

Anti-poverty policies can reduce reports of child neglect

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A new University of Washington study explores the link between a state-level economic benefit, the Earned Income Tax Credit, and reports of child maltreatment. Credit: University of Washington

Providing economic relief to struggling families can lead to another

positive effect—fewer cases of child neglect, according to new research by the University of Washington.

A 10% increase in a common benefit for low- to moderate-income working families, the Earned Income Tax Credit, led to a 9% decrease in the annual number of reports of [child neglect](#) made to child welfare agencies over a 14-year study period. That's a significant impact, researchers say, and can inform future social policies.

The study is relevant to current policy actions, as President Joe Biden has recently proposed an expansion of the child tax credit as part of his new stimulus plan.

"The EITC is an important part of the U.S. safety net that has been shown to substantially reduce [child poverty](#). Our results add to growing evidence that policies that improve family economic security can also prevent child maltreatment," said Nicole Kovski, a doctoral student at the Evans School of Public Policy and Governance at the UW.

She is lead author of the study published Jan. 19 in the journal *Child Maltreatment*.

Child maltreatment is a common problem in the United States, with an estimated one-third of children subject to a child protective services investigation before they turn 18.

The stress of poverty has long been linked to child abuse and family instability, and other research has explored the impact of different economic policies on child-abuse prevention. The UW study is the first to focus on the Earned Income Tax Credit - a program designed to assist lower-income families, often with a tangible benefit in the form of a tax refund—and its potential association with reports of child maltreatment made to child welfare agencies across the U.S.

The Earned Income Tax Credit is provided by both the [federal government](#) and 28 states, and eligibility and credit size vary with income and family size. UW researchers focused on the generosity of refundable state EITCs, noting that such a benefit has been found to be put toward a family's basic needs.

The research team analyzed the number of child abuse and neglect reports to local and state agencies from 2004 through 2017 and the correlation with the EITC program at the state level. The team hypothesized that the more generous a state's EITC, the more necessities, such as child care or rent, a family can put the money toward, potentially alleviating some of the stress that can lead to child maltreatment. Over the course of the study period, many states altered their level of benefit as a percentage of the federal tax credit, while others generally held steady. Minnesota, for example, provided an average of 33% of the federal credit, depending on household income, while Oklahoma provided 5% of the federal credit before making its EITC nonrefundable in 2016.

With the child abuse and neglect data, the UW team counted all reports of maltreatment, rather than just those reports that were found to be substantiated, reasoning that any report increases the likelihood of a child being victimized in the future. Taking all states into account—those with and without an EITC—during the study period, states averaged nearly 4,400 maltreatment reports per 100,000 children each year.

When annual state EITC benefits were taken into account, the team found maltreatment reports, particularly those of neglect, declined as benefit levels rose: A 10 percentage-point increase in state-level benefits was associated with 241 fewer reports of neglect per 100,000 children. The effect was even more pronounced in the number of neglect reports on children from infancy through age 5, the age range at which the

majority of maltreatment incidents occur.

Put another way, a 10 percentage-point increase in the refundable EITC benefit led to a 9% drop in rates of reported child neglect.

"This study highlights the importance of investigating the impact of social policies on health. Violence is a health issue with multiple forms, such as child maltreatment. An emerging body of evidence is empirically demonstrating that violence prevention can be an added benefit of social policies that were not necessarily enacted with that specific goal originally. This study is the most recent addition to that literature," said Ali Rowhani-Rahbar, an associate professor of epidemiology at the UW, director of the Violence Prevention Section at the Harborview Injury Prevention and Research Center, and the principal investigator of the project that supported this study.

While child neglect showed a trend, the link between EITC benefits and reports of specific types of abuse—physical, sexual and emotional—was not statistically significant. Researchers note that [child abuse](#) rates, in general, have declined much more significantly than neglect rates in recent decades, while neglect is found in three-quarters of child maltreatment cases.

Child neglect, too, may be more distinctly associated with poverty, past research has shown, potentially making some interventions more effective in preventing certain types of [maltreatment](#) than others.

"Child neglect often involves the failure of a caregiver to provide children with necessities, such as food, shelter and basic supervision. Additional income provided to families through the EITC can improve parents' abilities to meet these basic needs," Kovski said.

Researchers say the findings point to the fundamental value of an

economic policy—the EITC—as a [child-maltreatment](#) prevention strategy. In other words, proactively improving financial stability among families may mitigate the circumstances that lead to child neglect and abuse.

More information: Nicole L. Kovski et al, Association of State-Level Earned Income Tax Credits With Rates of Reported Child Maltreatment, 2004–2017, *Child Maltreatment* (2021). [DOI: 10.1177/1077559520987302](#)

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