



# The continuing role of material factors in child maltreatment and placement



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## ABSTRACT

This article constitutes a 20-year update to a previous publication (Pelton, 1994), which showed that there is overwhelming evidence that poverty and low income are strongly related to child abuse and neglect. Subsequent evidence shows that the relationship continues to be strong. In addition, there is further evidence since the 1994 publication that this relation is not substantially due to class bias. Yet it is suggested that class bias does exist within the system. There is also further evidence that decreases in child maltreatment follow increases in material supports, and that job loss bears a complex relationship to child maltreatment. Findings pertaining to racial bias within the child welfare system continue to be mixed, but leave no doubt that racial disproportionalities within the system are overwhelmingly related to racial disproportionalities in the poverty population. There is continuing evidence that children placed in foster care are predominantly from impoverished families, and that changes in the level of material supports are related to risk of placement. It is suggested that the fact that there are nearly one million children in out-of-home placement (foster care and child-welfare involved adoption, combined) is indicative of the continuing dysfunction of the child welfare system, and that the differential response paradigm has not altered this dysfunction. A proposal for a fundamental restructuring of the child welfare system is recommended and restated here. Prospects for such change are briefly discussed. Also, to reduce poverty, a previously proposed universal social dividend and taxation system is briefly discussed and recommended.

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## Introduction

When the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect commissioned me to write “The Role of Material Factors in Child Abuse and Neglect” (Pelton, 1994), it gave me the opportunity to update and further develop the review and analysis of the relationship between child abuse and neglect and poverty and low income that I had begun in an earlier article, “Child Abuse and Neglect: The Myth of Classlessness” (Pelton, 1978). The 1994 publication was largely a review and analysis of the evidence that had accumulated over the period from 1978 through 1992. Herewith, some 20 years later, is a new update.

## Summation of the 1994 Publication

The 1994 publication showed that there is overwhelming evidence that poverty and low income are strongly related to child abuse and neglect as well as to the severity of maltreatment. This evidence is remarkably consistent across studies utilizing a variety of definitions and methodologies and performed at different periods of time. Children from impoverished and low-income families are extremely overrepresented in the incidence of child abuse and neglect. The studies confirm that the strong relationship between income and maltreatment holds for every identified form of child abuse and neglect, including

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emotional abuse, emotional neglect, and sexual abuse. Moreover, substantial evidence indicates that the relationship is not merely an artifact of greater public scrutiny of lower-class families.

The relation between poverty and child abuse and neglect is a fact, but in itself does not establish causation. Yet given the evidence of an exceedingly strong relation, reason directs us to consider the highly plausible ways in which poverty and low income might operate as a context for child abuse and neglect. We are led to examine the possible mediating factors that enhance or reduce the likelihood of child abuse and neglect within that context. These factors include variances in the material hardships themselves that poverty produces, as well as in the personal factors of parents. But the available evidence indicated that few personal differences had been found to distinguish abusing and neglecting parents from other impoverished parents other than depression, low self-esteem, and feelings of helplessness. I suggested that these factors undermine one's ability to cope with poverty and its stressors, which include its various material hardships. Moreover, the stressors of poverty environments, if not reduced through material supports, can engender dysfunctional modes of coping, such as alcohol and drug abuse, that can destroy parental competence.

Thus the probability of child abuse and neglect may be *indirectly* related to material hardship, through the stresses on parents that such hardship may generate. However, the probability of child abuse and neglect is also *directly* related to material hardship, in being largely dependent upon the extent of the dangerousness and inadequacy of the material conditions of one's environment. That is, to the extent that people's environments and living conditions are made less dangerous, the quality of care that parents with the least ability to cope with poverty are capable of giving – although the same as before – will be less inadequate. The parents will be less susceptible to judgments of neglect, and less likely to resort to abuse in desperate attempts to keep their children away from the hazards of their environment – hazards that include the sexual abuse by others that may occur within a dangerous neighborhood environment.

The evidence reviewed pertaining to the provision of a wide variety of material supports and concrete services – including day care, window guardrails, emergency cash assistance, employment, and increased public assistance program benefits – suggested (although again without establishing causation) that such provision might reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect and the need for foster care placement.

Based on both evidence and reason, I concluded that the presence of material hardship is so pervasive in child abuse and neglect cases that any strategy aimed at greatly reducing the incidence of child abuse and neglect must centrally address this bedrock context in which severe harm to children thrives. The most effective way to reduce child abuse and neglect is to reduce poverty and its attendant material hardships. I claimed that without a key focus on material hardship, other additionally desirable approaches will not succeed in significantly reducing the incidence and severity of child abuse and neglect within our nation.

### Subsequent Evidence of Income-related Differences in Child Abuse and Neglect Rates

The National Incidence Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS) were designed to go beyond the substantiated reports known to public child protection agencies in the United States by additionally enlisting sentinels working in such community settings as hospitals, mental health agencies, public schools, and police departments to be on the lookout for suspected child abuse and neglect. The studies have been performed during 1979–1980 (NIS-1), 1986 (NIS-2), 1993 (NIS-3), and 2005–2006 (NIS-4). In my 1994 publication, I recounted the results of NIS-1 and NIS-2, both of which found strong income-related differences in the incidence of all specific forms of child abuse and neglect. There is subsequent consistent evidence from NIS-3 (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996) and NIS-4 (Sedlak et al., 2010).

For a family of four in 1993, the poverty threshold was roughly \$15,000, while the median income was about \$45,000. The NIS-3 1993 findings indicated that the incidence rate of physical neglect under the endangerment standard (which includes incidents in which children were harmed and/or endangered by maltreatment) was more than four times higher for children in families with annual incomes below \$15,000 than in families with incomes between \$15,000 and \$29,000, and almost 50 times higher than in families with incomes of \$30,000 or more (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996, Table 5-2). The physical neglect rate in the lowest income bracket was 54.3 per 1,000 children, or a rate of more than one of every 20 children living in families with incomes below \$15,000.

Furthermore, children in below-\$15,000 families were 27 times more likely to have experienced emotional neglect than those in \$30,000-or-more families; 12 times more likely to have been physically abused; and 18 times more likely to have been emotionally abused. They were even 18 times more likely to have been sexually abused (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996, Table 5-2). The overall maltreatment rate was nearly one of every ten children in below-\$15,000 families, which was almost three times the incidence rate for children in families with incomes between \$15,000 and \$29,000, and 25 times the rate for children in \$30,000-or-more families.

Looking at all of the children who had been maltreated in 1993 under the endangerment standard, 67% (of those from families whose incomes were known) were from families with incomes below \$15,000 per year, and 92% were from families with incomes below \$30,000. Only 8% were from families with incomes of \$30,000 or above (Sedlak, Hantman, & Schultz, 1997, Table B-6B).

The NIS-4 reported the relation of the incidence of child abuse and neglect to a composite measure of low economic status, defined as having a household income below \$15,000, and/or parents' highest education level below a high school diploma, and/or any household member who participated in a poverty-related program such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or food stamps. Although not permitting comparison with the NIS-3 findings, analyses utilizing this

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