How Neighborhoods Influence Child Maltreatment: Multiple Pathways & Policy Implications

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Major Messages

• Neighborhood and Community are important contexts (among multiple contexts) that shape maltreatment
  – Influence involves multiple pathways & elusive mechanisms
  – Context is complicated but measurable
  – Measurement requires mixed methods and multiple perspectives

• Important from scientific standpoint (identifying mechanisms) & in applying findings to prevention and intervention efforts
Understanding Causes of Maltreatment: An Evolving Focus

How Do Neighborhoods Influence Maltreatment?

- Research suggests neighborhoods may shape maltreatment through different pathways
- To help identify and characterize these pathways, we examined all 25 studies in scientific literature that investigated neighborhood effects
- Studies all used geographically designated neighborhoods
- Developed a conceptual framework to synthesize results and to organize and identify needed research on links between neighborhood and maltreatment
Conceptual Framework: Key Aspects

• Three potential pathways linking neighborhood & maltreatment:
  • Neighborhood influences on **maltreatment behavior**
  • Neighborhood influences on **definition, recognition and reporting** of maltreatment
  • Family and child characteristics

• Pathways may influence one another

• Each pathway has implications for research, practice and policy;
Pathway 1: Neighborhood Influences Actual Child Maltreatment Behavior

Family and Child Characteristics

Neighborhood Structure
- Neighborhood Disadvantage
- Neighborhood Demographics
- Neighborhood Stability

Neighborhood Processes
- Collective Efficacy
- Social Organization
- Community Resources / Deficits

Transactional Processes
- Environmental Stressors
- Social Support

Definition, Recognition, & Reporting Processes

Maltreatment Behaviors

Maltreatment Reports
Evidence for Pathway #1

- NBH structural factors → Maltreatment
- NBH disadvantage → Social Disorder
- NBH stability → Collective Efficacy → Violence
- NBH social disorganization & instability → Psychological & Social Distress → Parenting Behaviors

Ref: Coulton et al., 1995; Sampson et al., 2002; Ross, 2000; Ross et al., 20002; Lynch & Cicchetti, 2002
Pathway 2: Neighborhood Conditions Linked to How Maltreatment Defined & Reported

**Family and Child Characteristics**

- **Neighborhood Structure**
  - Neighborhood Disadvantage
  - Neighborhood Demographics
  - Neighborhood Stability

- **Neighborhood Processes**
  - Collective Efficacy
  - Social Organization
  - Community Resources / Deficits

- **Transactional Processes**
  - Environmental Stressors
  - Social Support

- **Maltreatment Behaviors**
  - Definition, Recognition, & Reporting Processes

- **Maltreatment Reports**
Pathway 2: Neighborhood Influences
Definition, Recognition and Reporting

• NBH differences drive defining/reporting differences independent of actual maltreatment behavior
• Long-standing controversy in some areas on whether increased reporting results from increased maltreatment or increased scrutiny
• Observed disparity & disproportionality of reports contribute to these debates
• Nonprofessionals make substantial % of reports & evidence suggests their definition/response may be shaped by level of neighborhood disorder
• Potentially critical pathway because majority of research uses reports to CPS as the measure of child maltreatment
Pathway 3: Apparent Neighborhood Influence Actually Due to Family/Child Characteristics (Selection Bias)
Pathway 3: Family and Child Characteristics (Selection Bias)

- Involves processes through which families select neighborhoods to live in
- (Unmeasured) characteristics that make parents likely to live in disadvantaged neighborhoods also and make them likely to maltreat children
- Thus, apparent link between neighborhood and maltreatment, but really due to individual or family factors
- Represents a real challenge to research trying to understand neighborhood effects
Different Pathways Lead to Different Research Needs, & Practice, Policy, Implications (examples)

- **Pathway 1: Behavioral Influences:**
  - Calls for research to better understand neighborhood conditions
  - Policies & practices to bolster conditions & processes that reduce maltreatment behavior

- **Pathway 2: Definition, Recognition & Reporting**
  - Research to better understand the factors involved
  - Policies & practices to improve recognition and accurate, appropriate reporting

- **Pathway 3: Family & Child Characteristics**
  - Research to better understand processes through which families select neighborhoods & account for selection bias in studies
  - Inform policies & practices to improve housing and neighborhood conditions
Complexities in Neighborhood Effects Research

• How to define a neighborhood
  – Administrative designations vs. resident perspectives

• Neighborhoods are not independent units

• Neighborhood effects may differ by “type” of maltreatment
  – Structural factors more linked to neglect vs. other types maltreatment

• Grappling with selection bias
  – Natural experiments, qualitative methods

Ref: Kim 2004, Drake & Pandey, 1996
A Plug for Mixed Methods & Multiple Perspectives in “Neighborhood Effects Research”

A preferred study design combines:

• Aggregate and structural measures (e.g. census-level, administrative records, geocoding)

• Neighborhood resident perceptions: interviews, surveys, ethnography

• Perceptions of local agency/institution staff

• Structured observations of environments and interactions
Thank You!