

The Relationship Between Poverty and Child Abuse and Neglect: New Evidence

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Briefing Note

Aims and Background

- This Briefing Note identifies some key messages of a literature review of international evidence about the relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect (CAN) published between 2016 and 2021^{2,3}.
- Over 30% of children in England live in poverty. Deep poverty has increased rapidly in the past five years. In England this has been accompanied by record levels of children in out-of-home care. More than one child in 60 is investigated for abuse or neglect each year.
- There has been a substantial increase in the volume and quality of published research into the relationship between poverty and CAN over the last five years. The report draws on 90 papers, from a wide range of academic disciplines, from 15 developed countries.

Key Findings

- It is now widely accepted that poverty and inequality are key drivers of harm to children, even if changes in policy and practice responses have been limited, to date.
- The evidence for this relationship between poverty and CAN is much stronger than five years ago. Seventeen studies show that changes in the economic conditions of family life alone – without changing any other factors – impact on rates of abuse and neglect. Increases in income reduce rates of CAN significantly. Economic shocks increase CAN unless families are protected by welfare benefits. The redistribution of economic and social resources should be an essential element of preventing harm, keeping families together and reuniting separated families.
- Poverty affects every aspect of family life. Poverty is inextricably implicated in other factors which increase the risk of harm: including domestic violence, poor mental health and substance use. Children's age and ethnicity interact with poverty in ways that increase inequalities.
- Deep poverty and persistent poverty are more damaging for children's safety and development than a low income or temporary difficulties. Insecurity and unpredictability of income, housing and employment, often the result of benefits administration practices or a lack of rights, compound the problems of parenting on an inadequate income.
- The neighbourhood a family lives in also influences the likelihood of CAN. Research has focused more on social relations within neighbourhoods (such as social cohesion or social control) than the impact of the local environment (such as buildings and parks) including access to locally based resources such as shops, schools, leisure facilities or health care. There is insufficient overall clarity about the conclusions that can be drawn, but there are signs of complex interactions between personal economic status and neighbourhood conditions.
- There is a steep social gradient in rates of substantiated CAN. There is not a binary divide between those who are in poverty and those who are not. In England, children in the most deprived decile were around 13 times more likely to be on a Child Protection Plan and over 10 times more likely to be looked after (CLA) than a child in the least deprived decile. Around one child in 36 in the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods were either on a CPP or CLA on the census day in 2015; but only one in 426 in the least deprived neighbourhoods. Over 50% of children subject to these interventions were from families in the most deprived 20% of neighbourhoods; only 5% were from the least deprived 20%.
- However, no research in this period has examined patterns of CAN in wealthier families. The social gradient in rates of substantiated abuse and neglect should enable researchers, policy makers and practitioners to understand the roles of economic and other factors in family life.

- Too much research reflects a ‘one size fits all’ approach to the relationship between poverty and abuse and neglect and fails to give an adequate account of the differential effects of poverty on different families. Parents’ and children’s gender, age, ethnicity, health or disability, employment or unemployment all affect the ways in which adverse economic conditions are worked out in family life but there is inadequate knowledge about or attention given to these differences. Policies, services and practices should be better tailored to individual needs.
- The focus in much research on the behaviour and circumstances of individuals and families deflects attention from the responsibility of the state and the potential for preventing child abuse and neglect through macro-economic and social policies, and leadership on social attitudes to people living in poverty.

Implications for Practitioners and Policy

- Qualitative and quantitative evidence emphasises the potential for child protection systems and practice to improve outcomes by engaging with the impact of income, employment and housing conditions on families and children to prevent child abuse and neglect. These factors should be actively addressed in every assessment, supervision session, case conference and court report.
- National and local strategic responses to poverty are required to underpin changes in practice.
- Policy and practice also could do more to respond to the connections between economic conditions and mediating factors which receive more attention: poor mental health, domestic violence and abuse, addictions, physical health, poor housing and homelessness.
- When parents’ feel that their difficulties in meeting children’s basic needs are not recognised or responded to, it compounds feelings of shame and stigma. In turn, this disrupts the chances of child protection services establishing effective relationships with families under pressure.
- There is evidence that some of the responses of child protection systems and workers interact with other policies covering housing, benefits and employment to actively increase economic and other pressures on parents while making recovery and the reunification of families more difficult.

Conclusion

- This review provides evidence that structural policy changes and shifts in the focal point of child protection interventions can expect to significantly improve children’s safety and wellbeing.
- National and local strategic responses to reduce family poverty and inequality are needed, to rebalance the current emphasis on investigating individual families’ behaviours.
- COVID-19 showed that governments can make very radical policy changes affecting the socio-economic conditions and context of family life, if they choose to, and, equally, that service agencies can substantially alter how they practice.
- With that recent example, and with families in England facing a stark cost of living crisis, this recent body of evidence points up the urgent need for new directions in policy, practice and research to reduce harm to children.

Notes

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2. The full report is available [here](#).
3. The review was funded by the Nuffield Foundation.