

Important new insights into the influence of poverty on child maltreatment

January 24 2017, by Deborah Johnson

Decades of studies have established a strong link between poverty and child maltreatment.

But identifying connections is only half the battle; uncovering root causes is a key aim of [child maltreatment](#) research. A new set of studies published this week and edited by researchers from the University of Wisconsin–Madison, is the first to try to get at the causal mechanisms behind the economic factors that are strongly associated with child maltreatment, either as a risk factor or an outcome.

Their findings, which are collectively presented in Children and Youth Services Review released this week, boost understanding of the role of income and poverty in child maltreatment.

The papers were presented at a workshop hosted by UW–Madison's Institute for Research on Poverty in August 2015 on the "Economic Causes and Consequences of Child Maltreatment." The event was organized by the journal special editors Kristen Slack, professor of [social work](#) and IRP affiliate; Lawrence Berger, IRP director and professor of social work; and Jennifer Noyes, distinguished researcher and IRP associate director.

"When people think about child abuse and neglect, they tend to focus only on deficiencies in parenting behaviors, and not a broader set of stressors that can create or exacerbate risk for children," Slack says. "Poverty and economic hardship need to be systematically considered in

our efforts to prevent maltreatment or lessen its consequences. For some families, economic support can make a meaningful difference in whether children experience harm."

In the new studies, researchers asked: What is it about economic disadvantage and inequality that often leads to child neglect and abuse?

Their answers are grouped into the following five themes, focusing on links of:

1. Economic resources with child maltreatment and child welfare involvement;
2. neighborhood socioeconomic factors with child maltreatment;
3. the economy, income-related policies, and child maltreatment;
4. economic factors and out-of-home placement (e.g., foster care) outcomes; and
5. experiencing child maltreatment and out-of-home placement with young adult socioeconomic outcomes.

The studies reveal some common threads. Researchers found [economic factors](#) often play a large role, but income alone does not explain the poverty-maltreatment relationship. They also found that it is important to go beyond the individual and family level when searching for commonalities in child maltreatment cases to include where people live, work and go to school, and also where families fit into the broader context of society at large.

Several studies suggest that high earners and well-to-do neighborhoods have unexpected links to child maltreatment outcomes. Other studies found that children and families at risk for maltreatment or already experiencing maltreatment very often experience numerous poverty-related problems—such as unemployment, low education, disability—and many other risk factors that further complicate efforts to

prevent child maltreatment and reduce its impact across the life course, which is the ultimate goal of all of this research.

To that end, findings from the studies also indicate that public policies that assist families through greater [economic](#) support have the potential to both reduce child maltreatment and promote family reunification when children are placed in foster care.

More information: The volume is available online:
www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/01907409/72

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison

Citation: Important new insights into the influence of poverty on child maltreatment (2017, January 24) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-01-important-insights-poverty-child-maltreatment.html>

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