



Intersections of individual and neighborhood disadvantage: Implications for child maltreatment



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ABSTRACT

Parenting behaviors are influenced by numerous factors, including individual, family, and community contexts. Ecological systems theory suggests that these systems as well as interactions among the systems coalesce to influence the parent/child relationship in multiple ways. When challenges exist within and across these systems, child abuse and neglect can occur. While a significant body of research has delved into parsing the relative importance of neighborhood-level versus individual-level predictors, little is known about the complex ways in which interactions across ecological systems might enhance or hinder parenting behaviors. The current study seeks to fill this gap by answering the following research question: (1) Are there interactive effects of individual and neighborhood poverty on the risk of child maltreatment? Structural equation modeling was used to analyze data from 946 parents at Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) clinics in Franklin County, Ohio. Living in higher poverty neighborhoods is associated with higher levels of maltreatment irrespective of individual poverty status, but there is not a corresponding decrease for those living in lower poverty neighborhoods. These findings suggest that both individual poverty status and neighborhood poverty matter for child maltreatment and that there does not appear to be a compounding effect of being both poor and in a poor neighborhood, nor is there a protective effect when poor but living in a nonpoor neighborhood.

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1. Introduction

Parenting behaviors are influenced by numerous factors, including individual, family, and community contexts. Ecological systems theory suggests that these systems, as well as interactions among them, coalesce to influence the parent-child relationship in multiple ways (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). When challenges exist within and across these systems, child abuse and neglect may be more likely to occur (Garbarino & Eckenrode, 1997). Although a significant body of research has examined the relative importance of neighborhood-level versus individual-level predictors (see Coulton, Crampton, Irwin, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2007; Freisthler, Merritt, & LaScala, 2006; Maguire-Jack, 2014, for reviews), little is known about the complex ways in which interactions across ecological systems might enhance or hinder parenting behaviors. The current study seeks to fill this gap by answering the following research question: (1) Are there interactive effects of individual and neighborhood poverty on the risk of specific subtypes of child maltreatment?

2. Background

2.1. Child maltreatment

An estimated 12.5% of children will have a confirmed case of maltreatment by the age of 18 years in the United States (Wildeman et al., 2014). The effects of childhood maltreatment experiences are far-reaching. During childhood and adolescence, child maltreatment is associated with worsened social-emotional development (Font & Berger, 2015; Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002) and mental health problems (Holmes & Sammel, 2005). In addition, maltreatment is believed to result in changes to biological stress systems, which may have neurological consequences, including delays in cognitive and academic skills (Edmiston et al., 2011; McCrory, De Brito, & Viding, 2011; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Watts-English, Fortson, Gibler, Hooper, & De Bellis, 2006; Wilson, Hansen, & Li, 2011). In the long-term, child maltreatment is associated with higher rates of disease and health risk behaviors (Felitti et al., 1998) and criminality (Fang & Corso, 2007; Widom & Maxfield, 2001), as well as reduced economic well-being (Currie & Widom, 2010; Font & Maguire-Jack, 2016). Beyond the negative impacts of maltreatment on individuals, the societal cost of maltreatment is believed to be quite high. Though estimates vary, a recent study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that the average

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lifetime cost per nonfatal maltreatment victim in the United States is over \$200,000 in 2010 dollars (Fang, Brown, Florence, & Mercy, 2012). Given the high costs associated with maltreatment both to victims and society, it is essential that we fully understand the risk and protective factors related to maltreatment, so that prevention efforts can be effectively targeted.

2.2. Poverty and child maltreatment

2.2.1. Individual level

Children in poverty are three times more likely to be maltreated compared to non-poor children (Drake & Jonson-Reid, 2013). Individual poverty status is associated with increased risk of substandard parenting, including abuse and neglect, in a variety of studies (e.g., Berger, 2004; Putnam-Hornstein & Needell, 2011; Sabol, Coulton, & Korbin, 2004; Sedlak et al., 2010; Slack, Holl, McDaniel, Yoo, & Bolger, 2004). Though poverty is associated with both abuse and neglect, it is most directly connected to a specific neglect subtype—physical neglect, which refers to a parent's inability or unwillingness to provide their child with basic physical needs, most commonly construed to include food, shelter, access to medical care, and clothing. Lack of resources may also inhibit access to adequate childcare, which could result in supervision neglect. Notably, however, a social selection process is likely also at play—that is, poverty and maltreatment are both correlated with a range of factors that could explain their association (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010). Nevertheless, there is emerging evidence of a causal role of income in maltreatment risk, particularly for supervisory neglect (Berger, Font, Slack, & Waldfogel, 2016; Cancian, Yang, & Slack, 2013).

The Family Stress Model of Economic Hardship (Conger & Elder, 1994) has been used to explain associations of poverty and economic hardship with a range of adverse family and child outcomes. The model proposes that economic problems, particularly when severe, can overwhelm family processes, and evoke parental depression, stress, and anxiety. Thus, not only may children be directly affected by economic deprivation, the resulting disruptions to family and parental functioning may also be harmful for child development. It has been suggested that the psychological symptoms experienced by parents pursuant to economic stress increase parental hostility and affect parenting behaviors (Conger & Elder, 1994; Mistry, Vandewater, Huston, & McLoyd, 2002; Newland, Crnic, Cox, & Mills-Koonce, 2013). Children within these families witness their parents' emotional distress and are more likely to be subjected to harsh and inconsistent discipline practices (Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994). Whereas the Family Stress Model of Economic Hardship (Conger & Elder, 1994) focuses primarily on harsh parenting behaviors (e.g., physical abuse), we hypothesize that these pathways may also relate to child neglect, as parents who are experiencing high levels of economic hardship and parent stress may also be inconsistent in their ability to meet the physical and emotional needs of their children.

Economic hardships may include income loss, unemployment, low levels of income, and a high level of debt relative to assets. Such hardships are stressful when parents become unable to meet their families' basic material needs, are unable to pay bills, or have to cut back on necessary expenses. Material hardship is a more direct measure of disadvantage associated with poverty, because even within very low-income families, some families below the poverty line are able to meet their needs, while other families above that level continue to experience these hardships (Gershoff, Aber, Raver, & Lennon, 2007).

2.2.2. Neighborhood level

Understanding whether, and in what ways, neighborhood poverty influences child maltreatment risk has been the focus of a great deal of research. Neighborhood poverty has been found to be correlated with child abuse and neglect in several studies using a variety of methods and samples (Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 1999; Deccio, Horner, & Wilson, 1994; Drake & Pandey, 1996; Ernst, 2000; Freisthler, 2004;

Freisthler, Midanik, & Gruenewald, 2004; Merritt, 2009). Further, of all the neighborhood characteristics examined across multi-level studies, poverty is the single neighborhood-level factor that is most consistently associated with maltreatment (Maguire-Jack, 2014).

At the neighborhood level, many studies have relied upon social disorganization theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942) to understand the pathways through which living in an impoverished neighborhood might contribute to risk for child maltreatment (Ben-Arieh, 2010; Coulton et al., 1999; Ernst, 2001; Freisthler, Gruenewald, Ring, & LaScala, 2008; Fromm, 2004; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1992). The theory was first proposed to understand the link between certain neighborhood characteristics and crime and delinquency. The authors found that areas with high levels of poverty, residential mobility (neighborhood turnover), and ethnic heterogeneity had higher rates of crime. The authors deemed such factors to characterize “disorganized neighborhoods.” These so-called disorganized neighborhoods are thought to lack the necessary structure to maintain social controls that allow community members to realize shared values (Sampson & Groves, 1989; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). When neighborhoods lack shared principles and community expectations, crime and other deviant behaviors are more common because the neighborhood residents are unable to organize against these social milieus. Neighborhood disorganization is believed to affect child and youth outcomes directly through fewer opportunities for prosocial activities and greater opportunities for deviant behavior (Elliott et al., 1996). These same pathways are likely to impact parents within the neighborhoods as well, through fewer formal resources available to support positive parenting (Bowen, Bowen, & Ware, 2002; Elliott et al., 1996), lower levels of social support and social control (Sampson, 2012), and a greater acceptance of harsh parenting and corporal punishment (Caughy & Franzini, 2005). Neighborhoods experiencing concentrated disadvantage are less likely to have social services and other institutional resources (Allard, 2009; Burchinal, Nelson, Carlson, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Zhou, 2010), which also contributes to disorganization because such resources provide an opportunity for residents to come together and work toward a shared vision for their community (Sampson, 2001). Related specifically to maltreatment, they also contribute to improved parenting through encouraging parental investment in their children (Dupéré, Leventhal, Crosnoe, & Dion, 2010) and providing prevention programming (Maguire-Jack, 2014).

2.2.3. Interaction across neighborhood and individual levels

Understanding the relative contributions of neighborhood- and individual-level poverty as well as the possible interaction between the two are essential for creating and implementing successful maltreatment prevention efforts. Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes “reciprocal determinism” when considering the interactions that take place between individuals and the environments in which they live (McAlister, Perry, & Parcel, 2008, p. 170). Reciprocal determinism is a process of environmental factors influencing individuals and individuals influencing their environment (McAlister et al., 2008). Rather than focusing on individual, social, or environmental factors as the determinants of behavior, Social Cognitive Theory posits that human behavior is the product of the interplay of all of these factors (McAlister et al., 2008). Past experiences are considered in relation to future behavioral action; they are seen as influential in shaping whether a person will engage in a specific behavior in the future and why (McAlister et al., 2008). Through the Social Cognitive Theory lens, behavior can be seen as “a product of an individual's learning history, present perceptions of the environment, and intellectual and physical capacities” (McAlister et al., 2008, p. 176).⁷

Experimental research has identified causal impacts of neighborhood poverty among low-income families. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), in a 10-year demonstration project called Moving to Opportunity (MTO), moved impoverished individuals from high-poverty neighborhoods to low-poverty

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