood processes may become more or less relevant to an individual across stages of the life course. Infants and preschool children, for example, are likely to be most affected through parents, whereas schools become the more influential setting for elementary school children. The residential setting may become more salient in the adolescent years through processes related to peer influence, along with growing engagement with institutions

child is exposed to, as well as the individual child's degree of vulnerability (Sharkey & Faber, 2014).¹⁴

Living in communities struggling on particular measures appears to be detrimental to children's life chances even if their own individual household is not particularly disadvantaged on those measures. Raj Chetty and his colleagues, for instance, found that not only were community single parenthood rates strongly associated with upward mobility for all 25th income percentile children ($r = -0.76$), but also for those who *themselves* had married parents ($r = -0.66$) (2014, Online Appendix Figure XII). This suggests that a working-class child living with his/her *own* two parents could be disadvantaged by living in a *community* with many single parents, despite the child's own family structure.

As another example, Patrick Sharkey found that even for children in nonpoor families (incomes in the top three quintiles), spending one's childhood in a high-poverty versus low-poverty neighborhood increases one's chances of downward mobility by 52% (2009, p. 2).

Community Inequalities in Close Proximity

The inequalities between communities can be jarring, even communities which are located near to each other. As we have written elsewhere about such inequalities:

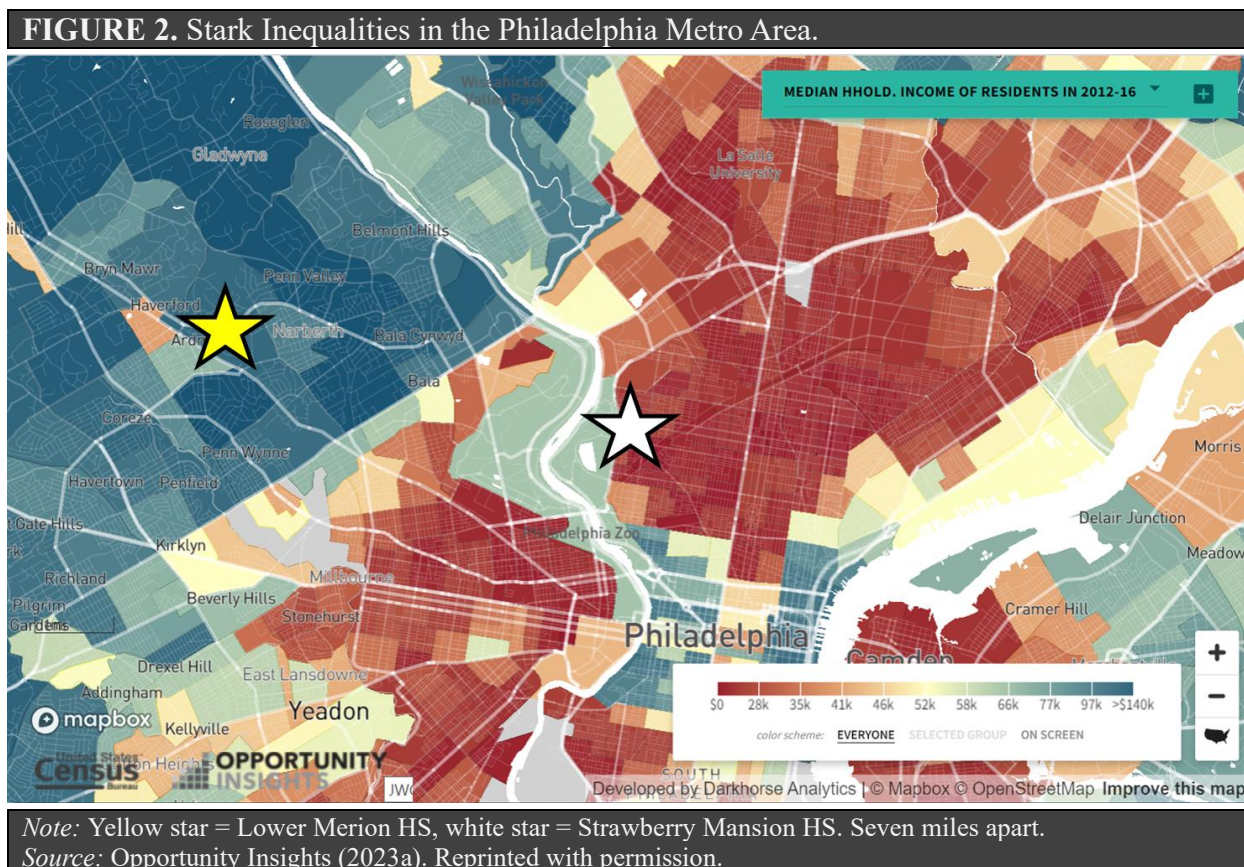
“Large differences [in life chances] exist whether one uses census tracts, counties, or commuting zones as the unit of analysis. We can use the states where we teach as examples. In Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, not far from Shippensburg University where Lawrence Eppard teaches, a 5-to-10-minute car ride will take you from a census tract with a 49 percent upward mobility rate for low-income men to a tract with less than 1 percent upward mobility. . . In Salt Lake City, not far from Brigham Young University where Erik Nelson teaches, there are similar inequalities (38 percent vs. less than 2 percent)—just as there are in cities across the country” (Eppard & Nelson, 2022).

As another example, consider Philadelphia, also not far from where Lawrence Eppard lives and teaches. Let us compare the struggling neighborhood near Strawberry Mansion High School (the

such as schools and the police. For adults, neighborhood effects likely operate most directly through access to institutions providing services and information” (Sharkey & Faber, 2014, p. 569).

¹⁴ “[C]hildren who have lived in the same community throughout their lives and who have become enmeshed in the social life of the neighborhood are likely to be most deeply affected by the set of peers, institutions, risks, and opportunities in the immediate environment that surrounds them. Children who live within a given community but attend school in a different part of town, children who are required to come home immediately after school and remain inside, and children who spend summers with relatives are less likely to be affected by what happens on the residential block on which they live. . . [I]n order to understand how residential environments affect the lives of youth, researchers have to conceptualize and analyze which features of the environment are most salient for different aspects of children's lives, how individuals interact with their environments over different periods of time, and how these patterns of interaction vary for subsets of the population. The neighborhood, from this perspective, is not a static feature of individuals' lives that is experienced in a uniform manner by everyone within it. Rather, a single neighborhood is experienced in different ways by groups of individuals who have lived there for varying lengths of time, and who spend their time within the neighborhood in different ways and in their own spaces, carving out unique social worlds from the common environment that surrounds them” (Sharkey & Faber, 2014, pp. 561-562).

white star in Figure 2 below) with its much more advantaged counterpart, a neighborhood near Lower Merion High School, located a mere seven miles away (yellow star in Figure 2).



These neighborhoods are incredibly unequal across a variety of measures, including median household income (\$24k near Strawberry Mansion versus \$110k near Lower Merion), poverty (36% vs 4.5%), proportion of children who have single parents (90% vs 18%), and proportion of residents who are non-White (100% vs 18%) (Opportunity Insights, 2023a).¹⁵

For high schoolers in these neighborhoods, there are huge gaps in five-year graduation (63.3% in Strawberry Mansion versus 97.4% in Lower Merion), regular attendance (20.2% vs 82.7%),¹⁶ average SAT scores (740 vs 1246), English proficiency (26.9% vs 90.8%), math proficiency (4.2% vs 74.2%), science proficiency (7.7% vs 83.9%), and proportion gifted (0% vs 14.8%). At Strawberry Mansion HS, no students are advanced in math or science and only 3.8% in English (vs 41.3%, 48.4%, and 27.5% at Lower Merion HS). Strawberry Mansion is more than 99% non-

¹⁵ Data come from the years 2012-2016 for household income, poverty, and single parenthood, and 2010 for fraction non-White.

¹⁶ The “regular attendance” indicator used here comes from the Pennsylvania Department of Education and is the percentage of students enrolled in a school for 90 or more school days who are present 90% or more of those school days (PA Dept. of Education, 2023a).

White and 92.1% of students are economically disadvantaged, compared with 36.2% and 18.0% at Lower Merion (PA Dept. of Education, 2023a & 2023b).¹⁷

Children who grow up in these areas have very different outcomes on measures like life expectancy (69.1 years near Strawberry Mansion HS versus 85.7 years near Lower Merion HS), household income (\$19k avg. vs \$73k), upward mobility rates (3.4% vs 52%), incarceration rates (9.5% vs <1%), marriage rates (11% vs 57%), and teen birth rates (48% vs. 1.1%) (CDC, 2023; Opportunity Insights, 2023a).¹⁸

The Claw Machine

The inequalities discussed in the previous section were for all children in those neighborhoods, regardless of any differences between them at the household level. But large disparities are evident even when comparing children who grew up with similar family incomes but in dissimilar communities.

Figure 3, for instance, displays the variation in average household income of adult males born between 1978-1983 who were raised in families at the 25th income percentile (henceforth “lower income”)¹⁹ across New York City neighborhoods, regardless of where these men ended up living in adulthood. You can see that in one area of the city, lower-income male children grow up to earn an average household income around \$79,000 in adulthood, while elsewhere they earn only around \$13,000.

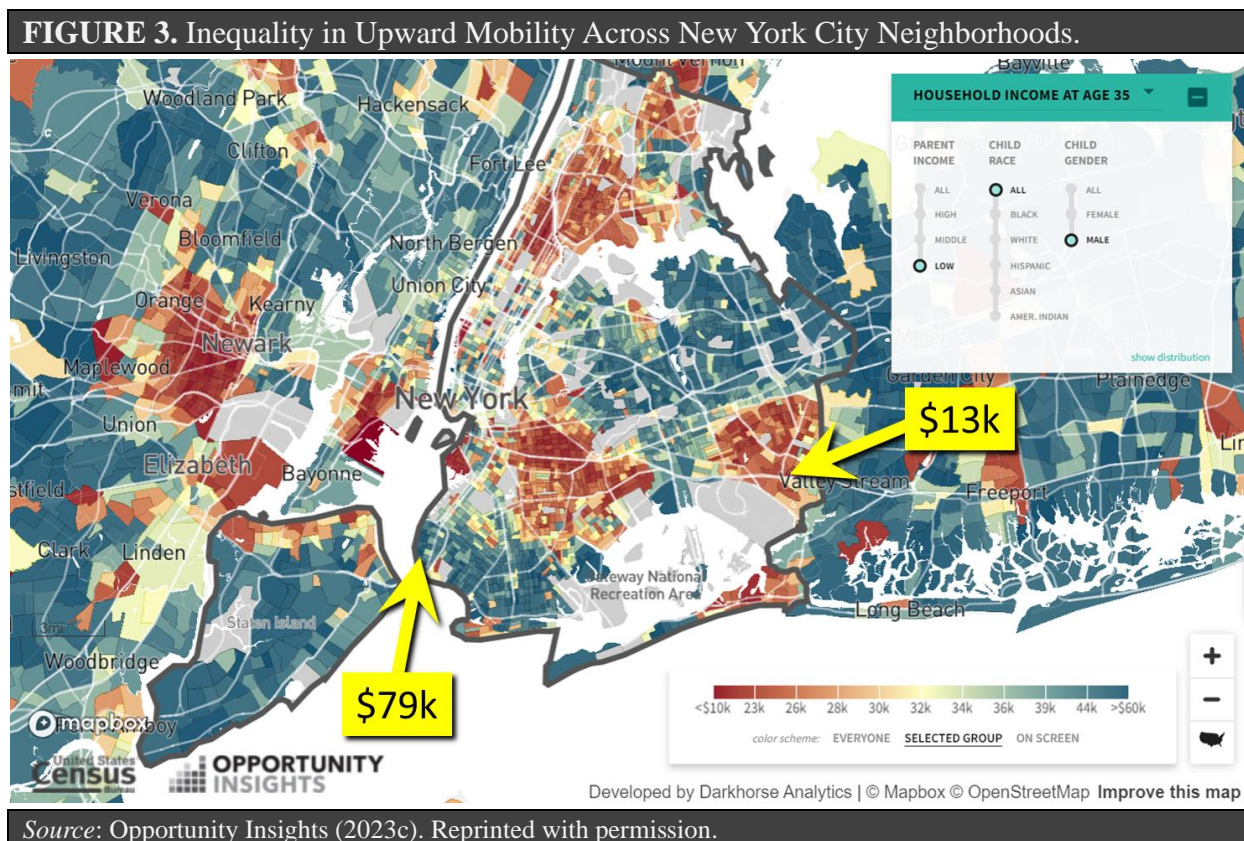
We use cities like New York City and Philadelphia as examples in this paper because they are recognizable American cities. While they serve as our examples, they are not unique—these vast differences are apparent throughout the United States.

Table 2 is another vivid example. In this table we have listed all counties from high-mobility North Dakota and low-mobility South Carolina together in descending order, from the highest average adult household income to the lowest for males who were raised in lower-income families in these counties. We color-coded the counties in the table to make a county’s state easy to identify: green for North Dakota and light orange for South Carolina.

¹⁷ All data most recent available from these sources.

¹⁸ All measures except life expectancy are for children born between 1978-1983 who grew up in these tracts and regardless of where they live now, measured when they reach their mid-30s. For life expectancy, see the CDC (2023) for details on their methodology.

¹⁹ For the purposes of our discussion, we will consider the American working class to be the proportion of the U.S. population without a four-year college degree (Draught, 2018). The Opportunity Insights database (2023a) we use allows for analyses of children from families at the 1st, 25th, 50th, 75th, and 100th income percentiles. The median annual earnings of Americans with only a high school degree/GED and no college in 2021 was around \$40,000 (NCES, 2023a). The 25th income percentile in the U.S. in the same year was around \$33,000 (DQYDJ, 2023). To identify whether families at the 25th income percentile should be considered “working class” or “poor” would largely depend upon family size. As an example, a single mother of one child with no college degree working as a receptionist might expect to earn around \$32,000 in 2021 (BLS, 2023a & 2023b), which is around the 25th income percentile for that year. This would be considered working class in 2021, as the poverty threshold for that family size was less than \$19,000 in that year (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).



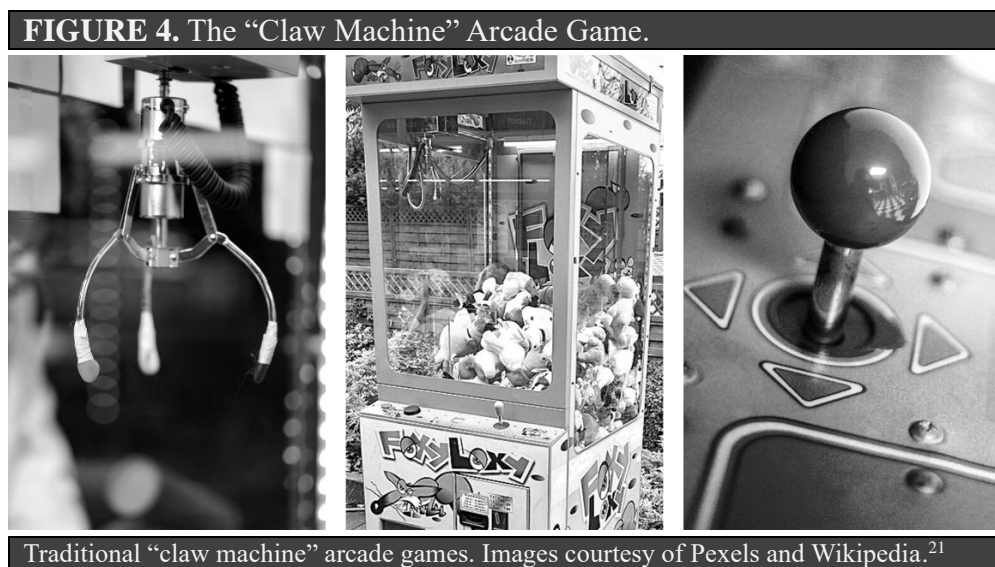
As you can see, there is virtually no comingling of ND and SC counties. When we rank them this way, they separate like oil and water: all North Dakota counties except one outperform the best-performing South Carolina county. The one ND outlier, Sioux County, is notable because it lies entirely within the Standing Rock Indian Reservation, which (like many Native American reservations) is burdened with high rates of poverty, unemployment, and other social problems. The next-lowest performing county in North Dakota, Benson County, boasts a better average household income for males from lower-income backgrounds (\$28,344) than the best-performing South Carolina county, Dorchester County (\$27,952).

You'll note that our analysis does not include the outcomes of *all* children who grow up in these communities but is limited to those raised in households at the 25th income percentile. The logic of this analysis is that if you compare all children, you could be comparing children of wealthy parents to those of poor parents. How can you be sure that any differences in outcomes that you observe are due to features of the unequal communities and not of the unequal household environments? By comparing children who grew up in households with similar incomes, our aim is to establish more of an apples-to-apples comparison.

For an apt metaphor, envision the “claw machine” game frequently encountered in U.S. arcades. In this game, players manipulate a crane-like claw with a joystick, guiding it over a sea of toys until it aligns with the one they desire. Players press a button and hope they positioned the claw correctly so that it drops down and extracts their toy and brings it back to them without losing grip and dropping it back into the heap.

Now picture a similar claw, but of colossal proportions—bigger than a house. It descends from the sky, seizes a house from its foundation, and relocates it to a completely different neighborhood several miles away. Notably, nothing about the internal household environment or its occupants has changed, only the community that surrounds the home is different. If all the sudden the children living in that household are faring much better or much worse after the move—educationally, physically/mentally, socially, or otherwise—with nothing having been altered inside of the home, one might conclude that the neighborhood produced this change in fortunes.²⁰

This is the logic of our analysis. While this method is not perfect—households can have similar economic resources but nonetheless vary in many other ways—it does provide important insights.



An example of how this plays out in the real world—children of similar household circumstances who are exposed to different community characteristics—comes from a study by RAND Corporation policy researcher Heather Schwartz. In her 2010 study:

“[Schwartz] analyzed the educational outcomes of children living in public housing within Montgomery County, MD, which features a nationally renowned public school system and a large-scale inclusionary housing program. Schwartz exploited the fact that families eligible for public housing were randomly assigned to subsidized apartments that were dispersed across the county, creating an exogenous source of variation in the quality of the zoned elementary schools to which children were assigned based on where they live. Analyzing a sample of 850 children over

²⁰ In an interesting study from the 1990s, researchers found that “changes in air pollution due to the closing and reopening of an integrated steel mill in Utah had a substantial effect on school attendance rates” (Sharkey & Faber, 2014, p. 564).

²¹ Middle image by MichalPL (2023) under a CC BY-SA 4.0 license. Far left and far right images courtesy of Pexels.com (Pexels, 2023). All pictures have been cropped and changed to black-and-white.

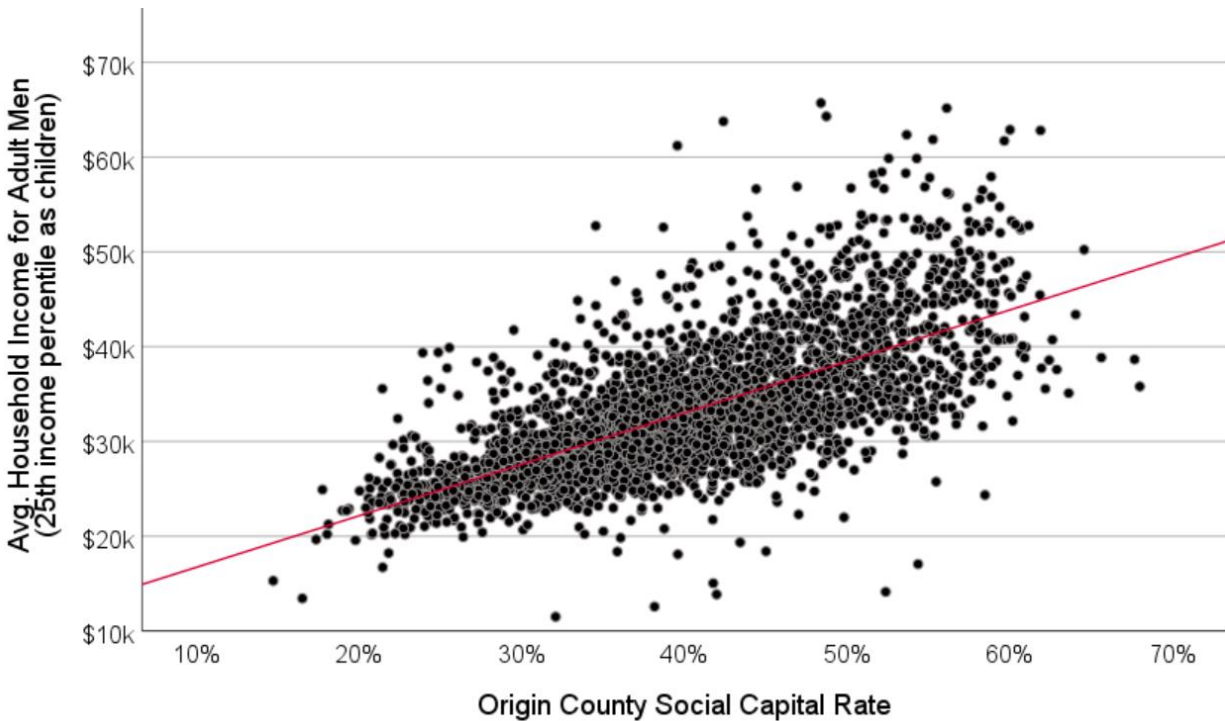
time, Schwartz found that children assigned to advantaged schools performed much better in reading and in math compared to peers who were assigned to less-advantaged schools with higher levels of student poverty. By the end of elementary school, the baseline math achievement gap between low-income students and their nonpoor peers within advantaged schools was cut in half. Low-income students assigned to less-advantaged schools did not experience the same relative improvements in academic performance over time” (Sharkey & Faber, 2014, p. 565).

TABLE 2. Upward Mobility Across North Dakota and South Carolina Counties.

County Name	Avg. HH Income	County Name	Avg. HH Income	County Name	Avg. HH Income
Dunn	\$65,713	Ransom	\$48,812	Greenville	\$25,669
Bowman	\$65,169	Sheridan	\$48,393	Spartanburg	\$25,420
Slope	\$63,845	Morton	\$46,716	Clarendon	\$25,371
McKenzie	\$63,775	Griggs	\$46,624	Colleton	\$25,213
Burke	\$62,888	Divide	\$46,556	Williamsburg	\$25,142
LaMoure	\$62,819	Sargent	\$46,492	York	\$25,142
Grant	\$61,860	Foster	\$45,775	Anderson	\$25,054
Golden Valley	\$61,718	Walsh	\$45,443	Laurens	\$24,827
Mountrail	\$61,210	Barnes	\$44,776	Charleston	\$24,807
Oliver	\$59,870	Richland	\$44,607	Chesterfield	\$24,678
Billings	\$59,329	Burleigh	\$43,657	Orangeburg	\$24,514
Steele	\$58,997	Stutsman	\$43,446	Edgefield	\$24,488
Stark	\$58,441	Ward	\$43,373	Union	\$24,472
Kidder	\$57,940	Eddy	\$43,186	Georgetown	\$24,447
Bottineau	\$56,853	Cass	\$40,207	Sumter	\$24,269
Nelson	\$56,136	Grand Forks	\$39,972	Florence	\$24,091
McHenry	\$55,805	Ramsey	\$37,811	Greenwood	\$23,728
Hettinger	\$55,566	Rolette	\$30,967	Lee	\$23,550
Cavalier	\$54,748	Benson	\$28,344	Marion	\$23,530
Towner	\$53,420	Dorchester	\$27,952	Chester	\$23,432
Adams	\$53,198	Lexington	\$27,732	Lancaster	\$23,395
Renville	\$53,164	Berkeley	\$27,614	Fairfield	\$23,265
Traill	\$52,891	Oconee	\$27,204	Barnwell	\$23,175
McIntosh	\$52,644	Newberry	\$27,138	Dillon	\$23,011
Emmons	\$52,450	Calhoun	\$26,821	Darlington	\$23,001
Wells	\$52,178	Kershaw	\$26,487	Cherokee	\$22,861
Dickey	\$52,017	Horry	\$26,433	Marlboro	\$22,705
Williams	\$51,693	Beaufort	\$26,275	Sioux	\$22,615
Logan	\$50,065	McCormick	\$26,162	Richland	\$22,561
McLean	\$49,938	Abbeville	\$26,158	Hampton	\$22,257
Pierce	\$49,602	Saluda	\$26,148	Jasper	\$21,961
Mercer	\$49,474	Aiken	\$25,973	Bamberg	\$21,879
Pembina	\$49,248	Pickens	\$25,849	Allendale	\$20,218

Note: Green indicates county is in North Dakota, light orange indicates South Carolina.

Source: Authors’ calculations using Opportunity Insights (2023a) data.

FIGURE 5. Social Capital and Upward Mobility.

Note: $r = 0.68^{***}$, $*p \leq .05$, $**p \leq .01$, and $***p \leq .001$. Average household income for males in their mid-30s born between 1978-1983 and raised in these counties in families at the 25th income percentile. Social capital rates indicate the average percentage of friends of below-median-SES residents in these counties who are above-median-SES (see Chetty et. al., 2022a & 2022b for more on this measure). Social capital remains associated with household income even when controlling for other community characteristics like household income, family structure, economic growth, educational attainment, race, school quality, and religiosity, among others.

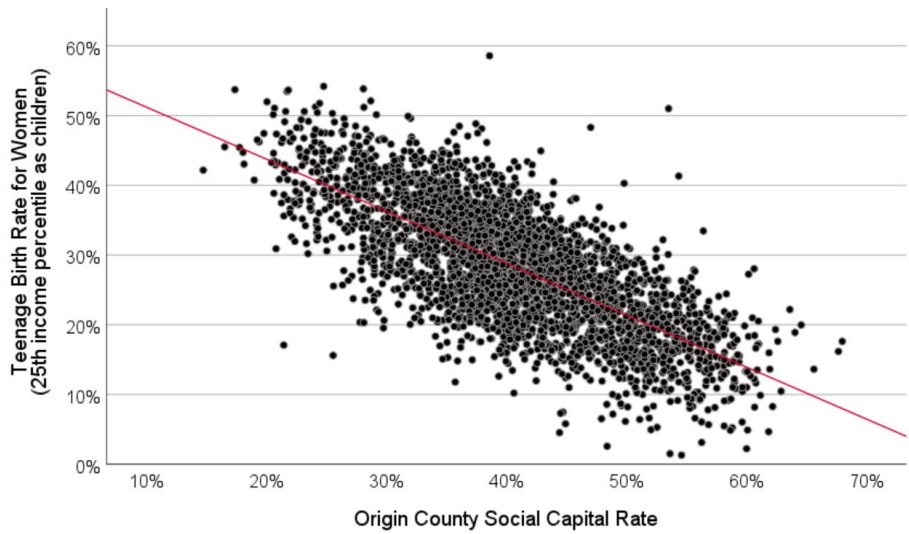
Source: Authors' calculations using Opportunity Insights (2023a & 2023b) data.

Figures 5-7 suggest some of the community characteristics that might contribute to disparate outcomes for children of similar family backgrounds who grow up in unequal U.S. communities.

Figure 5 shows the correlation between a community's social capital and upward mobility in adulthood for males raised in lower-income families in them. In the social sciences, when we refer to "social capital," we are referring to the people that you know and the resources and support that they can make available to you. Social capital is thus resources embedded in your social network that you can leverage when needed.²² The measure of social capital used here is the average percentage of below-median-SES residents' friends who are above-median-SES. The upward

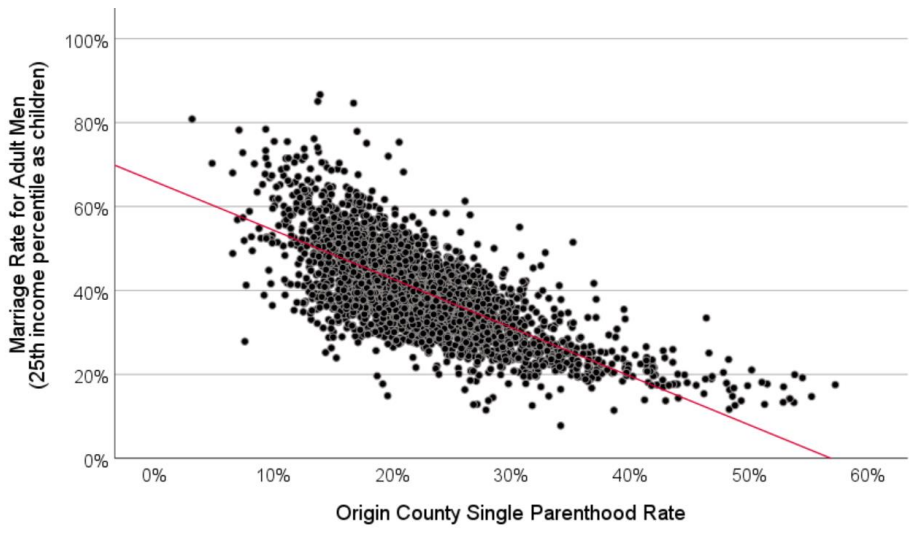
²² Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu referred to social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition—or in other words, to membership in a group—which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively-owned capital." He goes on to say that "The volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 21).

FIGURE 6. Social Capital and Teen Birth Rates.

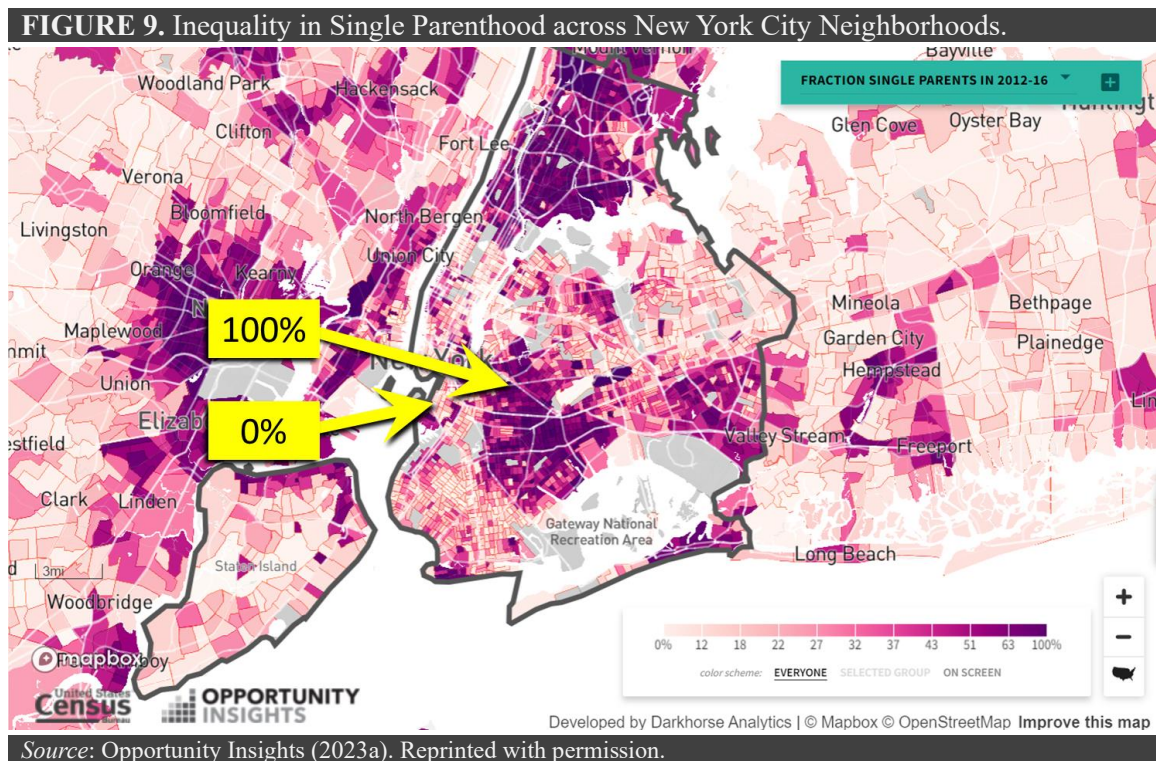
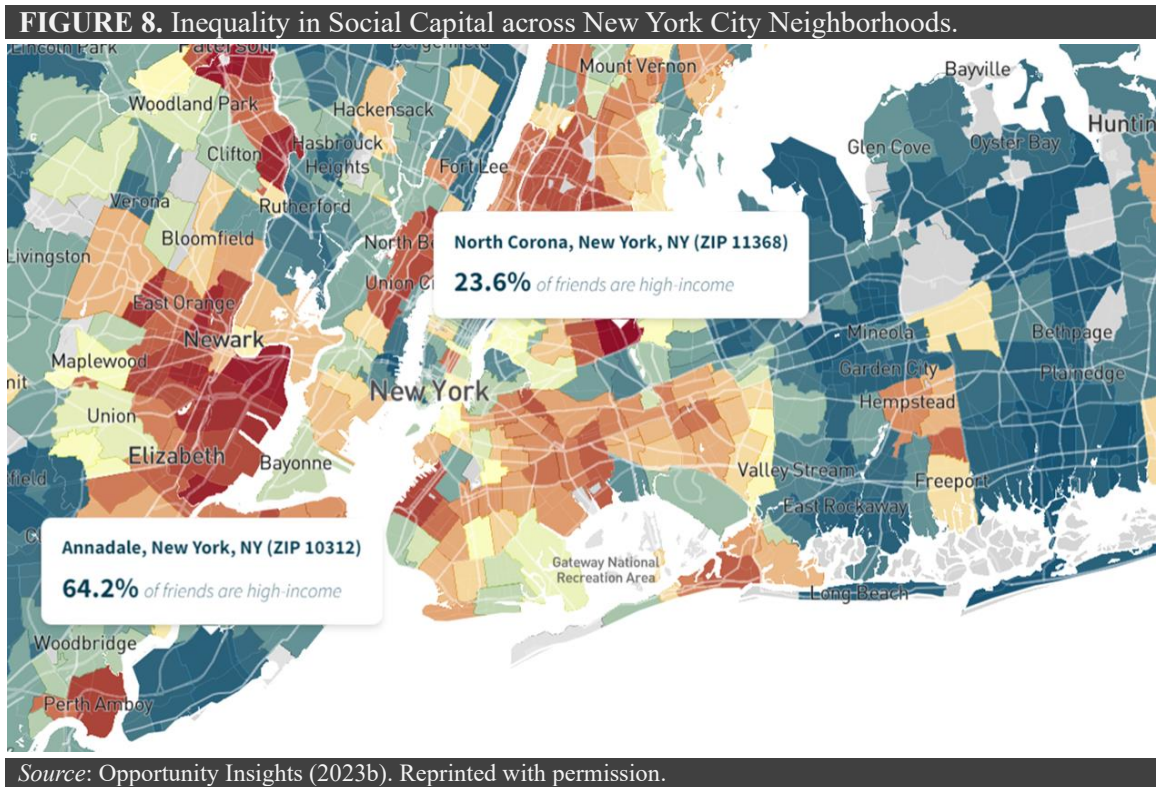


Note: $r = -0.72^{***}$, $*p \leq .05$, $**p \leq .01$, and $***p \leq .001$. Teenage birth rates for females born between 1978-1983 who were raised in these counties in families at the 25th income percentile and who ever had a child between 13 and 19 years of age. Social capital rates indicate the average percentage of friends of below-median-SES residents in these counties who are above-median-SES (see Chetty et. al., 2022a & 2022b for more on this measure). Community social capital remains associated with lower-income females' teenage birth rates even when controlling for other community characteristics like household income, family structure, economic growth, educational attainment, race, school quality, and religiosity, among others.
Source: Authors' calculations using Opportunity Insights (2023a & 2023b) data.

FIGURE 7. Family Structure and Marriage Rates.



Note: $r = -0.72^{***}$, $*p \leq .05$, $**p \leq .01$, and $***p \leq .001$. Marriage rates for males in their mid-30s who were born between 1978-1983 and who were raised in these counties in families at the 25th income percentile. Single parenthood rates are an average of the 1990 and 2000 rates from these counties. Community single parenthood rates and community average household income remain associated with lower-income males' marriage rates even when controlling for other community characteristics like economic growth, educational attainment, social capital, race, school quality, and religiosity, among others.
Source: Authors' calculations using Opportunity Insights (2023a) data.



mobility measure is the average household income of males born between 1978-1983, once they reach their mid-30s and irrespective of where they live at that point, raised in families at the 25th income percentile in these communities.

The correlation between community social capital and lower-income male children's eventual adult household income is strong²³ ($r = 0.68$)—you can see in Figure 5 that as social capital increases (as you move from left-to-right on the horizontal axis), average household income increases significantly (plotted on the vertical axis). Social capital and household income remain associated even when we use different, multivariate statistical methods to control for other community characteristics like income, economic growth, educational attainment, family structure, race, religiosity, school quality, and violent crime—in fact, social capital had the strongest association in our model (model explained 67% of the variance in the dependent variable).

Figure 6 shows the relationship between community social capital and teen birth rates ($r = -0.72$), while Figure 7 illustrates how community family structure influences marriage rates ($r = -0.72$). Both correlations are very strong, and both associations remain when we use multivariate statistical methods to control for a variety of other variables.

Beyond the outcomes featured here—upward mobility, teen birth, and marriage—we have undertaken various analyses of other life outcomes like educational attainment and incarceration. Across all of these analyses, the life chances of children are associated with community characteristics, with community social capital, family structure, school quality, and income proving particularly influential.

Many of the associations we find are strong. In our teen birth multivariate model—which, like our other models, included the independent variables community economic growth, educational attainment, family structure, income, race, religiosity, school quality, social capital, and violent crime—we found that every 10 percentage point increase in community social capital was associated with a 5.5 percentage point decrease in teen birth rates for females from lower-income backgrounds raised there.²⁴

Figures 8 and 9 illustrate how much characteristics can differ between communities within close proximity to each other. Figure 8 displays inequalities in social capital. In one community in New York City, you see that only around 24% of the friends of below-median-SES New Yorkers are above-median-SES. In other areas that number jumps to 64%.

Figure 9 shows the extent to which single parenthood varies across the city. In one neighborhood, all children are raised by single parents. In another nearby, no children are raised by single parents. That is an eye-popping difference.

²³ In the social sciences, we generally consider bivariate correlations of 0.50 or higher (regardless of whether they are positive or negative) to be strong. We consider them to be “statistically significant” if their p value is 0.05 or lower. We only report findings in this paper that are statistically significant.

²⁴ The teen birth multivariate model ($p < .001$) explained 63% of the variance in the dependent variable. Race, educational attainment, and household income were also associated, although not nearly as strongly as social capital. All multivariate models discussed in this paper were significant at the .001 level.

TABLE 3. Adult Outcomes Across Census Tracts for Americans Raised in Households at the 25th Income Percentile.

Adult Outcome	Top Tract Decile	Bottom Tract Decile
Avg. Male Household Income	\$49,340	\$19,033
Avg. Male Incarceration Rate	0%	13.4%
Avg. Male Marriage Rate	55.7%	13.2%
Avg. Male Upward Mobility Rate	29.2%	1.6%
Avg. Female Teen Birth Rate	5.2%	48.7%

Note: Adult outcomes for Americans born between 1978-1983 and raised in these tracts in families at the 25th income percentile (outcomes measured when they are in their mid-30s and regardless of whether they remained in these tracts as adults). All outcomes for males except for teen birth rates, which are for females raised in these tracts in households at the 25th income percentile who ever had a child between the ages of 13 and 19. Upward mobility refers to climbing to the top 20% income group by a person's mid-30s.

Source: Authors' calculations using Opportunity Insights (2023a) data.

Considering how strongly associated community characteristics are with children's life chances, the inequalities in these characteristics across American communities are concerning. Social capital, single parenthood, school quality, and household income have proven particularly powerful throughout the numerous analyses we have conducted—and there are wide gaps across American communities on these measures.

In the top decile of American communities, the average social capital rate is 64%, while it is only 26% in the bottom decile (Opportunity Insights, 2023b).²⁵ Single parenthood gaps are even more pronounced, with an average rate of 7% in the top decile but 76% in the bottom decile (Opportunity Insights, 2023a).²⁶ For household income, there is a whopping \$99,778 gap between the top and bottom deciles (Opportunity Insights, 2023a).²⁷ And a number of scholars (see Chetty et. al., 2014) have demonstrated large gaps in school quality across the U.S.—as an example from Pennsylvania, the top-performing high schools have an average of 89% of students regularly attending, compared with the bottom-performing high schools where only around 35% do (we are using regular attendance as a proxy for the quality of the school environment) (PA Dept. of Education, 2023a).²⁸

Table 3 shows some of the reasons why these inequalities matter: children's eventual outcomes in adulthood. There are huge differences between the top and bottom deciles in lower-income children's outcomes, including income (\$30,307 gap), teen birth (43.5 percentage point gap), marriage (42.5 percentage point gap), upward mobility (27.6 percentage point gap), and incarceration (13.4 percentage point gap) (Opportunity Insights, 2023a).

²⁵ Authors' calculations using 2022 data from Opportunity Insights (2023b).

²⁶ Authors' calculations using 2012-2016 data from Opportunity Insights (2023a).

²⁷ Authors' calculations using 2012-2016 data from Opportunity Insights (2023a).

²⁸ The "regular attendance" indicator used here comes from the Pennsylvania Department of Education and is the percentage of students enrolled in a school for 90 or more school days who are present 90% or more of those school days (PA Dept. of Education, 2023a).

It is worth mentioning, however briefly, how the incredibly useful Opportunity Insights (2023a) data we utilize, which allows us to examine the links between Americans' adult outcomes and their childhood families and communities, came to be.²⁹

All the way back in 1987, the U.S. Internal Revenue Service (IRS) began requiring taxpayers to list the Social Security numbers of any dependents that they claimed on their tax returns. The rule change was enacted in order to cut down on the number of taxpayers attempting to make fraudulent dependent claims in order to lower their tax burden (and, not surprisingly, Americans claimed fewer dependents the year after the law was changed) (Mervis, 2014).

Two researchers—Raj Chetty and Emmanuel Saez—recognized that this change held the promise of vastly expanding researchers' understanding of the determinants of social mobility. If Chetty and Saez could get access to these tax data, they could link adults' outcomes (via IRS data) back to the family (also via IRS data) and community (via U.S. Census data) environments in which they were raised and examine the factors responsible for their success (or lack thereof) (Mervis, 2014).

In 2011, Chetty and Saez responded to a call for research proposals from the IRS and were able to get the Treasury Department's Office of Tax Policy to allow them this access. They analyzed the data in Washington, D.C. under the supervision of a Treasury Department employee (Mervis, 2014). Chetty and his colleagues have not only published a number of important studies using these data, but they have generously made it publicly available for free to researchers like us to use in projects like this one. You can access the data yourself at [OpportunityAtlas.org](https://www.opportunityatlas.org). There you will find a user-friendly point-and-click webpage interface for the general public, and if you are so inclined, you can download their datasets in order to conduct more intricate statistical analyses.

These data allow researchers to examine how children in households with the same income level (you can choose either the 1st, 25th, 50th, 75th, or 100th income percentile) fare when those households are located in different communities. All of the adult outcome variables that we use in our analyses—household income, upward mobility, college graduation, incarceration, marriage, and teen birth for Americans who grew up in these communities in households at the 25th income percentile and regardless of where they live as adults—come from the Opportunity Insights (2023a) database of aggregated IRS data. The characteristics of the communities where these adults spent their childhoods—such as measures of community college graduation, economic growth, family structure, household income, race/ethnicity, religious participation, school quality, and violent crime—come from the same database.

There is one exception—social capital—which is housed in a second Opportunity Insights database at [SocialCapital.org](https://www.socialcapital.org) (2023b). These data come from Chetty and his team as well and constitute the world's largest data set on social connections. Analyzing 21 billion Facebook friendships from over 72 million users between the ages of 25 and 44, Chetty and his colleagues calculated the average percentage of Facebook friends of below-median-SES Americans in each community (both ZIP code and county data are available) that are above-median-SES. They call

²⁹ As economist Gary Solon explains, "For the purposes of measuring intergenerational mobility in the United States, [Opportunity Insights is] an amazing data set" (Mervis, 2014).

this measure “economic connectedness,” a proxy for social capital. Just like OpportunityAtlas.org, the SocialCapital.org website has a user-friendly point-and-click webpage interface for the general public and free downloadable databases for researchers. We would encourage everyone to check out both websites, they are fantastic and informative.

FIGURE 10. Social Capital.



Social capital has proven particularly influential in our analyses. Image courtesy of Pexels (2023).

Communities and Violence

Place also matters when it comes to crime involvement and victimization. Violent crime tends to be geographically concentrated in the most desperate American communities, areas which are struggling with not just one but multiple dimensions of disadvantage—not just poverty, but also things like high levels of unemployment, public assistance, single parenthood, and racial segregation. Scholars often refer to this as “concentrated disadvantage.”

As Harvard University scholar Robert Sampson, author of *The Great American City* (2012), notes, “[C]oncentrated disadvantage remains a strong predictor of violent crime” (2019, p. 13). Chase Sackett writes that “Concentrated disadvantage, crime, and imprisonment appear to interact in a continually destabilizing feedback loop” (2016).³⁰ When Patrick Sharkey mapped homicides

³⁰ Sackett goes on to explain that “Neighborhoods with more concentrated disadvantage tend to experience higher levels of violent crime. Numerous studies, for instance, show that neighborhoods with higher poverty rates tend to have higher rates of violent crime. Greater overall income inequality within a neighborhood is associated with higher rates of crime, especially violent crime. Sampson notes that even though the city of Stockholm has far less violence, segregation, and inequality than the city of Chicago, in both cities a disproportionate number of homicides occur in a very small number of very disadvantaged neighborhoods” (2016).

across the city of Chicago, he found a “strikingly visible” (2013, p. 30) overlap between concentrated disadvantage and homicide:

“[T]he concentration of violence goes hand in hand with the concentration of poverty. There is a remarkable spatial clustering of homicides in and around neighborhoods with high levels of poverty. . . there are entire sections of this violent city where the most extreme form of violence, a local homicide, is an unknown occurrence. There are other neighborhoods where homicides are a common feature of life. . . these maps provide perhaps the most vivid portrait of what living in areas of concentrated poverty can mean in America’s cities” (p. 30).

Studies show that violent crime tends to be concentrated not just within specific disadvantaged neighborhoods but in even smaller geographic “hot spots” or “micro places” within these struggling neighborhoods. It also tends to be concentrated within small, high-risk social networks (Braga et. al., 2010).

In one study of Boston data from an almost thirty-year period (1980-2008), more than half of all incidents of gun violence could be attributed to fewer than 5% of micro places in the city:

“Our analyses suggest that city-level gun violence trends may best be understood by the analyses of trends at a very small number of micro places, such as street segments and intersections, rather than analyses of trends at larger areal units such as neighborhoods, arbitrarily-defined policing districts, or Census tracts. These levels of aggregation may obscure important place-based dynamics that vary within larger geographic boundaries. . . Urban gun violence trends may be best understood as generated by a very small number of high-risk individuals who participate in high-risk social networks and perpetrate their shootings at a very small number of high-risk micro places. . . In this analysis, almost 89% of Boston street segments and intersections never experienced a single [gun] incident between 1980 and 2008. . . Boston gun violence trends were largely generated by repeated incidents at less than 5% of its street segments and intersections” (Braga et. al., 2010, p. 48).

The authors go on to note that:

“[T]hese findings strongly support the perspective that a city’s portfolio of gun violence prevention programs should include interventions that are explicitly place-based; that is, certain prevention efforts should be focused in very specific locations rather than diffused across larger neighborhoods” (p. 50).

Another study, this time in Oakland, found that 0.3% of the city’s population was responsible for up to 85% of Oakland homicides (McLively & Nieto, 2019, p. 38). Similar patterns are found across the U.S. (Papachristos et. al., 2014; Weisburd, 2015; Aufrichtig et. al., 2017). As criminal justice scholar David Kennedy notes: “In what we think of as the ‘most dangerous places,’ very, very few people are actually at any meaningful risk for violent offending. . . Most of the folks in those places are in no way a part of the problem” (Aufrichtig et. al., 2017).

Over the years we have conducted several analyses also showing a strong relationship between areas of concentrated disadvantage and the geographic location of violence in the U.S. We include a few examples from this work in Figure 11. These maps show the clear clustering of homicides within areas of concentrated disadvantage across multiple U.S. cities. Even in cities that are considered dangerous, there are many neighborhoods where gun homicides *never* occur. Instead, homicides are heavily clustered in neighborhoods burdened with multiple dimensions of disadvantage.

Living in violent communities impacts outcomes beyond one's likelihood of being involved in or victimized by crime, as Patrick Sharkey's research has shown:

“[C]hildren perform substantially worse on cognitive skills assessments if they are given the assessments in the immediate period of four to seven days following a local homicide that occurred near the home. The effect was strongest when the homicide occurred in the block group in which the child lived, weaker if it occurred in the census tract, and weaker still if it occurred in the larger neighborhood cluster, which was measured as a cluster of contiguous tracts. The pattern showing decaying effects of local violence suggests that the mechanism leading to impaired cognitive functioning likely involves the stress, shock, trauma, or fear experienced by individual children who are exposed to or made aware of extreme violence close to home” (Sharkey & Faber, 2014, p. 564).

Communities and Racial Inequality

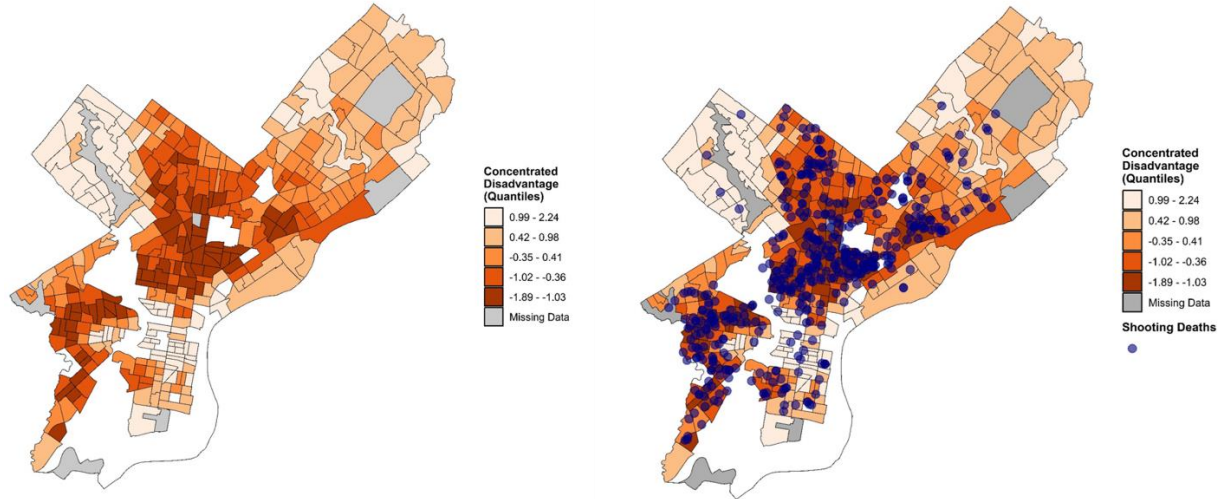
Several researchers have collected compelling evidence that community inequalities are an important factor driving racial inequality in America. As Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote in *The Atlantic*, “An unsegregated America might see poverty, and all its effects, spread across the country with no particular bias toward skin color. Instead, the concentration of poverty has been paired with a concentration of melanin. The resulting conflagration has been devastating” (2014).

Several studies and data sources underscore Coates's point. Patrick Sharkey, for instance, found that almost a third of Black children (31%) in America grow up in neighborhoods that are at least 30% poor, something that is exceedingly rare for White children (only 1%). Additionally, Sharkey found that while only 10% of Black children are raised in neighborhoods with less than 10% poverty, that is the norm (61%) for White children (2009, p. 9).³¹ And according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2023b), 63% of Black, 65% of Hispanic, and 56% of Native American students attended schools where a majority of students qualified for free or reduced lunch in fall 2021, compared with only 25% of White and 31% of Asian American students.

³¹ Elsewhere, Sharkey notes that “[W]hite families may experience spells of residence in high-poverty communities, but these spells are typically temporary. For black American families, residence in poor or disadvantaged communities is much more stable, and persistent exposure to such communities is common. Racial gaps in long-term exposure to neighborhood disadvantage are amplified when families are observed over multiple generations. . . [M]ore than half of black American families have lived in the poorest quarter of American neighborhoods over the past two consecutive generations, compared to only 7% of white families” (Sharkey & Faber, 2014, p. 567).

FIGURE 11. Mapping Concentrated Disadvantage and Violence Across the U.S.

PHILADELPHIA, PA



NEW YORK CITY, NY

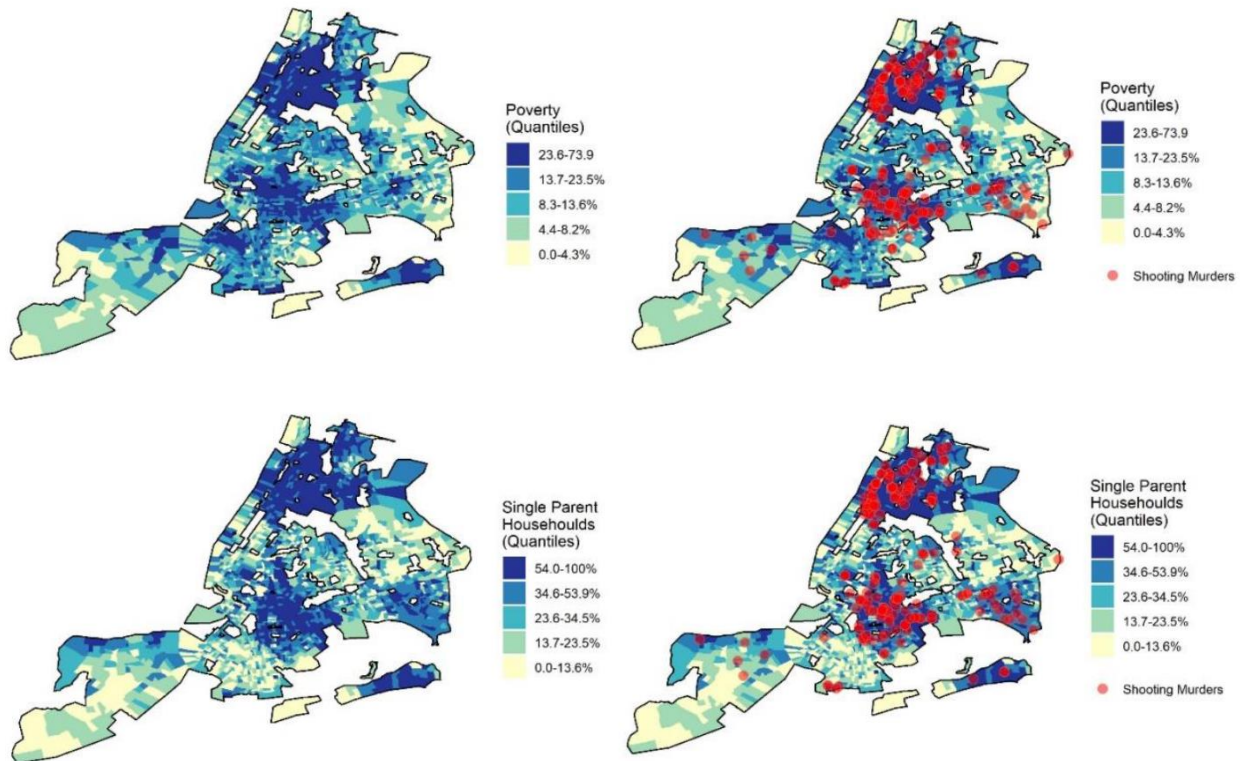
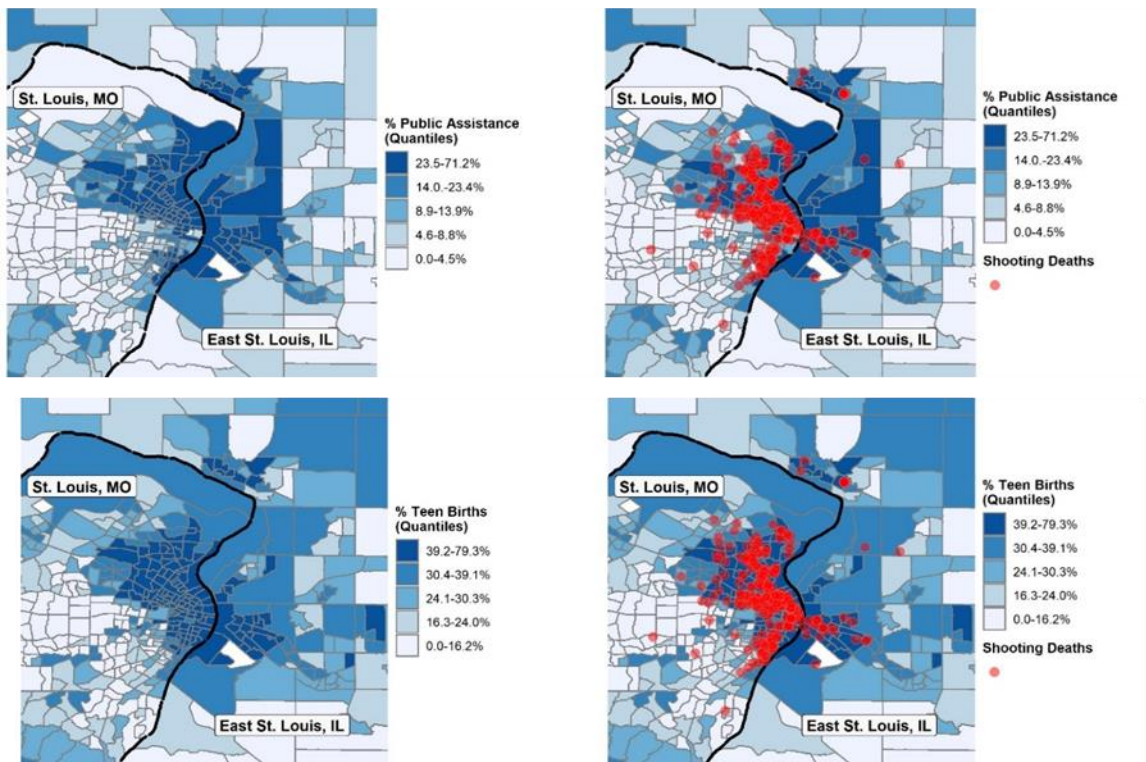
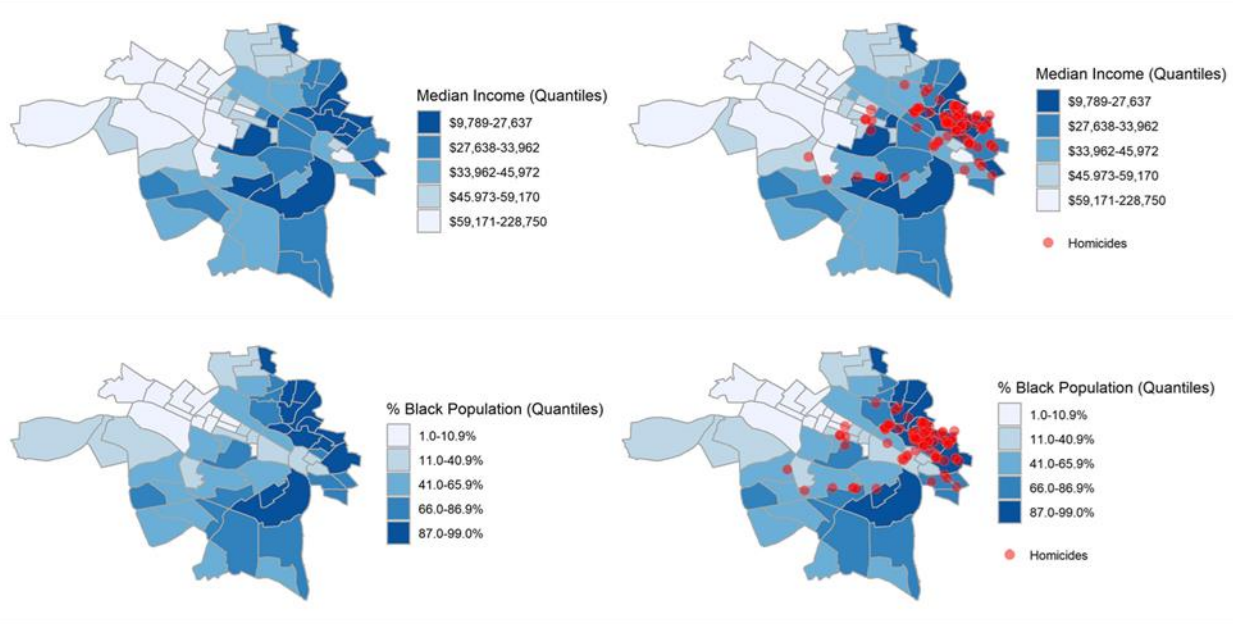


FIGURE 11 (continued).

ST. LOUIS, MO and EAST ST. LOUIS, IL



RICHMOND, VA



Source: PA analysis conducted by authors using Office of the Controller (2023) and U.S. Census Bureau (IPUMS, 2023) data. NY: Eppard et. al. (2020); MO/IL: Eppard & Nelson (2022); VA: Eppard et. al. (2021).

Sharkey notes that:

“[B]lacks and whites of similar economic status live in dramatically different residential environments, with blacks living in areas with higher crime rates, lower quality schools, higher poverty rates, lower property values, and severe racial segregation” (2009, p. 6).

Robert Sampson writes that “The spatial isolation of African Americans produces exposure to concentrated, cumulative, and compounded disadvantage, constituting a powerful form of racial disparity” (2019, p. 8). Rutgers University emerita professor Lauren Krivo explains that “[F]ew predominantly white communities have conditions that are anywhere near the levels of disadvantage that are common in non-white communities, and particularly black communities” (Aufrechtig et. al., 2017).³²

Considering the disproportionate racial makeup of our most disadvantaged communities in the U.S., we have argued elsewhere that “If place is as important for children’s success as the evidence indicates, then we cannot hope to truly address racial inequality in the United States without addressing the stark differences between our communities” (Eppard & Nelson, 2022).

What Can Be Done?

Given that we do not choose the family we are born into nor the community in which we will be raised, it seems that our life chances—at least in part—come down to the lottery of our birth:

“We do not choose to exist. We do not choose the environment we will grow up in. We do not choose to be born Hindu, Christian or Muslim, into a war-zone or peaceful middle-class suburb, into starvation or luxury. We do not choose our parents, nor whether they’ll be happy or miserable, knowledgeable or ignorant, healthy or sickly, attentive or neglectful. The knowledge we possess, the beliefs we hold, the tastes we develop, the traditions we adopt, the opportunities we enjoy, the work we do—the very lives we lead. . . This is the lottery of birth” (Martinez, 2016, p. 3).

Luckily, it seems that there are many good ideas about how we might intervene in meaningful ways to improve many children’s communities. Richard Reeves and Allegra Pocinki (2015) argue for such things as better enforcement of fair housing rules, reforming exclusionary zoning laws, ensuring more mixed-income housing and schooling, making sure public housing is not built in high-poverty areas, investing in infrastructure, and promoting more school choice.

We could also help families who wish to move out of struggling neighborhoods to achieve that goal, and there is evidence that such moves would be beneficial for young children.

³² Studying the city of Chicago, Robert Sampson found that there was virtually no overlap between the levels of neighborhood concentrated disadvantage of Black residents compared with non-Black residents: “[I]n cities such as Chicago children from different racial and ethnic backgrounds occupy entirely different types of communities” (Sharkey & Faber, 2014, p. 570).

Between 1994 and 1998, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) ran a social experiment called the “Moving to Opportunity” experiment (MTO). It was designed to assist researchers in establishing whether helping low-income families move to better neighborhoods would improve their economic and health outcomes (Chetty et. al., 2019).

In the MTO experiment, 4,600 low-income families with children living in high-poverty public housing in Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York City were entered into a lottery. They were then randomly assigned into three groups: those who would stay in public housing, those who would be offered a subsidized housing voucher to move elsewhere, and those who were offered the same voucher but with the stipulation that they must move to a low-poverty neighborhood (poverty rate less than 10%). This allowed researchers to compare the life outcomes of low-income families who moved out of public housing to a control group of similarly disadvantaged families who stayed (Chetty et. al., 2019).

Okay, we can’t help ourselves. We have to say it. . . MTO was like a giant claw machine!

Early analyses of the experiment, while documenting some positive results for movers, did not reveal large gains for children, “leading some to conclude that neighborhood environments are not an important component of economic success” (Chetty et. al., 2019).

More recent analyses, however, looked more closely at subpopulations within each group, and found that there were significant improvements for children who moved as long as they (a) moved in elementary school or earlier and (b) did not move to another disadvantaged neighborhood but instead into a low-poverty area. Children who moved out of public housing when they were young and into low-poverty neighborhoods were more likely to attend college and were more economically productive as adults. Female children who moved to low-poverty neighborhoods were more likely to marry, more likely to maintain relationships with the fathers of their children, and more likely to live in better neighborhoods in adulthood (Wolfers, 2015; Chetty et. al., 2019).

Many of the children who moved in their teenage years not only saw little improvement but were perhaps even hurt by the disruption of the move—so when earlier researchers included both teenagers and young children in their analyses, the positive effects for the young were probably cancelled out by the negative effects for some teenagers (along with the less-impressive results for movers who moved but into yet another disadvantaged neighborhood) (Wolfers, 2015).

As Michigan University economist Justin Wolfers explains:

“[The MTO experiment] suggests that the next generation—the grandchildren of the winners of this lottery—are more likely to be raised by two parents, to enjoy higher family incomes and to spend their entire childhood in better neighborhoods. That is, the gains from this policy experiment are likely to persist over several generations” (2015).

Additionally, modeling voucher programs after the MTO experiment would be fiscally responsible. As Chetty and his colleagues explain “The additional tax revenue generated from these earnings increases would itself offset the incremental cost of the subsidized voucher relative

to providing public housing” (2019). Because children relocated to better neighborhoods go on to become more economically productive adults, they end up contributing more to the economy and paying more in taxes, which likely offsets the additional expenses that the government would incur by implementing a voucher program similar to MTO instead of traditional public housing.

Chetty and his coauthors who conducted the MTO reanalysis concluded that:

“[O]ffering low-income families housing vouchers and assistance in moving to lower-poverty neighborhoods has substantial benefits for the families themselves and for taxpayers. It appears important to target such housing vouchers to families with young children—perhaps even at birth—to maximize the benefits. . . More broadly, our findings suggest that efforts to integrate disadvantaged families into mixed-income communities are likely to reduce the persistence of poverty across generations” (2015, pp. 40-41).

* * * * *

There is growing evidence of the significant impact of communities on the life chances of poor and working-class American children, revealing that place plays a pivotal role in shaping children’s future prospects. Whether it’s educational attainment, social mobility, exposure to violence, racial inequality, or other important measures, communities seem to matter a great deal irrespective of individual and household characteristics.

Studies like the aforementioned MTO, however, do offer hope. They suggest that improving struggling communities, or moving children out of them, can yield significant improvements in long-term outcomes. Such policies could pave the way for brighter futures for many American children, regardless of the lottery of their birth.

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