

Poverty and Child Neglect: How Did We Get It Wrong?

By Jill Yordy | February 21, 2023

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Prevention is a hot topic in child welfare policy conversations, and for good reason. Preventing child maltreatment helps families thrive and reduces the frequency of tragic outcomes. The [Family First Prevention Services Act](#) of 2018 propelled prevention efforts forward and launched a national conversation about keeping children out of foster care except when absolutely necessary.

The State of Child Welfare

Child maltreatment rates have declined dramatically over the past 30 years. [Between 1992 and 2019](#), physical abuse declined by 56% and sexual abuse declined by 62%. Public policy, awareness programs and decreased stigma associated with seeking help contributed to these changes.

By contrast, rates of child neglect remain high. Neglect is the most common type of child maltreatment in the U.S. Until recently, federal child welfare policies primarily responded to maltreatment without much attention to addressing risk factors. The outcome was to inadvertently punish struggling families more than help them.

More than [480,000 children were impacted by neglect in 2020](#), and it was a primary or contributing factor for [64% of children entering foster care](#) the same year. By comparison, [13% of children](#) entering foster care in 2020 were victims of physical abuse and 4% were victims of sexual abuse.

What Is Neglect?

Most experts agree [child neglect](#) occurs when the needs of a child are unmet by their primary caregivers. Inadequate clothing, food, shelter, medical and emotional care, along with unsafe environments, exposure to substance abuse and lack of supervision, are often included in definitions of neglect. Even with these definitions, pinpointing cases of neglect can be challenging. Policymakers and researchers are rethinking historical definitions, which often are [intertwined with poverty](#). States have authority to define exactly what neglect means through legislation, and there is [considerable variation](#).

Research shows the presence of one or more child maltreatment [risk factors](#), such as poverty, can make a child more vulnerable to experiencing neglect. While risk factors do not cause maltreatment, buffering or reducing them is [a promising prevention pathway](#).

Poverty Is a Risk Factor for Neglect

Poverty, much like neglect, is a complex problem. Census data show that rates of child poverty vary widely among the states, ranging from [8% to nearly 28% in 2021](#). Childhood poverty is associated with a range of [negative outcomes](#) across the lifespan, such as poor health, [lower educational attainment](#) and more risk-taking behaviors.

Poverty and child neglect are highly correlated and often impact families simultaneously; but poverty does not cause neglect. Experts say it's more complicated than that. Poverty produces material hardships for families. Such hardships often result in families experiencing [toxic stress](#), which can impede [children's cognitive development](#) and parents' capacity to meet the needs of their children. Incapacity to provide is not the same as an unwillingness to provide. This distinction is at the crux of the challenge policymakers face to disentangle poverty from neglect.

Want to Go Deeper?

The report [Policy Levers for Preventing Child Maltreatment](#) outlines strategies to reduce child abuse and neglect. NCSL offers a [child welfare fellows](#) program focused on preventing child maltreatment and reforming child welfare systems.

Poverty is experienced at [higher rates by people of color and people living in rural areas](#), which can contribute to [racial disparities within the child welfare system](#). Policies like redlining and the discriminatory use of home lending provisions in the GI Bill, for example, have had lasting generational effects, shaping the landscape of poverty across the country. While all children encounter teachers, doctors and others required to report maltreatment, higher rates of poverty in a community are often [associated with more reports of abuse](#). This doesn't necessarily lead to more confirmed cases of child maltreatment, raising questions about whether over-surveillance of poor families contributes to disproportionate child welfare system involvement.

Some states have reworked their definition of neglect to recognize parents' capacity or clarify that conditions of poverty alone do not constitute neglect. Iowa ([H 2507; 2022](#)) defined neglect as "the failure on the part of a person responsible for the care of a child to provide for adequate food, shelter, clothing, medical or mental health treatment, supervision, or other care necessary for the child's health and welfare when financially able to do so or when offered financial or other reasonable means to do so."

Updating mandatory reporting and training policies to better respond to complex situations and relationships, such as those involving poverty and neglect, is another option. Colorado ([H 1240; 2022](#)) attempted to make mandatory reporting systems fairer, given evidence of disproportionate impacts of reporting systems on under-resourced communities. At least [eight states enacted legislation in 2022](#) addressing mandatory reporting.

Evidence-Based Policy Options

Some policies appear to be particularly effective at reducing risk factors associated with neglect; examples include [child care subsidies](#), [affordable housing](#), [home visiting](#) and [enhanced primary care](#). Preventing child maltreatment almost certainly requires diverse and integrated strategies. Nebraska ([L 1173; 2022](#)) established a work group and called for an integrated, evidence-informed approach to transform its child welfare system to “support the well-being, permanency, and safety of children and families in Nebraska’s communities.”

Former Colorado Rep. Tonya Van Beber (R) and Rep. Jason Hughes (D) of Louisiana toured the [Warren Village](#) program in Denver as part of NCSL fellows programs last year. Warren Village provides resources, tools and a supportive environment for single parents with children to build skills and create the lives they want for their families. “When we see a public-private partnership of this quality that has actual outcomes and evidence-based processes that literally show us this does work, it was a wonderful thing to see,” Van Beber said at an [NCSL Town Hall](#) after the tour.

Hughes said the Warren Village tour reminded him that “poverty has to be addressed in a holistic way.” As states incorporate more comprehensive strategies to prevent child maltreatment, addressing neglect is especially pertinent.

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