

The interplay between poverty, unemployment, family disruption and all types of child abuse

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Research findings from a study of 500 cases carried out as part of a doctoral thesis will be outlined. They demonstrate the clear connection between those families whose children are notified in relation to all kinds of child abuse (including sexual abuse) and poverty, unemployment and family disruption. The multi-factorial nature of the influences which create this connection are examined. The long held belief that child sexual abuse is not related to class or poverty is challenged by these findings, pointing to the need to re-conceptualise this, as well as all types of child abuse, if prevention is to be an achievable goal.

In our current approaches to addressing and preventing child abuse we all too often focus on the individual family and situation and not often enough on the broad social environments of the children involved. Parton raised this issue internationally in 1985, Pelton even earlier in 1978. Garbarino and various co-authors (for example, 1980) have established the significance of neighbourhood and social environment on the capacity of families to provide care for their children. So the importance of the poverty of families involved in reported and substantiated child abuse has been made on many occasions. But it does not seem to be a connection which has been taken up by the professionals working to prevent child abuse situations, nor a connection which governments have seriously attempted to tackle.

This paper provides information from South Australia, which once again points to an overwhelming connection between the families we are currently assessing in relation to child abuse reports, and their poverty, unemployment and family disruption. The data will first be described, and then the implications for the prevention of child abuse discussed.

THE SOURCE OF THE DATA

The Child Protection Services (CPS), a unit within the Women's and Children's Hospital Adelaide, is a specialist assessment and treatment unit for child abuse. It not only considers the cases of children who are referred from within the hospital, but has a close inter-referral process with the Department for

Family and Community Services (FACS) and the Family Violence Units of the SA police, in relation to all reports of child abuse. The child abuse allegations referred to CPS are generally those which require more in-depth medical and psychosocial assessment and more specialised treatment. This produces a higher proportion of sexual abuse allegations in the CPS data than in the FACS data, and also a mean age about 15 months younger. A consultation service is offered to the general public, agencies and hospital staff, but only children about whom there are clear concerns of abuse are seen.

A sample of 500 referrals to the Child Protection Services, Women's and Children's Hospital Adelaide was analysed for (among other factors) the socio-economic situations of the children referred, by source of income and area of residence. The composition of the families in which the children lived at the time of the abuse was also noted where available.

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF THE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES REPORTED

A direct perusal of the 500 referrals to CPS shows the highest number came from the FACS District area of Elizabeth, followed by those of Enfield and Woodville. These are all recognised as covering council areas with lower socio-economic averages and higher rates of publicly housed and unemployed people, although of course there are pockets of greater affluence in all of them.

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Further analysis of the sample was undertaken using the Social Health Atlas of South Australia's four clusters of socio-economic level for the Adelaide metropolitan area (SAHC 1990). The place of residence of 334 children from the CPS sample able to be examined according to these clusters, were divided in the following way:

Cluster 1 (lowest):

88 of the referred children were from these areas. One postcode area, Elizabeth North, contributed 22 children.

Cluster 2

185 of the children came from this second lowest socio-economic level. The postcode area of Elizabeth contributed 33 children (6.6% of all referrals). Others with high referral numbers were Smithfield, Salisbury East, Parafield Gardens and Enfield.

Cluster 3

21 children were referred from this cluster.

Cluster 4 (highest)

35 children were referred from the highest socio-economic cluster. Wynn Vale, a new socially planned area with a deliberate mix of rental public and privately owned dwellings, had 7.

(Note: Some children in the sample

were from country areas, some places of residence were not known, some suburbs were un-grouped in the Social Health Atlas.)

Therefore 82% of the 334 children included in this breakdown were from suburban areas in the lowest two socio-economic clusters. Whilst there are many other variables involved here, it is strongly suggestive of a link between child abuse and lower socio-economic status, even when the sample includes a majority of sexual abuse allegations.

Family composition

To pursue more accurate information about the social and economic status of the families referred, the records of the 500 cases in the sample were examined for information about family composition at the time of the child's referral and the source of income of the child's caregiver, where this was known. The resulting data is shown in Table 1.

The sample shows at least 39 per cent of the children's families were headed by a sole parent (mother 32.8%; father 6.8%). Yet Australia-wide in 1994, sole parents headed only 13 per cent of all Australian households with dependent children (ABS Focus on Families 1994:1). This ABS data also shows most became sole parents after the end of a marriage or relationship in which the child was conceived; so most of the

children are experiencing the disruption of an existing family group. The gender of the sole parents in the CPS sample (80 per cent female) is the same as the national average (ibid.:7). Therefore, compared with the national distribution of the parental population, this CPS sample shows three times the rate of sole parents for children alleged to have been abused, a figure which deserves serious consideration and action.

Conversely, it is possible to say from this data that no more than 40 per cent of the children lived with both their natural parents, compared to the national figure of 80 per cent (ABS Focus on Families 1994:2).

Reconstituted families with step and de facto parents made up more than 15 per cent of the sample children's family situations whereas nationally this is 8 per cent (National Council International Year of the Family 1994). So the CPS sample shows again that about twice as many children alleged to be abused come from families that have been disrupted by separation and reformation.

Source of income of the families

In relation to income source at least 35 per cent of the 453 families reported or reporting to Child Protection Services were receiving a pension or benefit as their source of income (Table 1). Nationally this figure is 17 per cent

Table 1: Caregiver(s) of child and sources of income / CPS sample

	Child's caregivers		Income source							
	No. (1)	% of all	Pension		Wage		Self employed		Unknown	
			(1)	%	(1)	%	(1)	%	(1)	%
Mother only	164	32.8	89	54.2	6		2		67	41.0
Father only	34	6.8	15	44.1	2		2		15	44.1
Two parents	152	30.4	21	13.8	59		9		63	50.4
Parent and step-parent	23	4.6	0	0	3		1		19	
Parent and de facto parent	56	11.2	25	44.7	3		0		28	
Extended family	16	3.2	8		4		0		4	
Foster care	8	1.6	4		1		0		3	
Subtotal	453	90.6	162	35.8	78		14	3.1	199	43.9
Unknown	47	9.4			1				(46)	
TOTAL	500	100	162	32.4	79	15.8	14	2.8	245	49.0

(National Council International Year of the Family 1994:23). Only the two-parent families in the sample were clearly demonstrated to be more often employed than unemployed.

At least 54 per cent of the female sole parents and 44 per cent of the male sole parents were on pensions (income unknown for 41 per cent). The trend of the data suggests this figure would be much higher if income source for all families had been available. As well, the families of children with a parent and de facto parent also had at least 44 per cent on pension or benefit. (It was not always possible to know if this benefit was claimed as a couple or singly.)

In total, this information very clearly demonstrates that many more of the children reported to the official agencies for assessment of abuse come from poorer families, families which have suffered disruption, often leaving only one parent as caregiver on a pension, and tend to live in the more poorly resourced suburbs known to have residents with lower socio-economic averages.

The type of abuse, the caregivers and the abusers of the children.

The types of child abuse alleged in relation to the children in this CPS sample is shown in Table 2 and put against the information on family

composition (who the children live with). It can be seen that the sample is made up of 68 per cent of sexual abuse (only) allegations, a higher proportion of sexual abuse than the state data for the reasons of filtering mentioned earlier.

Despite this, the correlation to sole parenthood, lower socio-economic areas and income from pensions or benefits is still strong, suggesting child sexual abuse cannot be exempted from economic factors, and in this respect is like physical abuse and neglect.

The connection to sole parenthood is also concerning. Twenty-five per cent of the total sample were children alleged to be sexually abused, who were also living with a sole female parent (Table 2). Other analysis of this sample reported elsewhere (Hood 1997) shows that most of the children who were substantiated as having been sexually abused (n=154) were abused by acquaintances of the family (38%), followed by relations (23%) and then fathers (19%) and de facto fathers (9%). This suggests children in sole parent or disrupted families could be more vulnerable to contact with acquaintances and relations who target children for sexual purposes. The risk to these children needs to be further investigated.

Table 2 shows higher numbers of children living with sole mothers for

physical and multiple abuse also. Other analysis (Hood 1997) shows the alleged and substantiated abusers for physical abuse, neglect and emotional abuse were a parent(s) in most cases, but de facto and step-parents in some.

These connections to low income and family disruption carry through when the seriousness of the abuse is also looked at. The type of abuse alleged for the children in the sample was divided into three categories: 1) very serious; 2) serious; and 3) not serious (Hood 1997). In the 23 'very serious' cases where income was known, two thirds of parents were on pensions or benefits. The 'very seriously' abused children were also more often cared for by female sole parents than any other family composition situation. Fourteen out of 16 of these were sexually abused (seven by male relatives, three by acquaintances), the other two neglected (the mothers held responsible). For the middle category of 'serious' abuse female sole parents were also heavily over-represented. It is only in the category of 'not serious' abuse that two parent families form the biggest group.

What do these data mean for child abuse prevention?

These data add to the growing research in Australia that demonstrates the link between child abuse and poverty. Other Australian studies have found similar

Table 2: Type of abuse by child's caregiver(s)

Child's caregivers		Type of abuse alleged					
	Number known	Sexual	Physical	Neglect	Emotional	Multiple	Unknown
Mother only	164	116	24	6	4	13	1
Father only	34	19	5	0	1	9	
Two parents	152	107	28	4	1	12	
Parent and step-parent	23	18	4	0	0	1	
Parent and de facto parent	56	34	14	1	1	6	
Extended family	16	9	2	2	0	1	
Foster care	8	4	0	0	0	4	
Total for known caregivers	453	307	77	13	7	46	
		(68%)	(17%)	(3%)	(1.5%)	(10%)	
Sample of 500 cases		338	83	17	7		

high rates of sole parents in the child protection sample in Western Australia and Queensland (Thorpe 1994; Bray, Burgess & Pascoe, 1995) and the connection between sole parenthood (particularly female) and poverty is generally accepted.

In New South Wales Young, Baker and Monnone (1989) looked at the statistical relationship between child abuse and poverty in suburban Sydney. Through ranking postcodes and correlating those to confirmed child abuse it was concluded that, although the best predictor of the prevalence of child abuse in any area was still the size of the child population, poverty was associated with increases in the rate of child abuse. The link was found to be strongest for neglect, followed by emotional abuse, physical abuse, but lastly still a four fold increase for sexual abuse. Vinson (cited in Tregeagle 1990) found 86 per cent of the 'registrations' in his New South Wales sample were children from the lower socio-economic group. This 'finding remained unaltered, no matter which way injuries were classified according to their relative seriousness' and across all the 'grounds' of 'Sexual assault, Not coping, Neglect, Emotional abuse'.

Tomison (1996, for the National Child Protection Clearinghouse) reviewed the links between family structure and child abuse and, although he did not find evidence for a direct link, clearly family structure was connected to poverty. In looking at prevention this interplay between family structure and child abuse should be taken seriously.

This is not to argue that sole parenthood in itself leads to child abuse, but that so many sole parents are under-resourced to provide the kind of care their children need, and the kind of care that most would wish to give their children. Some sole parents have made a choice to take on that role and risk poverty in order to prevent further abuse of themselves or their children in the original family or relationship. The data in this sample shows that in relation to sexual abuse someone other than the sole parent is much more often substantiated to have abused the child. But not having enough money leads to emotional stress, mobility, poor housing, child care that is below the standard parents

would prefer, an inability to support the child through education, sporting and social activities. For those sole parents who have fewer adult survival skills, fewer extra-familial supports, lower educational levels, less health and child development knowledge, the stresses are compounded and the provision of protective care made more difficult.

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In using this data to point to a connection between child abuse and poverty it is acknowledged that poorer families are more likely to be reported for child abuse by others. The lack of skills of the parents, or the results of abuse and neglect may be more visible to others, and the families under more scrutiny. Middle class families may be referred to GPs or psychiatrists or the child sent to a different school, rather than a child abuse report made. The unanswered question is whether there are sufficiently high numbers of abused but unreported children in the middle and high income families to cancel out the connections to poverty that we already see for those who are reported. The type of abuse would need to be considered in further addressing that question.

The other notable information about this CPS data is that it includes many parents who make the report themselves, as a result of their own concern that the child they care for has been abused by someone else. Many of these parents are looking for help through the child protection system,

particularly in relation to their concerns about child sexual abuse; they have not been reported against their will. Some of these are sole female parents who were middle class before the breakup of the family or relationship in which the children were born.

So while reports to the child welfare agencies may not describe the total extent of the behaviour defined as child abuse, they do demonstrate which families are being involved in and affected by the intervention system. The intergenerational cycle of abuse is a much discussed and generally well supported concept. Usually it focuses on interpersonal, relationship factors. The intergenerational cycle of poverty also needs to be seen as relevant for those planning for child abuse prevention.

Why has the connection between child abuse and poverty not been placed at the forefront of child advocacy and attempts at policy change?

Tregeagle puts one reason succinctly when she says:

... for many practitioners there is a resistance to any explanation of abuse and neglect which could be seen as stereotyping the poor, blaming the victim and adding to the self-fulfilling prophecy (1990: 3).

But it is argued that practitioners are not helping poor families and abused children by ignoring this aspect of their situations, and instead placing on them unrealistic expectations of individual change in poorly resourced environments. Staff who work in any child welfare agency cannot help but be aware that most of their clients come from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds. A higher income would take many off the records. Yet information about socio-economic status of the family has not been systematically collected or published by most of the organisations who deal directly with child abuse and has therefore not been available for use in child welfare advocacy.

Another factor that has distracted attention from the connection between child abuse and poverty, has been the focus on sexual abuse above other types of child abuse. Soon after Pelton talked about 'the myth of classlessness' in

child abuse in 1979, the women's movement strongly brought to the forefront of debate the issue of child sexual assault. This was characterised first and foremost as a gender issue, that is, perpetrated by males against females. As part of this ideological position, it was strongly asserted that child sexual assault happens across all classes. Any suggestion that it did not happen as often in upper and middle class families was strongly refuted and tended to be seen as a challenge to the whole position.

Clearly there are many cases of sexual abuse of middle and upper class children. However, the feminist position that child sexual abuse happens across all classes has assumed to be the same as, child sexual abuse happens at the same rate to children from all socio-economic strata. This position spread to conceptualisations of other kinds of abuse as well. The data presented here argues against such an assumption in relation to sexual abuse, as well as physical abuse, emotional abuse and neglect. The assumption needs to be investigated further.

The data does not suggest that poor parents are more implicated in sexual abuse of children, but that poor children are more vulnerable to sexual abuse by others who are known to the family. As CPS is a central agency, staff are in a position to notice when some children are referred a second and third time, and the names of the same abusers appear in relation to a series of children. A small number of children are abused by a series of parent figures who move through their homes. Interviews with convicted child sexual abusers also tell us that these people do deliberately target children and families with needs; needs for companionship, needs for financial help, needs for baby-sitting at no cost, needs for love and attention. These families and children in the CPS sample and elsewhere, are often vulnerable socio-economically and emotionally.

It is argued that society has contributed to this vulnerability to child abuse for children who live in families on income support, including children in disrupted families and sole parent families, by policies of inadequate financial and structural support. Families are

increasingly breaking up in our society. The policy reaction has tended to be a punitive response to the parents, to make it 'hard' for them following the break-up in the hope that they will be forced to remain in or return to the marriage. Minimal income support is provided and no alternative community support mechanisms to supplement the nuclear family unit have been established; they are 'on their own'. The impact of the lack of social and policy support to the children in these families has not been seriously addressed. This paper adds to the data about the connections between poverty, family disruption and the vulnerability of children to abuse. If there is a serious desire to prevent children being abused the social movement of divorce and family fluidity cannot be ignored. Policies which are not punitive to the families of these children need to be put in place.

In the author's view, policy and practice in the future need to account for the following points:

1. Child welfare agencies and child protection agencies should ensure they keep information about the poverty of the families who are in their child protection systems, in order to be realistic about the problems they are trying to address.
2. The family income support services (pensions and benefits) and the child abuse intervention services need to be brought closer together. The former is dealt with at Commonwealth government level, the other at state government level. This serves to separate the making of policy and the outcome of policy decisions. (Tregeagle amongst others mentioned this in 1990). State governments do offer some funding for neighbourhood support programs but this cannot address the underlying issues sufficiently. It is important that we do address the connection between family poverty and child abuse and redistribute financial support to these families in some way. To do this we will need to stop blaming people for their own poverty. In particular we cannot blame children for their own poverty, but direct broadly based support services to

the children in these families before they get abused.

3. Others working in child abuse prevention are calculating the actual cost of child abuse to our community. This is important to convince governments that it is cost effective in the longer term to intervene in the cycles of disadvantage for abused children.
4. Good, affordable, accredited child care would help sole parents who do not have trusted others to care for their children. It is regrettable that this is becoming less rather than more accessible to poorer parents. □

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