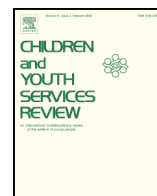




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# Child welfare involvement and contexts of poverty: The role of parental adversities, social networks, and social services

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### ABSTRACT

Research documents a link between poverty and child welfare involvement, but the nature of this relationship is unclear. By providing in-depth accounts of situations leading to child welfare involvement, parents' perspectives can enrich our understanding of how poverty matters for child welfare involvement. Based on in-depth interviews with 40 poor parents previously investigated for child maltreatment, I discuss contexts of poverty that provided pathways to child welfare involvement. Poverty created environments of desperation and disadvantage, combined with reliance on supports that reported parents to child welfare agencies. The vast majority of incidents parents described implicated in their involvement parental adversities related to poverty; embeddedness in disadvantaged networks or volatile personal relationships; and/or involvement in, or need for, social services. These findings suggest a research approach that interrogates this complexity and maltreatment prevention policies that broadly strengthen supports for families and communities.

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## 1. Introduction

State child welfare agencies receive reports of abuse or neglect of over six million children each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2015). These agencies are charged with investigating the reports and intervening to protect children as needed, either by providing services to families in the home, or arranging for children's care outside the home. This intervention into the lives of American families is not distributed evenly, with children from poor families and communities having an increased risk of involvement (Drake & Pandey, 1996; Lee & Goerge, 1999; Lindsey, 1991; Putnam-Hornstein & Needell, 2011). For example, in a recent California birth cohort, children eligible for the state Medicaid program were more than twice as likely to be reported for possible maltreatment by age 5, compared with those not eligible, and children born to mothers with a high school education or less were more than six times more likely to be reported by age 5, compared with children born to mothers with a college degree (Putnam-Hornstein & Needell, 2011). Understanding the role of poverty in child welfare involvement is critical to develop and support more effective interventions to protect children and strengthen families.

Despite increasing research on the relationship between poverty and child maltreatment, we know little about how poor parents actually get drawn into the child welfare system. Analyzing poor parents' accounts of the situations leading to child welfare investigations can provide insight into how poverty matters for child welfare involvement. In

this article, I draw on 40 qualitative interviews with poor parents in Providence, Rhode Island, previously investigated for child maltreatment, to consider the specific situations, as described by parents, giving rise to child welfare investigations. This micro-level, situational analysis, while acknowledging the role of individual agency and behavior, reveals contexts of poverty that provide opportunities for child welfare involvement, from related adversities to the dynamics of social network and social service provider interactions. These findings suggest a research approach that interrogates these contexts and maltreatment prevention policies that broadly strengthen supports for families and communities.

## 2. Poverty and child welfare involvement

Children from poor families and communities are highly overrepresented in the child welfare system (Lee & Goerge, 1999; Lindsey, 1991). Researchers have advanced multiple theories to explain how poverty increases the likelihood that a family will be involved with the child welfare system. Evidence suggests a causal relationship (Cancian, Yang, & Slack, 2013), although empirical support for theorized mechanisms is mixed, calling for additional inquiry into this relationship.

### 2.1. Poverty and child maltreatment

First, conditions of poverty may lead to child maltreatment, which then prompts child welfare involvement. Behavioral measurements of child maltreatment, in addition to measures based on agency reports, show it is also more common among the poor (Berger, 2004; Hussey, Chang, & Kotch, 2006; Sedlak et al., 2010). Poor parents may simply

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lack the material resources to meet their children's needs. As legal definitions of neglect typically include inadequate shelter, food, and clothing, financial constraints may preclude poor parents from providing adequately for their children. Yang (2014) finds that parents experiencing material hardship are more likely to be investigated by child protective services, controlling for poverty level. Homelessness also increases a parent's risk of child welfare involvement (Bassuk, Weinreb, Dawson, Perloff, & Buckner, 1997; Cowal, Shinn, Weitzman, Stojanovic, & Labay, 2002; Culhane, Webb, Grim, Metraux, & Culhane, 2003; Warren & Font, 2015). Although many states' laws dictate that neglect cannot be substantiated for reasons of poverty alone (HHS, 2012), the extent to which caseworker practice aligns with these definitions is unclear.

Poverty may also, or instead, contribute to harsher or less supportive parenting practices by increasing parental stress and family conflict, which are risk factors for child maltreatment (Stith et al., 2009). Empirical research on whether parenting practices mediate the link between poverty and child maltreatment is mixed, with studies finding that parental stress or parental practices partially, but do not fully, explain the relationship between economic hardships and child maltreatment (Berger, 2004; Berger & Brooks-Gunn, 2005; Hashima & Amato, 1994; Slack, Holl, McDaniel, Yoo, & Bolger, 2004; Slack et al., 2011; Yang, 2014). Parenting practices thus seem to play some role in, but do not provide a complete explanation for, the relationship between poverty and child welfare.

## 2.2. Parental adversities

Alternatively, increased likelihood of child maltreatment among the poor may result from other risk factors that are more common among poor parents, including domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness, and criminal justice involvement. These adversities are strongly associated with poverty and with child maltreatment or child welfare involvement. Research on poverty and child maltreatment typically conceptualizes these risks as contributing to a spurious relationship between poverty and child maltreatment, and either does not consider them or controls for them. Establishing a causal relationship—or even a causal direction, in the case of such adversities and poverty—has proven more difficult. However, some research finds that domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness, and criminal justice involvement are influenced by poverty and also affect child maltreatment, suggesting that these parental adversities may mediate the relationship between poverty and child maltreatment.

While the relationship is complex and difficult to disentangle, scholars argue that poverty increases the likelihood of the aforementioned adversities through mechanisms such as increased conflict and stress, family instability, and neighborhood disorder (Bassuk, Buckner, Perloff, & Bassuk, 1998; Benson, Wooldredge, Thistlethwaite, & Fox, 2004; Cunradi, Caetano, Clark, & Schafer, 2000; Cunradi, Caetano, & Schafer, 2002; Field & Caetano, 2004; Kessler, Molnar, Feurer, & Applebaum, 2001; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Sampson & Wilson, 1995; Western, 2006). For example, a study of poor mothers in California finds that the severe and chronic stresses of poverty—specifically, neighborhood disorder and stressful or traumatic life events—increase vulnerability to psychological distress and alcohol abuse (Mulia, Schmidt, Bond, Jacobs, & Korcha, 2008). These adversities may in turn inhibit parenting capacity or negatively affect parenting practices through increased stress or decreased support (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Salzinger, 1998; Chaffin, Kelleher, & Hollenberg, 1996; Slack et al., 2011; Stith et al., 2009; Turney, Schnittker, & Wildeman, 2012; Wildeman, Schnittker, & Turney, 2012). Perhaps unsurprisingly, these adversities frequently co-occur with child welfare involvement (Hazen, Connelly, Kelleher, Landsverk, & Barth, 2004; McGuigan & Pratt, 2001; Phillips, Burns, Wagner, & Barth, 2004; Sedlak et al., 2010; Slack, Lee, & Berger, 2007; Taylor, Guterman, Lee, & Rathouz, 2009).

Whether and how these factors interact with material constraints and parenting practices to influence child maltreatment remains unclear. In some cases, these adversities themselves constitute neglect, either in researchers' measurements or state policies, muddling our understanding of the relationship even further (Bragg, 2003; Warren & Font, 2015). They also frequently involve interactions with police officers or medical or mental health professionals trained to identify and report suspected child maltreatment. To the extent that poverty affects these parental adversities, they may constitute another mechanism through which poverty increases the risk of child maltreatment and/or child welfare involvement.

## 2.3. Reporting contexts

Research on the relationship between poverty and child maltreatment suggests that this explains at least part of the relationship between poverty and child welfare involvement. Nevertheless, although researchers often operationalize child maltreatment using official child welfare reports, child maltreatment does not automatically imply child welfare involvement. Researchers measuring child maltreatment find a lack of correspondence between parents reporting such behavior and those reported to child protective services (Brown et al., 1998; Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 1999; Sedlak et al., 2010; Slack et al., 2011). Maltreating behaviors only bring families into the child welfare system when such behavior comes to the attention of authorities.

Child maltreatment reporting practices may constitute another mechanism through which poverty shapes child welfare involvement. For example, among welfare recipients, welfare sanctions or employment changes predict child welfare investigation, but not additional child welfare involvement following the investigation, suggesting that economic factors may shape the child welfare report more so than the underlying behavior (Nam, Meezan, & Danziger, 2006; Slack et al., 2007). Slack et al. (2011) find that economic factors are stronger predictors of officially reported neglect, compared with parental reports of neglectful behavior.

Poor parents' overrepresentation in the child welfare system may result from biased reporting systems or increased visibility to authorities (Drake & Zuravin, 1998; Hampton & Newberger, 1985). For example, a family's social class may bias the inclination of professionals such as doctors to report child maltreatment. Poor families also typically have more contact with public agencies, such as welfare agencies, required to report child maltreatment. Neighborhood social processes may also lead to reports disproportionate to the actual incidence of child maltreatment in disadvantaged neighborhoods. In a black neighborhood in Chicago, interview respondents reported that residents commonly call child welfare to report their neighbors, sometimes making false accusations as a means of retaliation (Roberts, 2008). Neighborhood effects on official child welfare reports are stronger than neighborhood effects on parenting behaviors associated with maltreatment (Coulton, Crampton, Irwin, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2007), suggesting that at least some of the neighborhood's influence may be connected to the reporting process.

Taken together, this research supports the hypothesis that differences in reporting play at least some role in the overrepresentation of the poor in the child welfare system, but provides little insight as to the specific reporting contexts that produce these disparities (but see Roberts, 2008). McDaniel and Slack (2005) find that major life events, such as moving and having a baby, increase the risk of child welfare investigation. Since parenting stress, harsh discipline, and material hardship do not fully explain the relationship, they hypothesize that visibility to child welfare reporters following these life events may play a role. Their study sets the stage for an exploration of the contexts of family and community life that generate child welfare investigations among the poor.

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