



Child welfare involvement and contexts of poverty: The role of parental adversities, social networks, and social services



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ABSTRACT

Research documents a link between poverty and child welfare involvement, but the nature of this relationship is unclear. By providing in-depth accounts of situations leading to child welfare involvement, parents' perspectives can enrich our understanding of how poverty matters for child welfare involvement. Based on in-depth interviews with 40 poor parents previously investigated for child maltreatment, I discuss contexts of poverty that provided pathways to child welfare involvement. Poverty created environments of desperation and disadvantage, combined with reliance on supports that reported parents to child welfare agencies. The vast majority of incidents parents described implicated in their involvement parental adversities related to poverty; embeddedness in disadvantaged networks or volatile personal relationships; and/or involvement in, or need for, social services. These findings suggest a research approach that interrogates this complexity and maltreatment prevention policies that broadly strengthen supports for families and communities.

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1. Introduction

State child welfare agencies receive reports of abuse or neglect of over six million children each year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], 2015). These agencies are charged with investigating the reports and intervening to protect children as needed, either by providing services to families in the home, or arranging for children's care outside the home. This intervention into the lives of American families is not distributed evenly, with children from poor families and communities having an increased risk of involvement (Drake & Pandey, 1996; Lee & Goerge, 1999; Lindsey, 1991; Putnam-Hornstein & Needell, 2011). For example, in a recent California birth cohort, children eligible for the state Medicaid program were more than twice as likely to be reported for possible maltreatment by age 5, compared with those not eligible, and children born to mothers with a high school education or less were more than six times more likely to be reported by age 5, compared with children born to mothers with a college degree (Putnam-Hornstein & Needell, 2011). Understanding the role of poverty in child welfare involvement is critical to develop and support more effective interventions to protect children and strengthen families.

Despite increasing research on the relationship between poverty and child maltreatment, we know little about how poor parents actually get drawn into the child welfare system. Analyzing poor parents' accounts of the situations leading to child welfare investigations can provide insight into how poverty matters for child welfare involvement. In

this article, I draw on 40 qualitative interviews with poor parents in Providence, Rhode Island, previously investigated for child maltreatment, to consider the specific situations, as described by parents, giving rise to child welfare investigations. This micro-level, situational analysis, while acknowledging the role of individual agency and behavior, reveals contexts of poverty that provide opportunities for child welfare involvement, from related adversities to the dynamics of social network and social service provider interactions. These findings suggest a research approach that interrogates these contexts and maltreatment prevention policies that broadly strengthen supports for families and communities.

2. Poverty and child welfare involvement

Children from poor families and communities are highly overrepresented in the child welfare system (Lee & Goerge, 1999; Lindsey, 1991). Researchers have advanced multiple theories to explain how poverty increases the likelihood that a family will be involved with the child welfare system. Evidence suggests a causal relationship (Cancian, Yang, & Slack, 2013), although empirical support for theorized mechanisms is mixed, calling for additional inquiry into this relationship.

2.1. Poverty and child maltreatment

First, conditions of poverty may lead to child maltreatment, which then prompts child welfare involvement. Behavioral measurements of child maltreatment, in addition to measures based on agency reports, show it is also more common among the poor (Berger, 2004; Hussey, Chang, & Kotch, 2006; Sedlak et al., 2010). Poor parents may simply

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lack the material resources to meet their children's needs. As legal definitions of neglect typically include inadequate shelter, food, and clothing, financial constraints may preclude poor parents from providing adequately for their children. Yang (2014) finds that parents experiencing material hardship are more likely to be investigated by child protective services, controlling for poverty level. Homelessness also increases a parent's risk of child welfare involvement (Bassuk, Weinreb, Dawson, Perloff, & Buckner, 1997; Cowal, Shinn, Weitzman, Stojanovic, & Labay, 2002; Culhane, Webb, Grim, Metraux, & Culhane, 2003; Warren & Font, 2015). Although many states' laws dictate that neglect cannot be substantiated for reasons of poverty alone (HHS, 2012), the extent to which caseworker practice aligns with these definitions is unclear.

Poverty may also, or instead, contribute to harsher or less supportive parenting practices by increasing parental stress and family conflict, which are risk factors for child maltreatment (Stith et al., 2009). Empirical research on whether parenting practices mediate the link between poverty and child maltreatment is mixed, with studies finding that parental stress or parental practices partially, but do not fully, explain the relationship between economic hardships and child maltreatment (Berger, 2004; Berger & Brooks-Gunn, 2005; Hashima & Amato, 1994; Slack, Holl, McDaniel, Yoo, & Bolger, 2004; Slack et al., 2011; Yang, 2014). Parenting practices thus seem to play some role in, but do not provide a complete explanation for, the relationship between poverty and child welfare.

2.2. Parental adversities

Alternatively, increased likelihood of child maltreatment among the poor may result from other risk factors that are more common among poor parents, including domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness, and criminal justice involvement. These adversities are strongly associated with poverty and with child maltreatment or child welfare involvement. Research on poverty and child maltreatment typically conceptualizes these risks as contributing to a spurious relationship between poverty and child maltreatment, and either does not consider them or controls for them. Establishing a causal relationship—or even a causal direction, in the case of such adversities and poverty—has proven more difficult. However, some research finds that domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness, and criminal justice involvement are influenced by poverty and also affect child maltreatment, suggesting that these parental adversities may mediate the relationship between poverty and child maltreatment.

While the relationship is complex and difficult to disentangle, scholars argue that poverty increases the likelihood of the aforementioned adversities through mechanisms such as increased conflict and stress, family instability, and neighborhood disorder (Bassuk, Buckner, Perloff, & Bassuk, 1998; Benson, Wooldredge, Thistlethwaite, & Fox, 2004; Cunradi, Caetano, Clark, & Schafer, 2000; Cunradi, Caetano, & Schafer, 2002; Field & Caetano, 2004; Kessler, Molnar, Feurer, & Applebaum, 2001; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Sampson & Wilson, 1995; Western, 2006). For example, a study of poor mothers in California finds that the severe and chronic stresses of poverty—specifically, neighborhood disorder and stressful or traumatic life events—increase vulnerability to psychological distress and alcohol abuse (Mulia, Schmidt, Bond, Jacobs, & Korcha, 2008). These adversities may in turn inhibit parenting capacity or negatively affect parenting practices through increased stress or decreased support (Brown, Cohen, Johnson, & Salzinger, 1998; Chaffin, Kelleher, & Hollenberg, 1996; Slack et al., 2011; Stith et al., 2009; Turney, Schnittker, & Wildeman, 2012; Wildeman, Schnittker, & Turney, 2012). Perhaps unsurprisingly, these adversities frequently co-occur with child welfare involvement (Hazen, Connelly, Kelleher, Landsverk, & Barth, 2004; McGuigan & Pratt, 2001; Phillips, Burns, Wagner, & Barth, 2004; Sedlak et al., 2010; Slack, Lee, & Berger, 2007; Taylor, Guterman, Lee, & Rathouz, 2009).

Whether and how these factors interact with material constraints and parenting practices to influence child maltreatment remains unclear. In some cases, these adversities themselves constitute neglect, either in researchers' measurements or state policies, muddling our understanding of the relationship even further (Bragg, 2003; Warren & Font, 2015). They also frequently involve interactions with police officers or medical or mental health professionals trained to identify and report suspected child maltreatment. To the extent that poverty affects these parental adversities, they may constitute another mechanism through which poverty increases the risk of child maltreatment and/or child welfare involvement.

2.3. Reporting contexts

Research on the relationship between poverty and child maltreatment suggests that this explains at least part of the relationship between poverty and child welfare involvement. Nevertheless, although researchers often operationalize child maltreatment using official child welfare reports, child maltreatment does not automatically imply child welfare involvement. Researchers measuring child maltreatment find a lack of correspondence between parents reporting such behavior and those reported to child protective services (Brown et al., 1998; Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 1999; Sedlak et al., 2010; Slack et al., 2011). Maltreating behaviors only bring families into the child welfare system when such behavior comes to the attention of authorities.

Child maltreatment reporting practices may constitute another mechanism through which poverty shapes child welfare involvement. For example, among welfare recipients, welfare sanctions or employment changes predict child welfare investigation, but not additional child welfare involvement following the investigation, suggesting that economic factors may shape the child welfare report more so than the underlying behavior (Nam, Meezan, & Danziger, 2006; Slack et al., 2007). Slack et al. (2011) find that economic factors are stronger predictors of officially reported neglect, compared with parental reports of neglectful behavior.

Poor parents' overrepresentation in the child welfare system may result from biased reporting systems or increased visibility to authorities (Drake & Zuravin, 1998; Hampton & Newberger, 1985). For example, a family's social class may bias the inclination of professionals such as doctors to report child maltreatment. Poor families also typically have more contact with public agencies, such as welfare agencies, required to report child maltreatment. Neighborhood social processes may also lead to reports disproportionate to the actual incidence of child maltreatment in disadvantaged neighborhoods. In a black neighborhood in Chicago, interview respondents reported that residents commonly call child welfare to report their neighbors, sometimes making false accusations as a means of retaliation (Roberts, 2008). Neighborhood effects on official child welfare reports are stronger than neighborhood effects on parenting behaviors associated with maltreatment (Coulton, Crampton, Irwin, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2007), suggesting that at least some of the neighborhood's influence may be connected to the reporting process.

Taken together, this research supports the hypothesis that differences in reporting play at least some role in the overrepresentation of the poor in the child welfare system, but provides little insight as to the specific reporting contexts that produce these disparities (but see Roberts, 2008). McDaniel and Slack (2005) find that major life events, such as moving and having a baby, increase the risk of child welfare investigation. Since parenting stress, harsh discipline, and material hardship do not fully explain the relationship, they hypothesize that visibility to child welfare reporters following these life events may play a role. Their study sets the stage for an exploration of the contexts of family and community life that generate child welfare investigations among the poor.

2.4. A situational approach

Research on individual and ecological risk factors for child maltreatment dwarfs research on how, specifically, families become involved with child welfare. Beyond broad categories of report sources and maltreatment types—nearly 80% of child victims fall under the category of “neglect” (HHS, 2015)—we know little about the situations that lead families to come to the attention of the child welfare system. In the developmental or ecological framework, the child maltreatment outcome of interest is a pattern of parenting practices. In addition to understanding these habits and practices, studying specific situations is valuable in illuminating the nature of poor parents’ vulnerability to the child welfare system and detailing the processes through which this vulnerability translates into child welfare involvement. Detailed narratives of situations can shed light on how financial constraints interact with individual behavior and needs as well as the social environment to yield a child welfare report.

I focus on precipitating events rather than more general risk factors, examining how details in specific situations can shed light on broader processes. A situational approach, taken up in studies of violence and police calls (Bell, 2016; Western, 2015), highlights characteristics of the specific micro-situations that trigger child welfare involvement. This approach focuses less on the parenting practices of perpetrators of maltreatment than on the social processes and conditions that give rise to child welfare involvement. Analyzing these contexts, as portrayed by poor parents themselves, can generate and refine theories on the relationship between poverty and child welfare involvement. This approach also extends our conception of poverty as not limited to low income or economic hardship, to be isolated from its individual and social correlates. Often, poverty also involves a set of adversities, social network connections, and social service interactions and needs that may foster the behavior and reporting practices through which poor parents become involved with child welfare.

3. Data and methods

3.1. Data collection

This study draws on qualitative interviews with 40 poor, child welfare-investigated parents in Providence, Rhode Island. These respondents are a subsample of a larger interview study of 63 poor parents in Providence interviewed between January and June 2015¹; I focus here only on respondents who reported being investigated by the child welfare system at least once, although I draw on other respondents occasionally for context. I recruited respondents via flyers, encounters on the street or at local social service agencies such as homeless shelters and food pantries, and referrals from previous respondents. No more than five respondents in the full sample were recruited from the same place or the same social network chain. I did not screen respondents for child welfare involvement, nor did I mention the topic in recruitment materials. Only English-speaking parents were eligible. I conducted most interviews in respondents’ homes, with a few at local fast food establishments. Interviews lasted approximately two hours, and respondents were compensated \$20.

I began each interview in an open-ended manner, inviting the respondent to tell me her life story in detail, including childhood experiences, housing, employment, experiences with welfare and other social services, and financial strategies. This part of the interview often lasted an hour or more and provided important context for the child welfare discussion as well as opportunities for the topic to emerge organically. This also helped respondents feel comfortable and

accustomed to sharing personal information in detail, which I felt was particularly important given the sensitive nature of child welfare. I allowed respondents to lead the conversation, probing for more detail, but asked about particular topics if not mentioned: their own experiences with child welfare, the experiences of others they knew, general perceptions of the child welfare agency and its decision-making, experiences calling the child welfare hotline, and any worries or concerns about child welfare involvement. Respondents generally remarked afterwards that they enjoyed the opportunity to reflect on and share their experiences.

3.2. Sample description

Providence, Rhode Island, a city of approximately 180,000, has a poverty rate of 28%, almost double the national rate. The city is 38% non-Hispanic white, 38% Hispanic, and 13% non-Hispanic black. Of the 14 city-designated neighborhoods with poverty rates above the city average, three are majority white, six are majority Hispanic, and five have no majority racial or ethnic group. Blacks are outnumbered by whites and/or Hispanics in each of the 25 city-designated neighborhoods (The Providence Plan, 2015). With respect to child welfare involvement, 39.7 of every 1000 Rhode Island children were investigated by the child welfare agency (the Department of Children, Youth, and Families, or DCYF) in 2013, just below the national average of 42.9 (HHS, 2015).

Table 1 displays characteristics of the full sample and focal subsample. Most respondents were mothers of minor children, and white, black, and Hispanic parents are well-represented. Respondents reported low incomes, with a median household annual income under \$12,000, including assistance from family or friends and income from informal work. Because I did not ask detailed questions about income at screening, several respondents’ incomes exceeded the federal poverty threshold, but all qualified for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Few respondents had a college degree, a substantial majority were not working at the time of the interview, and most received some form of government cash assistance. Almost all respondents were unmarried parents, although about one-quarter cohabited with a romantic partner.

This subsample was selected from the larger study because they reported at least one child welfare investigation. Despite my best efforts to build trust and rapport, child welfare involvement is likely underreported due to the sensitive and personal nature of the topic, and possibly due to limitations of respondents’ own memories. Thus, I do not focus on differences between parents who do and do not report previous involvement. Of those who reported a previous investigation, 29 (73%) were supervised by the child welfare agency following an investigation, and 8 (20%) had at least one of their children adopted or in a guardianship via child welfare.

Gathering respondents’ life histories revealed widespread and substantial traumas and adversities, displayed in Table 2. For most respondents, including those who reported no previous child welfare investigations, low income existed alongside multiple compounding and interrelated sources of disadvantage. Respondents discussed a battery of adverse experiences and challenges they faced, challenges that may transmit poverty intergenerationally through parental stress, parenting behaviors, and exposure of their children to traumatic events and situations. In additional cases, respondents discussed a partner or close family member who had experienced these adversities. Those reporting child welfare involvement also reported adverse experiences at higher rates, particularly substance abuse, criminal justice involvement, mental health problems, and early parenthood. Although it is difficult to draw conclusions given the small sample size and the possibility of underreporting, this aligns with the broad consensus that these adverse experiences constitute risk factors for child welfare involvement.

¹ Three respondents lived in adjacent suburbs, and two had moved out of Providence days before the interview due to housing subsidy or shelter changes.

Table 1
Sample description.

	Child welfare-involved subsample (n = 40)	Full sample (N = 63)
<i>Female</i>	38 (95%)	59 (94%)
<i>Race/ethnicity</i>		
White (non-Hispanic)	18 (44%)	23 (37%)
Black (non-Hispanic)	10 (25%)	23 (37%)
Hispanic	11 (27%)	15 (24%)
Native American	1 (2%)	2 (3%)
<i>Immigrant</i>	7 (20%)	11 (17%)
<i>Median age</i>	31 years	31 years
<i>Education level</i>		
Less than high school	13 (32%)	18 (29%)
High school graduate or GED	11 (27%)	15 (24%)
Some college or certificate	13 (34%)	22 (35%)
Associate's degree or above	3 (7%)	8 (13%)
<i>Median monthly household income</i>	\$873	\$980
0–50% Federal Poverty Level	13 (34%)	21 (33%)
51–100% Federal Poverty Level	25 (61%)	32 (51%)
> 100% Federal Poverty Level	2 (5%)	10 (16%)
<i>Currently employed</i>	4 (10%)	12 (19%)
<i>Respondent, cohabiting partner, or child receives government benefits</i>		
SNAP	40 (100%)	60 (95%)
TANF	15 (37%)	22 (35%)
Disability benefits	19 (46%)	23 (37%)
<i>Median number of children</i>	3	2
<i>Relationship status</i>		
Single or noncohabiting partner	26 (66%)	42 (67%)
Cohabiting partner	9 (22%)	15 (24%)
Married	5 (12%)	6 (10%)

3.3. Data analysis

Interviews were audio recorded, with respondents' permission, and transcribed. I wrote detailed field notes after each interview, generally the same day. I read each full transcript multiple times. In this article, I focus on respondents' accounts of child welfare involvement, not child maltreatment. I draw on respondents' specific descriptions of situations that led to child welfare investigations. The analysis includes only child welfare reports screened in and investigated by the agency, as the agency would not have contacted respondents regarding screened out reports. It was not always clear from respondents' accounts whether child maltreatment investigations were substantiated by the agency. Although investigations do not necessarily indicate child maltreatment, they indicate a high risk of subsequent reports (Kohl, Jonson-Reid, & Drake, 2009) and provide an understanding of child welfare involvement—the factors that lead a family to come into contact with the agency. Taking this broader perspective illuminates mechanisms related to the people and systems with which a family interacts.

Respondents described 107 incidents leading to a child welfare investigation regarding their children.² I read each of these excerpts closely and coded them first based on the main allegation of child maltreatment, according to the respondent, using an open coding approach. I also coded excerpts based on aspects of the situations respondents described that emerged inductively, such as network members calling out of spite. I developed these themes iteratively after repeated reading and categorization of the incidents as situated in respondents' life history narratives. Notably, respondents' descriptions of the situations do not necessarily reflect any “true” reason for child welfare involvement, nor even the main allegation investigated. Rather, these accounts reflect their understandings of the situation and the strategies they employ

² Respondents listed a range of 1 to 8 incidents, with a median of 2. In two cases, the respondent was not investigated, but her partner (the child's other parent) was investigated.

Table 2
Adverse experiences of the sample.

	Child welfare-involved subsample (n = 40)	Full sample (N = 63)
<i>Adverse experiences</i>		
Foster care as a child	12 (30%)	18 (29%)
Homelessness as an adult	20 (50%)	29 (46%)
Domestic violence or sexual abuse as an adult	20 (50%)	26 (41%)
Substance abuse	17 (43%)	18 (29%)
Criminal justice involvement	27 (68%)	32 (51%)
Severe physical health problems	4 (10%)	12 (19%)
Mental health problems	25 (63%)	32 (51%)
Had a child before age 18 or graduating from high school	18 (45%)	22 (35%)
<i>Median number of above experiences</i>	4	3
<i>Experienced at least one of the above</i>	39 (98%)	59 (94%)
<i>Experienced at least three of the above</i>	29 (73%)	36 (57%)

Note: these counts likely underestimate the incidence of these experiences, as they reflect experiences that came up in interviews rather than results of a systematic survey.

to preserve positive self-identities (Sykes, 2011). Parents' first-hand accounts offer insight into the factors they see as salient, and analyzing these situations provides context beyond survey and administrative data sets.

4. Results

To probe the relationship between poverty and child welfare involvement as interpreted by poor parents, I analyzed 107 incidents that respondents reported led to a child welfare investigation. Although parents rarely implicated financial constraints directly in their descriptions of how they became involved, an inductive analysis highlighted contexts of poverty that provided opportunities for child welfare involvement. A substantial proportion of these incidents implicated specific parental adversities that, as discussed in Section 2.2, research links to poverty: domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness, and criminal justice involvement. Other cases involved housing, child behavior, child health, child monitoring (e.g., leaving children alone), physical abuse, and other parent behavior (e.g., prostitution).

Examining the situations that triggered the investigations revealed contexts that were often connected to conditions of poverty. Respondents described situations of need and deprivation in which their social networks were severely disadvantaged, or they had to depend on social networks or social service providers that ultimately reported them to child welfare. This compounded disadvantage and desperation occurred in contexts where reporting a parent to child welfare was not an exceptional response: in respondents' volatile personal relationships, their relations might call child welfare out of spite, or respondents interacted with social service providers mandated to report child maltreatment. Table 3 displays counts of incidents with different factors present. In almost all cases, respondents discussed poverty-related adversities and/or contexts related to social networks and social services, highlighting different paths through which poverty can lead to child welfare involvement.

4.1. Poverty-related parental adversities

A substantial proportion of incidents parents described (42%) implicated forms of disadvantage linked to poverty: domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness, and involvement with the criminal justice system. These factors sometimes overlapped, as when drug activity led to police involvement. Additionally, as noted in section 3.2, many respondents had experienced these adversities and/or were affected through the experiences of those closest to them. Even if respondents

Table 3
Factors cited in accounts of child welfare involvement.

Factor	Incidents mentioning factor (n = 107)
<i>Poverty-related adversities</i>	
Domestic violence	10 (9%)
Substance abuse	25 (23%)
Mental illness	7 (7%)
Criminal justice involvement	8 (7%)
At least one of the above	45 (42%)
<i>Other contextual factors</i>	
Disadvantaged networks	14 (13%)
Fractured relationships	29 (27%)
Social service reliance	27 (26%)
At least one of above	66 (62%)
At least one of above	95 (89%)

Note: counts are not mutually exclusive.

did not specify these challenges as precipitating child welfare involvement, these multiple and compounding forms of disadvantage may contribute to a stressful household environment and, indirectly, to parenting practices perceived as abusive or neglectful.

Respondents' narratives often portrayed the pathways from these disadvantages to child welfare involvement as "automatic" and triggered by "protocols" from homeless shelters, hospitals, police, and other reporting agencies. Maggie, a white mother living with her husband and 9-year-old daughter, explained in a matter-of-fact tone that when she was taken into jail on robbery charges, the police called child welfare. John, a black and Puerto Rican father of two, said his children's mother suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder and "went haywire." The police were called one night when they were arguing. "When you have a domestic [assault charge], DCYF is automatically gonna get involved with it." Marissa, a white mother living in transitional housing, described her daughter being removed from her custody at birth: "Well, if you use drugs and you're pregnant, they're gonna take your baby... I knew that." Their accounts were remarkably straightforward, as respondents saw this involvement as inevitable given the combination of behaviors (or alleged behaviors) and an agency required to report. Many respondents connected their child welfare involvement not to low financial resources, but to other adverse experiences that, as discussed in Section 2.2, are more common among the poor. As shown in Table 2, poverty for respondents was not solely an experience of material and financial hardship, but a clustering and compounding of multiple adversities (Desmond, 2015)—adversities that could be central to their involvement with the child welfare system.

4.2. Disadvantaged network ties

Living in poverty often matters beyond the effects of one's own low income. Situations leading to child welfare involvement sometimes involved the disadvantages of respondents' network ties, usually in a similar socioeconomic situation. Even if respondents' own poverty did not cause them to associate with disadvantaged ties, due to the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage, social network homophily, and income-segregated neighborhoods and schools, the experience of poverty typically means poor parents are connected to others whose disadvantages may prompt child welfare involvement. Respondents described how investigations resulted from connections to partners or co-resident adults who drew child welfare attention or from reliance on network ties who were themselves financially strained or unable to provide sufficient support. These dynamics show how the disadvantages in respondents' social networks both relate to poverty and translate into child welfare investigations.

Disadvantages or actions of those in close proximity to respondents' children could lead directly to child welfare involvement. In four cases, respondents said that partners physically or sexually abused their children, and in three of those cases, they became involved through neglect

charges. In other cases, respondents implicated the legal or child welfare status of close network ties. For example, when Helen, a 41-year-old white mother, went to jail for four days for an outstanding warrant from 10 years earlier, she left her children with someone with an "extensive" child welfare history, leading to a neglect charge. Her mother, the only family member she is close with, lives out of state, and her friends in the area, like her, are recovering addicts. Together with Helen's criminal justice involvement, the disadvantages of her network ties made her vulnerable to child welfare intervention.

In another example, Brittini, a white mother of two, was pulled over with her children's father in the car:

They ran his name; he had a warrant. They didn't like the fact that I was in the car with a felon and had my child there, so they called. They called, CPS came—they called me and we talked, or whatever. I had to go through the whole drug test, home visit and everything like that.

Criminal justice contact is commonplace among the poor; many men, particularly black men, in poor communities—poor mothers' likely romantic partners—are or have been involved with the criminal justice system (Western, 2006). Three other respondents in the full sample talked about connections to fugitives or sex offenders as leading to the investigation of network ties or as a concern for themselves. Other research finds that connections to those with warrants out for arrest can also bring the police into one's home; police observations can lead to threats to call child welfare authorities (Goffman, 2014).

Network ties' financial needs also prompt intervention. For example, Bethany, a 37-year-old white mother, twice arranged for her children to stay informally with her mother-in-law—once while she went to a detoxification program, and again when she spent 75 days in jail. Both times, her mother-in-law called child welfare so that she could receive money from the state for caring for the children. Child welfare agencies provide needed financial resources to poor communities through foster care payments (Roberts, 2008), so financially strained network ties may turn to child welfare to obtain this support.

In some cases, network disadvantages matter for child welfare involvement because of parents' desperate economic circumstances. Inadequate housing was a circumstance of removal for 11% of children in foster care in fiscal year 2012 (Dworsky, 2014). Several respondents in the full sample also lacked the financial means to afford their own place, but lived in separate apartments in multi-unit houses owned by family members, paying no or substantially reduced rent. For parents without such support, their financial circumstances sometimes led them to double up with friends and relatives. The homelessness that led to child welfare involvement occurred when these relationships became strained and they had nowhere to go.

Doubling up can also bring poor parents into the relationship drama of those around them, as when Roxanne, a Dominican mother of three, was investigated because she lived with a friend whose sister called child welfare saying that they left the children alone and brought men into the house. Roxanne met this friend through a mutual friend and moved in without knowing much about her, needing an affordable place to stay when her mother moved out of state. This friend was "having issues" with her sister, and Roxanne said the maltreatment allegations were unsubstantiated—in her view, at least in part because they told the investigator about the fight between the friend and her sister. Roxanne said that her friend's sister "didn't even know who I was." Nevertheless, her connection with this friend led Roxanne herself to be investigated.

Poor parents are enmeshed in social networks whose members are likely financially needy and/or may be entangled in the criminal justice system or in volatile relationships of their own. Certainly, not all instances of network disadvantage led to child welfare investigation, and respondents described instances in which disadvantaged network ties protected them from involvement, or in which they declined to

call child welfare on others based on empathy with their situation. Nevertheless, reliance on social network ties meant taking on risks of child welfare involvement based on these ties.

4.3. Fractured relationships

In addition to poor parents' embeddedness in disadvantaged networks, these networks are often marked by distrust and instability (Desmond, 2012; Levine, 2013), and respondents described environments in which calling child welfare constitutes a viable option for someone with a grudge. In respondents' narratives, more than one-quarter of incidents stemmed from friends, relatives, or neighbors calling the child welfare hotline not out of concern for the children, according to respondents, but out of spite or seeking revenge, leveraging the child welfare system for gain in their personal relationships. John, the black and Puerto Rican father, said his children's mother had a lot of enemies. He described a recent situation in which his son tripped and fell in the park. "Some girl that didn't like her called DCYF on her. Then, the next day, they come to the house saying that we was downtown drinking in the park with the kids and all kinds of stuff. It was crazy." Sometimes, though not always, respondents acknowledged truth in the reporter's allegations. Although these relationships typically did not directly cause the maltreating behavior, the relationships brought the behavior to the attention of authorities. Thus, although social networks can reduce the risk of child welfare involvement by providing social support (Coohey, 1996; Hashima & Amato, 1994; Kotch et al., 1997), certain network ties and relationships also lead to system involvement.

Respondents' invocation of spite as a reason for involvement may, in part, reflect their efforts to project positive self-identities and focus on the vindictive behavior of the reporter rather than their own abuse or neglect. However, the interviews suggest that spiteful motives do not solely reflect respondents' rationalizations. Echoing findings from previous research (Reich, 2005; Roberts, 2008), respondents perceived this dynamic as widespread. Parents who were not victims of spiteful reporting often described it occurring in their networks or generally in the community. Although it is possible they are just repeating rumors or hearing their networks' justifications for involvement, in their communities, calling child welfare out of spite is a cultural "tool" available to be deployed in an individual's strategy of action (Swidler, 1986).

For example, Gloria, a 31-year-old black mother of three, lived doubled up with her great-aunt following a serious incident of domestic violence. Her only child welfare investigation came when she called the police at that time, and the agency came to check on the children as a matter of practice. When I mentioned that sometimes people say neighbors or relatives call or threaten to call when mad, she described a scenario:

Gloria: I mean, if, let's say I was beating my kids and my neighbor heard. So if one day we was ever arguing, she can use that against me. But I don't have that to worry about.

Interviewer: She could use it against you how?

Gloria: Like if one day me and her was arguing, and I gotta call the cops on her, she can call DCYF on me, cause she knows I'm down here beating my kids.

Although she could not name anyone who had experienced this, she was "pretty sure" it happened. When asked what she had heard about it, she replied:

Gloria: I dunno, just people saying, oh, I should call DCYF on her 'cause she be beating her kids.

Interviewer: Is it more out of concern for the kids, or –

Gloria: No, just being mad or whatever.

Gloria described how a neighbor's observations might be used as leverage in a fight—not because her neighbor specifically dislikes her or has a penchant for calling child welfare, but because neighbors in general might do this. For Gloria, this dynamic is part of everyday conversation—it is simply something people do.

Although few respondents said they had ever called child welfare, examining their expressed motives for calling suggests that reporters, as well as those reported, understand calls as motivated by spite as well. Of seven respondents who had called or planned to call child welfare, three called about incidents of very serious physical or sexual abuse, and one called about a neighbor who repeatedly smoked and drank with friends, leaving her children to run around alone. In the remaining three cases, respondents articulated spiteful motives for calling about issues that did not rise to the level of abuse or neglect driving other respondents' calls: posting a photograph online of a baby posing with liquor bottles, pawning children's electronics to purchase drugs, and not enough bedrooms for children. In the third case, Brooke, a 26-year-old white mother, said she planned to call once her ex-boyfriend's baby was born. Recently, he had successfully sued for custody of their son. When asked why she wanted to call, she said:

'Cause I want him to have to go through the same thing I went through... I would actually do it for the right reason, not because of I was mad at him. I'm obviously a little bit mad, but I don't feel like three kids should have to be crammed into one room.

That reporters themselves referred to other motives in addition to concern for the children suggests that some child welfare investigations do result from poor parents' volatile social relationships and their awareness of the option to call child welfare to gain power or revenge in these relationships.

This strain in respondents' relationships was often rooted in conditions of poverty. Arguments often centered around issues like stolen money, borrowed money not repaid, use of a benefits card, and jeopardizing a neighbor's housing by reporting her to the landlord. Depending on one another for economic survival sometimes created friction between network ties that culminated in a child welfare report. For example, after the police were called due to domestic violence, Bianca, a Guatemalan mother of five, said the child welfare agency told her she needed to move out and file for a restraining order. She stayed with a woman whom Bianca allowed to receive the state childcare voucher for caring for Bianca's children. In return, this babysitter told the authorities Bianca had a job, when in fact she was working under the table growing marijuana. When the marijuana operation moved out of state, Bianca fell behind on rent and told her babysitter to accept the childcare voucher money as rent, which Bianca said led the babysitter to feel threatened by her and the babysitter's daughter to confront Bianca at her apartment.

She smack me in the face and we get into a fight... They don't call the cops. They call DCYF and told them that I've been seeing this guy, and that I don't have money to pay my rent, and that I'm gonna lose the apartment in a couple days. Oh, and that I hit the kids. Which it was probably not true, but they have to say something else.

Bianca's account of the situation leading to the child welfare investigation highlights the complex interaction between individual poverty, social networks and norms, and individual behavior. Bianca acknowledged that she was being dishonest with the child welfare agency about her source of income and violating the restraining order by contacting her children's father. Yet these transgressions came to the attention of authorities because of her desperate financial situation, her

relationship of economic interdependence with her babysitter, and, in her view, the way her babysitter saw calling child welfare as a legitimate and available weapon to hurt Bianca. That poor parents' relationships bring them into contact with child welfare is no coincidence; these incidents are often rooted in conditions of desperation and powerlessness.

4.4. Social service reliance

Poor parents often rely on the state and the nonprofit sector for their material and health-related needs, and interacting with these providers meant that child welfare authorities sometimes became aware of behavior that might have gone unnoticed otherwise. Notably, respondents described many social service encounters that did not lead to child welfare involvement. Nevertheless, some respondents described how interactions with, and reliance on, service providers led to contact with the child welfare system.

I focus on cases reported by agencies that serve the poor or provide social workers: 11 cases stemmed from interactions with early intervention services for children with developmental delays, visiting nurses, Medicaid, welfare offices, and homeless shelters. (I exclude from Table 3 reports from agencies serving broad segments of the population, high- and low-income, with and without adversities, such as daycares, schools, and hospitals.) Respondents described straightforward pathways from service provider interactions to child welfare involvement. For example, an early intervention worker reported a baby's difficulty eating, lead exposure triggered child welfare because a parent received state medical insurance, and miscommunication in the welfare office led to an allegation of child abandonment. Previous entanglements with the child welfare agency itself also prompted additional involvement; in seven cases, respondents' newborns were held at the hospital due to previous child welfare cases, or a case opened when they gave birth while in foster care themselves. These findings align with arguments that increased exposure to surveilling agencies at least partially explains why the poor are more likely child welfare involved.

Incidents reported by homeless shelters often involved parents leaving the shelter without a stable place to live, reflecting the intersection of parents' financial constraints and service use. Sherelle, a 26-year-old black mother, lived doubled up with her grandmother in an elderly high-rise complex that did not allow children. The child welfare agency removed her children and placed them with her cousin when she left a shelter with nowhere else to go. She said that they would be reunified as soon as she found and maintained a permanent place to live, and that financial constraints were keeping her from finding an apartment. Based on her income, she said an affordable apartment would be \$600 a month, and she needed a two-bedroom apartment for herself and her four young children. When asked what two-bedroom apartments cost these days, she replied, "650 or 680 or 700 or sometimes 750. I'm like okay, damn, but basically that's my whole damn check. I have nothing left over to pay the [utility] bills." As she described it, Sherelle's financial situation was central to her child welfare involvement. Yet other parents in the full sample said they arranged for children to stay with relatives informally, sidestepping the child welfare system, when the parent was not in a position to care for them adequately. Sherelle's situation in particular came to the attention of the child welfare agency because of the shelter's practice of calling when parents leave without a stable place to live.

Parents experiencing adversities such as domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness, and criminal justice involvement frequently interacted with agencies targeted at these vulnerable populations, such as rehabilitation facilities and psychiatric hospitals. On the one hand, these services could help poor parents address the adversities they faced. Yet parents also implicated service providers in child welfare involvement, as accessing these services could increase visibility to child welfare authorities. Desiree, a Dominican and Puerto Rican mother, largely evaded child welfare investigation for several years while she lived in "crack houses" and on the streets of inner-city Philadelphia

with her two young daughters. She supported her heroin addiction through prostitution and drug dealing. Desiree acknowledged that at that time, she was not able to meet her children's needs:

Screw my kids at this point. I'm a mother? I don't give a shit. Give me something [drugs]. Give me something! I don't wanna be sick. I don't give a fuck about these kids... My kids were always last priority, at every point in this time... All they have is so much love for me. I'm just looking at them. I'm like, I don't even like them. I didn't even like my kids at one point, because I was so fed up with taking care of them. I didn't wanna care for them anymore. I just wanted to get high.

When Desiree came to Rhode Island, she wanted to get clean and went to a program to detoxify. Only then, as she tried to turn her life around, did child welfare become involved, as this program subsequently reported her. She had left her children informally with her mother, who had cared for them frequently in the past but had a substantial criminal history. In Desiree's account, substance abuse itself did not lead to child welfare involvement, but rather substance abuse combined with interactions with a reporting agency and disadvantages of her network.

This is also exemplified by Joselyn, not in the focal sample as she said she had never been investigated, a 26-year-old Dominican mother living with her mother, her daughter, her sister, and her nephew. She works part-time at a transitional housing program serving mothers with histories of substance abuse. She said she is frequently in contact with the child welfare agency, and when a drug screen comes back positive, she does not hesitate to call. She described one former resident who tested positive for marijuana, saying, "I had to call DCYF to come remove the baby 'cause she was gonna get discharged," echoing Sherelle's experience in the homeless shelter. Like Desiree, the parents Joselyn oversees place themselves at risk of child welfare involvement not only through their behavior, but because their behavior occurs within the context of a surveilling program in which the decision to call child welfare is clear-cut and commonplace.

In several other cases, parents' need to access services and support from the state led to child welfare involvement. In two cases, respondents' own desperate situations and lack of other options led them to call child welfare for help. For example, Colleen, a white mother with seven young children, described a difficult time in which she and her boyfriend were using drugs and lacked housing and childcare for the two young children they had at the time. Her boyfriend called child welfare; she said they had tried everything and did not know what else to do. By involving child welfare, she said she was able to "focus on me and get what I need to get done, fix myself so I can be a good mom to them." Needing help urgently could draw parents into the child welfare system.

Other parents voluntarily accessed or accepted services through the child welfare agency because they needed help managing their children's behavior. These challenges are not unique to poor families, although poor children are more likely to exhibit mental health and behavior problems (McLeod & Shanahan, 1993; Newacheck et al., 1998; Qi & Kaiser, 2003). The economic and social resources of more well-off families may help them address children's behavior problems outside of the child welfare system. In two of these cases, parents filed wayward charges on their teenage children, describing behavior stemming from peer influences in their disadvantaged neighborhoods. Wendy, a 48-year-old black mother and grandmother, said her 16-year-old son was in the streets at night and skipping school. She was concerned about his drinking, drug use, and gang involvement; once, she said, he was shot at in front of her house. She tried giving him a curfew and talking to his father. "His father's alcoholic so he's not too much of a help. So, couldn't send him there. But basically we did a lotta talking and it didn't help so I had no choice." Wendy said that in order for her son to receive counseling services, she needed a referral to child welfare. Her son's behavior, and her need for support in managing that behavior, led her to request state intervention into her family.

In two other cases, parents also framed their child welfare involvement as a bureaucratic necessity in order to access needed services.³ Laura, a Hispanic mother of three, said that her family's service needs precipitated a child welfare case:

Like for my middle one, because of her [health issues], they opened a DCYF case so that one of the adjoining companies can get paid for the services to my daughter... They're like it's open, but it's not for you, it's for the payment. I'm like okay. Makes no sense, but whatever.

Poor parents have a multifaceted relationship with social service providers. On the one hand, they rely on these providers to meet their needs and help them manage the challenges they and their families face. However, this reliance also exposes them to the child welfare system. Poor parents are thus connected with the child welfare system not only because of parental, child, or family needs, but because they turn to social services to fill the gap between these needs and what their private resources and personal networks can provide—services that can subsequently entangle them in the child welfare system.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Examining specific situations highlights contexts of poverty, over and above low income, that matter for child welfare involvement. Low income is often one of multiple adversities poor parents face. Disadvantages cluster, accumulating over the life course and intergenerationally (Desmond, 2015; Sharkey, 2008). Many respondents traced their child welfare involvement not to poverty directly, but to related adversities: substance abuse, mental illness, domestic violence, and criminal justice. Yet these adversities cannot be fully separated from respondents' poverty. A comprehensive research approach would conceptualize these challenges as central to the experience of poverty for many, and incorporate them into a richer theory of the role of poverty in child welfare involvement. Moreover, my findings highlight how families' needs interact with the supports available to them to precipitate child welfare involvement. Contexts of acute need combined with supports that channel them to child welfare agencies emerge from conditions of poverty, as parents' own relations are severely disadvantaged and as they turn to social services mandated to report them.

Parents' descriptions of situations also draw our attention to how particular behavior translates into a child welfare report. These findings shed light on the nature of reporting processes—often portrayed as automatic for social service providers and vindictive for social network ties—in producing increased involvement in child welfare for poor parents. Additional research can build on findings about disproportionate reporting (Hampton & Newberger, 1985) to probe social contexts that facilitate or inhibit child welfare reporting. This line of research would help explain how particular groups are more likely to reap the benefits and/or experience the intrusion of child welfare involvement.

In addition, the interviews underscored the distinction between child maltreatment and child welfare involvement, and I encourage future researchers to be clear about which outcome they are examining. Causes of each outcome may differ. I focus on child welfare involvement rather than child maltreatment itself. Studying child welfare involvement is important in understanding the roots of disproportionate state intervention into certain families, such as poor families and black families (Roberts, 2002). Child welfare involvement may constitute an additional trauma—or additional protection from maltreatment—that shapes life course outcomes even apart from maltreatment experienced. Future research might take a situational approach to probe how contexts of poverty lead to maltreating behaviors themselves,

which carry a host of negative impacts for victims of maltreatment (Currie & Widom, 2010; Margolin & Gordis, 2000).

Aiming to generate theories rather than test them, I also examine only situations leading to a child welfare report, and do not consider situations that could have triggered a child welfare report, but did not. In a similar vein, I show how some situations stem at least partly from financial constraints. Additional research could more rigorously test these mechanisms by comparing similar situations of financial constraint and parenting behavior that do and do not lead to child welfare investigation.

Multiple methods are needed to advance our understanding of how economic resources and child welfare involvement may be linked. Alongside analysis of survey and administrative data on child welfare involvement, researchers should also engage in ethnography to observe how and when dynamics related to social relationships and social service interactions translate into child welfare reports, and in-depth interviews to probe reporting practices on the part of professionals as well as nonprofessionals. Qualitative research should also explore other contexts. For example, research in cities with concentrated populations of poor blacks is critical given the racial geography of child welfare (Roberts, 2008). Research with non-English-speaking parents would provide an important perspective absent in this study; recent immigrants might be a select group experiencing different contexts of poverty and thus different pathways from poverty to child welfare involvement. Additionally, analyzing both parents' and caseworkers' accounts, as Sykes (2011) does, would provide multiple perspectives to understand situations in more detail.

Isolating the causal effect of income is a critically important and policy-relevant endeavor that helps us understand how providing additional financial supports may prevent child welfare involvement. Yet on the broader question of whether and how poverty matters, this causal effect provides only a narrow answer. For many, the experience of poverty goes beyond a lack of income to encompass a complex constellation of intertwined adversities and contexts. Additional income can certainly alleviate material hardship and enable purchases that facilitate upward mobility, but a positive income shock may not reverse all the conditions of poverty that matter for child welfare involvement. For example, when provided the resources to move and stay out of a disadvantaged neighborhood, many parents did not do so, due to the structure of the housing market and the coping mechanisms they had developed (Edin, DeLuca, & Owens, 2012). Even with additional income, parents' own adverse experiences, social networks, and social service needs can persist.

Despite the potential persistence of these noneconomic disadvantages, the findings from this study do not diminish the importance of economic resources. Instead, they emphasize the centrality of such resources for child welfare involvement, in fostering the conditions of financial dependence and desperation for state assistance that make poor parents vulnerable to child welfare involvement. Poverty, conceptualized broadly to encompass the personal adversities, social network ties, and social service needs of poor parents, likely has a much larger effect on child welfare involvement than an estimate of income alone might suggest.

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³ Although such statements may reflect parents' efforts to present themselves in a more positive light, local service providers told me that receiving services is indeed often conditional on an open child welfare case.

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