The Elephant in the Room: The Role of Poverty in Child Maltreatment

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Presentation Overview

- National estimates and trends in child maltreatment
- The Recession and child protection systems
- Relationship between poverty and child maltreatment
- Policy and service responses to child maltreatment
- Recommendations for policy and practice
Most Recent Data on Incidence

- National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) (2009)
  - 10 per 1,000 children

- National Incidence Study (2005-6)
  - Harm Standard: 17 per 1,000 children
  - Endangerment Standard: 40 per 1,000 children
(Number per 1,000)

- **NIS-3**: 23/1,000; 42/1,000
- **NIS-4**: 17/1,000; 40/1,000

Years:
Note: Trend estimates represent total change from 1992 to 2009. Annual rates for physical abuse and sexual abuse have been multiplied by 2 and 3 respectively in Figure 1 so that trend comparisons can be highlighted.
Real Declines in Physical and Sexual Abuse?

 Arguments for real declines:

- They are large
- Declines in official statistics parallel declines in other perpetrator-victim phenomena;
- Declines parallel declines in teen suicide, runaway teens, juvenile delinquency, and teen pregnancy;
- Declines in National Incidence Study maltreatment estimates between 1993 and 2005-6 (NIS-3 to NIS-4)
Real Declines in Physical and Sexual Abuse?

**Argument against real declines:**
- Increase in child maltreatment fatalities
  - But in line with historical fluctuations
- State policy changes (e.g. differential response, changing maltreatment definitions) are responsible
  - But many of these instituted after decline began
  - States with “mechanical” declines offset by many states with unexplained declines
- Increased caseloads have created system pressure to deflect alleged maltreatment
Of note...

- Smaller declines in neglect relative to PA and SA translate into larger proportions of families with neglect-related CPS involvement.

- Neglect more likely to recur than PA and SA; composition of CPS is increasingly one of chronic neglect cases.
Substantiations as a % of Referrals

- Delaware
- Illinois
- Maine
- Michigan
- Missouri
- Nebraska
- New Jersey
- New Mexico
- Oregon
- Pennsylvania
- Rhode Island
- South Carolina
- Texas
- Virginia
- Wisconsin
Studies on Recession and Maltreatment


- Anecdotal observations that maltreatment increased with unemployment at Boston Medical Center
- Studied 18 years of data at the national and state levels and found with every 1% increase in unemployment there was a .5% increase in maltreatment reports one year later
- Also found that states with higher unemployment rates had more reports
- Consistent with earlier findings by Steinberg et al., Krugman et al., Jones, and Catalano
Abusive Head Trauma During a Time of Increased Unemployment: A Multicenter Analysis

- Overall rate of abusive head trauma (AHT) increased from 8.9/100,000 before recession to 14.7/100,000 during recession
- No increase in non-inflicted traumatic brain injury
- No relationship between rate of AHT and county-level unemployment rates
State level data on CPS reports and economic indicators in 7 states (unemployment, labor force participation, food stamp use)

States demonstrated trends in expected direction for economic indicators, but not for child maltreatment

Increases in unemployment predicted increases in neglect reports
Why no declines in trend data?

1. Fewer mandated reporters
2. “Lag” effect (other trends may serve as harbingers, e.g., increased doubling-up, unemployment, family homelessness)
3. System capacity and deflection efforts
4. Those with CPS histories (e.g., chronic neglect) may be least affected by recession
5. Increases in public benefit use may precede uptick in CPS caseloads
To summarize...

- Inconsistent trends in CPS indicators during recession
- Contextual trends: increased indicators of economic stress, but declines in crime statistics
- Unclear counterfactual: slowed or stagnated declines vs. increase?
- Verdict: need more time and more data
Relationship between Poverty and Child Maltreatment

What we know & what we don’t know
Most Poor Families Do Not Maltreat…

Families in Poverty

Families in CPS
WHAT WE KNOW

- Low-income families are over-represented in child protective services (CPS) and out-of-home care populations;
- In National Incidence Studies (NIS-1-2-3-4), strong inverse correlation with income; strongest for neglect;
- Child maltreatment report rates are greatest in communities with high poverty rates and high unemployment rates;
- Receipt of public assistance (e.g., TANF, Food Stamps) predictive of CPS involvement;
- Welfare sanctions that result in income loss are predictive of neglect reports, but not substantiations;
- Strong correlation between welfare assistance and child protection caseloads, at least prior to 1996 federal welfare reform.
Implications of these study findings....

- The role poverty-related factors play in CPS policy and maltreatment definitions:
  
  - CPS practice philosophy dictates “not for reasons of poverty alone”; less clear in practice
  
  - If economic hardship increases risk of CPS reports but not substantiated reports or case openings, then what?
  
  - Need for explicit attention to the economic needs of families at-risk for maltreatment—rather than just their parenting-related needs—whether or not CPS has a role
Poverty and Maltreatment: WHAT WE DON’T KNOW

- Little experimental evidence linking access to economic resources to child maltreatment outcomes
  - Delaware’s welfare reform experimental evaluation (Fein & Lee, 2000).
  - Wisconsin’s Child Support Demonstration Evaluation (Cancian, Slack & Yang, 2010)

- Limited understanding of the mechanisms linking poverty and child maltreatment
  - Direct effects of resources
  - Stress/coping
  - Surveillance and/or class bias
  - Social “selection”
How Might Poverty Matter for CPS Involvement?

Caregiver Characteristics

- Increased stress or depression
- Changes in parenting
- Changes in home environment

Increased risk or harm to child

CPS Report

Poverty and Economic Hardship

Cultural, Environmental, and System Characteristics

Interface with reporters
Policy and Service Response

Context

Where we are and where we need to go
Current Policy and Economic Contexts

- Clear economic insecurity
- No clear economic safety net
- No institutionalized “emergency assistance” options
- Limited access to affordable, reasonable-quality housing
- Very few family-friendly, low-wage jobs; few with adequate benefits; few provide living wage (though EITC helps)
- No clear practice links between public assistance and child welfare systems
- Overall fragmented and categorical systems
Contuum of CPS Involvement

FULL

Traditional CPS

Differential Response

Community Response

Screened out or closed after investigation

Reunified or aging out of foster care

Family Support

NONE
“Community Response” Models

- Non-CPS agencies receive referrals for low-risk families
  - Serve more low-risk families previously excluded from the child welfare system to prevent escalation of risks associated with abuse/neglect (and re-reports to CPS)
  - Reduce demands on CPS systems that have relied on limited resources to serve lower-risk families
  - Prevent escalation of risks that may lead to child maltreatment
  - Build a more comprehensive, community-based service continuum for serving families at risk for maltreatment
  - Provision of services in a less “threatening,” less intrusive context; may encourage self-referrals
Average acceptance rate of 54%; range 28% to 83%

CPS referral reasons were most often related to parenting needs; participant needs most often related to income.

Participant reports of public benefit receipt were low at CRP intake, despite very low income levels.

70% of participants made significant progress toward at least one service goal; 57% attained at least one goal.

Having an income-related service goal was highly predictive of goal attainment.
What could we change in practice?

- Parenting interventions may not work if economic context is in chaos;
- Inventory economic hardships during service assessment phase (in CPS as well as in prevention programs)
  - Acknowledge that economic hardships affect parenting
  - Listen for sources of economic stress and probe to understand how such stress affects caregiving capacities
  - When identified, consider how they translate into risks for children in question
  - When identified, probe about the degree of control caregiver has over each hardship
  - Make “poverty-informed” decisions
Future Research

- Experimental evaluations of economic support interventions
  - HOW MUCH CHILD MALTREATMENT PREVENTION CAN WE “BUY” WITH ECONOMIC SUPPORT INTERVENTIONS ALONE?

- Cost-benefit analyses of programs that involve economic support components; track child well-being and CPS events

- More attention to mechanisms linking poverty to child maltreatment
  - With careful attention to how poverty elevates risk of actual harm to child, versus risk of being noticed and reported to CPS
An Example...

- Community Response model focused on economic support intervention:
  - Comprehensive benefit screening and eligibility determination, and advocacy in accessing benefits for which family is eligible;
  - Flex funds dedicated to emergency assistance with material needs;
  - Financial literacy training (for prevention workers)
The Milwaukee CRP Model

Linking to Benefits and Economic or Material Resources

Target Population:
Families whose CPS cases close upon investigation

Service Duration:
~6 weeks; families can re-engage if they need additional assistance

Financial Decision-making Assistance

One-time emergency assistance with economic needs

*Referrals for other “non-economic” service needs
M-CRP Staff Roles

Outreach and engagement

**Resource** hub for information on public benefits and local resources to help stabilize a family’s economic situation

Guide and **advocate** in benefit linkage process

**Educate** on issues pertaining to financial planning, debt reduction, credit issues…..
Implementation Challenges

- Switch from a comfort zone
  - ...emphasizing parenting interventions to systematic and comprehensive economic support intervention.
  - ...that deferred to other service silos
  - ...that views “financial literacy” as something with more middle class relevance
  - ...that embraced family-defined needs
    - Conundrum of you don’t know what you don’t know
  - ...in which relationship-building was central, and often hinged on connecting around parenting/family relational issues
  - ...in which financial decision making was “new territory”
Preliminary Findings from La Crosse

Sample N=279

- 186 Treatment; 93 Control group members
- 26.5% (74) had a post program referral CPS report (19.4% within 1 year)
- 47.3% had at least one CPS report 90+ days PRIOR to the program index report
- Treatment group more likely to have prior reports
Preliminary Main Findings

ITT TOT (crude)

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- ITT: Intention to Treat
- TOT (crude): Total (crude)
For reasons of poverty alone.....