

Child protection research briefing

Poverty and child maltreatment

April 2008

Poverty and Child Maltreatment

Introduction

Child maltreatment occurs in many forms and across all socio-economic groups. We know that most parents who live in poverty do not maltreat their children and parent effectively, but research shows that children who grow up in poverty can be more vulnerable to some forms of maltreatment, particularly neglect and physical abuse. They also have an increased risk of adverse experiences and negative outcomes, both in the short and long term. These outcomes include poor health (physical and mental), death from illness or accident, educational disadvantage and disaffection, unemployment, poverty during adulthood, criminalisation for anti-social behaviour or offending, as well as becoming victims of crime. Children who experience both poverty and maltreatment are doubly disadvantaged because the experience of maltreatment may in turn further undermine life chances in the long term. While there is a vast amount of research on poverty and the link to maltreatment, there is a dearth of research in the UK exploring the nature of the relationship between the two.

Key points

- A number of prevalence and incidence studies have highlighted the link between poverty and some forms of child maltreatment, especially neglect, emotional and physical abuse.
- While the research shows an association between neglect and poverty, it does not mean that poverty causes neglect or abuse. In actual fact, the majority of families living in poverty do not maltreat their children and parent effectively.
- There are no large-scale studies that specifically examine the nature of the relationship between poverty and child maltreatment in the UK, but the most common explanation centres on the stress factors associated with poverty and social deprivation, which are further compounded if drug misuse and mental health issues come into play.

What is poverty?

There is no single definition of poverty but the two most commonly used concepts are absolute poverty and relative poverty. Absolute poverty refers to a state in which income is insufficient to provide the basic needs required to sustain life (i.e. food and shelter). Relative poverty defines income or resources in relation to the average, and recognises that human needs are socially derived and therefore vary according to social contexts and the ability (or inability) to participate in the social norms of one's society. Townsend (1979) considers that individuals, families and groups are in relative poverty "if they lack the resources to obtain the types of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged or approved in the societies to which they belong"(p.31). The UK Government puts the measure of relative poverty at a household income of less than 60 per cent of equivalent median income before housing costs (HM Treasury, 2008).¹

How many children in the UK are affected by poverty?

Currently, 3.8 million children live in poverty in the UK², which represents one of the highest relative child poverty rates among the world's wealthiest countries (UNICEF 2005). Children who grow up in poverty are at increased risk of a wide range of adverse experiences and negative outcomes, including poor health (physical and mental), death from illness or accident, educational disadvantage and disaffection, criminalisation for anti-social behaviour or offending as well as becoming victims of crime. Their disadvantage may persist well into an adult life marred by low aspirations, increased risk of unemployment, low pay and poverty. If growing up in poverty coincides with being neglected or physically abused by parents, this disadvantage can be doubled as it further undermines long-term life chances. But although there is a vast amount of research on the impact of poverty and of maltreatment, little work has been done to explore the relationship between the two.

Poverty and child maltreatment: research evidence

A number of prevalence and incidence studies highlight the link between poverty and child

¹For an overview on child poverty, see Bradshaw 2005

²After housing costs (Source: Department for Work and Pensions, 2007)

maltreatment.³ Incidence studies analyse the number of new cases occurring in a defined population over a specified period of time – usually a year. Prevalence studies look at the proportion of a defined population affected by child maltreatment during a specified time period – usually childhood (Creighton 2007).

Prevalence studies

The most comprehensive and methodologically sophisticated prevalence study conducted in the UK is the NSPCC's Child Maltreatment in the Family (2000). The research comprised of a random probability sample of 2,869 young people aged 18 – 24, who were interviewed about family life in childhood, their parents' and other people's behaviour towards them, their own wellbeing and views on the treatment of children.

In this study, about one-third of all respondents agreed with the statement that 'there were always a lot of worries about shortage of money' in their families when they were children, but this proportion rose to 65 per cent among those who had experienced serious physical abuse or serious neglect, and 71 per cent of those who had experienced emotional maltreatment - no social class trends were identified for emotional maltreatment using other indicators (cited in Hooper et al 2007; see also Cawson et al., 2000). This study therefore confirmed the association between socio-economic status, financial problems in the family and parental child maltreatment, though it is much stronger with physical and emotional maltreatment and absence of physical care than with either sexual abuse outside the family or absence of supervision (Cawson 2002, p.16).

The findings also showed that compared to young professional respondents, young people working in semi-skilled or unskilled jobs were three times more likely to have suffered serious physical abuse, and ten times more likely to have experienced a serious absence of care in childhood; compared to respondents in higher education, they were twice as likely to have experienced such neglect (Hooper et al, 2007, p. 97).

The NSPCC study highlights one particular limitation of prevalence studies. No actual parental income measures were used: respondents were asked how a shortage of money had affected their families when they were growing up. Cawson (2002) in fact warned that

³ The studies discussed here are UK based; references covering international research are listed in the reference section at the end of this briefing.

respondents who agreed with the statement that ‘there had been ‘always a lot of worries about shortage of money’, or that ‘their families could not afford to give them things that other children had’ (almost as many), “does not necessarily mean that the families lived in poverty or had significantly below average incomes – it could for example mean that the family had an expensive lifestyle or that money needed for essentials was instead spent on drugs or alcohol” (p.15). In addition, data collected for prevalence studies tend to be quantitative rather than qualitative and thus may lack the depth of understanding that can be obtained through qualitative data. Studies of this nature also tend to be infrequent and variable in methodological design, thus making it difficult to make comparisons between different research findings.

Incidence studies

A number of incidence studies also highlight the association between poverty and maltreatment, showing a ‘clustering’ of children on child protection registers in deprived areas of cities (Balwin and Carruthers, 1993 & 1998; Tuck, 1995). For example, in Coventry almost 25 per cent of the children on the city’s child protection register lived in one of the most deprived electoral wards which housed only just over 12 per cent of the total child population in the city (Baldwin and Carruthers, 1993 & 1998). In Strathclyde, 60 per cent of the children on the regional child protection register lived in Glasgow, which had the highest concentration of poverty but accounted for only 27 per cent of the region’s population. Within Glasgow, the three poorest areas accounted for four times as many registered children as the other areas of the city (Baldwin and Spencer, 1993 cited in Tuck, 2000). In Gibbons’ (1990) controlled study of family support intervention in local areas, material deprivation was one of the most significant variables in differentiating between referrals and non-referrals of families to social services⁴ for child care problems (cited in Baldwin and Spencer, 1993). Gibbons et al (1995) also found that 57 per cent of families involved in the child protection system lacked a wage earner and over half (54 per cent) were dependent on Income Support.

Incidence studies also have their limitations. Firstly, there can be a high degree of reporting bias as findings only represent those families already known to agencies because they are experiencing social problems. Indeed, it has been argued that there is a greater likelihood of identifying risk in working class families than in middle class families, as families living on a low income tend to have more contact with official agencies, for example through housing

⁴ Now referred to as Children’s Services.

services and welfare benefits (Corby 2000; DoH 1995). Secondly, there are variations in rates of child protection registrations between local authorities that do not reflect differences in the nature of the populations or the levels of harm experienced by children. In addition, it is likely that official statistics only represent a fraction of actual incidence as many cases of abuse are unreported or unrecognised (Cawson et al 2000; Tuck 2000).

Other studies

The Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (ALSPAC) tracked a cohort of 14,256 children born to mothers resident in Avon.⁵ From this sample, a total of 115 children were identified as having been placed on local child protection registers prior to their 6th birthday. The study found a positive relationship between the indicators of deprivation and registration suggesting that the greater the deprivation the greater risk of maltreatment: “This study again emphasises the importance of both material and social deprivation in relation to child maltreatment. We have found that different measures of material deprivation remain independently predictive of child maltreatment. This includes factors that may refer to neighbourhood characteristics, such as the housing tenure, or overcrowding in the home, as well as more individual measures such as car ownership. Poverty in all its manifestations is damaging to children’s well-being” (Sidebotham et al. 2002, p.1255).

Bifulco and Moran’s study (1998) analysed women’s childhood experiences of neglect and abuse and depression in adulthood. Women from poor childhood homes were twice as likely to have suffered abuse or neglect (77 per cent versus 38 per cent), and the association was even more striking with multiple forms of abuse, with a three-fold increase: 45 per cent of those from poor childhood homes had experienced more than one form of abuse compared with 15 per cent who had experienced no poverty. (p.128).

Poverty links to specific forms of maltreatment

Most studies find a variation in the correlation of poverty with different types of maltreatment. Generally, stronger links are found with neglect and physical abuse, while the link with sexual and emotional abuse is much weaker.

⁵ The ALSPAC study is part of the WHO initiated European Longitudinal Study of Pregnancy and Childhood. Further details can be found on the study website (<http://www.alspac.bristol.ac.uk/> - currently under reconstruction), or <http://www.alspac.bristol.ac.uk/collab/ALSPAC-policy.pdf> [24/04/08]

Physical abuse

Creighton's (1992) study examining child abuse trends in England and Wales found that parents of children who were physically abused were distinguished from parents nationally by their youth, low socio-economic status, high unemployment and increased likelihood of engaging in criminal activity. As highlighted above, Cawson et al (2000) found that those in the lower social grades were almost 50% more likely to have experienced physical abuse than those from professional AB grades.

Gillham et al (1998) correlated registered cases of abuse and neglect and official census data on child population, with indices of social deprivation such as social worker ratio, unemployment rates, single-parent density, means-tested clothing grants and free school meals for children. The analysis of 5,551 referrals and 1,450 registered cases of abuse and neglect in Glasgow between 1991 and 1993 found substantial correlations with all indices of deprivation, particularly between physical abuse and rates of male unemployment. The study concluded that "living in areas of localised high unemployment (particularly male) is likely to put families, otherwise vulnerable, at greater risk of child physical abuse and neglect" (p.88). The ALSPAC (2001) study team also found that paternal unemployment remained a significant risk factor for child maltreatment, stating that "this may represent a combination of adverse economic effects of unemployment as well as the stress and impact on the self-esteem of fathers, and the increased contact that fathers have with their children if they are not at work." (Sidebotham et al. 2002, p.1253).

Neglect

Child neglect is complex and multifaceted and thus difficult to define. It can range from physical to psychological/emotional neglect, absence of supervision, abandonment and supervisory neglect. Other subcategories include neglect by substance and alcohol abusing caregivers, medical neglect and prenatal neglect.⁶

There is a strong correlation between poverty and neglect (Tuck 2000). Thoburn et al. (2000) found that 98 per cent of the families whose children were at risk of emotional maltreatment or neglect were characterised by the extreme poverty of their material environment - reflected

⁶ The NSPCC has compiled a child protection research briefing on neglect, available on NSPCC inform: http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/Briefings/childneglect_wda48222.html

in the fact that 59 per cent lived in over-crowded housing conditions, with 56 per cent of parents reporting high levels of emotional stress. Among the 180 families interviewed, the most common reason for referral for emotional maltreatment or neglect was parents leaving their child alone, usually for short periods; these families often had working parents who were unable to afford child care. Physical neglect - inadequate care or nourishment - was also common. (cited in Baldwin and Spencer 2005, p.30). Through the pressures of their circumstances and in family crisis, parents had become caught up in a child protection system that was more attuned to assessing risk than to bringing out the best in parents struggling in adversity (cited in DoH 2001; p 232.). Creighton et al. (1992) also found that parents whose children were registered for neglect were significantly more likely to live in unemployed families than was the case in the total population.

While research shows an association between neglect and poverty, it does not mean that poverty causes neglect. The majority of people living in poverty do not neglect their children. The association between poverty and child neglect might be better explained by the interaction or impact of factors that may result or be associated with living in poverty. As Stevenson (1998) notes, poverty is an important factor but “only one in a complex web of factors.” (p.21) For example, Minty (2005) states “it could well be that chronic poverty plays a part in many instances of physical child neglect by possibly reducing morale, or by increasing a sense of general hopelessness and passivity. It is also clear that there are stressors which could be related to neglect both directly or indirectly such as alcohol and drug abuse, and that some forms of mental illness might cause neglect directly, or cause it indirectly by dragging families into poverty.” (p.59). Bifulco and Moran (1998) also highlight that neglect often results from structural changes in the family, for example through death, departure or illness of a parent; as the capacity of carers to cope emotionally and economically is reduced, getting an income may be prioritised above childcare. (cited in Cawson et al. 2000, p.39).

Sexual Abuse

The relationship between poverty and maltreatment in the form of child sexual abuse is more contentious. (Tuck 2000, p.55). As pointed out by Findlater and Fyson (2007) sexually abusive behaviour occurs across all socio-economic, cultural and religious groups (p.69). However, in Tuck’s earlier study (1995) similar correlations were found between all forms of abuse (including sexual) and social deprivation, but a possible explanation for this is that perpetrators target vulnerable children or women to secure access to children; socially deprived neighbourhoods are characterised by relatively large numbers of lone parents,

usually mothers, living on low incomes and coping with a range of material adversities (Tuck, 2000, p.55).

Emotional Abuse

Research on links between poverty and emotional abuse is very limited. However, as stated above, Thoburn et al. (2000) found that 98 per cent of the families whose children were at risk of suffering emotional maltreatment or neglect were characterised by the extreme poverty of their material environment.

Poverty and child maltreatment: the nature of the relationship

Child maltreatment is clearly a complex and multi-dimensional problem (Hooper 2005). It can occur in all socio-economic groups, but there is an association between poverty and an increased risk of neglect and physical abuse. However, the nature of this link and its causal direction is unclear, which is partly due to the difficulty in disentangling the causal relationships between poverty, social exclusion, child maltreatment and other associated social problems such as mental illness and substance misuse (Lovell, 2003). Poor communities often experience multiple, inter-related problems such as social exclusion, social isolation and lack of social capital.⁷ It is difficult, if not impossible, to unravel how these different variables may influence, interact or contribute towards the increased risk of child maltreatment. As pointed out by Baldwin (1993) "...correlation does not establish cause. There are specific problems in attributing cause in child abuse. The causative pathways are complex with many inter-related variables at work and disentangling the relative influence of different variables is problematic" (p.359).

The most widely used and accepted theoretical perspective for explaining the relationship between poverty and maltreatment focuses on stress. It is argued that the multitude of factors associated with poverty and social deprivation, especially when compounded by drug misuse or mental health problems, negatively impact on parenting by increasing vulnerability to stress. Stress increases the risk of parenting difficulties and breakdown, for example through reacting to the demands of childrearing with harsh or inconsistent discipline, or by sinking into depression, despair and hopelessness, all of which can impact on parents' capacity to

⁷ Social capital refers to the overall social relations between people and the norms of trust and reciprocity on which they are based (Jack, 2004).

meet their children's needs (Katz, 2004; Katz et al. 2007; Hooper et al. 2007). Most families living in poverty 'get by' and cope with the adversity as well as the negative 'label' and stigma of 'being poor' (Lister 2000). There are however, a minority of parents who do not manage these pressures so well and research from Britain, America and Australia indicates that there is an association between poverty and parenting difficulties, including neglect and to a lesser extent physical abuse (Frederick and Goddard., 2007; Cawson et al., 2002; Sidebotham et al., 2002; Taylor, Spencer and Baldwin, 2000; Tuck, 2000; Gilham et al., 1998; Drake and Pandey, 1996; Gibbons et al., 1995; DiLeonardi, 1993; Jones and McCurdy, 1992; Pelton, 1981).

Beyond the family's own poverty, poor neighbourhoods can further add to the stress, for instance through crime, poor and overcrowded housing and lack of amenities; research conducted by Ghate and Hazel (2002) also shows that parents who live in poor environments suffer from high levels of stress. Social support is a key factor here, as are other sources of resilience that help to buffer the impacts of stressful life events.

In a recent qualitative study examining the relationship between poverty, parenting and children's well-being in diverse social circumstances, Hooper et al (2007) found that stress, unless buffered by sufficient social support and/or mitigated by other sources of resilience, is likely to be significant in the increased risk of some forms of maltreatment among parents living in poverty. The findings also highlight a number of issues and concepts associated with this argument that merit more attention. For example, the role and impact of violence and abuse in parents' own histories, the role of attachment insecurity and care and control conflicts, identities and parenting and the impact of stigma and poverty.⁸

Conclusion

The research evidence outlined above shows that there is an association between poverty and an increased risk of child maltreatment, particularly neglect and physical abuse. However, these findings tell us little about the nature of this relationship and what processes underlie and interact with poverty to increase risk. Although there is a growing body of research into

⁸ Information and findings from this study conducted by the NSPCC and the University of York in partnership with The Frank Buttle Trust can be found on the NSPCC inform website: http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/Findings/livingwithhardship_wda52842.html

the characteristics of vulnerable families and the types of risk factors associated with abuse, studies that examine how these processes actually interact and overlap with each other are limited.⁹ In order to better safeguard and support children and families living in poverty, more awareness and understanding of the impacts of financial hardship and the different forms of adversity that families are living in need to be recognised if their needs are to be effectively met.

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⁹ For further discussion of the literature see Katz et al (forthcoming) and see Hooper et al (2007) for further exploration of the relationship using qualitative data.

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Note

Parts of this briefing have been extracted from an existing, unpublished literature review for a study entitled 'Parenting on a low income: stress, support and children's well-being' (The Frank Buttle Trust, University of York and NSPCC) written by Dr Sarah Gorin and Ms Claire Dyson (NSPCC) and Dr Carol-Ann Hooper and Dr Christie Cabral (University of York). Information about this study can be found on NSPCC inform: http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/Findings/livingwithhardship_wda52842.html [24/04/07]

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