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Is the physical availability of alcohol and illicit drugs related to neighborhood rates of child maltreatment?[☆]

Bridget Freisthler^{a,*}, Barbara Needell^b, Paul J. Gruenewald^a

^a *Prevention Research Center, Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, Berkeley, CA, USA*

^b *Center for Social Services Research, School of Social Welfare, UC Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, USA*

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Abstract

Objective: This study examines how the availability of alcohol and illicit drugs (as measured by alcohol outlet density and police incidents of drug sales and possessions) is related to neighborhood rates of child abuse and neglect, controlling for other neighborhood demographic characteristics.

Method: Data from substantiated reports of child abuse and neglect in 304 block groups in a northern California city were analyzed using spatial regression techniques.

Results: This study found that higher concentration of bars ($B = 6.66, p < .05$) and higher numbers of incidents of drug possession ($B = .53, p < .001$) were positively related to rates of child maltreatment in neighborhoods when controlling for neighborhood demographic characteristics. Thus, areas with more bars and drug possession incidents per 1000 population have higher rates of child maltreatment.

Conclusions: The presence of more bars per population may represent a lack of resources available to residents, may increase the stress on neighborhoods by “attracting” populations prone to participating in dangerous activities, or increase the frequency of alcohol use that then leads to maltreatment. Areas with more drug possession incidents may also contribute to the overall level of neighborhood stress and disorganization or act as a marker for drug use that leads to maltreatment. These results suggest that the neighborhood substance availability may deserve

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* Corresponding author address: Department of Social Welfare, UCLA School of Public Affairs, 3250 Public Policy Building, Box 951656, Los Angeles, CA 90095–1656, USA.

special attention when developing preventive interventions to reduce child abuse and neglect in neighborhood areas.

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Introduction

In 2002, Child Protective Service agencies throughout the United States received more than 1.8 million referrals of abuse or neglect involving more than 3 million children. From those referrals, 896,000 children had substantiated reports indicating that enough evidence existed to say that the abuse or neglect occurred (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2004). Substance abuse by parents can place children at greater risk of maltreatment and those children are more likely to be removed from their homes when child maltreatment occurs in comparison to children whose parents do not abuse alcohol and/or drugs (US Department of Health and Human Services, 1999).

Many of the interventions designed to reduce maltreatment for substance abusing parents in the child welfare system are individually focused (Dore & Doris, 1997; Gregoire & Schultz, 2001; Moore & Finkelstein, 2001). Yet, environmental interventions that focus upon changing neighborhood or community environments including those related to alcohol and drug availability may provide an alternative method of preventing or reducing child abuse and neglect. For example, Earls, McGuire, and Shay (1994) report on a program implemented at the neighborhood level to enhance community supports to prevent child maltreatment. Such a program has the ability to reduce child maltreatment through primary prevention efforts that focus upon neighborhood structures and processes, rather than individual behaviors, related to maltreatment.

Despite the link between child maltreatment and substance abuse, only a few studies have examined the relationship between drug activity or alcohol availability and maltreatment at the aggregate level. These studies have found a positive relationship between child maltreatment and density of alcohol outlets, particularly bars related to neglect and off-premise alcohol outlets (e.g., liquor and convenience stores) related to physical abuse (Freisthler, 2004; Freisthler, Midanik, & Gruenewald, 2004) and a negative relationship between excise tax on beer at the state level and violence and severe violence on children (Markowitz & Grossman, 1998). Albert and Barth (1996) found a positive relationship between the number of arrests for drug crimes by females and child maltreatment rates at the county level. These studies are limited because they have not examined alcohol and drug availability simultaneously, used units of analysis too large to be considered a neighborhood (Albert & Barth, 1996; Markowitz & Grossman, 1998), rely on older datasets (Markowitz & Grossman, 1998), or data that do not adequately measure availability (Albert & Barth, 1996).

The previous studies notwithstanding, neighborhood studies of child abuse and neglect have generally focused solely on how neighborhood socio-demographic characteristics are related to maltreatment. These studies have found that less social support (Garbarino & Kostelny, 1992; Vinson, Baldry, & Hargreaves, 1996), higher poverty rates (Coulton, Korbin, Su, & Chow, 1995; Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 1999; Deccio, Horner, & Wilson, 1994; Drake & Pandey, 1996; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1992; Young & Gately, 1988), higher rates of neighborhood unemployment (Gillham et al., 1998; Zuravin, 1989), residential instability (Coulton et al., 1995; Deccio et al., 1994; Ernst, 2001; Young & Gately, 1988; Zuravin, 1989), lower

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