

Whole Child Portrait

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Demographics and Determinants

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When I was in elementary school I lived with both parents. In middle school, it was just my mom. By freshman year, I was “couch surfing,” moving between my parents’ houses and various friends.

At 14, I was in a treatment program for eating disorders at our local hospital, and by 15, I had left New Jersey for a drug and alcohol rehab center in Florida. Growing up, I lived in a cash-strapped household in a wealthy town. Everyone knew our family. This was often a point of pride and sometimes a cause for embarrassment. As a kid, I thought we were poor but now I know better.

I look white but I am Native Hawaiian and Jewish. I am strongly rooted in both cultural identities, even though I don’t look like either. My fair skin and little nose mean I avoid the disparaging remarks and treatment some family members experience.

Malia is my Hawaiian middle name, which I always use, and Kilstein is the Jewish maiden name I had until I married. My names never cost me a job, housing loan, or the chance to get accepted into a school I applied for. If anything, they have distinguished me enough for employers to consider me a “diversity” hire and colleges to offer me a scholarship.

I grew up speaking English. My family sprinkles it with Hawaiian at home, but we can easily stop in public. Most of the people in school, at work, and out in the community speak the same language I do. I don’t have a different accent from my neighbors, and as my brothers would say, we sound like the people on TV.

I’m straight. I was born a girl and have known that was my gender ever since. I dated boys and eventually married one. I’ve never been conflicted about which bathroom to use or worried about how people will look at me in the one I choose.

I have excellent hearing and terrible eyesight. This requires that I always wear contact lenses or glasses, with emergency pairs stashed in my house, car, and bags. I move easily and don't require extra assistance or accommodations to get around.

All of this gives you a basic picture of my life, but it doesn't tell you who I am. It gives you insights into how I grew up, what categories I fit in, and how the world sees me. It doesn't tell you what I am good at, what I like, and what makes me, me. You might sense challenges (there were plenty) and privilege (also plenty). Though this listing of personal details is limited, these pieces of my background have had an outsized impact on my life.

In our work with children, the first picture we have of them is like this one, rudimentary and flawed. This is because we profile them. It is our unavoidable starting point.

This starter profile is a crude outline of a young person. It is drawn from data found on rosters and registration forms—age, race, disability, medications, health history, primary contact, and who not to contact. It is informed by what others tell you or you tell yourself. Perhaps a child's former teacher told you what to expect. Maybe you know the family, or the neighborhood where the family lives.

Profiles are drawn with data and colored by assumptions, personal biases, and other people's stories. We fill in blank spaces with speculations that come from not knowing as well as past experience. We assign details, deciding who kids are, and what their lives must be like. Profiles shape, texture, and limit how we see and understand children. Profiles are inescapable and incomplete.

Profile Parts

Profiles are the outlines or silhouettes of kids, based on whatever available, observable, and reportable data we have. They are constructed from different combinations of demographics and determinants, unique to every child. **Demographics** are personal characterizations and population-level categories such as race and gender. Demographics tell us the types of advantage kids have in school, other systems, and society. **Determinants** are the social, environmental, political, and historical conditions kids are born with and grow up in, including whether they have access to good healthcare and schools and how safe it is at home and in the neighborhood. Determinants give us a sense of young people's protections and vulnerabilities.

Less Societal Advantage	DEMOGRAPHICS personal characteristics and categories	More Societal Advantage
–	←————→	+
Fewer Protections and More Vulnerabilities	DETERMINANTS social, environmental, political, and historical living conditions	More Protections and Fewer Vulnerabilities

Every child's profile is made up of their personal demographics and life determinants (see Table 1). As a kid, I was a white-passing female, who was straight, mostly healthy, low income, with divorced parents, who lived in a safe neighborhood. While I didn't live in poverty, I did experience economic inequality.¹ I am Hawaiian and Jewish, and while I didn't experience the marginalization of being brown, I did inherit historic trauma and political determinants that increase my risks of certain health issues and addiction.

Viewed together, my unique profile reveals the advantages and disadvantages I had and the protections and vulnerabilities I experienced. Some of my profile parts changed over time, but most stayed the same.

Profiles place kids at different starting points in life and learning. These pictures reveal the incredible influence and impacts of biology, background, and personal circumstances.

Demographics

Consider a census survey or school district report card. Demographics are the population-level data these surveys collect. Some demographics are observable, and others are self-reported. Common demographics include race and ethnicity, age, gender and sexual identity, income level, disability status, citizenship and immigration status, and how many people live in the home. Less common but still important are spoken languages and religious and/or cultural practices.

Demographics tell us how much societal advantage—sometimes called privilege—a young person has. Privileged groups hold more institutional and societal power. Life and learning are hardest for kids who belong to

demographic groups with the least advantage because schools, systems, and society rarely prioritize their needs.

Table 2 shows a partial breakdown of demographics, so we can see which demographics hold more advantage. It’s imperfect because there is a lot of variation within groups. For instance, kids can be wealthy but not as wealthy as others. They can be heterosexual but discriminated against because they are seen as too effeminate or masculine. A child can have a mild or less visible cognitive or physical difference, or several that are severe. Between races and genders, there are groups who have experienced more suffering and violence, even compared to those who also experience marginalization.

Table 2 Demographics and Relative Advantage

DEMOGRAPHICS personal characteristics and categorizations		
Less Societal Advantage (-)	← →	More Societal Advantage (+)
Poor	SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS	Wealthy
Black, Indigenous, People of Color	RACE	White/Caucasian
Gender-Diverse or Transgender	GENDER	Cisgender
LGBTQ+	SEXUALITY	Heterosexual
Living with a disability, physical or cognitive difference(s)	DISABILITY + DIFFERENCES	No disability, physical or cognitive difference(s)
Undocumented, Immigrant, Evacuee	CITIZENSHIP + IMMIGRATION STATUS	U.S. Citizen

The less societal advantage a kid has, the more likely they are to suffer from structural and societal harm, as well as individual maltreatment. This can include harassment, discrimination, exclusion, persecution, and violence. Levels of marginalization are not equally distributed across places and people. They can be worse in certain parts of the country and at different times in history. Demographics are loaded with biases and judgments, some of which we know we have, and others that we might be unaware of.

Determinants²

While demographics characterize and categorize who kids are, determinants give us a sense of how they live. Determinants tell us about a child's home and community life, schools, and the bigger historic and global context they are growing up in. This part of their profile reveals the types of resources and opportunities they have, as well as how safe and stable their lives are.

Table 3 is another imperfect but helpful picture, this time showing different determinants kids grow up with. Determinants are the observable and reportable conditions that largely determine the life, health, and learning young people have available to them.

Table 3 Determinants and Relative Protection and Vulnerability

DETERMINANTS living and learning conditions		
(-) Fewer Protections and more vulnerability	← →	(+) More Protections and less vulnerability
Poor air and water quality. Climate and extreme weather vulnerability.	ENVIRONMENTAL	Healthy air, drinkable water, climate and weather resilient home and community
Lacks access to critical opportunities and resources, including quality healthcare, schooling, basic services, and/or food. Lives in a house and/or community that is unsafe and/or violent.	SOCIAL	Ample access to opportunities and resources that support healthy development and learning. Lives in a house and/or community that is safe and free from violence.
Lives in a politically dangerous and divided place and/or time.	POLITICAL	Lives in a place and/or time when politics are either positive or don't harm families or children's learning and development.
Growing up in a time and context when opportunities, resources, safety, and stability are limited, lacking, and/or actively decreasing.	HISTORICAL	Growing up in a time and context when opportunities, resources, safety, and stability are present, available, and/or increasing.

Determinants are more changeable than demographics. It's possible you've seen this in your own life. When I moved and changed who I was living with, my social determinants shifted. Similarly, the political and environmental conditions of my life have adjusted across time and locations. Other determinants are historic and fixed. For example, I can't change who my biological family is or my ethnic and cultural history.

Profiles Show Cumulative Challenges

Kids don't have just one determinant or demographic. It's their full set that gives us a picture of how easy or hard their lives are now and may be in the future. Profiling is largely harmful, but profiles can be helpful. We can better serve and support kids when we are clearheaded about the risks and realities they face.

Sometimes young people have cumulative disadvantages and marginalization, which means they are burdened by multiple demographics and determinants that bring disadvantage and vulnerability, including high levels of stress and trauma.³

Consider a Black child who recently immigrated to the United States who has a severe learning disability, limited English, and lives in poverty with his single parent. Because of his family's financial and transportation situations, he can't get the healthcare he needs. His language and learning needs are unmet because his neighborhood school is underfunded and short-staffed. As a young Black immigrant with special needs, he faces heightened risks. He's among the most likely to be suspended, expelled, arrested,⁴ and to spend time in jail or prison.

Many children experience **cumulative disadvantage** and **marginalization**. They are born and live with characteristics and conditions that elevate their risks of hardship, harm, and adversity. The more accumulation, the deeper the disparities, and the greater detriment to life, learning, and life expectancy. There are many reasons why, and all require more time and study than this book provides. Historic policies of exclusion, suppression, and oppression are often to blame. Disadvantage begets disadvantage. Cumulative disadvantage and marginalization were best described by author and reporter Jonathan Kozol as producing "savage inequalities."

Here are four examples, from many more:

- Kids of color and native youth have higher levels of chronic inflammation and health problems. They experience unequal treatment by healthcare providers.⁵ This stresses caregivers and can

make things harder at home. Poor healthcare and household stress can negatively impact young people's ability to learn, develop,⁶ and stay healthy.

- Living in poverty saps mental resources, making it harder to learn and retain new information. Poverty and being poor are chronic stressors, which contribute to and often drive developmental disparities, delays, and mental health conditions.⁷
- Before COVID-19, nearly half of U.S. families of color lived in poverty.⁸ The combination of being a person of color and living in poverty impacts everything from future education and employment outcomes to overall life expectancy. For example, tribal members of the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota die up to 2 decades earlier than white neighbors who live a few hundred miles away.⁹ Residents in St. Louis City who live several miles apart have nearly a 20-year life expectancy difference based on income and race.¹⁰ Early data from the COVID-19 pandemic indicates that these life disparities were made worse by the pandemic.¹¹
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, kids with disabilities and cognitive or physical differences faced disproportionate marginalization and disadvantage. Without major prevention and intervention strategies, this trend could reoccur in the face of another disruption. Many of these young people were cut off from vital therapies, medical supplies, and care.¹² This was worst for children who already experienced cumulative disadvantage and marginalization, including those living in poverty, attending under-resourced schools, and/or living with a single parent.

From Profiles to Portraits

Let's draw these demographic and determinant profiles in pencil so we can remove the parts we get wrong and add in important details about children as we learn them. While profiles only tell part of a young person's story, they carry profound power and often lifetime problems.

Our job is to consider the characteristics, categories, and life conditions assigned to kids and use that information to inform and improve how we support them. We must commit to a lifetime of our own learning, action, and reflection, seeking to understand what it means to live with different demographics and determinants, and doing what we can to make things better, not worse.

At its worst, profiling dehumanizes children. It depicts them without dimensions and details, leaving us to sort, group, assume, and judge. At its best, profiles are a jumping-off point—a collection of data and insights that begin to tell us who a kid is and what they need to thrive.

We must push ahead and commit ourselves to gather our materials and expand the picture we have of each child from *basic profile* to *holistic portrait*, understanding that this initial information will stay with kids and inform their life experience. We can use profiles as the outline for higher-definition portraits that respect and represent the fullness of who young people are.

CHAPTER TAKEAWAYS

- The first picture we have of a young person is rudimentary and flawed because we profile them. This is an unavoidable starting point. Profiles can be helpful and harmful.
- Profiles are the starting picture of who a young person is, based on whatever available, observable, and reportable data we have. Profiles are made up of different demographics and determinants, unique to every child.
- Demographics are personal characterizations and population-level categories, such as race and gender. Demographics give us a sense of how advantaged kids are in school, systems, and society.
- Determinants are the social, environmental, political, and historical conditions kids are born with and grow up in, including whether they have access to good healthcare and schools, and how safe it is at home and in the neighborhood. Determinants tell us the types of protections and vulnerabilities kids experience in learning and life.

Many young people experience cumulative disadvantage and marginalization. They are born and live with characteristics and conditions that make adversity far more likely. The more accumulation, the deeper the disparities. The deeper the disparities, the greater the risks to life, learning, and life expectancy.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Consider your own profile and how it impacted you as you grew up. How does it impact you today?
- What profile parts do you understand the least and why do you think that is? Which ones—if any—make you uncomfortable?
- In what ways have you profiled kids? How has that changed the way you treated them?
- What do you plan to do with the information you read in this chapter?

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