



Parenting stress and child maltreatment: The buffering effect of neighborhood social service availability and accessibility



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ABSTRACT

The current study examines the relationship between aspects of social service availability and child maltreatment. Specifically, the study uses negative binomial regression to estimate whether service availability, accessibility, and receipt are associated with physical child abuse and neglect. Relying on Social Cognitive Theory and Stress and Coping Theory, the moderating effect of the service variables was tested on the relationship between parenting stress and maltreatment. The sample is comprised of 1053 parents who completed a survey in July of 2014. The findings suggest that service availability has a potential protective effect against physical abuse and neglect, and that service accessibility has an additional protective effect above and beyond sheer availability of services for child neglect. Further, the availability of services has a significant moderating effect – it decreased the relationship between parent stress and abuse and neglect. Service receipt had a paradoxical effect – although one might expect receiving social services to reduce maltreatment, there was a positive correlation between the two such that parents reporting receipt of a greater number of services tended to have higher levels of abuse and neglect. Further, service receipt moderated the relationship between parenting stress and neglect, such that the relationship was stronger. The study suggests that efforts to increase service availability and accessibility may prevent child maltreatment.

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1. Introduction

Child maltreatment has profound effects for families. Children experiencing abuse and neglect are at risk for negative consequences in virtually every domain of development (Edmiston et al., 2011; McCrory, De Brito, & Viding, 2011; Putnam, 2003; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Watts-English, Fortson, Gibler, Hooper, & De Bellis, 2006; Wilson, Hansen, & Li, 2011). Research on the prevention of child maltreatment has focused on evaluating specific programs and strategies as well as understanding the risks for child maltreatment. Although a newer body of literature has started to build on the protective factors for individuals and families (e.g. Jaffee et al., 2013), a great deal of information regarding what prevents maltreatment from happening, especially at the community level, remains unknown. The current study focuses on one potential protective mechanism within neighborhoods, social services. Specifically, we consider the availability, accessibility, and receipt of social services as potential sources of support for families. This support may directly decrease child maltreatment levels as well as moderate the relationship between individual risk and maltreatment.

2. Background

2.1. Social service availability and child maltreatment

The availability of social services is a neighborhood characteristic that could potentially serve as a protective factor for families. Only a handful of studies have explored the relationship between local availability of services at the neighborhood level and parents' potential risk for child maltreatment (e.g. Freisthler, 2013; Klein, 2011; Morton, 2013). Results of these studies have indicated that increased availability of housing and adoption services were associated with decreased referrals for child abuse and foster care entry (Freisthler, 2013), lower rates of maltreatment referrals and substantiations were related to higher percentages of children attending preschool in local and adjacent neighborhoods (Klein, 2011), and increased geographic accessibility of substance abuse services within a neighborhood moderates the relationship between alcohol outlets and maltreatment referral rates (Morton, 2013).

Through examining county-level data, one study has explored the relationship between social service availability and potential risk for child maltreatment (Maguire-Jack, 2014). A negative relationship was found such that an individual parent's risk for having child maltreatment substantiated decreased as county spending on maltreatment prevention programs increased (Maguire-Jack, 2014).

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The current study examines service availability differently from the aforementioned studies, which rely on objective measures of availability. This study focuses instead on what residents perceive to be available, assuming that there will be important discrepancies between resident knowledge and objective availability. Although the actual availability of services may still play a protective role for families (by decreasing neighborhood rates of social milieu), the services that families know about may provide a more direct preventive role (by having a place to go when challenges arise or by feeling supported by agencies). Similar to the measure from *Coulton, Korbin, and Su (1999)*, the current study uses self-report by parents about what services are available. *Coulton et al. (1999)* examined the relationship between local availability of services and parents' risk for child maltreatment as measured by the Child Abuse Potential Inventory (CAPI; *Milner, 1986*). The authors did not find a relationship between the local availability of services and parents' potential for child maltreatment (*Coulton et al., 1999*). However, as the authors note, the CAPI does not measure whether parents actually engage in abuse or neglect, but rather, their potential for such behavior (*Coulton et al., 1999*). Therefore, the results of this study do not preclude the possibility that local services play a protective role in communities by reducing the chances that high-risk parents will engage in maltreatment behaviors.

2.2. Service receipt & child maltreatment risk

Prior research related to service receipt and maltreatment risk has mainly focused on the receipt of some form of child welfare services and subsequent rates of recidivism among parents. Involvement with social services (e.g., mental health, domestic violence services) outside of the child welfare system by at-risk parents has largely been missing from research in this area. Recently, however, some work has emerged that attempts to incorporate data regarding parent involvement across service systems and the impact on maltreatment risk and recidivism (*Drake, Jonson-Reid, & Sapokaite, 2006; Jonson-Reid, Chung, Way, & Jolley, 2010*).

Through a secondary data analysis across several systems (e.g. birth records, child welfare, Medicaid), *Drake et al. (2006)* found that individual level characteristics and service use outside of the child welfare system were strongly associated with maltreatment recidivism. Involvement with specific service sectors, such as mental health or substance abuse treatment services or special education services, were associated with higher rates of recidivism within the sample. Within their sample, *Jonson-Reid et al. (2010)* also found that having a history of involvement with mental health or substance abuse treatment was associated with higher recidivism risk.

Finally, a lower recidivism rate was found among parents who had previously received public assistance from Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), a precursor to the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, but had not re-entered AFDC or TANF during the study. In essence, parents who received assistance from these programs, but then "permanently exited," had a lower recidivism risk than other parents in the study (*Drake et al., 2006*). Similarly, *Jonson-Reid et al. (2010)* found that receipt of AFDC or TANF either lowered the risk for recidivism or had no impact among their sample.

2.3. Parenting stress

Stress results from the pressure of demanding or adverse circumstances, and is often experienced as mental or emotional strain. When feeling 'stressed,' it is assumed that the pressures being felt exceed a person's coping skills and abilities (*Pereira et al., 2012*). As such, stress can have a negative effect on a person's health and mood. For parents, the negative impact of stress can extend beyond their own health and mood and into the relationship with their children (*Abidin, 1995; Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996*). Parenting stress is directly related to parents' responsibilities as a caregiver for their children and involves

the idea that the demands of caregiving outweigh the resources available to the caregiver (*Pereira et al., 2012*). Further, parenting stress is conceptualized not by the different demands of parenting each day, but by the collective impact of the day-to-day demands placed on parents over time (*Rodriguez-JenKins & Marcenko, 2014*). These demands are undoubtedly numerous and can lead to exhaustion and physical and emotional fatigue (*Deater-Deckard, 2004; Rodriguez-JenKins & Marcenko, 2014*).

High levels of parenting stress are associated with parents demonstrating less nurturing behavior towards their children (*Pereira et al., 2012*), decreased enjoyment and increased conflict arising in the parent-child relationship (*Anthony et al., 2005; Abidin, 1995*), punitive parenting practices (*Pinderhughes, Dodge, Bates, Pettit, & Zelli, 2000; Webster-Stratton, 1990*), and an increased risk for child maltreatment (*Anthony et al., 2005; Black, Heyman, & Smith Slep, 2001; Haskett, Smith Scott, Grant, Ward, & Robinson, 2003; Pereira et al., 2012; Rodriguez, 2010; Taylor, Guterman, Lee, & Rathouz, 2009*). Child health and well-being are also implicated when considering the effects of high parenting stress; in a home environment in which high levels of parenting stress are present, child behavior problems could arise or existing conditions could be aggravated (*Margalit & Kleitman, 2006*), adding additional risk for maltreatment (*Rodriguez-JenKins & Marcenko, 2014*). As of 2009, an estimated 13% of children in the United States lived in a household with at least one parent who was experiencing high levels of parenting stress (*Raphael, Zhang, Liu, & Giardino, 2009*). Given this incidence rate and the negative effects of parenting stress, it is imperative to explore strategies to reduce parenting stress and prevent subsequent maltreatment.

2.4. Parenting stress & child maltreatment

In a meta-analysis of the risks for child abuse and neglect, parenting stress was found to be significantly associated with both abuse and neglect, with particularly large effect sizes for neglect (*Stith et al., 2009*). *Pereira et al. (2012)* examined whether a mother's own maltreatment history and current level of parenting stress were associated with parenting difficulties. The authors found that mothers who reported experiencing both high levels of maltreatment as children and high levels of current parenting stress were less sensitive with their children (*Pereira et al., 2012*). Finally, two studies comparing samples of abusive and nonabusive mothers found higher levels of parenting stress among abusive mothers (*Graham, Weiner, Cobb, & Henderson, 2001; Timmer, Borrego, & Urquiza, 2002*).

2.5. Parenting stress & social service accessibility

Aspects of both individual parents and the neighborhoods in which they live serve as risk and protective factors related to child maltreatment. Individuals interact with their environments in important ways that affect their ability to parent their children; the continued study of these interactions is important for understanding maltreatment and for informing ways to prevent it. One protective factor that has been identified as beneficial for a family is access to health care and social services (*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2015*).

Lack of service availability and accessibility has a direct impact on parenting stress and well-being. To this end, *Gershoff, Aber, Raver, and Lennon (2007)* found that a lack of access to services, or material hardships such as food insecurity, residential instability, inadequate medical care and financial trouble, led to increased parenting stress and subsequent decreases in positive parenting practices and behaviors. Further, the authors discovered that when considering the relationship between income and parenting stress, incorporating material hardship reverses the direction of association between the two variables.

A model excluding material hardship showed a negative relationship between income and parenting stress: when income increases, parenting stress decreases. However, when material hardship is

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