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Beyond CPS: Developing an effective system for helping children in "neglectful" families

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Policymakers have failed to address the neglect of neglect

Over the past 25 years, reports of physical abuse and sexual abuse to child protective services (CPS) agencies have declined by 56% and 62%, respectively. Concurrently, domestic violence declined by over 60%.

Unfortunately, there has been little or no decline in two other factors affecting the well-being of millions of children—the number of families reported to child welfare agencies because of alleged neglect and the percent of children living in poverty. The numbers are alarming. In 2012, CPS agencies in the United States investigated allegations of child maltreatment involving over 3 million unduplicated children, nearly 5% of all children. More than 70% of these reports involved allegations of neglect, although there were overlapping allegations of physical or sexual abuse in a portion of cases. (The number of "pure" neglect

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cases cannot be determined from available data.)[1] Cases categorized as neglect accounted for 75% of substantiations and over 60% of all foster care placements. Especially troubling is the evidence, developed by Chris Wildeman and his colleagues, that at least 12% of all American children will have a substantiated CPS finding, usually for neglect, before they reach their 18th birthday.

Like the prevalence of neglect, the proportion of children living in poverty has not declined in the past 20 years. Although there have been variations over time, about 1 in 5 children live in families with income below the poverty level. Neglect and poverty have always been closely linked. As Dee Wilson recently observed, child welfare agencies in the United States are serving a large population of families who are not just poor, many of these families are on the verge of destitution, with yearly incomes less than half of the federal poverty standard.

Despite the prevalence of neglect as a basis for CPS interventions, many researchers and practitioners have asserted, for over 40 years, that there is a deep failure of policymakers to acknowledge the problems in "neglectful" families and take the steps necessary to meet the needs of their children—the "neglect of neglect." These commentators contend that public child welfare agencies and the general public pay less attention to neglect than to physical or sexual abuse and are more tolerant of neglect even in its chronic forms, even though chronic and or severe neglect may be more detrimental to a child's health and development than physical or sexual abuse.

Commentators offer a variety of policy changes to address these perceived failures. Some experts call for a clearer definition of neglect that broadens the basis for CPS involvement. For example, Laura Proctor and Howard Dubowitz recently wrote, "We advocate defining child neglect as any situation in which a child's basic needs are not adequately met, resulting in actual or potential harm." Others focus on expanding formal CPS intervention in currently reported cases. For example, Elizabeth Bartholet argues that there is a need for more CPS oversight of neglectful families and more removals of neglected children from their families. Advocates also call for reorganizing CPS policies and services so that they are better designed to meet needs of the children in the multi-problem families that are currently brought to the attention of CPS agencies for neglect, especially in families evidencing chronic neglect. In contrast, other commentators have long contended that poverty is the primary cause of neglectful parenting and advocate poverty reduction as the core strategy for addressing the needs of these children and parents.

I agree that the current approaches for supporting children (and their families) reported to CPS for neglect are often quite deficient. There is solid evidence that the development of a substantial percentage of these children will be significantly impaired by the inability of their parents to provide *minimally* adequate care, nurturance, and support during periods of their childhood, especially early childhood. Some of these children also face the threat of serious physical injury or sexual abuse because

[1] Three million other reports were not investigated for reasons that are not clear. All of these numbers are approximations. They are drawn from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and based on reports from states. Unfortunately, the inconsistency in reporting and labeling of data by the states makes the data very hard to interpret. The true incidence of any particular threat to children's safety is not obtainable from any state or national data sets.