



Center for Innovation in Child Maltreatment Policy, Research and Training

Brown School

Child Maltreatment and Poverty

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The questions I was asked to respond to:

Summarize research related to poverty-related bias (including surveillance bias) in CPS reporting and case processing—what is the evidence on the scope/nature of this problem?

Discuss poverty as a root cause of neglect—what are the implications for how CPS should respond?

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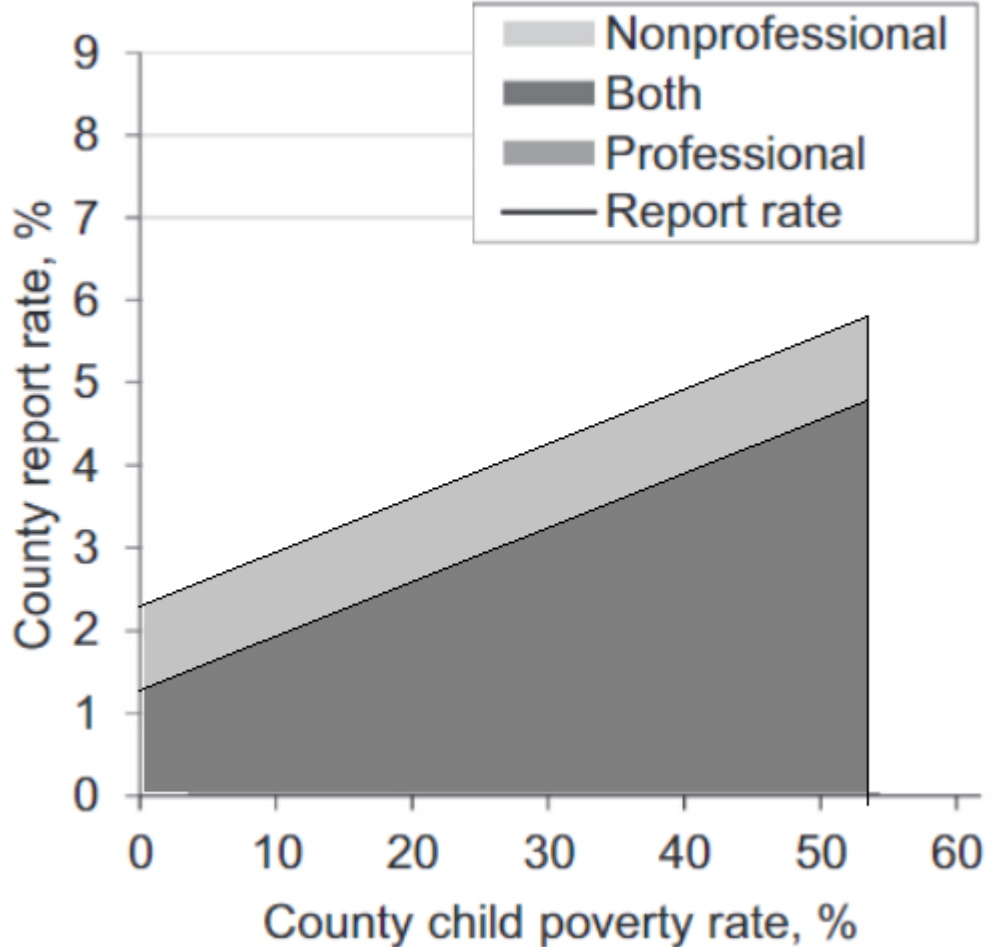
First Kind of Possible Bias: Class Based Visibility Bias.

Poor people (*probably?*) contact more mandated reporters.

It is commonly believed that one primary way that poor children might be more likely to be reported is through their increased contact with so many different kinds of many mandated reporters, like social service providers.

It totally makes sense. More eyes = More reports.

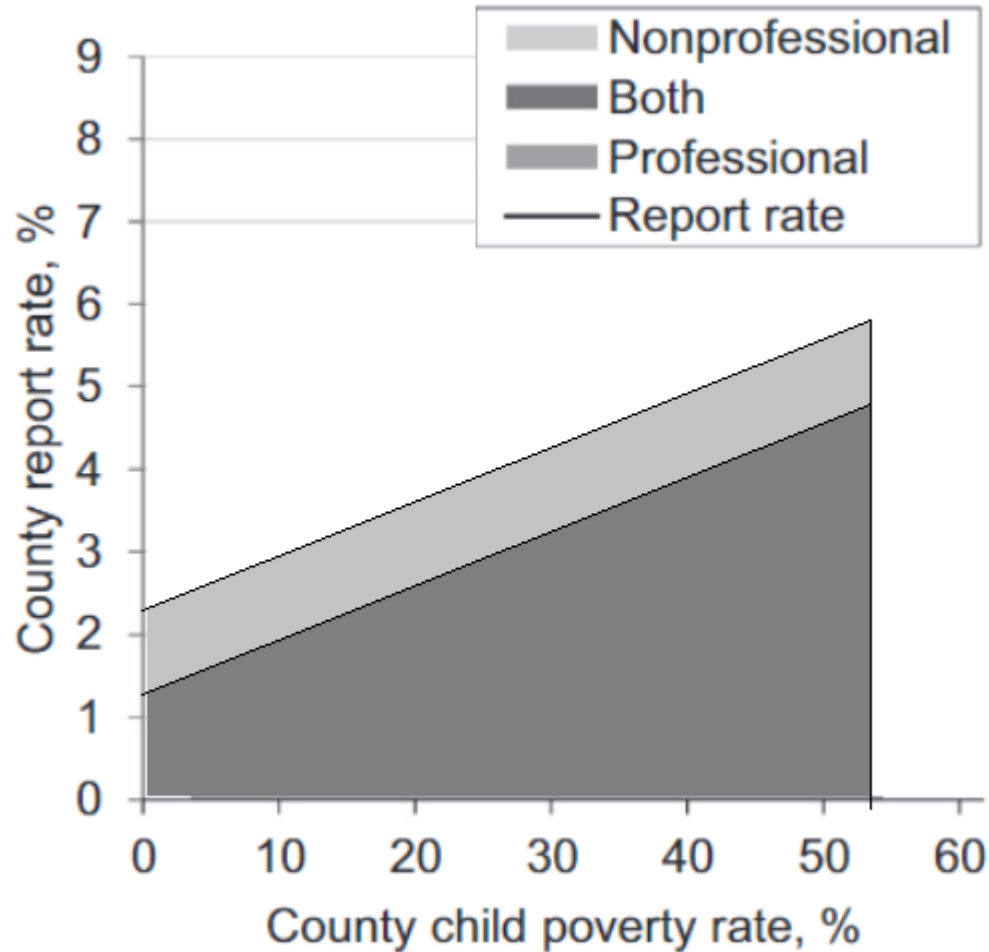
This is what we would expect to see if poor people were being reported more often due to surveillance by mandated reporters.



WARNING!!! HYPOTHETICAL DATA!

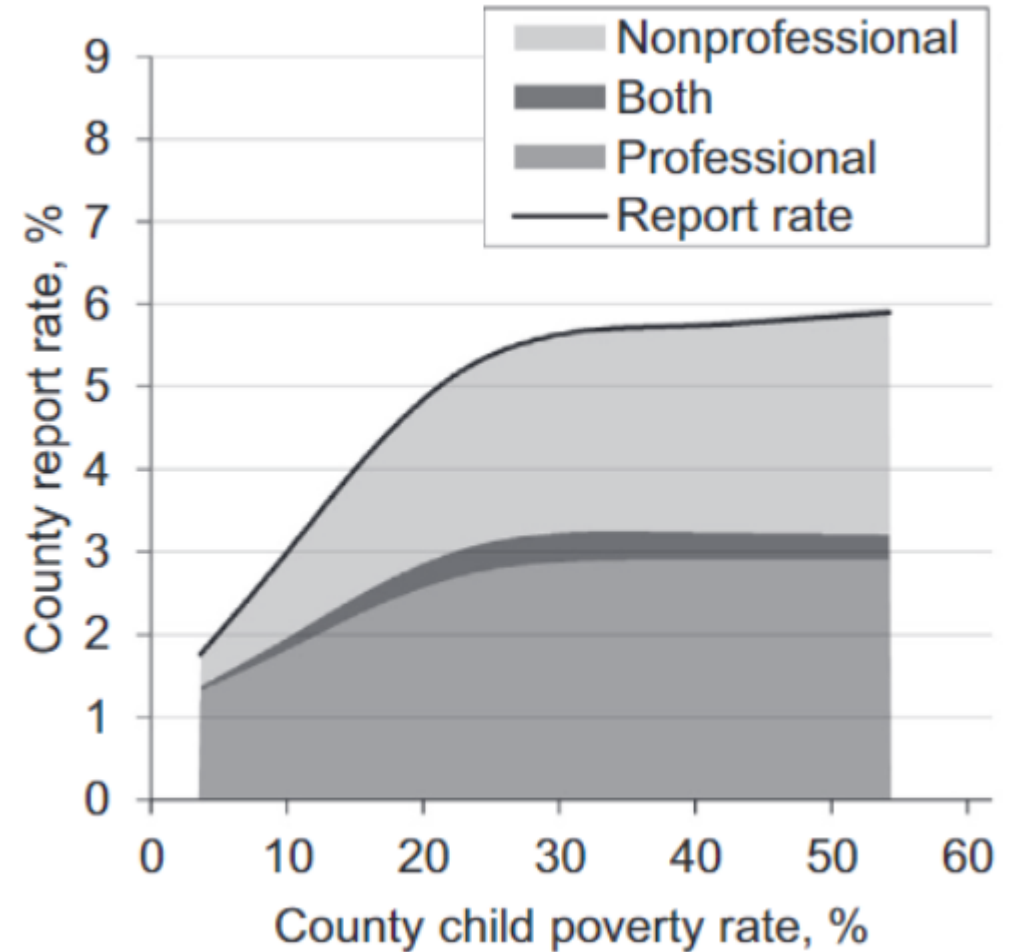
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But the data don't really tell that story

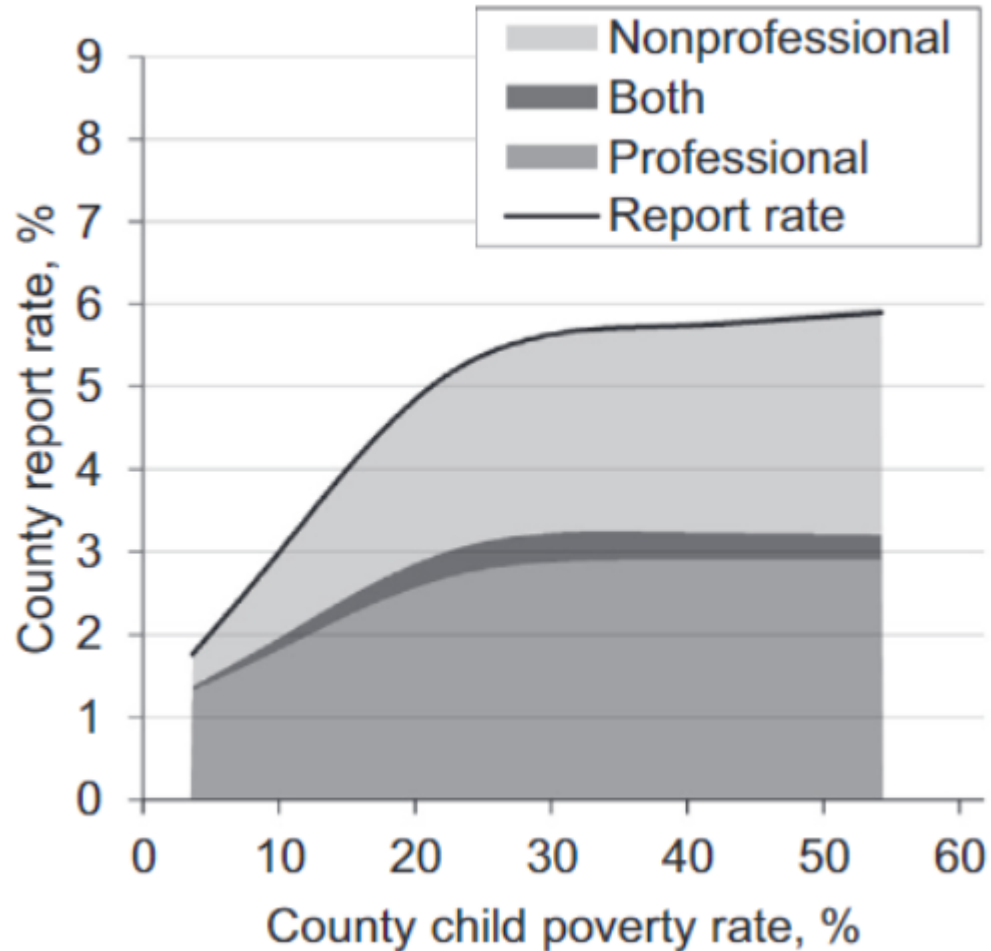


Real >>>

<<-Bias
Theory



But the data don't really tell that story



This study uses national data (NCANDS and Census). As we move to the right on the graph (getting poorer), the **proportion** of child maltreatment reports from professional sources (bottom grey area) gets smaller – **poor kids are proportionately less (not more) likely to be reported by mandated sources** (mandated reporters are a “smaller slice of the pie” for reports about poor people).

A Very Different Way To Look at Class Based Visibility Bias:

Maybe reporters can't tell the difference between neglect and poverty, and so poor people get reported for no reason except they are poor?

How can we know if this is true or not?

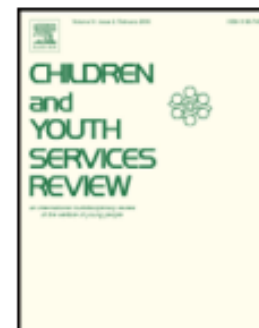
One way is to look at poor people contacted by CPS and poor people NOT contacted by CPS. If they look the same, that would support the "They're just being reported because they are poor" idea.



Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Children and Youth Services Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/childyouth



Children and Youth Services Review 31 (2009) 422–427

Is the overrepresentation of the poor in child welfare caseloads due to bias or need? 

Melissa Jonson-Reid, Brett Drake , Patricia L. Kohl

George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Washington University in St. Louis, United States

Increased odds of having negative outcomes

Poor kids contacted by CPS compared to poor kids not contacted by CPS

Mental health services	Status offending	Delinquency (non-violent)	Delinquency (violent)
4.13***	3.29***	2.07***	2.69***

Other disability (not mental health)	ER/hospital care: violent injury	ER/hospital care: head or fracture (unintentional)	ER/hospital care: teen pregnancy
2.25***	1.77***	1.44***	2.14***

- Numbers above are from Jonson-Reid, M., Drake, B. Kohl, P. (2009). Is the overrepresentation of the poor in child welfare caseloads due to bias or need? *CYSR*, 31, 422-427
- For similar findings, see Font, S. A., & Maguire-Jack, K. (2020). It's not "Just poverty": Educational, social, and economic functioning among young adults exposed to childhood neglect, abuse, and poverty. *Child abuse & neglect*, 101, 104356.

Increased odds of having negative outcomes Poor kids contacted by CPS compared to poor kids not contacted by CPS

Poor kids who are reported to CPS are this much more likely to have the outcome than other poor kids NOT reported to CPS.

Mental health services	Status offending	Delinquency (non-violent)	Delinquency (violent)
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So poor kids contacted by CPS are a distinct, very high risk subgroup of poor children – People who refer to CPS are able to make at least partly accurate determinations about the presence of actual risk, even among poor populations.

What about “Surveillance Bias”? Sometimes people use this term to mean *“if someone is helping you (like someone referred by CPS or a social service agency) are you more likely to be referred by those helpers?”*

This could set up a loop

– get reported, get served, get seen, get reported....

This isn't a strictly poverty-related form of bias, but if you think poor people are likely to get more services, it might be worth looking at.

Impact of Intervention Surveillance Bias on Analyses of Child Welfare Report Outcomes

Mark Chaffin

David Bard

University of Oklahoma Health Sciences Center

CHILD MALTREATMENT, Vol. 11, No. 4, November 2006 301-312

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*Environmental Research
and Public Health*



Article

Surveillance Bias in Child Maltreatment: A Tempest in a Teapot

Brett Drake *, Melissa Jonson-Reid and Hyunil Kim

These studies used very different methodologies but found the same thing – if you are being provided services related to child welfare, your chance of being reported to CPS goes up, but only by a maximum of about 2%. This number is far too small to account for the substantially higher rates of reporting among poor people.

In my view, the “verdict” on Class Based Visibility Bias and Surveillance bias (“Intervention Surveillance Bias”) is that they do not appear to be powerful factors which could be responsible for the large numbers of poor children reported to CPS.

Could these forms of bias be happening? Possibly. Could they explain the very large (statistical) over-representation of poor children? No.

The other question I was asked to respond to:

Discuss poverty as a root cause of neglect—what are the implications for how CPS should respond?

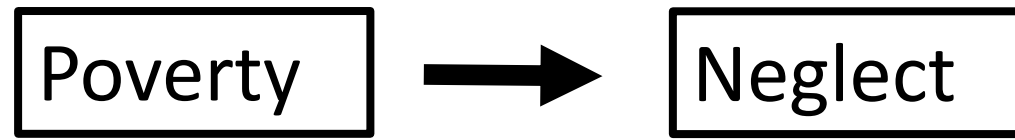
Child Maltreatment 2020



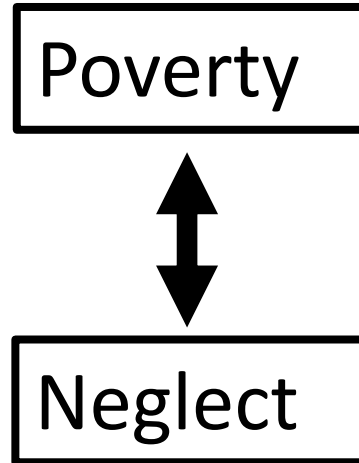
Exhibit 4–E Maltreatment Types of Child Fatalities, 2020

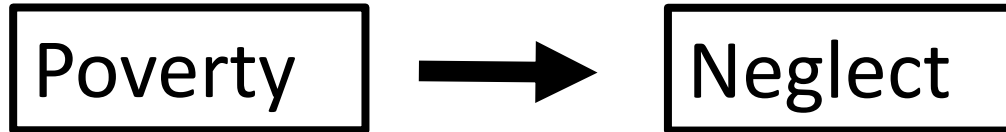
Maltreatment Type	Child Fatalities	Maltreatment Types	Maltreatment Types Percent
Medical Neglect	-	126	8.5
Neglect	-	1,091	73.7
Other	-	5	0.3
Physical Abuse	-	630	42.6
Psychological Maltreatment	-	21	1.4
Sexual Abuse	-	14	0.9
Sex Trafficking	-	-	-
Unknown	-	1	0.1
National	1,480	1,888	N/A

So can poverty CAUSE neglect?



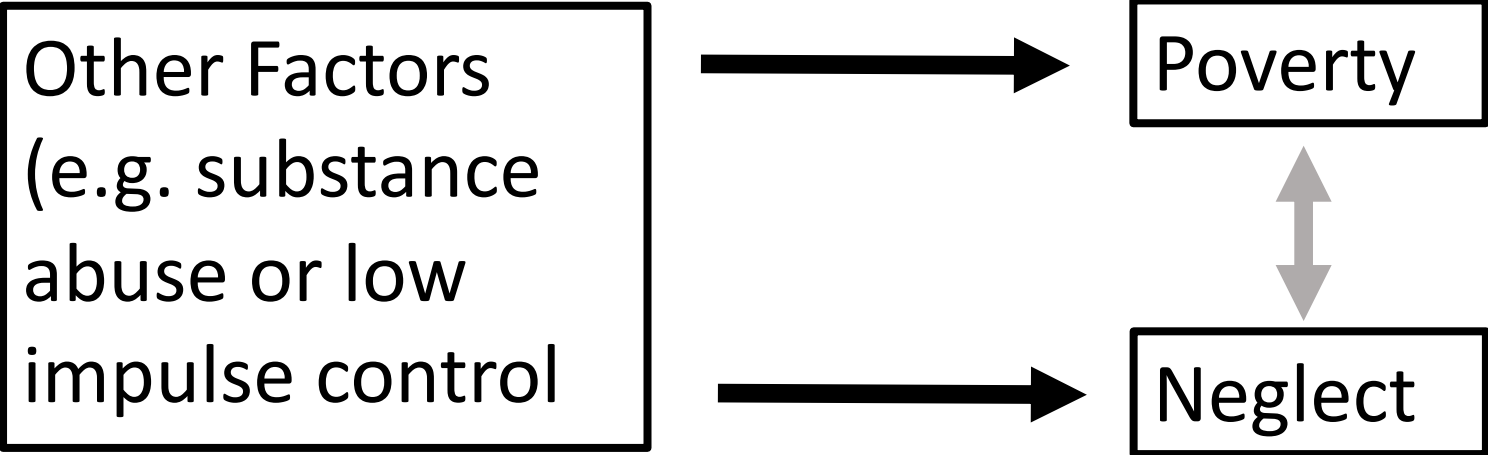
Or do we just know that they are associated (correlated)?



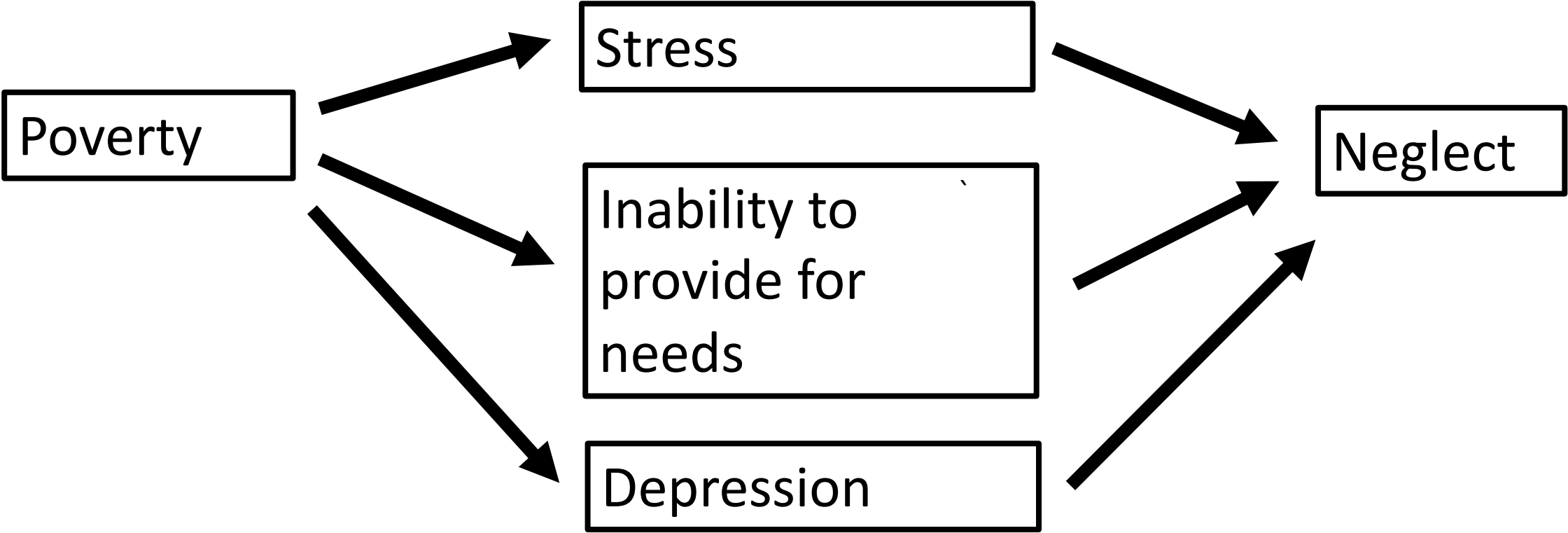


- Cancian, M., Yang, M. Y., & Slack, K. S. (2013). The effect of additional child support income on the risk of child maltreatment. *Social Service Review*, 87(3), 417-437. (RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRIAL)
- Berger, L. et. al. (2017). Income and Child Maltreatment in Unmarried Families: Evidence from the Earned Income Tax Credit. *Review of Economics and Households* 15(4), 1345-1372. (INSTRUMENTAL VARIABLE)
- Rostad, W. et al. (2017). The influence of concrete support on child welfare program engagement, progress and recurrence. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 72, 26-33. (PROPENSITY SCORE MATCHING)
- Puls, H. T., Hall, M., Anderst, J. D., Gurley, T., Perrin, J., & Chung, P. J. (2021). State spending on public benefit programs and child maltreatment. *Pediatrics*, 148(5).
- McCray, N. (2018). Child health care coverage and reductions in child physical abuse. *Heliyon*, 4. DOI:10.1016/j.heliyon.2018.e00945.
- Klevens, J. et al. (2017). Effect of Earned Income Tax Credit on hospital admissions for pediatric abusive head trauma, 1995-2013. (2017). *Public Health Reports*, 132(4), 505-511. (NOT CPS DATA)
- Yang, M. et. al. (2019). Child care subsidy and child maltreatment. *Child and Family Social Work*, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/cfs.12635>
- McLaughlin, M (2017). Less money, more problems. How changes in disposable income affect child maltreatment. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 67, p.315-321.
- Raissian, K. & Bullinger, L. (2017). Money Matters: Does Minimum wage affect child maltreatment rates?. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 72, 60-70.
- McLaughlin, M. (2018). The relationship between cigarette taxes and child maltreatment. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 79, 339-349.

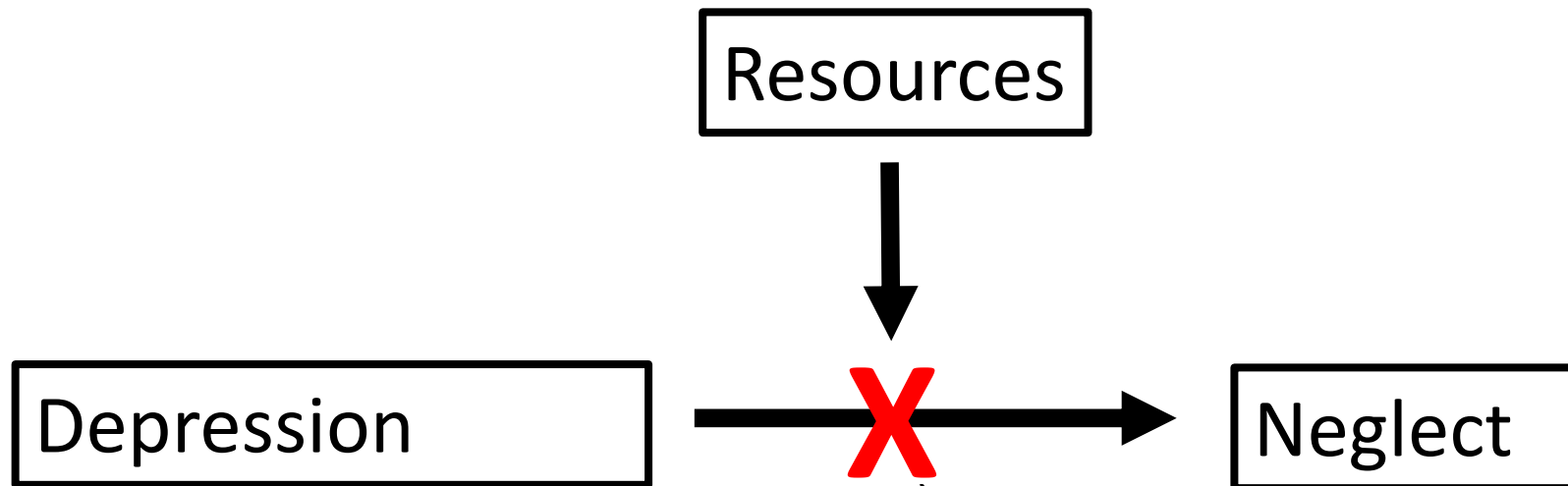
In addition (not “instead of…”), It is also likely that other (“spurious”) factors contribute to both



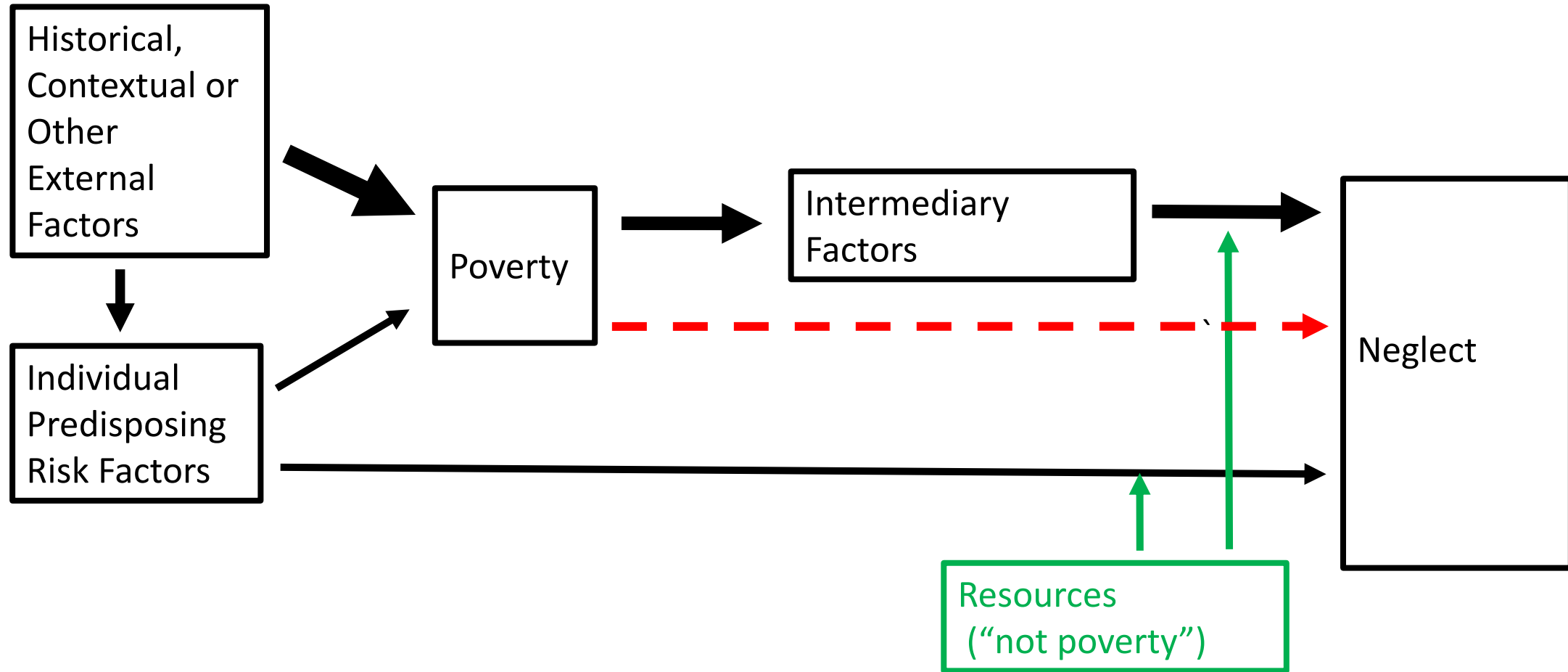
Many people have suggested that poverty may cause neglect through an intermediary (“mediating”) factor or factors (*partial list only!*)



To complicate matters even more, poverty (as in “not being poor”) probably has an buffering “moderating” effect, altering how other factors relate to the chances of neglect



You could put these together to get a sense of the complexity of the issue, and I am certain you could add other paths too.



Note: **The dotted red line** is meant to represent mistaking poverty for neglect, which is counter to official CPS policy, but which some believe is occurring.

A bit too much? Confusing? There are some recent and excellent systematic reviews available for you to read if you would like to spend a little more time reviewing what we know.

- Conrad-Hiebner, A., & Byram, E. (2020). The temporal impact of economic insecurity on child maltreatment: A systematic review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 21*(1), 157-178.
- Hunter, A. A., & Flores, G. (2021). Social determinants of health and child maltreatment: a systematic review. *Pediatric research, 89*(2), 269-274.

And of course, Pelton's 2015 article, which is the best overview I am aware of. Pelton LH. The continuing role of material factors in child maltreatment and placement. *Child Abuse Negl.* 2015 Mar;41:30-9.

In fact, I am going to borrow from one of those systematic reviews in performing the last task I have been charged with – discussing policy implications. **The next four slides are quoted from Conrad-Hiebner & Byram, 2020.**

Conrad-Hiebner, A., & Byram, E. (2020). The temporal impact of economic insecurity on child maltreatment: A systematic review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 21*(1), 157-178.

Service provision Practice: Child welfare workers should (1) assess economic insecurity when working with families, (2) prioritize serving families with multiple hardships, (3) refer families to local anti-poverty programs, and (4) ensure that families receive all social assistance for which they qualify (ConradHiebner & Scanlon, 2015)

Multisystem collaboration Practice: (1) Child welfare agencies should collaborate with organizations that address economic insecurity, including housing authorities and job placement agencies. (2) Job placement agencies and low-income housing authorities could prioritize serving economically insecure families in the child welfare system. For example, the National Center for Housing and Child Welfare (2017) is a national collaboration between supportive housing and child welfare. (3) State child welfare and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) agencies can apply for federal grants to improve collaboration and client data (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2015).

Policy advocacy Policy: Policy makers (1) could suspend TANF penalties and time limits for low-income families involved in child welfare and (2) provide more employment opportunities (job placements, Job Corps) for families involved in child welfare (Conrad-Hiebner & Scanlon, 2015).

I personally think we can pick up that ball and run with it a little further... If we are interested in PREVENTION, we probably shouldn't wait until there is a CPS report.

Impact of economic insecurity on abuse versus neglect Research: Researchers should (1) investigate the temporal impact of bill-paying hardship, food hardship, housing hardship, and debt-to-assets ratio on subsequent child psychological maltreatment, physical abuse, and neglect and (2) conduct an experiment testing the effect of receiving “services as usual,” housing vouchers, or a combination of housing vouchers and “services as usual” on future child physical abuse, neglect, and psychological maltreatment among families receiving child maltreatment prevention services

I'd add one more (*not quoting Conrad-Hiebner & Flores now*). Poverty can be a serious problem when parents try to comply with CPS or court ordered plans. I think it is necessary for this to be seriously considered, and for **assistance to be provided to parents who will find it difficult to interact with CPS or the courts without material assistance** (e.g. child care while attending substance abuse treatment).

Thanks.