

Reduction in Child Poverty Drives a Reduction in Child Maltreatment

A recent [study by Child Trends](#) showed that government programs such as the Earned Income Tax Credit reduced child poverty from 27.9% to 11.4% between 1993 and 2019. Since poverty is correlated with child maltreatment, this should have prompted a corresponding reduction in abuse and neglect.

In fact it did. [Federal statistics](#) show that, beginning in 2015, screened-in maltreatment reports dropped from 47 to around 32 per 1,000 children. The lag time from the reduction in poverty was lengthy, but nevertheless the expected improvement happened.

While racial disparities remain, [research by Emily Putnam-Hornstein](#) et. al. shows that when the impact of poverty is erased, child maltreatment referral and substantiation rates for Black children are similar to or slightly lower than for whites. This indicates that promoting economic justice is perhaps the most powerful strategy for addressing disparities in child welfare.

Narrative for podcast

This is a follow-up to the podcast we did two weeks ago on the big drop in child poverty in America between 1993 and 2021 that caught a lot of experts by surprise. By the way we were going to do this podcast last week but we changed course and did the weekly blog that these podcasts are connected to on the Minnesota's Child Welfare Training Academy, which just had its grand opening and was such a great story and accomplishment that we dropped everything to give it a timely review.

To recap where we were, last time we talked about a report by Child Trends (see link above) and the New York Times which analyzed census data and the Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM), which augments the official poverty indexes by calculating the impact on poverty of government transfer and support programs such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, subsidized housing, the SNAP a.k.a. the Food Stamp program, child care and similar federal benefits. The gist of the story was that these government programs have moved millions of families from being under to being over the official poverty line. The catch was that the official poverty line is not a particularly accurate measure of poverty, so someone right around the poverty line is not really able to rent an apartment, buy food, and pay for the other basic necessities of life. However for those who are raised enough above the poverty line by these transfer programs to eke out a living, it has made a huge difference. There is a [link to the September 11, 2022 Times story](#) in the written version of this podcast and it has some stories of individuals who have been lifted out of poverty by these government programs which add credibility and depth to the numbers. Or you can just Google the title of the article which is "Expanded Safety Net Drives Sharp Drop in Child Poverty".

What we promised to follow up on in this podcast is the impact of this welcome development on child maltreatment. As we discussed briefly, there is strong evidence that poverty, particularly extreme poverty, which is defined as 50% or less than the official poverty threshold, is a major driver of child abuse and neglect. We cited an article by Leroy Pelton which summarized the previous 20 years of research that established this connection. The article is called "The

continuing role of material factors in child maltreatment and placement.” It is not available for free on the Internet so if you want to read it, unless you have access to research through an institution of higher education you will have to buy it.

The following quote though summarizes what Pelton learned from reviewing the research:

“Based on both evidence and reason, I concluded that the presence of material hardship is so pervasive in child abuse and neglect cases that any strategy aimed at greatly reducing the incidence of child abuse and neglect must centrally address this bedrock context in which severe harm to children thrives. The most effective way to reduce child abuse and neglect is to reduce poverty and its attendant material hardships. I claimed that without a key focus on material hardship, other additionally desirable approaches will not succeed in significantly reducing the incidence and severity of child abuse and neglect within our nation.”

This quote reminds me of Bill Clinton’s campaign slogan “it’s the economy, stupid”. I always thought that was kind of crude, but the point is that, while we tend to research and analyze many aspects of child maltreatment, poverty dwarfs all the other factors combined as the most important root cause.

So if that is the case, then this dramatic drop in child poverty should have resulted in an equally dramatic drop in child maltreatment. And in fact, there was a significant drop in federal child abuse and neglect statistics in recent years. The main source of this information is the federal Department of Health and Human Services annual Child Maltreatment Report. I put together some statistics for the last podcast which I said that from 2009 to 2014 the number of total reports of child maltreatment per 1000 children in the population ranged from 41.6 to 50. Then in 2015 to 2019 this number dropped to between 30 and 32 and stayed there.

One question I had was why the experts missed this. If this is the case we should have been seeing articles and papers on this decline in maltreatment from at least 2015 or so. So I went back to the federal reports to try to get some more detail and discovered one reason why this trend might have not been obvious to researchers. I had originally looked at numbers from the 2013 and 2019 reports, which covered the period back as far as 2009. But when I looked for some details in reports for the in-between years I saw that some key statistics were jumping around as DHHS tweaked its methodology from year-to-year. In some cases they displayed a big difference. For 2014 for example, the number of screened-in reports of child treatment per 1,000 children was 50 in but in subsequent years the number was reported as 29 per 1,000. This combined with atypical numbers during Covid probably made it difficult for researchers to detect the actual trend.

Stepping back though, the trend is still clear. Using the 2013 report, from the mid 2000’s up through 2013 for example the number of screened in reports ranged from around 42 to 47 per 1000, then, using the 2020 federal report, the rate per 1,000 children dropped to the low 30’s from 2015 on. That’s a drop of 30% or more. While the point where this drop-off occurs is different in other annual reports, they all show a drop-off of 30% or more at some point during the teens.

The Child Trends analysis indicates that for the most part this reduction of poverty benefited all groups of children. The only groups that did not benefit equally were Asian and Pacific Islanders, and some subsets of Hispanic groups, particularly those where there was no stable family income. The flipside of this is that this equal reduction of poverty for everyone did not narrow the racial disparities gap particularly between Black and white children. Put another way, there were fewer BIPOC children living in poverty but the proportions compared to whites stayed about the same.

Another aspect of this is whether the decline in poverty resulted in fewer Black and Indigenous children being referred to child protection, having substantiated cases, or ending up in out of home care. We would expect this to be the case based for example on the work of Emily Putnam Hornstein, Barbara Needell, Bryn King, and Michelle Johnson-Motoyama. These authors reported in the May 2012 edition of *Child Abuse and Neglect* on “Racial and ethnic disparities: A population-based examination of risk.” This study reached the conclusion, which will surprise many, that when risk factors such as socioeconomic status, or SES, young maternal age, absent fathers, and poor child health are stripped away, Black children were very similar to white children in terms of being referred to child protection, have substantiated cases of child maltreatment, and placed in to foster care. I put a link to this study in the narrative to the blog you can simply look it up on the web, the ResearchGate URL has a public access version.

Putnam-Hornstein has citations to other research that show similar results and I copied these citations in the written version of this podcast which you can find on our website or by clicking on the link to this podcast script in our weekly blog.

(“Previous research has demonstrated that controlling for SES diminishes or even reverses Black/White disparities, both at the individual (Ards, Myers, Chung, Malkis, & Hagerty, 2003; Ards, Myers, Malkis, Sugrue, & Zhou, 2003; Dettlaff, Rivaux, Baumann, Fluke, Rycraft, & James, 2011; Dworsky, Courtney, & Zinn, 2007; Slack et al., 2007) and neighborhood/county level (Drake et al., 2009; Wulczyn, Gibbons, Snowden, & Lery, 2013”).

A close look at the data suggests whites and Blacks were roughly equal in these three categories, with Black children actually doing somewhat better in terms of referral rates per 1,000 children and entry into foster care. As a result the authors say “these data suggest that race/ethnicity may not be the most salient factor, but rather a proxy for entrenched and systemic racial differences in the prevalence of other correlates of child maltreatment. This finding has important implications for efforts to reduce racial disparities.” Again, restating this in non-academic language, and reaching a similar conclusion to that of Pelton, Putnam-Hornstein is saying that our efforts to reduce racial disparities in child protection and foster care would have the biggest impact if they focused on eliminating income disparities between whites and BIPOC families. The implication is that if we can increase economic justice, we will reduce the racial disparities in child welfare.

What does this mean in practical terms? Well, at the level of individual cases, all this information suggests that our primary efforts to reduce the number of families overall in child protection and

foster care, and to reduce racial disparities, should be to connect families in or on the verge of the child protection system with as many financial resources as possible. On a macro level, we would get the biggest impact by advocating for the expansion of programs that benefit poor families financially. What the Child Trends analysis tells us is that, even if we don't get the grand prize of a child allowance, the incremental impact of expanding programs like the Earned Income Tax Credit, school lunches, SNAP, affordable housing, and affordable/available childcare can make an enormous difference in reducing child abuse and neglect.

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