

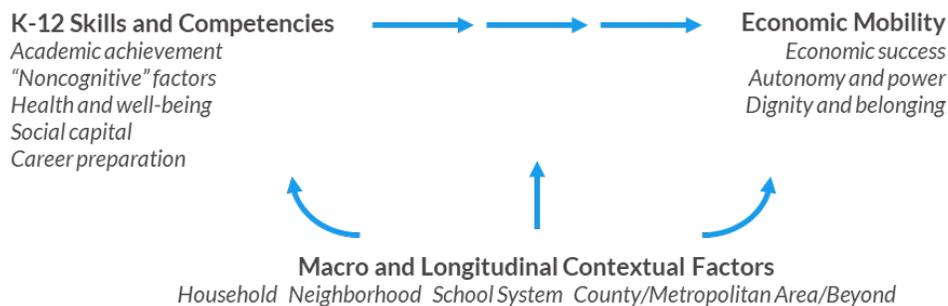
Individuals in Context

February 2024

We use “context,” “environment,” “structural,” and “systems” in somewhat overlapping ways to refer to the multidimensional, longitudinal, and interacting forces that exist beyond the scale of the individual and that influence individual experiences and outcomes. Contextual factors include contemporary and historical processes, policies, and practices of oppression along multiple lines (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, and immigrant status) that play out across geographies and scales.

Research often focuses on the individual in isolation from that context for several reasons (e.g., because individualism is a cultural norm, because it’s what we’re trained to do as researchers, because it’s analytically challenging to do anything else). We want the research this initiative funds to push against these norms by engaging with how individuals exist in context.

Studies should examine individual-level skills and competencies and their connection to mobility but with careful consideration of the world beyond and how the two are intrinsically linked. In practice, this could mean conceptualizing any potential drivers of mobility as existing within a particular environment, articulating your theory of how potential drivers are cultivated and how their efficacy as drivers may be affected by contextual factors, proposing study designs and analysis plans that examine relationships affected by adjacent systems and allowing for the estimation of context-specific relationships, and discussing findings and implications through a contextual lens.



What contextual factors are we referencing? In the Skills, Competencies, and Contextual Factors of Interest section below, applicants will find a list of structural factors (systems and structures outside the individual’s PK–12 experience) and longitudinal factors (existing before or after the PK–12 time frame). We encourage teams to engage with these factors.

Additionally, we recommend using these resources for engaging with systemic racism throughout the research project:

- Rekha Balu, Karishma Furtado, Chitra Balakrishnan, Claire Cusella, and Brian Smedley, “[Research Within versus Outside Existing Systems: Framing and Studying the Effects of Structural Racism](#)” Urban Institute (2023).
- “[The Do No Harm Project](#),” Urban Institute

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Student Upward Mobility Initiative is currently funded by the Walton Family Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Joyce Foundation. We are grateful to them and to all our funders, who make it possible for Urban to advance its mission.

The views expressed are those of the authors and should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute’s funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples. Copyright © February 2024. Urban Institute. Permission is granted for reproduction of this file, with attribution to the Urban Institute.