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UNEMPLOYMENT RATES, SINGLE PARENT DENSITY, AND INDICES OF CHILD POVERTY: THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO DIFFERENT CATEGORIES OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

BILL GILLHAM, GARY TANNER, AND BILL CHEYNE

Department of Psychology, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, Scotland

ISOBEL FREEMAN, MARTIN ROONEY, AND ALLAN LAMBIE

Research Section, Strathclyde Region Social Work Department, Glasgow, Scotland

ABSTRACT

Objective: There were two main research questions: First, is there a relationship between rates of child physical abuse, child sexual abuse and child neglect and levels of female and male unemployment, single-parent density and child poverty in the immediately local area; and second, is this relationship different for different categories of abuse and neglect and different categories of deprivation?

Method: Using archival data—registered cases of abuse and neglect and official data on child population, social worker ratio, unemployment rates, single-parent density, means-tested clothing grants and free school meals for children—a multiple correlational analysis was carried out of the 5,551 referrals and 1,450 registered cases of abuse and neglect in Glasgow, Scotland for the years 1991 through to 1993.

Results: Substantial correlations were found with all indices of deprivation but particularly physical abuse with rates of male unemployment. Lower and more variable correlations were found with female unemployment rates. Sexual abuse and neglect rates showed a less consistent relationship with the indices of deprivation. In general male unemployment rates alone accounted for two-thirds of the variance in total abuse and neglect rates, other factors adding little or nothing to this.

Conclusions: The results demonstrate the importance of selecting small and relatively homogeneous areas for this kind of analysis to achieve ecological validity. Male unemployment rates at this level allow for the ranking of areas in terms of priority need. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd

Key Words—Child abuse and neglect, Unemployment, Single parents, Child poverty, Demography, Epidemiology.

INTRODUCTION

FROM THE BEGINNING of large-scale epidemiological studies of child abuse (Gil, 1970) a very much higher proportion of the parents (usually fathers) of abused children have been reported as unemployed compared with the population at large. In his analysis of over 20,000 cases in the United States reported during 1967 and 1968 Gil found that 50% of abusive fathers were unemployed during the year they perpetrated the abuse and 12% were unemployed at the actual time of the abuse.

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Requests for reprints should be sent to Bill Gillham, Ph.D., Senior Lecturer, Department of Psychology, University of Strathclyde, 155 George Street, Glasgow, G1 1RD, Scotland.

The much larger study of all officially reported cases of abuse and neglect in the U.S. between 1976 and 1982 found that 45% of the families were in receipt of public assistance, this being four times the national level (Russell & Trainor, 1984).

The only United Kingdom studies comparable in scale are those carried out by the NSPCC (Creighton & Noyes, 1989; Creighton, 1992) involving approximately 10% of all children on Abuse/Protection Registers in England and Wales during the period 1973–1990. In the later study covering the whole period, Creighton reports that the percentage of fathers and father substitutes unemployed at the time of the abuse increased from under 30% in the early and mid 1970s (a time of relatively full employment in the U.K.) to 40% in 1990 (with even higher figures in the mid 1980s). Interestingly, Creighton also reported that the proportion of mothers of abused children in paid employment declined from 24% to 13% over the same period. Female unemployment is rarely reported as a separate statistic or, indeed, at all in such studies. As the present study will indicate, this may be an important omitted variable.

In the earlier study (Creighton & Noyes, 1989) covering the period 1983–1987, only 13% of mothers and 31% of fathers were in paid employment at the time of registration. During the same period in the U.K., 50% of women and 87% of men with dependent children were in paid employment (OPCS, 1989). The scale of the difference is large, by a factor of around three. This is almost exactly the same ratio reported by Gil (1970) in his earlier national survey in the U.S.

Madge (1983) in a review of the literature, mainly relating to the U.K., on the effects of unemployment on children, points out, however, that “families containing abused children tend to differ from the norm not only in terms of their employment status, but also regarding their age, family structure and material circumstances (p. 315).”

There is plenty of room here for “third factor” explanations. Madge goes on to cite Gil’s (1969) suggestion that unemployment may be the “last straw” in families suffering a range of deprivations.

Although the apparent effects of being unemployed (which have some support in the empirical literature—see review by Jones, 1980) have common-sense appeal, it is probably that associated poverty bears the causal responsibility. Gelles (1988), looking at the supposed stressful role of being a single parent (with a similar appeal to common-sense levels of explanation) concluded that being poor, rather than being lone, was the determining factor in abuse. However this may be, indices of single parent density and child poverty warrant inclusion in the investigative equation. In whatever ways the effects operate, individual-level explanations are, in any case, unlikely to be sufficient. Unemployment, poverty and isolation may affect families indirectly through the effects that they have on the social environment within which families exist. Steinberg, Catalano, and Dooley (1981) comment:

increased job loss in the community may affect parents not themselves experiencing joblessness. Changes in the economic climate of a community may result in changed economic expectations and morale, thus modifying the social climate in which families function (p. 977)

It is this indirect effect of social demography that the present study attempts to investigate, rather than the presumed direct effects on potentially abusing and neglectful families of being unemployed, or lone, or poor.

Levels of Investigation

Whether investigating the effects on individual families of the breadwinner being unemployed or the indirect effects on families in presumed ‘high risk’ areas, the choice is (at least notionally) between a longitudinal and cross-sectional study. The former is more secure for inferring a causal relationship (or the direction of it): see Steinberg, Catalano, and Dooley (1981) for a full discussion of the methodological issues on this point. But both methods can suffer from third factor problems. Longitudinal studies may not be able to take account of correlated historical processes; cross-

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