

Research Statement

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The primary goal of my research is to demonstrate the impact of multidimensional poverty on mental health. My research centers an intersectional approach; I examine economic and racial disparities in health due to individual and neighborhood poverty. Even as a child, I knew that the stress of poverty affected families and communities. By age twelve, I had lived in nearly a dozen neighborhoods, including a mobile home park in Mesa, Arizona where economic stressors on my family and neighbors were acutely apparent. Years later, living in a mostly White Chicago suburb, I could see differences in resources and consequently lower stress in my family and neighbors' lives. As a social work student, I acquired an understanding of the ecological frameworks that matched my experience: for example, neighborhood as mezzo factor and income as a micro factor both impacted my individual health. Now, in addition to describing the patterns I saw while growing up, I am able to study poverty as a pivotal social determinant of physical and mental health. As a scholar, my contribution to mental health equity and neighborhood context would add to the innovative and growing body of work on neighborhood and income as determinants of health.

I consider the overwhelming presence of structural racism and economic inequality deeply embedded in the U.S. as forms of violence that must be addressed, especially in neighborhoods, housing, and mental health systems. Poverty is one of the United States' worst addressed mental health crises, and COVID-19 is predicted to set back efforts to reduce poverty by at least 10 years. Furthermore, poverty at a neighborhood level can impact many health outcomes. Despite neighborhood poverty's impact on physical health, there is little research on the neighborhood economic determinants of *mental health*. My research utilizes a multi-tiered approach to measure the impact of both individual poverty *and* neighborhood poverty on health outcomes, with a specialization in mental health outcomes.

My clinical work with non-profit organizations, advanced quantitative training, and scholarship on poverty and mental health has given me an advanced perspective as a researcher. First, my involvement in non-profit research helped me gain an understanding of community-level factors and mental health outcomes which ultimately led to my focus on neighborhood characteristics. I was employed by the Utah State Office of Service and Volunteerism to analyze data from a statewide survey on social issues and identified mental health concerns as the primary issue reported by respondents. I then conducted follow-up focus groups with low-income adults on primary mental health concerns in their community, including high rates of suicide and the inaccessibility of mental healthcare. As an intern for the non-profit suicide prevention agency Hope4Utah, I interviewed community leaders to create a community-based model to decrease suicidality. These experiences have led me to the definitive conclusion that as a researcher, I am responsible to continue to remain active in the local community. For example, as a recipient of the Lyndon B. Johnson's CONNECT fellowship, I worked with Foundation Communities, a local Austin non-profit, to identify barriers to housing for BIPOC adults in the United States. I look forward to being an active force for equity in any community where I live.

My advanced statistical training is imperative for my research analyzing multilevel, longitudinal data (individuals nested in neighborhoods over time). In my MSW program, I chose the research track and took courses such as structural equation modeling to advance my quantitative skills. In my doctoral program, I earned a certificate in Applied Statistical Modeling by taking courses such as hierarchical linear modeling, Bayesian analysis, and growth curve modeling. I have used my research skills to analyze the effect of wealth inequality on psychological distress. For example, using growth curve modeling, I found that having wealth significantly lowered an individual's psychological distress over 15 years. I was selected to present these findings as a finalist in the University of Texas at Austin's 2021 Three Minute Thesis Competition. I also enjoyed teaching the undergraduate social work course *Social Work Statistics* using R and received a near-perfect course rating.

My research experience has allowed me to better measure poverty and its effects on mental health. As principal investigator for the "Promoting Digital Literacy Among Older

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Adults: An Intergenerational Approach Study,” I received IRB approval to design and implement an intergenerational program to address social isolation among older adults living in Section 8 housing. I designed and distributed pre- and post-surveys and worked on an inter-University team in tandem with the University of Rhode Island to publish three articles in academic journals, including *Sustainability* (IF=3.25). Under the mentorship of Dr. Catherine Cubbin, Professor and Associate Dean for Research at the Steve Hicks School of Social Work, I have examined poverty at both individual and neighborhood levels. In one analysis, I assessed the moderated mediation of racial/ethnic identity on the relationship between adverse childhood experiences, income, and depression, submitted the manuscript for publication as first author, and presented our findings at the Society for Social Work Research’s 2021 conference. I also examined neighborhood poverty’s effects on birth outcomes with a sample of 1 million births across Texas, submitted the manuscript for publication as first author, and will be presenting our findings at the upcoming American Public Health Association conference. Additionally, I assist Dr. Cubbin in her editorial work for the journals *Health & Place* (IF=4.08) and *Demography* (IF=3.90).

I also prioritize conducting research that is both interdisciplinary and intersectional. Last year, I partnered with Dr. Diana DiNitto, a nationally recognized policy expert, to assess an interdisciplinary program designed to train mental health professionals to provide care for marginalized populations. This project resulted in a presentation at an international conference. I continue to examine poverty and health disparities through interdisciplinary collaborations. I am a member of an inter-university team that includes poverty experts from Columbia University and Rutgers University. In our recently published article *Racial-ethnic inequality in cardiovascular health in the U.S.: Does it mirror socioeconomic inequality?* in *Annals of Epidemiology* (IF=3.80), we reported the finding that structural racism accounted for greater disparity in cardiovascular health across the lifespan than SES; the intersection of gender amplified the risk for Black women compared to White women. I also place a high priority on helping local organizations. For instance, I am assisting Austin’s Healthy Community Collaborative by using data to demonstrate the mental health benefits of affordable housing across Texas. As a scholar, I will continue to foster interdisciplinary and intersectional research as a key component of my research trajectory. Based on my scholarly and community activity, I was awarded the University of Texas at Austin Graduate School’s continuing fellowship to fund my dissertation.

Using the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, my three-paper dissertation measures the impacts of neighborhood poverty and gentrification on child psychological distress over time. I specifically test for racial disparities in this relationship given the history of structural racism (e.g., redlining) and current exclusionary practices (e.g., zoning) in neighborhoods. I am employing hierarchical linear modeling to account for the nested individual mental health data in neighborhood-level characteristics. My short-term research goals include 1) expanding neighborhood poverty research on other mental health outcomes (i.e., depression, suicidality, and anxiety across the lifespan); 2) examining the effects of neighborhood gentrification on mental health; and 3) examining policies meant to reduce poverty at the individual and neighborhood levels. To support my neighborhood-level research as a junior faculty member, I would apply for external funding from sources like The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. I aim for my work to propel social work forward as a leader on neighborhood determinants of mental health in interdisciplinary collaborations.

I am accountable as a researcher to children growing up in poverty, particularly in marginalized communities. Ultimately, I plan to use research to influence policies that reduce the individual and neighborhood poverty I witnessed as a child and improve mental health in communities across the United States.