

Study suggests social workers lack tools to identify potential chronic child neglect

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Credit: University at Buffalo

Neglect accounts for more than 75 percent of all child protection cases in the United States, yet, despite this alarming frequency, child welfare workers lack effective assessment tools for identifying the associated risk and protective factors of chronic neglect, according to Patricia Logan-Greene, an assistant professor in the University at Buffalo School of Social Work.

Logan-Greene is the author of a newly published study with Annette

Semanchin Jones, also an assistant professor of [social work](#) at UB, which suggests that the ineffective assessments are often the result of using instruments that are not specifically designed to include elements predicting chronic neglect.

Generally speaking, neglect refers to a lack of adequate care, including failure to meet basic needs like food and housing, lack of supervision, missing essential medical care and educational neglect. Chronic neglect refers to repeated incidents of neglect, often across several developmental stages.

The effects of chronic neglect can impact early brain development, cognitive development and emotional regulation, but even within [child](#) protection agencies, social workers might rate neglect cases as lower risk when compared to what they consider more serious offenses.

The authors say that many child protection agencies, in the absence of properly targeted assessments, turn to standardized assessments that do not address the potential accumulation of harm due to chronic neglect.

"Most of these tools weren't developed with chronic neglect in mind at all, but even the standardized assessments, according to the results, weren't consistently implemented," says Logan-Greene. "We know from previous research, for example, that having in place good support systems protects against neglect, yet 99 percent of families with chronic neglect are categorized as having good support.

"That can't possibly be true."

"There's a real opportunity here for states to look at implementation practices and train case workers to ensure effective implementation," says Semanchin Jones.

The authors identified critical predictors of chronic neglect, such as hazardous housing, mismanaged finances and alcohol abuse, which Logan-Greene says can help determine which families need help the most.

The primary caregiver in families with chronic neglect was also more likely to have a history of domestic violence, drug use and mental health problems.

Knowledge of these factors also makes it more likely to either develop new, more effective tools or to modify current ones that focus on chronic neglect.

"One of the implications here is that we could potentially add to or adjust standardized assessments so we could use them for chronic neglect," says Semanchin Jones. "There are many ways neglect impacts on the well-being of these children, so if we know that, we can then intervene for families that might go on to develop chronic neglect."

The findings, which add critical new insights to the understudied area of chronic child neglect, appear in the journal *Child & Family Social Work*.

In addition to the prevalence of neglect, Logan-Greene mentions the ironic "neglect of neglect" in research, as noted decades ago by the [child welfare](#) scholar Leroy Pelton.

And while Pelton's words still have an element of truth today, Logan-Greene and Semanchin Jones are among those researchers contributing to a growing body of literature on chronic neglect.

The challenges begin at a basic level.

Although evidence points to the seriousness of neglect, there is no

federal definition of the term. Different states have different standards and because some child welfare systems exist as county-administered agencies, the definition of neglect can vary even within a particular state.

"Most of the time child neglect is considered among the least damaging forms of maltreatment compared to physical and sexual abuse, but we do have research that neglect and chronic neglect, especially, are significantly detrimental to children even when they're not physically harmed," says Logan-Greene.

For their study, Logan-Greene and Semanchin Jones conceptualized chronic neglect as five or more reports investigated by child protection agencies over a five-year period.

The research was prospective with the authors looking at roughly 2,000 cases from the time of a first neglect report and then followed the families into the future to determine if that neglect became chronic.

"We compared those who never had another report to others, and we also compared them using the agency's risk assessment tools to determine if that tool effectively predicted chronic [neglect](#)," says Semanchin Jones.

Provided by University at Buffalo

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