

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

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All eyes are on the U.S. early care and education (ECE) system, and tools to make it more equitable are more important than ever. With the American Rescue Plan allocating \$39 billion to public and private child care centers,<sup>1</sup> and the American Families Plan proposing a \$200 billion investment in universal preschool and an additional \$225 billion toward a high-quality and accessible child care system and workforce,<sup>2,3</sup> the ECE system is experiencing its largest expansion since the 1960s. At the same time, the Biden administration's executive order to pursue racial equity in federal policies and programs<sup>4</sup> is placing unprecedented expectations on early childhood policymakers to confront longstanding racial inequities. In order to ensure equitable expansion and reach of the ECE system, policymakers need practical frameworks and tools that place racial equity at the heart of their policy design, implementation, and evaluation work.

Neighborhood-informed early childhood approaches are one such policy tool that can be used to advance racial equity for children. By focusing on the resources within a child's neighborhood, and not just on a child's family resources, policymakers can acquire a richer and more nuanced sense of the opportunities available to that child—and the gaps they face. Furthermore, because children across the U.S. live in highly racially segregated neighborhoods (due to housing policies that reinforce segregation), neighborhood inequities translate into racial inequities in opportunities for healthy development and access to high-quality early care and education. Neighborhood-informed ECE policy approaches seek to

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<sup>1</sup> American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, H.R. 1319, Congress (2021).

<sup>2</sup> Tankersley, J., & Goldstein, D. (2021, April 28, 2021). Biden Details \$1.8 Trillion Plan for Workers, Students, and Families. The New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/28/us/politics/biden-american-families-plan.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Fact Sheet: The American Families Plan. (2021). [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/28/fact-sheet-the-american-families-plan/>.

<sup>4</sup> Executive Order on Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities Through the Federal Government. (2021). [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2021/01/20/executive-order-advancing-racial-equity-and-support-for-underserved-communities-through-the-federal-government/>.

disrupt these patterns of unequal neighborhood access to early childhood services, resources, and programs that disproportionately harm some of our most vulnerable children and reinforce racial disparities.

## WHAT ARE NEIGHBORHOOD-INFORMED EARLY CHILDHOOD APPROACHES?

A child's neighborhood—the immediate geographic area surrounding their home, typically measured as the census tract or block group where a child lives—shapes their lives in countless ways. Neighborhoods vary on a number of levels: from poverty concentration among residents; to the quality of local schools; to employment opportunities for adults; to access to grocery stores, medical care, and playgrounds. These contexts shape not only a child's development, but also their families' resources to care for them and connect them with additional experiences that support healthy development. As a result, poor children who live in low-opportunity neighborhoods are more likely to face the "triple threat" of growing up in family poverty, a lack of opportunities in their neighborhoods, *and* limited neighborhood access to high-quality early care and learning. These accumulating set of risks contribute to growing economic and health inequities that take hold early in children's lives and span into adulthood.

Neighborhood-informed approaches to early childhood policymaking can help ensure that these most vulnerable children—those facing multiple barriers to healthy development—receive the highest levels of funding and attention. To date, much of federal early care and education policy has focused on providing vouchers or subsidies to children in low-income families. But this approach may equate a poor family in a resource-rich neighborhood with a poor family in a high-risk neighborhood—providing resources that do not stretch nearly as far for one family as they do for another. A neighborhood-informed approach, however, takes into account children's developmental risk (i.e. the mix of resources and risks the child faces) at the individual, family, *and* neighborhood levels. By targeting children who are low-income, with few childcare options nearby, *and* who live in a low-opportunity neighborhood, this approach can require that resources go first to where they are most needed.

## USING NEIGHBORHOOD STRATEGIES TO ADVANCE RACIAL EQUITY

Significantly, a neighborhood-informed approach to early childhood policy has the potential to advance racial equity for children, defined as all children having the resources they need to grow and thrive. Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, and immigrant children are disproportionately more likely to experience family poverty *and* live in a high-risk, low-resourced neighborhood. For example, 70% of poor Hispanic children and 75% of poor Black children live in low-opportunity neighborhoods, compared to only 35% of poor White children.<sup>5</sup> These differences translate to inequitable access to publicly-funded early childhood care, too. One-third of poor Hispanic preschool-aged children and 46% of poor Black preschool-aged children live in low-opportunity neighborhoods with no Head Start, compared to only 15% of poor White preschool-aged children.<sup>6</sup>

As a result, taking neighborhood-level risk factors into account when allocating resources starts to prioritize assistance to Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, and immigrant children, as these are the children who face the greatest risks around family economic resources, neighborhood conditions, and neighborhood ECE access. While a neighborhood-based approach is

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<sup>5</sup> Acevedo-Garcia et. al., "Racial and Ethnic Inequities In Children's Neighborhoods: Evidence From The New Child Opportunity Index 2.0," *Health Affairs* 39:10, <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/full/10.1377/hlthaff.2020.00735>

<sup>6</sup> Hardy et. al. "Unequal Availability of Head Start: How Neighborhood Matters," [diversitydatakids.org](https://diversitydatakids.org), January 2020.

not explicitly anti-racist, it begins to confront the racial/ethnic inequalities that are rooted in neighborhood inequality and residential segregation.

Looking ahead as ECE funding expands, this framework can ensure more equitable resource targeting, giving first priority to the most vulnerable children, with the goal of reaching all vulnerable children over time. It can also strengthen accountability of the entire ECE system, by showing how many vulnerable children remain unreached by the federal early childhood care and education system, and how the insufficient reach of the ECE system disproportionately harms Black, Hispanic, Indigenous and immigrant children, allowing longstanding inequities to persist.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

What can you do to increase the use of neighborhood-informed strategies in the ECE space?

### For ECE grantees and administrators:

- **Use the levers you already have.** There are numerous opportunities under existing regulations and policies to increase the use of neighborhood-informed approaches.
  - Read about opportunities for CCDF, Head Start, the Preschool Development Grant through Five, Title I Preschool, and the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program in our full report, available [here](#).
  - Use the [neighborhood-level early childhood data](#) on [diversitydatakids.org](#) to advance these approaches.
  - See the [Child Opportunity Index](#) for measures of children’s neighborhood conditions and opportunities for all U.S. neighborhoods
- **Systematically account for children’s neighborhood-related developmental risks in federal ECE policies.** The evidence is clear that using this approach to determine eligibility and prioritization for early childhood policies, programs, and services has the potential to enhance racial equity across the system and could strengthen accountability, planning, and evaluation across federal ECE policies.
- **Work towards a national information system about children’s neighborhood risks and neighborhood-level access to ECE.** Many of these data points already exist within specific agencies and could be integrated into a national system to make neighborhood-informed approaches simple and accessible for all initiatives.

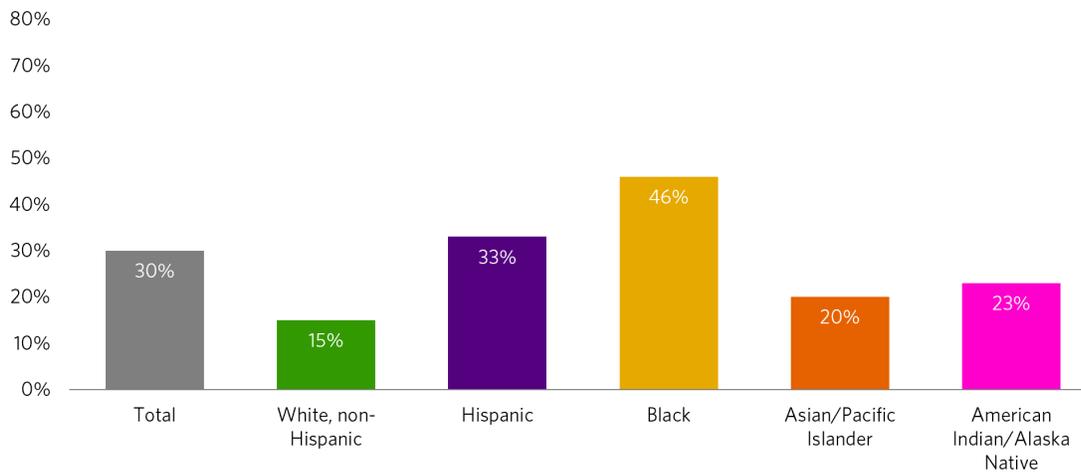
### For ECE policy and legislative advocates:

**Gather and share evidence of neighborhood-informed approaches.** More data, case studies, and stories of successful neighborhood-informed strategies can help policymakers visualize how this approach will benefit families and advance racial equity across ECE platforms.

## AN EXAMPLE FOR PRACTITIONERS: USING EXISTING LEVERS IN HEAD START TO IMPLEMENT MORE EQUITABLE CHILDCARE POLICY

Across the U.S., children who are income-eligible for Head Start are highly racially segregated in their neighborhoods. The typical Head Start eligible White child lives in a neighborhood that has 72% White residents, while the typical Head Start eligible Black or Hispanic child lives in a neighborhood that is 18% White or 17% White, respectively.<sup>7</sup> What's more, White Head Start eligible children are much more likely than Head Start eligible Black, Hispanic, Indigenous and immigrant children to live in neighborhoods that are rich in opportunities that matter for children. The availability of high-quality Head Start programs also varies widely: poor Black, Hispanic and Indigenous children are much more likely than White children to live in low-opportunity neighborhoods that lack adequate access to Head Start.

**Percent of poor 3-4 year olds in very low opportunity neighborhoods with no Head Start**



Source: diversitydatakids.org. Child Opportunity Index 2.0 Database. Population data from American Community Survey, 2013-2017.

While this is a positive outcome for low-income White children, it signals how separate and unequal neighborhoods can disproportionately leave Black, Hispanic, Indigenous and immigrant children behind. Considering the conditions, resources and opportunities that children face across *multiple* settings (family, neighborhood) provides more complete information about the relative challenges children can face. This information can more effectively guide ECE policies and programs, which are intended to help children overcome the developmental adversities they face growing up in the dynamics of family and community poverty.

Head Start already contains several “levers” under its existing regulations for grantees to implement neighborhood-informed approaches. Specifically, performance standards around determining strengths, needs, and resources; achieving program goals; and the selection process all offer opportunities to use neighborhood-approaches to effect more equitable policy. For example:

- Grantees are already required to define their own service areas, justifying Head Start locations based on community need. Currently, these service areas can be very large and include a large number of neighborhoods.

<sup>7</sup> Reported “percent of a (Black, Hispanic) HS eligible child’s neighborhood that is White, non-Hispanic.” Data source: Head Start Program Information Report, 2019.

By considering how need varies within those neighborhoods, though, grantees can pinpoint the level of funding they should request and prioritize and tailor service appropriately.

- Under existing regulations, grantees have the ability to prescribe how the program will prioritize families in its selection process. By assessing each family's neighborhood-level risk factors and ECE availability in the application process, grantees can prioritize children facing double or triple threats. Grantees can also target recruitment to a specific neighborhood with demonstrably high need within their larger service area.
- Many grantees provide transportation for families, although doing so is not required. Transportation can be a key way to mitigate neighborhood risk, by giving families in the highest need neighborhoods the opportunity to attend high quality Head Start programs, even if those programs are located several miles away.

As part of their needs assessment and strategic planning work, Head Start grantees, state departments of early care and education (including Preschool Development Grant Birth Through Five grantee states), can identify children in their state or locality facing triple threat and then utilize neighborhood-informed to tailor approaches. Many grantees already do this work on an informal or ad-hoc basis. More targeted and systematic approaches can ensure resources are targeting the most truly vulnerable and dismantling patterns of unequal localized access to high-quality ECE.

#### **Four steps to get started using neighborhood-informed approaches:**

1. Assess and identify the neighborhood level data you have on components of the ECE system you are focused on (e.g. Head Start, subsidized child care programs, etc.). It is important that these are available at the neighborhood level (e.g. census tract, census block group or city planning neighborhood) because using larger areas (like counties) masks inequities that play out at the hyper-local level most relevant for families' child care and early education arrangements, which are often within a few miles of home.
2. Assess and identify the neighborhood level data you have on children's broader set of neighborhood resources, conditions and opportunities. One example is the [Child Opportunity Index](https://diversitydatakids.org/child-opportunity-index) available for all neighborhoods nationally across the U.S., at [diversitydatakids.org/child-opportunity-index](https://diversitydatakids.org/child-opportunity-index)
3. Assess and identify the neighborhood level data you have on children's characteristics by age, income and race/ethnicity. The Census Bureau's American Community Survey is the primary source for these data.
4. Assess technical capacity (existing or needed) to bring together these three data elements to use neighborhood-informed approaches and to conduct racial-equity focused analyses in your needs assessment, planning, service administration, monitoring and evaluation work.

### **Learn More**

There are numerous parallel opportunities within all major federal ECE policies. Read our full report “[Advancing Racial Equity Through Neighborhood-Informed Early Childhood Policies: A Research and Policy Review](#),” for evidence on the value of neighborhood-informed early childhood policies, an in-depth discussion of how neighborhood-informed approaches can advance racial equity, and a policy review of existing levers for neighborhood-informed approaches within federal ECE policies and programs.

Share your thoughts with us at [info@diversitydatakids.org](mailto:info@diversitydatakids.org).