

Poverty, not bias, explains racial/ethnic differences in child abuse

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Poverty—rather than biased reporting—seems to account for the higher rates of child abuse and neglect among black children, reports a study in the September *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, the official journal of the Society for Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics.

States with a higher proportion of [minority children](#) living in poverty also have greater racial/ethnic disparities in [child abuse](#) and neglect, according to the new research by Paul Lanier, PhD, of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and colleagues. They write, "For families of all races and ethnicities, the development and implementation of strategies to prevent child maltreatment must encompass attention to poverty as a known risk factor for maltreatment."

Why Are Abuse and Neglect Rates Higher for Black Children?

The study explored reasons for the disproportionately high reported rates of [abuse](#) and neglect among US [black children](#). Two main theories have been advanced. The "risk model" suggests that higher exposure to poverty and other risk factors leads to higher rates of abuse and neglect, while the "bias model" suggests that bias leads to higher rates of reported and substantiated abuse and neglect among black children.

In contrast, reported rates of abuse and neglect in Hispanic children are

similar to those in non-Hispanic white children. The researchers sought to compare the impact of poverty and other risk factors for child abuse across racial/ethnic groups.

To do this, they analyzed state-level data on childhood poverty and rates of abuse and neglect in non-Hispanic white, black, and Hispanic children from birth to age three. By looking at state data, Dr Lanier and coauthors sought to overcome the limitations of previous studies using national data.

On average, state poverty rates for black and Hispanic children were about three times higher than for non-Hispanic white children. Minority children were also about twice as likely to have single or teen mothers.

For both black and Hispanic children, the state-level data showed a "consistent linear relationship" between poverty and maltreatment. States with a higher percentage of minority children living in poverty, as compared to non-Hispanic white children in the same state, had greater racial/ethnic discrepancies in reported rates of child physical abuse, [neglect](#), and sexual abuse.

Across Groups, Poverty Is a Risk Factor for Child Abuse

"Although on average the level of maltreatment for Hispanics is lower than blacks (when compared to non-Hispanic whites) the relationship of maltreatment to poverty remains consistent across these two groups," the researchers write. State rates of single and teen motherhood were also strongly related to the disproportion in maltreatment.

Consistent with studies of national data, the results tend to support the "risk model"—that greater exposure to risk factors explains the disproportion in reported maltreatment rates among black children. With

some variations, a one-point increase in state "disproportionality ratios" for poverty, single mothers, and teen mothers was associated with about a half-point increase in the ratio for maltreatment.

The study adds to the "multitude of research" showing the ill effects of child poverty on health outcomes, according to Dr Lanier and coauthors. They write, "Poor children often experience the cumulative burden of an impoverished home, harsh or neglectful parenting, and a community environment without adequate resources." The authors suggest that while individual bias is likely one part of the issue, focusing on addressing the broader social [risk factors](#) that minority [children](#) disproportionately face is likely to make a larger impact.

The researchers believe that pediatricians are "uniquely positioned" to address child poverty—in their practices, in their communities, and in the public policy arena. Dr Lanier and colleagues conclude, "Focusing on eliminating child [poverty](#) and supporting high-risk parents holds promise for making the largest impact toward reducing [child maltreatment](#)."

More information: [Click here](#) to read "Race and Ethnic Differences in Early Childhood Maltreatment in the United States"

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