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Children who live in disadvantaged neighborhoods at any point up to age 18 are 75 percent more likely to be unemployed and are also more likely to earn a lower income as adults.

Kids in tough neighborhoods face joblessness, lower income as adults

By [Susan Kelley](#) | November 9, 2017

For decades researchers have known kids who grow up in disadvantaged neighborhoods are more likely to face a slew of difficulties in childhood, from higher rates of teen pregnancy and health problems to less education.

A new Cornell study now shows a child's neighborhood also impacts her economic well-being into adulthood.

As the first study to use national data to examine this issue on a modern sample of Americans, the research suggests that children who live in

disadvantaged neighborhoods at any point up to age 18 are 75 percent more likely to be unemployed and are also more likely to earn a lower income as adults. The research by [Steven Alvarado](#), assistant professor of sociology, [was published Oct. 29 in Social Science Research](#).

“We now have evidence that long-term exposure to neighborhood disadvantage can wreak havoc on one’s economic outcomes in adulthood,” Alvarado said, “which is to say that it can transform itself from an effect on one generation to an effect on multiple generations. Because once these people have kids, the lingering impact of their childhood neighborhood is going to then likely affect their children’s outcomes through limited economic and educational opportunities.”

And the longer a person lives in a tough neighborhood, the worse the effects, Alvarado found. People who lived in a disadvantaged neighborhood at any point both as a child and as an adult are 125 percent more likely to experience unemployment in adulthood, according to the study.

Sustained exposure across childhood and into adulthood, Alvarado says, is the key detriment, rather than exposure only as a young child or only as a teen.

“These effects accumulate. The longer the exposure to neighborhood disadvantage, the more likely people are to experience economic difficulty in adulthood,” Alvarado said.

This is the third of what Alvarado hopes will be several papers that dig into never-before-analyzed data that has revealed novel information about the pernicious effects of neighborhood disadvantage. ([Two previous papers](#) showed teens that live in disadvantaged neighborhoods face a higher risk of obesity and reduced cognitive ability in childhood).

The data are from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, an ongoing nationally representative sample of 12,686 men and women who were between the ages of 14 and 22 when they were first surveyed in 1979. The data includes information about educational level, employment, income, health, and marital and childbearing histories. Alvarado cross-analyzed this data with information from census tract locations and from the children of these survey respondents.

He created a scale to measure neighborhood disadvantage when each child was between ages 0 and 18. The scale includes the percent of residents at or below 100 percent of the poverty line, who are jobless, out of the labor force, have at least a bachelor's degree, and are managers and professionals, as well as the neighborhood's median income and housing value.

“These findings show it's important to improve the resources that surround children in these disadvantaged neighborhoods as early as possible in order to intervene in the reproduction of poverty over generations,” Alvarado said.

Those resources include not only physical and material resources like libraries, children's museums, and good schools but also conditions that make the neighborhood safe – like proper lighting and good sidewalks, Alvarado said. “All these things are tied into a healthy ecology where kids can safely learn and grow.”