
Child Poverty

and

Child Welfare

Literature Review

**for The Children's Advocate
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Index

Child Poverty and Child Welfare Literature Review

Why children are in care	1
Explaining the link between poverty and the maltreatment of children	3
Defining poverty	4
The Canadian reality	5
Aboriginal children	6
Single-parent families headed by women	7
Youths	8
The Alberta reality	8
Conclusion	9
Notes	10
Bibliography	12

One fundamental characteristic of the child welfare system, however, has not changed appreciably over the years: its clients are still overwhelmingly drawn from the ranks of Canada's poor.

In the Best Interests of the Child

While this statement is more than a decade old, a review of the literature suggests that it still holds true today. The focus of this report is to offer a brief overview of the literature pertaining to the link between child poverty and the child welfare system.¹ Does the literature substantiate the existence of such a link? If so, what theoretical perspectives have been to explain this relationship, and how is it reflected in the Canadian, and more specifically, the Albertan reality?

Why children are in care:

Before addressing the relationship between poverty and child welfare directly it is important to establish the groundwork for such a discussion. In Alberta the primary reasons offered for the placement of children in care are neglect and abuse.² Therefore, it is important to define these terms before addressing the relationship between child welfare and poverty. Having considered the defining criteria for abuse and neglect, the causal theories in regards to the maltreatment of children will also be reviewed.

The definitions of child neglect and abuse have evolved based on rising material standards and changing expectations regarding child-rearing practices. Some studies combine neglect and abuse in an overall definition of "inadequate care or supervision"³ while another considers child abuse as a sub-category of neglect.⁴ Still others draw a clear distinction between neglect and abuse. In her book, *Understanding Child Abuse and Neglect*, Cynthia Tower defines neglect as the "parental failure to meet basic human needs — adequate food, shelter, safety, and affection"⁵ while distinguishing two types of abuse — physical and

sexual. Physical abuse "refers to the non-accidental injury inflicted by a caretaker".⁶ In defining sexual abuse Tower calls for the inclusion of more than physical violence so as to incorporate such factors as the exploitation of children for sexual purposes (i.e. pornography).⁷ Other authorities on the issue of child abuse distinguish a third type of child abuse — emotional.⁸ These distinctions are relevant to the present discussion as the link between poverty and the maltreatment of children varies when the nature of the abuse is taken into consideration. While studies identify a significant link between poverty and physical abuse and neglect,⁹ no such link has been clearly established when considering sexual abuse.¹⁰

Marjorie Martin contends that "all available evidence from historical sources and recent studies indicates that poor families are disproportionately higher users of public child welfare services in Canada".¹¹ The Child, Youth and Family Policy Research Centre suggests little is known about the "factors that lead to a child's coming into care".¹² However, data gathered in Canada reveals that disproportionate numbers of children in care in this country are in fact poor.¹³ While direct causality has not been established between the maltreatment of children and poverty in general, and some writers have expressed concern regarding the suggestion of such a link, studies have identified specific socioeconomic factors which indicate children are at greater risk. Depending on the focus of the particular study, such factors as the level of housing vacancies, density, mobility, access to material resources and the level of isolation within a community have been cited as affecting the level of risk.¹⁴

Explaining the link between poverty and the maltreatment of children:

What explains the relationship between the maltreatment of children and poverty? The explanations offered by the experts have evolved over time.¹⁵ Early perceptions focused on the individual, with the resolution of this issue centered on individual treatment and cure. In the 1970s critical analysis of this perspective offered alternative models which reflected a growing awareness of the need to address the broader socioeconomic context of child abuse and neglect. One focus of this analysis has been the comparison of neighborhoods. These studies have identified mediating factors within neighborhoods which indicate greater or lesser risk to children. Aspects of socioeconomic status have been a consistent component of the findings.¹⁶ One study involving Montreal neighborhoods found a link between maltreatment of children and factors related to economic deprivation, including the percentage of families living under the poverty line and the number of single parent female headed households. A second study in Montreal compared two low-income areas. In this situation the rate of the maltreatment of children varied according to the social support network existing in the neighborhoods.¹⁷

More recently, models analyzing the role of power relationships as they pertain to socioeconomic status have also been introduced into the study of the maltreatment of children. Such an approach underlies feminist analysis. The feminization of poverty, as reflected in the growing proportion of single parent families headed by females which are living in poverty, makes this literature relevant to the present topic. As they relate to child abuse and neglect, power relationships are seen to have the potential to exert influence on more than one level. The differential between rich and poor can affect awareness of available resources and access to these resources. On another level power relationships

based on gender can be seen to affect the very nature of maltreatment of children. Christine Parton suggests that among those who maltreat their children women more frequently neglect or emotionally abuse children, while men (biological father or father substitute) tend to resort to physical or sexual abuse more often than women.¹⁸

To conclude this section of the report focused on the defining criteria of the maltreatment of children, and the explanatory models for child abuse and neglect, it is important to note that the literature looking at the link between child poverty and child maltreatment does not suggest poor parents are inherently inadequate in regards to parenting. However, the literature does go beyond indicating more poor children are in care simply because this sector of society is under greater scrutiny. Rather, the literature indicates children living in poverty are at greater risk in regards to maltreatment.¹⁹

Defining poverty:

One of the dilemmas which arises in the discussion of poverty is that there is no universal measure of poverty. Poverty can be defined in absolute terms, based simply on minimal requirements for survival, or in relative terms, which takes into consideration the general standard of living in a country. Whichever definition is used, an income level establishes a cutoff line for identifying those living in poverty. This figure is influenced by the methodology used to determine a cutoff point. While these will not be addressed here, for further information regarding the criteria and methodology in defining poverty one can refer to *No Pepper for the Poor* by Jonathan Murphy, or to the introductory discussion in *The Canadian Fact Book on Poverty: 1989*.²⁰ To apply any one standard would exclude various writers. However, those cited in this article generally use the

income levels set by Statistics Canada (i.e. \$26, 619 for a family of four in 1989 in an urban area) or the Canadian Council on Social Development (i.e. \$27,597 for a family of four in 1989 in an urban area). It is the levels set by these two agencies which form the basis of the statistics cited below, however, it is important to be aware that differences do exist in defining poverty.

The Canadian reality:

Reviewing the literature on the relationship between child welfare and poverty highlights particular areas of concern as it applies to Canada: the high incidence of aboriginal children in care; the rising proportion of poor single parent families headed by women who face the stresses posed by poverty, combined with the demands of child care; and the dilemma posed by youths (generally 14 to 17 years of age) no longer living at home or who are leaving the child care system.

To place these concerns into context, let us first consider that the number of poor children in Canada is rising. In 1986 there were 120,000 more poor children in Canada than in 1980.²¹ By 1990 this number had risen once again, by nearly 90,000, to a figure of 1,105,000, or 16.9% of all the children in this country. This upward trend also applies to Alberta. Between 1981 and 1984 the number of low-income children grew by 94% in this province.²² The number jumped by more than 30,000 between 1986 and 1990. At 18.3%, the proportion of children living in poverty in Alberta is above the national average.²³

Having recognized the number of poor children within the national and provincial context, how is this reflected in the numbers of children in care in this country? Ross and Shillington indicate that in 1986 there were 49,000 children in care across Canada. Depending upon the community, "between 54 and 75 per

cent of these children came from low-income families", at a time when low-income families made up 13.1% of all families in Canada.²⁴ Once again these facts are paralleled in Alberta. The proportion of poor families (14.3%) was above the national average and yet the statistics suggest more than half of the children in care come from poor families.

Aboriginal children:

When the level of poverty is combined with data on aboriginal origin the picture is even more disturbing. The higher level of infant mortality, poorer housing conditions, higher unemployment, and greater levels of poverty for aboriginal people in Canada raise disturbing questions.²⁵ In 1986 the poverty rate was 54% among aboriginal children in Alberta.²⁶ There are also a higher proportion of aboriginal children involved in the child welfare system and this involvement tends to be more intrusive in nature than for other children. In 1985 Alberta Social Services and Community Health indicated "about ten native children to one non-native child out of the province's overall population required services under the [Child Welfare] Act."²⁷ While less than 30% of the voluntary custody agreements involve native children, "45% of all permanent guardianship files involve native families".²⁸

As with the efforts to explain the links between poverty and the maltreatment of children, theoretical models have been developed to account for the number of native children in care. Three trends in this analysis have been to focus on the individual, on cultural differences or on a socioeconomic model. There are those theorists who go beyond these explanations to call for greater autonomy among aboriginal peoples. This perspective rejects the imposition of solutions from outside the aboriginal culture. Rather, appropriate solutions need

to come from within this community, and that the role of others is to offer support in an effort to achieve these goals.²⁹

Single-parent families headed by women:

Another factor highlighted by a review of the literature is the issue of the rising number of single parent families headed by females. Why is this of significance to the present discussion? It takes into consideration that while a small majority of poor children still live in two parent families (57%)³⁰ there is a growing trend towards one-parent families. This fact was already noted in a 1979 report by the Standing Committee on Health, Welfare and Science which also indicated that 83.2 per cent of such families were headed by women.³¹ Statistics show this group are at greater risk for poverty.

In 1984, over two-thirds (68%) of all children living with only their mother were in low-income families. And this percentage is growing. In 1981, 62% of children in female headed lone-parent families were living in low-income families. As well, female-headed lone-parent families accounted for 34% of the increase in the total number of children living in low-income families in Canada in the 1981-1984 period.³²

Drawing particular attention to single parent families headed by women in no way seeks to diminish the concerns of single parent families headed by males but to acknowledge that by the late 1980s "families headed by women [were] 4.3 times more likely to be poor than male-led single parent families".³³

What do we know about single parent families which might aid in the development of social policy? As mentioned in the discussion on the literature, poverty per se has not been demonstrated to cause the maltreatment of children. The Montreal study which compared two low-income neighborhoods may provide some direction in reducing the risk to children. As this study demonstrates, when social support networks are present there is less risk to children.

Youths:

Finally, the issue of youths and their special needs demands attention. Children living on the street, involvement in prostitution, teenage pregnancy and the stress of leaving care are some of the issues raised regarding this age group. While the number of youths who find themselves in these situations may be small, this group is particularly vulnerable due to their age, the likelihood of problems at home, their difficulty finding employment, etc.³⁴ The limited numbers should not be cause to neglect this segment of the population. In his book, *On Our Own With No Direction From Home*, Brian Raychaba discusses the problems facing children leaving care, including lack of skills, higher rate of unemployment and the potential to end up as homeless people. These same issues arise for other youths who find themselves without stable accommodation.

The Alberta reality:

Within the literature pertaining to Alberta, there are variations within the province which warrant further consideration. One of the variations revealed is the distinction between the two largest urban areas — Edmonton and Calgary — which need to be considered when planning social policy. The most significant distinctions highlighted by a review of the literature pertaining to child poverty and child welfare are as follows:

- 1) The level of poverty in 1990, as cited by the Centre for International Statistics — despite the fact that Calgary has a bigger population than Edmonton, 22.4% of Alberta's poor children lived in Edmonton while 18.5% lived in Calgary.

- 2) The number of children in care — on March 31, 1990 the total child welfare caseload for the province of Alberta was 7,855. Of these 42% were

located in the Edmonton area while only 19% were in the Calgary area.³⁵

3) Native population — based on 1981 Statistics Canada data there is a significant difference in the number of aboriginal people living in the Edmonton and Calgary census areas. While natives made up 2.3% of the total population of the Edmonton area, only 1.3% of the Calgary area were of aboriginal heritage.³⁶ Within the metropolitan area of Edmonton, aboriginal people make up about 5% of the population. Recent information indicates that of these, 37.6% are under fifteen years of age, nearly half of the native families live in poverty and they account for one third of the open child welfare files.³⁷

Conclusion

The literature addressing the issue of child poverty and its links to child welfare highlight the need to focus attention on this issue. The explanatory work done in this area does not suggest poverty causes the abuse and neglect which results in children being placed in care. Rather, the socioeconomic factors which may be associated with poverty add stress and limit the options available to low-income families. These pressures have been demonstrated to place children at greater risk. One way to reduce the risk of child maltreatment is to address the underlying issues related to poverty.

NOTES

- 1 Child poverty can not be separated from family poverty and as such poverty is discussed in this context throughout this report, unless otherwise specified.
- 2 Hepworth, H. Philip. "Child Neglect and Abuse" *The Challenge of Child Welfare* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985): 49.
- 3 Pelton, Leroy. "Child Abuse and Neglect and Protective Intervention in Mercer County, New Jersey" *The Social Context of Child Abuse and Neglect* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1981): 92.
- 4 Hepworth, H. Philip. "Child Neglect and Abuse" *The Challenge of Child Welfare* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985): 34.
- 5 Tower, Cynthia Crosson. *Understanding Child Abuse and Neglect* (Toronto: Allyn and Bacon, 1989): 100.
- 6 *Ibid.* 54.
- 7 *Ibid.* 105-106.
- 8 Callahan, Marilyn. "Public Apathy and Government Parsimony" *The Challenge of Child Welfare* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985): 14.
- 9 Among others, the following sources identify a link between poverty and child abuse and neglect:
 - Pelton, Leroy. *The Social Context of Child Abuse and Neglect* (New York: Human Services Press, 1981): 24, 94.
 - Standing Senate Committee on Health, Welfare and Science *Child at Risk* (Hull, Quebec: Canadian government Publishing Centre, 1980): 51.
 - Frost, Nick. "Official Intervention and Child Protection: The Relationship Between State and Family in Contemporary Britain" *Taking Child Abuse Seriously* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990): 37-38.
 - Marsden, Lorna. "The Senate Report on Child Poverty" *Canadian Woman Studies* 12(Summer 1992): 75.
- 10 Parton, Nigel. "Taking Child Abuse Seriously" *Taking Child Abuse Seriously* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990): 16.
- 11 Martin, Marjorie. "Poverty and Child Welfare" *The Challenge of Child Welfare* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1985): 53.
- 12 The Child Youth and Family Policy Research Centre. *The State of the Child in Ontario* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1991): 80.
- 13 Among others, the following sources indicate a disproportionate number of poor children in the child welfare system in Canada:
 - Raychaba, Brian. *To Be On Our Own* (National Youth in Care Network, 1988): 25-26.
 - Standing Senate Committee on Health, Welfare and Science *Child at Risk* (Hull, Quebec: Canadian Government Publishing Centre, 1980): 51.
 - Ross, David and Shillington, Richard. *The Canadian Fact Book on Poverty 1989* (Ottawa: The Canadian Council on Social Development, 1989): 1-2.
- 14 Young, Gay and Gately, Tamra. "Neighborhood Impoverishment and Child Maltreatment" *Journal of Family Issues* 9(June 1988): 251-252.
 - Garbarino, James. "An Ecological Approach to Child Maltreatment" *The Social Context of Child Abuse and Neglect* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1981): 252-253.
 - Pelton, Leroy (ed). *The Social Context of Child Abuse and Neglect* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1981).
 - Tower, Cynthia Crosson. *Understanding Child Abuse and Neglect* (Toronto: Allyn and Bacon, 1989).
 - The Violence Against Children Study Group. *Taking Child Abuse Seriously* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990).
- 15 For a more complete analysis of the evolution of explanatory models related to the present topic please refer to the following writers:
 - The Violence Against Children Study Group. *Taking Child Abuse Seriously* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990).
 - Tower, Cynthia Crosson. *Understanding Child Abuse and Neglect* (Toronto: Allyn and Bacon, 1989).
- 16 For more information in regards to such studies please refer to:
 - Chamberland, Claire, et al. "Conduites abusives et négligentes envers les enfants: Réalités canadienne et américaine" *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science* 18(October 1986): 391-412.
 - Zuravin, Susan "The Ecology of Child Abuse and Neglect: Review of the Literature and Presentation of Data" *Violence and Victims* 4(Summer 1989): 101-120.
 - Garbarino, James. "An Ecological Approach to Child Maltreatment" *The Social Context of Child Abuse and Neglect* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1981): 5.
- 17 Chamberland, Claire, et al. "Conduites abusives et négligentes envers les enfants: Réalités canadienne et américaine" *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Science* 18(October 1986): 409-410.
- 18 Parton, Christine "Women, Gender Oppression and Child Abuse" *Taking Child Abuse Seriously* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990): 41-62.

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- 19 Pelton, Leroy. *The Social Context of Child Abuse and Neglect* (New York: Human Services Press, 1981): 26-27.
20. Murphy, Jonathan. "No Pepper for the Poor" *First Reading* (Edmonton: Edmonton Social Planning Council, 1992): 8-10.
- Ross, David and Shillington, Richard. *The Canadian Fact Book on Poverty 1989* (Ottawa: The Canadian Council on Social Development, 1989).
- 21 "Children and Poverty" *Transition* (December 1988): 8.
- 22 Arnoti, Brigitta. "Children in Low-Income Families" *Canadian Social Trends* (Winter 1986): 19.
- 23 Canadian Council on Social Development. *1990 Poverty Statistics* (Ottawa: Centre for International Statistics).
- 24 Ross, David and Shillington, Richard. *The Canadian Fact Book on Poverty 1989* (Ottawa: The Canadian Council on Social Development, 1989): 1-2, 23.
- 25 Siggner, Andrew. "The Socio-Demographic Conditions of Registered Indians" *Canadian Social Trends* (Winter 1986): 2-9.
- Morse, Bradford. *Indian Child Welfare: A Tragedy in Need of Reform*. A paper presented to the Conference on Provincial Social Welfare Policy, May 1982. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa, Faculty of Law, 1990): 72.
- 26 Ryerse, Catherine. *Thursday's Child: Child Poverty in Canada* (Ottawa: National Youth in Care Network, 1990): 72.
- 27 Alberta Social Services and Community Health. *Child Welfare in Alberta: A Progress Report* (Edmonton: Alberta Social Services and Community Health, 1985): 7.
- 28 Murphy, Jonathan. *Edmonton's Urban Natives: An Uphill Struggle for Survival* (Edmonton: Edmonton Social Planning Council, 1991): 7.
- 29 Johnston, Patrick. *Native Children and the Child Welfare System* (Toronto: Canadian Council on Social Development in association with James Lorimer & Company, Publishers, 1983).
- 30 Standing Committee on Health and Welfare, Social Affairs, Seniors and the Status of Women. *Poverty* (Ottawa: Canadian Communications Group, 1991): 75.
- 31 Standing Senate Committee on Health, Welfare and Science. *Child at Risk* (Hull, Quebec: Canadian Government Publishing Centre, 1980): 51.
- 32 Arnoti, Brigitta. "Children in Low-Income Families" *Canadian Social trends* (Winter 1986): 19.
- 33 Gorlick, Carolyne. "Economic Stress, Social Support and Health/Well-being of Low-Income Female Single Parents" *Transition* (March 1989): 6.
- 34 Alberta Social Services. *Planning Children's Services in the 1980s* (Edmonton: Alberta Social Services, 1986): 37-38.
- 35 Walter, Bernd. *Carrying Their Words: First Annual Report of the Children's Advocate* (Edmonton: Children's Advocate Office, 1990): 19.
- 36 Alberta Native Affairs. *A Demographic Overview of the Native Populations in Alberta* (Edmonton: Alberta Native Affairs, Policy & Planning Branch, Native Affairs Secretariat, 1985): 6.
- 37 Murphy, Jonathan. *Edmonton's Urban Natives: An Uphill Struggle for Survival* (Edmonton: Edmonton Social Planning Council, 1991): 1, 3, 6, 7.

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