Single mothers in their communities: The mediating role of parenting stress and depression between social cohesion, social control and child maltreatment

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Sheila Barnhart, MSW *, Kathryn Maguire-Jack, PhD, MSW, MPA

1947 College Road, Columbus 43210, OH, United States

A B S T R A C T

Child maltreatment remains a significant problem in the United States. Single mothers are at elevated risk for maltreatment due to financial limitations and lower levels of available supports. The current study investigates whether neigborhood social cohesion and informal social control were associated with child maltreatment in a sample of single mothers, and further examines the direct and indirect pathways through which these associations occur. The current study uses an analytic sample of 1,158 mothers who participated in the third and fourth wave Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing (FFCW) study to estimate the direct associations between social cohesion, informal social control, and child maltreatment, as well as two potential mediators, maternal depression and parenting stress. Descriptive statistics reveal that participants were economically disadvantaged, approximately 57% possessed at least a high school diploma or GED, and the majority of participants were African American, Non-Hispanic (64.7%), followed by Hispanic (19.9%) and White, non-Hispanic (12.8%). The structural equation models did not show significant associations between informal social control and either physical abuse or neglect. Social cohesion, on the other hand, was indirectly related to physical abuse and neglect. Maternal depression mediated the relationship between social cohesion and maltreatment. While parenting stress did not explain the relationship between social cohesion and child maltreatment, parenting stress was individually associated with both physical abuse and neglect. The findings suggest that maternal depression may be an important pathway through which social cohesion is affects child abuse and neglect for single, non-cohabiting mothers.

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1. Introduction

Child maltreatment is a pervasive problem that affects the health and wellbeing of society's most vulnerable members. The highest rates of child maltreatment occur between the ages 0 and 3, and this trend generally declines with age (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). In 2014, approximately 3.6 million referrals to child protective agencies were made and 2.2 million cases were investigated in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013).

Child maltreatment includes both child abuse and neglect. Each state has its own definition of abuse and neglect, which must be based on the standards set in the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), as amended by the CAPTA Reauthorization Act of 2010. The federal definition of child abuse and neglect is, "Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation; or an act or failure to act, which presents an imminent risk of serious harm" (42

U.S.C. §5101). Child abuse includes acts of commission that include physical, sexual, or psychological harm, potential for harm, or threat of harm (Leeb, Paulozzi, Melanson, Simon, & Arias, 2008). Child neglect includes acts of omission, that is, failure to meet basic, supervisory, or emotional needs of children (Leeb et al., 2008). The majority of child maltreatment cases involve neglect (75%), followed by physical abuse and sexual abuse (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2016).

The effects of child maltreatment are immediate and long lasting. Child neglect is associated with internalizing and externalizing behavioral problems (Mills et al., 2013), emotional and social problems (de Bellis, 2001), and academic failure (Kurtz, Gaudin, Wodarski, & Howing, 1993). Further, in 2014, neglect was indicated in 72.3% of child cases resulting in death (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2016). Long lasting effects of child maltreatment include chronic physical and mental health problems (Gilbert et al., 2009). Adults with histories of childhood physical and sexual child abuse report higher rates of dissociative symptoms (Mulder, Beautrais, Joyce, & Fergusson, 1998). In a seminal study of the long-term consequences of child abuse and neglect, Cathy Spatz Widom examined children who

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: Barnhart.95@osu.edu (S. Barnhart), Maguirejack.1@osu.edu (K. Maguire-Jack).

were maltreated in the late 1960s and early 1970s and continues to follow their outcomes. In the long-term follow-up it was found that experiencing maltreatment in childhood was associated with lower IQ test scores, lower earnings, and a lower likelihood of being in a skilled job at approximately age 29 (Currie & Widom, 2010). Further, the negative association with adult socioeconomic outcomes persisted 15 years later (Currie & Widom, 2010). In addition to the economic disadvantage outcomes, children who were abused or neglected are also more likely to have ongoing problems with health (Felitti et al., 1998; Font & Maguire-Jack, 2016) and mental health (Springer, Sheridan, Kuo, & Carnes, 2007).

Neighborhoods have long been examined for their direct effects on social problems such as violence (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997) and health inequality (Franzini, Caughy, Spears, & Esquer, 2005; Goldfeld et al., 2015; Kohen, Brooks-Gunn, Leventhal, & Hertzman, 2002; Ross, 2000). There are multiple pathways by which contextual factors could influence child maltreatment. For example, neighborhood poverty may be associated with maltreatment because of a lack of resources available to parents within the community or increased stress among parents due to being surrounded by poverty. Connections between residents may decrease the risk of maltreatment because of the ability of residents to rely on one another for small favors (Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016).

The manner in which neighborhoods influence child maltreatment outcomes among single mothers is of particular interest since this demographic is especially vulnerable with respect to child maltreatment (Berger, 2005; Gelles, 1989) and faces greater economic hardships (McLanahan & Percheski, 2008; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). The majority, if not all, of the responsibilities in child rearing fall on single mothers.

Given the high number of children experiencing child abuse and neglect in the United States and the severe consequences of maltreatment, it is essential to improve our understanding of the factors that support parents and protect against maltreatment. The current study focuses on single mothers, who, by virtue of having fewer supports and greater caretaking responsibilities, may face greater stress and ultimately a higher risk of child maltreatment. We examine the ways in which positive neighborhood processes might prevent child abuse and neglect for single mothers, and the specific pathways through which their parenting behaviors are affected by strong neighborhood connections.

2. Literature review

2.1. Single mothers

A mother's relationship status is an important factor with respect to child maltreatment. Single mothers, also referred to as unmarried mothers, constitute a significant portion of families in the US, with the population having risen four-fold in the United States since 1960 (Livingston, 2014). Single mothers are more likely to live in poverty (Bramlett & Blumberg, 2007; McLanahan & Percheski, 2008; McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994), which is associated with child maltreatment (Eckenrode, Smith, McCarthy, & Dineen, 2014). With respect to parenting, single mothers are more likely to engage in corporal punishment (Gershoff, 2002) and child maltreatment compared to two-parent families (Berger, 2005; Chaffin, Kelleher, & Hollenberg, 1996; Gelles, 1989; Mersky, Berger, Reynolds, & Gromoske, 2009; Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996).

2.2. Neighborhood processes and child maltreatment

While most research on the etiology of maltreatment has focused on individual parent characteristics, a body of literature now exists linking characteristics of neighborhoods to parenting behaviors. In terms of structural characteristics of neighborhoods, several studies have suggested an important role of neighborhood poverty contributing to

maltreatment behaviors above and beyond the impact of individual poverty status (Maguire-Jack, 2014). Studies examining the relationship between the processes of neighborhoods, that is the interactions of the individuals residing within the neighborhood, are less common (Coulton, Crampton, Irwin, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2007).

Many researchers apply social disorganization theory (Shaw & McKay, 1942) to understand the pathways through which neighborhoods influence parenting (Ben-Arieh, 2010; Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 1999; Ernst, 2001; Fromm, 2004; Garbarino & Kostelny, 1992; Maguire-Jack & Klein, 2015). Shaw and McKay (1942) proposed this theory to understand patterns of delinquency across neighborhoods. They concluded that disorganized neighborhoods, defined as having high levels of poverty, residential mobility, and ethnic heterogeneity had higher levels of crime and delinquency than other areas (Shaw & McKay, 1942). Proponents of social disorganization theory have suggested that disorganized neighborhoods lack the structure to maintain social controls that allow community members to realize shared values, enabling them to deter various social problems (Sampson & Groves, 1989; Sampson et al., 1997).

Parents in disorganized neighborhoods tend to lack supports for positive parenting practices (Bowen, Bowen, & Ware, 2002; Elliott et al., 1996), have lower levels of social support and social control (Sampson, 2012), and have a greater acceptance of harsh parenting and corporal punishment (Caughy & Franzini, 2005).

2.2.1. Social cohesion

Social cohesion is a neighborhood process that can be understood as the "closeness" among residents, that is, the connections between neighbors and their willingness to help each other (Carpiano, 2006). Neighborhoods rich in social cohesion may offer more support for parents (McDonell, 2010). When neighbors look out for one another, parents may have greater access to instrumental, social, and emotional support.

Social cohesion has been examined in a variety of child maltreatment etiology studies. While some studies have not found evidence of a relationship (e.g. Coulton et al., 1999; Molnar, Buka, Brennan, Holton, & Earls, 2003), several studies have found a protective effect of social cohesion. In the early neighborhood work, Garbarino and Sherman (1980) found that residents of neighborhoods with higher rates of maltreatment were less likely to assist with childcare and interact with neighbors compared to residents in neighborhoods with lower rates of maltreatment. Vinson, Bladry, and Hargreaves (1996) found that areas with fewer interactions between neighborhood networks had higher levels of abuse. Maguire-Jack and Showalter (2016) found that social cohesion served a protective role in child neglect, especially in the ability to meet a child's basic needs.

While most studies have focused on the direct relationships between social cohesion and child maltreatment, Guterman, Lee, Taylor, and Rathouz (2009) shifted the conversation by examining the specific pathways through which neighborhood perceptions affect maltreatment. The authors examined perceptions of social cohesion, social control, and neighborhood disorder jointly and found that poorer perceptions of neighborhoods were directly associated with physical abuse and indirectly associated with child neglect, through their impact on parenting stress and personal control (Guterman et al., 2009).

2.2.2. Informal Social Control

Informal social control is an additional neighborhood process that may have a role in child maltreatment. The construct pertains to actions performed by community members to jointly sustain order and crime prevention (Emery et al., 2015; Sampson et al., 1997). Informal social control may play a protective role against child maltreatment in a couple of different ways. Community members may fear retribution from their neighbors directly intervening in their situations, or indirectly, through reports to child protective services. Additionally, social control