

Child abuse rises with income inequality, study shows

February 11 2014, by Melissa Osgood

As the Great Recession deepened and income inequality became more pronounced, county-by-county rates of child maltreatment – from sexual, physical and emotional abuse to traumatic brain injuries and death – worsened, according to a nationwide study by Cornell University.

The [income inequality](#)-child maltreatment study, to be published in the March 2014 edition of the peer-review journal *Pediatrics*, covers all 3,142 American counties from 2005-09, and is one of the most comprehensive of its kind and the first to target child abuse in places with the greatest gap between rich and poor.

"Our study is the first to demonstrate that increases in income inequality are associated with increases in [child maltreatment](#)," said John J. Eckenrode, professor of human development and director of the Family Life Development Center in the College of Human Ecology. "More equal societies, states and communities have fewer health and social problems than less equal ones – that much was known. Our study extends the list of unfavorable child outcomes associated with income inequality to include child abuse and neglect."

Nearly 3 million children younger than 18 are physically abused, sexually abused, physically neglected or emotionally abused each year in the United States, the Cornell researchers noted. That is about 4 percent of the youth population – and those are just the officially documented cases.

"Certainly, poor counties with general, overall poverty have significant problems with [child abuse](#)," Eckenrode said. "We were more interested in geographic areas with wide variations in income – think of counties encompassing affluent suburbs and impoverished inner cities, or think of rich/poor Brooklyn, New York – that's where income inequalities are most pronounced. That's where the kids are really hurting."

The hurt doesn't stop when kids graduate – if they do – from school, the Cornell researchers observed.

"Child maltreatment is a toxic stressor in the lives of children that may result in childhood mortality and morbidities and have lifelong effects on leading causes of death in adults," they wrote. "This is in addition to long-term effects on mental health, substance use, [risky sexual behavior](#) and criminal behavior ... increased rates of unemployment, poverty and Medicaid use in adulthood."

More information: Results of the massive study will be published in the March 2014 journal, *Pediatrics*, as "Income Inequality and Child Maltreatment in the United States."

Provided by Cornell University

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