



ISSUE BRIEFS | FEBRUARY 2023

Separating Poverty From Neglect in Child Welfare

Neglect, often defined as the failure to provide a child with needed food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision, affects millions of children. [Three-quarters](#) of child welfare cases involve reports of neglect, including many thousands that result in family separation each year. Although rates of most types of maltreatment have declined significantly in the past 30 years, rates of neglect have fluctuated only slightly and remain high (Child Trends, 2019). Persistently high rates of neglect, and the potentially serious consequences of both [neglect](#) and [family separation](#) by the child protection system, point to the need for more effective prevention and early intervention strategies.

In the past, prevention strategies have often focused on family-level issues and dynamics, but the role of poverty, and the systemic factors that make escaping poverty

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difficult for families, cannot be ignored. Research tells us that families who are experiencing poverty are far more likely to be reported to child protective services (CPS) than families with more resources, but it does not tell us *why* this is the case. What is increasingly clear is that helping families move out of poverty decreases the risk to children (Rostad et al., 2017).

Our country is currently facing a period of widespread and growing economic insecurity. Broad swaths of the U.S. population are experiencing financial hardship without a clear and consistent safety net (Kinder et al., 2021). Financial help in an emergency is available in some situations and jurisdictions, but it is far from guaranteed. Many areas also face a scarcity of quality, affordable housing, and too many jobs still fall short of offering a living wage and benefits (Slack & Berger, 2021).

This issue brief explores what the research shows about the overlap among families experiencing poverty and those reported to the child welfare system for neglect, the societal context within which both poverty and neglect exist, and strategies that have proven effective for preventing and addressing both poverty and neglect, together. It is important to note that none of these strategies are intended to be "quick fixes" implemented in isolation. The issues underlying poverty and neglect require long-term advocacy, assistance, and collaborative community support to resolve. The strategies presented in this brief should be viewed as part of a larger movement within the child welfare system away from a focus on surveilling and separating families experiencing poverty and toward collaborating with a broader social services system to ensure that all families have access to the resources and support they need to care for their children and thrive.

WHAT IS NEGLECT?

Federal law provides a definition of "child abuse and neglect," but it does not explicitly define "abuse" and "neglect" separately, leaving more nuanced descriptions of specific types of maltreatment to the States. Most States do not make a distinction in statute between a single incident of neglect (such as a momentary lapse in supervision) and a pattern of deprivation (or "chronic neglect"). As a result, a wide variety of child experiences and family needs fall under the global term "neglect." Some States define specific types of neglect in their statutes, such as educational neglect, medical neglect, and abandonment. Some States' definitions include specific exceptions, such as religious exemptions for medical neglect (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). Because of these differences from State to State, it is difficult to determine whether all cases of neglect that come to the attention of the child welfare system represent equivalent risk of harm.

Racial, ethnic, and political disparities further complicate the issue. A significant body of research has documented the overrepresentation of certain groups, particularly Black, Brown, and American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) children and families, in the child welfare system relative to their representation in the general population (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). AI/AN and Black children are found by CPS agencies to be victims of child maltreatment at rates (per 1,000 children in the population) almost twice that of White children (Chapin Hall, 2022). Explicit and implicit bias affect how families are treated at every CPS decision point: African American and AI/AN families are reported to CPS and subjected to investigations at higher rates than other families, are more likely to be removed from their families, and are less likely to reunify (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021).

SOCIETAL FACTORS IN POVERTY AND NEGLECT

“There is a fine line between parental neglect of children and societal neglect of families.”
—Teresa Rafael, executive director, Children’s Trust Fund Alliance

Most families who live in poverty do not neglect their children. However, families who are poor are overrepresented in the (much smaller) population of people reported to CPS agencies for neglect. A recent study found that material hardship (poverty) was the only factor that consistently predicted both child welfare system involvement and neglectful behaviors self-reported by families (Slack & Berger, 2021). The Fourth National Incidence Study found that children from families with low socioeconomic status were seven times more likely to be neglected than children in households with more resources.

Some of the connection may be explained by increased surveillance of people living in poverty. For example, families living in poverty are more likely to come into contact with mandated reporters through overpolicing and reliance on social safety net services (e.g., public housing, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF], Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program [SNAP]). Specific poverty-related factors are also associated with greater risk of neglect, as in the following examples:

- Difficulty finding child care was found to be a strong predictor of maternal neglect (more so than mental health, severity of drug use, or history of abuse as a child) (Chapin Hall, 2022).
- States in which TANF recipients lost benefits for not working saw increases in both neglect and foster care entries between 2004 and 2015 (Ginther & Johnson-Motoyama, 2017).
- Unemployment rates, self-reported housing instability, and evictions have all been associated with increased risk of neglect (University of Oxford, 2017; Chapin Hall, 2022).

It stands to reason that increased stress from a job loss or other economic shock, housing uncertainty, or the turbulence of falling into and out of poverty can result in strained family dynamics, relationships, and caregiving decisions. However, research has found that family dynamics alone do not fully account for the link between experiencing poverty and being reported or substantiated for neglect (Fong, 2017). Poverty and neglect coexist in a social context. Chronic neglect and poverty are impacted by complex social inequities and public policy decisions that extend back generations.

Historical trauma and structural and systemic racism play significant roles in intergenerational poverty and child welfare system involvement, which are disproportionately experienced by Black, Brown, and AI/AN families in the United States. In 2019, approximately 30 percent of Black and AI/AN children, and only 10 percent of White children, lived in families with incomes below the Federal poverty threshold (Chapin Hall, 2022). This disparity is not improving over time: between 2000 and 2014, AI/AN, Black, and Hispanic and Latino families experienced more downward income mobility than White and Asian families (Akee et al., 2017).

Despite the dangers that family poverty can pose to the health and well-being of children, U.S. public policy has consistently made a clear separation between financial supports to families and resources for child protection (Weiner et al., 2021), often at the expense of Black, Brown, and AI/AN families. The Social Security Act of 1935 first placed the Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) program (the precursor to TANF) within the Social Security Administration, while social services for families were located within the Federal Children's Bureau, within the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This effectively prevented child welfare agencies from using financial supports as a strategy to keep families safely together.

In response to States removing (primarily Black) families from AFDC rolls because they were deemed "unsuitable," the 1961 Flemming Rule required States to either provide these families with support or place the children into foster care. A year later, the Social Security Act was amended to create an uncapped entitlement for placement into foster care while providing no similar funding stream to support intact families (Chapin Hall, 2022). Meanwhile, up to and including the first half of the 20th century, AI/AN families were routinely separated by the forced placement of their children in assimilationist boarding schools that forbade children to speak their Tribal languages or participate in their culture. The prevalence of these abusive institutions, which only began to decline after the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) in 1978, has resulted in generations of trauma, mistrust, and cultural loss.

In 1974, the mandated reporting laws enacted as part of the [Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act](#) further cemented a system that emphasizes surveillance of families over preventive care and support. Most recently, the Family First Prevention Services Act expands the availability of evidence-based prevention strategies but does not include economic supports among the eligible services.

WHAT WORKS

There are numerous theories about how economic policies and social conditions contribute to higher rates of neglect reports, citing factors such as the effects of surveillance and overpolicing, social norms, and structural and systemic racism. Regardless of the cause, a growing and compelling body of evidence shows that promoting family financial stability is associated with reduced risk of both neglect and involvement with child welfare.

“Despite the field’s large and almost unanimous embrace of ecological systems theory as a framework for understanding the causes of maltreatment, our interventions are inordinately focused on changing or fixing the parent. We either have to admit that we have the wrong theory, which I don’t think is the case, or get busy trying to understand other aspects of the ecological system that families live within and how changing elements of those other parts of the ecology can also prevent maltreatment.”

—Kristen Shook Slack, professor, University of Wisconsin–Madison

PREVENTING POVERTY-RELATED NEGLECT AT A POPULATION LEVEL

Attendees at the first-ever White House Conference on the Care of Dependent Children in 1909, while acknowledging the overlap of families experiencing poverty and child maltreatment, declared that poverty alone was not a compelling reason to separate children from their families. Today, approximately half of States include exemptions for poverty in their statutory definitions of child abuse and neglect (Williams et al., 2022).

One policy approach to reducing poverty-related neglect is to ensure that every State explicitly excludes poverty-related conditions from its statutory definition of maltreatment. For example, Washington State's 2022 Keeping Families Together Act ensures that children cannot be separated from their families solely on the basis of community or family poverty or inadequate housing. Similar legislation has been passed or proposed in other States (Chapin Hall, 2022).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have long proposed strengthening economic and concrete supports to families as another critical strategy in preventing child maltreatment. These supports improve parents' ability to provide for their children's basic needs, help caregivers secure appropriate child care, and reduce stress and depression. Economic supports may also reduce household crowding and increase housing stability (Fortson et al. 2016).

In 2021, changes to the Child Tax Credit had a significant impact on child poverty. These changes, authorized by the [American Rescue Plan](#) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, temporarily increased benefit levels, expanded access to families with the lowest incomes, and paid the benefit in monthly installments between July and December. According to the Columbia University Center on Poverty and Social Policy, the tax credit, while in effect, reduced monthly child poverty by 30 percent and kept more than 3 million children out of poverty (Parolin & Curran, 2022).

Research increasingly shows that policies like this that expand benefits and improve financial security in households with children decrease neglect reports. Jurisdictions often have discretion to improve access to such benefits by simplifying application processes, making applications available online, reducing barriers to eligibility as permitted, and providing prioritized access to families at risk of separation or involvement with the child protection system. Some of the policies that address poverty-related conditions and have shown to reduce neglect rates, specifically, include the following:

- **Earned Income Tax Credit.** One study found that a \$1,000 increase in income through the Earned Income Tax Credit is associated with an 8- to 10-percent reduction in CPS involvement for low-income, single-mother households (Berger et al., 2017). A second study found a 10-percent increase in *refundable* State earned income tax credit benefits was associated with 241 fewer reports of neglect per 100,000 children in the population (Kovski et al., 2021).
- **Medicaid coverage.** In a study comparing States with expanded Medicaid coverage to States that chose not to expand coverage, Medicaid expansion was associated with 422 fewer cases of neglect per 100,000 children younger than the age of 6 (Brown et al., 2019).

- **Minimum wage.** One study found increases in the minimum wage led to fewer child maltreatment reports. For every \$1 increase, neglect reports for young and school-aged children declined 9.6 percent (Raissian & Bullinger, 2017).
- **Child care.** One study found that States with more accommodating policies regarding subsidizing child care for child welfare-involved children had fewer child removals than other States (Meloy et al. 2015). Another observed a 16-percent decrease in the likelihood of a neglect report in the following 12 months associated with each additional month that low-income mothers received a child care subsidy (Yang et al., 2019).
- **Nutrition assistance and food subsidies.** Medicaid-enrolled children whose parents participated in SNAP (i.e., food stamps) and/or Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) programs were found to be at lower risk of substantiated maltreatment than children whose parents did not participate in either nutrition program (Lee & Mackey-Bilaver, 2007). In rural areas, proximity to stores that accept SNAP benefits has also shown to be associated with fewer neglect reports (Bullinger et al. 2021).

Other important economic supports, including housing assistance and child support, have been found to impact maltreatment rates in general, although studies may not have specifically focused on neglect:

- **Child support.** One study found that mothers who received TANF and were eligible to receive all child support paid on behalf of their children (without a decrease in their benefits) were 10 percent less likely to have a screened-in maltreatment report than mothers who received only part of their children's child support payments. Even an increase in child support payments as small as \$100 per year had a positive impact (Cancian et al., 2013).
- **Housing assistance.** Supportive housing programs have been shown to result in less substantiated maltreatment, fewer removals, and increased reunification among children of child welfare-involved families facing housing instability (Farrell et al., 2018). In another study, homeless families referred for permanent housing subsidies experienced 50 percent fewer foster care placements (Gubits et al., 2015).

The CDC has identified family-friendly work policies as another important strategy to both support families' economic stability and improve the balance of work and parenting time. These policies include increasing wages, providing paid leave, and offering consistent but flexible schedules (Fortson et al., 2016).

ASSESSING NEGLECT IN THE CONTEXT OF POVERTY

It can be difficult for caseworkers to distinguish between maltreatment and the effects of poverty. Thus, it is important to conduct a thorough assessment through observation and by asking questions, recognizing there may not be clear-cut answers. This could include assessing adequate level of care (for example, supervision and basic needs, acknowledging that childrearing practices and standards of care differ from culture to culture), whether the children are experiencing actual harm, and whether the neglect (if present) reflects a parent's choices or a lack of available resources despite the family's best efforts. It is particularly important when working with AI/AN families for caseworkers to assess their knowledge of traditional Tribal childrearing and wellness practices. Cultural awareness is an important practice when interacting with all families.

The family's income, as well as their knowledge of and access to economic resources, are critical considerations when assessing safety and risk. Acknowledging these factors during important decision points may help prevent unwarranted neglect substantiations and unnecessary separation of children from their families. Determining whether the family is eligible for benefit programs that could ease financial strain, and helping to connect families with economic and concrete supports wherever possible, should be a regular part of practice with families who are struggling financially.

Important questions to consider may include the following:

IF A REPORT ALLEGES ... CONSIDER ...

Physical neglect

- Can the family afford to provide for children's basic needs, such as appropriate shelter, food, clothing, and hygiene?
- Is affordable housing available where the family wants to live?
- Does the family live in a "food desert" that makes access to healthy, affordable food more difficult?
- Is transportation or neighborhood violence a barrier to accessing basic needs?

Medical neglect

- Can the family afford medical insurance, or is there a free or low-cost clinic nearby?
- Are there resources from the Tribe that may assist with medical needs?
- Does the family have unpaid medical bills that are getting in the way of securing care?
- Does the caregiver's employer allow paid time off for medical appointments?
- Is transportation a barrier to timely care?

Supervisory neglect

- Is quality safe and affordable child care available in the family's community during the hours worked by caregivers?

Emotional neglect

- Are the demands and stressors of living in poverty and/or distressed communities depleting the caregiver's ability to offer children the affection and emotional support they would otherwise provide?

Educational neglect

- Do caregivers' work hours prevent them from monitoring the child's school attendance?
- Is reliable transportation available?
- Are older children staying home to care for younger siblings due to lack of affordable child care options?

ADDRESSING POVERTY-RELATED CONCERNS EXPERIENCED BY FAMILIES INVOLVED WITH CHILD WELFARE

Regardless of the type of maltreatment alleged in a report or found during an investigation, child welfare systems and caseworkers can take steps to acknowledge the many ways that economic disadvantages impact the families on their caseloads and, when poverty is a factor, offer support to help families achieve greater financial stability.

Assess and address concrete needs first. So far, a specific combination and amount of economic support has not been identified that eliminates all cases of neglect. Many families have other issues that will need to be addressed to stay together safely. However, it is clear that most parents cannot focus on interventions like parenting classes or substance use treatment when they are facing financial crises. In the early stages of working with a family, caseworkers should ensure that basic needs such as food and [housing](#) are met before expecting parents to fulfill other aspects of their case plan.

Take a two-generation approach to working with families. Two-generation approaches (also referred to as whole-family approaches) intentionally integrate services provided to children and their families at the same time to help improve family financial stability and well-being. For more information, see the Child Welfare Information Gateway brief, [Two-Generation Approaches to Supporting Family Well-Being](#).

Ensure compliance with ICWA. In addition to setting higher standards to prevent the separation of AI/AN children from their families, ICWA requires child welfare agencies to make active efforts to preserve families. A step beyond the "reasonable efforts" required for all families, active efforts may include helping parents access supportive community resources and all benefits for which they are eligible, including Tribal supports. This work should be done with cultural awareness and humility and in authentic engagement with Tribal leaders.

Offer or refer to benefit navigator services. Benefit navigators advocate for families in applying for a complex array of economic safety-net programs. They understand the eligibility requirements and build relationships with people in each program, so families are not left to navigate these complicated systems alone. It is important to be aware that Tribal members, as citizens of sovereign nations, may have access to additional benefits and resources.

Identify and/or offer flexible funds for families. In a recent cohort facilitated by Alia, three jurisdictions offered more than \$130,000 over 2 years in direct support to families. These funds were provided when other options had been exhausted. More than half the funds went to housing expenses, in the form of rental payments to maintain housing or help with move-in expenses (first and last month's rent and security deposit). Other funds supported car repairs; utility payments; and basic needs, such as food and clothing, legal fees, and child care. This flexible funding was very effective: 85 percent of families that received the funds were able to remain together (prevent removal) or reunify (Alia, 2021).

Codesign supports with people with lived experience. Families who have direct experience with child welfare systems and those living in the most impacted communities are the experts in what families need to thrive. Systems that [engage people with lived experience](#) in the planning, implementation, and evaluation of program services, and pay them fairly for their expertise, benefit from their first-hand experience while creating economic opportunities within the community.

Engage community partners. Partnerships often play an important role in effectively serving families, particularly those with complex needs. Community partners, such as community-based organizations, supports (e.g., faith-based entities), and leaders have intimate knowledge of the strengths and needs of their communities. Collaborating with these partners allows child welfare professionals to gain a better understanding of the unique resources and services available in the community, as well as the gaps in these supports. Having this information will prove valuable while working with families to identify and help them access critical services to address their needs, such as housing supports, treatment for substance use disorders, and mental health care.

Focus on strengths. Keeping a family together, housed, and fed while facing economic strain, trauma, and structural inequality is a tremendous sign of strength. Child welfare workers can form better relationships with caregivers who are experiencing poverty by approaching them from this strengths-based perspective, assuring them that poverty is not a personal failure and helping them to build on the positive parenting strategies and supports they already have in place. The [protective factors](#) can serve as a framework for assessing families' strengths and helping them identify ways to build on their existing capacity to help their family thrive. [Cultural connectedness and belonging](#) are other important protective factors to consider, particularly within AI/AN families.

Connect families with [preventive legal advocacy](#). Addressing unmet legal needs can help prevent families from coming to the attention of child welfare. Preventive legal advocacy is a critical support that helps families address legal issues such as wrongful denial of government benefits; divorce, custody, and protective orders; and housing insecurity/tenancy issues that, when unaddressed, can lead to accusations of neglect.

Community Collaborations to Strengthen and Preserve Families Grants

The Children's Bureau issued awards in fiscal years [2018](#) and [2019](#) to develop, implement, and evaluate primary prevention strategies to improve the safety, stability, and well-being of all families through a continuum of community-based services and supports. Several grant recipients are directly addressing poverty through concrete supports and service coordination.

CONCLUSION

Poverty is a complex, ongoing issue that has significant societal, systemic, organizational, community, and family affects. The effects of poverty can be harmful to children, but it is critical to recognize that poverty alone does not equal neglect. Families may experience and remain in poverty despite efforts

to advance their economic situation. Thus, when families experiencing poverty come to the attention of the child welfare system, it is important to consider the families' knowledge of and capacity to access social supports and help connect them with resources. Economic and concrete support interventions are not a panacea for child neglect and do not eliminate the need for other social work strategies. However, growing evidence indicates that providing such supports can reduce maltreatment rates overall, neglect rates in particular, and the number of families coming to the attention of CPS agencies.

Effectively alleviating family poverty requires a multisystem approach. Child welfare systems cannot continue to treat neglect and poverty as strictly family issues. We must consider the impact of poverty on families and the context within which many families remain in poverty, including the limited availability of economic supports, a benefits system that distinguishes between the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor, and a long history of systemic racism and inequality. Ultimately, the goal must be to create a new context in which multiple systems work together with communities to equitably provide the support all families need to nurture their children and thrive.

In the meantime, child welfare agencies can focus on ensuring that families experiencing neglect and poverty are viewed with compassion and respect, rather than blame and that they receive prompt access to the supports needed to keep them safely together whenever possible.

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SUGGESTED CITATION:

Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2023). *Separating poverty from neglect in child welfare*. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/bulletins-poverty-neglect>



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