Currently in the US, almost 1 in 4 young children live in poverty. We know from research that these children are likely to experience a range of contextual risks, including having a depressed parent and/or living in substandard or crowded housing. At the same time, children in middle and upper income groups also face a variety of risks that are dependent on the contexts in which they live. What are the impacts of these risk factors on the healthy development of all children in the US? To explore this question, we must develop a deep understanding of risk in early childhood (birth to age 8) and the processes through which multiple risks interact to lead to outcomes for children and families. To develop this rich understanding, we must view the phenomena associated with early childhood risk factors through various disciplinary lenses. This course will provide an introduction to early childhood risk by gathering and synthesizing research from neuroscience, education, economics, sociology, medicine, and community and developmental psychology. Specifically, we will investigate how risk in early childhood arises from or is altered by contextual features such as biology, the family, child care arrangements, neighborhood characteristics, and federal and state policy. By learning from diverse disciplines, we will gain a nuanced understanding of early childhood risk that will enhance our ability to identify innovative strategies for prevention and intervention, both directly with children and families and through thoughtful policy generation. This course is designed for students with a deep interest in building a cross-disciplinary knowledge base and synthesizing diverse research critically, with an eye toward the similarities and differences with which disparate disciplines ask and investigate questions about early childhood risk. There is no prerequisite for this course.

General Objectives of the Course

Content

We will investigate the following questions:

1. In what ways do different fields investigate and talk about risk in early childhood? For example, what is risk for biologists versus economists?
2. How does our understanding of risk change as we synthesize findings across disciplines?
3. From what sources and in what ways does risk manifest in the lives of young children?
4. How do multiple risk factors interact to impact young children?

Skills

We will learn and practice:

1. the use of this knowledge to build logic models that can be used to reveal opportunities for policy-based interventions.
2. skills for analyzing research articles which employ both qualitative and quantitative methods.
3. basic skills for synthesizing findings across multiple articles representing a range of disciplinary fields.


## Overview of Module Content

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<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Emphasis</th>
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<td>1</td>
<td>Defining risk and the theoretical frame we will use to study it</td>
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<td>The family and other caregivers</td>
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<td>5</td>
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### Week One (February 7): Defining risk and the theoretical frame we will use to study it

*Readings from Developmental Psychology, Medicine and Neuroscience*

**Required:**


At least one of the following:


### Week Two (February 14): The child and her beginnings

*Readings from Neuroscience and the Biology of Adversity*

**Required:**


At least one of the following:


**Policy Brief:** Early Experiences Matter: A Collection of Policy Briefs from Zero to Three (read pages 5, 21-22, and 44-54)

**Week Three (February 21): The family and other caregivers**  
*Readings from Education, Sociology, and Community Psychology*

**Required:**


**At least one of the following:**


**Policy Brief:** A policy statement from National Association for the Education of Young Children on Media Violence in Children’s Lives

**Week Four (February 28): The family’s social and physical context**  
*Readings from Sociology and Economics*

**Required:**


**At least one of the following:**


**Policy Brief:** When the Bough Breaks: The Effects of Homelessness on Young Children. A policy statement by Child Trends
Week Five (March 7): The political and cultural contexts

Readings from Sociology, Economics, Biology of Adversity, and Medicine

Required:


**At least one of the following:**


**Policy Brief:** The Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Policy Statement on Improving Access to Work Supports

Week Six (March 14): Synthesizing across contexts

Readings from Neuroscience and Psychology

Required:


**At least one of the following:**


**Policy Brief:** The National Forum on Early Childhood Program Evaluation, Science Briefs: *Do Disadvantaged Neighborhoods Affect Children’s Verbal Skills*
Where does the course meet?

We will meet in Gutman Library, Room 303.

When does the course meet?

H-301K meets once a week on Thursday from 1:00 pm- 4:00 pm. As a module, H-310 meets six times (February 7, February 14, February 21, February 28, March 7, and March 14).

In addition, students will meet outside of class in small study groups (no more than 4 students per study group) to discuss the readings and complete written responses to a set of questions I provide for each week’s readings. These questions will be available a week before the answers are due. General questions are listed in the assignments section and 1-2 additional reading-specific questions will be added each week.

How are the classes structured?

Most class meetings will have two parts. In the first part, we will discuss the readings and questions that you are required to prepare in advance. In the second part of each class, I will provide a conceptual overview of the session’s topic, drawing both on what we learned from the week’s readings and additional literature I survey during an interactive presentation. The last ten minutes of each class will be spent reviewing the major take-home messages of the day’s content and reviewing the following week’s objectives. Over the course of the module, we will incrementally build our understanding of risk and how it operates in early childhood by synthesizing findings across disciplines.

Where can the readings be found?

The readings will be available through the course I-PAC (more details to be added when available).

What work is expected of me?

There are three ongoing assignments for this module.

Assignment 1: Weekly Readings and Class Discussion (30 pts.)

Each week, you will be expected to complete all the assigned reading and answer, in writing, a short-set of instructor-supplied questions. You will turn these responses into the instructor by WEDNESDAY at 12 each week except week 1. You are encouraged to form a study group with 2-3 classmates with whom you can collaborate throughout the semester. In class we will have a discussion about the readings that explicitly involves the answers you, and your study group, generate for the instructor-supplied questions. As you will notice in the syllabus, you are required to read 2 articles each week. One article, labeled REQUIRED, will be read by the entire class. The other article will be selected from the additional readings listed for each week. I encourage you to select the additional article in conjunction with your study group. The general questions that you will answer about each article are listed below by article type. In addition, I will send out 1-2 additional article-specific questions each week.

For the empirical and review articles:
1. What questions are addressed in this paper? Why are they important? How are they related to risk in early childhood? What level of a child’s ecological context is this paper investigating? What is the background of the authors?

2. What are the main findings? How does this advance or change our understanding of risk in early childhood? What new questions are suggested by these articles?

3. Take an ecological perspective, how do these findings fit into the ecological context of the child?

4. What levers for change does this article imply or explicitly address? What barriers might prevent these levers from being used to reduce risk in early childhood?

For the policy brief:

1. What is/are the policy recommendation(s) in this brief?

2. What evidence is used to support the recommendations?

3. Does the brief take an ecological perspective? If so, how? If not, what is missing?

Assignment 2: Life Course Protection and Risk Map (30 pts.)

**Goal:** To use our own early experiences to develop a deep understanding of how factors in our lives have implications that differ across contexts and developmental stage. We will also develop a deep understanding of how individual factors take on new meanings in our lives as they interact with other factors and as we shift our attention from one child or life outcome to another.

**Overview:** This assignment involves creating a personal timeline that captures meaningful events and contextual features from our prenatal period to age 8. While we will populate the timeline with these events and contextual features in the first two weeks of the course, this is a module-long assignment. Each week, time will be set aside in class to work in groups to interpret how different events and contextual features in our early lives were protective, sources of risk, or both. Constructing our own early life course map will give us an additional tool for critically analyzing the course readings. For example, early in the module we may read about the risk associated with having a teenage mother. Yet, by examining our own lived experiences we will discover that having a teenage mother does not occur in a vacuum. While our mother may have been younger than 20, she may also have had a strong support network or access to prenatal care—both of which may have offset to some degree the implications of teenage motherhood as a risk factor for certain child outcomes such as low birth weight or preterm birth.

**What you need to do:** Create a physical or digital space for your timeline. You can have a physical or digital journal, Powerpoint or Prezi presentation, etc. You will “hand” these timelines into me every week so make sure you have selected a format that facilitates this. I have posted my own timeline (as it should look at the beginning of the course in week 2) on the course iSite.

**A note about privacy and confidentiality:** I endeavor to create a collaborative space in which it is safe to discuss issues that are important to you. I welcome discussions of things that may be difficult to talk about yet encourage you to know and honor your own limits. As you will be working on this timeline in small groups, sharing it with me, and potentially discussing it in class, I encourage you to decide what you are comfortable sharing publically and what you would like to refrain from sharing. I have started my own timeline and posted it on the course iSite as a sample. In doing so I was quite careful to share only information that I was comfortable letting others know about me. I encourage you to do the same.

Assignment 3: Logic Model Project (40 pts.)

You will create a logic model that synthesizes your understanding of risk and protection as it relates to a child outcome of your interest. A logic model is a diagram that identifies specific inputs related to a single outcome. It is detailed and is meant to reveal possible causal pathways and points at which intervention might be successful (leverage points). You will:
1. Create a logic model for an outcome of interest to you that illustrates the mechanism, as you understand it from our course readings and discussions, connecting risk exposure in early childhood to poor outcomes in this area.
2. Present this logic model to the class for feedback and modification. (week 6)
3. Submit a 5-page write-up of your logic model including a written elaboration of the key elements of the model and identifying the best points at which policy-level intervention could occur.

There are two check-in dates for this project, meant to support your project development:

1. Week 2: brief paragraph regarding outcome you are interested in and your best thinking, to date, about the key ingredients of optimal development for this outcome
2. Week 4: logic model draft and talking points for presentation

**When do I turn in each assignment?**

Please refer to the table below (also posted on the iSite) for assignment due dates.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day</th>
<th>What Is Due</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February 13</td>
<td>Written responses to discussion questions (word document, 12 point font, double spaced) (6pts.)</td>
<td>Group assignment, please list all group member names on document</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 14</td>
<td>Logic Model: Brief paragraph regarding outcome you are interested in and your best thinking, to date, about the key ingredients of optimal development for this outcome (5 pts.)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 20</td>
<td>Written responses to discussion questions (word document, 12 point font, double spaced) (6 pts.)</td>
<td>Group assignment, please list all group member names on document</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 21</td>
<td>At the end of class, please submit your life course protection and risk map. (10 pts.)</td>
<td>Individual assignment. I will be providing feedback on this on-going assignment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 27</td>
<td>Written responses to discussion questions (word document, 12 point font, double spaced) (6 pts.)</td>
<td>Group assignment, please list all group member names on document</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 28</td>
<td>Logic Model: logic model draft and talking points for presentation (10 pts.)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 6</td>
<td>Written responses to discussion questions (word document, 12 point font, double spaced) (6 pts.)</td>
<td>Group assignment, please list all group member names on document</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 7</td>
<td>At the end of class, please submit your life course protection and risk map.</td>
<td>Individual assignment. I will be providing feedback on this on-going assignment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 13</td>
<td>Written responses to discussion questions (word document, 12 point font, double spaced) (6 pts.)</td>
<td>Group assignment, please list all group member names on document</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 14</td>
<td>At the end of class, please submit your FINAL life course protection and risk map. (20 pts.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 21</td>
<td>Logic Model: Please submit a 5-page write-up of your logic model including a written elaboration of the key elements of the model and identifying the best points at which policy-level intervention could occur (25 pts.)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The course roadmap