Children and Youth Services Review 72 (2017) 71–81

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Children and Youth Services Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/childyouth

The Great Recession and risk for child abuse and neglect

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 29 August 2016
Received in revised form 8 September 2016
Accepted 12 October 2016
Available online 15 October 2016

Keywords:
Aggression
Fragile Families
Parenting
Abuse
Neglect
Unemployment
Consumer confidence

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the association between the Great Recession and four measures of the risk for maternal child abuse and neglect: (1) maternal physical aggression; (2) maternal psychological aggression; (3) physical neglect by mothers; and (4) supervisory/exposure neglect by mothers. It draws on rich longitudinal data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a longitudinal birth cohort study of families in 20 U.S. cities ($N = 3177$; 50% African American, 25% Hispanic; 22% non-Hispanic white; 3% other). The study collected information for the 9-year follow-up survey before, during, and after the Great Recession (2007–2010). Interview dates were linked to two macroeconomic measures of the Great Recession: the national Consumer Sentiment Index and the local unemployment rate. Also included are a wide range of socio-demographic controls, as well as city fixed effects and controls for prior parenting. Results indicate that the Great Recession was associated with increased risk of child abuse but decreased risk of child neglect. Households with social fathers present may have been particularly adversely affected. Results also indicate that economic uncertainty during the Great Recession, as measured by the Consumer Sentiment Index and the unemployment rate, had direct effects on the risk of abuse or neglect, which were not mediated by individual-level measures of economic hardship or poor mental health.

1. Introduction

The Great Recession, which officially began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009 (NBER, 2010) was the largest economic downturn in the United States since the Great Depression. The Great Recession was characterized by the collapse of the housing market, sustained levels of high unemployment, the collapse or rescue of a number of large banks, and widespread fear of a long-term economic downturn or depression.

That economic downturns are associated with adverse changes in the parenting children receive is well established in the existing literature (Elder, 1974). Elder's seminal study of children and families during the Great Depression (1974), and in later work with Conger (Conger & Elder, 1994; Elder, Conger, Foster, & Ardelt, 1992; Elder & Conger, 2000), established the groundwork for the Family Stress Model. This model describes the pathways through which individual-level economic hardship increases marital conflict and mental health problems, which in turn increase negative parenting practices, resulting in increased child problem behaviors. Given the severity of the Great Recession, the links between it and changes in the well-being of children and families may be particularly pronounced. Such consequences are important to understand given the extraordinarily large number of families affected by the Great Recession and the long-term implications of parenting for children's development.

We estimate the influence of the Great Recession by matching two different macroeconomic measures—the national Consumer Sentiment Index and the local unemployment rate—to the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), taking advantage of the fact that children and families were interviewed at different points during the Great Recession both within and across cities (due to variation in interview timing). This strategy enables us to estimate the association between an exogenous economic condition and the risk for child maltreatment. Additionally, we test a number of potential individual-level moderators and mediators.

Although we draw on the work of Elder (1974) and Conger and Elder (1994), we test the Family Stress Model in a number of ways. First, we rely on a prospective longitudinal birth cohort study that contains a much wider variation in parental marital status and racial/ethnic and socioeconomic make-up than the samples used in much of the prior Family Stress Model literature (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010). The conflict that arises within marital relationships as a result of economic hardship is a key component of the Family Stress Model. That our data

Abbreviations: CSI, Consumer Sentiment Index; FFCWS, Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study; CTSPC, Conflict Tactics Scale for Parent and Child.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.10.016
0190-7409/

allow us to test how the Great Recession might affect the risk for child maltreatment among non-married parents may be a particularly important addition.

Second, that our macroeconomic indicators are exogenous—that is to say, independent of individual families' experiences—is important for our study. Exogenous variables remove the selection problem that would otherwise influence our findings. For instance, an individual's parenting might be associated with their unemployment status due to some other unobserved factor that is correlated with both, whereas the overall unemployment rate is independent of a given individual's parenting.

In this sense, providing exogenous predictors, the Great Recession can be seen as a type of “natural experiment.” Although much of the prior literature involving the Family Stress Model examined family functioning in the context of economic hardship (see for example: Conger, Wallace, Sun, McLoyd, & Brody, 2002), it generally compared families who lost their jobs or livelihoods with families who did not. However, it is important to note that families who lost their jobs and those who did not likely differed from one another on other unmeasured characteristics. By using exogenous macroeconomic indicators rather than individual ones our study avoids this problem.

Third, we depart from prior research grounded in the Family Stress Model by examining the effect of both exogenous changes in the macro-economy *and* individual-level measures of economic hardship. In particular, we draw on two measures of the macro-economy that capture different, but linked, aspects of the Great Recession. The Consumer Sentiment Index (CSI) is designed to capture the country's perceptions of the state of the economy as a whole as well as perceptions of personal finances, while the local unemployment rate is a measure of the severity of the Great Recession with regard to employment prospects in a person's local area. In this way our macroeconomic measures capture both the widespread uncertainty brought on by the Great Recession as well as local labor market effects.

In addition, we test the potential moderating role of family structure. Much of the literature based on the Family Stress Model relies on the connection between economic hardship and increased marital conflict as a primary pathway leading to harsh parenting and poor child outcomes (Conger et al., 2010). However, given the wide range of research indicating that non-married mothers may be particular vulnerable to the negative effects of economic hardship and uncertainty, it may be particularly important to investigate the effect of the Great Recession across a range of family structures (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994).

Last, we test the potential mediating role of a number of individual-level measures of hardship. This strategy allows us to examine both the indirect and direct effects of the Great Recession on the risk for child maltreatment. Indeed, prior research has largely relied on either only macroeconomic measures (Millett, Lanier, & Drake, 2011), or only individual-level measures (Sedlak et al., 2010). The ability to test both indirect and direct effects of the Great Recession is an important innovation.

2. Background: the Great Recession

The Great Recession was the most severe economic downturn since the Great Depression. By the third quarter of 2009 U.S. households had lost nearly $16.4 trillion in net worth compared with the beginning of the recession period (Isidore, 2011). The national unemployment rate rose to approximately 10% from a steady pre-recession rate of 5% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). In addition, the Great Recession was notable because of the collapse of the housing market, which resulted in nearly 4 million foreclosures between 2006 and 2008 (RealtyTrac). The Great Recession was also marked by a number of large-scale bank collapses and rescues: Bear Stearns in April 2008; Country Wide Financial in July 2008; Merrill Lynch and Lehman Brothers in September 2008, among others. News coverage of these events was widespread; the Economist magazine estimated that use of the word “recession” in two national daily newspapers peaked in early 2009 with nearly 4500 uses (The Economist, 2011). Media coverage of the Great Recession had large effects on the public's confidence in the economy and expectations about their own finances. In fact, the Consumer Sentiment Index (CSI), a measure of consumer confidence, declined from an average of 86.5 in the 11 months prior to the recession to an average of 64.2 during the Great Recession. This was a remarkable decline. For example, in the non-recessionary years 2002 through 2006 the average change between 12-month averages was 4.4 points.

3. Theories of how economic shocks might affect families

3.1. The Family Stress Model

Conger and Elder put forth the Family Stress Model whereby economic hardship is thought to negatively affect parental relationships and mental health, which in turn affects parenting, which has negative consequences for child development. In their studies of families in the Great Depression (1974), the Iowa Farm Crisis (1994), and other related work (see for example: Brody et al., 2001; or Conger et al., 1992), Conger, Elder, and colleagues, found that economic shocks were associated with worse parenting (and adverse changes in child development). In his classic study of the Great Depression, Elder documented the ways in which economic hardship is translated into increased aggressive parenting behaviors and reduced warmth and closeness between parents and children. The Family Stress Model would predict that as the economy worsened, parents would increase their harsh and neglectful parenting practices.

3.2. Subjective well-being

Several scholars have posited that economic shocks might affect families through their subjective assessments of well-being (Deaton, 2011). This theoretical prediction is supported by empirical research. A growing literature on economic shocks and people's self-reported well-being has shown that one need not be directly affected by an economic downturn to report changes in one's assessment of one's own well-being. For instance, Christelis, Georgarakos, and Japelli (2011) and Shapiro (2010) have shown that many households that did not experience financial losses during the Great Recession nonetheless reduced their consumption. Deaton (2011) notes that traditional measures such as unemployment have a greater negative influence on subjective well-being than the associated loss of income would account for. Drawing on this theory and related research (Kalil, 2013), we include in our study a measure of consumer sentiment as well as the unemployment rate. Consumer sentiment may be a better measure than traditional macroeconomic measures because it captures individuals' subjective well-being *and* their view of the general state of the economy.

4. Prior evidence on economic shocks

4.1. Aggregate shocks

The focus of this paper is on the association between the Great Recession and risk for child abuse and neglect on the part of mothers. A growing body of research has examined the association between the Great Recession and outcomes such as hospital-diagnosed instances of child maltreatment (Huang et al., 2011); high frequency spanking (Brooks-Gunn, Schneider, & Waldfogel, 2013); harsh parenting (Lee, Brooks-Gunn, McLanahan, Notterman, & Garfinkel, 2013); Child Protective Services investigations (for fathers, but not mothers) (Lindo, Schaller, & Hansen, 2013); material hardship (Pilkauskas, Currie, & Garfinkel, 2012); and domestic violence (Schneider, Harknett, & McLanahan, 2016). This study is among the first to investigate