



SYSTEMS SYNERGY: HOW REDUCING POVERTY CAN PREVENT CHILD NEGLECT

A CSCH Brief by Kerri M. Raissian, Megan Feely and Helene M. Marcy

Overview

Although child physical and sexual abuse rates have decreased over the last 30 years, child neglect rates have remained high.¹ Recently researchers from UConn, together with researchers from Georgia Tech and the University of Illinois, wrote about the reasons that those rates persist and discussed the need for a new direction in addressing child neglect.² The research team recommends adopting a model of systems synergy that promotes “safe and consistent care for children that makes reduction of child maltreatment the responsibility of every social service program in the United States.”² This brief summarizes the discussion and recommendations from their article.

Background and Emerging Research

“Child neglect is an act of omission, or failure to act, that results in imminent harm. In contrast, child abuse is an act of commission—something that is done—that results in real or imminent harm to a child.”² Historically, research has not focused very much on the potentially different causes of child abuse versus child neglect; as a result “child welfare interventions have continued to focus on family behaviors rather than family circumstances.”² To prevent neglect, families need to provide safe and consistent care for their children all of the time but that requires resources. Emerging research has demonstrated a relationship between financial hardship and an increased risk of child neglect, yet “financial hardship remains one of the few preventative factors that is unaddressed in the current policy.”²

“We know financial hardship creates the conditions for neglect, and as a society, we are obligated to respond.”

The research team urges researchers and policymakers to look at financial hardship as a cause of child neglect. Reframing “preventing neglect” to “providing safe and consistent care” creates a positive goal to guide policy development. They suggest that policies addressing child neglect should incorporate the alleviation of such hardship into proposed solutions and social service systems and that reductions in neglect should be considered in the assessment of the costs and benefits of different programs.²

Safe and Consistent Care as the Responsibility of All Systems

Once financial hardship is acknowledged as a main cause of child neglect, “the critical role of systems, policies, and programs outside of [child protective services] becomes clearer. Housing policy, food policy, employment opportunities, and transportation all factor into the macrosystem.”² Accordingly “poverty alleviation programs have a role to play in helping families to provide [safe and consistent care]...to prevent neglect.”²

Moving Forward to a Model of Systems Synergy

Currently, social services programs are siloed and government programs outside of child protective services do not identify reduction of child neglect as a program goal. In addition, social service programs such as TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) sometimes include goals that can contribute to child neglect (e.g. parental work or school is prioritized over the safe and consistent care of children).²

The research team “advance[s] a model that recognizes the relationship between financial hardship and neglect and enlists antipoverty policies and programs as part of the solution.”²

Such a model requires:

- “a shift in policy focus and development where children’s holistic needs are considered as the primary concerns of policies, and
- that unintended consequences for children [becomes] a central concern” of every system.²

“A model for change: **systems synergy** for the promotion of safe and consistent care that **makes reduction of child maltreatment the responsibility of every social service program in the United States.**”

Recommendations for Achieving Synergy

The researchers write that in order to realize this systems synergy, the United States needs to:

- **Make maltreatment visible in policy development and analysis.** “Incorporating accountability for [safe and consistent care] into programs would increase the sense of shared responsibility...An adverse impact on children should be considered a cost of the program.”
- **Bolster data integration and dissemination.** Linked data, which thus far has focused on individual-level risk, could be applied more broadly to “help researchers to better understand the issue, identify possible solutions, and track the efficacy of program approaches.” In addition, “this research must be better disseminated and translated to policy-makers, decision-makers, and program providers.”
- **Incorporate incentives for innovation and accountability.** “An incentive system awarding federal funds to states that develop successful cross-system efforts to reduce child neglect would encourage innovation.”

Finally, the research team argues that “a strategy of systems synergy is not only achievable but also the most pragmatic response available. It builds on systems that are currently in place, is efficiency enhancing, and, most importantly, provides a path forward for reducing child neglect in the United States.”²

Research Team Members include Lindsey Bullinger (Georgia Tech), Megan Feely (University of Connecticut), Kerri Raissian (University of Connecticut), and Will Schneider (University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign).

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children’s Bureau. 2020. Child maltreatment 2018. Available from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/child-maltreatment>.

² Feely M, Raissian KM, Schneider W, Bullinger LR. The Social Welfare Policy Landscape and Child Protective Services: Opportunities for and Barriers to Creating Systems Synergy. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 2020;692(1):140-161. doi:10.1177/0002716220973566