Problem statement

Across metropolitan Atlanta, stark disparities in wealth, opportunity, and well-being persist despite overall regional prosperity. In Fulton County—one of the economic engines of the Southeast—these inequities are especially pronounced along geographic and racial lines, with communities in South Fulton, including College Park and East Point, experiencing significantly higher rates of poverty, lower educational attainment, and reduced access to resources compared to their northern counterparts.

For children growing up in these communities, poverty is not only an economic condition—it is a developmental risk factor with profound biological and psychological consequences. A growing body of research identifies poverty as a form of Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE), placing it alongside more traditionally recognized stressors such as abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction (Hughes & Tucker, 2018). ACEs are strongly associated with increased likelihood of trauma exposure, with young children experiencing multiple ACEs facing significantly higher odds of developmental and emotional difficulties (Webster, 2022; Chen, 2025).

Exposure to chronic adversity activates the body's stress response system, leading to prolonged elevation of stress hormones such as cortisol. Over time, this results in toxic stress, a condition that disrupts healthy brain development and alters neural functioning, particularly in regions responsible for executive function, emotional regulation, and memory (Webster, 2022). These neurological disruptions can impair a child's ability to focus, self-regulate, and engage in learning environments, contributing to long-term academic and behavioral challenges.

The cumulative physiological impact of sustained stress is further explained by the weathering hypothesis, which posits that prolonged exposure to socioeconomic disadvantage leads to accelerated biological deterioration (Geronimus, 1992; Geronimus et al.). This process, often referred to as increased allostatic load, reflects the "wear and tear" on the body and brain caused by repeated activation of stress response systems. Among children, this manifests not only in immediate emotional and behavioral concerns, but also in heightened risk for chronic health conditions and mental health disorders later in life.

Beyond physiological effects, ACEs significantly shape cognitive and social development. Children exposed to adversity are more likely to experience delays in emotional development, difficulties forming secure attachments, and challenges in navigating social relationships (Webster, 2022). Critically, ACE exposure is also associated with diminished future orientation—the ability to envision and plan for a positive future—which plays a key role in motivation, goal-setting, and long-term success (Nayar, 2022; Mueller et al., 2023). Without a strong sense of future possibility, young people may disengage from educational and developmental opportunities, further perpetuating cycles of poverty.

Importantly, even in the absence of high-risk behaviors, children exposed to structural forms of adversity—including poverty, community violence, and food insecurity—may internalize a belief that they lack agency to change their circumstances or achieve meaningful success (Khetarpal, 2023). This erosion of hope and self-efficacy represents a critical, yet often overlooked, dimension of trauma.

While systemic, anti-poverty interventions remain essential, they do not address the immediate and embodied effects of trauma already experienced by children. In communities across South Fulton, many young people are navigating not only economic hardship, but also the neurological and emotional consequences of sustained adversity. Without targeted, developmentally responsive interventions, these impacts can hinder their ability to learn, build relationships, and realize their full potential.