

APSAC Research to Practice Brief

Study Title: Child Neglect in the Broader Context of Child Victimization

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Introduction:

Child neglect is the most common form of child maltreatment, based on both CPS reports (75% of which were for neglect in 2015) and in the National Incidence Studies (the NIS-4 found that 61% of the 1.25 million children who were maltreated during the study year were neglected). Despite this, neglect has not been as thoroughly researched as other forms of maltreatment. Furthermore, most neglect research uses CPS reports, which do not provide a complete picture of the issue. The present study uses a nationally representative sample of children in the U.S. to examine how physical and supervisory neglect are connected to other forms of child maltreatment and, more generally, child victimization issues outside the scope of CPS.

Study Aims:

1. Determine how exposure to physical and supervisory neglect may be differentially associated with various components of parental socioeconomic resources including parental education, family income, perceived financial strain, use of public assistance, and parental unemployment history and whether such associations are similar to or different from those evident for other forms of maltreatment;
2. Determine the relative risk of exposure to other forms of maltreatment as well as other forms of nonmaltreatment victimization, given exposure to physical and supervisory neglect; and
3. Assess the impact of lifetime exposure to neglect on trauma symptoms, independent of exposure to other forms of maltreatment, nonmaltreatment victimization, and poly-victimization.

Study Sample:

The study used an aggregated sample of 7,852 children ages 2-17, collected from the 2011 and 2014 waves of the National Surveys of Children's Exposure to Violence (NatSCEV).

Interviews were conducted by phone. Researchers used the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (JVQ) and asked questions related to 1) physical neglect (care neglect, unsafe home neglect, and hygiene neglect); 2) supervisory neglect (parental absence and unsafe people in the home); 3) physical abuse from a parent, caregiver, or adult family member; 4) sexual abuse from a parent, caregiver, or adult family member; 5) emotional abuse from a parent or caregiver; 6) physical assault; 7) sexual assault; 8) witnessing intimate partner violence; 9) witnessing abuse of siblings by parents; 10) peer victimization; 11) dating violence and; 12) conventional crime. Researchers also assessed for socioeconomic resources through 1) parental education; 2) total family income; 3) financial strain (whether parent agreed that there was not enough money for essential clothes or household items); 4) use of public assistance and; 5) parental job loss. The Trauma Symptoms Checklist and Trauma Symptoms Checklist for Young Children were used to assess for trauma symptoms in the children.

Findings:

When examining differences in neglect by age group, researchers found significantly greater care neglect in children under ten than children ages 10-17 (5.27% vs. 32.4%). There were no significant differences in other types of physical neglect by age. Researchers also found significantly greater supervisory neglect in children ages 10 to 17. (17.56% vs. 4.58% in children ages 2-9). While some of this variation may reflect developmentally appropriate variations in level of supervision, these findings and the findings related to physical neglect suggest incomplete CPS data, which tend to show much higher rates of neglect in very young children.

Children whose parents have less than a high school diploma were twice as likely to experience physical neglect than children whose parents received a college education (11.35% vs. 5.68%). Supervisory neglect was also significantly less likely when parents had a college education. No other types of maltreatment were associated with parental education.

Income level was not associated with any type of maltreatment, however, parents who reported financial strain and receiving public assistance had higher rates of physical neglect. No other forms of maltreatment were related to these socioeconomic indicators.

The only socioeconomic indicator significantly connected to all forms of maltreatment was parental job loss. In the case of neglect specifically, children with a parent who had been unemployed were more likely to experience both physical neglect (19.08% compared to 5.19% without job loss) and supervisory neglect (19.08% compared to 8.58%).

The researchers also found strong relationships between neglect and all other types of victimization. Children who were physically neglected were at 9.07 times the risk of sexual abuse, 5.28 times the risk of physical abuse, 3.5 times the risk of emotional abuse, and were 9.6 times more likely to witness sibling abuse than non-neglected children. Children who experienced supervisory neglect were 7.51 times more likely to be sexually victimized by an adult non-caregiver than children with no supervisory neglect.

All types of maltreatment and victimization were related to child trauma symptoms, but the strongest relationship was polyvictimization (total number of victimization types, excluding neglect), which was most significantly related to trauma symptoms. When researchers controlled for polyvictimization, the effects of neglect on trauma symptoms was no longer significant.

Recommendations:

This study builds the body of literature examining the nuances of the links between neglect and poverty. Researchers did not find income level to be a predictor of physical neglect but did find that reported financial strain and use of public assistance were linked to physical neglect. Practitioners may consider adding a question about perceived financial strain in their assessments of at-risk families to reflect these findings.

Researchers also found parental education to be significantly linked to both physical and supervisory neglect. Since most education programs do not include instruction on parenting and child development, more research should be done to understand why education showed greater links than other socioeconomic indicators. Parental education and home visiting programs might consider targeting parents with lower levels of education for their services.

Parental job loss was associated with each form of child maltreatment, which could be linked to the stress of job loss or, due to unemployment's links to substance and alcohol use, may be an indicator of family dysfunction. A history of parental unemployment, even if not associated with economic strain, could be an indicator of the need for supportive intervention. Promoting parental employment and economic justice may be an appropriate component for community based, comprehensive prevention initiatives.

Neglect was also significantly related to all other forms of maltreatment and victimization. Because neglect is most commonly reported to CPS, workers should be certain to assess for these other forms of maltreatment and victimization when conducting a neglect investigation.

Bottom Line:

Neglect is the most common and least-researched form of maltreatment. Understanding its specific relationship to socioeconomic risk factors and other forms of maltreatment and victimization are integral parts to forming evidence-based, targeted interventions and secondary prevention programs to combat it.

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