

Case workers need more holistic approach to identifying chronic child neglect

August 10 2016

A new study by researchers at the University at Buffalo suggests that Child Protective Services (CPS) caseworkers may need to use a more all-encompassing approach to improve how they respond to cases of chronic neglect.

Neglect accounts for more than 70 percent of cases reported nationally to CPS, according to Annette Semanchin Jones, an assistant professor in the UB School of Social Work.

While the typical CPS response often focuses on a single case, which might not appear to be a matter of egregious harm, previous reports may provide a more comprehensive assessment of the situation.

"It's difficult to incorporate past allegations of neglect when you're looking at one incident that may not rise to a level of serious concern," says Semanchin Jones, who conducted the research with Patricia Logan-Greene, also an assistant professor of social work at UB.

Their recently published study, which appears in the journal *Children and Youth Services Review*, suggests that a more holistic approach might improve how CPS responds to cases of chronic neglect.

"For cases of chronic neglect, if workers look over time and consider past allegations more thoroughly they could see an accumulation of harm that is very concerning," says Semanchin Jones.

There is no uniform definition of neglect. Its meaning can change depending on state standards but, generally, neglect is defined as failing to provide children with adequate food, clothing, shelter, medical care, education and supervision based on their age and development.

Chronic neglect, which also has different definitions from state to state, is recurring cases of neglect within a family, often across multiple developmental stages for children.

Despite its prevalence, neglect is understudied and poorly understood from a research perspective, but Semanchin Jones says there is a growing body of literature that indicates how neglect, and chronic neglect in particular, can have serious consequences on a child's emotional regulation and cognitive development.

The UB study is among the first to examine cases of chronic neglect with a focus on CPS practices.

The authors conducted a detailed case record review to examine CPS practices related to cases of chronic neglect, studying 38 families that had five or more neglect reports to CPS.

The results found that all of the families had at least four significant stressors, including extreme poverty, parental substance abuse, parental mental health issues, child behavioral problems or domestic violence.

"This is a finding in itself," says Semanchin Jones. "Systems need workers trained to identify these issues. Having good training in place would give workers a foundational knowledge to identify these family challenges early on in the case."

But the researchers found that case workers sometimes missed evidence of some of these risks

"There were questions raised about risk assessment procedures," says Semanchin Jones. "We saw evidence that the standardized processes used for risk assessment didn't always match the case notes."

She says better training and implementation of [risk assessment](#) protocols may be needed to ensure assessment tools are being used correctly and consistently.

"There needs to be a comprehensive assessment if there is any indication a family is experiencing chronic neglect," says Semanchin Jones. "Case workers need the tools to look at the history of the case, not just at one incident or one child, but at the whole family."

A comprehensive assessment can help identify a family's strengths and challenges.

"They're dealing with multiple factors. The initial assessment needs to be comprehensive so case workers can respond appropriately," she says.

Logan-Greene added, "Building on these findings, the jurisdiction that was the focus of the study has already made some adjustments to better respond to the needs of these families, including specialized CPS teams with additional training on these issues related to chronic neglect."

Provided by University at Buffalo

Citation: Case workers need more holistic approach to identifying chronic child neglect (2016, August 10) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-08-case-workers-holistic-approach-chronic.html>

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