



Pathways from neighborhood to neglect: The mediating effects of social support and parenting stress



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ABSTRACT

Neighborhood social cohesion relates to common bonds and feelings of trust between neighbors. The everyday demands of caregiving can take a toll on parents and increase their levels of stress and in some cases can lead to maltreatment. The current study seeks to understand how the support networks of parents relate to child maltreatment. Specifically, using structural equation modeling path analysis and a sample of 1045 families from Franklin County, Ohio, we examine the direct relationship between neighborhood social cohesion and child neglect as well as the indirect relationship between the two, mediated by social support and parenting stress. We find no significant direct association between neighborhood social cohesion and neglect. However, we find important indirect effects. Specifically, parents who reported higher levels of neighborhood social cohesion had higher levels of social support, lower levels of parenting stress, and consequently, lower levels of neglect.

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1. Introduction

Families interact with their environment in important ways that may have implications for child maltreatment. Supportive neighbors can provide mutually beneficial relationships for parents that make child rearing easier. To the extent that neighbors are able to assist with childcare and provide emergency help with basic needs such as meals, the neighborhood context has the potential to reduce child neglect. While child abuse occurs as a result of an act of commission, that is, a parent's direct actions of physically harming a child, child neglect is the result of an act of omission – when a parent does not meet a child's basic physical, health, supervision, safety, and emotional needs. Parents who are emotionally and geographically close to trusted and supportive individuals may be better able to meet their child's basic needs and parent in appropriate ways, as they have people they can easily call upon when unexpected situations arise (e.g. emergency childcare situations). The current study investigates the complex ways in which supportive relations between neighbors (neighborhood social cohesion) relates to child neglect, both directly and indirectly through their association with social support and parenting stress.

2. Literature review

2.1. Focus on neglect

Of the 3.5 million referrals to child protective services agencies in the United States during federal fiscal year 2013, approximately 80% of these cases were due to concerns of child neglect (USDHHS, 2015). Although this form of maltreatment is the most common, neglect has received relatively less attention in the research literature compared to physical child abuse. Despite gains in the understanding of the significance of child neglect, there are still significant gaps in understanding the causes of neglect (Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, & van IJzendoorn, 2013).

2.2. Neighborhood social cohesion and child neglect

Neighborhood social cohesion relates to the mutual trust and support between neighbors (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Social cohesion is one component of collective efficacy, a neighborhood process construct conceptualized by Sampson et al. (1997). Sampson et al. (1997) posited that neighborhoods were more than the aggregation of the demographic characteristics of residents, and that the informal processes that occurred between neighbors played an important role in understanding the functioning of communities. They proposed the concept of collective efficacy, which included both the social cohesion between neighbors as well as the willingness of neighbors to intervene in a variety of problematic situations occurring within a

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community, referred to as social control. It was posited that collective efficacy would be protective against the negative structural characteristics of neighborhoods, such as high rates of poverty and disadvantage.

In the context of child maltreatment, relations between the various components of collective efficacy and child neglect have differing theoretical relationships. While social control may prevent child neglect because of a parent's fear of retribution (e.g. reports to child protective services), social cohesion may be protective because of the supportive relationships that provide an informal safety net for parents who are struggling to meet their child's basic needs. In this study, we focus on the relation between social cohesion and child neglect, to understand the importance of positive relationships between neighbors. Prior work investigating the relation between social cohesion and maltreatment have been somewhat mixed. While some studies have found evidence of associations between social cohesion and lower levels of physical abuse, emotional abuse, and child neglect (Freisthler & Maguire-Jack, 2015; Garbarino & Sherman, 1980; Guterman, Lee, Taylor, & Rathouz, 2009; Kim & Maguire-Jack, 2015; Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016), others have not found such relationships (Molnar, Buka, Brennan, Holton, & Earls, 2003; Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 1999).

A related study found that smaller social networks were associated with a greater risk of supervisory neglect (Johnson-Motoyama, 2013). While this small body of work has suggested an important link between neighborhood social cohesion and maltreatment, less is known about the pathways through which this relationship occurs. Although social cohesion may directly reduce child neglect through having additional supportive individuals to meet the basic needs of children, there are likely also important indirect effects because of the influence of social cohesion on other risk and protective factors for maltreatment. To this end, Guterman et al. (2009) examined two mediating pathways from neighborhood processes (including social cohesion, social control, and neighborhood disorder) to child maltreatment: parenting stress and personal control, and found important indirect effects for both factors. However, because this study did not separate out the various neighborhood processes, it remains unknown whether there are important mediating pathways from neighborhood social cohesion to child maltreatment. In the current study, we seek to advance this knowledge by specifically investigating the direct effect of neighborhood social cohesion on child neglect as well as the indirect effects through its association with social support and parenting stress.

2.3. Social support and neglect

Social support includes relationships with family and friends who provide both material (e.g. financial help or assistance with childcare) and nonmaterial (e.g. emotional) support (Thompson, 1995). Social support is an essential component of overall emotional wellbeing for all individuals (Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Hall-Lande, Eisenberg, Christenson, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2007; Hawthorne, 2008). For parents, social support is crucial for buffering the demands of caregiving as it provides a direct resource to assist with caregiving as well as meeting a child's basic needs. Social support directly impacts the relationship between parents and children (Ergh, Rapport, Coleman, & Hanks, 2002; Gracia & Musitu, 2003; Hawthorne, 2008). Parents who are socially isolated are more likely to maltreat their children (Starr, 1982; Polansky, Chalmers, Buttenwieser, & Williams, 1981; Belsky, 1993; Gracia & Musitu, 2003) and engage in neglect specifically (Seagull, 1987), while those with strong social bonds are more likely to cope with stress of the everyday demands of parenting in a more positive manner (Fram, 2003).

Neighborhood social cohesion is a measure of social connectedness, trust, and bonds between neighbors. As such, it is expected to have a direct association with the reported social support of parents, because the neighbors serve as a direct source of social support. Further, because higher levels of social support have been found to be associated with lower levels of parenting stress (Ostberg & Hagekull, 2000), we also

investigate the extent to which social support is related to child neglect through its influence on parenting stress.

2.4. Parenting stress and neglect

Parenting is demanding, and the everyday challenges associated with child rearing can place strain on caregivers. Parenting stress results when parents' responsibilities as caregivers for their children outweigh the resources available to the caregiver (Pereira et al., 2012). Such stress can negatively affect a parent's health and mood, and can extend into a parent's relationship with their child (Abidin, 1995; Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996). A high level of parenting stress is associated with an array of problematic parenting behaviors including an increased risk for punitive parenting and child maltreatment (Anthony et al., 2005; Pinderhughes, Dodge, Bates, Pettit, & Zelli, 2000; Pereira et al., 2012; Rodriguez, 2010; Taylor, Guterman, Lee, & Rathouz, 2009) including neglect specifically (Slack, Holl, McDaniel, Yoo, & Bolger, 2004).

Parenting stress is influenced by a number of factors including low levels of social support, child caretaking hassles, and a greater number of children in the family (Ostberg & Hagekull, 2000). Relatedly, respite care has been found to significantly reduce levels of parenting stress (Chan & Sigafos, 2001). To the extent that parents live in communities with high levels of social cohesion, they have trusted neighbors who are willing to help them out with small favors, including emergency childcare. As such, neighborhood social cohesion may directly influence parenting stress.

2.5. Theory

Belsky's (1993) developmental-ecological model for understanding the etiology of maltreatment suggests that influences at the individual, family, community, and societal level provide challenges that may result in maltreatment. Neighborhoods provide both parents and children with various resources, including social interaction, behavioral role models, social supports, access to goods and services, and safety. Additionally, Sampson et al. (1997) posited that shared principles and community expectations are required to organize against deviant behaviors within the community. The current study applies these two complementary frameworks for understanding the complex ways in which social cohesion is directly and indirectly associated with child neglect.

2.6. Contributions of the current study

The current study advances the study by Guterman et al. (2009) in two important ways: first, by examining social cohesion specifically, and second, by examining the role of social support. The prior study examined a joint measure of neighborhood processes, including two neighborhood processes (social control and social cohesion) as well as a neighborhood disorder scale that measured whether certain social milieu were reported to be a problem in the respondent's neighborhood (e.g. gangs and drug dealers). These three scales were each measured separately and combined using parcels formed by the means on each scale. In examining the social cohesion scale separately, the study provides critical information for community interventions by examining the mechanisms to target for maltreatment prevention. This study is also a direct extension of a prior study that examined the relationship between social cohesion and child maltreatment (Maguire-Jack & Showalter, 2016). The prior study used negative binomial regression to estimate these relationships and found that social cohesion was associated with child neglect. In this extension, we seek to understand why this relationship exists by specifically modeling two hypothesized mediators from social cohesion to neglect. We hypothesize that neighborhood social cohesion will have a direct association with child neglect as well as an indirect association, through its relations with social support and parenting stress.

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