

Executive Summary

The Relationship Between Poverty and Child Abuse and Neglect: New Evidence

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With
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Executive Summary

Key Points

This [review](#) reports on the implications of international evidence about the relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect (CAN) published in the last five years. It updates a previous review published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (Bywaters et al., 2016).

Underlying social and economic inequalities in developed economies have continued to widen.

In England this has been accompanied by record levels of children in out-of-home care, with more than one child in 60 being investigated for abuse or neglect each year.

Major reviews of children's social care in England and Scotland have affirmed that **family poverty and inequality are key drivers of harm to children**. The international evidence base for this is much stronger than in 2016. The 90 papers reviewed include 17 quasi-experimental studies which found that changes in the economic conditions of family life alone – without any other factors – impact on rates of abuse and neglect. Increases in income reduced rates significantly. Economic shocks increased abuse and neglect except when families were protected by welfare benefits. This is substantial new evidence for a contributory causal relationship between the economic circumstances of families and CAN.

Deep poverty, growing rapidly in the UK in recent years, and persistent poverty are more damaging for children's safety and development than a low income or temporary difficulties. Insecurity and unpredictability of income, often the result of benefits administration practises, housing and employment, compound the problems of parenting with an inadequate income.

The gender, age, ethnicity, and health or disability of children and parents influence the ways in which adverse economic conditions affect family life. More attention should be given to these structural patterns in research, policy and practice.

Child protection systems and services are too rarely engaging effectively with the impact of income, employment and housing conditions on families and children. Nor do policies, systems and practice adequately recognise how economic conditions are inextricably connected to factors more often highlighted: mental health, domestic violence and abuse and addictions. A lack of recognition of parents' difficulties in meeting children's basic needs compounds parents' feelings of shame and stigma. In turn, this reduces the chances of child protection services establishing effective relationships with families under pressure.

Child protection system responses sometimes interact with policies covering housing, benefits and employment to exacerbate economic and other pressures on parents while making recovery and the reunification of separated families more difficult.

There is a steep social gradient in rates of substantiated abuse and neglect. This reinforces the relevance of the investment and stress models of the impact of economic and other factors on family life. As yet, almost no research has studied better off families, although in England half of all

substantiated abuse and neglect cases occur in families living outside the most deprived 20% of small neighbourhoods.

Recent research about neighbourhood factors has focused more on social relations than on the impact of the local environment and available resources. There is insufficient overall certainty to draw clear conclusions, but there is evidence of complex interactions between personal economic status and neighbourhood conditions.

The focus of child protection systems and practice on the behaviour and circumstances of individuals and families deflects attention from social structures and the responsibility of the state for - and its potential for preventing - child abuse and neglect.

Limitations in the evidence base and data systems are identified.

The review concludes with key recommendations for action: redistributive national macro-economic and social policies, a child protection system that actively engages with family poverty and a strategic research agenda.

Introduction and Background

1. The **aim** of this literature review is to bring up to date and extend a previous review of evidence about the relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect (CAN), carried out in 2015 (Bywaters et al., 2016). It does not cover the outcomes of child maltreatment or the relationship between poverty and CAN in low and middle-income countries.
2. Although the report focuses mainly on the English context, the evidence drawn upon is international. Indeed, there is a clear commonality and interrelatedness of concerns and future directions being sought globally, which have been highlighted recently in several editorials and special editions of journals (Berger & Slack, 2021; Bywaters et al., 2019; Slack et al., 2017).
3. There are **three main reasons** for this update: a substantial volume of new research, rising levels of severe child poverty in the UK and mounting pressures on children's social care. These reasons have been reinforced by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the current cost of living crisis.
4. It is now widely accepted that 'poverty is a contributory causal factor in CAN' (Bywaters et al., 2016, p.33). The objectives of this further review are to consider varied evidence about the nature, strength and timing of the relationship between different aspects of poverty and inequality and various forms of CAN. As a by-product of this work, the review reports on three other issues flagged up in 2016: data availability and limitations; methodological developments in research; and limitations and gaps in the research base.
5. Overall, the rates of relative family poverty in the UK have been fairly constant for about twenty years at around 22%. But the numbers living in deep poverty or destitution have been rising rapidly over recent years (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2022). This is reflected in escalating food bank use (700,000 or 2.5% of all UK households in 2019/20) and the growing numbers of families housed in temporary accommodation, including 125,000 children in 2020. Children are more likely to be living in poverty than adults. Over 30% of all

children in the UK are currently living in poverty. Family poverty is closely associated with other factors related to abuse and neglect, such as parental mental health and domestic violence.

6. Over the five-year period 2015/16 to 2019/20, the numbers and proportion of children on Child Protection Plans (CPPs) in England on March 31st grew initially, but more slowly compared to the steep rise in the previous years, before falling back a little after 2018. Over 200,000 children – around 1 in 60 – were investigated because of safeguarding concerns in 2019/20, up by 125% since 2009/10. The number of children in out-of-home care is at record levels, partly as a result of an almost doubling of the numbers of 16-17 year olds entering care annually across the decade. Due to the high proportion of children who are in care because of abuse or neglect, we take out-of-home care as a proxy measure of CAN in this report. Although the age pattern of children in care has shifted towards this older group, the proportion of children whose time in care is attributed to abuse or neglect rose from 52% in 2009/10 to 61% by 2020/21. In a vicious cycle, partly resulting from these demand pressures, service provision has moved away from prevention and family support and towards more mandatory forms of late intervention across the last decade. However, there are also some limited signs in the UK of new national and local child protection services' initiatives to tackle poverty.
7. There are many elements to bear in mind when reading the evidence about poverty and CAN. Family, neighbourhood and national factors influence the relationships between CAN and poverty. Both CAN and poverty are defined and measured in a variety of different ways in the literature. Family socio-economic circumstances have many dimensions and are affected by the insecurity and instability of resources, as well as their adequacy. The social gradient of family economic circumstances rather than a binary divide between those in or not in poverty is another important consideration, as are issues of intersectionality: including gender, age, ethnicity and disability. A focus on poverty can imply that policies directed only at families living in poverty should be constructed, leaving other families and social structures untouched, whereas a focus on inequalities suggests that policy change should address the relationships between more and less well off families, the distribution of income and wealth as well as poverty.

Understanding the Relationship Between Poverty and Child Abuse and Neglect

8. The causes of maltreatment are multi-factorial and often contested. Neither poverty nor any other single factor is necessary or sufficient for CAN to occur. We view poverty not as a stand-alone factor in CAN, one of a list alongside others, but as intrinsic to other contributory factors, such as parental mental health or domestic abuse and violence. The most widely referenced explanations for the relationship between family poverty and CAN are the investment (Duncan et al., 2014) and family stress (Conger et al., 2000) models, alternatives which are not mutually exclusive. The investment model focuses on the adequacy of the resources families have to ensure their children's development and health. The family stress model focuses on the psychological consequences of inadequate resources. Feelings of shame and stigma often exacerbate stress. Neighbourhood level factors, including relational variables such as social cohesion and social control, are also hypothesised as independently relevant. Some authors emphasise the significance of social

inequalities. Official rates of CAN are influenced by processes of identification and decision making, both system conditions and the attitudes and behaviours of front line managers and practitioners, including the possibility of bias. Issues of a lack of recognition felt by families may compound inequalities in the distribution of resources available to them (Fraser, 1995; 1997; 2000). Recognition, in this sense, is seen as essential to people's sense of efficacy and self worth, involving affirmation, acknowledgement, understanding and respect. While the concept of recognition can risk placing too much emphasis on inter-personal relations (Garrett, 2013), the theory of social harms (Pemberton, 2016), like the theory of fundamental causes (Phelan et al., 2010), shifts the focus onto underlying social structures and 'the detrimental activities of local and national states and of corporations on the welfare of individuals' (Dorling et al., 2008, p.14) This view is reflected in the 'social model of child protection' (Featherstone et al., 2018).

Methods and Papers Identified

9. The aims and objectives of the review were addressed through a critical literature review of international literature using systematic methods, excluding lower and middle income countries. Individual experts from a number of countries were also contacted directly. Grey literature searches were conducted by the NSPCC into materials held in their archive. To be included in our final sample, papers had to provide novel empirical, peer reviewed evidence that was directly relevant to the focus on poverty and CAN in children under the age of 18 and to be published in English between 1.1.2016 and 31.7.2021.
10. In total, 90 papers were identified¹. These included 7 meta-analyses, systematic or scoping reviews, 67 quantitative papers, and 17 qualitative papers. These are described in detail within Tables [4](#), [5](#) and [6](#) respectively. The reviews and quantitative papers are heavily weighted towards evidence from the USA; the national origins of the qualitative papers are much more widely spread. A brief snapshot of the key findings of each paper, indicating whether relationships between aspects of poverty and CAN are statistically significant or not, is also provided in Tables [7](#), [8](#), [9](#) and [10](#).

Findings and Discussion

11. The review confirmed a substantial increase in the volume and quality of published research into the relationship between poverty and CAN over the last five years. The work draws on a wider range of academic disciplines than in 2016 and was based in 15 different developed countries.
12. The very different economic, legal, and social policy contexts of child protection in different countries and the complex issues of definition and measurement present major challenges to cross-national replication. Readers need to be cautious about transferring findings from one time and place to another.

¹The total is 90 as there was one mixed methods paper included as a quantitative and qualitative paper.

Is the relationship between poverty and CAN confirmed by the studies?

- 13.** The seven reviews and meta-analyses provide strong evidence that poverty, measured in multiple ways, is associated with increased levels of one or more forms of CAN. The causal nature of this relationship was confirmed by the quasi-experimental studies (see para. 17).
- 14.** Every study of the association between poverty and CAN focusing on data about family characteristics and influences found statistically significant evidence of a relationship, influencing at least one type of CAN. There were a few examples of specific variables not being confirmed in individual studies but no overall pattern to these which would lead to their being discounted. This applies for a variety of measures of socio-economic circumstances (SEC), whether single factors, such as income or employment, or multiple factors. It also applies for a low level of resources, insecure or fluctuating resources and for a variety of measures and definitions of CAN. The impact of poverty in many studies was substantial, not marginal.
- 15.** Many papers explore the relationship between socio-economic conditions and other influences, as 'poverty ... impacts on every aspect of family life' (Mason et al., 2021, p.7). Poverty should not be viewed just as one of a list of factors, but as inextricably connected to other factors with relevance for CAN, such as caregivers' substance use, mental and physical health, having been a victim of domestic violence, imprisonment or past placement in foster care. Qualitative studies add to the picture, finding evidence of anxiety, depression, familial conflicts, sleep disorders, lack of energy and vitality, and hopelessness. A small number of studies point to gender differences in the impact of economic conditions on mothers or fathers and the consequences for CAN. Ethnic differences were less visible in these studies than might be expected given their scale and significance.
- 16.** Neighbourhood studies found some evidence that living in an area where a high proportion of households exhibited a negative indicator, such as poverty, unemployment or unoccupied housing, had an additional effect on maltreatment. In addition, studies explored whether relational aspects of neighbourhoods, such as social cohesion and social control, were factors in CAN. The material conditions of high poverty neighbourhoods have not been an explicit focus of these studies. Detailed findings emerge but the discussion illustrates the complexity involved in disentangling family and neighbourhood factors.

What do the quasi-experimental studies tell us?

- 17.** Sixteen of the 18 quasi-experimental papers analyse data from one or more States in the USA. All found some evidence of a causal relationship between changes in family economic conditions and maltreatment rates. Positive effects were found for income increases and negative effects for income reduction, instability, and unemployment. There was also evidence that economic shocks were mitigated by welfare receipt. Two papers, Schneider et al. (2017) and Lindo et al. (2018), found different results for changes in economic conditions depending on whether they affected men or women, fathers or mothers. Lindo et al. (2018) presents evidence suggesting that increased male unemployment may have negative effects for children but increased female unemployment may have benefits in terms of reduced maltreatment or make no obvious difference, a finding worth further study.

Is poverty more strongly associated with some kinds of CAN than others?

18. There are a growing number of attempts to differentiate the associations between different manifestations of poverty and different kinds of abuse and neglect. This is an area ripe for further work, although trying to differentiate between closely connected phenomena such as income, employment and housing may be, in the end, a distraction from the overall impact of gross economic inequalities, however manifested. The studies in this review do not clearly confirm either the hypothesis that neglect, or some aspects of neglect, is more closely associated with poverty than abuse, or that sexual abuse is less associated with poverty than other kinds of CAN.

Does the duration of poverty make a difference?

19. Two studies support the suggestion that longer duration in poverty has a detrimental effect on the likelihood of CAN. When duration in poverty-related programs increased from 0 to 9 years, the number of maltreatment reports increased by between 2.5 and 3.7 times (Kim & Drake, 2016).

Can benefits protect against maltreatment?

20. Three quasi-experimental studies provide specific evidence of the protective effects of additional income in the form of welfare benefits. For example, Cai (2021) found that negative income shocks of 30% were only associated with increased CPS investigations over a two to four year follow up period in the absence of protective social welfare benefits. Without compensatory benefits, shocks were associated with a 27% increase in any investigation, a 38% increase in physical abuse investigations, and a 25% increase in neglect investigations. By comparison, negative earnings shocks that were accompanied by an income supplement had no association with CPS involvement.

Is there a social gradient in the relationship between SEC and CAN?

21. Inequalities in care rates between local authorities linked to socio-economic conditions have been widening in the UK over the past 14 years (Bennett et al., 2020). Successive studies in the UK countries (Bywaters et al., 2020) have reported that a child in the most deprived decile (10%) of small neighbourhoods is over ten times more likely to be on a child protection plan (CPP) or in out of home care (CLA) than a child in the least deprived decile, both markers of CAN. Webb et al. (2020a) confirmed the strength of this social gradient using multi-level modelling: an increase of one standard deviation in Index of Multiple Deprivation score for small neighbourhoods was associated with a 74% increase in the expected CPP rate, and a 70% increase in the expected CLA rate. Broadly similar findings are reported in Aotearoa/New Zealand and in other UK based, US and Norwegian studies. This points to the need for explanations of differential rates between wealthy and very wealthy families as well as for families in greater or lesser degrees of poverty.

How do aspects of identity intersect with poverty?

22. Age is a significant factor in the strength of the relationship between poverty and CAN. The impact of poverty on CAN in families with young children appears to be particularly strong and the social gradient steeper. Esposito et al. (2017, 2021) suggest that parental socio-economic circumstances are key to younger children, but young people's behaviour is a central factor for older children. However, this may obscure young people's vulnerabilities, for example, in the face of adults grooming them for drug distribution, sexual exploitation or trafficking. Exactly how poverty plays out across different ages in childhood has not yet been examined.
23. Child's gender and, particularly, the interaction of gender with age, ethnicity and socio-economic status is an issue worth addressing, but is under-explored at present.
24. Many studies control for ethnicity rather than examining in detail the way that it plays out in relation to child protection. Ethnicity is also measured in different ways in different studies and/or countries. Where data exists, they tend to confirm higher rates of reported or substantiated maltreatment amongst Black than White populations in the US and the UK. Webb et al. (2020a) reported significant differences between sub-categories of ethnic groups in England, but these were complex and differed both based on the intensity of child protection intervention and the level of deprivation. At average levels of deprivation 6 ethnic minority populations had significantly different levels of child protection interventions when compared to White British populations, but there were no simple universal patterns. Detlaff and Boyd (2020, p.256) argue that in the US 'efforts to address disproportionality have stalled.' The attention paid to quantifying or understanding the rates amongst Hispanic and other minority group children linked to poverty in US studies, including Native American children, was minimal in this period. However, indigenous children in several countries are overrepresented amongst both disadvantaged children and children in contact with child protection services. Much more work, especially studies involving members of minority communities as co-producers, is needed to understand these patterns and construct policies to equalise rates.
25. No studies examined the intersection of child health or disability with poverty as a factor for maltreatment. This is a clear gap in the literature.

How do supply factors influence the relationships between poverty, inequality and CAN?

26. In England, local authorities with low average deprivation were found to have been intervening more frequently than local authorities with high average deprivation when equivalent neighbourhoods are compared. This was described as the 'inverse intervention law' (Bywaters et al., 2015). The finding has been subsequently confirmed, for England, in terms of there being a steeper social gradient in low deprivation local authorities compared to high deprivation local authorities (Hood et al., 2021; Webb et al., 2020a). This may reflect, in part, differential spending relative to need. The lack of household level socio-economic data makes confirmation difficult.
27. Webb et al. (2020b) subsequently identified an even stronger statistical pattern in England, an 'inequalities intervention law'. Local authorities with high inequality but low deprivation had a social gradient in children looked after rates five times greater than that of local authorities with low inequality and high deprivation. It is hypothesised that this might be, in

part, due to a greater sense of stigma for families living in poverty when those around them are better off, compared to areas that are more equal.

Does social work practice mitigate or exacerbate the relationship between poverty and CAN?

28. It cannot be taken for granted that social services involvement with families where there are child protection concerns mitigates the effects of poverty, although it may. Fauske et al. (2018) found that, in Norway, parents who were unemployed and marginalised were least likely to feel they were 'taken seriously, ...seen, ...(or) heard' (p.5) by social services. Salariat or intermediate occupation families were more likely to agree with social workers' perceptions of their family situations. However, Hood et al. (2020) reported UK social workers finding it more difficult to engage middle class parents, a greater tendency for disguised compliance and the potential for social workers to feel intimidated by parents who were wealthy or well educated. Studies in various countries found that social workers commonly did not prioritise poverty in their direct work with families (for example, Morris et al., 2018). They reported that social workers often felt that they lacked the skills to deal with family finances, and/or had ambivalent attitudes to families' poverty, creating barriers in their relationships with families. This can add to parents' feeling that they may be blamed and shamed, mistrusted, rejected and unrecognised, or threatened.
29. Evaluations of social workers holding budgets to spend on supporting families provide evidence of the complexities involved (Saar-Heiman & Krumer-Nevo, 2021). However, an evaluation of a programme to support mothers with both material and relationship issues following child removal found improved emotional well-being, greater housing and financial security, increased engagement in education, employment and specialist services and improvements in key relationships in women's lives, including with their children (Broadhurst & Mason, 2020). There is also some evidence that involvement with children's services can make poverty worse and harder to escape from because of the interaction between policies on entitlements to social security and housing and the actions of children's services, such as child removal.

What does this new evidence tell us about explaining the relationship between poverty and CAN?

30. The Investment Model. The international evidence about the social gradient in child protection points to the significance of what parents with money can purchase as well as what those without cannot afford, although none of these studies examined maltreatment in average- or high-income families, an important gap. Different kinds of investment may be required at different points across the age range. Several diverse sources, including Hood et al. (2020), provide suggestive evidence that poverty is a greater risk factor for CAN in the early years than in adolescence.
31. The Family Stress Model. The papers provide more evidence that parenting in poverty is highly stressful not only because of inadequate income itself but because of the associated shame and stigma. The stress is also implicated in many of the mediating factors which link poverty and maltreatment. However, these recent studies have not provided a definitive understanding of what kinds of factors (for example, the level of income, the security and stability of income, inequality in income or the pressures of low paid work or benefit claims)

are particularly stressful or whether there are particular pathways that link stress to maltreatment. The gendered context of income and wealth in families is highlighted by Lindo et al. (2018), showing that the impact of employment on family life and children's safety may depend - at least in part - on whether it is the mother or father who is affected.

32. **Neighbourhood Factors.** Recent studies reinforce the idea that factors at the neighbourhood level influence rates of maltreatment over and above household level factors but without conclusively clarifying which factors affect outcomes in what ways.
33. **Intersectionality.** This has received some attention but neither child gender nor disability are a focus of these studies. Work to explain the impact of children's age and ethnicity on the relationship between poverty and CAN remains limited.
34. **Social Harms.** The theoretical framework within which most of the papers operate largely takes for granted the characterisation of a range of difficulties in children's lives in terms of abuse and neglect and a conception of child protection that sees the primary causes of maltreatment lying within families, or in the consequences of factors, such as poverty, that affect families. However, there is a growing critique of current child welfare policies and practices in which the relationship between poverty and CAN can be characterised as reflecting the unequal distribution of economic resources, compounded by lack of 'recognition' (Fraser, 1995).

The Impact of the Pandemic

35. The negative economic consequences of the pandemic, which have been particularly severe for families in poverty and disadvantaged groups, have led to concerns about the potential impact on CAN. Mixed evidence is emerging internationally about trends in actual rates of CAN during the pandemic. Recent administrative data for England for the year to April 2021 shows a continuing slight fall in CPPs and entries to care, in line with previous years. There are three possible reasons for this: the unprecedented temporary government support for family finances and businesses together with local community action may have mitigated the economic effects; there may be a delay in the time it takes for trends to be seen in the data and/or there may have been changes in the levels of under-reporting. At the time of writing, it is impossible to reach secure conclusions about the impact of the pandemic.

Conclusions and Future Directions

36. There has been a considerable increase in the volume of research about poverty and child abuse and neglect in the past five years, in the range of disciplines engaged with the issues and the quality of the methods employed in analysing the evidence, although there remain significant limitations and gaps.
37. While not always producing consistent results in detail, the overall conclusion is that recent research has substantially strengthened the evidence about the contributory causal relationship between poverty and CAN identified in the 2016 report. The impacts of poverty on CAN are large in scale. The depth and duration of poverty are also important.
38. Numerous studies demonstrate that population level income increases for families in poverty, for example, from higher benefits, reduce the chances of child maltreatment. While

economic shocks, such as a sudden loss of income or employment, are shown to have negative impacts on children. Welfare receipts are shown to mitigate the effects of family level economic shocks.

- 39.** Poverty is pervasive in its practical and psychological consequences for families and family relationships. Insecurity and instability compound the problems of managing family life when resources are inadequate. The interaction of employment with gender roles emerges strikingly from one recent study as having significance for CAN. Poor quality housing adds significantly to the issues of availability, affordability, and location for families in poverty.
- 40.** Poverty is closely interconnected with factors sometimes given greater prominence as causal for CAN, such as poor parental mental health and domestic violence. Poverty increases the chances of such troubles and is also a consequence of them, making them harder to leave behind or resolve, in order to build a solid foundation for family life. Other factors, such as debt and debt management, gambling, the physical health or disability of parents or children and, in the US, in particular, imprisonment, are also connected but much less the focus of attention.
- 41.** There is not a binary divide between families in poverty and those who are not. The evidence is for a social gradient in child abuse and neglect which runs across all families and places. The infrastructure for family life purchased by wealthier parents is scarcely mentioned in this body of research.
- 42.** Neighbourhood factors, including the concentration of poverty, social cohesion, and social control, can reduce or exacerbate the effects of individual family poverty in a number of ways which require further investigation. No neighbourhood level interventions to reduce CAN were evaluated in these studies.
- 43.** Most studies of CAN focus on family and neighbourhood level factors. How abuse and neglect are conceptualised and government policies which create or maintain poverty and inequality, or which fail to regulate economic markets in ways that protect families and their relationships, receive much less attention. The policies and practices that have the stated intentions of protecting children and improving their lives sometimes exacerbate both poverty itself and the shame and stigma that accompanies it. When children go into care, too often the way social policies are framed mean further material losses for parents, as well as emotional damage not addressed through additional support, which reduces the chances of reunification. Some programmes offering support to parents show that this does not have to be the case.
- 44.** Child protection practitioners find it hard to incorporate ways of talking with families about complex and emotive issues surrounding poverty or to help families deal with or exit poverty. Frequently, families' socioeconomic status is not seen as core business, with agency priorities, structures and models of practice shown to be an obstacle to poverty aware practice. As a result, parents too often feel a lack of recognition, that their concerns and priorities are not understood or heard, and view services as a source of threat rather than help.
- 45.** There tends to be a 'one size fits all' approach to service planning and delivery which does not pay sufficient attention to intersectionality or to inequalities of place. Evidence

suggests insufficient attention is paid to the different roles played by mothers and fathers in relation to securing and spending money, employment and time use, child care and protection roles and responsibilities.

Limitations

46. Research in some countries, including the UK, is severely hindered by the lack of almost any individual level data about the parents of children in contact with children's services and about the socio-economic circumstances of their households.
47. There is a lack of an internationally agreed consistent approach to the definition and measurement of CAN. There are similar difficulties for comparative research over definitions and measures of poverty.
48. There is very little research which examines the impact of programmes designed to reduce CAN by addressing families' socio-economic circumstances.
49. There are no examples of research being co-produced with parents or children.

Future Directions for Research

50. A number of issues for future research have been suggested by this review:

- Comparative Studies
- Data and Data Systems
- Replications
- Studies that Differentiate Between Children and Between Parents
- Studies which Differentiate Between Maltreatment Types and Sub-Types
- Studies that Differentiate Between Facets of Poverty
- Qualitative and Mixed Methods Studies that Incorporate the Voices of Parents, Children, and Young People
- Studies of Parental Stress, Shame, and Stigma
- Studies of the Impact of Policies and Practices
- Studies of Inequalities
- Studies of Interventions
- Research that is co-produced

Future Directions for Policy and Practice

51. The significance of a range of economic and social policies for the safety and well-being of children is underlined by the quasi-experimental studies, backed by other research providing long term evidence linking the economic conditions of family life with rates of CAN. Changing the framing of child abuse and neglect towards a greater emphasis on structural factors may be a necessary step towards policy change. Measures based on redistribution and recognition, for example to repair holes in and amend the ethos of the welfare safety net, could be expected to prevent harm to children. Structural measures to

address the social determinants of social inequalities, such as those proposed for health inequalities by Marmot (Marmot et al., 2020a; 2020b), are also highly relevant to CAN.

52. A review of the unintended consequences of contradictory policies which can undermine rather than support families would be valuable. Policies which set the structural context of children's social care services should be 'poverty-proofed'. These policies include the level and distribution of funding, data collection and analysis, inspection and regulation, the role of the courts and social work education.
53. Research on the poverty aware paradigm (Krumer-Nevo, 2016) and the social model of child protection (Featherstone et al., 2018) has provided some useful beginning evidence about practice. The authors propose moving away from a narrow focus on parental risk to ways in which society, communities and families can provide environments where harm is minimised, and children enabled to flourish. However, as of yet, recommendations about the multiple ways in which practice can better engage with families' material circumstances are largely untested by research, particularly in terms of their capacity to change outcomes for children and their families. Evaluations of experiments which gave social workers power to spend money directly raise significant moral issues while demonstrating that such an approach is far from a simple technical fix (Saar-Heiman & Krumer-Nevo, 2021). Research has shed little light to date on possible alternatives to the essentially individualistic, case-by-case approach that is embedded in contemporary practice in most locations and the power imbalance between service providers and families.

Last Word

54. There is much more evidence of the relationship of poverty and CAN than there was five years ago. Large and significant gaps in knowledge remain, but the groundwork that has been undertaken means that **three key recommendations** can be suggested.

The first is that an essential element in policy to reduce harm due to CAN should be **national 'levelling up' policies that cut family poverty**, especially deep and persistent poverty, and insecurities affecting income, housing and employment. At present, some policies, particularly those on benefits, housing and immigration, conflict with the principle that the welfare of children should be paramount.

Second, the children's social care system needs to **engage much more effectively with children's and families' basic material needs** as a key factor for child protection. Too often families feel misunderstood, blamed, mistrusted and threatened rather than helped.

Third, **there is a need for a major programme of research**. This requires a national strategy for collecting and analysing data and a programme of research funding linked to key questions about poverty, inequality and intersectionality. The perspectives of parents, children and young people should be a core component of such research.

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