

Family Resources, Family Structure, Public Policies, and Child Maltreatment Risk: A Longitudinal Analysis

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Abstract:

Child maltreatment in the U.S. has been closely linked to poverty, as well as to parental characteristics and caregiving environments that have been associated with poverty. However, researchers have yet to fully understand these relationships or to identify the specific effects of income and poverty on different types of maltreatment. Existing research has also been limited by the use of cross-sectional and administrative data. Previous studies have therefore lacked comparison groups of non-maltreating families, and have been unable to differentiate between higher risks of actual maltreatment for lower income and single-parent families and higher risks of being reported for maltreatment for these families. Thus, we have very little knowledge of the mechanisms through which relationships among poverty, public policies, and child maltreatment operate, as well as whether relationships between poverty and maltreatment are causal. Such knowledge may have important policy implications for U.S. child and family policy, which has traditionally approached child maltreatment via separate mechanisms than poverty. By better understanding the impacts of other public policies, particularly welfare benefit levels, on child maltreatment, we may gain insight into the ways in which these policies, through their effects on family income and structure, may influence parental behaviors toward their children.

This paper presents a framework for estimating the ways in which family resources, family structures, and public policies, as well as changes in these factors over time, affect child maltreatment risk. I use data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) to estimate a series of models on several measures of the adequacy of the child's physical environment, parental spanking behaviors, emotional support, cognitive support, and medical care. Information used to construct measures of "maltreatment risk" in these areas is drawn from the HOME Inventory, items regarding parental spanking, and items dealing with immunizations and routine medical and dental care. Predictor variables for the models include household income; family structure (mother-father, single-mother, or mother and other man); employment status of mother; employment status of father (if present); other basic socioeconomic/demographic information for the household (education, family size, etc.); parental mental health; parental substance use; and a set of state policy variables (e.g., welfare benefit levels, toughness of welfare programs, child care policies, child support enforcement policies, foster care payment levels, etc.). As one of the overarching goals of this research is to establish a causal link between family resources, family structures, and child maltreatment, child-fixed effects models are used to estimate the impact of changes in the predictor variables on changes in the outcome variables over time. Such models allow for estimations of the ways in which changes in family resources and family structures (or changes in public policies that affect family

resources and structures) affect changes in child maltreatment and children's living arrangements over time, by controlling for unobserved characteristics that are assumed to be correlated with one or more of the other variables and to be time-invariant.

Preliminary results suggest that income and poverty, family structure, and the policy environment, as well as changes in these factors over time, differentially impact various types of child maltreatment risk. Income and poverty impact routine medical and dental care, the quality of the caregiving environment, and spanking behaviors. In terms of family structure, single-parent families and families with a biological mother and non-biological father figure tend to have lower quality caregiving environments than mother-father families, and changes in family structure tend to put children at greater risk of maltreatment. Finally, this analysis provides some evidence that more generous welfare policies may serve as protective factors for children. These findings suggest that lower income and single-parent families are indeed at a higher risk of engaging in maltreatment, irrespective of child welfare involvement. This research holds implications for predicting the ways in which changes in economic policies may affect child maltreatment at the family level.