

UNPACKING THE CONNECTION BETWEEN POVERTY & CHILD NEGLECT:

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY & PRACTICE

Sandra Rosenbaum School of Social Work and
the Institute for Research on Poverty
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Kristen Slack and Lonnie Berger
Kslack@wisc.edu

Overview of presentation

- Background
- Incidence of child maltreatment in the U.S.
- The link between poverty and child maltreatment: what do we know and what don't we know?
- A programmatic example of an economic support program to prevent child maltreatment: **Project GAIN**
- Current policy and economic contexts and the child maltreatment prevention landscape
- "Poverty-informed" practice

2

A long, long time ago...

U.S. Welfare Reform Debates in early/mid-1990s

- Rarely discussed child protective services (CPS) system
- AFDC-recipient families over-represented in CPS populations;
- In National Incidence Studies (NIS-1-2-3), strong inverse correlation with income;
- Child maltreatment report rates greatest in communities with high poverty rates and high unemployment rates.

1

Illinois Families Study (IFS)

5 year longitudinal, panel study

Annual in-person surveys
Linked individual-level administrative data
Medical chart reviews (for young children only)

Random sample of 1998 TANF recipients

Representative of 75% of the state TANF cases

4

Select Findings from IFS

- Parental employment has a protective effect on CPS reports that was greatest when combined with welfare receipt.
- Those who received welfare in the absence of employment faced a significantly greater risk of CPS involvement, even compared to those who neither worked nor received welfare.
- Parenting measures did not mediate the link between perceived economic hardship and neglect.
- The imposition of a TANF sanction increased the risk of being reported to child protective services (CPS).
 - *But... sanctions were unrelated to substantiated allegations of maltreatment.*

5

What predicts neglect?

Fragile Families
and Child
Wellbeing (FFCW)
N=1,820

Healthy Families
New York
(HFNY)
N=421

Illinois Families Study-
Child Wellbeing
(IFS-CWB)
N=385

- All involve probabilistic samples (or subsamples) of low-income families with young children
- All involve prospective, longitudinal designs
- All are able to distinguish neglect from other forms of maltreatment, and have two different measures of neglect outcomes
- They share a relatively large set of common/approximate measures

6

Predictors of Neglect

CPS NEGLECT

HFNY: public benefit receipt, material hardships, unemployment, depression, substance use

IFS-CWB: public benefit receipt, material hardships, unemployment, (low) self efficacy, (low) involvement in child activities, spanking, parenting stress

FFCW: material hardships, depression, parent health problems, (low) self efficacy, (low) involvement in child activities, parenting stress

SELF-REPORTED NEGLECT

HFNY: public benefit receipt, material hardships, spanking, (low) self efficacy, LBW (-)

IFS-CWB: material hardships, (low) self efficacy, (low) involvement with child activities, parenting stress, domestic violence

FFCW: material hardships, depression, parent health problems, child health problems, domestic violence, substance use

Black=statistically significant in 1 study; Blue=statistically significant in 2 studies; Red=statistically significant in all 3 studies.

7

Implications of these findings....

- Maltreatment not all about parenting; poverty may play a critical role
- Reported but not substantiated for abuse or neglect: then what?
- Rates of re-reports to CPS similar for families with substantiated & unsubstantiated allegations

8

Most Recent U.S. Data on Incidence

- National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS, 2019)
 - 8.9 per 1,000 children victimized
 - 47.2 per 1,000 children received a CPS response
- Between 10-35% of U.S. children experience CPS involvement over the course of childhood (Wildeman et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2017)
- National Incidence Study (NIS-4) (2005):
 - "Harm standard": 17/1000 (61% experienced neglect)
 - "Endangerment standard": 40/1000 (77% experienced or were at risk for neglect)

9

Characteristics of Neglect

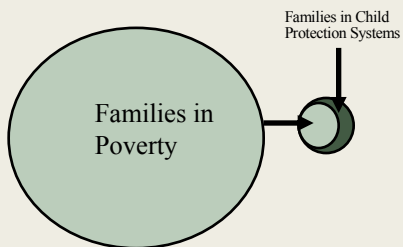
- Neglect is most common form of child maltreatment.
 - 75% of known child victims experienced neglect (17% and 8% experienced physical or sexual abuse, respectively)
 - 61% experience only neglect
- Form of CM most associated with poverty, and most likely to be associated with a CM-related deaths.
- Most common among 0-3 age group, declines with age.
- Only form of maltreatment to NOT show a statistically significant decline since 1990.

10

WHAT DOES POVERTY HAVE TO DO WITH
CHILD MALTREATMENT PREVENTION?

11

**Most Parents Experiencing Poverty
Do Not Maltreat their Children...**



12

Why focus on poverty in our prevention efforts?

- Most CPS-involved families have low incomes
- Income and poverty strong and consistent correlates of child maltreatment and CPS involvement
- Parenting and other psychosocial interventions may be less effective if economic context is stressed
- Constricted economic safety net in U.S.
- Low-hanging fruit?

13

WHAT WE KNOW...

- In U.S. National Incidence Studies (NIS-1-2-3-4), strong inverse correlation with income; strongest for neglect;
- Population-level analyses support a strong association between poverty and CPS involvement, and between poverty and maltreatment-related infant deaths;
- Fluctuations in means-tested benefits are predictive of CPS involvement.

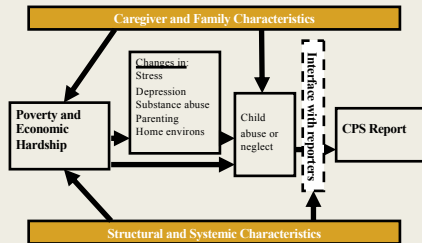
14

WHAT WE DON'T KNOW (but are starting to understand)

- Limited understanding of the mechanisms linking poverty and child maltreatment
- Limited (but growing) experimental evidence linking changes in income to child maltreatment outcomes
- **How much child maltreatment prevention can we achieve if we only intervene around economic stressors?**

15

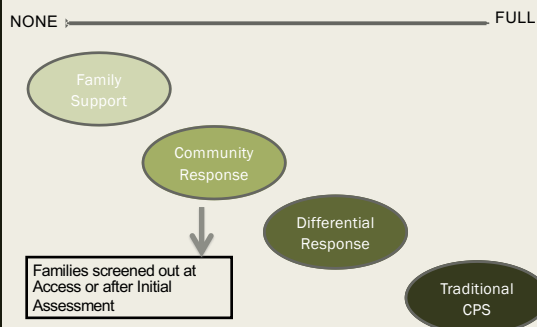
How Might Poverty Matter for Child Maltreatment and CPS Involvement?



Evidence increasingly suggests a causal relationship

- Knowing whether link between poverty and child maltreatment is causal is crucial for policy and practice
- Experimental studies that test whether maltreatment risk changes as income increases or decreases increasingly suggests a causal relationship:
 - Fein & Lee (2003): *Delaware randomized welfare reform experiment*
 - Cancian, Yang, & Slack (2013): *WI randomized child support pass-through experiment*
 - Berger, Font, Slack, & Waldfogel (2016): *EITC expansions*
 - Raissian & Bullinger (2017): *Increases in state minimum wage*
 - Wildeman & Fallesen (2017): *Decrease in Danish welfare benefits*
- Designing an intervention to test whether economic support has a preventive effect on child maltreatment

Continuum of CPS Involvement



The Milwaukee GAIN Model

Linking to Benefits and Economic or Material Resources

Target Population:
Families whose CPS cases close upon investigation.

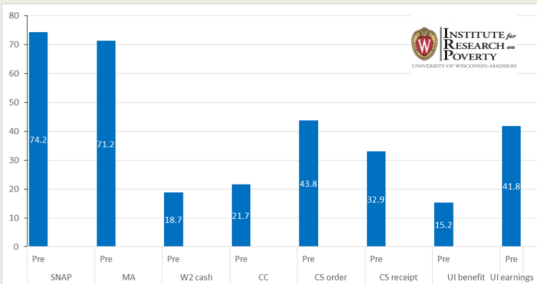
Financial Decision-making Assistance



One-time emergency assistance with economic needs

19

Program Participation in Year Before a Screened-In Call: Milwaukee



20

Project GAIN Partners

Getting Access to Income Now



*Evaluation funded by the CDC and Casey Family Programs

Menu of Services

- Employment – job search, licenses, resume building, practice interviews
- Housing – eviction prevention, homelessness, referrals for foreclosure prevention
- Benefit Advocacy – TANF, SNAP, EITC, LIHEAP
- Education – GED, CNA, post-secondary education
- Financial Decision Making – taxes, credit repair, bill paying, bankruptcy, banking, budgeting, legal issues

Examples of Financial Goals

■ Access to Benefits (includes Energy Assist.)	24%
■ Budgeting or Credit Counseling	9%
■ Education/job skills	11%
■ Employment (job search and resume)	17%
■ Housing	17%
■ Material resources	7%
■ Transportation	4%
■ Other need (child support, taxes, legal)	11.7%

Shining Star

- After getting assistance moving to a new place, “Janel” benefited by:
 - lower rent (**\$115 less per month**)
 - new unit has heat included (lower energy bill)
 - closer to her job (from 16 miles each way, 5x per week, to 1.5 miles each way, saving on gas **\$25 per week**)
 - new daycare has lower co-pay **\$20 less per week** (also closer to home and work, she says she now has an extra hour per day to herself)
 - Total monthly difference = **\$295+**

Shining Star, cont.

"They helped me start my new life in peace and organized. Without them I would have never moved forward and would have been stuck in disorganization and debt."

—"Janel", single mother with 3 year-old daughter

Milwaukee GAIN Financial Advocates



Sample

- ~5,000 families randomized into treatment or control condition between Aug 2012 and Sept 2016
- Initially focused on families with at least one child < 6 years old ("early cohort"), eventually opened to all families ("late cohort").
- A final "survey cohort" during last year of the evaluation
- Altered T:C randomization ratio to adjust to staff capacity relative to number of eligible reports over time
- Presenting on the "intent-to-treat" or "ITT" effect for early and late cohorts

Treatment Group Participation Rates

■ Early cohort: 31.6%

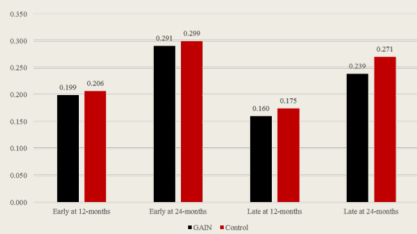
- 97% of participants had 1+ home visits; 71% had 2+

■ Late cohort: 22.5%

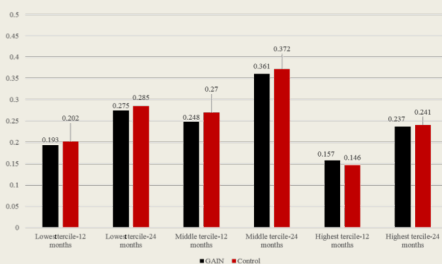
- 97% had 1+ home visits; 60% had 2+

Lower-income families, families receiving SNAP, families with primary caregiver who identifies as Black, and families with prior CPS substantiations were more likely to participate in GAIN.

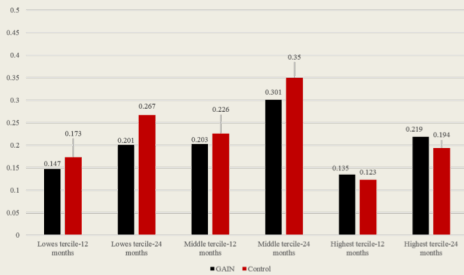
Full Sample Mean Differences in Caregiver CPS Investigation within 12- and 24-Months of Randomization (N=2,433 for early cohort and 2,900 for late cohort)



Early Cohort Mean Differences in Caregiver CPS Investigation within 12- and 24-Months of Randomization, by Baseline Income Tercile (N=2,433)



Late Cohort Mean Differences in Caregiver CPS Investigation within 12- and 24-Months of Randomization, by Baseline Income Tercile (N=2,900)



Summary and Considerations

- Project GAIN is the first RCT of an economic support program specifically designed to reduce child maltreatment.
- Some suggestion of an effect on income stabilization and reduced CPS recurrence for the lowest income families, particularly in the Late Cohort.
- The ITT patterns also suggest potential increases in CPS re-investigation and income instability for higher-income, but still economically disadvantaged families.
 - Not a one-size-fits-all intervention

Current Policy and Economic Contexts

- Clear economic insecurity
- No clear economic safety net
- No institutionalized “emergency assistance” options
- Limited access to affordable, reasonable-quality housing
- Low-wage jobs—unstable/insufficient hours; inadequate benefits; few provide living wage
- Unfriendly or inaccessible safety net service systems
- Overall fragmented and categorical systems

The Poverty Conundrum in CPS

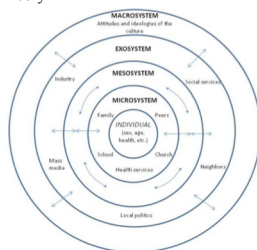
- Numerous indicators of poverty repeatedly shown to elevate the risk of child maltreatment, in particular, child neglect
- Line between poverty and neglect sometimes blurred
- American ideology that poverty equates to a personal flaw
- Yet, longstanding philosophy in child welfare that poverty does not equal maltreatment

- *"For reasons other than poverty..."*

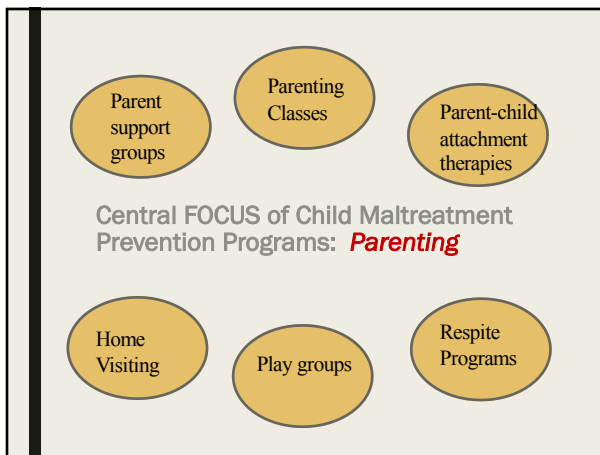
THE PREVENTION LANDSCAPE

Theoretical Framework

Ecological Systems Theory



Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979)



How do we currently address poverty in child maltreatment prevention?

- The U.S. economic safety net has not been traditionally viewed as a preventive tool with respect to child maltreatment.
- Prevention work often involves referring families to other systems for assistance with economic needs.
- Prevention programs that attempt to address economic needs tend to use a case-by-case approach, not a systematic one.

38

How could we address child maltreatment prevention in policy?

- **Benefit navigator programs** that assist and advocate for families in navigating the complex safety net and (sometimes) unfriendly practices that are encountered in safety net programs.
- Families identified as at-risk for child maltreatment could receive **prioritized assistance** with shoring up their economic safety net if poverty stressors are identified as a problem.
- **Bold policy reforms** like universal basic income, expansions of child care subsidies and housing vouchers, and paid family leave.

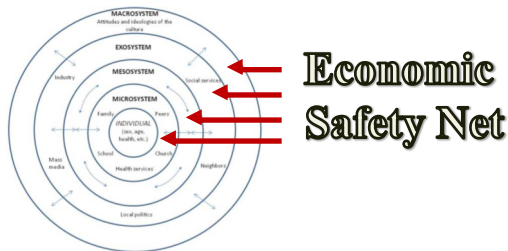
"Poverty-Informed" practice

- Systematic interventions to address poverty are not common, but should be viewed as a necessary component of prevention services.
- Understand the eligibility requirements and policies associated with various safety net programs, and build relationships within those systems.
- Important to identify families for whom interventions to address poverty and economic stress are the primary solution for interrupting maltreatment risk.
- Ensure families understand that poverty is not a personal failure, and acknowledge the stress it creates.

40

Theoretical Framework and the Economic Safety Net

Ecological Systems Theory



Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979)

Future Directions

- Practice the social-ecological framework—don't just emphasize parenting behaviors in our prevention efforts.
- Articulate systematic approaches to addressing poverty in prevention programs.
- Work to change policies and practices in systems that administer aspects of the economic safety net.
- Work to change the public discourse on parental control over the circumstances of poverty, and beliefs that child maltreatment is just about "bad parenting."
- Work to change the public and political discourse on societal and community responsibility in preventing child maltreatment.

Takeaway thought....

*"There's a fine line between
parental neglect of children
and societal neglect of
families."*

- National Alliance of Children's Trust Funds

43

THANK YOU!

44
