Child abuse potential: Correlates with child maltreatment rates and structural measures of neighborhoods

Darcey H. Merritt *

Rutgers University, School of Social Work, 536 George Street, New Brunswick, NJ, 08901, United States

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ABSTRACT

This community-based research investigates differential child maltreatment rates per 1000 same-age population within communities, and compares the rates to survey data that capture the potential for child abuse by a random sample of individuals in the same community in order to evaluate the impact of neighborhood conditions (e.g., maltreatment rates, child care burden, poverty) and individual factors (e.g., demographic and network support) on parents' potential for abuse. This study used a National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect dataset comparing 20 census tracks and 400 cases of substantiated maltreatment claims. Data were analyzed with hierarchical linear models to account for the nested sampling design. The relationship between substantiated maltreatment in a given community and the potential to abuse was significant, and parents' potential for abuse increased when they were men, lived in impoverished communities, or were burdened by child care demands; abuse potential decreased when they were married (vs. single), working full time (vs. not working), had at least a high school diploma (vs. no diploma), enjoyed a higher income and when they had support from families and friends. Findings suggest that policymakers focus attention on increasing financial resources, educational opportunities, and relieving child care demands for families at risk of abuse.

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1. Introduction

Child abuse and neglect remains a salient social problem, thus warranting a continued evaluation of measurement tools used to assess child abuse potential. This paper investigates the impact of neighborhood structural factors on child abuse potential and substantiated child maltreatment rates within census tracts and block groups in a concentrated Cleveland, Ohio area. Particular attention is given to the examination of the relationship between child abuse potential and substantiated child maltreatment rates in these census tracts. Although two studies assess the etiology of child maltreatment using a comprehensive multi-level analysis, (Korbin & Coulton, 1996; Reppucci, Woolard, & Fried, 1999), many studies have shown a correlation between neighborhood structural factors and child abuse and neglect (Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 1999; Freisthler, Midanik, & Gruenewald, 2004; Hay, Fortson, Hollist, Altheimer, & Schaible, 2007; McWayne, McDermott, Fantuzzo, & Culhane, 2007).

Abusive and neglectful parental behavior is most often viewed solely as an individual level deficiency, however, behaviors displayed by parents and children are often impacted by environmental influences. This study joins the growing research that incorporates assessments of individuals and families in context using hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) in order to investigate the impact of nested levels of data. Studying parents nested in neighborhoods allows for determining the relationship between parents with the potential to abuse children and the child maltreatment rates in their communities.

Typically, child maltreatment rates are measured by the prevalence of substantiated instances of child abuse and neglect. However, these data don't allow for a delineation of physical abuse and neglect because Ohio doesn't distinguish between the two in order to arrive at their child maltreatment rates. Alternatively, the potential of parents to abuse their children is measured by a widely used and validated instrument, the Child Abuse Potential Inventory (CAP), developed by Milner (1986, 1994). Of particular interest is determining whether the CAP instrument is capturing the potential for parents to abuse and neglect children as indicated and represented by the substantiated child maltreatment rates within these communities. Perhaps groups of families with relatively low potential to abuse their children live in concentrated neighborhood areas characterized by high-substantiated child maltreatment rates. One would expect CAP rates to be indicative of the substantiated maltreatment rates in similar communities, if not; this could be a systematic bias issue regarding child abuse reporting and social worker disposition decisions. Or possibly, the potential to abuse is not as positively correlated with actual incidences of maltreatment as would seem logical. This inquiry seeks to demarcate neighborhood characteristics in areas with higher rates of maltreatment than the potential to abuse (CAP) scores in those areas.

In addition to assessing the relationship between CAP scores and child maltreatment rates among neighborhoods, this study seeks to

* Tel.: +1 732 932 8003x16.
  E-mail address: darceym@rci.rutgers.edu.

delineate individual level characteristics that may influence CAP scores within areas characterized by certain neighborhood structural measures. An assessment such as this will illuminate any connections between neighborhood rates of maltreatment and variables that demonstrate either a positive or negative relationship with the individual potential to abuse.

2. Study overview

This paper presents a secondary data analysis of a large dataset, entitled *Neighborhood and Household Factors in the Etiology of Child Maltreatment*, collected by Jill Korbin and Claudia Coulton (principal investigators) of Case Western University, in which the structural neighborhood and environmental factors were assessed in an effort to predict the potential for child abuse. Given that the dataset is quite extensive, specific attention will be given to assessing the association between child abuse potential due to neighborhood factors and actual substantiated rates of child abuse maltreatment within these neighborhoods. A line of inquiry centers on determining a possible relationship between community level mean CAP scores and community level substantiated maltreatment rates. Additionally, this paper inquires about how certain individual and community level factors relate to the CAP scores, and whether certain community level factors possibly moderate the relationships between individual level factors and CAP scores.

Cross-level interactions between the individual risk and/or protective factors and the neighborhood structural measures will be identified in order to assess the impact on child abuse potential scores. Investigating these interactions fits within an ecological framework, which assumes that there are multiple levels of explanation for child maltreatment, such as individual characteristics and socio-environmental factors. Based on previously studied components of the prevalence of child abuse and neglect, theoretical principles and the relationship between external environments and individual behavior, this study expects to find a moderate relationship between child maltreatment rates and child abuse potential (CAP) scores within neighborhoods. Further, it is expected that community level factors moderate certain relationships between the individual level factors and the potential to maltreat children.

2.1. Literature review and theoretical underpinnings

In order to apply context to this type of inquiry, the concept of a neighborhood needs to be highlighted and addressed as it influences micro level behavioral dynamics. Sampson, Morenoff, and Gannon-Rowley (2002) provide a succinct definition of neighborhood as "ecological units nested within successfully larger communities" (p.445). Moreover, Nicotera (2005) defines neighborhoods as "complex, multidimensional ecosystems that are shaped by forces from within and without" (p.220). Understanding the child and family within their context is an essential component of assessment and treatment planning. Family, community, societal, and political factors need to be taken into consideration when investigating child maltreatment in order to conduct a comprehensive evaluation (Garbarino, 1977; Belsky, 1980). Thorough best practice mandates addressing the causes, consequences and ensuing treatment formulations for abused children (US Dept. of Health and Human Services, 1997), while maintaining cognizance of contextual factors.

Seminal studies have noted a host of characteristics associated with child maltreating families, such as, single parenting, lack of social supports, low parental educational attainment, poor parent/child relationships, minority ethnicities, inadequate parenting, and those living in unstable and poverty stricken environments (Black, Heyman, & Slep, 2001; Chaffin, Kelleher, & Hollenberg, 1996). The following review of literature highlights the multi-level factors that impact the prevalence of child maltreatment. This section is couched in a discussion of theoretical underpinnings appropriate for the study of child abuse and neglect. As such, the theoretical principles employed in this analysis incorporate components of social capital theory (Coleman, 1988) and family stress theory (Hill, 1949), which provide an analysis based on a comprehensive melding of deductive explanation. These theories represent instructive guidelines for an analysis appropriate for the nature of these multiple levels of data because they capture intricacies of familial relationships in the context of their outer environments. For instance, social capital theory can be appropriately applied as an explanation highlighting the importance of the predictor variables used in these analyses —support from family and friends.

Particularly analogous to multi-level studies is the ecological perspective, which recognizes that individuals and families are in dynamic transactions with the outer socioeconomic and political environments. Moreover, these fluid interactions are embedded within the cultural context (Germain & Gitterman, 1996). Child abuse and neglect does not occur in a vacuum, hence assessment and intervention methods should be guided by a comprehensive understanding of outer layers of influence. Individuals and families live in and interact with communities, and as such, neighborhood characteristics and processes should not be separated from the behaviors of those families. Whereas, the potential to abuse children is subject to environmental influences, similarly, the substantiation of child maltreatment is indirectly impacted by societal influences (Garbarino, 1995). There are complex interactions among individuals, families, and communities, all of which are either subject to individual and societal protective factors or risk factors for continued child abuse (Little & Kantor, 2002; Cox, 1997). Child abuse potential has been assessed as it relates to family functioning (Mollerstrom, Patchner, & Milner, 1992), gender differences (Perez-Albeniz & de Paul, 2004), intimate personal violence (Casanueva & Martin, 2007), and of particular interest, the validity of the CAP scale and challenges for reliable assessment (McNary & Black, 2003).

At an individual level, child maltreatment risk factors include parental substance abuse (Dore, Doris, & Wright, 1995; Chaffin et al., 1996), depression (Chaffin et al., 1996; Zuravin & DiBlasio, 1996; Kotch et al., 1995), maternal distress, parental history of physical abuse and corporal punishment as children (Mohr & Tulman, 2000), and intimate partner violence (Little & Kantor, 2002). Conversely, protective factors are indicated based on the child's age and developmental stage, parental coping abilities, intelligence, and available social supports (Garmezy, 1985). Family factors have been identified to include the dynamics of family interactions, family stressors, financial difficulties, chronic poverty, and unemployment. Further, at the community level, social isolation, job availability, access to community services, formal and informal social supports, and peer groups of family members influence the propensity for child maltreatment (Reppucci et al., 1999; Fegan & Bowes, 1999; Little & Kantor, 2002).

Parenting with consistently limited resources can be difficult and most often leads to neglect, as a form of child maltreatment (Gaudin, 1993). Social capital theory (Coleman, 1988) addresses this issue of resource availability and can be directly applied to families interfacing with the child welfare system, as 59% (AFCARS Report) of substantiated reports of child maltreatment are due to neglect. It is theorized that all individuals rely on social capital, measured by available resources and acceptable social networks (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992; Vinson, Baldry, & Hargreaves, 1996) in order to successfully manage our life trajectories. In addition to the impact of limited resources as a risk factor for child neglect, limited resources at the familial level are influenced by the available community resources. This supports a need to assess how social capital impacts multiple levels of analysis.

Kasarda and Janowitz (1974) posit a systemic model of community as a complex system of friendship and kinship networks, inclusive of formal and informal ties, encouraging social cohesion and social trust.