

## Child Abuse and Poverty

It is an article of faith among "child savers" that "child abuse crosses class lines." They tell us that we are as likely to find maltreatment in rich families as in poor, but the rich can hide from authorities. But like most child saver "truisms," this one is false. Prof. Leroy Pelton of the University of Nevada – Las Vegas School of Social Work, calls it "The Myth of Classlessness."

Like the tailors in the fable of The Emperor's New Clothes, the child savers have invented a whole group of invisible, middle-class child abusers only they are wise enough to see. Of course there are some middle class child abusers. But the evidence is overwhelming that poverty is by far the most important cause of child maltreatment -- and the most important reason families end up in "the system" whether they have maltreated their children or not.

The federal government's Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-3) compared families with an annual income of under \$15,000 to families with an annual income over \$30,000. Their findings:

- **Abuse is 14 times more common in poor families.**
- **Neglect is 44 times more common in poor families.**

The study emphasized that the findings "cannot be plausibly explained on the basis of the higher visibility of lower income families to community professionals."<sup>1</sup>

Studies in which all the subjects are equally open to public scrutiny (groups made up entirely of welfare recipients, for example) show that those who abuse tend to be the "poorest of the poor."<sup>2</sup>

The Myth of Classlessness doesn't just run counter to research. It runs counter to common sense. It is well-known that child abuse is linked to stress. It is equally well-known that poor families tend to be under more stress than rich families.

The gap between rich and poor is widest in the area of "neglect" -- which makes up by far the largest single category of maltreatment reports. That's because the poor are included in our neglect laws almost by definition. What is neglect? In Ohio, it's when a child's "condition or environment is such as to warrant the state, in the interests of the child, in assuming his guardianship." In Illinois, it's failure to provide

"the proper or necessary support ... for a child's well-being." In Mississippi, it's when a child is "without proper care, custody, supervision, or support." In South Dakota, it's when a child's "environment is injurious to his welfare."<sup>3</sup>

Such definitions make a mockery of the oft-repeated child-saver claim that "we never remove children because of poverty alone."

Imagine that you are an impoverished single mother with a four-year-old daughter and an infant son. The infant is ill with a fever and you need to get him medicine. But you have no car, it's very cold, pouring rain, and it will take at least an hour to get to and from the pharmacy. You don't know most of your neighbors and those you know you have good reason not to trust. What do you do?

Go without the medicine? That's "medical neglect." The child savers can take away your children for medical neglect. Bundle up the feverish infant in the only, threadbare coat he's got and take him out in the cold and rain? That's "physical neglect." The child savers can take away your children for physical neglect. Leave the four-year-old to care for the infant and try desperately to get back home as soon as you can? That's "lack of supervision." The child savers can take away your children for lack of supervision.

And in every one of those cases, the child savers would say, with a straight face, that they didn't take your children "because of poverty alone."

Or consider some actual cases from around the country:

- In Orange County, California, an impoverished single mother can't find someone to watch her children while she works at night, tending a ride at a theme park. So she leaves her eight-, six-, and four-year-old children alone in the motel room that is the only housing they can afford. Someone calls child protective services. Instead of helping her with babysitting or daycare, they take away the children on the spot.<sup>4</sup>

- In Akron, Ohio, a grandmother raises her 11-year-old granddaughter despite being confined to a wheelchair with a lung disease. Federal budget cuts cause her to lose housekeeping help. The house becomes filthy. Instead of helping with the housekeeping, child protective services takes the granddaughter

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away and throws her in foster care for a month. The child still talks about how lonely and terrified she was – and about the time her foster parent took her picture and put it in a photo album under the heading: “filthy conditions.”<sup>5</sup>

- In Los Angeles, the pipes in a grandmother’s rented house burst, flooding the basement and making the home a health hazard. Instead of helping the family find another place to live, child protective workers take away the granddaughter and place her in foster care. She dies there, allegedly killed by her foster mother. The child welfare agency that would spend nothing to move the family offers \$5,000 for the funeral.<sup>6</sup>

- In Paterson New Jersey, parents lose their three children to foster care solely because they lack adequate housing. When the children are returned, one of them shows obvious signs of abuse – bruises and new and old burn marks -in foster care. The parents are suing. And so is their first caseworker. He never wanted the children taken away. He’d even found the family a better apartment. But that’s not what his superiors wanted. Indeed, the caseworker says that because he insisted on trying to help the family, and refused to alter his reports to make

the parents look bad, he was fired.

Why were his bosses so anxious to take away the children? There was a rich, suburban couple ready and waiting to adopt them. And according to the lawsuit filed by the caseworker, a supervisor told him that “children should be taken away from poor parents if they can be better off elsewhere.”<sup>7</sup>

It is NCCPR’s position that no child should ever be removed from the child’s family for neglect alone, unless the child is suffering, or is at imminent risk of suffering, identifiable, serious harm that cannot be remediated by services.

Even when child savers don’t remove the children, the “help” they offer impoverished families can be a hindrance. For such families, demanding that they drop everything to go to a counselor’s office or attend a parent education class is simply adding one more burden for people who already are overwhelmed.

Step one to ensuring they can provide a safe environment for their children is offering help to ameliorate the worst effects of poverty. Family preservation programs do just that, (see Issue Paper 10). And that is one reason they succeed where other efforts fail.

*Updated, January 1, 2008*

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1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, *The Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect* (NIS-3), September, 1996, Chapter 5, pp. 2-17; Summary: Chapter 8, pp.10-11. //2. e.g. Bernard Horowitz and Isabel Wolock, "Material Deprivation, Child Maltreatment and Agency Interventions Among Poor Families," in Leroy Pelton, ed., *The Social Context of Child Abuse and Neglect* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1981), p.138 //3. Ohio Statutes, Sec. 2151.04; Illinois Statutes, Chapter 23, Sec. 2053; Mississippi Statutes, Sec. 43-21-105; South Dakota Statutes, Sections 26-8-6 and 26-8-2. //4 Laura Saari, "Checking Up on the Children," *Orange County Register*, Jan. 17, 1999, p.E1. //5. Donna J. Robb, "Child Abuse Charge Unfair, Group Says" *The Plain Dealer*, March 11, 1998, p.1B. //6. Nicholas Riccardi, "Grandmother Blames County in Latest Death of Foster Child" *Los Angeles Times*, June 15, 1999, p.B1. //7. Jennifer V. Hughes, "Lawsuit Says DYFS Ordered False Reports," *The Record*, May 4, 2001, p.L3.