The Scope, Nature, and Causes of Child Abuse and Neglect

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and
KATHRYN MAGUIRE-JACK

Child maltreatment is a complex problem affecting millions of children in the United States every year. This article examines existing knowledge on the scope, nature, and causes of child abuse and neglect. First, we review the discordant definitions and conceptualizations of child maltreatment and consider the implications of broad and narrow definitions for the size and scope of the child welfare system and for child safety. Second, we provide an assessment of the quality and comprehensiveness of existing data for understanding the incidence rates and trends in child abuse and neglect. Third, we review theory and evidence on the causes of child maltreatment, with particular attention to whether and how social policy can reduce its prevalence. Last, we provide recommendations for improving the use of data and scientific evidence in child welfare policy and systems.

Keywords: child maltreatment; child welfare system; risk factors; measurement; data

Over the past several decades, states have developed and expanded their child welfare systems with growing federal oversight to effectively prevent and respond to child maltreatment. Over this same period, research and data to understand child maltreatment has proliferated. Yet core questions remain unanswered: How many children experience maltreatment today? How much have rates changed over time and why? How effective are existing systems in identifying children in need of protection?

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What policies are most effective for reducing child maltreatment? These questions evoke important social values about the scope and size of government; roles of federal, state, and local governments; children’s rights; and parental autonomy. In this article, we review these debates and, where possible, we draw on available research and data to make recommendations about how to move forward. We begin with a review of how child maltreatment is defined—in federal policy, in states’ civil and criminal statutes, and in research—and explore the implications of broadening or narrowing definitions. Beyond definitions, we then describe the difficulties and limitations associated with estimating rates of child maltreatment. To this end, we draw on numerous population-level or nationally representative survey datasets to compare estimates of the incidence and prevalence of child maltreatment. These comparisons highlight the extent to which official statistics on victimization (based on confirmed reports to child protective services [CPS]) underestimate exposure to abuse and neglect among U.S. children. Underestimates of child maltreatment rates may lead to an underinvestment in resolving this problem. We then turn to a discussion of the causes of child maltreatment, with special emphasis on factors that may be malleable through social policy changes. Last, we provide recommendations about how investments in data and research can be leveraged to inform policy reforms, improve the child welfare system, and better protect children from abuse and neglect.

Scope and Nature of Child Maltreatment

This section reviews definitions of child maltreatment, describes approaches to measuring maltreatment, and reviews existing estimates of the incidence and prevalence of child maltreatment.

What is child maltreatment?

Child maltreatment has a range of definitions, with variability across and within countries; between civil and criminal statutes; and across legal, lay, and academic perspectives. Further, variability in measurement reflects differences in definitions, standards of evidence, and sources of information. In the United States, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), originally passed in 1974 (P.L. 93-247), provides the federal definition of child maltreatment: “Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker, which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation, or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm.” This definition encapsulates a fairly broad range of actions and inactions that can be defined as child maltreatment but narrows the focus to perpetrators in caregiving roles. Typically, the child welfare system focuses on maltreatment perpetrated by individuals who are responsible for the child, consistent with the primary mandate of child safety. The child welfare system receives and investigates allegations of child maltreatment through CPS and provides in-home and foster care services to
families at risk. When a child is abused by a person outside the family, the child's parents (or legal custodians) are expected to take protective action (e.g., by eliminating contact with the abuser), and law enforcement and the criminal justice system can act to protect society at large through criminal prosecution. This leaves no clear need for child welfare system intervention; in contrast, abuse or neglect by a parent may require child welfare system intervention, alone or in combination with law enforcement.

States provide more specific—and sometimes more expansive—definitions in their civil statutes (which guide child welfare system and family court actions) and criminal statutes (which guide decisions to prosecute forms of child maltreatment as a criminal offense). Consistent with a focus on child safety rather than parental culpability, statutory definitions of child maltreatment tend to emphasize harm or threat of harm to children that results from specific actions or inactions, with comparatively little emphasis on perpetrator intent. In research, definitions tend to be less restrictive with regard to perpetrators and may consider a range of exposures that pose a threat to children's safety or welfare, irrespective of whether they meet legal definitions. For example, survey-based measures of neglect tend to include so-called involuntary neglect, or situations in which a child experiences material deprivation but it is unknown whether the deprivation is solely due to poverty. The widely used Parent-Child Conflict Tactic Scales—a caregiver self-report survey instrument about the frequency of various parenting acts or omissions over the past 12 months in the domains of psychological aggression, physical assault, nonviolent discipline, and neglect (Straus et al. 1998)—include children lacking necessary medical care in the neglect subscale, which may occur for reasons of negligence, poverty, or (less commonly) malice.

Under many states' statutes, neglect that occurs solely due to poverty is not defined as child neglect (Rebbe 2018), regardless of harm incurred to the child. Nevertheless, definitions remain vague and subject to differential interpretation. In addition, low-income families compose a large majority of CPS reports and families receiving child welfare system interventions (Dolan et al. 2011), and child welfare agencies face persistent criticism about whether they accurately distinguish parental acts of neglect from poverty-driven material hardships (Eamon and Kopels 2004; Milner and Kelly 2020). Yet differentiating neglect from poverty is a rather difficult and subjective judgment. Consider a single parent who leaves her toddler home alone because she lacked childcare, and while alone, the child falls down the stairs. Injuries sustained in the fall were unintentional but were a foreseeable risk given the child's developmental stage. Whether the incident was mostly about poverty or mostly about parental negligence is not clear-cut. One approach is to consider whether a reasonable person might have made the same choice given the parent's constraints. For example, a parent who left her child home alone to avoid being fired from her job (which would risk homelessness and other forms of serious deprivation) arguably behaved more reasonably than a parent who left to attend a social event. However, to make such a determination about whether neglect was “involuntary,” the circumstances must be investigated; as such, it is, to some extent, inevitable that impoverished families will be overrepresented in neglect reports to CPS. In addition, whereas
the distinction between poverty and neglect can and should drive decisions about how to intervene—in-home services versus foster care, court-mandated services versus voluntary community supports—it is not clear such distinctions should determine whether to intervene. It would seem reckless for the child welfare system to ignore serious risk or harm to a child simply because the parent was not perceived to be “at fault,” particularly in a society in which the child welfare system may be the best or only means of accessing services or resources.

**Measurement of child maltreatment**

There are numerous approaches to measuring maltreatment. The most prominent strategies and data sources are described in Table 1. Each data source or approach has significant limitations. Both the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS; a federal database comprising extracts of state child welfare records) and the National Surveys of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW; a federally sponsored longitudinal survey of CPS investigations) only contain information about families investigated by CPS, thus providing no information about the nature or extent of child maltreatment that does not reach the attention of CPS. Although NSCAW includes a variety of measures of child maltreatment, including parent-reported and child-reported, each measure is limited to a different subsample, thus inhibiting comparisons of measures. For example, the parent-reported measures are only asked for the primary parent and only if they retain custody of their children at the time of the interview, whereas the child-reported items that directly align with the parent-reported items are only asked of children ages 11 and older.

Outside of data collected on children and families already involved in the child welfare system (e.g., NCANDS, NSCAW), there is little prospective data collection on child maltreatment. Beginning in the 1980s, there have been four National Incidence Studies (NIS), which collected information about suspected child maltreatment from professionals who have regular contact with children. The value of these studies is that they captured child maltreatment that may not have been reported to CPS or that was reported but screened out (not investigated) by CPS. In addition, by relying on informants other than parents, these studies are, arguably, less biased by the limitations and biases of self-reported maltreatment. However, the last NIS was in 2005–2006, and we do not know when funding will be appropriated to conduct another round.

Many large-scale longitudinal surveys, such as the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS; a longitudinal study that tracks a nationally representative birth cohort of children born in large U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000), do not collect explicit information on child maltreatment. Although there are a variety of reasons that surveys may include or exclude particular measures, of particular note, affirmative disclosures of child maltreatment victimization or perpetration introduce legal and ethical dilemmas about mandatory reporting to CPS and informed consent (Putnam, Liss, and Landsverk 2014). If disclosures would invoke mandatory reporting responsibilities, respondents may be unlikely to respond truthfully, which may limit the quality and utility of any data collected.
| Measure Type                  | Found In | Examples of Measures                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Utility as a Measure of Maltreatment                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|------------------------------|----------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Child welfare involvement    | NCANDS;  | Investigation, alternative response, and substantiation of maltreatment allegations, by type                                                                                                                             | **Benefits:** National coverage, annual collection, consistency of the variables included each year  
**Concerns:** Detection bias (Brown et al. 1998), ongoing debate regarding meaningfulness of substantiation (Font, Maguire-Jack, and Dillard 2020), state and temporal variation in statutory definitions and policies (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2016), variation in completeness and quality of state reports |
|                              | NSCAW    |                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Professional proxy-reports   | NIS      | Professional descriptions of scenarios coded by type and severity of maltreatment (Sedlak et al. 2010)                                                                                                               | **Benefits:** Addresses some problems related to detection bias; accounts for degrees of severity  
**Concerns:** Small samples; concerns about methodology (proxy-reported estimation)                                                                                                                                                                                            |
| Parent-reported maltreatment | NSCAW, NSCEV | Parent-Child Conflict Tactic Scales (Straus et al. 1996); Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire (Finkelhor et al. 2005)                                                                                                   | **Benefits:** Addresses some problems related to detection bias; includes more nuanced questions (e.g., frequency, severity)  
**Concerns:** Response bias due to social desirability and mandatory reporting requirements; low agreement between parent and child reports (Font and Cage 2018); inadequate measures of neglect                                                                                                                                 |
|                              |          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| Child-reported maltreatment  | NSCAW    | Child version of Conflict Tactic Scales; Exposure to Violence Questionnaire (Fox and Leavitt 1995)                                                                                                                      | **Benefits:** May reduce detection and social desirability biases; allows for cross-comparisons of multiple sources of information (e.g., parent and child reports)  
**Concerns:** Ethical issues around reporting/risk to children who disclose; not available for young children; typically excludes neglect                                                                                                      |

(continued)
TABLE 1 (CONTINUED)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure Type</th>
<th>Found In*</th>
<th>Examples of Measures</th>
<th>Utility as a Measure of Maltreatment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Substandard parenting       | Numerous population-based household surveys (e.g., FFCWS) | Commonly: physical punishment, severe material hardships, yelling/criticizing child, substance use and domestic violence in the household | **Benefits:** Parents may be more truthful about substandard parenting than maltreatment; responses do not trigger mandatory reporting duties; substandard parenting and maltreatment are similarly associated with child wellbeing; often combine parent reports and interviewer observations; relative measures of how far below “average” parenting quality a family is in a particular domain  
**Concerns:** Not exact measures of maltreatment (as legally defined); may still have underreporting due to social desirability bias; limited ability to track population-level change over time |
| Adult retrospective reports of maltreatment | BRFSS; AddHealth | Commonly: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) questionnaire (Felitti et al. 1998), which includes some maltreatment items | **Benefits:** By asking adults, there is no concern about mandatory reporting, which may allow for more truthful responses  
**Concerns:** Recall bias is likely significant, resulting in high rates of false negatives (Hardt and Rutter 2004); inadequate measures of neglect |

a. Not an exhaustive list.
Thus, some surveys may include measures of “substandard parenting” or “behaviorally-approximated” maltreatment measures—parenting behaviors or environments that post risks to child safety and well-being but are not considered to trigger mandatory reporting responsibilities. Such measures may include children’s exposure to high-frequency or harsh physical discipline, domestic violence or parental substance use, or deprivation of basic needs (Font and Berger 2015; Schneider, Waldfogel, and Brooks-Gunn 2016; Berger et al. 2017).

Child victims may also underreport experiences of maltreatment for fear of the consequences to their parents or the unknown environment that may await them in foster care, or due to poor recall of early experiences or difficulty conceptualizing neglect. Moreover, interviews with young children require significant training to ensure quality, which may be cost-prohibitive in much survey research. Child-reported maltreatment is thus relatively uncommon in surveys, and when it is used, measures vary in depth and scope (Amaya-Jackson et al. 2000). Retrospective studies of child maltreatment are far more common, in part because they are used to examine long-term outcomes associated with early childhood experiences. However, such measures are prone to underreporting due to recall bias (Hardt and Rutter 2004), which may pose particular concerns for identifying less-severe maltreatment, maltreatment in early childhood (versus middle childhood or adolescence), and child neglect (versus physical, emotional, or sexual abuse).

More generally, existing data sources include inadequate and inconsistent measures of neglect. Child neglect can include a large number of domains, but commonly used scales tend to focus disproportionately on physical neglect (unmet basic needs). Such measures tend to conflate poverty-driven material deprivation with negligent parenting by sidestepping complex issues of parental capacity, intent, and culpability, and by excluding more difficult-to-measure experiences such as inappropriate supervision or failure to protect children from harm. In contrast, CPS records are, on the whole, likely to substantially undercapture emotional maltreatment and, by design, do not capture most physical or sexual abuse committed by noncaregivers. Moreover, low rates of substantiation for all forms of maltreatment are suggestive of substantial undercounting, and it is not possible to differentiate between genuinely false CPS reports and reports where CPS deemed the evidence insufficient or CPS did not consider the incident severe enough to warrant substantiation. Thus, researchers must use caution when using CPS records—and CPS victimization rates based on substantiated reports—to make claims about the incidence or prevalence of child maltreatment. In addition, substantial variability in the rate at which reports are screened-in for investigation or substantiated make cross-state or cross-year comparisons highly suspect. Notwithstanding, CPS investigation records are appropriate for studies of the causes or consequences of child maltreatment: CPS investigations are associated with short- and long-term adverse outcomes for children even when no intervention occurs, indicating that the adverse outcomes cannot be attributed solely to system intervention, but rather to the alleged maltreatment and related family circumstances (Hussey, Marshall, Knight, et al. 2005; Font and Maguire-Jack 2020). Moreover, children known to the child welfare system are
those positioned to receive intervention, and thus studies of their circumstances and outcomes are necessary to inform policies and practices. Nevertheless, researchers should be diligent about explaining the limitations of such measures, including likely contamination of the comparison group (i.e., undetected maltreatment among those without CPS investigations). Ideally, however, questions of critical significance for social policy would be addressed with multiple measures of child maltreatment.

**Estimating the incidence and prevalence of child maltreatment**

The type of measure used has significant implications for estimating the incidence and prevalence of child maltreatment. Table 2 shows different estimates of child maltreatment incidence (annual rate per 1,000 children) from the NIS-4, NCANDS, and the National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence (NSCEV). The estimates for NCANDS are based on the authors’ analysis of the NCANDS child files, whereas the other estimates are pulled from published research or reports (Finkelhor et al. 2015; Sedlak et al. 2010). It is evident from Table 2 that CPS substantiations are likely to grossly understate all forms of child maltreatment, but especially physical abuse. The NIS-4 includes two measures: a harm
standard and an endangerment standard. The harm standard is more stringent and requires evidence of specific harms to the child victim, whereas the endangerment standard includes any maltreatment that poses a significant risk to children.

Table 3 depicts estimates of lifetime prevalence (from birth to age 18) of child maltreatment for children in the United States, drawing from national population or nationally representative survey datasets. We show the overall estimate as well as subtypes due to lack of consistency across data source in types of maltreatment included. Unsurprisingly, estimated prevalence based on CPS-substantiated maltreatment is far lower than estimates based on CPS investigations or caregiver-reported maltreatment. For example, 2 percent of U.S. children have a CPS-substantiated allegation of physical abuse by age 18, whereas 18 percent of

### Table 3
Lifetime Prevalence Estimates by Source

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>NCANDS</th>
<th>BRFSS</th>
<th>NSCEV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Measure</td>
<td>Substantiated</td>
<td>Investigated as</td>
<td>Adult retrospective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>CPS victims</td>
<td>CPS victims</td>
<td>self-report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>by age 18</td>
<td>by age 18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>23-state sample</td>
<td>nationally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>representative sample</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Source)</td>
<td>(Kim et al. 2017)</td>
<td>(Centers for</td>
<td>(Finkelhor et al.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Disease Control and</td>
<td>2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Prevention 2019)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any maltreatmenta</td>
<td>11.8%</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglect</td>
<td>8.0%</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical abuse</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>17.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual abuse</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(narrow perpetrator</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>definition)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>0.6%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>34.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maltreatment/</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emotional abuse</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Witness to family</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>violence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual abuse (broad</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perpetrator definition)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| a. The types of maltreatment included in the composite “any maltreatment” measure vary by source.
children are estimated to have experienced physical abuse based on retrospective reports of adults (Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System; BRFSS) or caregiver report (NSCEV).

Both CPS-substantiated and CPS-investigated maltreatment rates suggest emotional maltreatment is relatively rare, whereas emotional maltreatment is the most common form of maltreatment identified in the BRFSS and NSCEV. The differential findings related to emotional maltreatment may be driven by the fact that emotional maltreatment is difficult to demonstrate and “prove.” However, forms of maltreatment most likely to have physical indicators, like physical abuse, also have very low rates of substantiation when investigated by CPS. Rather, low rates of CPS investigation for emotional maltreatment may indicate underreporting, which may reflect inadequate understanding of the signs or symptoms of emotional abuse among mandatory reporters, or reporters’ ambivalence about the threshold at which harsh or withdrawn parenting becomes emotional maltreatment. Additionally, maltreatment subtypes commonly co-occur, but a single form of maltreatment is sufficient to justify intervention. Thus, CPS investigators may choose to pursue or focus on the allegations of abuse or neglect that are easiest to document. Scholars have long noted the difficulty in identifying and responding to emotional maltreatment, given the child welfare system’s emphasis on physical safety (English et al. 2015). Moreover, in surveys, measures of emotional abuse tend to focus on the child’s experiences of verbal abuse, whereas legal definitions (commonly, “mental injury”) require evidence that the child suffered serious and observable injury to their psychological capacity or emotional stability (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2016) as a result of the experiences. (Of course, since researchers are often interested in the effects of maltreatment, defining maltreatment based on its effects would be tautological.)

Notably, CPS-substantiated sexual abuse is more prevalent than caregiver-reported sexual abuse by a parent or caregiver. This may reflect underreporting by caregivers, in addition to differences in what each measure captures. Depending on the state, CPS measures of sexual abuse may include a broader definition of perpetrator (e.g., not limited to parents or caregivers; may include figures such as babysitters, temporary household members, or siblings). Differences may also reflect some states’ practice of designating “failure to protect from sexual abuse” in the same category as perpetration of sexual abuse.

Prior research on concordance across measures of child maltreatment

Prior research has also sought to compare estimates of child maltreatment using multiple sources or approaches to measurement. Overall, such research suggests low agreement between child and parent reports of children’s experiences of abuse, neglect, and other adversities (Chan 2015; Font and Cage 2018; Schneider et al. 2014) and between child self-reports and CPS or court records (Pinto and Maia 2013; Swahn et al. 2006). Given lack of consensus about the definition and operationalization of neglect, it is perhaps unsurprising that agreement across reporting sources appears lowest for neglect (McGee et al. 1995).
The implications of low agreement across measures for scientific understanding of the antecedents and outcomes of child maltreatment are not fully apparent. Some research studies indicate that the correlates of victimization (both risk factors and outcomes) are similar irrespective of the source of information (Font and Berger 2015; Font and Cage 2018; Schneider et al. 2014). However, other research suggests that children’s reports of their prior victimizations are more predictive of social-emotional functioning reports from social workers or information from child welfare case records, especially for child neglect and emotional maltreatment (McGee et al. 1995).

The discordance across measures of maltreatment raises critical questions about the extent to which child welfare agencies are providing services to the optimal number of families and whether families receiving services are those most in need. A large number of children are reported to CPS each year, and hundreds of thousands of children enter foster care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2020), but are these numbers disproportionate to the size of the underlying problem of child maltreatment? It seems unavoidable that some number of nonmaltreated children will be reported to CPS if mandatory reporters are acting appropriately—suspicious events, such as unexplained injuries or a young child exhibiting inappropriate sexual behavior, should be reported but may ultimately have nonmaltreatment explanations. Some may point to the large proportion of “unsubstantiated” CPS investigations as an indication that too many investigations are occurring. However, there is little reason to believe that most unsubstantiated investigations are false allegations. Moreover, research has documented that there is little consistency across caseworkers or agencies in decision-making (Doyle 2007; English et al. 2002; Font, Maguire-Jack, and Dillard 2020), and there is substantial evidence that children with an unsubstantiated maltreatment report face heightened long-term risk of a host of negative outcomes (Font and Maguire-Jack 2020; Hussey, Marshall, English, et al. 2005), including future maltreatment (Kohl, Jonson-Reid, and Drake 2009) and death (Putnam-Hornstein 2011). In addition, annual and cumulative incidence rates of investigated maltreatment are not substantially greater than rates of child maltreatment reported in surveys (Tables 2–3). Another data point to consider is the approximately 2.7 million U.S. children informally raised by relatives (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2012) in what is referred to as the “hidden foster care system” (Gupta-Kagan 2020). This suggests that a rather large number of children require temporary or permanent substitute care, far exceeding the number of children placed in formal foster care. Collectively, these data points suggest that the number of children involved with the child welfare system may not be excessive relative to the number of children exposed to substantial risk in their familial environments.

However, these data also imply that the child welfare system may incorrectly identify which children are in need of intervention beyond the CPS investigation (i.e., in-home services or foster care). Certainly, not all children who experience maltreatment are in need of intervention, and part of the investigative process is to determine what, if anything, is needed to reduce future risk of harm. When a nonparent perpetrates maltreatment, and children have a parent or legal
caregiver willing and able to protect them from future harm, intervention may unnecessarily usurp or undermine protective action taken by parents or caregivers. Similarly, in cases involving a single incident of nonsevere maltreatment, caregivers may be able to successfully address the precipitating factors (mental health, substance use, parenting skills) through voluntary community services. However, it would be a misstep for child welfare agencies to merely delay action until serious harm occurs—it is critical to identify (1) when a low-risk event is a signal of a deteriorating family environment or incipient crisis and (2) whether parents in need of support are able and willing to follow up on voluntary community services without oversight or court mandate. Unfortunately, there is relatively limited evidence to bring to bear on these issues, and subjective assessment of issues like parental cooperation raise concerns about implicit bias. Predictive risk modeling (discussed by Drake et al., this volume) may provide a path forward for more effective targeting of limited resources.

**Are rates of child maltreatment increasing or decreasing?**

Rates of child sexual abuse and child physical abuse appear to have declined substantially throughout the 1990s and early 2000s according to numerous data sources (victimization surveys, crime reports, CPS substantiations) and consistent with declines in violent crime broadly (Finkelhor and Jones 2006). However, in recent years, CPS-substantiated rates of sexual abuse have increased once again, and rates of physical abuse have stagnated (Finkelhor, Saito, and Jones 2020). Factors that may have contributed to declines in physical and sexual abuse specifically include increased public awareness and prevention efforts focused on physical abuse (e.g., shaken baby prevention campaigns) and sexual abuse (e.g., proliferation of “safe touch” training), increased treatment and medication options for child behavior problems, and more aggressive prosecution and sentencing of violent crimes (Jones, Finkelhor, and Halter 2006).

It is more difficult to ascertain whether neglect rates have changed during this period: CPS data suggest little net decline, with enormous variability across states (Finkelhor, Saito, and Jones 2020), and there are few other data sources to negate or confirm. Moreover, because neglect comprises a broad range of parental acts and omissions, it is possible that some forms of neglect have increased and others have declined. More detailed categorization of neglect in national data systems is essential for testing the impacts of various social, demographic, and governmental changes on rates of child neglect.

Moreover, critical questions about how and for whom maltreatment rates have changed remain unanswered. For example, has the cumulative incidence (prevalence) of perpetrators and victims declined? A decline in annual incidence of maltreatment coupled with no change in prevalence of victims or perpetrators may suggest effective interventions (success in reducing revictimization and reoffending) rather than effective prevention. Available data suggest slight declines in prevalence of substantiated maltreatment between 2004 and 2009, and little change between 2009 and 2016 (Wildeman et al. 2014; Yi, Edwards, and Wildeman 2020). Again, however, declines in the prevalence of substantiated
maltreatment may reflect, in full or in part, changes to child welfare system policy and practice.

**Risk Factors for Child Maltreatment**

This section reviews theories surrounding the causes of child maltreatment, risk factors for maltreatment, and limitations of the current work.

*Theories related to child maltreatment etiology*

Several theories from a range of scientific disciplines help to explain differences in children’s risk of experiencing maltreatment. These theories focus on child and parent characteristics, relationships within the family, and the environment surrounding the parent; some theories additionally emphasize the interplay among multiple factors. Although early frameworks for understanding child maltreatment focused largely on the pathologies of perpetrators, modern theories tend to emphasize a broader range of individual, family, environmental, and societal factors (Garbarino 1977; Gelles 1973).

A large body of research has focused on the intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment, or the processes through which individuals’ experiences of maltreatment victimization increase the risk that their children experience maltreatment victimization (Schelbe and Geiger 2017). Attachment theory (Bowlby 1969) suggests that insecure attachment—or a phenomenon in which the parent-child relationship is contaminated with fear and distrust—explains intergenerational transmission of maltreatment. Parents who have not experienced secure attachments with their own caregivers have difficulty forming them with their own children (Morton and Browne 1998). Other research refers to social learning theory (Bandura 1978) to suggest that intergenerational transmission occurs because children learn how to be parents from their own parents (Muller, Hunter, and Stollak 1995). Both theories, as applied to maltreatment, suggest that the propensity to perpetrate child maltreatment is rooted in parents’ own childhood relationships and experiences.

Looking beyond explanations related to prior parenting experiences, the family stress model of economic hardship (Conger and Elder 1994) was proposed to understand the pathway through which economic hardships, such as debt burden, income loss, or economic insecurity, negatively affect child and adolescent development. The model proposes that economic hardship may not only deprive children of critical material needs, but also adversely impact family dynamics. The model posits that difficulties in or inability to meet family economic needs results in economic pressure, which in turn produces psychological distress, relationship conflict, and changes in parental affect and behavior (Conger and Elder 1994). In these family environments, children may be subjected to harsh and inconsistent discipline practices, or parents may be withdrawn (Conger et al. 1994). In extreme cases, harsh or withdrawn parenting can escalate to child abuse or neglect.
Social disorganization theory was originally put forth to explain geographic variation in crime and delinquency (Shaw and McKay 1942), but it has since been widely applied to geographic variation in child maltreatment rates. The theory postulates that there is something unique about the communities in which individuals live that can increase the rates of crime and delinquency, and that by and large these differential rates are not driven by differences across individual people. Shaw and McKay (1942) referred to this phenomenon as social disorganization and proposed three community-level factors that they posited led to increased crime and delinquency: concentrated disadvantage, ethnic heterogeneity, and residential mobility. This theory has been adapted by child maltreatment researchers to understand geographic variation in maltreatment. These researchers have suggested that parents face multiple stressors, are unable to access resources, and do not have the necessary social norms to prevent maltreatment because of the neighborhood in which they live (Coulton et al. 2007; Coulton, Korbin, and Su 1999).

Theorists have also considered how child maltreatment is defined and the extent to which that reflects the norms of those in position to set and enforce parenting standards (Hutchinson 1990). Social deviance/labeling theory posits that there is no objective behavior that can be called “child abuse”; it is only through perceiving deviance from a socially accepted norm that it is labeled as such (Gelles 1975). Specifically, Gelles (1975) refers to child abuse as a social construction by which “a) a definition of abuse is constructed, b) certain judges or ‘gatekeepers’ are selected for applying the definition, and c) the definition is applied by designating the labels ‘abuse’ and ‘abuser’ to particular individuals and families” (p. 365). Thus, some argue that, although violence occurs in a range of family environments, it is predominantly labeled as “child abuse” when it occurs within lower-income or otherwise socially marginalized families (Newberger, Newberger, and Hampton 1983).

Last, ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 1976) combines many of these theories, asserting that to truly understand individuals, one must consider all of the factors that occur at multiple levels of the social ecology, conceptualized as systems. Ecological systems theory is depicted as a series of concentric circles, with the child at the center of these circles surrounded by the microsystem (the child’s most consistent and frequent connections: parents, siblings, peers, and school), mesosystem (relationships between the child’s microsystems), exosystem (institutions and public policies), and macrosystem (social norms and cultural values). This theory posits that there is no single cause of maltreatment, but there are a range of independent and interactive factors that when combined may lead to abuse or neglect.

Although not originally created to explain child maltreatment, ecological systems theory is prolific in child maltreatment research and theory. An early adoption of this framework was Belsky’s efforts to integrate child, family, and environmental influences into a holistic model of parenting and child maltreatment (Belsky 1980, 1984). Belsky theorized that a parent’s own history of maltreatment as a child increases the likelihood that they will engage in abusive or neglectful parenting themselves. Within the microsystem, Belsky suggested that
the family and child him/herself contributes to maltreatment—that children influence their parents’ behavior, while simultaneously being influenced by it. At the exosystem level, Belsky pointed to places of employment and the neighborhood. Parents who are unemployed or have low job satisfaction may have a greater propensity to maltreat. Further, being socially isolated within one’s neighborhood can both contribute to a greater level of stress/depression and increase the opportunity to maltreat because of a lack of oversight from others. Finally, at the macrosystem level, Belsky suggested that society’s attitudes toward violence, corporal punishment, and the rights of children all contribute to maltreatment.

As the body of theoretical work proliferated, so too did empirical studies examining the extent to which data supported the theories. Applying attachment and social learning theories, studies have focused on factors about individual parents’ own experiences of maltreatment in childhood (Muller, Hunter, and Stollak 1995). Applying the family stress model of economic hardship, researchers have focused on economic shocks in families and their relation to harsh parenting (Conger et al. 2002; Parke et al. 2004). Social disorganization theory has been applied by child maltreatment researchers to hone in on the impact of neighborhood characteristics on parenting (Coulton et al. 2007). Still other studies have relied on the more holistic ecological systems theory to focus on the array of characteristics at different levels of the social ecology that might contribute to maladaptive parenting behaviors (Mulder et al. 2018).

Taken together, these theories highlight that child maltreatment is a complex phenomenon with multiple conditions that must coalesce for abuse and neglect to occur. The theories range from unidimensional, focusing on specific factors of individual relationships (e.g., attachment theory) to the multidimensional, focusing on a broad array of factors (e.g., ecological systems theory). Theories that fall at different points on this continuum have complementary strengths and weaknesses, with those that are more narrowly focused being easier to examine and test, but possibly missing many other causes; and those that are broader being much more difficult to test, but more holistic in their consideration of the causes.

Prior reviews and meta-analyses on risk factors for child maltreatment

Four components are required to establish a causal effect of a presumed risk factor on an outcome: (1) there must be a logical relationship, (2) there must be an empirical association, (3) the temporal ordering must be accurate, and (4) the relationship must not be spurious or due to an omitted variable (National Research Council 2014). Most prior work has identified correlates of child maltreatment, as opposed to causal factors that meet all of the aforementioned requirements for causality. There has been a large focus on specific characteristics of the child, parents, and family that might contribute to abuse and neglect. Parent characteristics consistently associated with child maltreatment include parental experiences of childhood maltreatment (Assink et al. 2019; Mulder et al. 2018; Stith et al. 2009; van IJzendoorn et al. 2020); parental experiences of intimate partner violence (Assink et al. 2019; Korbin and Krugman 2014; van IJzendoorn et al. 2020); and parental behavioral health characteristics such as
anger, depression, alcohol and drug abuse, and psychopathology (Mulder et al. 2018; Stith et al. 2009; van IJzendoorn et al. 2020). In addition, numerous studies indicate that parental and family socioeconomic status is associated with child abuse and neglect (Erickson, Labella, and Egeland 2018; Kolko and Berkout 2018; Korbin and Krugman 2014; National Research Council 2014; Stith et al. 2009) as well as family structure, with single-parenthood being associated with a greater risk for abuse and neglect (Mulder et al. 2018; Stith et al. 2009).

Research to identify the causal antecedents of child maltreatment has largely focused on factors that can be addressed through public policy. In particular, reforms and expansions of public benefit programs or economic policies provide bountiful opportunity for natural experiments. This body of research generally suggests that increased income (through the Earned Income Tax Credit, increased minimum wage, child care subsidy, welfare, and child support policies) reduces CPS reports, child neglect, and foster care caseloads (Berger et al. 2017; Biehl and Hill 2018; Cancian, Yang, and Slack 2013; Maguire-Jack et al. 2019; Raissian and Bullinger 2017; Yang et al. 2019), whereas reduced access to employment and public benefits may increase rates of CPS reports (Fein and Lee 2003; Paxson and Waldfogel 1999; Raissian 2015). Estimated effect sizes vary across studies and are difficult to compare due to differences in samples, methods, and measures. Broadly, however, studies of income changes suggest that relatively modest increases in income may reduce an individual’s risk of a CPS report by about 10 percent (Berger et al. 2017; Cancian, Yang, and Slack 2013); state-level studies of policies that increase family income similarly suggest reductions in rates of CPS reports or foster care entries by 7 to 10 percent (Biehl and Hill 2018; Raissian and Bullinger 2017).

There is a related small but growing body of research that suggests that expansive social policies—particularly, those that increase access to income, child care, parental leave, and health care—may also have unintentional benefits vis-à-vis child maltreatment prevention, such as decreased child welfare reports, decreased self-reported maltreatment, and decreased foster care caseloads (Campbell 2019). This research is not conclusive, however, and the issues plaguing this body of research are complex and difficult to address. For example, policy impact studies often leverage differences in policies across states or changes in policy over time. As with other studies of the causes of maltreatment, many policy impact studies use CPS records to measure child maltreatment, and both temporal and geographic variability in child welfare systems practices and policies may confound policy variation. Thus, estimating the causal effect of a particular policy is challenging. Also, many studies rely on state-level data, making it difficult to identify the mechanisms through which policy changes impact rates of CPS-reported maltreatment. Because substantiation status is not a reliable means of distinguishing true versus false reports of child maltreatment, many studies focus on changes in the rate of CPS investigations (also referred to as “screened in reports”). Although there are plausible mechanisms through which such policies or programs could reduce child maltreatment (e.g., reducing parental stress, ensuring children’s basic needs are met), it is also possible for CPS reports to decline with no true change in child maltreatment, given that
some subset of children reported to CPS have not experienced maltreatment. Expanded economic benefits, for instance, may reduce low-risk CPS reports and those that are unlikely to be substantiated, in particular, by reducing suspicion of neglect among families for whom poverty is the sole or primary risk factor. Thus, claims about reducing the occurrence of child maltreatment on the basis of changes in CPS reports should be made and interpreted cautiously. Notwithstanding, if such policies or programs reduce the rate at which impoverished families are unnecessarily reported to CPS, that frees up resources to aid families where child maltreatment is occurring, which may ultimately improve the quality and functioning of the child welfare system.

Beyond income or antipoverty programs, few policy levers have been widely studied. There has been some effort by researchers to understand whether policy changes can reduce substance use, with results indicating that reductions in the supply of or access to illicit drugs and prescription drugs with high potential for dependence may reduce foster care caseloads (Cunningham and Finlay 2013; Gihleb, Giuntella, and Zhang 2019; Markowitz et al. 2011; Quast, Storch, and Yampolskaya 2018). Overall, the capacity of public policy to prevent and treat substance use and addiction is not altogether clear. However, substance use drives a substantial proportion of foster care entries and child maltreatment cases (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2014; U.S. General Accounting Office 1998), and its prevention and treatment should be a component of any comprehensive child maltreatment prevention strategy.

Another potential policy lever that has received little attention is expansion of health insurance coverage and affordable health care. Child welfare agencies have limited resources to spend on services for families, and there is little evidence that the services provided are effective at preventing and ameliorating the effects of maltreatment (Jonson-Reid et al. 2017). Yet many of the evidence-based services for reducing child maltreatment or associated risk factors are covered by health insurance, including various mental health and substance use services and home visiting programs. Child welfare agencies have limited resources and contract with a limited number of service providers, which may constrain the quality of services as well as the number of families to whom such services are offered (Child Welfare Information Gateway 2014). Insured parents are better positioned to seek treatment from providers outside of the narrow network of child welfare system contractors, which may allow parents to access effective treatments prior to the onset of child maltreatment and also increase the quality of services available to families in the child welfare system. However, approximately 11 million parents are uninsured (Karpman et al. 2016), and many more may be underinsured or face high out-of-pocket costs. Expansion of health care coverage and reduction of out-of-pocket health care costs may increase uptake and quality of services for at-risk parents.

Quality of data on risk factors for child maltreatment

The most common approaches to investigating risk factors for child maltreatment are to examine characteristics associated with child welfare system involvement, or
to rely on parent self-report of maltreatment behavior or substandard parenting (i.e., concerning parent practices or environments that may not reach the legal threshold for reporting to CPS).

The only annual national data available on CPS cases, NCANDS, contain several variables related to risk factors for maltreatment, but there are significant limitations to the data. First, the dataset includes only those cases of maltreatment that are reported to CPS. As such, it is not possible to understand individual-level causal processes leading to maltreatment, because there is no counterfactual. Second, the quality of data is poor. Many states report no data on risk factors, whereas others report information that is highly suspect. Data on parental drug use illustrates these concerns (Seay 2015). In NCANDS in 2017, several states reported parental drug use as a risk factor in less than 5 percent of substantiated cases, despite strong indications that substance use is a major factor in child maltreatment and child welfare system involvement in particular (Berger et al. 2010; Brook and McDonald 2009; Child Welfare Information Gateway 2014; Murphy et al. 1991; Ross 1997). Although data quality problems are well known, states have little incentive to improve the quality of their NCANDS submissions. NCANDS submission is voluntary, and the Children’s Bureau¹ indicates that the purpose of the data is “to examine trends in child abuse and neglect across the country”—a purpose that is of little direct value or consequence to the day-to-day operations of state agencies.

In addition, survey data may not provide reliable information on critical risk factors. Returning to the example of parental substance use, the accuracy of self-reported substance use is low in populations already involved with public systems (Garg et al. 2016; Peters, Kremling, and Hunt 2015; Rendon et al. 2017). In a review of different estimates of parental substance use among child welfare system-involved parents, parent self-report produced lower rates than caseworker report or case record reviews (Seay 2015).

In addition to underreporting, reliance on parent or caregiver reports, as is common in surveys, may produce findings that are driven or inflated by common method variance. Common method variance occurs when measures are produced using the same reporter: in survey data, the parent may be the source of information for both the risk factors and the maltreatment measures. It is difficult to ascertain how much of a problem this is; and for some constructs, alternative sources of measurement may be unavailable or unreliable. Recent meta-analyses of risk factors for neglect (Mulder et al. 2018) and sexual abuse (Assink et al. 2019) did not find that the source of information on neglect (child welfare records or self-report) explained heterogeneity in effects of various risk factors. Other meta-analyses of risk factors for child maltreatment have not addressed this question (Stith et al. 2009).

Conclusion

Child maltreatment is a complex problem with far-reaching consequences for victims. Decades of research from around the world has provided significant
information about the ways in which maltreatment affects victims and the circumstances that increase the likelihood for maltreatment to occur. Despite this wealth of knowledge, significant issues with defining and measuring child abuse and neglect remain, which critically limit the knowledge to be gained. Official child abuse and neglect definitions vary by state, and these definitions are not necessarily consistent with those used in research, which also commonly vary from one study to the next.

We offer several recommendations for improving science, policy, and practice related to child maltreatment. First, we propose standardizing definitions of maltreatment within child welfare systems. Current variation in such definitions across states limits the utility of cross-state comparative studies and undermines national estimates of prevalence, incidence, and trends in child maltreatment. Further, although child abuse is commonly understood to have subtypes (e.g., sexual, physical, psychological), child neglect is not typically separated in this same way, despite the diverse array of parental acts and omissions that are captured by the overarching term “neglect” (e.g., supervisory neglect, emotional neglect, physical needs neglect). Though researchers have long urged the capture of this information (Slack et al. 2003), there has been no improvement to measures in NCANDS or other administrative datasets. Given that neglect is the most common form of maltreatment within the U.S. child welfare system, more nuanced information is needed on the causes and consequences of its various subtypes.

Second, we propose improving the measurement of child maltreatment, given the set of standardized definitions. All states are required to document child abuse and neglect through their systems, but submitting data to NCANDS is a voluntary process, and limited information is available. Notably, however, compulsory federal reporting (such as the Adoption and Foster Care Reporting and Analysis System) is also plagued with problems, which may in part reflect the dysfunctional and antiquated data systems used in many states (Font 2020). Current plans for the Comprehensive Child Welfare Information Systems (CCWIS) and corresponding data quality protocols (Federal Register 2016) should emphasize the quality and timeliness of NCANDS submissions and require complete and valid data on all NCANDS elements.

Third, social welfare programs within the United States gather a wealth of information about families. Commonly, such information is unable to be easily linked across systems, and concerns about privacy of individuals has hindered progress in making such linkages. If linked, such data would facilitate evaluation of state and federal policy or programmatic changes (e.g., expansions or retractions of public benefits). Advances in technology facilitate matching between systems and careful planning and security protocols can address concerns about privacy (Jonson-Reid and Drake 2008). Despite their limitations, administrative or systems data are an invaluable tool in understanding the experiences and outcomes of maltreated children who child welfare systems identify.

However, administrative data are insufficient to inform policy and practice, given that not all cases of child maltreatment reach the attention of the child welfare system. Thus, our final recommendation is that surveys include multiple-source measures of maltreatment to bound estimates of the prevalence, antecedents,
and effects of child maltreatment. Further, there is a need for studies comparing maltreatment models across datasets that use the same measures, to ascertain the reliability of estimates across different sample parameters and time frames. Moreover, existing survey measures could be greatly improved. Slack and colleagues (2003) critique overreliance on studies that predict child welfare involvement or reinvolvement to understand the causes and correlates of child maltreatment, given limitations and potential biases of system involvement as a proxy for child maltreatment. To augment and validate current data focused on child welfare involvement, prospective survey designs, including birth cohorts, provide a viable option to track experiences and outcomes throughout childhood. To understand the causes of maltreatment, a universal sample of children, rather than focusing on children deemed to be “high risk” from prior research, is needed.

Note

References


