

A KIDS COUNT/PRB Report on

CENSUS 2000

The Concentration of Negative Child Outcomes in Low-Income Neighborhoods

By

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The Annie E. Casey Foundation
Population Reference Bureau
February 2006

PRB

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KIDS COUNT/PRB Reports on Census 2000

This paper is part of a series of reports on the 2000 Census prepared for the nationwide network of KIDS COUNT projects. These reports have been guided by the recommendations of an expert advisory group of data users and child advocates brought together in a series of meetings by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Population Reference Bureau. Members of the advisory group have provided valuable assistance about how to interpret and use data from the 2000 Census.

A list of the advisory group members can be found at the back of this report.

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Executive Summary

At the end of the 20th century, one in five children in the United States lived in neighborhoods where at least 20 percent of the population lived in poverty. Research has shown that children growing up in poor neighborhoods are at higher risk of health problems, teen pregnancy, dropping out of school, and other social and economic problems compared to children living in more affluent communities.¹

Researchers often make reference to a critical threshold or tipping point of neighborhood poverty, beyond which social and economic problems for children and families increase dramatically.² Neighborhood poverty thresholds are also used by the federal government and many state and local jurisdictions to allocate funds to poor communities. Yet there has been little research on the extent to which negative child outcomes are concentrated in America's poorest neighborhoods.

Our analysis of 2000 Census data indicates that negative child outcomes are highly concentrated in poor neighborhoods. However, we did not find evidence of a tipping point in the relationship between neighborhood poverty and child well-being. The following key points summarize our major findings:

- Children who live in poor neighborhoods are at greater risk of experiencing negative outcomes (e.g., dropping out of school) compared to children living in more affluent communities.
- There is a linear association between neighborhood poverty rates and children's risk of experiencing several negative social and economic outcomes.
- Because high rates of neighborhood poverty are linked to negative social, economic, and health outcomes for children, these negative outcomes tend to be geographically concentrated in poor communities.
- There are significant racial, ethnic, and geographic differences in the proportions of children residing in poor neighborhoods and in the concentrations of negative child outcomes.

Introduction

One of the most important decisions parents make is where to live. Neighborhood characteristics can affect a child's choice of peers and playmates; the quality of schools; and the availability of amenities, such as parks, playgrounds, and libraries. Neighborhoods vary in the types of child-care services available, the level of personal safety, and the availability of jobs. These neighborhood norms may have long-term effects. They can help launch a child toward college and a stable work life, or increase the likelihood that he or she will commit a crime or become a teenage parent.

This common-sense understanding is also reflected in empirical studies that show the importance of neighborhoods in shaping children's lives.³ Children who grow up in poor neighborhoods are at higher risk of health problems, child mortality, teen pregnancy, dropping out of school, substance abuse, and behavior problems.⁴ Many of these neighborhood effects persist even after controlling for family characteristics.⁵

Some research has suggested that there is a critical threshold of neighborhood poverty and that child and family risk factors multiply once that threshold is crossed.⁶ There is also evidence that people who lived in poor neighborhoods as children are more likely to live in neighborhoods of the same quality as adults, suggesting that neighborhood effects often carry over into adulthood, and from one generation to the next.⁷

In this report, we investigate the extent to which negative child outcomes are concentrated in America's poor neighborhoods. We present results in two different ways. First, we examine the *proportion* of children with negative outcomes (e.g., high school dropout rates) in neighborhoods with poverty rates ranging from less than 5 percent to 40 percent or more. These results are used to show which dimensions of child well-being have linear or non-linear relationships with

neighborhood poverty. Second, we show the *distribution* of children with negative outcomes across neighborhoods with different poverty levels. These results—presented separately by race, ethnicity, and by state—show the extent to which negative outcomes are concentrated in poor communities.

All of the estimates in this report are based on the Population Reference Bureau’s analysis of the 2000 Census Summary Files. The 2000 Census is the best source of reliable social, economic, and population estimates for neighborhoods and other small geographic areas. Census tracts are used to define neighborhood boundaries. Census tracts are county subdivisions and contain about 4,000 residents each. They are designed to be relatively homogeneous in terms of their demographic, economic, and housing characteristics. At the time of the 2000 Census, there were about 65,000 census tracts nationwide, covering both urban and rural areas.

The census provides broad coverage of geographic areas, but subject matter is limited to the content of the 2000 Census questionnaire. In this report, we focus on seven different dimensions of child well-being:

- Children living in single-parent families;
- Children living in poverty;
- Children with no parents in the labor force;
- Children with one or more disabilities;
- Children ages 3 to 4 not enrolled in school;
- Teens who are high school dropouts; and
- Teens not in school and not working.

Although these seven measures are not intended to capture the full range of conditions shaping children’s lives, we believe that they reflect many of the key factors that affect child welfare.

Moreover, the measures are consistent across neighborhoods.

Each of these measures is constructed as a “negative outcome,” so that higher values always indicate worse conditions for children. However, there is not necessarily a direct causal relationship between each measure and child well-being. For example, residence in a single-

parent family is associated with worse child outcomes, because children who grow up with one parent typically do not have access to the same economic resources and “social capital” available to children growing up in two-parent families.⁸ For definitions of each of the measures, see the appendix.

Children Living in Poor Neighborhoods

Hurricane Katrina’s destruction of New Orleans brought national attention to many of the vulnerabilities of families living in poor, urban neighborhoods—including high rates of unemployment, lack of access to transportation, and high levels of racial and economic segregation that isolate families from job opportunities and social networks outside of their communities.⁹ In 2004, about 62 percent of children in New Orleans resided in single-parent families and 38 percent were poor.¹⁰

But poverty is not just an urban problem. In 1999, 48 of the 50 U.S. counties with the highest poverty rates were located in rural areas—especially in parts of Appalachia, the Rio Grande Valley, the Mississippi Delta, and the Northern Great Plains.¹¹ Families in rural America, like their urban counterparts, often face challenges in gaining access to social and economic pathways out of poverty.

Nationwide, about 14.7 million children—one in five—lived in neighborhoods with 20 percent or higher poverty rates in 1999 (see Table 1). The U.S. Census Bureau labels neighborhoods with poverty rates of 20 percent or more as “poverty areas,” but scholars and researchers commonly use thresholds of 30 percent or 40 percent to define high-poverty neighborhoods.¹² In this analysis, we classify neighborhoods with poverty rates of 30 percent or more as “high poverty” and neighborhoods with poverty rates of 40 percent or more as “extremely high poverty.”¹³ In 1999, 6.3

million children lived in neighborhoods with high poverty rates, and another 2.3 million children lived in neighborhoods with extremely high poverty rates.

Table 1
**Distribution of Children by Neighborhood Poverty Rate
in 1999**

	Number	Percent
All children	72,293,812	100
Neighborhood poverty level		
Under 20%	57,546,894	80
20-29.9%	8,445,605	12
30-39.9%	3,965,557	5
40%+	2,335,756	3

Source: Population Reference Bureau, analysis of Census 2000 Summary File Data.

Poverty tends to persist in communities, so long-term residents in many of these neighborhoods have experienced high neighborhood poverty rates for several decades. In 2000, more than 8 million children lived in “persistently poor” neighborhoods that have had poverty rates of 20 percent or higher since at least 1980.¹⁴

Child Outcomes in High-Poverty Neighborhoods

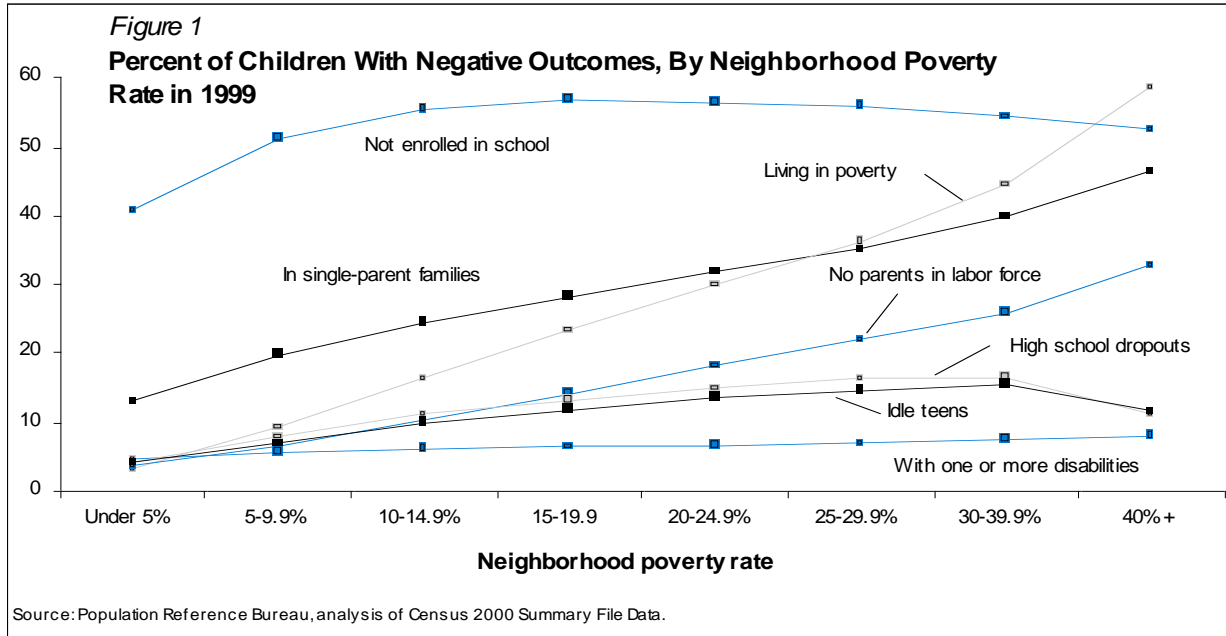
The research literature often refers to a tipping point of neighborhood poverty, beyond which social and economic problems for children and families increase at an accelerated pace.¹⁵ The poverty tipping point is typically assumed to be around 20 percent although thresholds of up to 40 percent have also been used.¹⁶ Research on poverty thresholds has important implications for policymakers who are trying to strengthen neighborhoods. If there is a tipping point of neighborhood poverty, then the negative effects of living in poor neighborhoods can be

dramatically reduced through relatively minor shifts in the distribution of poor and low-income families.

Neighborhood poverty thresholds are currently used to administer several federal housing programs. For example, the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit program, administered by the U.S. Department of the Treasury, provides tax benefits to homeowners living in designated “Qualified Census Tracts,” where at least half of all households have incomes at 60 percent of the area’s median income or below.¹⁷ The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Empowerment Zones Program provides federal funds to neighborhoods with poverty rates of 20 percent or higher.¹⁸ Neighborhood poverty thresholds are also used by many states and local jurisdictions to allocate funds to poor communities.

We analyzed outcomes for children residing in eight different categories of neighborhoods, with poverty levels ranging from less than 5 percent (most affluent) to more than 40 percent (most disadvantaged). If there were a poverty tipping point, we would expect child outcomes to be relatively stable up to that critical threshold and increasingly worse in neighborhoods with higher poverty rates. But for most dimensions of child well-being, we found a highly linear relationship between neighborhood poverty levels and negative child outcomes.

For example, about 13 percent of children living in the nation’s most affluent communities lived in single-parent families in 2000 (see Figure 1). This rate increases to 20 percent for children in neighborhoods where the share of individuals living in poverty ranges from 5 percent to 10 percent, and more than doubles to 28 percent for children living in neighborhoods with poverty rates ranging from 15 percent to 20 percent. In neighborhoods with extremely high poverty, 46 percent of children lived in single-parent families.



Child poverty rates, or the percentage of children living in a family with income below the U.S. poverty threshold, increase dramatically with increases in neighborhood poverty rates. In the most affluent neighborhoods, where poverty rates are below 5 percent, the child poverty rate is about 3 percent. In neighborhoods with poverty rates ranging from 20 percent to 25 percent, the child poverty rate increases to 30 percent. And in the poorest neighborhoods, the child poverty rate is nearly 60 percent. The proportion of children with no parents in the labor force shows a similar pattern across neighborhoods with different poverty rates. These results are not surprising, since high poverty rates in many neighborhoods are closely linked to the employment status of parents.

High school dropout rates follow a slightly different pattern. Although the share of teen dropouts ages 16 to 19 was lowest in the most affluent neighborhoods, it peaked at 16 percent in neighborhoods with poverty rates between 25 percent and 40 percent. In the neighborhoods with extremely high poverty rates (40 percent or higher), only 11 percent of teens were high school dropouts, a figure just above the national average of 10 percent. We see the same pattern in the

proportion of teens not in school and not working. Many of these extremely poor neighborhoods are actually college towns that have relatively few high school dropouts or idle teens, but many 18- and 19-year-old undergraduates with little or no income.¹⁹

Disability rates are also correlated with neighborhood poverty levels, although the relationship is not as strong. In the most affluent neighborhoods, about 5 percent of children were classified as having one or more disabilities, compared with 8 percent in the poorest communities.

Preschool enrollment rates exhibit a non-linear relationship with neighborhood poverty levels. The share of young children not enrolled in school was highest in neighborhoods with poverty rates between 10 percent and 30 percent, and slightly lower in both poorer neighborhoods and more affluent ones. At the lower end of the income scale, this may reflect the allocation of funds for early education programs. Families in the poorest communities are more likely to qualify for Head Start or other programs that enable them to send their young children to school than those families that are slightly better off. The proportion of children not enrolled in school was lowest in the most affluent communities, where many two-income parents enroll their children in preschool or day care centers.

Overall, results show relatively strong linear associations between neighborhood poverty levels and the proportion of children in single-parent families, child poverty rates, children with no parents in the labor force, and the proportion of high school dropouts and idle teens. From a policy perspective, these findings raise questions about the use of neighborhood poverty thresholds to determine the allocation of funds for vulnerable children and families. The results in this report suggest that children might be better served by programs that provide funds to communities in proportion to neighborhood poverty levels, with the most assistance going to children in the poorest neighborhoods.

Racial and Ethnic Differences

There are significant racial and ethnic differences in the proportions of children residing in poor neighborhoods (see Table 2). While about 8 percent of non-Hispanic white children nationwide lived in poor neighborhoods in 1999, Asian/Pacific Islander children were nearly twice as likely to live in such neighborhoods (17 percent), and American Indian and Latino children were more than five times as likely (45 percent and 42 percent respectively). African American children fared the worst. They were six times as likely to live in such neighborhoods (48 percent). Overall, there were 5.2 million African American children living in poor neighborhoods in 1999—more than children from any other racial or ethnic group.

Table 2
Number and Percent of Children Living in Poor Neighborhoods* in 1999, by Race/Ethnicity

	Number	Percent
All children	14,746,918	20
Non-Hispanic white children	3,409,063	8
Asian/Pacific Islander	441,013	17
Latino	5,131,155	42
American Indian/ Alaska Native	380,242	45
African American	5,208,081	48

*Neighborhoods with 20 percent or higher poverty in 1999

Source: Population Reference Bureau, analysis of Census 2000 Summary File Data.

Estimates of neighborhood poverty are not available for children in immigrant families, but new immigrants comprise some of the most vulnerable population groups and also tend to be concentrated in poor, urban neighborhoods. For example, three-fourths of Latino children living in Rhode Island in 2000 resided in poor neighborhoods.²⁰

Geographic Concentration of Negative Outcomes

Because high rates of neighborhood poverty are linked to negative social, economic, and health outcomes for children, these negative outcomes tend to be geographically concentrated in poor communities. “Concentrations of poor people lead to a concentration of the social ills that cause or are caused by poverty.”²¹ As we saw in New Orleans, families in high-poverty neighborhoods become isolated from economic opportunities and social networks that could reverse negative behaviors and provide pathways out of poverty.

Results from the 2000 Census show the extent to which negative outcomes for children are concentrated in America’s poorest communities (see Table 3). In 1999, only 20 percent of all children were living in impoverished neighborhoods, compared with 33 percent of children in single-parent families, 49 percent of poor children, 44 percent of children with no parents in the labor force, 25 percent of children with disabilities, 23 percent of young children not enrolled in school, 36 percent of high school dropouts, and 37 percent of idle teens.

Table 3
Distribution of Children With Negative Outcomes, By Neighborhood Poverty Rate in 1999 (Percent)

	All children under age 18	Own children in single-parent families	Children living in poverty	Children with no parents in the labor force	Children with one or more disabilities	Children ages 3 to 4 not enrolled in school	Teens who are high school dropouts	Teens not in school and not working
All children	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Neighborhood poverty rate								
Under 20%	80	67	51	56	75	77	64	63
20% or higher	20	33	49	44	25	23	36	37
20-29.9%	12	17	23	21	13	13	19	19
30-39.9%	5	9	15	13	7	6	10	10
40%+	3	6	11	10	4	4	6	7

Note: Numbers may not sum to 100% because of rounding.

Source: Population Reference Bureau, analysis of Census 2000 Summary File Data.

Nearly half of all poor children nationwide, or 5.7 million poor children, lived in impoverished neighborhoods in 1999. Poor families in any type of neighborhood face challenges

in raising their children, but the obstacles are even greater for those living in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty. There is also a strong racial and ethnic component to this concentrated poverty. In 1999, African American and Latino children accounted for more than 75 percent of poor children residing in poor neighborhoods.²²

State Trends

Our analysis of state-level data shows that there are wide variations in the proportions of children living in poor neighborhoods (see Table 4). In Louisiana, Mississippi, and New Mexico, more than two-fifths of children were living in neighborhoods with poverty rates of 20 percent or higher in 1999—more than twice the national average and a far higher proportion than in most other states. By contrast, Idaho, Iowa, New Hampshire, and Vermont had the smallest shares of children living in high-poverty neighborhoods—less than 5 percent each. In the District of Columbia, which was not ranked against the 50 states, more than half of all children resided in poor neighborhoods in 1999.

These same states also ranked near the top and the bottom of the rankings in terms of the concentration of negative outcomes in poor neighborhoods. For example, in Louisiana and Mississippi, nearly three-fifths of children in single-parent families lived in poor neighborhoods, compared with less than 5 percent of children in single-parent families in New Hampshire and Vermont. Overall, the results suggest that negative outcomes for children are most highly concentrated in the Mississippi Delta and southwestern United States. New York and Rhode Island also stand out due to high concentrations of negative child outcomes in poor neighborhoods.

Table 4

Percent of All Children and Children with Negative Outcomes Living in Poor Neighborhoods* in 1999, by State

State	All children	Children in single-parent families	Children living in poverty	Children with no parents in the labor force	Children with one or more disabilities	Children ages 3 to 4 not enrolled in school	Teens who are high school dropouts	Teens not in school and not working
United States	20	33	49	44	25	23	36	37
Alabama	27	43	53	50	32	28	37	41
Alaska	10	12	25	22	7	9	16	18
Arizona	29	36	60	54	31	35	51	52
Arkansas	25	37	45	42	27	24	35	34
California	30	39	59	49	33	37	49	46
Colorado	9	15	28	25	11	12	23	22
Connecticut	12	28	46	40	19	15	34	33
Delaware	6	11	20	15	8	6	15	18
District of Columbia	54	70	78	71	59	63	57	60
Florida	20	30	44	37	24	21	32	33
Georgia	21	35	49	40	24	22	31	34
Hawaii	14	23	35	26	17	15	22	22
Idaho	5	8	9	8	4	6	10	10
Illinois	17	33	49	40	24	18	29	32
Indiana	10	20	30	27	15	11	18	20
Iowa	4	8	13	12	7	5	11	11
Kansas	9	16	24	23	11	11	22	23
Kentucky	30	39	56	54	38	33	44	49
Louisiana	44	59	71	65	48	45	57	60
Maine	7	10	16	15	10	8	14	16
Maryland	9	18	34	25	13	10	21	24
Massachusetts	14	29	45	40	20	16	31	32
Michigan	16	32	47	43	21	18	30	33
Minnesota	7	14	26	27	9	8	16	16
Mississippi	44	58	67	64	48	39	49	54
Missouri	16	27	38	36	19	16	25	29
Montana	21	29	41	40	26	21	42	40
Nebraska	8	17	24	26	10	10	21	21
Nevada	13	17	32	25	12	16	28	27
New Hampshire	1	3	7	7	3	2	4	4
New Jersey	13	27	43	34	18	15	35	33
New Mexico	41	47	64	62	43	44	55	54
New York	30	49	64	60	39	33	49	49
North Carolina	15	25	34	30	17	15	24	26
North Dakota	11	20	28	29	11	12	24	26
Ohio	15	30	43	39	22	15	30	33
Oklahoma	25	35	46	42	29	27	42	42
Oregon	10	14	21	19	12	12	19	19
Pennsylvania	15	32	44	42	23	16	27	32
Rhode Island	24	43	62	60	30	31	52	49
South Carolina	22	32	43	38	25	22	29	32
South Dakota	16	26	44	44	18	16	34	39
Tennessee	19	33	42	40	23	19	29	31
Texas	31	39	59	52	33	36	48	45
Utah	8	13	24	21	10	9	19	24
Vermont	3	5	7	9	4	2	6	6
Virginia	10	20	31	24	13	11	18	21
Washington	11	17	30	24	13	15	22	21
West Virginia	33	37	50	51	39	34	44	47
Wisconsin	9	20	35	34	14	9	25	26
Wyoming	6	8	13	14	6	7	12	11

*Neighborhoods with 20 percent or higher poverty in 1999

Source: Population Reference Bureau, analysis of Census 2000 Summary File Data.

There is a strong racial and ethnic overlay to these state differences.²³ In West Virginia, negative outcomes are concentrated in white, rural communities. In the South, negative outcomes are concentrated in black communities. In the Southwest, Latino communities are most likely to experience a concentration of negative outcomes, while in the Dakotas the concentration of negative outcomes is most evident on American Indian reservations. States with large urban areas also tend to have higher concentrations of negative outcomes compared to states that are more rural, because of the concentrated poverty in certain inner-city areas.

From the information in Table 4, readers can also identify states with disproportionate concentrations of negative outcomes in poor neighborhoods. For example, about one-quarter of children in Rhode Island lived in poor neighborhoods in 1999, but more than two-fifths of *poor* children lived in such neighborhoods. Several other northeastern states, including Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York had disproportionate shares of poor children living in neighborhoods with high poverty rates. Illinois also ranked among the worst states on this measure of relative inequality.

Dropout rates showed a similar geographic pattern. Over half of high school dropouts in Rhode Island lived in poor neighborhoods—more than double the state average for all children. Arizona, California, Connecticut, Montana, New Jersey, and New York also had relatively high proportions of dropouts living in poor neighborhoods.

Conclusion

At the end of the 20th century, nearly 15 million children in the United States lived in poor urban or rural neighborhoods. Children living in these poor neighborhoods are at substantially higher risk of negative economic, educational, and health outcomes compared with children living

in more affluent communities. This concentration of negative outcomes is especially pronounced for African American and Latino children, who are five to six times more likely than non-Hispanic white children to live in poor communities. The numbers presented here indicate that more needs to be done to ensure that children grow up in healthy and supportive environments. We hope that these results will stimulate additional research and focus more attention on this topic.

Appendix: Definitions

Children in poverty

A child under age 18 is defined as “poor” if he or she resides in a family with income below the U.S. poverty threshold defined by the U.S. Office of Management and Budget. Poverty thresholds differ by family size and are adjusted annually for inflation using the Consumer Price Index. However, they do not take into account geographic differences in the cost of living. Poverty data reflect income received during the year prior to the census. In 1999, the poverty threshold for a family of four was about \$17,000. Poverty status is not determined for people in institutions, military group quarters, college dormitories, and for unrelated individuals less than 15 years old.

Children living in single-parent households

In this report, children in single-parent households are defined as people under age 18 who are the sons or daughters of a householder—male or female—without a spouse in the home.

Children with no parents in the labor force

For children in single-parent families or subfamilies, “no parents in the labor force” means that the resident parent is not in the labor force. For children in married-couple families or subfamilies, it means that neither of the resident parents is in the labor force.

Children living in poor neighborhoods

Children under age 18 who live in census tracts where 20 percent or more of the population is below the poverty level are classified as living in poor neighborhoods. Census tracts contain about 4,000 residents, on average. If a census tract has a poverty rate of 20 percent or more, all of the children in that tract are defined as living in a poor neighborhood. Poverty data reflect income received during the year prior to the census.

Children with one or more disabilities

Children ages 5 to 15 with one or more long-lasting physical, mental, or emotional conditions are defined as having a disability. Responses to the questions about disability represent either the person’s own perceptions or, in the case of most children, the perception of the household member who fills out the census form.

Children ages 3 to 4 not enrolled in school

Enrollment rates are calculated for 3- to 4-year-olds and includes enrollment in either a public or private school.

Teens who are high school dropouts

High school dropouts include people ages 16 to 19 who are not enrolled in school (full- or part-time) and are not high school graduates. Teens who have a GED or equivalent are considered high school graduates.

Teens who are not in school and not working

Also referred to as “idle teens,” this measure includes people ages 16 to 19 who are neither enrolled in school nor working full- or part-time.

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¹³ For more information about children living in poor neighborhoods, see William P. O'Hare and Mark Mather, "The Growing Number of Kids in Severely Distressed Neighborhoods: Evidence from the 2000 Census," A KIDS COUNT/PRB Report on Census 2000 (October 2003).

¹⁴ Population Reference Bureau, analysis of Decennial Census data from the Urban Institute's Neighborhood Change Database, 1980-2000.

¹⁵ Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*; and Quercia and Galster, "Threshold Effects and Neighborhood Change."

¹⁶ Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged*.

¹⁷ The Department of Housing and Urban Development, "Qualified Census Tracts and Difficult Development Zones," accessed online at www.huduser.org, on Jan. 5, 2006.

¹⁸ Federal Grants Wire, "Empowerment Zones Program," accessed online at www.federalgrantswire.com/empowerment_zones_program.html, on Jan. 5, 2006.

¹⁹ Among the 20 U.S. counties with the most 16- to 19-year olds living in extremely high poverty neighborhoods, seven were home to large universities (Brigham Young University, Indiana University, Florida State University, Texas A&M, University of Florida, University of Texas, and the University of Wisconsin) and had teen dropout rates of less than 2 percent. Published census tables on high school dropouts and idle teens do not provide data separately for 16- and 17-year olds, which could be used to correct for this problem.

²⁰ PRB analysis of data from the 2000 Census Summary Files.

²¹ Jargowsky, "Stunning Progress, Hidden Problems."

²² PRB analysis of data from the 2000 Census Summary Files.

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