

Unemployment triggers increase in child neglect, according to new research

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The number of reported cases of child neglect in the United States of America increased as a result of the spike in unemployment following the financial crisis of 2007-08, according to new Oxford University research. The first study of its kind suggests that unemployment can cause an increase in child neglect because parents have more limited access to the resources required to provide for a child's basic needs, such as clothing, food and medical care.

Defined as the physical, mental, sexual or emotional abuse or neglect of a person under the age of 18, [child](#) maltreatment is a prolific problem in American society, with about 700,000 cases reported in 2015 alone. Neglect describes a situation when parents' inability to provide for their child's basic needs harms the child's health, safety and/or wellbeing.

Child maltreatment is widely understood to have significant consequences in later life, affecting mental health, the chances of employment and the likelihood of substance abuse, among other things. However, the causal effects of economic hardship, and the knock-on impact on maltreatment, are significantly less understood.

The study, conducted by two researchers from Oxford University, has for the first time, considered and quantified these causal effects, specifically whether [unemployment](#) causes child maltreatment.

Using nearly a decade's worth of data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), produced by the National Data

Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN), the team observed every reported incident of child abuse and neglect made to the state Child Protective Services for nearly every county in the U.S. from 2004 to 2012.

The findings reveal a significant link between unemployment and [child neglect](#), with a 1 percentage point increase in the [unemployment rate](#) leading to a 20 percent increase in reported neglect. However there does not seem to be a relationship between unemployment and other forms of [child abuse](#).

Elisabetta De Cao, Research Fellow in Oxford's Centre for Health Service Economics & Organisation, said: 'There is increasing research on the causal effect of economic conditions on domestic violence, but this work has never been done for children, which is a very different dynamic.'

The research also considers the value and impact of social (government provided) and private safety nets (partner, family, friends, health insurance), and whether access to these resources can have a mitigating effect on unemployment.

Access to state provided [unemployment benefits](#) were found to make a huge difference. Initially offered to people for a maximum of 26 weeks pre-recession, during the economic crisis it was extended in some states, and ranged significantly from 48 weeks to up to 99. In states that were more generous, offering 87 weeks of unemployment benefits or more, child neglect increased by 14% but in states that offered a maximum of 55 weeks of benefits, reported incidents of child neglect rose by 21%.

Dan Brown, PhD student in Economics at Oxford University added: 'Our study shows that unemployment causes an increase in child neglect, with little evidence of an effect on other types of abuse. During hard times, if

parents lose their jobs and don't have access to safety nets, they no longer have the means to provide for their children, which ultimately leads to neglect.

'We also found an indication that after a job loss people spend less on basic goods, like food and beverages. In doing so, this can lead to a higher likelihood of neglect.'

While state help offers significant value, the research revealed that access to private safety nets also has a positive effect. A key private safety net the authors looked at is health insurance. The effects of unemployment on child neglect were notably greater in counties where more children did not have [health insurance](#), and were therefore less protected.

In terms of demography, African American children were found to be least likely to have two employed parents living with them, and were accordingly more at risk of neglect when one parent lost a job, than Caucasian or Hispanic children.

Of the potential policy implications of this report, and how the US government can use the findings to better protect children, Elisabetta said: 'In general policies that are designed to enable parents' employment security could prove an important contribution to reducing [child maltreatment](#). There is an indication that cutting these services will lead to an increase in [neglect](#). We need to better understand whether parents face barriers to creating private safety nets, which could help people to cope during bad economic times.'

'If we can reduce the number of neglected children, it will have a positive long term impact on society. These children will go on to have better outcomes in adulthood, which will have positive labour, health and economic effects.'

Although the team studied the effects of unemployment in the USA, they are in the process of replicating the study in the UK, which arguably has a more generous welfare system. The results of this work are expected in the next year.

More information: [www.economics.ox.ac.uk/departm ... in-the-united-states](http://www.economics.ox.ac.uk/departm...in-the-united-states)

Provided by University of Oxford

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