



How Economic Equity and Hope for the Future Could Reduce Child Abuse and Neglect in the United States

Lindsey Rose Bullinger, Georgia Institute of Technology

Nearly 40% of all children in the United States are the subject of an investigation by child welfare agencies. Although confirmed physical and sexual abuse has declined substantially in the past two decades, two other types of maltreatment, neglect and fatalities from maltreatment, are not declining. Referrals alleging maltreatment continue to rise and U.S. children are still three times more likely to die from maltreatment than their counterparts in Canada.

Child maltreatment (including physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, and neglect) has been linked to negative health and economic consequences in both the short- and long-term. As adults, children who were the victims of abuse and neglect are more likely to be depressed, unemployed, commit crimes, and use social services.

Child maltreatment also generates substantial costs to society. The lifetime cost for each maltreated child who does not die is estimated to be \$242,426 – totaling \$145 billion in the United States in 2019 dollars. Because the costs in human suffering and economic resources are so high, researchers work to understand how best to prevent the maltreatment of children.

Economic Mobility and Child Maltreatment

Although some prevention strategies that target specific families have been successful, recent overall reductions in physical and sexual abuse are largely due to declines in risk factors such as teen births as well as evolving societal views on spanking and laws that monitor offenders within communities. A recent review of available evidence by the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force points to the disappointing record for home-visiting and other efforts to prevent first-time instances of child maltreatment. So far, researchers have not been successful in recommending effective across-the-board steps to prevent (especially first-time as opposed to repeat) maltreatment.

Because children living in poverty are at a greater risk for abuse and neglect than children in middle-class and high-income families, a handful of studies have shown that increasing a family's income can reduce mistreatment of children. In addition to children living in poor and low-income families, recent research has found that those in communities with higher income inequality are more likely to experience poor health and maltreatment.

Increasing gaps between the top and bottom of the U.S. income distribution may also affect how easy it is for children to climb up the income ladder in adulthood. Despite rhetoric about the American Dream, income mobility in the United States is now lower than in many other developed countries; and of course, chances for

upward mobility are not uniform across the country. There are better and worse places to grow up.

Have Abusive Parents Lost Hope?

What if underlying economic obstacles are an important reason for high U.S. rates of child maltreatment? Could it be that many parents do not invest in their children because of the lack of opportunities for economic advancement for their offspring? Perhaps many parents abuse or neglect their children because they lack hope.

Current research explores this idea. [Combining reports of child maltreatment with measures of economic realities derived from tax records of more than five million families](#), my colleagues and I have studied the relationship between intergenerational income mobility and child maltreatment. We find that communities with greater income mobility have lower rates of maltreatment of children of all ages, from birth to age 17. Rates of neglect and physical abuse, especially, are lower, as are rates of repeated abuse of children who have previously been mistreated.

The relationship between income mobility and maltreatment is distinct from the well-established relationship between poverty and maltreatment, and it is different from the recently discovered association between income inequality and maltreatment. Since our analysis adjusts for these other forms of inequality, our findings imply a more precise dynamic: If parents believe their children have a chance for a brighter economic future – if they have hope – they may be likely to invest more in their children. Of course, more research must be done to pin down whether this mechanism is actually at work in the outlooks of parents.

Policy Recommendations

Results from this study provide preliminary support for the theory that ensuring future economic opportunities for children can reduce their exposure to maltreatment. If this theory is correct, preventing child maltreatment may require welfare workers and public officials to think more boldly than in the past. Governments can use various tools to reduce economic inequality and enhance income mobility – and reduce child maltreatment in the process. Some examples include:

- According to overwhelming evidence, increasing the minimum wage reduces poverty, and [recent research](#) shows that such increases can also reduce child maltreatment.
- The Earned Income Tax Credit is another tool for reducing inequality, which also reduces child maltreatment.
- Because educational inequality reinforces intergenerational inequality, investing in early childhood education – funding universal preschool, for example – can reduce the [income-based achievement gap](#) for children that is also associated with child mistreatment.

Children are among the most vulnerable members of our society. They cannot protect themselves, so the duty to prevent maltreatment falls on representatives of the citizenry as a whole. Research suggests that narrow interventions focused on particular families one at a time are unlikely to have long-lasting success, while broader policies to redress underlying social and economic obstacles are more likely to prevent abuse and

ensure better futures for all children.

Read more in Kerri Raissian and Lindsey Bullinger, "[Money Matters: Does Increasing the Minimum Wage Reduce Child Maltreatment?](#)," *Children and Youth Services Review*, (2017): 60-70; Lindsey Bullinger, Kerri Raissian, and W. Joel Schneider, "Intergenerational Income Mobility and Child Maltreatment in the United States," (working paper, 2019).