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The Paradox of Child Poverty and Welfare

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Abstract

The United States confronts persistent child welfare issues rooted in poverty. The age-old debate vacillates between advocating personal responsibility and bolstering social safety nets. Current welfare programs, aiming to mitigate child poverty, often fall short given the deep nexus of poverty and child maltreatment. This paper probes the intricate ties between child poverty and welfare, emphasizing state legislative variances, inherent system paradoxes, and potential policy enhancements. Exploring historical contexts, existing societal frameworks, and future reforms, this research emphasizes the urgency for all-encompassing solutions. These should tackle poverty’s core while fortifying child welfare, safeguarding the well-being of forthcoming American generations.

Keywords: Child welfare, legislation, maltreatment, policy, poverty, social safety net

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Introduction

It's remarkable to think that how the United States, as one of the world's wealthiest countries, should assist "at-risk" children has long been a point of contention. How much, if any, assistance should they and their families expect? Should the government, private organizations, or a mix of the two pay for assistance? Is the problem of impoverished children due to parental irresponsibility and immorality, or does it stem from structural issues in American social, cultural, political, and economic contexts? What kind of help, if any, should be provided to prevent rewarding parental irresponsibility without harming their children?

Attempts to answer these questions date back to the early Republic and have almost always been divisive politically. For some, individual responsibility and limited government has long defined what it means to be an American; others disagree and have argued for a sturdy social safety net. As a result, there has been little long-term agreement on the best approach to deliver services to the poor, if any at all.

Children are innocent and deserve care and other chances to help them become model employees and citizens in the United States. Americans are less conflicted about providing a social safety net for children than they are about aiding adults, at least theoretically. Various welfare programs such as Earned Income Tax Credit, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, Childcare and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families are there to work as society's backbone to promote child welfare.

Children whose parents were too impoverished to care for them ended up in orphanages during the majority of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Not only were these facilities criticized, but life in orphanages was regulated and frequently brutal, with high rates of child sickness and mortality. In 1909, a significant federal conference called to discuss the issue of dependent children concluded that this practice was unethical. Hundreds of thousands of institutionalized children with living, if impoverished, parents' ought to be at home, according to these reformers. In the framework of the Great Society's War on Poverty, the 1960s saw fresh initiatives to address the problem of underprivileged children. In 1964, the fact that over a quarter of children were destitute was regarded nothing short of a

disgrace in the world's richest country. While programs like Medicaid and Food Stamps (later known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), were heavily disputed because they would reduce adult incentives to work, others, such as Project Head Start, which provided services directly to poor children, were less so because they avoided concerns about rewarding adults who had made poor choices and were thus undeserving. Children's initiatives drew strong political backing. In the 1980s and 1990s, a more conservative political atmosphere reignited disputes over whether the government had a role to play in poverty solutions, and even if it was in the best interests of poor children to keep them at home. During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, while the economy was growing, child poverty decreased. However, following the 2008 financial crisis, it has climbed to nearly the same level as when President Lyndon B. Johnson started the War on Poverty in 1964 (The Council of Economic Advisers U.S., 2014).

Factors contributing to the issue

The reasons of child poverty are inextricably linked to the causes of adult poverty. Expenses connected with raising children, as well as job losses and wage cutbacks, the shift from a two-parent to one-parent home, and a family member obtaining a handicap, are all factors that contribute to families falling into poverty (Katz, 2013).

Factors that make it difficult for adults to satisfy their fundamental necessities result in their children growing up in a state of economic insecurity and deprivation as well. There is no complete social safety net in place in the United States to properly protect children from the emotional, physical, neurological, and generational effects of such instability (Jiang et al., 2015).

Current policies do not guarantee economic stability

Raising children is costly and adding more family members necessitates an increase in expenditures, yet families sometimes confront their most expensive bills well before their prime working years. This is a problem for families of all economic levels, but those with the fewest resources bear the burden of the financial effects. Because

America's existing policies do not ensure a decent level of living, a child's economic security is inextricably linked to their caregivers' job market experience. Over the last few decades, changes in caregivers' job have substantially driven variations in the child poverty rate (Wood, 2003).

Persistent economic inequality

Despite cycles of economic growth over recent decades, child poverty rates have remained high. That so-called growth is not being experienced equally by everyone. Income inequality has increased dramatically since the 1970s, and therefore, in 2019, the poorest 20% of Americans received about 3% of total household income, while the richest 20% received more than half (Duncan & Murnane, 2011, pp. 47-49). The continuing poverty that families across the country experience is directly tied to rising inequality; if all families' earnings had increased at the same rate, poverty would have been greatly reduced. According to United States Department of Agriculture, income disparity is responsible for 93% of the increase in rural child poverty between 2003 and 2014 (Hertz & Farrigan, 2016). This disparity has more than financial repercussions; it also relates to learning gaps and differences in child development markers (Sims et al., 2007).

Lack of work-family policies to support caregivers

A lack of paid leave and childcare support for caregivers, particularly solo moms, might drive people to reduce their working hours, exit the workforce completely, or sacrifice critical time with their families to pay the bills. The differences are worsened by a scarcity of accessible childcare, which is one of the most significant costs for today's families. For low-income families, whose jobs are already insecure, inflexible, and underpaid, childcare decisions can have serious ramifications for their family finances and future career prospects (Bauman et al., 2006).

Wealth disparities by race and gender

Savings and assets enable people to invest in their own and their children's futures; they aid families in surviving tough times, promote economic mobility, and have been linked to improved child outcomes. Institutional racism and sexism, on the other hand, have resulted in significant income disparities. Women with children and women of color have less wealth than other women (Bailey et al., 2017; Wallace et al., 2015).

Affected population and family impact checklist

Children are now the poorest age group in American society, and the nation's youngest children have the greatest poverty rates. Approximately 22% of all children in the United States are poor, with another 22% living in low-income homes. One-quarter of American children under the age of three live in homes with earnings below the federal poverty level, which is \$23,624 for a family of four with two children. Federal programs such as Social Security and Medicare, on the other hand, have successfully decreased senior citizen poverty rates from around 35% to less than 10% during the last half-century (Trisi & Saenz, 2021). Furthermore, there are significant disparities in poverty rates among children based on race and ethnicity. More than a third of African American and Hispanic children, for example, live in poverty, while roughly 44% of African American children under the age of 5 live in poverty. Minority children are also more likely to grow up in chronic poverty, which is defined as poverty that lasts longer than five years (Lindsey, 2008).

Family impact analysis

Family responsibility

From family impact perspective, Programs that promote family responsibility strive to help and empower families in a variety of ways, including good parenting, family formation, and financial assistance. Many assistances such as differential response is focused

on community participation and service delivery that is dependent on partnership between child welfare agencies and community-based groups. One of the most difficult tasks, however, is figuring out how to increase service delivery in communities when state finances are shrinking. For attaining child welfare and reducing the implications of child poverty, local governments, and community nonprofit groups, rather than the state or federal government, are responsible for assisting families. However, not all local governments and community groups have the capacity to handle the increased demand for their services that may arise because of the increasing demand. The program empowers families to accept responsibility for their children when they are left at home, to address many impediments to family functioning, and to freely opt into specific programs that will help them to be more well-adjusted and stable (Kemp et al., 2009).

Family stability

Keeping parental, marital, and other familial connections when children are involved is essential for family stability. Helping families resolve their difficulties before they become significant crises is part of promoting family stability. Families who get child welfare aid receive greater assistance from workers in obtaining services to satisfy their basic requirements through other public assistance programs than families that do not receive child welfare assistance (Kemp et al., 2009). Child welfare services not only assist to financially stabilize the family, but they also aid to lessen the chance of future instability.

Family relationships

This concept focuses on how successfully the program supports family members in improving relationships, preventing violence or neglect in the home, and creating a healthy environment for a child's development. This concept examines how effectively a policy or program acknowledges how relationships and family dynamics might change because of diverse life circumstances. Child welfare services provide as a safety net for families that are going through a difficult time and

have been accused of child abuse or neglect (Toros et al., 2018). Furthermore, these programs encourage family stability and responsibility, which will have an influence on the development of good family connections in the long run.

Family diversity

Family diversity includes programs that recognize family diversity, do not discriminate based on race or ethnicity, comprehend economic realities, and recognize variances across geographic regions from a family impact standpoint. Many child welfare programs provide this type of specialized care to meet the requirements of vulnerable families. The literature shows that racial and ethnic minorities, as well as low-income groups, have a disproportionate number of child maltreatment complaints. Differential response, a personalized strategy, may be a technique to lessen racial and ethnic disparities in the child welfare system. Some scholars emphasize the relevance of communities in aiding families in bridging the gap between the implementation of child welfare programs and local regions. Because of the lack of concentrated service delivery providers in rural areas, implementing a differential response system can be difficult, but there is some evidence that the well-established and long-standing network ties between child welfare agencies and community-based organizations providers in rural areas could be a potential strength.

Family engagement

In terms of family impact, family engagement entails supporting the formation of partnerships between programs and the families they serve. Such programs enable families to make judgments about prospective service offers, provide flexible and easily accessible service alternatives, and assist in the development of a social support network surrounding the family. Strong state assessments of differential response and other child welfare programs have resulted in the voluntary engagement of lower-risk families (Merkel-Holguín et al., 2006). In general, these approaches have improved family satisfaction with the child welfare system, which is critical for improving family participation in using services and supports.

Impact of the problem on people

Poverty has an impact on children's physical, mental, and emotional health, in part because poverty is defined by environmental and sociocultural conditions that put children at risk. Poor children are more likely to grow up in households with single mothers, who are more likely to suffer from domestic violence, severe depression, and drug abuse. Children from low-income households tend to live in high-poverty locations, such as big cities. Poor schools, high crime rates, restricted access to health care, and a lack of social services are all common problems in these places (Ferguson et al., 2007). Child maltreatment is a public health concern that has long-term health consequences for children who are mistreated or neglected. Children who have been abused or neglected have poor health, which is due in part to the hazards of poverty, such as parental substance misuse, mental illness, and family violence, as well as a direct result of their abuse or neglect. Growth abnormalities, untreated vision and dental problems, asthma, developmental delay, early sexual intercourse, higher rates of sexually transmitted infections, early pregnancy, high rates of mental health disease, and a variety of chronic medical diseases are all more common in maltreated children than in their peers (Hussey et al., 2006). According to several studies, low-income households have the greatest rates of child abuse and neglect.

Poverty has an influence on children's educational performance; on average, disadvantaged children are less prepared for kindergarten, have poorer reading and mathematical abilities, finish fewer years of schooling, work less, and earn less than their wealthier peers. Poverty has long been related to poor health among children. Infant mortality and low birth weight rates are greater in impoverished households, and these rates are influenced by race and ethnicity within poor communities. Poor children are more likely to be diagnosed with severe, chronic health problems, have higher rates of lead poisoning, are more likely to die as a child, are more likely to be hospitalized, and are more likely to be diagnosed with severe, chronic health issues. All these factors have a major and long-term influence on the health of children from low-income families (Kohl et al., 2009). Higher incidence of child maltreatment exists in those states with higher proportions of very poor children, higher levels of unemployment, and

larger proportions of working single-mothers. According to county-level study, larger wealth disparity correlates with a higher frequency of child maltreatment. The impact of physically defined communities, as well as community structural elements, particularly economic reasons, are strongly linked to child maltreatment (Putnam- Hornstein & Needell, 2011).

Consequences of inaction

There is a need for early childhood maltreatment prevention, which is best addressed by addressing the fundamental causes of maltreatment, such as child poverty. One of the most powerful and constant indicators of child maltreatment is poverty. There isn't a single state that complies with the limited federal child welfare requirements that are assessed (Currie & Spatz Widom, 2010). As the federal agency in charge of policing and enforcing child welfare laws, the government must do a better job of reviewing states' compliance with federal standards and state plan requirements and apply harsh repercussions when they don't. Furthermore, the federal Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) must be held accountable for its role in implementing congressional directives and performing oversight. The Department of Health and Human Services isn't the only government agency that has failed America's neglected and mistreated children. To address a wide variety of issues, Congress must adopt comprehensive child welfare financing reform, such as the obscure look back clause, which assesses Title IV eligibility based on poverty levels in 1996. Failure to guarantee that social workers have manageable caseloads and get enough training and supervision, that cases of neglect and abuse are reported in a timely manner, and that foster parents are properly licensed and trained are among the federal state inadequacies (Bragg, 2003). However, legal impediments, long-standing challenges, and restricted access for aggrieved foster children seeking a last route of remedy frequently impede these cases.

Potential solutions to the Problem/Policies

Providing financial stability to all families can act as a preventative measure for reducing child welfare involvement and ensuring family stability. A two-generation strategy to poverty reduction, which focuses equally on the well-being of both children and parents, has the potential to abolish the bandwidth tax on parents' cognitive capacities while also reducing their children's exposure to very stressful and unfavorable situations (Marcenko et al., 2012).

Key recommendations for potential solutions:

- **Family earnings** ensure that earnings are sufficient to satisfy necessities for families and people, completely restore Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funding to levels prior to 2011 and remove means-testing for kinship child-only TANF.
- **Education and training** are important aspects of every business. Prioritize parents receiving TANF for professional programs under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) and enhance funds for the State Need Grant. Creating assets is a must. Fully fund and expand the Working Families Tax Credit for low-income families and allow the refund to be placed into asset-building schemes automatically.
- **Early childhood education and care** ensure that children have access to high-quality, voluntary early learning programs, as well as families with closed Child Protective Services cases.
- **Housing** can be supported by investing in the State Housing Trust Fund to develop affordable housing for low-income persons; prohibit discrimination against low-income renters who rely on government aid to help pay their rent (e.g., TANF, SSI, or a Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher).

Policies to improve the child welfare system should include the following strategies:

- Preventing the maltreatment of children so that they don't need to enter the child welfare system.

- Encouraging family preservation efforts that keep children in the system with their parents
- Strengthening care by relatives – kinship care – to improve the experience of children already in the system.

The efforts to increase the quality and quantity of three policies are being focused on: a. targeted preventative services, b. treatment in the form of improved family preservation services, and c. kinship care as a treatment for children in need of an out-of-home placement. Each policy focuses on a separate system decision point.

A model that simulates how children enter and flow through the nation's child welfare system can be set up to project how different policy options (preventive services, family preservation treatment efforts, kinship care treatment efforts, and a policy package that combined preventive services and kinship care) would affect a child's pathway through the system, providing objective analyses about the effects of prevention and treatment programs on child welfare outcomes. This will incorporate maltreatment risk, detection, system paths, and outcomes into a comprehensive quantitative model that can be used to predict the impact of policy changes. The simulation model will identify ways to increase targeted prevention and treatment while meeting multiple goals, including reducing maltreatment and the number of children entering the system, improving a child's experience as they move through the system, and improving outcomes in young adulthood. All these goals may be achieved while simultaneously lowering the total cost of the child welfare system.

From a public health standpoint, the good news is that boosting kinship care can help accomplish the intended policy goals by enhancing both preventive and treatment. The number of children that are maltreated can be lowered by combining policy alternatives that act at different points in the child welfare system, sparing many of them from having to join the system. For those who do join the system, the combined policy measures improve the child's experience, improving young adult outcomes and lowering system costs.

Apply theory of paradox

Utilizing the Theory of Paradox, as proposed by Karen Bogenschneider (2014), it is acknowledged that differences in opinions and viewpoints do not necessarily pose insurmountable obstacles in negotiation processes. Instead, these divergent perspectives are considered valuable, and through recognizing their significance, compromises can be achieved. In essence, both sides may attain some of their objectives, leading to a situation where neither party feels completely dissatisfied. According to the paradox theory, the definition of family is not fixed; all families are unique and equally important. Policies addressing the diverse requirements of families can be more effective, as opposed to favoring one particular family structure. Family life is fundamentally about commitment, where families are dedicated to fulfilling the basic needs of the children who depend on them. This commitment remains steadfast even in challenging circumstances, such as when adults are stressed or when disruptions occur in the parents' relationship. The theory of paradox builds upon the concept of 'true paradox' in political science, which involves two initially seemingly irreconcilable ideas that, upon closer examination, are found to be both important and valid when considered together. For instance, the concepts of welfare and poverty are intertwined and valid in their own right, illustrating a true paradox.

Poverty and child welfare involvement

Poverty significantly contributes to the overrepresentation of children from impoverished families and communities in the child welfare system (Lee & Goerge, 1999). Various theories have been proposed to elucidate how poverty escalates the probability of family involvement with child welfare services. Although there is evidence supporting a causal link (Cancian et al., 2013), the empirical backing for these hypothesized mechanisms remains mixed, necessitating further investigation into this complex relationship. One proposed mechanism is that the conditions of poverty may increase the occurrence of child maltreatment, subsequently leading to child welfare intervention. Research indicates that child maltreatment, both as reported by child welfare agencies and measured through behavioral assessments, is

more prevalent among economically disadvantaged families (Sedlak et al., 2010). It is plausible that impoverished parents face challenges in meeting their children's basic needs due to limited material resources. Given that legal definitions of neglect often include inadequate provisions such as shelter, food, and clothing, financial constraints may hinder impoverished parents from adequately caring for their children. Yang (2014) found that parents experiencing material hardships are more likely to be subject to investigations by child protective services, even when accounting for poverty levels. Additionally, homelessness increases the likelihood of parental involvement with child welfare agencies (Warren & Font, 2015). Despite the presence of laws in many states that dictate neglect cannot be substantiated based solely on poverty, the extent to which caseworkers adhere to these definitions remains uncertain. Alternatively, poverty may contribute to more stringent or less supportive parenting practices by elevating parental stress and family conflicts, both of which are recognized risk factors for child maltreatment (Stith et al., 2009). The research on the link between poverty and child maltreatment suggests that this factor elucidates at least a portion of the connection between poverty and child welfare involvement. Nevertheless, it is important to note that child maltreatment, as operationalized in research through official child welfare reports, does not automatically translate into child welfare intervention. Researchers measuring child maltreatment have identified a lack of alignment between parents' reports of such behavior and cases reported to child protective services (Sedlak et al., 2010). Cases of maltreatment prompt child welfare involvement only when such behavior comes to the attention of authorities. Reporting practices for child maltreatment may represent another avenue through which poverty influences child welfare involvement. For instance, among welfare recipients, changes in welfare sanctions or employment predict child welfare investigations but not further child welfare involvement post-investigation, suggesting that economic factors may have a more significant role in initiating child welfare reports than the actual behavior itself (Slack et al., 2011).

By delving into the detailed narratives of situations leading to child welfare involvement, parents' perspectives can provide valuable insights into how poverty impacts such involvement. Poverty often creates environments characterized by desperation and

disadvantage, with families relying on support systems that may subsequently report them to child welfare agencies. Many incidents described by parents implicate parental challenges related to poverty, involvement in disadvantaged social networks, turbulent personal relationships, and interactions with, or the need for, social services as factors contributing to their involvement. These findings underscore the need for research approaches that comprehensively explore this complexity and emphasize maltreatment prevention policies that bolster support systems for families and communities. Furthermore, research indicates that imposing child support charges on parents with children in foster care can exacerbate family separations and lead to years of debt for impoverished parents (Mulia et al., 2008). In most cases where children are removed from their homes and placed in foster care, family poverty plays a significant role (Mulia et al., 2008). The rationale behind charging child support to parents with children in foster care stems from the belief that families, even those responsible for child abuse or neglect, should assume responsibility for their children. However, for child welfare agencies dedicated to supporting families, the imposition of child-support charges may perpetuate the very issues and behaviors that brought a family to the attention of Child Protective Services in the first place (Sedlak et al., 2010).

Poverty traps and the social protection paradox

Given the clear relationship between child maltreatment and poverty, the legal response to child abuse and neglect includes poverty's influence on family safety, and legislative reform focuses anti-poverty programs' effectiveness on lowering the prevalence of child abuse and neglect. Child welfare regulations, on the other hand, have traditionally remained quiet on the relationship between child mistreatment and poverty (Goldman, 2003). Furthermore, legislative change and financing have emphasized permanence and timeframes once a child is placed in foster care, rather than proactive efforts that provide practical help to disadvantaged families. The legislation governing child abuse and neglect is complex and varies by state in terms of defining what constitutes abuse and neglect, when a child may be placed in foster care, and how long a child can remain in the

state's possession. This has traditionally meant a variety of legal solutions to child abuse and improved results for children in the child welfare system. In Pennsylvania and California, for example, adolescents can stay in foster care until they become 21, although the standards for remaining eligible for care varied in each state. Furthermore, several jurisdictions do not allow young people to stay in foster care once they reach 18 or 19, enabling them to age out of the system regardless of their economic or social circumstances. Similarly, there is no agreement on whether poverty should be expressly excluded as a legal reason for establishing in court that a child is neglected and therefore eligible for placement in foster care or termination of parental rights (Fong, 2017). Indeed only a few jurisdictions explicitly exempt poverty as legal grounds for neglect. In New York, a parent's failure to provide food, clothes, housing, or education for their child must be evaluated considering their financial capabilities or if they were provided "financial or other reasonable means to do so." The legislation of D.C. specifies that the deprivation is not attributable to his or her parent's, guardian's, or custodian's lack of financial resources (Fong, 2017).

Poverty is never expressly stated as a cause of child maltreatment; rather, neglect is described as a failure to provide enough food, housing, or medical care in case law. Persistent unemployment, homelessness or insufficient housing, and chronic food insecurity are among the criteria used by courts to make judgments of abuse or neglect, or in more extreme situations, to terminate a parent's rights to their child. The need of making a clear distinction between poverty and child maltreatment should not be overlooked for effective child welfare interventions. Most cases brought to the attention of child welfare services and eventually handled by courts include allegations of neglect (Fong, 2017). Child welfare organizations and, by default, courts are obliged to analyze aspects connected to poverty and broaden their understanding of a family's needs and suitable solutions because of implicitly acknowledging the relationship. In part, the system may begin a modest but significant shift toward including families in preventative programs targeted at lowering poverty, such as income subsidies and subsidized childcare (Sedlak et al., 2010).

Promising programs and policies

To appreciate the possible influence of anti-poverty initiatives on child poverty and maltreatment, it is important to first put the quantity of resources dedicated to the problem in context. Aside from the long-term health and well-being effects of child maltreatment, the financial consequences of child abuse and neglect are enormous. Without a college degree or secure work, the chances of young people fleeing states at the age of 18 ending up homeless are increased. Recent legislative moves, however, to allow states to prolong authority until foster youngsters reach the age of twenty-one, might have an influence on educational outcomes (Slack et al., 2011).

The short- and long-term consequences are enormous, and there is reason to expect that a concerted effort to alleviate child poverty would have a knock-on effect on child maltreatment rates and, as a result, foster care participation.

Conclusion

The purpose of the child welfare system, in all state-specific variations, is to prevent children from being abused and to assist those who have been abused in finding a secure, stable, and permanent home. To have a major impact on child maltreatment, policies and regulations that alleviate poverty for both children and adults must be promoted. Because having a poor parent puts a child at risk, giving health care, educational help, childcare, nutritional support, and other forms of aid benefits future generations of Americans. It's also critical to recognize and explain a right to seek judicial relief when states break the law and aren't held accountable. To minimize maltreatment, a balance of improved prevention and treatment is required that enhance children's experiences in the child welfare system, improve outcomes, and lower lifetime costs.

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