

Can providing material needs decrease the rate of child maltreatment?

PELTON, L. H. (2015). THE CONTINUING ROLE OF MATERIAL FACTORS IN CHILD MALTREATMENT AND PLACEMENT. *CHILD ABUSE & NEGLECT*, 41, 30-39.

What can we learn from this study?

Overwhelming evidence demonstrates that low income and poverty are significant risks for child maltreatment, and children from low-income and impoverished families are highly overrepresented in the existing child protection system. Racial disparities in the child protection system may be reflective of racial disparities in the population of people living in poverty. The dual nature of the child protection system — both offering supports for families in need and policing the behavior of parents and families — is inherently flawed. Differential response is a step in the right direction but is an insufficient system reform.

Study details:

- **Data sources:** National Incidence Studies of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS); comparison of changes since publication of Pelton (1994); review of literature.
- **Methodology:** Literature review and analysis
- **Dates:** 1979-1980 (NIS-1), 1986 (NIS-2); 1993 (NIS-3); 2005-2006 (NIS-4)

What are the critical findings?

Supports for families to reduce material hardships and the effects of poverty can reduce rates of child maltreatment, yet many families cannot access services until a case has been opened.

- Child abuse and neglect rates are significantly different by income level (NIS-4 data).
 - The overall maltreatment incidence rate was nearly six times higher for children in low-income families than for other children.
 - The incidence rate of specific forms of maltreatment was between three times higher (for physical and sexual abuse) and almost nine times higher (for physical neglect) for children in low-income families than for other children.
- Even modest losses or gains in cash income positively impact rates of child abuse and neglect.
- Poverty results in material hardships that can lead to parental stress, which in turn can lead to child abuse and neglect. In addition, poverty and its effects (such as hazards of inadequate housing, including unsafe neighborhoods and exposure to lead paint) can lead to accidental or unintentional injuries, which are more likely presumed to be the fault of parents more often than is appropriate.

Why is this important for our work?

Any effort to significantly decrease child maltreatment must address poverty. This article lends support to the argument that the child protection system needs to be fundamentally restructured. A system that provides proactive supports and resource referrals to impoverished families may be more effective in reducing maltreatment and children entering foster care, particularly if parents can request supports without the fear of punitive consequences. Furthermore, developing a narrower definition of neglect would help reduce placements by not conflating conditions of poverty with neglect.

This summary synthesizes the findings from a single research study. To learn more about the economics of child maltreatment, please review the following resources: [Why is child welfare system transformation necessary?](#) and [How is a 21st century child well-being system better for families and communities?](#)

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