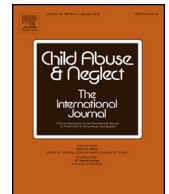


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Child Abuse & Neglect



Research article

Neighborhood-level social processes and substantiated cases of child maltreatment



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ABSTRACT

Child maltreatment is a preventable public health problem. Research has demonstrated that neighborhood structural factors (e.g. poverty, crime) can influence the proportion of a neighborhood's children who are victims of maltreatment. A newer strategy is the identification of potentially modifiable social processes at the neighborhood level that can also influence maltreatment. Toward this end, this study examines neighborhood-level data (maltreatment cases substantiated by Illinois' child protection agency, 1995–2005, social processes measured by the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods, U.S. Census data, proportions of neighborhoods on public assistance, and crime data) that were linked across clusters of contiguous, relatively homogenous Chicago, IL census tracts with respect to racial/ethnic and socioeconomic composition. Our analysis—an ecological-level, repeated cross-sectional design utilizing random-intercept logit models—with a sensitivity analysis using spatial models to control for spatial autocorrelation—revealed consistent associations between neighborhood social processes and maltreatment. Neighborhoods higher in collective efficacy, intergenerational closure, and social networks, and lower in disorder had lower proportions of neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse substantiated cases, controlling for differences in structural factors. Higher collective efficacy and social network size also predicted a lower proportion of substance-exposed infants. This research indicates that strategies to mobilize neighborhood-level protective factors may decrease child maltreatment more effectively than individual and family-focused efforts alone.

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Introduction

Experiencing child maltreatment is associated with mental, physical, social and economic consequences impacting individuals, families and communities across the life course (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1994; Cicchetti & Lynch, 1993; Garbarino, 1993; Turner, Finkelhor, & Ormrod, 2010). While research has long pointed to parent and child characteristics as significant components of understanding this complex problem, a growing number of studies have identified neighborhood characteristics as an overlooked aspect of program planning (Coulton, Crampton, Irwin, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2007; Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 1999; Garbarino & Sherman, 1980; Molnar, Buka, Brennan, Holton, & Earls, 2003; Zuravin, 1989). Promising community-level interventions are beginning to emerge (McDonnell, Ben-Arieh, & Melton, 2015). Identifying characteristics that can strengthen communities offers promising avenues for further prevention of child maltreatment.

The goal of this study is to identify potentially modifiable neighborhood characteristics that may prevent child maltreatment. We examined the associations between four neighborhood social processes (*Collective Efficacy*, *Intergenerational Closure*, *Neighborhood Social Networks*, and *Social and Physical Disorder*) and reported child maltreatment proportions in Chicago, Illinois from 1995 through 2005. We present results for these social process factors while controlling for neighborhood differences in poverty, unemployment, violent crime and other structural factors.

Understanding Child Maltreatment: Ecological Perspectives

Research on ecological perspectives considers conditions in the environments where children are developing, whether or not they have individual and family-level risks. These conditions shape relationships and interactions between youth and their caregivers, recognizing that human relationships do not exist in a vacuum. The Bioecological Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) guided hypotheses for this study, as it provides a basis for examining a variety of contexts (e.g. school, peer groups, neighborhoods, etc.) that comprise social life, where the contexts affect individual behavior and behaviors affect contexts reciprocally (Bronfenbrenner, 2005).

Multiple individual and family characteristics associated with child maltreatment have been identified by researchers. For example, in families of low socioeconomic status and/or with parental unemployment the risk of physical abuse is three times higher, and the risk of neglect is seven times higher (Sedlak et al., 2010). Other child and family-level risk factors for child maltreatment include children who have special needs, have contact with child welfare agencies, and families where parental substance abuse problems and mental illness exist (Bartholet, Wulczyn, Barth, & Lederman, 2011; Sedlak et al., 2010).

A number of studies have explored ways that neighborhood characteristics influence different aspects of child health (Brooks-Gunn, Berlin, Leventhal, & Fuligni, 2000; Sellstrom & Bremberg, 2006), including maltreatment (Coulton et al., 2007, 1999; Freisthler & Maguire-Jack, 2015; Garbarino & Sherman, 1980; Molnar et al., 2003; Zuravin, 1989). Studies of child maltreatment have consistently found that neighborhood structural factors, such as poverty (Coulton et al., 2007, 1999; Freisthler, Merritt, & LaScala, 2006; Zuravin & Taylor, 1987), housing stress and instability (Ernst, 2000; Fromm, 2004; Manabe, 2004; Warren & Font, 2015; Zuravin, 1989), childcare burden (Coulton et al., 1999), substance availability (Freisthler, Gruenewald, Remer, Lery, & Needell, 2007; Freisthler, Needell, & Gruenewald, 2005), residential density (Zuravin, 1986) and immigrant concentration (Molnar et al., 2003), have an effect on maltreatment.

Although it has been hypothesized that, beyond structural factors, neighborhood social processes affect child maltreatment, there has been little research to support this. An early study focused on understanding why neighborhoods that were identical in socioeconomic status had different rates of child maltreatment. The authors described neighborhoods with higher maltreatment rates as “socially impoverished”, characterized by “needy” families competing for scarce social resources (Garbarino & Sherman, 1980). Neighborhood social impoverishment has been posited to influence child maltreatment in three significant ways: (1) need among residents inhibits sharing behaviors; (2) a dearth of positive role models reinforces inappropriate and inadequate behaviors; and (3) a lack of intimate and confident interactions inhibits nurturance and feedback (Garbarino & Barry, 1997).

Coulton et al. (2007) presented a model of the development of maltreatment employing structural factors and social processes. The model posits that neighborhood structural characteristics (e.g. rates of poverty, racial segregation, unemployment) influence neighborhood social processes (e.g. collective efficacy), and that their balance results in differing outcomes. One notable individual-level study tested this model in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing (FFCWS) study of 20 U.S. cities. They found that individual-level perceived negative neighborhood social processes, comprised of social disorder measures and reverse coding of the collective efficacy scale used in this study, affected parenting stress, which, in turn, affected risk of physical abuse and neglect perpetration (Guterman, Lee, Taylor, & Rathouz, 2009). More recently, Freisthler and Maguire-Jack (2015) found that neighborhood social disorder predicted higher rates of physical abuse controlling for structural factors. Additional testing of Coulton et al.'s (2007) model regarding the dual influences of structural factors and social processes on levels of maltreatment is warranted and is the focus of the current study.

Collective Efficacy

An extension of Bandura's concept of self-efficacy (1995), collective efficacy is a group's shared belief in their capabilities to succeed at given tasks (Sampson, 2003). Its measurement combines social control: neighbors' capacity to regulate

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