



## VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

### HISTORY OF VULNERABILITY

The history of vulnerability is rooted in research related to the environment, natural disasters, and health and medicine. At present, populations of young people may be identified as vulnerable based on situational characteristics such as early parenthood, disconnection from school and work, homelessness, and involvement in the juvenile justice and foster care systems. Moreover, although vulnerability has been used interchangeably with the term poverty, vulnerability is not the same as poverty. Rather, poverty is an enabling, contextual factor that increases individuals' susceptibility to experiencing vulnerability.

### VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

Viewing children, youth, and families at-risk through the lens of vulnerability allows for a more well-rounded understanding of the impact external factors have on young people's lives. An understanding of this relationship is crucial to identifying the primary resources and supports these individuals need and should be provided with in order to reach their fullest potential.

### DIMENSIONS OF VULNERABILITY

Vulnerability is not a singular concept. Rather, it is grounded in the following five dimensions: developmental, emotional, mental, physical, and social.

#### *Developmental Vulnerabilities*

Developmental vulnerabilities are situated in the context of childhood and occur when children do not meet developmental milestones appropriate for their specific age. Developmental vulnerabilities pertain to delays or impairments in cognitive, language, emotional, motor skills, and social development due to genetic, environmental, and physiological factors (Boyse, 2010; Dunlap, 1997). Examples of factors include prenatal exposure to toxins, perinatal complications, premature birth, malnutrition, and low birth weight.

#### *Emotional Vulnerabilities*

Emotional vulnerabilities limit individuals' ability to adapt to their environment. They can render children and youth susceptible to experiencing emotional deregulation—the inability to monitor and manage their experiences, expressions of, and responses to emotion (Adams & Baronberg, 2005). Children and youth with emotional vulnerabilities may be hyper-vigilant, easy to overwhelm and anger, and have difficulty in forming relationships. Emotional vulnerabilities are attributable to factors such as developmental, environmental, and psychological sources. Examples of factors include experiencing abuse, neglect, bullying, rejection, and trauma.



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### ***Mental Vulnerabilities***

Mental vulnerabilities impact individuals' psychological functioning and intellectual ability and are associated with problems in learning, memory, perception, and problem-solving (Schneider, Schumann-Hengsteler, & Sodian, 2005). Children and youth with mental vulnerabilities have difficulty processing and integrating new information. They frequently experience problems with reading, writing, and mathematics. Factors that contribute to mental vulnerabilities include environmental and physiological influences related to brain development, genetics, and exposure to alcohol, drugs, and lead.

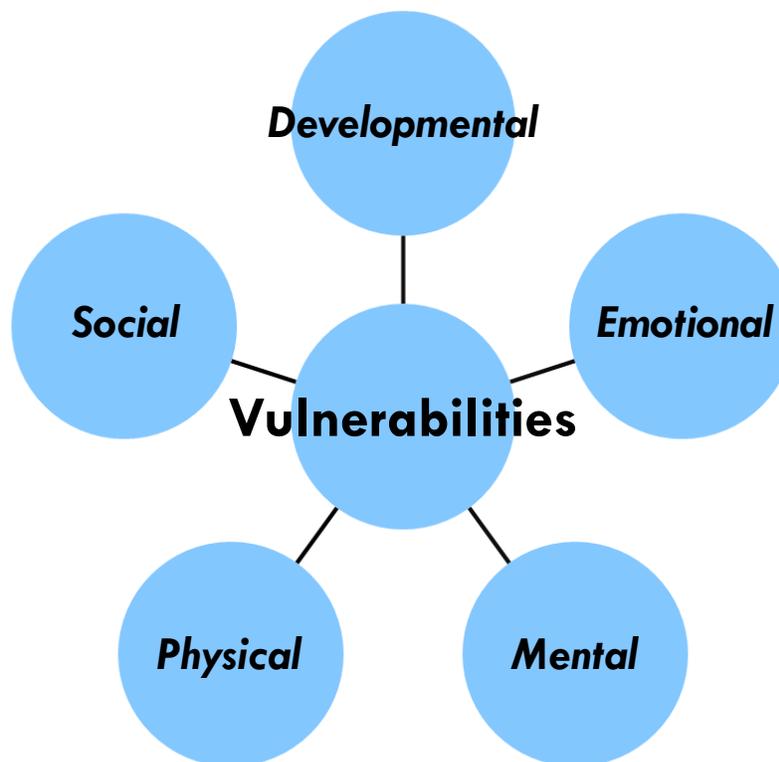
### ***Physical Vulnerabilities***

Physical vulnerabilities increase children and youth's susceptibility to bodily injuries, illnesses, and diseases including asthma and other respiratory ailments, diabetes, malnutrition, and even death (NICHD, 2003). Physical vulnerabilities are attributable to a variety of environmental, physical, and social factors such as exposure to environmental hazards, lack of access to health care, inadequate nutrition, and victimization.

### ***Social Vulnerabilities***

Social vulnerabilities contribute to individuals' susceptibility to experiencing social exclusion. This, in turn, affects their overall quality of life by restricting equitable access to quality supports and services such as health care, educational, vocational, and employment opportunities (Magrab, n.d.). Contextual factors that contribute to social vulnerability include gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geography.

## **DIMENSIONS OF VULNERABILITY**



## VULNERABLE POPULATIONS, YOUTH DEVELOPMENT, AND EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Positive youth development is grounded in a framework which emphasizes the strengths of young people within the context of their physical and social environments (Damon, 2004). Although this approach acknowledges the impact of vulnerabilities on children and youth, it retains a distinctively child/youth-centered focus that aims to work in collaboration with young people to ensure they have access to meaningful opportunities that foster their growth and development. An integral aspect of youth development is establishing a connection between young people and experiential learning opportunities that foster and enhance their developmental, emotional, mental, physical, and social skills (Stuart Foundation, 2009).

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