

What is Neglect? Maybe Not What People Think

A common trope alleges that child protection caseworkers confuse poverty with neglect.

This has been repeated so often that many accept it as fact, but there's actually no evidence to support it.

For one thing, [state Guidelines](#) (pp. 39-40) define neglect as failing to provide for children's basic needs only if parents are "reasonably able to do so."

For another, just a quarter of neglect cases are screened into child protection for failure to provide basic needs, fewer still have a maltreatment finding, and these remaining cases usually also involve factors such as leaving children with dangerous caregivers, or withholding medical care ([Barth et. al. p. 488](#)).

[Our report on Minnesota child fatalities](#) argues that services like child care and early learning scholarships simultaneously support parents and reduce neglect. Let's focus on increasing these resources, not on inaccurately criticizing caseworkers.

Script for podcast on neglect:

In today's blog, or ebrief as we call it, I mention a study by Barth, Jonson-Reid et. al. entitled "[Research to Consider While Effectively Re-Designing Child Welfare Services](#)". With a little work you can Google it, or there is a link to it in the blog and also in the script for this podcast, which you can also find in the blog or on our website at safepassageforchildren.org. Barth and Jonson-Reid address 10 common misconceptions about child welfare, including heightened surveillance and neglect-as-poverty. It's a really useful, head-clearing article to read beyond the topic for today of misconceptions about neglect.

In today's blog I quoted them that only one quarter of neglect cases are screened into child protection due to a lack of basic material needs. Beyond that, only one quarter are substantiated. So even if all of these were mistakenly screened in, the pool gets down to 1/16 to begin with, and we know from experience and evidence that a significant number of those remaining cases will have what I will call true neglect, which includes things like leaving children with dangerous caregivers such as a violent boyfriend or a group of adults getting high on drugs, leaving infants or small children unattended for hours or even days at a time, or deliberately not providing food or clothing, often as a means of punishment, or not providing medical care to a child when the child being is in obvious pain.

Another recent contributor to this conversation about neglect is an article in the Child Welfare Monitor by Marie Cohen entitled "[Neglect as poverty: the myth that won't go away](#)", which updates an analysis she did about a year ago. If you don't know this monthly blog I recommend that you subscribe. Cohen is one of the sharpest minds in the child welfare space. She regularly takes on issues like this one, misconceptions about neglect, which are primarily products of viewing child welfare through an ideological lens rather than looking at the actual facts. She is an equal opportunity gadfly for all political distortions. She also documents the heck out of her blogs so you can get direct links to research you may otherwise not know about

or have to dig for. You can find it at childwelfaremonitor.org or there is a link to it in the script for this blog or again on our website.

In this blog one of the main issues Cohen addresses is an area where neglect and poverty may overlap. This intersection is one where an ideological approach gets it right. Specifically, a common reason to find maltreatment due to neglect is lack of supervision, meaning among other things that a mother may leave her child with dangerous caregivers, resulting in injury or sexual assault or other terrible outcomes. But sometimes mothers may do that because the alternative is to either not work or to leave the child in an even worse situation. These situations aren't deliberate neglect, i.e. where the parent is simply not motivated to nurture the child, or for example is so committed to getting drugs that she leaves the child alone for long periods or with dangerous people. In situations like this that aren't intentional neglect, the law and child welfare guidelines would still require the case to be screened then and receive a finding of neglect. But it doesn't really fit that description because it's not a case of parents not bonding with or caring for the child. It's a real dilemma. How do you make sure that young children especially are safe and supervised without breaking up the family and punishing a mother who is not being neglectful?

The obvious solution is to make childcare available to all mothers who are working, which is why we always support early learning scholarships and childcare in our legislative agenda. But until the happy day comes that we have universal childcare, the best that a caseworker can do is try to help the mother problem solve around finding a friend or relative to help care for the children, maybe help finding another job, or some other bit of casework magic.

In the comprehensive report we just released on child fatalities – again you can find on our website – we discuss another form of neglect in which mothers left their children with boyfriends, who had been abusing the children in the past, as well as often abusing the mother, and the boyfriend ultimately killed the child. These usually involve elements of domestic violence that need to be addressed separately from or in addition to the lack of child care. These situations also present a classic dilemma. Sometimes the mother is doing everything humanly possible to deal with the abuser. She may be cooperating with prosecutors, getting a Harassment Restraining Order or HRO, and still be unable to keep the aggressor away from herself or her children. The most straightforward solution in these situations seems to be for the mother to take her children to a safe shelter. But research indicates that this moment, when she chooses to get away, is one of the most high risk times in the progression of domestic violence. So it would be a bit reckless to just kind of cavalierly say that she should just get out of the situation. At times like this a skilled domestic violence advocate is a really good resource to have.

What we saw in a study more commonly was women who were unwilling or perhaps just emotionally or psychologically unable to leave their abuser. While the mother is a victim in these situations, she also has an obligation to keep her children safe. This is a situation where child advocates and domestic violence advocates may not completely agree. In our view, as child advocates, at some point the situation crosses a line where the safety of the children of

becomes paramount. In that case, even if the woman is also a victim, it is incumbent on the child protection system to get the children to a safe place, and to bring a CHIPS petition against the mother for failure to protect them. A CHIPS petition, if you're not familiar, stands for Child In Need Of Protection or Services. It is a court action that starts the process to determine whether to terminate parental rights. It is not that domestic violence advocates don't see the need to sometimes file a CHIPS petition as well, it's is that we may draw the line in a different place.

Another common situation we found in the report was one in which one or both parents were chronically addicted to drugs or had chronic mental illnesses that played out over a period of years, yet child protection left children in these high-risk situations or returned them repeatedly until the children were killed. Again these situations are usually classified as neglect and tragically make the point that neglect is not less dangerous than abuse.

Another area that Marie Cohen delves into is a recent study of 295 neglect investigations in California, which found that only 14% of the investigations involved neglect related to depriving the child of basic needs. Most neglect cases, and I'm quoting here, involved:

“inadequate supervision, which was investigated in 44 percent of the cases, and failure to protect (leaving the child in the care of a known abuser or failure to intervene with known abuse), in 29 percent of cases. Moreover almost all (99 percent) of the investigations of physical neglect included concerns related to substance use, domestic violence, or mental illness; or they involved another type of maltreatment such as physical or sexual abuse or an additional neglect allegation. Thus, the authors conclude that almost no parent was investigated for material deprivation alone...” .

So again this documents that the situation is far more nuanced than is suggested by the argument that caseworkers simply confuse poverty and neglect. Cohen does goes on to note what we mentioned a moment ago which as that the study did not cull out any of the kind of lack of supervision cases that are not deliberate neglect but rather related to the fact that child care was unavailable.

One of the critical aspects of this debate about screening parents into child protection for poverty alone is to be clear that being poor doesn't mean a person abuses or neglects their children. In this respect, research that shows that children who are merely poor have better outcomes than children who also suffered from neglect. Again the Barth and Jonson-Reid article has a good discussion of this and also has links to primary research that are helpful. In brief, this research shows that the effects of neglect are more serious than the impact of poverty alone. Lifelong outcomes such as more serious developmental deficits, poor cognitive or academic outcomes, trauma symptoms, mental health issues, more involvement with juvenile justice or criminal justice systems, and reduced earnings are greater for children who have been neglected compared to those who were merely poor.

This debate about confusing poverty with neglect is a prime example of a concern that we are constantly raising, which is the tendency to look at child protection and foster care through an ideological lens. Our mantra is: “Ideology never works out for kids”. That is true regardless of which end of the political spectrum and ideological view comes from. When it comes to children,

it is critical that we look at the facts unflinchingly, are disciplined about understanding research, and make policy and inform practice based on real information not political tropes.

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