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Economic predictors of child maltreatment in an Australian population-based birth cohort

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ABSTRACT

A correlation between socioeconomic disadvantage and child maltreatment has long been observed, but the drivers of this association are poorly understood. We sought to estimate the effects of economic factors on risk of child maltreatment after adjusting for other known influences using the Australian Temperament Project, a population-based birth cohort of 2443 individuals and their parents. We used logistic regression to estimate associations of childhood economic factors (parental education, occupation, and unemployment; type of housing; and retrospective perception of poverty) with retrospective reports of perceived child maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect, and witnessing of domestic violence), controlling for demographic factors, parental mental health and substance use, and child health. We then used these estimates to approximate the proportions of child maltreatment—population attributable fractions—that are theoretically preventable by addressing childhood economic disadvantage. Economic factors were associated with all types of child maltreatment. For the most part, these associations diminished only partially when controlling for noneconomic confounders, supporting hypotheses of causal relationships. Jointly, economic factors were significant predictors of physical abuse, sexual abuse, and witnessing of domestic violence but not of emotional abuse or neglect. Retrospective perceptions of childhood poverty were, in particular, strongly associated with most forms of child maltreatment but not with sexual abuse after accounting for other economic factors. We estimated that 27% of all child maltreatment was jointly attributable to economic factors. These findings suggest that strategies that reduce economic disadvantage are likely to hold significant potential to reduce the prevalence of child maltreatment.

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1. Introduction

The association between child maltreatment and poverty has been well-established in the literature, despite initial concerns of detection bias and victim-blaming (Pelton, 1978; Zellman, 1992). The reasons for the association, however, are not well-understood (Berger & Waldfogel, 2011). In their recent review of the literature on poverty and child maltreatment, Drake and Jonson-Reid (2014) identified many likely contributors to the relationship between poverty and maltreatment but noted that the causality of the relationship has a particularly poor underpinning in both theory and empirical research. By modelling the temporal contribution of potential causal influences, the present study aims to provide empirical estimates of the causal contribution of parent- and family-level economic factors to the risk of child maltreatment.

1.1. Risk factors for child maltreatment

In reviews of the risk and protective factors for child maltreatment, researchers have identified a range of social and environmental factors, many of which center on socioeconomic disadvantage (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Salzinger, 1998; Stith et al., 2009; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). Factors identified as being important include parent-level factors (e.g., low education and income) and broader social or structural factors such as income inadequacy, unemployment levels, social isolation, inadequate housing and homelessness,

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and poor access to resources (child care, welfare services, schools, etc.), exposure to racism or discrimination, and stressful life events (Lamont & Price-Robertson, 2013). The largest group of risk factors associated with the occurrence of abuse and neglect relate to parental characteristics that prevent or interfere with good parenting skills, appropriate monitoring, and affective responses to children and their changing developmental needs.

Such social and economic factors are, however, highly interrelated conceptually and empirically. One distinction that can be drawn is between factors that are fixed (age, race/ethnicity, and gender, etc.—factors that might be considered "demographic"), and factors that may be more amenable to change (education, unemployment, poverty, etc.). In the subsequent analysis, parental education, occupation, unemployment, housing, and poverty are considered jointly as potentially modifiable factors contributing to economic disadvantage. A further distinction is offered, however, between poverty—perhaps a purer measure of economic disadvantage—and the remaining indicators, which are more closely related to social status and arguably more intrinsic characteristics of the parents than are household wealth or income.

Poverty has been postulated to affect child maltreatment through a range of mechanisms, including limiting parental capacity to provide for the needs of their children (food, shelter, medical care, etc.), increasing parental stress, reducing incentives for parents to invest their time and money in child-rearing, and reducing alternatives for discipline (Berger & Waldfogel, 2011). Whether and how much parents work may directly influence the amount of time that parents spend with children and thus the opportunity for exposure to poor parenting of any type, and may greatly increase the psychological stress that parents are exposed to. Conger and Donnellan (2007) offer a theoretical framework through which socioeconomic disadvantage may influence parenting behavior and child well-being. Family economic pressures act as stressors that increase parental conflict and inhibit nurturing and involved parenting and increases the propensity for harsh parenting behavior in their model. If economic factors contribute to destabilization of parental relationships or increased rates of parenthood outside of stable relationships, this would also increase the opportunity for children to be maltreated by their parents' associates (boyfriends, step-parents, etc.).

1.2. Questions of causality and the potential outcomes framework

Estimating the causal effect of economic factors on child maltreatment is important because it provides guidance regarding how best to intervene. If the relationship between economic factors and child maltreatment is not causal, then addressing economic disadvantage will have little effect in terms of preventing child maltreatment. On the other hand, if the relationship between economic factors and child maltreatment is causal, then intervention to address economic disadvantage is likely to reduce the prevalence of child maltreatment and policies that increase economic disparities may exacerbate the problem.

In this analysis, we adopt an epidemiological approach to causal inference that is rooted in the potential outcomes framework (Glass, Goodman, Hernán, & Samet, 2013). This approach focuses on the differences in potential outcomes (in this case, child maltreatment) that would occur under scenarios that differ only with respect to the distributions of certain risk factors (economic disadvantage). If changing only the risk factor will change the outcome, then the relationship can be said to be causal. However, with outcomes such as child maltreatment and risk factors like economic disadvantage, true experiments can be difficult to construct and we must often rely on observational data to test the causality of these relationships or estimate their strength.

The main limitation of observational data as compared with experimental data is that there are often differences between people that are associated with both the exposure and outcome in question. Such differences confound the observed association, making it appear weaker or stronger than would result from a causal effect alone. Addressing confounding is therefore central to causal inference in observational data (Glass et al., 2013).

For something to confound the relationship between economic disadvantage and child maltreatment, it must either cause or have a common cause with both. As such, confounders are mostly limited to demographic factors (family size and structure, ethnicity, parental age, etc.) and parental characteristics (particularly mental health, substance use, and parental history of child maltreatment). Child health problems may also affect the risk of maltreatment while placing additional economic pressures on parents (Font & Berger, 2015) but the relationship between child health and maltreatment is likely to be bidirectional. Domestic violence is a well-established risk factor for child maltreatment that is associated with economic disadvantage, but it can itself be considered a form of psychological or emotional abuse (James, 1994; Kitzmann, Gaylord, Holt, & Kenny, 2003) and this is how we conceptualize it here.

1.3. Empirical evidence on the economic causes of child maltreatment

While experimental studies of the effects of economic factors on risk of child maltreatment are rare, occasional opportunities arise in the course of changes to things like income support programs. New programs or changes may be rolled out incrementally, producing experimental conditions in which direct comparison can be made between groups receiving the new and old services. Sometimes, programs can even be rolled out in a randomized manner to ensure comparability of the treatment groups and facilitate evaluation of the program. This was the case in the study by Cancian, Yang, and Slack (2013), which found that an exogenous increase in the proportion of child support payments that was distributed to resident parents, thus increasing their income, was associated with decreased screened-in child protection notifications regarding their children.

A related form of 'natural' or 'historical' experiment can occur when exogenous factors (factors external to the parent-child relationship) are suddenly changed or interrupted. Population-level economic factors have few theoretical pathways through which their relationship to child maltreatment can be confounded, reducing the need to collect or model data on large numbers of variables simultaneously. For example, Wildeman and Fallesen (2016—this issue) found that a substantial reduction in a specific type of Danish welfare payment increased risk of out-of-home placement by 25%. Similarly, Schneider, Waldfogel, and Brooks-Gunn (2016—this issue) linked macroeconomic indicators of the Great Recession (the American experience of the Global Financial Crisis) to measures of behavioral approximations of physical abuse and neglect taken over the corresponding period in a population-based birth cohort. They found that there were direct effects of the Great Recession on risk of behaviorally approximated physical abuse but no effects or weak protective effects on risk of behaviorally approximated neglect. At the same time, using state-level child protective services data from the U.S., Raissian and Bullinger (2016—this issue) found that increases to the state minimum wage reduced reports of child neglect.

Outside of true and 'natural' experiments, observational investigation of the causes of child maltreatment is generally restricted by the limited availability of large-scale epidemiological data sets that contain a sufficient range of postulated risk factors to be modelled simultaneously (Munro, Taylor, & Bradbury-Jones, 2013). As most of the causes of child maltreatment operate at or through the level of the parents, data collection must span multiple generations and long periods of time. There are few prospective cohort studies that collect such broad information over these periods. In the Mater–University of Queensland Cohort Study, Martin et al. (2011) reported an analysis of the effects of maternal economic and noneconomic risk factors (measured early in the life of their offspring) on sexual abuse as reported by offspring in

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