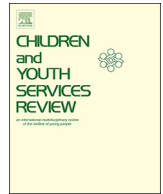




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Neighborhood poverty and child abuse and neglect: The mediating role of social cohesion

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ABSTRACT

Child maltreatment is a significant public health problem. For decades, scholars and practitioners alike have sought to better understand and address its underlying factors. Among those factors are neighborhood socioeconomic conditions, including poverty rates. Understanding the mechanisms through which these factors affect maltreatment rates, however, is underdeveloped. This article explores the relationship between neighborhood poverty and child abuse and neglect rates in a diverse set of neighborhoods in South Carolina. Using data collected from a survey administered to a random sample of caregivers with children under the age of 10 ($n = 483$), substantiated reports of child abuse and neglect, and Census block group data, this study investigates the possibility that neighborhood social cohesion (i.e., mutual trust and shared expectations among neighbors), mediates the relationship between neighborhood poverty and child abuse and neglect rates. Significant direct effects of poverty on rates of neglect and abuse were found. Multiple regression analyses were then conducted to assess the proposed mediation models. Social cohesion was found to mediate the association between neighborhood-level poverty and abuse rates but not neglect rates. The findings suggest that efforts to increase neighborhood social cohesion may be effective in reducing rates of child abuse.

1. Introduction

Child maltreatment is a significant public health problem. Despite small declines in the United States in physical and sexual abuse and neglect, too many children - 683,000 in 2015 - experience maltreatment (Finkelhor, Saito, & Jones 2017; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2017). In addition to the challenges posed by abuse and neglect at the time of the incident, researchers have identified a host of negative longer-term outcomes related to behavioral health (e.g., De Bellis, Woolley, & Hooper 2013; Gilbert et al. 2009), physical health (e.g., Widom, Czaja, Bentley, & Johnson 2012), and delinquency (e.g., English, Widom, & Brandford 2002).

Given the scale and scope of child maltreatment and the potential for long-term negative consequences, identifying factors that may prevent it is imperative. For decades, scholars and practitioners alike have recognized that child maltreatment results from a host of individual-, family-, and community-level factors. Strategies aimed at preventing child maltreatment, however, have concentrated on individual- and family-level influences (e.g., parent education, home visiting; Butchart, Harvey, Mian, & Furniss 2006; McDonell & Melton 2008; Stagner &

Lansing 2009; Waldfogel 2009). Selected individual- and family-oriented approaches have proven successful, but concerns exist regarding whether they are cost effective and whether they are enough to significantly reduce child abuse and neglect rates. Indeed, studies examining neighborhood influences on child maltreatment have identified a number of associated structures and processes (e.g., residential stability, concentrated poverty, sense of community, social capital). As stated by Daro and Dodge (2009): ...attention has shifted from directly improving the skills of parents to creating environments that facilitate a parent's ability to do the right thing. It is increasingly recognized that environmental forces can overwhelm even well-intended parents, communities can support parents in their role, and public expenditures might be most cost-beneficial if directed toward community strategies. (p. 68).

In spite of growing acknowledgement of the importance of communities to child maltreatment prevention (see, e.g., McLeigh & Melton 2015; U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse & Neglect 1993), research seeking to identify intervention points for informing community-based primary prevention strategies is lacking. In this article, we address this gap by examining the relationship between neighborhood-level factors

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and child maltreatment. Specifically, we examine the relationship between neighborhood-level poverty status (aggregated poverty status of individuals living in the same U.S. Census block group) and child abuse and neglect rates. Next, we examine whether the relationships are mediated by social cohesion (mutual trust and support among neighbors; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls 1997).

2. Literature review

Social disorganization theory (Bursik & Webb 1982; Miethe, Hughes, & McDowall 1991; Sampson & Groves 1989; Shaw & McKay 1942, 1969) has been used to better understand the pathways through which neighborhoods influence caregivers. The theory suggests that disorganized neighborhoods put caregivers at higher risk for maltreatment because they often comprise a multitude of stressors (e.g., crime; physical disorder; violence), do not share norms regarding child rearing, and lack supports and resources to help caregivers in their child rearing efforts (Ben-Arieh 2010; Coulton, Korbin, & Su 1999; Harrikari 2014; Kim & Maguire-Jack 2015). Many of the studies framed in the context of social disorganization theory have focused on structural characteristics of neighborhoods. Less attention has been paid to interaction among neighbors (i.e., *process-oriented constructs* such as social capital, social and physical disorder, and social networks) and the effects such interactions may have on child maltreatment. In particular, although a significant body of research has shown an association between neighborhood-level poverty and child maltreatment, few studies have sought to identify processes that may reduce its effect.

2.1. Poverty and child maltreatment

Examining structural aspects of neighborhoods provides insight into whom lives in the neighborhood. Studies measuring economic deprivation at a neighborhood-level have consistently found a significant relationship between aggregate rates of neighborhood poverty and child maltreatment (Ben-Arieh 2010; Coulton, Korbin, Su, & Chow 1995; Deccio, Horner, & Wilson 1994; Freisthler 2004; Freisthler, Bruce, & Needell 2007; Zuravin 1989). Indeed, Maguire-Jack (2014) found that of all the neighborhood characteristics included in multilevel studies, poverty is the one most often associated with child abuse and neglect.

Some studies have examined abuse and/or neglect separately to determine if the influence of neighborhood poverty varies by maltreatment type. Studies examining only abuse have found an association with neighborhood poverty (Freisthler & Maguire-Jack 2015; Merritt 2009). Studies examining both abuse and neglect have found a relationship between both maltreatment types and neighborhood poverty (Freisthler, Medanik, & Gruenewald 2004; Zuravin 1989). A few studies found the relationship with one maltreatment type to be stronger than the other. Drake and Pandey (1996) found associations between poverty and neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse, with the strongest association being with neglect. Similarly, Maguire-Jack and Font (2017) and Kim (2004) found neighborhood poverty to be more strongly related to neglect than abuse. Ernst (2000), however, found poverty to be a significant predictor of physical abuse, but for neglect, the association was only significant when considered in concert with other economic variables (i.e. middle class, housing stress, median property values). Similarly, Paulsen (2003) found that child abuse, more so than neglect, was strongly associated with neighborhood disadvantage.

As Pelton (2015) has pointed out, however, not all caregivers living in high poverty communities – or even most – maltreat their children. Thus, it is important to develop a better understanding of factors that protect against maltreatment among caregivers living in high poverty so that effective child maltreatment prevention efforts can be developed.

2.2. Social cohesion

Structural factors such as poverty rates provide insight into the sociodemographics of people living in a particular area; neighborhood processes provide information regarding how neighbors *interact* with one another. One of the social processes that has been studied in an effort to understand how neighborhoods contribute to children's safety is *collective efficacy*. Sampson (Sampson 2003; Sampson et al. 1997; Sampson & Morenoff 2004), building on social disorganization theory, posited that communities that exhibit *social cohesion* (i.e., mutual trust and shared expectations) and the capacity to influence informal social controls have stronger collective efficacy, which in turn leads to lower rates of crime. Sampson et al. (1997) tested the relationship between collective efficacy and neighborhood crime and found that collective efficacy mediates the relationship between the characteristics of socially disorganized communities and crime and violence.

The theory regarding the relationship between collective efficacy and crime has been extended to child maltreatment (e.g., Emery, Truang, & Wang 2015; Freisthler 2004; Guterman, Lee, Taylor, & Rathouz 2009; Kim & Maguire-Jack 2015; Molnar, Buka, Brennan, Holton, & Earls 2003; Sabol, Coulton, & Korbin 2004). The extension has been based on the notion that caregivers who reside in socially cohesive neighborhoods that foster norms regarding appropriate behavior are less likely to maltreat their children. Findings have been somewhat mixed, although recent studies have found collective efficacy to be associated with less frequent physical abuse (Freisthler & Maguire-Jack 2015) and lower proportions of physical and sexual abuse and neglect (Molnar et al., 2016).

A possible reason for the mixed findings may be the applicability of the measure to child maltreatment. Emery et al. (2015) raised concern about the social control aspect of the collective efficacy measure. They postulated that whether neighbors are willing to intervene in situations of family violence – as opposed to street crime – may be culturally determined. They further postulated that the measure developed by Sampson et al. (1997) pertains to social control in the *public sphere* (e.g., “If some children were spray-painting graffiti on a local building”), whereas child maltreatment tends to occur in the *private sphere*. These factors may help explain the weak or inconsistent findings regarding the relationship between collective efficacy and maltreatment.

A small body of research examines the relationship between social cohesion and child maltreatment, as opposed to the combined social cohesion and control measure (i.e., collective efficacy). Social cohesion has been defined in a variety of ways, but Eshuis, van Dam, van Twist, and Anquetil (2014) found that most definitions include two components. The first component focuses on a shared common identity among community members. This shared identity can result in individuals developing stronger connections to the community, having more positive attitudes about belonging to the community, and becoming more disposed to being influenced by the community. The second component involves relationships, or interpersonal ties, among community members. Social cohesion is stronger when social networks within the neighborhood are strong.

Research has suggested that social cohesion may offer more support for parents (McDonnell 2010). For example, using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, Franco, Pottick, and Huang (2010) found that parental stress is greater in neighborhoods with low social cohesion. In theory, when neighbors look out for one another, parents may have greater access to instrumental, social, and emotional support. Thus, social cohesion may help parents in their caregiving roles by increasing feelings of support and assistance in meeting basic needs of children. Maguire-Jack and Showalter (2016) examined the relationship between social cohesion and child maltreatment with a sample of 896 parents recruited from Women, Infants, and Children clinics in an urban county in Ohio. They found that social cohesion was associated with neglect, but not abuse. Using a sample of single mothers participating in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study, Barnhart and

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