



Caution! Men *not* at work: Gender-specific labor market conditions and child maltreatment[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the effect of labor market conditions—measured through unemployment, mass layoffs and predicted employment—on child maltreatment using county-level data from California. Using these indicators, we separately estimate the effects of overall and gender-specific economic shocks. We find only modest evidence of a link between overall economic conditions and child maltreatment. However, analysis by gender reveals robust evidence that maltreatment decreases with indicators for male employment and increases with indicators for female employment. These opposite-signed effects are consistent with a theoretical framework that builds on household-time-use models and is supported by an analysis of time-use data, though we discuss other mechanisms that may also play important roles.

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1. Introduction

In 2015 alone, child protective services agencies in the United States investigated nearly four million referrals for child maltreatment and identified nearly 700,000 victims — a rate of 9.2 victims

per 1000 children.¹ Child maltreatment has grave and long-lasting consequences both for victims and for society. In addition to the immediate suffering that they experience, victims tend to suffer from poor physical and emotional health, and are at increased risk for depression, behavioral problems, and high-risk health behaviors (Fletcher, 2009, Thornberry et al., 2010). As adults, they are more likely to be unemployed, in poverty, and using Medicaid (Zielinski, 2009, Currie and Widom, 2010), and are more likely to commit crimes (Currie and Tekin, 2012). Child maltreatment also imposes a number of direct and indirect costs on society — costs of hospitalization and ongoing physical and mental health care for victims, expenses for law enforcement and child welfare agencies, increased pressure on the criminal justice system, and lost productivity.

A large body of research establishes that poverty and parental unemployment are strong predictors of child maltreatment. Thus, it

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¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2017).

seems natural to expect aggregate economic downturns to be associated with increases in child maltreatment. Perhaps surprisingly, the existing evidence on the relationship between macroeconomic conditions and maltreatment is mixed. Despite the onset of the Great Recession in December 2007, national child victimization rates fell from 2007 to 2012, continuing a downward trajectory that has spanned nearly two decades.² Meanwhile, a growing multidisciplinary literature exploring the link between economic conditions and child maltreatment at the state and county level has generated seemingly contradictory results, with some researchers finding a positive association between local unemployment rates and child maltreatment (Frioux et al., 2014), others finding a negative association (Raissian, 2015), and several studies generating mixed or inconclusive evidence on whether aggregate economic conditions influence rates of abuse and neglect (Paxson and Waldfogel, 2002; Wood et al., 2012; Bitler and Zavodny, 2004, and Seiglie, 2004).

Moreover, there exists an important gap in the literature on the effects of *gender-specific* labor market conditions on child maltreatment. There are several reasons why economic shocks that disproportionately affect women may have different effects on child maltreatment than aggregate economic shocks that disproportionately affect men. For one thing, the underlying propensity to commit child maltreatment and the likelihood of being reported for it differ between males and females, and changes in male and female employment have different effects on the distribution of childcare between mothers and fathers. Other factors that contribute to maltreatment such as stress, substance abuse, and bargaining power may also respond differently to changes in male and female labor market conditions.

In this paper, we evaluate the economic determinants of child maltreatment by combining county-level administrative maltreatment data from California with new aggregate labor market variables that are more likely to be exogenous with respect to child maltreatment than standard economic indicators. These include predicted employment rates and employment growth rates that capture demand-induced variation in labor market opportunities, as well as mass layoffs. Gender-specific versions of these economic indicators allow us to separately estimate the effects of plausibly exogenous changes in labor market opportunities facing males and females.

Focusing on measures of overall economic conditions, we find modest evidence that the overall state of the local labor market is linked with child maltreatment. In contrast with two other recent studies using county-level data from other states (Frioux et al., 2014; Raissian, 2015), we do not find a statistically significant relationship between local unemployment rates and maltreatment rates. When we focus on labor market indicators that are more likely to be driven by labor demand, we find some evidence that improvements in local economic conditions reduce child maltreatment; however, the estimates are only sometimes statistically significant.

The main insights from our study come from our analyses of the effects of gender-specific economic conditions on child maltreatment. The results of these analyses highlight that estimates pooling labor market conditions for males and females conceal important patterns by gender. In particular, they indicate that male employment is associated with reductions in child maltreatment and female employment is associated with increases in child maltreatment. This pattern of opposite-signed effects of male and female employment is apparent across regressions based on three different plausibly exogenous proxies for gender-specific labor market conditions that use different sources of identifying variation.

We outline a simple theoretical framework to highlight the different causal pathways through which labor market shocks may affect child maltreatment. In this framework, a child's risk of being maltreated is a function his or her caregivers' propensities for maltreatment and the amount of time spent with each caregiver. Thus, economic shocks can alter rates of maltreatment either by changing the amount of time that children spend with different caregivers or by changing caregivers' propensities for maltreatment. In light of suggestive evidence that males are more likely to maltreat children when adjusted for time-of-exposure, one possible reason for the opposite-signed effects of male and female employment is that male employment reduces time spent with fathers while mother's employment increases it. We use data from the American Time Use Survey to examine changes in parental time spent with children following changes in employment status and find empirical support for this mechanism. We also explore the potential role of employment-related changes in mental health and substance abuse—which are likely to alter parents' propensities to maltreat their children—by examining the degree to which hospitalizations for substance abuse and self-harm are affected by local labor market conditions for each gender.

In addition to improving upon our understanding of the determinants of child maltreatment, this paper contributes to a small but growing literature in economics that uses aggregate gender-specific economic variables to test the implications of economic models of individual and family decision-making.³ The results from this paper suggest that a gender-focused approach may be particularly important for understanding of the effects of economic shocks on child welfare, and that the distribution of childcare within households may be an important mechanism generating these effects. Our findings also have important policy implications. In particular, our finding that reductions in male employment rates and increases in male layoff rates are associated with increases in child maltreatment suggests that targeting income support, job-search assistance, child-care assistance, and mental health services to families experiencing job displacement might be an effective way to reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect. Meanwhile, our finding that increases in female employment are related to increases in child maltreatment suggest that policies seeking to increase female labor force participation may have negative implications for child welfare unless they are partnered with other family support services.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. In the next section, we provide further background on child maltreatment victimization and perpetration and describe prior studies estimating the effects of local economic conditions on child maltreatment. We then discuss our data and key variables in Section 3, including the set of economic indicators that allow us to address potential endogeneity concerns and to separately identify shocks to labor market opportunities facing males and females. We explain our empirical strategy that uses these measures in Section 4 and present our main results in Section 5. In Section 6, we outline a theoretical framework that highlights the different causal pathways through which labor market shocks might affect child maltreatment. In Section 7, we look for evidence of these mechanisms in empirical analyses of parental time use and measures of mental health. Section 8 concludes.

2. Background: economic conditions and child maltreatment

According to a 2010 report to Congress based on the Fourth National Incidence Study (NIS-4) of Child Abuse and Neglect (Sedlak et al., 2010), more than 1.25 million children experienced demonstrable harm resulting from maltreatment in the United States

² The national child victimization rate was 15.3 (per 1000 children) in 1993 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001), 10.6 in 2007 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010), and 9.1 in 2012 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015).

³ See, e.g. Blau et al. (2000), Qian (2008), Aizer (2010), Schaller (2016), Page et al. (2017), and Anderberg et al. (2016).

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