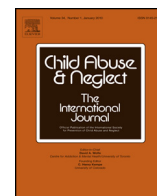


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Child Abuse & Neglect



Research article

The protective effect of neighborhood social cohesion in child abuse and neglect

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ABSTRACT

Relations between parents within a neighborhood have the potential to provide a supportive environment for healthy and positive parenting. Neighborhood social cohesion, or the mutual trust and support among neighbors, is one process through which parenting may be improved. The current study investigates the association between neighborhood social cohesion and abuse and neglect, as well as specific types of abuse and neglect. The sample for the study is comprised of 896 parents in one urban Midwestern County in the United States. Participants were recruited from Women, Infants, and Children clinics. Negative binomial regression is used to examine the association between neighborhood social cohesion and child maltreatment behaviors, as measured by the Conflict Tactics Scale, Parent-to-Child Version (Straus et al., 1998). In this sample of families, neighborhood social cohesion is associated with child neglect, but not abuse. In examining the relationship with specific types of abuse and neglect, it was found that neighborhood social cohesion may have a protective role in some acts of neglect, such as meeting a child's basic needs, but not potentially more complex needs like parental substance abuse.

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Introduction

Child maltreatment or the physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and neglect of children is reported to state and local investigators in the United States at a rate of 6 referrals per minute or 3 million referrals annually (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Certain neighborhood characteristics, including high rates of poverty, instability, and childcare burden, have been found to be associated with higher levels of maltreatment (Maguire-Jack, 2014). Although neighborhoods may put families at risk for maltreatment, strong bonds with neighbors may serve as a protective factor against such behaviors. The current study examines the potentially protective role of support between neighbors in preventing child maltreatment.

Types of Maltreatment

Child maltreatment is broadly defined as acts of commission (abuse) or omission (neglect) by a caregiver that results in harm, potential for harm, or threat of harm to a child (Leeb, Paulozzi, Melanson, Simon, & Arias, 2008). In recent years, maltreatment research has shifted from focusing on individuals to different levels of the social ecology, such as the ways

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in which neighborhoods influence families. In examining neighborhood risks for maltreatment, several studies have found poverty to be strongly related to neglect (Drake & Pandey, 1996; Freisthler, Midanik, & Gruenewald, 2004; Garbarino & Crouter, 1978; Kim, 2004). Similarly, a random sample of parents at risk for maltreatment showed poverty to be related to abuse (Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 1999). Although there are similarities between the two types of maltreatment, this study focuses on the differences in parental behavior types including subtypes of neglect and abuse that are largely missing from the current literature.

The behaviors that are encompassed by child abuse and neglect are very different and warrant individual exploration of the literature to fully understand their etiology. In a meta-analysis of the risks for child abuse and neglect, it was found that physical abuse was strongly associated with parent anger/hyper-reactivity, family conflict, and family cohesion (Stith et al., 2009). However, in the same analysis, neglect was associated with separate risk factors like parent-child relationship, perception of the child as a problem, parent's level of stress, and parent self-esteem (Stith et al., 2009). Further, Black and colleagues (2001) found that caregivers who engage in physical abuse are emotionally reactive and distressed, avoid focused problem-solving, feel incompetent as parents, and have low levels of social support. While it seems physical abuse occurs in isolated incidents, neglect is more closely associated with risk factors that are prolonged, like caregiving deficits, poor prenatal and postnatal care, and homelessness (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002). It is likely that the two types of maltreatment occur under different conditions but the circumstances of abuse and neglect subtypes warrant further investigation.

Researchers have found some evidence of relationships between caregivers' social relationships and maltreatment. One recent study examined the risk factors for three neglectful acts within Latino families: (1) not enough food for a child, (2) inability to take a child to the doctor due to cost, and (3) leaving a child in a questionably safe place (Johnson-Motoyama, 2013). This study found differences across these types of neglectful behaviors, including that smaller social networks are associated with a greater risk of leaving a child in an unsafe place, but not the other types of neglect. Other research compliments this in that neglectful parenting is found to be highest among individuals who report low social support from relatives, friends, and neighbors (Gauda, Polansky, Kilpatrick, & Shilton, 1993). Geographic regions are one organizing structure for social networks, and therefore the influence that neighbors have on one another could determine the presence of child maltreatment in families.

To further the conversation of maltreatment subtypes, the current study examined subtypes of abuse and neglect and their relation to neighborhood social cohesion. For physical abuse, we considered corporal punishment and severe assault. Prior research has found that corporal punishment is more common among parents who are younger, less educated, single, have lower income, and those who have higher levels of stress and depression (Day, Peterson, & McCracken, 1998; Pinderhughes, Dodge, Bates, Pettit, & Zelli, 2000; Regalado, Sareen, Inkelas, Wissow, & Halfon, 2004; Straus & Stewart, 1999). In addition to these risk factors, more severe physical abuse is correlated with alcohol and drug abuse problems, domestic violence, having experienced abuse as a child, having conflict with the child or with the spouse, and child behavioral problems (Stith et al., 2009).

For neglect, we considered basic needs (supervision, food, medical attention) and failure to provide adequate care due to mental health or substance abuse problems. There is general agreement in the field that child neglect and poverty are strongly correlated (Jonson-Reid, Drake, & Zhou, 2012). Basic needs neglect is more directly related to poverty, as parents with no intention of putting their child in risk of harm who are struggling to make ends meet would still be more likely to be unable to meet these basic needs. On the other hand, neglect due to caregiver mental health or substance abuse problems may differ from basic needs, in that such concerns may be more complex and therefore more difficult for neighbors to address.

Neighborhood Context of Maltreatment

Children from families who experience substance abuse, depression, unemployment, and poverty are more likely to experience maltreatment (Stith et al., 2009). The ecological model suggests that factors exist at different levels of the social ecology including the individual, relationship, community, and societal level that influence child and family relations like child maltreatment (Belsky, 1980; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Although much of the literature has focused on individual and family increased risk for maltreatment (Stith et al., 2009) there is a significant body of work dedicated to understanding influences at higher levels of the social ecology (see Coulton, Crampton, Irwin, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2007; Freisthler, Merritt, & LaScala, 2006; Maguire-Jack, 2014 for reviews).

Many studies have relied on social disorganization theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942) to provide a framework for understanding how neighborhoods might contribute to 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 relationship between community milieu and rates of juvenile delinquency (Shaw & McKay, 1942). As noted by Shaw and McKay (1942), "The communities with the highest rates of delinquents are occupied by those segments of the population whose position is most disadvantaged in relation to the distribution of economic, social, and cultural values" (p. 348). In other words, the theory proposes that the concentration of disadvantaged people in neighborhoods lends itself to criminal acts. Child maltreatment researchers have expanded this theory to understand neighborhood conditions for child abuse and neglect. Social disorganization theory applied to maltreatment suggests that distressed neighborhoods might put parents

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