



PREVENTING CHILD NEGLECT:

Looking at the problem through a macro lens

A CSCH Brief by Kerri M. Raissian, Megan Feely, Daniel Schwartzman and Helene M. Marcy

The Problem

Child neglect “occurs when basic needs of children are not met, regardless of cause.”¹ Though rates of physical and sexual abuse among children have decreased since 1992, child neglect rates have not.² The issue is severe: in 2016, 80% of the almost 1500 child maltreatment deaths occurred as a result of neglect and child maltreatment deaths continue to increase.³ Recently researchers from UConn, together with researchers from Georgia Tech and the University of Illinois, highlighted the importance of addressing macro-level issues as an effective way of combating child neglect.³ This brief summarizes the discussion and recommendations from their article.

Prior Research and a Public Health Model Framework

Prior research on child neglect prevention has focused mainly on family dynamics, individual behavior, and family-level interventions. By focusing primarily on these factors, scholars potentially limit their understanding of the influence of external macro-level issues such as economies, labor markets and governmental affairs.³

The research team suggests that researchers and policymakers should consider looking at the problem of child neglect deaths from a public health model framework. A public health model involves “defining the fatality outcome, understanding the mechanisms that lead to the cause-specific mortality and implementing macro-level policies and campaigns to change behaviors.”³

This public health model approach has reduced child mortality in other areas. In order to reduce child fatalities caused by motor vehicle accidents, for example, the public health goal was “to reduce the total number of motor vehicle accidents by making **all** driving safer.”³ Rather than attempting to address individual cases of problematic drivers, public health campaigns tackled the issue from multiple angles and increased public awareness of safe driving practices in general. These campaigns, along with policy changes focusing on all cars and drivers (lowering the speed limit, increasing penalties for drunk driving) and manufacturing changes, have resulted in fewer motor vehicle accident deaths.³ The researchers ask us to “imagine a world where neglect prevention mirrors our approach to car safety, where macro-level interventions apply to all cars and all drivers, not just those who are statistically likely to be in an accident or those who have already been in one.”³

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Emerging Macro Research

Emerging research shows that policy changes that positively affect the family's macro-environment are promising as primary preventions of child neglect. Studies have shown that interventions such as income supports and increased minimum wage lead to reductions in child maltreatment.⁴ These findings suggest that programs designed to increase net income for low-income families may lead to reductions in neglect by mitigating the pathways through which poverty leads to child neglect.⁵ Other research has focused on services aimed at supporting the health and development of children in low income families.³ Access to early childhood education, child healthcare and paid family leave have all been shown to be inversely correlated with child maltreatment.⁶ "The literature consistently demonstrates that economic changes, either as a result of specific policies or macroeconomic trends, result in relatively predictable changes in child maltreatment and more specifically neglect."³

Recommendations

The research team writes that in order to be able to conduct this macro-level research, researchers need:

- **A standard definition of child abuse and neglect.** "Consistently defined and measured outcomes would allow comparison of the effects of policies and programs across studies."
- **To clearly delineate the causes of neglect.** "Analyses should separate maltreatment by type (i.e. neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse), as research has previously shown different causal mechanisms for different types of maltreatment."
- **Access to data on neglect and economic factors.** "These data currently exist but are often not available to researchers." Access to these data will enable researchers and policymakers to quantify the economic costs and effects on child neglect so as to determine the effectiveness of prevention programs.
- **To collaborate across disciplines.** Research from experts in economics, public health, medicine, public policy, family studies and social work needs to be encouraged and rewarded. "Creative incentives for practitioners and researchers to collaborate would increase the pace and effectiveness of this work."³

Research Team Members include Lindsey Bullinger (Georgia Tech), Megan Feely (University of Connecticut), Kerri Raissian (University of Connecticut), and Will Schneider (University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign).

¹ Dubowitz, H., Black, M., Starr, R. H., Jr., & Zuravin, S. (1993). A conceptual definition of child neglect. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, 20(1), 8–26

² Finkelhor, D., Saito K., & Jones, L. (2018). Updated trends in child maltreatment, 2016. Crimes against children research center.

³ Bullinger, L. R., Feely, M., Raissian, K. M., & Schneider, W. (2019). Heed Neglect, Disrupt Child Maltreatment: a Call to Action for Researchers. *International Journal on Child Maltreatment: Research, Policy and Practice*. doi: 10.1007/s42448-019-00026-5

⁴ Raissian, K. M., & Bullinger, L. R. (2017). Money matters: Does the minimum wage affect child maltreatment rates? *Children and Youth Services Review*, 72, 60–70. doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.09.033

⁵ Klevens, J., Schmidt, B., Luo, F., Xu, L., Ports, K. A., & Lee, R. D. (2017). Effect of the Earned Income Tax Credit on Hospital Admissions for Pediatric Abusive Head Trauma, 1995–2013. *Public Health Reports*, 132(4), 505–511. doi: 10.1177/0033354917710905

⁶ Berger, L.M., Font, S.A., Slack, K.S. et al. Income and child maltreatment in unmarried families: evidence from the earned income tax credit. *Rev Econ Household* 15, 1345–1372 (2017).