

## Narrative of Podcast for “Do Social Workers Confuse Poverty with Neglect?”

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### Do Social Workers Confuse Poverty with Neglect?

Research cited in this [Child Welfare Monitor article](#) indicates that most poor parents do not neglect their children. So when poor families are screened into child protection it raises the concern that this is happening because mandated reporters and child protection workers have trouble distinguishing poverty from neglect.

National statistics however show that only a quarter of child protection reports alleging neglect are for unmet material needs, and just a quarter of those are screened in.

Further, states including Minnesota define neglect [in statute](#) as a failure to provide material necessities “when reasonably able to do so”, and Minnesota [operational guidelines](#) (p. 37) state that maltreatment findings should not be made based solely on conditions of poverty.

Statistics are hard to obtain, but these standards suggest that workers are likely screening families into child protection for deliberate neglect not poverty.

### Podcast Narrative

Last December 1st we did a blog and a podcast based on an article called Research to Consider While Effectively Redesigning Child Welfare Services. It lists seven authors including well-known names like Richard Barth, Melissa Jonson-Reid and Brett Drake. The purpose of the article was to challenge 10 common misperceptions about child welfare. We were able to access the article but unfortunately it is behind a firewall for most people, but the Child Welfare Monitor did an excellent summary and analysis of the article on November 1st 2021, which is available at [childwelfaremonitor.org](http://childwelfaremonitor.org).

There has been a recent rebuttal to this article by the way by several authors including [Emiko A. Tajima](#), [Angelique G. Day](#), and [V. Kalei Kanuha](#) which I would love to read but it's behind a firewall too and I can't get access to it through my usual pathways.

Today I'd like to do a deeper dive into one theme of that article by Barth et. al., which is the relationship between poverty and child neglect. I think this is important because there is a lot of sensitivity around this issue in terms of racial bias in child protection and foster care, and it's very easy to talk about neglect in a way that is misperceived as bias, or actually does reveal some implicit bias that needs to be named and dealt with.

I have recently been reminded of this again in a webinar where an extremely capable speaker made comments along the lines of “families get into child protection because of issues like food insecurity and housing instability”. If you break that down the underlying assumption could be or at least may be perceived by the listener as saying that the effects of the poverty like being

homeless or having to move multiple times a year or being hungry is almost the same as neglect.

In reality, the research cited in this article by Barth and company indicates that most families who are poor do not neglect their children. Neglect involves issues like deliberately depriving children of material needs, or not attending to infants and toddlers during their critical first 1000 days of brain development, or being indifferent to children's risk-taking or rule breaking behavior, or leaving them for long periods to fend for themselves in situations where they are too young to do so, or leaving dangerous weapons or drugs lying around, or exposing them to individuals who may harm them. Those are different issues from not having enough food.

These are the kinds of reasons why over 70% of child fatalities due to maltreatment are classified as neglect cases or neglect combined with abuse.

That said, it is often difficult for people to get their brains wrapped around the nuance of this issue because there is in fact a relationship between poverty and maltreatment, including both abuse and neglect. Families in all communities, regardless of race or ethnic background are more likely to end up in child protection if they live in concentrated poverty. One of the most interesting findings referred to in the Barth article is that once poverty is controlled for, the rates of child maltreatment treatment reports, substantiated reports, and of entries into foster care are similar to if not a bit lower in Black communities than in white communities. Approximately three times as many Black families live in poverty compared to white families, and the disparities in child protection are similarly disproportionate.

So the net result is that families who live in poverty are more likely to maltreat their children, yet at the same time most poor parents across all demographics do not abuse or neglect their children.

That's not exactly counterintuitive. I know first hand from growing up in a poor family and neighborhood about the stresses that being poor places on parents. I have seen people crack under these pressures and do things they otherwise would not have done. So one of the obvious public policy "fixes" is to lessen that burden, to ensure that families do not fall into deep poverty. Addressing this issue would lead to policies that ensure for example equal access to jobs that pay enough support the family, affordable housing, adequate food, healthcare, a childcare allowance, and similar society-wide programs. We note that President Biden's short-lived childcare allowance lifted nearly 50% of children out of poverty! We need to do more of that.

Those are systemic, across-the-board fixes. Within the limited scope of the child welfare system, as the Barth article points out, we could put more money into programs that reach people when they are very poor and on the verge of getting into child protection, and are not able to provide for the material needs of their children. In Minnesota there is a program called Parent Support Outreach Program, PSOP for short, which does exactly that. However it is small and does not support most at-risk poor families.

Another piece of this puzzle that I would like to touch on is accusing child protection workers of not being able to distinguish between poverty and child abuse, particularly when it comes to

nonwhite cultures. The underlying narrative is that most child protection workers are white and are not familiar with or perhaps uncomfortable with the culture of poverty, or the specific communities that they serve whether Black or Native or immigrants or other BIPOC families. The last time I checked however, almost 50% of child protection workers in Minnesota's largest county were BIPOC individuals. And my experience is they make the same decisions as white workers because they are personally committed to protecting children and they are also constrained by the same laws and policies as everyone else. There are not many entrepreneurs or rule breakers in government generally, particularly among professions where people are responsible for the lives of children.

And in fact this article points to research that mandated reporters who are seeing neglect only report about 25% of neglect cases for lack of basic needs. They tend to report neglect for reasons listed earlier, meaning deliberate neglect that puts children directly in harm's way. Even when these are reported, only about one quarter of those are actually screened in. So for starters, only about one in eight neglect cases related to material deprivation in child protection even get an assessment or investigation, and overall fewer than half of those cases are substantiated. So the perception that child protection is filled with families that are merely poor, and are not neglecting their children, is just statistically incorrect.

In addition, Minnesota is one of a number of states that have worked hard to make the distinction between material wants caused by intentional neglect and material wants caused by poverty. As mentioned, the Minnesota statute 260.03, which is where the definitions are, states that neglect is the "failure by a person responsible for a child to supply a child with necessary food clothing shelter health medical or other care required for the child's physical or mental health when reasonably able to do so". It's the "reasonably able to do so" phrase that critically clarifies the distinction between deliberate neglect and neglect due to poverty.

And as also mentioned in blog, there is a long section in most recent State Department Human Services document entitled Minnesota Child Maltreatment Intake, Screening, and Response Path Guidelines which gives a lot of specificity around what types of situations constitute neglect as a child protection issue and what kinds are indicators of simply not having enough resources. Given that, the section concludes stating "when it is determined that reports of neglect are based solely on conditions due to poverty a finding of maltreatment should not be made." I have not had a chance to check with the Child Welfare Training Academy folks about this but I would be very surprised if this wasn't something that is emphasized strongly in their training of workers.

Finally, I'd like to mention that a good reading of this article is very helpful because it really delves into the nuances of the harms caused to children by poverty versus neglect. Both poverty and neglect have long-term negative consequences for children, and they do overlap in many ways. So it is not as simple as saying it will be okay if parents are poor but don't neglect their children, because some of the consequences for children of deprivation are serious even if their parents aren't neglecting them. Getting into these nuances in conversations where racial disparities in the system are top of mind requires a lot of openness and grace on the part of the participants, to make sure everyone is hearing each other well. If those kinds of conversations

can occur, it may be possible to create policies and practices which provide the optimal kind of support for each family and child.

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