

# Is it possible to modify neighborhood-level characteristics to reduce the rate of child maltreatment?

MOLNAR, B. E., GOERGE, R. M., GILSANZ, P., HILL, A., SUBRAMANIAN, S. V., HOLTON, J. K., DUNCAN, D. T., BEATRIZ, E. D., & BEARDSLEE, W. R. (2016). NEIGHBORHOOD-LEVEL SOCIAL PROCESSES AND SUBSTANTIATED CASES OF CHILD MALTREATMENT. *CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT*, 51, 41-53.

## What can we learn from this study?

Considerable research documents child- and family-level risk factors for child maltreatment. Although some research identifies neighborhood-level factors (including crime and poverty), neighborhood characteristics often are overlooked in developing and implementing practices and policies to reduce child maltreatment. This study considers an approach in which children are considered within the context of their community — regardless of their individual and family-level characteristics — to determine whether neighborhood-level characteristics can be modified to reduce or prevent maltreatment.

### Study details:

- **Data source:** Neighborhood-level data (maltreatment cases substantiated by Illinois' child protection system; social processes measured by the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods; U.S. Census data)
- **Methodology:** Ecological-level repeated cross-sectional design, with random-intercept logit models; sensitivity analysis conducted with spatial models
- **Dates:** 1995-2005

## What are the critical findings?

Strengthening and improving neighborhood-level social processes may be more effective in reducing child maltreatment than efforts designed to intervene at the child- or family-level alone. After controlling for poverty, unemployment, crime, and other factors, the researchers found that:

- Neighborhoods with more collective efficacy (social cohesion and social control), intergenerational closure (parents know the parents of their children's friends, and parents know other children and families in the neighborhood), and social networks (physical proximity of close friends and family) had lower rates of substantiated neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse.
- Neighborhoods with less physical and social disorder (threatening behavior, including verbal harassment and public intoxication; destruction of public property including graffiti and broken windows) had lower rates of substantiated neglect, physical abuse, and sexual abuse.
- Neighborhoods with more collective efficacy and social networks had lower rates of substance-exposed infants.

## Why is this important for our work?

Investment in programs that strengthen and support neighborhoods rather than target individual families — including community-wide anti-poverty and neighborhood improvement programs, as well as violence prevention programs — may be effective in reducing rates of child maltreatment.

This summary synthesizes the findings from a single research study. To learn more about community-based approaches to reducing child maltreatment, please review the following resources: [How is New Hampshire building a 21st century child strengthening and family well-being system?](#) and [What leadership strategies have advanced transformation in the District of Columbia?](#)

For additional information, [access the article](#) directly or email [KMResources@casey.org](mailto:KMResources@casey.org).