



Research article

Does unemployment affect child abuse rates? Evidence from New York State[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This article used child maltreatment reports from New York State from 2000 to 2010 to investigate the relationship between county level unemployment and county level child maltreatment rates. Models showed that a 1 percentage point increase in unemployment rates reduced the child report rate by approximately 4.25%. Report rates for young children (children under the age of 6) and older children (children ages 6 and over) responded similarly to changes in local unemployment, but the relationship between unemployment rates and child maltreatment reports did vary by a county's metropolitan designation. The negative relationship between unemployment and child maltreatment reports was largely contained to metropolitan counties. The relationship between unemployment and child maltreatment reports in non-metropolitan counties was often positive but not statistically significant. These findings were robust to a number of specifications. In alternate models, the county's mandated reporter employment rate was added as a control; the inclusion of this variable did not alter the results.

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Child maltreatment is an act of abuse or neglect perpetrated against a child by their caregiver. In 2013, state child protective service (CPS) agencies received 3.5 million referrals alleging maltreatment involving 6.4 million children (Department of Health and Human Services, DHHS, 2015). Understanding the causes of child maltreatment and developing clear policy interventions are important given the human, social, and economic costs of child abuse. One relationship of interest to policymakers, child and family advocates, and practitioners is that of unemployment and child maltreatment. Economic recovery and recession are inevitable parts of the business cycle, but changes in the economy may have implications for child well-being. If families have an adverse response to changes in the macro economy, then it is important for policymakers and practitioners to understand this *before* a negative event occurs. Such precursory knowledge may allow for the construction of policies and safety net provisions that can be put into place in advance of an economic shock; thereby creating a pro-active policy response that may reduce child maltreatment.

Despite the importance of understanding the relationship between unemployment and child maltreatment, the relationship is not well-understood. Frioux et al. (2014) points out that the conventional wisdom surrounding unemployment and child maltreatment suggests these variables share an adverse relationship, but some research (discussed below) suggests this is a premature – and perhaps incorrect – conclusion. This article used a novel data set containing county level child maltreatment data from 2000–2010 from New York State. This data was used to answer the following questions:

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1. Did child maltreatment rates respond to changes in the unemployment rate?
2. If so, did this response vary by child maltreatment sub-type (i.e., neglect, physical, emotional, sexual, or other abuse)?
3. Did changes in the unemployment rate have differential effects for children under age 6 versus children ages 6 and over?
4. Did changes in the unemployment rate have differential effects on child maltreatment rates for children living in metropolitan versus non-metropolitan counties?
5. What was the effect of high unemployment on child maltreatment?

Literature Review

Researchers have used both individual level studies and aggregate level studies to study the relationship between unemployment and child maltreatment. Studies that used the individual as the unit of analysis often found that when a parent became unemployed they were more likely to engage in harsh or abusive parenting. The most recent National Incidence Study (the NIS-4) found that children whose parents were unemployed experienced rates of neglect 2–3 times higher than children with employed parents (Sedlak et al., 2010). In exploring mechanisms to explain this finding, Slack, Holl, McDaniel, Yoo, and Bolger (2004) concluded that unemployment was a trigger for stress, which thereby increased the use of spanking as a discipline technique among parents.

However, individual level studies are problematic for several reasons. Parents that are unemployed may be very different on unobservable characteristics from parents who are employed, and it may be that an omitted characteristic caused both unemployment and the perpetration of child maltreatment. Despite the use of previous studies employing research designs to lessen this concern, unobservable characteristics remain a problem. Just as important, individual level studies have only quantified the direct effects of a given caregiver's employment status. If a change in the community's unemployment rate also affects those who remain employed (via stress, resources, or some other means), then the effect of unemployment on child maltreatment will be understated.

An alternative research design has been to use aggregate level data and examine the effect of local (often state or county) level indicators of employment on local child maltreatment rates.¹ Paxson and Waldfogel (1999) used state-level panel data from 1990 to 1996 to examine the relationship between parental work status and parental absenteeism (e.g., working mother, absent father, working father, absent mother, etc.) and child maltreatment. They found that states with higher fractions of absent fathers and working mothers experienced higher levels of child maltreatment. In a closely related study, Paxson and Waldfogel (2003) found preliminary evidence that welfare reform may have increased some forms of child maltreatment. In both articles, the authors interpreted their findings to show that moving single parents (especially mothers) into employment without substantially increasing their incomes may be detrimental to children. Costs of employment may include the cost of childcare, the demands and stressors of work, and less time for parental involvement, and for some families, these costs may outweigh the benefits conveyed by employment. Other articles that used the state as the level of aggregation (Bitler & Zavadny, 2004; Millett, Lanier, & Drake, 2011) have not found a robust relationship between state level unemployment and child maltreatment rates. One reason for this may be because important sub-state variation is masked by state aggregation, making the relationship very difficult to detect.

In an effort to exploit sub-state variation in both variables, some researchers obtained county level data, and subsequently explored the relationship between county level unemployment and child maltreatment. Lindo, Schaller, and Hansen (2013) conducted a county-level panel data analysis to ascertain the relationship between unemployment and child maltreatment rates. Their study was confined to California, and they found no relationship between unemployment and child maltreatment using aggregate data. However, the conclusions one can make are limited. They only included physical, emotional, and sexual abuse in their study, which only comprised about 28% of child maltreatment reports in California in 2009² (DHHS, 2010). Despite this limitation, they obtained Mass Layoff Data³ and found that increases in male layoffs increase child abuse rates and increases in female layoffs reduced child abuse rates. A complementary analysis used the American Time Use Survey and showed that when a caregiver (mother or father) became unemployed they spent more time with their children. The authors posited that men are more likely to be perpetrators of maltreatment, and therefore, male unemployment increased a child's exposure to harmful caretakers, which increased child maltreatment rates. They assert that when women are unemployed, children are exposed to less harmful environments; thereby reducing child maltreatment. However, their description of who is likely to commit maltreatment in California is only partially supported by data. For example, the perpetrator's sex is missing in the NCANDS 2010 Child File in 82% of reports, and when the variable is collected, 55% of the perpetrators in California are women (author's calculations).

Nguyen (2013) also conducted a county-level analysis using data from California; though in this study, out-of-home cases rather than CPS referrals was the dependent variable. Nguyen found that overall there was no relationship between unemployment and child maltreatment, but upon further analysis, Nguyen uncovered that in 16 of California's

¹ Please see Coulton et al. (2007) and Coulton, Korbin, Su, and Chow, 1995 for a comprehensive theoretical overview of how environments affect child well-being.

² Their study ranged from 1996 to 2009.

³ Due to federal budget cuts, this data is no longer available to the public or researchers.

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