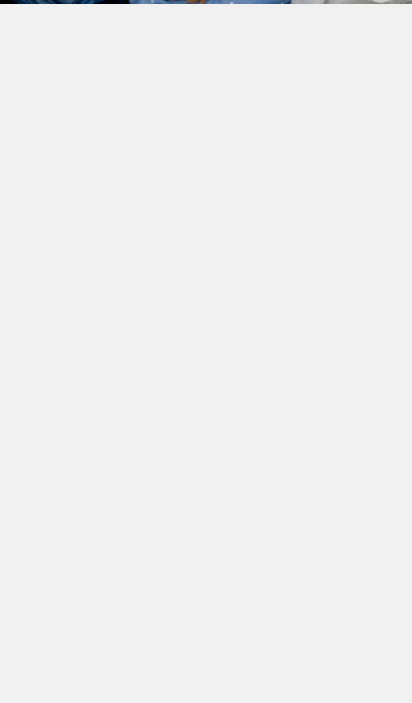# THE GEOGRAPHY OF CHILD OPPORTUNITY: WHY NEIGHBORHOODS MATTER FOR EQUITY

Neighborhoods matter for children's health and development. All children in the United States should live in neighborhoods with access to good schools, healthy foods, safe parks and playgrounds, clean air, safe housing and living-wage jobs for the adults in their lives. However, far too many children in the U.S. live in neighborhoods that lack these conditions.

- **Neighborhoods influence the quality of experiences that children have today.** The neighborhoods where children live influence whether they have access to green spaces, safe housing and healthy food, and the quality of the early education centers and schools they attend.

- **Neighborhoods influence children's health and education.** Research shows that poor children who live in higher opportunity neighborhoods have lower stress levels than poor children in low-opportunity neighborhoods. A positive neighborhood environment may protect children against the detrimental effects of family poverty. Children in neighborhoods with higher poverty rates tend to have worse educational outcomes, which affect opportunities for living a healthy life.

- **Neighborhoods influence children's norms and expectations for the future.** Living in a neighborhood where the local schools have higher graduation rates or a large proportion of adults with college degrees sends strong messages that education is valued and attainable.

- **Neighborhoods influence future outcomes.** Neighborhoods shape children during their critical development years and thus affect children's long-term outcomes. Research shows that the neighborhoods where children grow up influence long-term outcomes such as their health and life expectancy and their income as adults.

The Child Opportunity Index (COI) 2.0 quantifies, maps and compares neighborhood opportunity for children across the United States. It is the first national measure of contemporary child opportunity available: it covers all U.S. neighborhoods. It ranks opportunity by measuring a wide range of neighborhood conditions that shape children's health and development.

- The COI 2.0 has data for 72,000 neighborhoods or census tracts in the United States.
- This is the first time we have a single, consistent metric of contemporary child opportunity for every U.S. neighborhood.
- This report—an updated, expanded and improved version of the COI released in 2014—focuses on child opportunity in the 100 largest metropolitan areas, which comprise 47,000 neighborhoods where 67 percent of children live.
- The COI 2.0 measures neighborhood opportunity along three domains that matter for children:
  - Education
  - Health and environmental
  - Social and economic
- The COI ranks neighborhood opportunity based on 29 common conditions within these domains, including: availability and quality of early education centers and schools; high school graduation rates and the number of adults with high-skills jobs; poverty and employment rates; air pollution levels; housing vacancy rates and home ownership; and availability of green spaces and healthy food outlets. Each neighborhood receives a Child Opportunity Score and is assigned to an opportunity level: very low, low, moderate, high, or very high opportunity. The Child Opportunity Score is also broken down by race and ethnicity.

Key findings from COI 2.0:

Bakersfield CA has the lowest opportunity score (Child Opportunity Score of 20) in the nation; Madison WI has the highest (Child Opportunity Score of 83). In Bakersfield, 51 percent of children live in very low-opportunity neighborhoods that by national standards have the most limited conditions and resources for healthy child development. In contrast, in Madison, WI, virtually no children live in very low-opportunity neighborhoods by national standards.

There is a geographic pattern of child opportunity across the United States. With few exceptions, metros in the southern portion of the country have notably lower Child Opportunity Scores than those in the northern portion. On average, the highest opportunity metros are in the Plains states and in New England. California's Central Valley has some of the metros with the lowest opportunity scores in the U.S., while San Jose and San Francisco have some of the highest opportunity scores.

There is wide variation in child opportunity across metros but wider inequities occur within metros. Although metros are relatively small geographic areas, the opportunity gap for children is often as wide (or wider) within metros as it is across metros throughout the country. Within a given metro area, children who live only short distances apart often experience two completely different worlds of neighborhood opportunity. Only 9 percent of the variation in neighborhood opportunity for children happens between metros while 91 percent happen within metros.

Children's race and ethnicity are strong predictors of access to opportunity.
- Black and Hispanic children are much more concentrated in very low-opportunity neighborhoods: across the 100 largest metros, 46 percent of black children and 32 percent of Hispanic children live in very low-opportunity neighborhoods.
- Black children are 7.6 times and Hispanic children 5.3 times more likely to live in very low-opportunity neighborhoods than white children.
- Across the 100 largest metros, white children live in neighborhoods with a Child Opportunity Score of 73 compared to a score of 33 for Hispanic children and 24 for black children.
- Even in metros with overall high opportunity, the Child Opportunity Score for black and Hispanic children is substantially lower than for white and Asian/Pacific Islander children.
- Racial/ethnic inequities are pervasive but even more extreme in some metro areas.

Measures of child opportunity should capture the quality of children's neighborhoods and should be predictive of how well children will do in the future.

- **Child neighborhood opportunity is associated with life expectancy.**
  Across all metros, there is a seven-year difference in life expectancy between residents in very low-opportunity neighborhoods (75 years) and residents in very high-opportunity neighborhoods (82 years).
- **Child neighborhood opportunity is associated with economic mobility as an adult.**
  Household income at age 35 for children who grew up in poor families ranges from $29,000 in very low-opportunity neighborhoods to $46,000 in very high-opportunity neighborhoods

Examples of how government, researchers, and nonprofits are using the Child Opportunity Index 1.0 to make improvements include:

- **Albany, NY:** Its ranking as worst among the 100 largest metros in terms of the concentration of black children in very low-opportunity neighborhoods spurred community leaders to invest in advancing equity. A five-year capital plan to renovate 13 parks and playgrounds is almost complete, and the COI data and resulting investments have catalyzed ongoing conversation about improving opportunities for Albany's black and Hispanic children.
- **Pinellas County, FL:** The County's Juvenile Welfare Board combined its own rich data with the COI to help focus resource allocation and program development and better track neighborhood change over time. The COI allows local community leaders to identify needs specific to the neighborhoods in their service area and customize their services to match those needs.
- **Chicago, IL:** The City of Chicago used the COI as a key tool that informed its five-year strategic plan, *Healthy Chicago 2.0: Partnering to Improve Health Equity.* The COI enabled the Chicago Department of Public Health and planning committee to better see which neighborhoods are best resourced and which had the fewest resources for children. The Department can now more effectively create prevention and intervention strategies to narrow health inequities across Chicago's 77 neighborhoods.

To learn more about COI 2.0, visit diversitydatakids.org.

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data for a diverse and equitable future