

Poverty & Neglect in child welfare

Summary

Poverty is the greatest threat to child well-being and an underlying factor in many child welfare cases. Child neglect, the most common reason for child welfare intervention, is often the result of poverty rather than parental maltreatment. Furthermore, child removal and out-of-home care remains standard practice in child neglect cases. Data shows that such separation of children and families is detrimental, and especially traumatic for BIPOC children who are removed at a disproportionate rate compared to white children. Short- and long-term access to economic support and social services ensure families can invest in the long-term well-being of their children, eliminating the need for child welfare intervention.

Introduction

In child welfare cases, poverty is the most important determining factor for child well-being¹. Inadequate income, more than any other variable, constitutes removal in child welfare cases.² Over 60 percent of families in the child welfare system are investigated for neglect,^{3,4} and, similarly, many families who have their children removed have trouble paying for basic necessities.⁵

Child removal and subsequent out-of-home placement has been standard practice for child protection; however, decades of research⁶ suggest that the current child welfare system continually fails to protect children because of its inability to address underlying conditions of poverty and economic injustice. Furthermore, the child welfare system can exacerbate harm when children are removed from their existing environments, even in cases of perceived neglect.⁷ Many children who are removed through child welfare intervention experience adverse outcomes,^{8,9} the devastating effects of which are particularly harmful to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) children and families.¹⁰

The ability to fully support the well-being of healthy children and families is contingent upon an accessible and comprehensive continuum of economic supports and social services for families. Ideally, when families have resources to thrive, children are protected; when children are protected by their families, the traumatic practices of temporary child removal and out-of-home care become obsolete.

Definitions

For the purpose of this paper, poverty and child neglect are defined as follows:

- *Poverty* is a condition “defined relative to the standards of living in a society at a specific time. People live in poverty when they are denied an income sufficient for their material needs and when these circumstances exclude them from taking part in activities which are an accepted part of daily life in that society.”¹¹
- *Child neglect* is a category of maltreatment defined by the failure of a parent or caretaker to act on behalf of a child, resulting in imminent serious harm. Under this definition, a “child” is understood to be a minor under the age of 18.¹²

The intersection of poverty and neglect in Child Welfare and the impact on BIPOC families

Most families experiencing poverty do not maltreat their children.¹³ In child welfare, the intersection of poverty and neglect is nuanced and affects families in different ways over time. Poverty increases the risk for neglect in child welfare cases, but poverty does not equate with neglect.¹⁴

Poverty is a risk factor for neglect, however, because conditions of poverty can make it extremely difficult for parents to meet children’s needs. For example, child neglect cases may be filed due to insufficient food or supervision due to lack of access to childcare, which are indicators of financial need rather than parental mistreatment.¹⁵ Families who experience economic insecurity are more likely to be subjected to intervention by the child welfare system, yet what these families need is more resources to adequately support themselves. Poverty also increases risk for child neglect because the stress of living in poverty can impact caregivers’ capacity to provide social and emotional support for children. The daily stress that caregivers endure while struggling to meet their basic needs can result in poor mental health outcomes, such as anxiety and depression. When parents’ or caregivers’ mental health is not protected, parenting capacities may be compromised.¹⁶

Current Child Welfare Practice

In standard child welfare practice, intervention often means quickly removing children from situations of perceived abuse or neglect. However, research consistently shows that forcible separation of children from their parents is a source of significant and lifelong trauma, even if intervention occurs due to a case of neglect or other harm.¹⁷ In a 2019 study of foster care alumni, 25% were found to experience post-traumatic stress disorder, almost twice the rate documented by U.S. war veterans.¹⁸ Regardless of how long parent-child separation lasts, the trauma associated with forced parent-child separation has devastating health and psychological impacts for children, including cognitive delays, depression, increased aggression, behavioral problems, and poor educational achievement.¹⁹ The presence of permanent, accessible, and flexible economic relief programs could eliminate traumatizing child removals in the majority of child neglect investigations.

Racism in Child Welfare

Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) families who experience economic instability are already at risk of harmful child welfare intervention. Furthermore, the child welfare system is especially harmful to families who also face barriers due to systemic racism, racial bias, and discrimination. Many reported cases of child neglect, often resulting in children’s removal from the home, reflect underlying conditions of pervasive racial and economic injustice., Black children are nearly three times as likely as white children to be living in poverty.²⁰ Black children are also overrepresented within the child welfare system,^{21 22} and studies show that when Black children are removed from their homes, on average, they are assessed to have lower risk at the time of removal than white children removed from their homes.²³ More than half of Black children (53%) will experience a child protective services investigation before their eighteenth birthday.²⁴

Little evidence exists that suggests Black families have a higher incidence of child maltreatment compared to other races,²⁵ yet substantiated allegations of neglect are significantly more frequent in cases involving Black families.²⁶ Even discounting the presence of racial discrimination in reporting bias,²⁷ evidence suggests that families are often discriminated against for their experience of living in poverty. Due to US history of slavery, segregation, redlining, restrictive covenants, disinvestment policies, welfare restrictions, and multi-generational trauma,²⁸ BIPOC families are overrepresented among the poor.²⁹ The child welfare system reinforces blame for perceived neglect on individual parents and caregivers, rather than recognizing systemic racism and programmatic child welfare failings which restrict caregivers’ abilities to provide supportive environments for children.

Many BIPOC parents and caregivers experiencing poverty cannot afford food, lack access to stable housing and employment, may suffer from poor mental health outcomes, and face the extra challenge of navigating restrictive welfare programs.³⁰

TANF is one example of a restrictive welfare program. According to a study about state-level TANF policy decisions, states with larger Black populations, all else equal, have more restrictive TANF policies.³¹ In Washington state specifically, the inflexible 60-month time limit policy terminated TANF benefits for a disproportionate number of Black and Indigenous families from 2015 to 2019.³² The analysis showed that Black people and Indigenous people comprised 20 percent and 9 percent of the TANF caseload, respectively. However, due to the 60-month time limit, 30 percent of Black recipients and 12 percent of Indigenous recipients were removed from the TANF caseload entirely.³³ Other barriers to TANF, including work and family requirements, also push families further into poverty. This cycle is most harmful to BIPOC families, many of whom already face barriers to employment, healthcare, and education.

Conclusion

Poverty is the greatest threat to child well-being,³⁷ and the intersection of poverty and child neglect is striking. Many children will remain at risk for the increased trauma of child welfare intervention in the absence of robust policies to address underlying conditions of economic hardship and other supportive resources. Policies that alleviate stressors of poverty, provide help for substance use, housing, and other material and supportive needs invest in family and child well-being. Short- and long-term access to resources and services ensure families can meet their basic needs and invest in the long-term well-being of their children.

The Future of Child Welfare

The child welfare system will perpetuate systemic harm as long as it continues to separate children from their families when they are accused of neglect. Child removal in this situation should be extremely rare, an option reserved for the direst circumstances. However, traumatic child removals will remain common practice in the absence of policy to support and strengthen families. A six-city study of TANF recipients found that children of families who had their cash assistance reduced or eliminated were 50 percent more likely to be food insecure than children receiving benefits in non-sanctioned families.³⁴ Conversely, policies that expand families' access to direct income, such as unrestricted cash programs, alleviate the immediate stressors of poverty, protect families' right to self-determination, and reduce risk of child neglect. Direct cash assistance can protect our most vulnerable populations, as well as those who do not qualify for programs like TANF but are still living paycheck to paycheck. Evidence shows that cash payments to families are associated with reduced child maltreatment, improved child behavior, better nutrition, improved access to healthcare, and lower infant mortality.^{35 36}

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