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**ECONOMIC DETERMINANTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD MALTREATMENT**

*Lawrence M. Berger, University of Wisconsin-Madison  
Jane Waldfogel, Columbia University & London School of Economics*

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OECD Contact: Willem Adema, Principle Administrator, Social Policy Division, Tel: +33 (0)1 45 24 15 57, Email: Willem.ADEMA@oecd.org

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## ABSTRACT

Substantial numbers of children in the advanced industrialized countries experience child abuse and neglect each year, resulting in considerable social, emotional, and economic costs to both the children themselves and to their societies as a whole. Yet, whereas scholars and policymakers have grown increasingly concerned with promoting child well-being, particularly among low income children, limited attention has been paid to child maltreatment. This paper reviews the existing research on the economic determinants and consequences of child abuse and neglect, drawing on theoretical and empirical studies from a wide range of disciplines. We first provide background information about child maltreatment in advanced industrialized countries. Next, we present current theory and empirical evidence regarding links between low income and child maltreatment. We then turn to the evidence on the long-term consequences of maltreatment. Finally, we conclude with a brief discussion of interventions to prevent abuse and neglect.

We argue that results from a large number of studies clearly imply that economic resources play an important role in influencing risk for child abuse and (particularly) child neglect, although conclusive causal evidence has thus far been elusive. Furthermore, existing evidence that child abuse and neglect impose tremendous long-term costs both to victims and to society as a whole justifies heightened efforts to reduce child maltreatment. Finally, although a few proven programs exist, the evidence base with regard to effective policies and programs for preventing maltreatment is generally quite weak. Additional rigorous research across the advanced industrialized countries is necessary to promote a better understanding of the economic determinants and consequences of abuse and neglect, as well as the efficacy of policies and programs aimed at preventing child maltreatment and ameliorating its adverse effects.

KEYWORDS: Children, Child well-being, abuse and neglect

## RÉSUMÉ

On recense de nombreux cas de maltraitance et de délaissement d'enfants chaque année dans les pays industrialisés avancés, ce qui entraîne un coût social, psychologique et économique considérable pour les enfants eux-mêmes comme pour la société dans son ensemble. Pourtant, si les universitaires et les dirigeants s'attachent de plus en plus à promouvoir le bien-être des enfants, en particulier lorsqu'ils sont issus de milieux défavorisés, les mauvais traitements qui leur sont infligés n'attirent guère l'attention. Ce rapport passe en revue les recherches existantes sur les déterminants économiques et les conséquences de la maltraitance et du délaissement des enfants, à partir d'études théoriques et empiriques relevant de multiples disciplines. Des informations de fond sont tout d'abord exposées à propos de la maltraitance des enfants dans les pays industrialisés avancés, puis des données probantes théoriques et empiriques récentes sont présentées en ce qui concerne les liens entre niveau de revenu et maltraitance d'enfant. Les conséquences à long terme des mauvais traitements subis sont ensuite étudiées, avant de conclure par un bref examen des actions entreprises pour lutter contre la maltraitance et la privation de soins.

Les auteurs de ce rapport soutiennent l'idée que les résultats de nombreuses études impliquent clairement un rôle important des ressources économiques dans le risque de maltraitance et (notamment) de délaissement des enfants, même si les données concluantes sur ce lien de causalité sont encore difficiles à appréhender. En outre, les éléments existants qui démontrent que les mauvais traitements et la négligence ont des conséquences extrêmement graves à long terme sur les victimes et sur toute la société justifient de renforcer les efforts déployés pour lutter contre cette situation. Enfin, s'il existe quelques programmes efficaces dans ce domaine, les données dont on dispose à propos des stratégies et des programmes de lutte efficaces sont généralement rares. Il est nécessaire de mener d'autres recherches rigoureuses dans tous les pays industrialisés avancés afin de promouvoir une meilleure compréhension des déterminants économiques et des conséquences de la maltraitance et du délaissement des enfants, mais aussi afin de renforcer l'efficacité des mesures et des programmes mis en place pour lutter contre la maltraitance des enfants et en atténuer les effets délétères.

## ECONOMIC DETERMINANTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD MALTREATMENT

### Introduction

1. Across advanced industrialized countries, increased attention has focused in recent years on child well-being defined to include children's health and development as well as the conditions in which they are raised (see for example OECD, 2009). However, one important dimension of child well-being – child maltreatment – has received considerably less attention from scholars and policy makers than its other aspects. This is a serious omission given that, in all of the industrialized countries, substantial numbers of children suffer from child abuse and neglect, resulting in considerable social, emotional, and economic costs to both the children themselves and to society as a whole.

2. In this paper, we review what is known about the economic determinants and consequences of child maltreatment, drawing on theoretical and empirical studies from a range of disciplines including economics, medicine, psychology, psychiatry, sociology, epidemiology, social work, and public health. We first provide background information about child maltreatment in advanced industrialized countries. Next, we present current theory and empirical evidence regarding links between low income and child maltreatment. We then turn to the evidence on the long-term consequences of maltreatment. Finally, we conclude with a brief discussion of interventions to prevent maltreatment.

### Background

3. In developed countries, child maltreatment is generally conceptualized to include acts of commission (abuse) and acts of omission (neglect), usually on the part of a parent, that “result in harm, potential harm, or threat of harm to a child,” regardless of parental intent (Gilbert et al., 2009a, p. 68).<sup>1</sup> Although precise definitions differ considerably by country (and, often, by state, region, or province within a country), the primary types of maltreatment that are seen as meriting report, investigation, and/or child welfare intervention can be broadly described as falling into the categories of neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and psychological/emotional maltreatment. Child neglect, which is by far the most common form of maltreatment in all of the developed countries (Gilbert et al., 2009a), is generally defined as inadequate provision of basic necessities such as food, clothing, shelter, supervision, education, or medical care and, in some cases, a failure to meet children's emotional needs. Physical abuse usually refers to an act that causes bodily harm to a child or places a child at risk of bodily harm, often as a result of punishment or discipline. Sexual abuse encompasses a range of sexual activities involving a minor, spanning from direct sexual contact to sexual exploitation or exhibitionism. Finally, psychological or emotional maltreatment can be loosely defined as actions or omissions that cause, or are likely to result in, psychological harm to a child.

4. Just as precise definitions of maltreatment differ by country, so too do mandated reporting laws, policies regarding child maltreatment investigations, and the nature of child welfare system intervention (Gilbert, 1997; Hetherington et al., 1997). On the whole, these differences are reflected in the extent to

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<sup>1</sup> We therefore use the terms “child maltreatment” and “child abuse and neglect” interchangeably in this paper.

which a country's child welfare policies, programs, services, and interventions tend toward one or another end of a continuum in four major areas: (1) protecting children versus preserving families; (2) addressing families' needs versus responding to what is seen as substandard or dangerous parenting; (3) partnering with families versus taking an adversarial and investigative approach; and (4) providing voluntary versus non-voluntary (mandated) services (Gilbert, 1997). More broadly, Pires (1993) notes that entire child welfare systems in developed countries can be viewed on a continuum ranging from those that focus primarily on child and family well-being (characterized by an interest in serving all children in the population), to those that are primarily intended to serve at-risk children and families (through early intervention and supportive services), to those primarily focused on child protection (serving children who have been identified as experiencing abuse or neglect). In general, child welfare systems in countries that rely more heavily on universal programs and provide relatively liberal benefits tend toward a child well-being focus, whereas those that rely more heavily on means tested and categorical programs, and often provide less generous benefits, tend toward a child protection focus (Freymond & Cameron, 2006; Pires, 1993). As such, the Netherlands, France, and the Nordic/Scandinavian countries represent the child and family well-being end of this continuum; most continental European countries are relatively prevention focused; and, the Anglo-American countries fall on the child protection end (Cameron & Freymond, 2006; Freymond & Cameron, 2006; Gilbert, 1997; Gilbert et al., 2009b; Hetherington, 2006; Hetherington et al., 1997; Pires, 1993; Waldfogel, 1998).<sup>2</sup>

5. Despite these differences, government sponsored child welfare agencies have considerable coercive and legal power to intervene in abusive and neglectful families in all developed countries (Freymond & Cameron, 2006). That is, even in countries in which the child welfare system is heavily oriented toward voluntary participation in services, government has clear authority to intrude in family life if a parent has violated the country's legally defined standards of care for children. Nonetheless, the ways in which such authority is enacted differ considerably depending upon the orientation of child and family policy in a particular country (Cameron & Freymond, 2006; Hetherington et al., 1997). For example,

6. Although mandatory reporting operates in both child protection and family service-oriented systems, the filing of a report in each of these two systems has somewhat different implications. Reports filed in systems with a protective orientation prompt investigations that are more legalistic and vested with the coercive powers of the state than those filed in systems with a service orientation, which emphasizes therapeutic and voluntary measures. (Gilbert, 1997, p. 235; quoted in Hetherington, 2006, p. 44)

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<sup>2</sup> We note that there can also be considerable differences within countries over time, as a given country's orientation and approach to child maltreatment may evolve and change.

## IS LOW INCOME A DETERMINANT OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT?

7. In this section we review the theory as to why low income would affect maltreatment. We then review the empirical evidence on this association.

### Theoretical framework

8. The conceptualization of the determinants of child maltreatment is most commonly approached from the perspective of ecological or developmental-ecological models such as those proposed by Garbarino (1977) and Belsky (1993). These models posit that there is neither a single cause of child maltreatment nor any “necessary or sufficient causes” (Belsky, 1993, p. 413). Rather, abuse and neglect are thought to result from the joint influence of—and interactions between—a host of risk factors including parent and child characteristics and interactions, parenting knowledge and behaviors, socioeconomic status and access to economic resources (income), and the social and environmental context in which a family is situated. Any or all of these factors may contribute to the likelihood that a family will engage in abuse or neglect, but none will necessarily cause maltreatment. As such, most scholars and practitioners consider low income to be one of many risk factors for maltreatment (Crittenden 1999; Stith et al., 2009). Furthermore, as discussed below, despite an abundance of evidence that low income is highly correlated with child abuse and neglect, the empirical research to date has made limited progress toward determining whether this association is causal. Likewise, little is known about whether absolute or relative income may be more important with regard to child maltreatment or whether the association between low income and child maltreatment may be linear or non-linear, such that it is constant or varies in magnitude throughout the income distribution.

9. With these caveats in mind, there are nevertheless several reasons to suspect that low income and child maltreatment might be causally linked (see, e.g., Berger, 2007; Paxson, Berger, & Waldfogel, 2002; Pelton, 1994; Shook, 1999; Slack et al., 2004). First, low income may directly restrict a parent’s ability to meet a child’s basic needs. This is particularly relevant with regard to neglect, which is often defined by inadequate provision of food, shelter, clothing, and medical care, as well as inadequate physical conditions of the home or care giving environment. Low-income parents may simply lack the resources to purchase the goods and services necessary to provide for their children in these areas. If a child’s access to such goods and services falls below a legally defined threshold, such that his or her needs are not being adequately met, the family may be at risk of being deemed neglectful, regardless of parental intent.<sup>3</sup> As such, inadequate low income may be directly—and mechanically—linked to at least some forms of child maltreatment.

10. Second, low income may be indirectly linked to child maltreatment through mechanisms such as parental stress and depression. Low income is adversely associated with a range of aspects of parental

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<sup>3</sup> Note, however, that we may expect differences in these associations across countries, depending on the strength, range, and generosity of social benefits with regard to ensuring that families are able to meet children’s basic material needs. Furthermore, a family’s ability to meet such needs is likely to depend on both its income and the expenditure decisions parents make in the context of a limited budget.



mental health and well-being, and particularly with increased parental stress and depression; each of these factors may, in turn, result in harsh, substandard, or neglectful parenting and thereby pose a threat to child safety and well-being (Conger et al., 2002; Conger et al., 1994; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; McLeod & Shanahan, 1993; McLoyd, 1998; McLoyd & Wilson, 1991; Votruba-Drzal, 2003).<sup>4</sup>

11. Third, economic theory suggests that low-income parents may invest less in their children than higher-income parents because the former expect to receive lesser future compensation for such investments (Becker, 1993). For example, it is possible that low-income parents have fewer expectations that their children will provide for them financially as they age. If this is the case, and if child maltreatment (and child neglect in particular) reflects underinvestment in children, it can be expected to occur more frequently among lower-income families (Berger, 2004). Similarly, parents who would be—or believe they would be—better off by limiting the time and money they invest in meeting their children’s needs in order to maximize their ability to meet their own (perceived) needs, may also under-invest in their children’s care; if extreme enough, such under-investment may constitute abuse or neglect.

12. Fourth, low-income parents may have fewer disciplinary or behavioral control options from which to choose compared to higher-income parents. Thus, low-income parents may abstain from or withhold certain care giving behaviors and/or engage in harsh physical discipline in an attempt to elicit particular behaviors from their children (Becker, 1993; Weinberg, 2001). For example, Weinberg (2001) argues that low-income parents are more likely than other parents to utilize physical forms of discipline such as spanking as a means of altering their children’s behaviors because they lack the income to offer their children other types of incentives, such as gifts or allowances, in exchange for behavioral compliance. To the extent that such strategies cross a legally defined threshold for maltreatment a family may be considered emotionally and/or physically abusive or neglectful.

13. Fifth, maltreatment-related behaviors may be influenced by whether a family receives child-conditioned (cash or in-kind) transfers. Child-conditioned transfers might be inversely associated with maltreatment in two ways. To begin with, if income is causally associated with child abuse and neglect, then public policies that increase income should result in decreased maltreatment. In addition, if benefits are child-conditioned, then parents who receive them may have a financial incentive to provide their children with adequate care. That is, parents should be less likely to maltreat children if they risk losing income (via child removal and the accompanying loss of benefits) by doing so. This suggests that cash transfers based upon the continued presence of children in the home may create a disincentive for child maltreatment (Berger, 2004).

14. Sixth, economic instability (changes in income) may influence the likelihood that parents will engage in abuse or neglect over and above the influence of a family’s overall level and source(s) of income. In particular, decreases in income may lead to a concomitant deterioration of the home

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<sup>4</sup> A large literature indicates that, on average, low income parents engage in harsher, more punitive, and less responsive parenting, and provide lower quality home environments than their higher income counterparts (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; McLoyd, 1998; Votruba-Drzal, 2003)—although the parenting behaviors of the vast majority of low-income families do not constitute maltreatment. Several scholars have argued that abuse and neglect represent the tail end of the distribution of parenting behaviors (Berger, 2004, 2007; Kolko, 2002). David Kolko (2002, p. 25), for example, observes that “physically abusive behavior represents an exaggerated aggressive or hostile response that occurs within a continuum of parenting practices.” Indeed, maltreating parents are likely to provide lower-quality caregiving environments for their children, to engage in less responsive parenting, and to parent in a more punitive style than non-maltreating parents (Baumrind 1994, 1995; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Current evidence suggests that both average parenting behaviors and substandard parenting behaviors (Berger, 2004, 2005, 2007) are influenced by parental income.

environment or quality of parental care, and/or an increase in parental stress.<sup>5</sup> Such situations, if severe enough, may place children's safety or well-being at risk and thereby constitute child maltreatment. Additionally, families experiencing persistently low income may be at greater risk of maltreatment than those experiencing only brief or episodic periods of low income, as the adverse effects of low income may accumulate over time.<sup>6</sup>

15. Finally, it is important to consider the role of family structure, which may be linked to child maltreatment both through variation in income and (independently of income) through variation in parental behaviors toward and investments in children across family types (Berger 2007, 2005, 2004; Berger, Paxson, & Waldfogel, 2009).<sup>7</sup> On average, single-parent families and (married and unmarried) stepparent families have lower incomes than two-biological-parent families. Differences in child maltreatment rates between family types may, at least in part, reflect such differences in income. Additionally, for single-parent families, the dual parental role of caregiver and breadwinner is characterized by considerable time constraints and high levels of stress, both of which may lead to increases in child abuse and neglect. With regard to stepfamilies, non-biological parents have fewer incentives than biological parents to invest in children and may also require time and attention from biological parents that would otherwise be devoted to childrearing. Stepfamilies also tend to be characterized by higher levels of intra-familial conflict and parental role ambiguity (with regard to the non-biological parent) than two-biological-parent families. Each of these factors may help to explain why maltreatment rates are higher among single-parent families and stepfamilies than two-biological-parent families.

16. Despite these theoretical tenets, however, it is also possible that correlations between low income and child maltreatment are not causal, but rather reflect social selection such that they are spuriously driven by other factors (e.g., limited parental education, substance abuse, mental health problems) that affect both parental income and whether a parent is likely to engage in maltreatment.<sup>8</sup> A related concern, at least when considering "official" maltreatment records (as opposed to actual parental behaviors), is that low-income families are simply more likely to become involved with child welfare services—for example, as a result of higher levels of exposure to potential reporters or due to disparities by family socioeconomic status in the decision making of potential reporters and child welfare professionals with regard to child maltreatment reporting and case findings—even if they are no more likely to actually maltreat their children than are their higher income counterparts.

17. Below, we review the empirical evidence regarding associations between low income and child maltreatment; we then discuss whether the existing evidence suggests that these associations are likely to be causal.

### **Empirical evidence**

18. Most empirical research linking low income to child maltreatment and child welfare involvement has been conducted in the United States and, to a lesser extent, in the other Anglo-American countries (Cameron & Freymond, 2006). Many of the studies conducted in these countries have focused on

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<sup>5</sup> Conversely, gains in income may be associated with reductions in maltreatment by allowing families to begin to purchase such necessities or by functioning to reduce parental stress.

<sup>6</sup> Prior research suggests that maltreating families tend to experience deeper and more persistent poverty and material deprivation than non-maltreating families (Falconnier & Elkin, 2008; Giovannoni & Billingsley, 1970; Wolock & Horowitz, 1979).

<sup>7</sup> As such, tax and other public policies that influence family structure may also influence child maltreatment rates.

<sup>8</sup> Likewise, associations between family structure and child maltreatment may fully or partially be driven by social selection.

involvement with the child welfare system as an indicator of child maltreatment, and such studies have supported the conclusion that poverty and community disadvantage are “the most consistent and strongest statistical predictors of having an open child protection case” and particularly of having a child placed in out-of-home care (Cameron & Freymond, 2006, p. 11). More generally, a large body of research spanning approximately four decades and examining both actual parenting behaviors and child welfare involvement has shown that income is inversely correlated with parental behaviors that constitute abuse and neglect as well as with child welfare system involvement.

19. Low-income and poor families have consistently been found to have increased probabilities of both actual child maltreatment and involvement with child welfare services (Gil, 1970; Pelton, 1981, 1994; Russell & Trainor, 1984; Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996; Stith et al., 2009; Trickett, Aber, Carlson, & Cicchetti, 1991; Wolock & Horowitz, 1979). Existing evidence also suggests that other indicators or correlates of low income, such as single parenthood, unemployment, limited access to social and economic resources, and residence in a low-income community are correlated with a variety of measures of child maltreatment (Coulton et al., 1995; Coulton et al., 2007; Crittenden, 1999; Drake & Pandey, 1996; Dubowitz 1999; Jones, 1990; National Research Council, 1993; Paxson and Waldfogel, 2002, 2003), as well as with substandard parenting (Berger, 2007, 2005, 2004; Berger & Brooks-Gunn, 2005; Paxson, Berger, & Waldfogel, 2002).<sup>9</sup>

20. Furthermore, among low-income populations and populations considered to be at risk of child maltreatment, welfare benefit sanctions (which entail a decrease in the cash payment amount), utility shut-offs, loss of employment, residential moves, and self-perceived material hardship are all associated with increased risk of child welfare system involvement (Courtney et al, 2005; McDaniel & Slack, 2005; Slack, Lee & Berger, 2007; Slack, Holl, McDaniel, Lee & Bolger, 2004). Similar evidence has been found at the aggregate level; U.S. studies indicate that higher community- and state-level poverty, unemployment, and welfare receipt rates, as well as less generous state-level social welfare benefits, are associated with higher community- and state-level child maltreatment rates (Coulton et al., 2007; Coulton et al., 1995; Drake & Pandey, 1996; Paxson & Waldfogel, 2002; 2003; Slack, Holl, Lee, McDaniel, Altenbernd & Stevens, 2003). Finally, findings from the U.S. also suggest that low income is more closely associated with child neglect than with other forms of child maltreatment (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2008).

21. As noted above, there is much less evidence regarding links between low income and child maltreatment in non-Anglo-American countries. In addition, inconsistencies in definitions of maltreatment across countries and in the availability of data on maltreatment and child welfare system involvement have precluded meaningful cross-country comparisons of both maltreatment rates and of the characteristics of the population of children involved in the child welfare system (Pires, 1993). As such, Freymond and Cameron (2006, p. 315) note that “Regrettably, there is very little international comparative research upon which to base comparisons of systems of child and family welfare. Most comparisons are based upon the analyses and impressions of knowledgeable informants within particular systems.”

22. Yet, both the anecdotal evidence provided by key informants and the (albeit limited) empirical evidence to date support the notion that the link between low income and child maltreatment is not limited to the U.S. For example, Pires (1993) indicates that key informants on the child protection systems in Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom describe economic stress as a contributing factor with regard to increasing child maltreatment in their countries. Likewise, even in countries such as Denmark and Finland, which have generous social welfare systems that are much more focused on child and family well-

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<sup>9</sup> Although the latter group of studies is not focused on child maltreatment per se, the underlying processes linking socioeconomic factors to maltreatment may be similar to those linking socioeconomic factors to substandard parenting.

being than on child protection, limited economic resources, financial problems, low levels of education, and unemployment appear to be considerable risk factors for child maltreatment (Hearn et al., 2004; Hestbaek, 1999) and are associated with intensive child welfare intervention such as out-of-home placement (Hestbaek, 1999). In short, though quite limited, the cross-national evidence to date suggests that, in high-income countries, low parental income and educational achievement are strongly associated with both child maltreatment and with deaths resulting from child abuse (Gilbert et al., 2009a).<sup>10</sup>

23. Despite considerable empirical (at least from the Anglo-American countries) and anecdotal evidence demonstrating that low income and child maltreatment are correlated, however, given limitations in existing data and study methodologies, we actually know very little about whether the two phenomena are causally related. Existing studies are almost exclusively observational (rather than experimental) in nature and have thus been unable to convincingly adjust for selection bias. Furthermore, most existing research has utilized cross-sectional and/or retrospective (rather than prospective) data, and has tended to focus on samples of exclusively low-income families or families who have a priori been defined as being at risk of or having already experienced child maltreatment. Longitudinal, prospective, and population-based studies are exceedingly rare. To the best of our knowledge, there have been no studies that experimentally test the effect of exogenous changes in income on the likelihood that families engage in child maltreatment.

24. However, three U.S. studies provide suggestive evidence that the low income-maltreatment link may be causal. Results from an experimental evaluation of a welfare reform program in the state of Delaware demonstrated that the treatment group, which was subject to a less generous benefit package (including harsher work requirements, eligibility conditions, and penalties for noncompliance) and thus received lower cash benefits than the control group, exhibited a higher rate of substantiated child neglect reports (Fein & Lee, 2003). Unfortunately, though, the study could not identify which components (benefit levels, work requirements, etc.) were driving this association.

25. A quasi-experimental study from the state of Illinois provides some further (albeit, again, limited) evidence suggesting that economic resources and child maltreatment may be causally linked. Shook and Testa (1997) used a unique identification strategy based on inefficiencies in program implementation that (presumably) resulted in exogenous variation in benefit receipt to test the efficacy of a program that provided short-term and relatively limited cash assistance to families that were at risk of having a child placed in foster care due to inadequate provision of food or shelter by their families. They found that eligible families who received cash assistance were less likely than eligible families who did not receive cash assistance to experience child removal over the subsequent 15-month period, suggesting that even short-term and relatively limited economic supports may play a protective role with regard to child abuse and neglect (or, at the very least, with regard to intensive child welfare system involvement).

26. Finally, Cancian, Slack, and Yang (2010) used data from a randomized child support and welfare reform experiment in the state of Wisconsin to test whether an exogenous increase in income is associated with a decrease in the likelihood that a family is the subject of a child maltreatment investigation. They found that treatment group families, who were eligible for the exogenous income transfer, were less likely

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<sup>10</sup> Additionally, although rigorous empirical evidence is lacking, child welfare scholars have speculated that generous social welfare policies are associated with lower levels of child maltreatment given that countries with lower poverty rates and more liberal benefits tend to also have lower maltreatment rates (Freymond & Cameron, 2006; Pires, 1993). Indeed, both maltreatment and child abuse-related death rates are considerably higher in the U.S. (and, to a lesser extent, the other Anglo-American countries) and the Eastern European countries, than in the Western, Central, and Southern European and Scandinavian countries that are engaged in a more holistic approach to child welfare and child and family policy; child poverty rates follow a similar pattern (Gilbert, 2009a; Pires, 1993).

to experience a child maltreatment investigation than control group families. This result appears to provide the strongest evidence to date in support of a causal link between family income and child maltreatment (at least as measured by child protective service system involvement).

27. Though suggestive in nature, none of these studies provides conclusive evidence that there are causal links between low income and child maltreatment. Thus, additional research using rigorous methods to identify whether such associations are causal is needed. Answering this question has crucial implications for public policy: if child maltreatment and low income are spuriously correlated, then public policies that increase family income but do not address other factors associated with both income and maltreatment cannot be expected to affect maltreatment rates; conversely, if low income is causally related to maltreatment, generous income support policies may play a considerable role in reducing abuse and neglect, and the wide range of associated economic and social consequences with which they have been linked. We turn to those consequences in the next section.

### **Consequences of maltreatment**

28. Why should governments be concerned about child maltreatment? Economists typically justify government intervention, including efforts to promote child well-being, on the grounds of equity and/or efficiency (see e.g. OECD, 2009). Although action against child abuse and neglect is usually justified on equity grounds, in fact, the problem of child maltreatment warrants intervention on both grounds.

29. The equity argument is that maltreatment represents an unacceptable way for children to grow up and that responsible societies have an obligation to do all they can to prevent it. This argument can also be expressed in terms of a rights perspective, in that children have a ‘right’ to a childhood free of abuse and neglect. Whether framed in terms of equity or rights, the moral imperative to protect children is seen as so strong that it can even trump society’s interest in protecting the privacy of the family and the rights of parents. Thus, as we discussed earlier, virtually every industrialized society has established minimal conditions for child-rearing and has drawn a line where government will intervene – against parents’ will if necessary – to protect children from abuse or neglect. Societies differ in where they draw this line (for example, some countries prohibit corporal punishment of any kind whereas others permit parents to spank but not to use more extreme forms of physical discipline), but all societies have set thresholds of some kind, and all have some mechanism for responding to situations where children are being maltreated or are at risk of maltreatment.

30. Perhaps less familiar is the efficiency argument for intervening against child maltreatment. Briefly, the efficiency argument is that child maltreatment imposes long-term costs – for the children involved and for society as a whole – and that these costs justify investment in cost-effective programs to prevent maltreatment. It is useful to place this argument in the context of the growing body of work on child well-being more generally. With increased knowledge and awareness about the long-term benefits of societal investments in children, and the long-term costs of poor child health and development, economists have increasingly made the case for cost-effective investments to promote child well-being (see, for example, OECD, 2009). Although child maltreatment is usually omitted from such discussions – because data on child maltreatment tend to be less readily available than for other child outcomes – the same arguments apply to that domain. As we review below, there is compelling evidence that maltreatment experienced during childhood is associated with a host of poor outcomes in adolescence and adulthood, and that these outcomes impose substantial costs for both the children involved and society more generally. Although the evidence base on cost-effective programs to prevent maltreatment is limited, as we discuss below, the evidence we do have points to a handful of programs that have been shown to effectively prevent child maltreatment, and others that appear promising.

31. Below, we first review the evidence on the adverse effects of child maltreatment throughout the lifespan. We then review the evidence on existing interventions.

### **What do we know about the long-term effects of child maltreatment?**

32. In this section, we draw on empirical studies as well as recent reviews (in particular, Gilbert et al., 2009a; Krug et al., 2002; WHO, 2006). We organize our discussion by outcome, considering first the effects on health, mental health, substance use, and criminal behavior, then cognitive development and academic achievement, and finally employment and earnings. We conclude this section with a discussion of family-related outcomes including the intergenerational risk of maltreatment.

33. We note at the outset that the evidence base ranges from small-scale studies of select populations to larger-scale studies of more representative populations, some using prospective methods and others relying on retrospective data (see Gilbert et al., 2009a for a useful discussion of the strengths and limitations of existing research designs in this area). For the most part, studies are observational. Although all of the studies we cite control for other differences between maltreated and non-maltreated children, such studies can only control for a limited set of characteristics that are captured in their data; thus their estimates remain subject to selection bias and cannot be considered causal. We highlight the few instances where studies use more rigorous methods to establish causality.

34. We note, also, that our aim is to document where it appears that there are long-term effects of maltreatment on later adolescent or adult outcomes and to highlight where those effects are likely to be particularly costly. As such, we do not, for the most part, distinguish between the effects of different types of maltreatment; nor do we consider the developmental timing of effects within childhood,<sup>11</sup> although we recognize that such factors are important for a more nuanced understanding of linkages between maltreatment and later outcomes (see, e.g. Cicchetti & Carlson, 1989).

### **Health, mental health, substance use, and criminal behavior**

35. Experiences of childhood maltreatment have been found to be associated with poorer adult health on a range of outcomes (see e.g. Felitti et al., 1998; Springer et al., 2007; see also review in Gilbert et al., 2009a). In particular, several studies have established an association between child maltreatment and elevated risk of obesity in adolescence and adulthood (Johnson et al, 2002; Lissau & Sorensen, 1994; Noll et al., 2007; Thomas, Hypponen, & Power, 2008).

36. In terms of mental health, it is well-established that children who have been maltreated are at higher risk of both externalizing (acting-out) and internalizing (anxiety, depression) behavior problems (see, for example, Banyard, Williams, & Siegel, 2001; Fergusson, Boden, & Horwood, 2008; Herrenkohl et al., 1995; Herrenkohl & Herrenkohl, 2007; Lansford et al., 2002; Manly et al., 2001; Thornberry, Ireland, & Smith, 2001).<sup>12</sup> In addition, many studies have found that individuals who were maltreated in childhood are more likely to suffer from depression as well as post-traumatic stress disorder in adolescence

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<sup>11</sup> In general, maltreatment experienced in early childhood tends to have larger adverse developmental consequences than maltreatment experienced in later childhood or adolescence (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002); this is consistent with a large literature documenting the importance of early experiences for later life outcomes (see e.g. Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> There is also evidence from both school and summer camp settings that maltreated children display higher levels of aggression and less social competence and ability to self-regulate behavior than non-maltreated children (Manly, Cicchetti, & Barnett, 1994; Reidy, 1977; Shields, Cicchetti, & Ryan, 1994). This implies that there may be adverse peer effects of maltreatment to the extent that maltreated children disrupt learning for peers. However, we are not aware of any direct empirical evidence showing this to be the case.

and adulthood; those who were physically or sexually abused are also at higher risk of suicide (see review in Gilbert et al., 2009a).

37. With regard to substance use, several studies have found that children who were maltreated face a higher risk of alcohol problems in adolescence and adulthood; this finding appears to be driven by a particularly elevated risk of alcohol problems among women (see e.g. Lansford et al., 2009; Widom, Ireland, & Glynn, 1995; Widom et al., 2007; see also reviews in Gilbert et al., 2009a; Simpson & Miller, 2002). Children who were maltreated are also at higher risk of drug problems in adulthood and again there is evidence that this result reflects increased risk for women (see e.g. Lansford et al., 2009; Widom et al., 2006; Widom, Marmorstein, & White, 2006; Wilson & Widom, 2009).

38. There is also a wealth of evidence establishing a connection between having been maltreated as a child and elevated risk of delinquency and violence in adolescence and adulthood (Widom, 1989; see also review in Gilbert et al., 2009a). Most notably, a recent U.S. study, which applied more rigorous methods than prior studies (e.g. propensity score matching and twin estimates), found that having been maltreated as a child doubles the risk of engaging in crime in adolescence and young adulthood (Currie & Tekin, 2006).

### **Cognitive development and academic achievement**

39. Studies in the U.S. have found that children who were maltreated are more likely to be referred for special education (indicating learning difficulties), have lower school attendance and achievement, and are less likely to complete high school than children who did not suffer abuse or neglect (Jonson-Reid et al., 2004; Lansford et al., 2002; Leiter, 1997; Perez & Widom, 1994). Furthermore, the effects on cognitive development and academic achievement appear to persist into adulthood: Following a sample of U.S. children who had been referred to the courts for maltreatment and comparing them to similar children who were not referred, Perez and Widom (1994) found that at age 28, the maltreated group had lower IQ scores and reading ability, had completed one year less schooling, were more likely to have repeated a grade, were more likely to have been truant, and were more likely to have been suspended or expelled from school. However, a study in New Zealand found that most of the differences in educational outcomes between maltreated and non-maltreated children were explained by other family characteristics suggesting that social selection may play a role in explaining the association between child maltreatment and adverse developmental outcomes (Boden, Horwood, & Fergusson, 2007).

### **Employment and earnings**

40. Much of the evidence on the long-run effects of child maltreatment on adult employment and earnings comes from a U.S. study following a sample of children referred to the courts for child maltreatment.<sup>13</sup> Comparing outcomes at age 29 for these children versus matched controls, the maltreated children were less likely to be employed and, if employed, less likely to be in skilled or professional occupations (Widom, 1998). A more recent study examines longer-term economic outcomes for this sample (Currie & Widom, 2010). Comparing labor market outcomes at age 41, the study found that, consistent with the results at age 29, those who had been maltreated as children were less likely to be employed and, if employed, less likely to be in skilled or professional occupations. In addition, those who had been maltreated had lower earnings and fewer assets (they were less likely to own stock, a car, or a home). These results were not confined to those who had been physically or sexually abused but were also present when the sample was restricted to those who had been neglected. Finally, analyses by gender

<sup>13</sup> There are also two studies focusing specifically on the long-run effects of sexual abuse on employment and earnings. Hyman (2000) finds that sexual abuse is linked to lower earnings in a U.S. sample, while Mullen et al. (1994) find it is linked to a higher likelihood of engaging in unskilled work in a New Zealand sample.

indicated that women were more strongly affected: although both women and men who had been maltreated had poorer labor market outcomes at age 29, by age 41, significant earnings differences between those who had been maltreated and controls were present only for women.

### **Family-Related Outcomes and the Intergenerational Risk of Maltreatment**

41. Experiencing maltreatment in childhood has also been linked to the risk of adverse outcomes for the next generation of children. Two mechanisms, in addition to the risks posed by having parents who suffer from the poor outcomes discussed above, appear to be particularly important in explaining these links. First, children who are maltreated are more likely to become teen parents (Lansford et al., 2007; Thornberry, Ireland, & Smith, 2001). Young parental age is consistently identified as a risk factor for child maltreatment (Fundudis, Kaplan, & Dickinson, 2003; Lee & Goerge, 1999). In addition, although many children of teen parents do well, on average teen parenthood creates a host of developmental risks for the child of the teen parent who will be more likely to grow up in an unstable or single parent household and in a household with fewer resources to draw upon (Furstenberg, 2007).

42. Second, there is strong intergenerational persistence in parenting behavior. Children who are maltreated are more likely to go on to become maltreating parents themselves, thus perpetuating the cycle of abuse and neglect and exposing another generation of children to maltreatment (see, for example, WHO, 2006). On a more positive note, as we discuss below this means that the benefits of preventing maltreatment are also potentially intergenerational – programs that reduce maltreatment in the current generation of children should provide additional pay-offs in the form of reduced maltreatment in the next generation.

### **Interventions to prevent maltreatment**

43. The evidence base reviewed above suggests that the costs of maltreatment are likely to be substantial. Yet, firm estimates of the full range of long-run costs of abuse and neglect are lacking. For the most part, existing economic analyses tend to focus on the costs of child welfare system involvement or, more generally, on government expenditures on child welfare-related programs and services. Yet, these items represent only a subset of the full costs of abuse and neglect. A few studies have also used back-of-the-envelope methods to produce rough estimates of the total cost of abuse and neglect: Prevent Child Abuse America (2007) estimates the total annual cost of child maltreatment in the U.S. to be \$103.8 billion; Taylor and colleagues (2008) estimate the total annual cost of child abuse and neglect in Australia to be \$38.7 billion, which they describe as a conservative estimate. To the best of our knowledge, however, there are no methodologically rigorous studies in this area.

44. Once all of the adverse outcomes documented above plus those that are harder to measure such as children's pain and suffering are taken into account, the case for intervening to prevent maltreatment is compelling. At the same time, however, it must be acknowledged that the evidence on which specific interventions, or types of interventions, effectively prevent maltreatment is very limited. As others have noted, child protective agencies provide "a somewhat haphazard set of services that aim to help abusive families and their children ... [with] a shortage of effective intervention programs to provide needed services [and] a dearth of prevention services" (Haskins et al., 2007, p. 2). Most programs intended to prevent maltreatment have not been evaluated. And, even when evaluations have been carried out, they have rarely used rigorous methods or direct measures of maltreatment (MacMillan et al., 2009; Waldfogel, 2009).

One program that has been rigorously evaluated and shown to substantially reduce maltreatment is the Nurse Family Partnership (NFP) (Olds et al., 1986, 1997; see also reviews by Howard & Brooks-Gunn, 2009; MacMillan et al., 2009; Waldfogel, 2009). Briefly, NFP provides intensive in-home support and



services, delivered by trained nurses, to first-time young mothers, with the goal of reducing the risk of maltreatment. A random assignment evaluation in the initial site (Elmira, New York) found that the program reduced subsequent maltreatment by 50%, as measured by objective indicators such as emergency room visits and referrals to child protective services; in addition, parents who received the home visits were less likely than parents in the control group to report punishing or physically restraining their children. Subsequent studies provided further evidence of the program's effectiveness in reducing the risk of maltreatment,<sup>14</sup> and the program is now being rolled out nationally in the U.S. as well as in several locations in other countries including Canada, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom.

45. Janet Currie and co-authors have compared the cost of the NFP with the benefits that would be obtained in terms of reduced adult crime or improved adult earnings. Based on data from the Elmira, New York program, these estimates assume that NFP costs about \$4,000 per year per child and reduces the risk of maltreatment by 50%. With regard to crime, Currie and Tekin (2006) found that maltreatment doubled the risk of adult crime. Because the costs of crime are so high, these costs alone would justify investing in a preventive program such as NFP (see Currie and Tekin, 2006, for detailed calculations). With regard to earnings, Currie and Widom (2010) found that those who had been maltreated in childhood earn, on average, about \$5,000 per year less in mid-life than comparable individuals who had not been maltreated. These losses add up considerably over the course of a working life. Again, these costs alone would justify investing in a program such as NFP. And, of course, as the authors point out, these costs are only a subset of the total costs of maltreatment, making the case for intervention even stronger.

46. In short it seems clear that, if effective programs – such as NFP – can be identified, it is quite likely that they would pass a cost-benefit test. The real challenge is to identify proven programs. Looking across different types of preventive programs, one recent review identified only two proven programs – the NFP home visiting program, which has the strongest evidence base, and the Early Start home-visiting program, which reduced some indicators of maltreatment (but not others) in an experimental trial (MacMillan et al., 2009). Another recent review also highlighted NFP as having the strongest evidence base, while pointing to some evidence on the role that child care programs might play in preventing maltreatment among young children (Waldfogel, 2009).<sup>15</sup>

47. But there are many other programs, currently being funded, for which the evidence base is weak or non-existent. In the U.S. and many other countries, parent education programs are the most commonly provided type of prevention service. Yet, a review of the evidence on parent education programs prepared for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services concluded:

48. The record is neither rich nor, on the whole, particularly compelling. However, a few studies have demonstrated positive findings. Many of the existing studies in this area rely on outcomes that do not include actual maltreatment reports, but focus on short-term gains in knowledge, skills, or abilities. Thus, taken as a whole, little is known about the impact of these programs on child maltreatment in the long term (Thomas et al., 2003, p. 15).

49. Moreover, when that same review invited nominations for effective parent education programs, only one program (the University of Maryland's Family Connections program for at risk families with

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<sup>14</sup> A random assignment trial in Memphis, Tennessee, found that children in the treatment group had fewer injuries and accidents requiring medical treatment, and lower mortality rates, than the controls; a third random assignment trial, in Denver, Colorado, did not collect data on these outcomes but did find beneficial effects of the program on intermediate outcomes such as the sensitivity of mothers' parenting (see review in Howard & Brooks-Gunn, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Both reviews also identified some promising programs, which have not been studied experimentally but have shown some promise in non-experimental studies (MacMillan et al., 2009; Waldfogel, 2009).

children age 5-11) met the standards to be judged as a demonstrated effective program, having been evaluated using a random assignment design and having demonstrated significant effects on protective and risk factors for child abuse and neglect.<sup>16</sup>

50. Home visiting programs are another very extensively used approach to preventing maltreatment. However, whereas the NFP home visiting program has been found to be effective in reducing child maltreatment, the evidence on other home visiting programs is considerably weaker. Howard and Brooks-Gunn (2009) review the evidence on nine home visiting programs. Although they find some positive results for selected programs, the evidence is mixed, and the NFP program is the only one where the evidence, from multiple sites, is consistently positive. They therefore conclude that “overall, researchers have found little evidence that home-visiting programs directly prevent child abuse and neglect” (p. 119).<sup>17</sup> Understanding why the NFP program has been more consistently effective in preventing maltreatment than other home visiting programs remains an important challenge. But it is likely that the intensive and long-term nature of the program, its strict adherence to a defined program model, and its reliance on nurses for service delivery, all play an important role in its success.

51. Given the high costs of maltreatment, identifying additional effective programs should be a high priority. This will require carrying out more rigorous evaluation studies and ensuring that such studies include direct measures of child abuse and neglect. In addition, it is clear that more evidence is needed on programs in settings other than the U.S. where most of the existing studies have been carried out.

### **Conclusion**

52. Although it is often thought that child maltreatment is a hidden problem about which little is known, and one that is not particularly amenable to outside influence, the evidence reviewed here suggests otherwise. A large number of studies have been conducted on the determinants of maltreatment; their results point clearly to economic resources playing an important role in influencing risk for child abuse and (particularly) child neglect, although conclusive causal evidence has thus far been elusive. The existing evidence that maltreatment imposes tremendous long-term costs both to the children involved and to society – costs that justify heightened efforts to reduce maltreatment – is even more clear.

53. At the same time, our review highlights several important gaps in current knowledge. First, cross-national research on child maltreatment has been hampered by both inconsistencies across countries in definitions of abuse and neglect and by a scarcity of comparable data on maltreatment and child welfare systems. The field would benefit greatly from research aimed at precisely describing and comparing how abuse and neglect are defined, as well as research documenting the types of data that are available, across countries. Such an exercise would have important implications regarding the types of cross-national comparisons that are currently possible as well as the types of data and approaches to conceptualizing maltreatment that will be necessary to facilitate improved in-depth cross-national empirical analyses in the future.

54. Second, additional research using sophisticated analytic methods is necessary in order to gain further insight into whether associations between low income and child maltreatment are likely to be causal in nature. As noted above, identifying whether these relations are truly causal, as opposed to simply

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<sup>16</sup> An additional two programs were reported to be effective but lacked a random assignment evaluation.

<sup>17</sup> The programs reviewed, in addition to Nurse-Family Partnership for which they found the strongest evidence, included five other programs in the U.S. (Hawaii Healthy Start, Healthy Families America, the Comprehensive Child Development Program, Early Head Start, and the Infant Health and Development Program); the Early Start Program in New Zealand; a demonstration program in Queensland Australia; and a program for depressed new mothers in the Netherlands.

correlational, is crucial to designing effective public policies for preventing child maltreatment. Additionally, research in this area should also examine: (1) whether relations between low income and child maltreatment are consistent or differ across individual countries and between groups of countries defined by their social, economic, and policy contexts; (2) whether links between economic resources and child abuse and neglect are closely associated with particular low income thresholds (e.g., absolute or relative poverty thresholds) or tend to be somewhat more linear in nature (and whether there is variation in the form of these relations across countries or contexts); (3) the extent to which child maltreatment may be influenced by income instability compared to levels of absolute or relative income; (4) whether low income is similarly or differentially associated with child abuse and child neglect (both within and across countries/context); and (5) the extent to which low income may differentially influence actual parental behaviors that constitute abuse or neglect compared to systemic factors such as child welfare reporting, system involvement, case findings, types and intensity of interventions, and outcomes for children and families (including, but not limited to, out-of-home placement). It would also be useful to design experimental evaluations testing the influence of exogenous changes in income (particularly those resulting from child-conditioned transfers) on child maltreatment.

55. Third, most empirical research regarding the economic causes and consequences of maltreatment has been conducted in Anglo-American countries, especially the U.S. The extension of these lines of inquiry to a wider range of countries is warranted. In particular, it will be important for future work to provide a rigorous accounting of the full range of economic and social costs of maltreatment in different societies, as well to fully identify areas in which there may be similarities and differences in those child well-being-related outcomes that appear to result from child abuse and neglect in countries with a holistic or well-being oriented approach to child welfare compared to those with a child protection focus.

56. Finally, given limited evidence regarding which interventions are most effective at preventing (particular types of) child maltreatment, it is crucial that future prevention programs be rigorously evaluated and that such evaluations include direct measures of child maltreatment and be conducted in the various contexts in which a prevention program may be implemented. These evaluations should include detailed cost-benefit analyses.

57. On the whole, the limitations of existing work have led us to concur with Gilbert and colleagues (2009a) that it is crucial to generate more evidence on the causes and consequences of child maltreatment, as well as the efficacy of existing and future programs, in a variety of social, economic, cultural, and policy contexts. We agree that

58. International comparative studies are needed, especially in countries outside North America and northern Europe, to help learn lessons from different settings about how to prevent child maltreatment and its consequences... Research into what works at an individual and policy level is a priority (Gilbert et al., 2009a, p. 77).

59. As such, we (re-)emphasize that, although a few proven programs exist, the evidence base on effective programs is not as strong as it should be. It is crucial to encourage rigorous research and evaluation in order to identify the most efficient programs for addressing child maltreatment in particular contexts.

60. Thus, the agenda for further research – across advanced industrialized countries – is quite long as well as challenging. The leadership of an international organization such as the OECD in focusing attention on this important issue and stimulating further research could prove consequential, and we applaud them for their interest in this subject. The OECD plays a unique role as a cross-national public policy advisory organization to the advanced industrialized countries and has an unparalleled history of gathering and comparing policy information and government data from member nations. We strongly urge

the Organization to expand this role with regard child abuse and neglect. A crucial first step toward advancing cross-national policy research in this area would be to compile a detailed country-by-country database containing information on the full range of maltreatment-related policies of member countries (with regard to definitions of abuse and neglect, as well as reporting, investigation, and child removal policies). This would allow for initial descriptive work comparing the range and types of policies that have been adopted by the advanced industrialized countries. Ideally, such a database would also include detailed information on the types of administrative data used to track child maltreatment rates and involvement with the child welfare system in each country. This would shed light on the extent to which administrative and other child welfare data are (or are not) consistent across particular countries. It would therefore have important implications for future data collection efforts aimed at tracking abuse and neglect cross-nationally. It would also enable researchers to determine the types of comparative analyses that are currently possible and the specific countries that can be included in particular types of analyses. Such an endeavor would greatly benefit the international policy community and facilitate research to inform policies for preventing child maltreatment and reducing its ill effects across the industrialized world.

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