

APSAC Research-to-Practice Brief: Early Exposure to Child Maltreatment and Academic Outcomes

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Introduction

This study seeks to investigate the prevalence of early contact with child protection services (CPS) before the third grade and to understand whether early contact was associated with important academic outcomes (math and reading standardized test scores, grade retention, and special education status in third grade). This study is the first statewide analysis linking maltreatment to academic outcomes by merging data from the Michigan Department of Education (MDE), the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), and the United States Census. This article expands previous understandings of relationships between CPS involvement and educational experiences by focusing on a broader definition of contact, estimating the number of children who have experienced at least one maltreatment investigation from birth to third grade, whether unsubstantiated or substantiated.

Research Questions

Rather than put forth hypotheses, the authors present two research questions: 1) What is the prevalence of formally investigated child maltreatment in the public school population by the time students reach third grade, and do prevalence rates vary by school district? 2) What is the association between early contact with CPS and critical academic outcomes?

Study Sample

This study included a diverse sample of over 700,000 children enrolled in Michigan's public schools who were born between 2000 and 2006 and had available data reported to MDE and MSHHS.

Findings

The authors found a high prevalence of contact with the child protection system for public school students before third grade (approximately 18%), ranging from 1% to as high as 59% across all school districts. Of all investigations, over one third were substantiated. Students receiving free lunch (an indicator of family poverty), students from poor neighborhoods, and Black students had disproportionately higher rates of CPS investigations.

Further, any involvement with CPS was negatively associated with all four measures of negative academic outcomes, even when controlling for other factors that may affect performance (i.e., race, gender, and poverty). Having substantiated investigations resulted in even larger negative outcomes than did unsubstantiated investigations.

Recommendations

The study findings are important for informing allied systems of care collaboration, particularly among child

welfare and educational systems. The authors demonstrated the odds of experiencing CPS investigations is higher than the odds of experiencing other factors (e.g., asthma, child food allergies, child disabilities, and obesity) related to negative outcomes addressed within educational policies and support programs, highlighting the importance of allocating financial resources specifically to the population of maltreated youth. One option for addressing the needs of this population would be to better align information reported to CPS with information collected within schools to inform approaches similar to those used to support students with suspected disabilities (such as Individualized Education Programs). Yet, the authors emphasize the importance of considering privacy and confidentiality issues associated with this approach. Less controversial approaches would include a more general approach to trauma informed practices in schools.

Bottom Line

CPS involvement is not infrequent and may actually be the norm for students in some school districts, a finding that refutes the public's misconception that

maltreatment is uncommon. Further, disparities exist for already vulnerable youth in our public education systems, including youth of color and poor youth, as well as by school district. Focusing on addressing the academic struggles of youth with maltreatment histories early in their educational trajectories is crucial to limiting the likelihood they will culminate in more complicated problems in the future.

Citation

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About the Author

Misti Jeffers is currently a doctoral candidate in Social Policy at Brandeis University. She has conducted research related to child welfare, juvenile justice, and experiences of rural poverty. Misti earned her Bachelor of Science in Psychology and Human Services from East Tennessee State University, her Master's in Child Study and Human Development from Tufts University, and her Master's in Social Policy from Brandeis University.

