

Poverty, Neglect, and Involvement in the Child Welfare System: Perceptions of Workers and Parent Clients

Emily Perdue
Sociology, Social Work, & Anthropology
Northern Michigan University
1401 Presque Isle Ave.
Marquette, MI 49855 USA

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Timothy Hilton

Abstract

This exploratory research examines perceptions of relations between poverty and client involvement in child welfare cases of alleged or substantiated physical neglect. The primary data used to gain insight into how poverty is seen to impact cases of this type was collected by way of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with both workers for, and clients of, child welfare agencies in four of Michigan's Upper Peninsula counties. Audio recordings of the interviews were analyzed and coded with NVivo computer software, and a grounded theory approach was taken, allowing concepts and themes (that helped to answer questions raised during the research process) to emerge from the data. Compiled data suggest that poverty can affect all three types of client involvement identified here, as well as case outcomes, according not only to clients, but also to workers.

Keywords: Family, Poverty, Neglect

1. Introduction

Families comprise over 13% of the 15% of Americans living below the poverty line.¹ Poverty is strongly associated with child neglect; or with reports and findings of neglect, made to and by the child welfare system. The widely-cited Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-3)² reports that significant differences in abuse and neglect rates were found in all income brackets, across all categories of maltreatment and severity of outcome except fatal injuries.

Yet perhaps the pervasive links between poverty, neglect, and client involvement in the child welfare system are even more prominently displayed in the definitions used by policymakers and that therefore guide the decisions made by child welfare workers. Neglect as currently defined in family law and child welfare work is the failure to provide for a child's basic needs. Circumstances under which the child cannot safely be returned home due to risk of harm by the parent or the *inability* of the parent to provide for the child's basic needs are grounds for termination of parental rights. Chronic neglect is one of the most common statutory grounds for determining parental unfitness.

This language does not differentiate between, for instance, an unwillingness to provide for one's child and a lack of access to material resources more closely related to political or structural factors than to parental unfitness. Together with the fact that most cases agency-confirmed as child maltreatment are those categorized as neglect³, this is what makes relations between poverty, neglect, and involvement as a client in a child welfare case especially troubling, as well as worthy of study. Whether and how these associations are conceived of by child welfare staff, and by parent clients, is of equal importance, and is the focus of this research.

2. Methodology

This qualitative study asks whether and how poverty is perceived by child welfare workers to be a contributing factor in client involvement with cases of alleged or substantiated neglect, as well as whether and how poverty is perceived by birthparent clients to play a role in these cases. Subjects are workers or clients of child welfare agencies in four of Michigan's central Upper Peninsula counties. The sample includes 14 participants total ($n=14$): Eight workers, for public or contracting agencies and ranging from caseworker to administrator ($n=8$); and six clients, with past or current involvement in an alleged or substantiated neglect case ($n=6$). Sampling methods used were purposive. Recruitment of workers depended on accessibility, and eligibility of voluntary participation by clients giving informed consent was based on low-income status and experience with a case involving allegations of, specifically, physical neglect. A total of 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted, two workers and two clients opting to interview together. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to three hours. Most were audio-recorded, the recorded information serving as the study's primary data and analyzed with the help of NVivo software. All interviews resulted in supplemental written narratives, and all data was examined using grounded theory, which functions by allowing concepts and themes to come from the gathered data.

3. Data

The grounded theory approach helped to enhance this study's validity (which refers to whether and to what extent research questions and participant responses measure what they were intended to) by making clearer what participants meant when they spoke of 'client involvement.' While this investigation was originally concerned with the relation of poverty to client involvement being initiated, or how impoverished parents become clients, three distinct conceptualizations of client involvement emerged from the data. One of them, just mentioned, refers to how the client involvement began. Usually, this was prompted by a party outside the family and outside the child welfare system, such as an anonymous reporter, and usually, the parent-turned-client was very low-income.

Another of them refers to the process of client involvement, from case opened to case closed; the events, dynamics, decisions, actions, and outcomes that make up the client's case. Here, 'client involvement' is synonymous with 'case processing,' and implicitly assigns responsibility for client involvement to the agency and/or larger child welfare system that it operates within. In simpler terms, the agency gets and keeps the client involved, usually involuntarily, in a case.

A third way of conceptualizing client involvement speaks to the client's involvement in his or her own case; the opportunity of the client, and the utilization of that opportunity, to participate in case planning, goal-setting, and outcomes. Here, client involvement can be summed up as 'client participation.' This way of thinking about client involvement seems to leave more room for voluntary involvement on the part of the client.

While these are not mutually exclusive concepts, in theory or practice, they did clarify the 'types' of client involvement that were not the original research concern. In doing so, these distinctions shed light on the nuances of relations between poverty, allegations or findings of neglect, and involvement as a client of the child welfare system.

Clarification by workers, of just who is considered the client in any given case, also proved helpful to this study. All workers' interviews proceeded, throughout almost their entirety, with each worker referring to the parents involved in the case as clients. Yet near the end of each interview, when workers were asked to specify who they considered their clients to be, several named the child as such.

3.1. Worker Perceptions (Poverty's Impact On Client Involvement)

Everyday examples of the poverty/neglect debate abound. As a case in point gleaned from this study, two workers pinpointed the "dirty home" as an aspect of poverty, while two other workers pegged the same as an occurrence of neglect. Underlying many divergent diagnoses like these is a much older sociological argument, one that could be described as between Karl Marx and Max Weber and that attempts to determine whether economics shapes culture or culture shapes economics. In this study, some workers held that poverty is entwined in the very roots of much child treatment, especially neglect and most especially neglect of the physical kind. Other workers countered that both poverty and child maltreatment, including neglect, have cultural or behavioral explanations.

The dialectic at hand, a modern and specialized version of its prototype, has as its opposing points structural economic factors beyond families' control (job availability, layoff, recession, inflation, poverty policy, etc.) on the

one hand, and individual personalities or shortcomings of parents on the other. Domestic violence, alcohol or drug abuse, and mental health issues, along with dirty homes—all listed by workers interviewed as common reasons for child removal, and all known to be associated with poverty—fit into this framework of endless controversy.

Multiple workers proposed that the only relationship between poverty, neglect, and client involvement with their agency is that clients use poverty as an excuse for poor parenting and/or as an instrument to gain undeserved or abused financial advantage. One worker reported having been asked, by a client who explained that he and his family were well provided for by governmental sources, “Why do you work?” This worker also reported having observed birthparents risk removal of their children from their home in order to receive monetary benefits, and having heard verbal accounts of plans made by females to produce a child in order to obtain unearned income from the state.

Another worker, in a separate interview, echoed this perception of client motivation. “The more children you have, the more money you make.” For clients, it’s about “self-gratification. What they want, when they want it.” In this worker’s view, it is not poverty that breeds neglect, since clients do not, in fact, experience poverty, but rather, are handed “more resources than most of us have.” Clients expect others to pay their and their children’s way through life. When shortages do arise they can likely, in this worker’s perception, be traced to parental behavioral factors.

At the same time, according to the present account, the motives of clients stem not just from their personal characteristics. The state plays a pivotal role here. Making it too easy for parents and clients to misuse funds, the state perpetuates a cycle wherein struggling families “can’t pull themselves up, because the support is there only if you don’t have any money.” In any case, this worker doubts a serious relationship between poverty, neglect, and client involvement with the child welfare system, as “there are plenty of very poor people who raise their children very, very well, with morals and values.”

A third worker agrees with the assessment that values are an integral part of any conversation about poverty, neglect, and client involvement; though takes a different stance on how they operate, or what they explain, within this context. “There are *a great many* middle-class value complaints,” or reports made by citizens whose suspicions of neglect are based on the belief or knowledge that the families being reported lack middle-class values, which is largely what makes them suspect in the reporter’s eyes. When asked whether the worker has had experience with cases of neglect outside a context of poverty, the reply was:

Oh, yes. But they’re rare, because people don’t look at middle-class families like they do lower-class families. There could be a lot of neglect in a middle-class family, but the neighbors and other people aren’t looking at it, that’s all. People tend to put a microscope on lower-income families. I’ve seen that prejudice in workers.

Notably, the worker quoted here was the only one to suggest a lack of recognition by some parents that they are involved in a neglectful situation. This worker was also one of only two who named generational poverty during their interviews as central to the discussion at hand. The other of these outlined connections between poverty and client involvement as follows.

I think it [poverty] contributes [to client involvement], first, because the parents that I’ve worked with, they’ve not known anything outside poverty, in their own developmental years. It’s all those factors that go with being poor, that impacted- now they’re biologically adult, capable of producing children, many of them wonderfully talented human beings, just not capable of making sense of the world. And I think poverty causes this. Their parents were struggling, maybe they didn’t know how to be a parent, or maybe they didn’t have an education. And if you don’t parent by design, you parent by default...It’s generational poverty...It’s poor decision-making, and they don’t have parents to rescue them and make better choices...I don’t see poverty as someone who’s unwilling to work. There are always those, but I think they’re in the minority...Families not in poverty, they can cover up their misdeeds. You go pay your fine, and it’s a totally different outcome.

To the families that make up the client base of child welfare work, outcomes, namely those regarding removal, reunification, or termination, are of the utmost significance. Workers were asked during interviews: Are children removed because parents are poor? Here are the responses of workers attempting to answer that question.

- ❖ “Hopefully not. But I can’t say that 100%. 99%, no. But...it can happen.”

- ❖ “No. Parents do not lose their children because they are poor. They lose them because they are neglectful.”
- ❖ “Well, it’s never going to be stated that way. I will tell you this: I know it’s never, ever going to be characterized that way. The circumstances that children are found in, that lead to removal, can often be traced back to circumstances of poverty.”
- ❖ “Are children removed because parents are poor? No. Are children removed because they’re at imminent risk *because of poverty*? Yes. That’s what I’d say.”
- ❖ “No, I don’t think parents ever lose their children for financial reasons. It might have a lot to do with all the factors that come with being poor. [Agreement with last statement by co-worker.] It’s hard to sort out all those things...but sometimes, you might request a termination because these parents will never be able to provide for their children.”
- ❖ “No.”
- ❖ “No.”

3.2. Client Perceptions (Poverty’s Impact On Case Involvement)

The handful of clients who participated in this study include one (male/female) married couple and four female clients best described with regard to family type as one single, two divorced, and one remarried. All but one client interviewed was the birthparent of the child or children involved in the case (the exception being a stepparent). Interviews with clients count a total of 17 children under clients’ care, 13 of whom were directly involved in a case, and a total of ten cases mentioned or discussed.

All but one of the clients interviewed were receiving multiple forms of government-issued financial assistance before their case was opened, and all clients received multiple forms of such financial help while their case was open. The most common of these forms included: Some form of cash assistance (whether issued by Social Security, SSI, or DHS); food benefits; medical coverage; and WIC. Rather basic resources like diapers, clothing, or transportation were named in every interview as the most difficult to secure consistently. One former client, when asked early in the interview what the hardest thing to keep up with financially was, replied, “Just providing.”

Interestingly, poverty was not always seen by clients as a contributing factor to their case involvement; even when it was evident that either poverty or its relief was an important part of the case’s evolution. For example, the client quoted immediately above, along with reporting that generally to provide for her children was the most challenging financial feat she faced, also explained that once the state and the agency helped to put her children back into her care on a regular basis, with neither paid employment nor child support, “that’s when things got hard.”

The state and the agency, though, also helped her to gain financial stability. A major source of help for the newly- (and as yet tentatively-) reunited family was low-income housing, and for a while, the housing commission, using prorated income-based guidelines, charged her nothing for rent. A DHS-run program aided in putting furniture, including beds for her kids, into the family home, and DHS assisted her in getting a car as well (“this was back when DHS could do that”). She received food benefits, medical and mental health coverage, and cash assistance for the family. The local workfare agency, not often credited with facilitating hires, helped her find a job, and she got help paying for daycare while she worked. She even got a punching bag. “They told me about services I didn’t know about- that I think a lot of people don’t know about.” There was no service requested by but unavailable to her.

She also received financial and social supports from her family, which were emphasized numerous times during the interview and included clothing, school supplies, a washer, and a dryer. Her kids are grown now, and her case is a success story. Here, it was the relief of poverty that, undoubtedly, played a substantive role in the case.

In other cases, poverty itself was more recognizable as a component. One client’s case was opened while she and her child were staying in another couple’s home, not having had a place of their own to reside. (Note that this is an example of how poverty [here, in the form of homelessness] can contribute to client involvement as initialized.)

Another client, or rather, a pair of them, had been in need of emergency assistance, especially with electricity and heat, every few months before their case was opened. This couple had four children, giving them a family of six, so even with the help of the food benefits they were getting, just feeding the family was difficult at times. After an

initial removal, their food and WIC benefits were cut—and since they still had the kids in their care three days per week (for a time), it was that much more difficult to feed their children when they were in the home. He reported having lost his job when the case was opened, because their caseworkers wanted him there during home visits. After an eviction, she'd found a new place, but the children were not returned, because it "wasn't big enough for the kids." (Notice that these are examples of how poverty can affect client involvement as case processing.) Their court-appointed attorney was not much help. "He would not return calls, was not in his office, he wasn't answering questions, and he was never in court. And the best lawyer in town," he said, "was the kids' lawyer." (This is an example of how poverty can affect client involvement as participation in one's own case.)

At the time of the interview, they had been on a HUD waiting list for four years. Also at the time of the interview, which was in June of 2012, their children were still in need of permanent placement, having been removed from their care in August of 2010.

Similarly, one client, a birthmother of five children, spoke of the compounded powerlessness, along with the twofold stigma, of being both low-income and a client of child protective services (CPS). "I was overwhelmed, with too many things [to do] and not enough people." Her cases left her steeped in financial adversity ("I'm no better off now than I was twenty years ago") and social disgrace ("It stays with you. Even now, I feel like I'm not much of a person"). She discussed skills like budgeting money, and a network of positive relationships, as the most important things a client can have and use.

She had favorable things to say of one caseworker who "went out of her way to help, even when she wasn't supposed to," and associated her best experiences of client involvement with in-home programs, which were most helpful to her, pointing out that these services generally are most useful for many clients who lack transportation.

Lack of childcare, too, especially the affordable and competent kind, was highlighted in several interviews. Two clients reported that their children were harmed while not in their presence, and conveyed that this was a reason for their neglect charges.

Clients were asked during their interviews: Did poverty, or a lack of access to material resources, play a role in your case, or in your involvement as a client of the child welfare system?

- ❖ "Yeah." [Agreement.]
- ❖ "No, not in my case."
- ❖ "No. No, in this case."
- ❖ "Oh, definitely."
- ❖ "Yes. All the way through."

4. Discussion

Much of the data gathered over the course of this study aligns with prior research on poverty and the child welfare system. Both workers and clients described, during their interviews, situations that are common to families involved in cases of alleged or state-substantiated physical neglect, many of these situations sharing the attributes of financial distress in the form of a lack of several kinds of resources.

Social support, highlighted as paramount to parent clients by one abovementioned interviewee, is known to be tightly tied to financial and other types of familial stability. Positive relationships with members of extended family, neighborhood, or community mitigate the difficulties or dangers of poverty.⁴ Lack of social systems can be severely detrimental to family cohesion, and in a context of involvement with child welfare or child protection agencies, the risks posed by this particular deficit are, at times, amplified instead of lessened. This is especially so if there are shortcomings in service provision. A 2010 study by Timothy Hilton and Cornell DeJong illustrates this conundrum with a quote from a homeless woman who asks "why you would take my son and pay for a foster home, but you can't help me with anything. He's not neglected; we're just in a financial spot."⁵

Homeless status, as mentioned by the client who "caught a case" while staying in another family's home, has become, in recent years, less often overlooked in studies of poverty in America.⁶ Families with children are now one of the fastest growing segments of the homeless population.⁷ The most common makeup of a homeless family is a mother with one or two children.⁸

Even before the mode of homelessness came to be characterized by motherhood, homelessness had been shown, in both state- and national-level studies, to be either a factor or a sole precipitating cause in cases of children's (removal from their home and their parents' care and) placement into foster care.⁹ Homelessness had also appeared

a possible candidate for another of the accumulating classifications of parental neglect, a 1996 publication stating “It is unclear whether homelessness should be considered neglect...”¹⁰

On a somewhat similar note, one worker interviewed for this study disclosed that a change in policy regarding initial investigations had just been made. Whereas which types of referrals (to the child welfare agency, of suspected child abuse or neglect) to be looked into was heretofore determined locally, new orders from the state capital mandate that such specifics as a household’s lack of electricity must now be investigated.

Lack of legal support for clients facing child welfare cases in court, described in detail by an above-quoted client, is another issue that some scholars have been attempting to put more social and political focus on. In 1982 Douglas Besharov¹¹ pointed to the urgent significance of the fact that while the Sixth Amendment to the Constitution guarantees the right to counsel in criminal cases, there is no absolute federal right to counsel in child protection cases, due to the United States Supreme Court determination of the 1981 *Lassiter v. Department of Social Services* case. Besharov described the *Lassiter* holding as standing for the proposition that “a drunken driver’s night in the cooler is a greater deprivation of liberty than a parent’s permanent loss of rights” to retain any legal connection whatsoever to their child.

In 2009 Vivek Sankaran listed a number of systemic barriers to a parent client’s procurement of the legal assistance that suspected criminals benefit from. He also relayed that one pilot project enhancing legal representation of parents (by lowering caseloads, increasing compensation, and providing support services, such as experts, to the lawyers) resulted, after just three years, in: Faster hearings, a 50% increase in reunification rates, a nearly 45% decrease in terminations of parental rights, and a 50% decrease in the rate of children “aging out” of the foster care system. (‘Aging out’ is a phrase used to describe situations in which children have been placed into some form of foster care and have subsequently reached the age of legal adulthood before having been legally adopted.)

Lack of transportation, described by one researcher as “endemic to rural areas,”¹² was a challenge faced by all clients interviewed; and has been linked to unsuccessful case outcomes by one Michigan prosecutor, taking a survey anonymously, who said “If you are poor, lack transportation and a job, you can’t get to all the appointments that the social workers pile on, with the result that you lose your children because you don’t comply with requirements.”¹³

Lack of childcare, mentioned by more than one client, was also talked about by a few of the workers interviewed. While a couple of them acknowledged situations such as using perhaps less-than-qualified neighbors as baby-sitters or trading baby-sitting for things, one worker connected lack of childcare to lack of two other very important considerations, putting their relations to one another this way; “The less education clients have, the more likely it is that they’ll be hired to work afternoon or night shifts- when daycares are closed.”

Lack of reasonable efforts was brought up by one client maintaining that the agency, while initially reassuring her that she and her children’s father would receive marriage counseling upon her request, never followed through on it. Reasonable efforts are those made by the State, or the agency, to reunify families after the initial removal of a child from their home, and are legally required. Yet as this client did, some of the literature on reasonable efforts suggests that they are not always made, which is why such efforts have become a hotly contested topic.¹⁴

Undoubtedly, what efforts are made depend upon many things, and there is evidence that one of these things is what stories are covered by media, which can play just as important a role in child welfare work now as it did during the field’s inception.¹⁵ A study by Brenda Smith and Stella Donovan¹⁶ found fear of negative media attention on caseworker decisions to be part of the job, relaying that this fear clearly played a role in workers’ routine decision-making in 1990s Chicago. Early in the decade, over 70% of children in Cook County were returned home from substitute care within 18 months. Over the next several years, tragedies involving children who presumably had been involved with the child welfare system at some point prior were highly publicized through media. A speaker on behalf of the Illinois Department of Child and Family Services was quoted, in the study cited by Smith and Donovan¹⁷ as saying, “In the nineties, with the tragedies that happened, people stopped reunifications.” When data for Smith and Donovan’s study were collected in 1997 and 1998, 35% (less than half) of kids in that same county were returned home from substitute care within 18 months.

Today, parent clients no longer have 18 months to prove their capacity for reunification. The 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) shortened the period in which a permanency planning hearing must be held, from 18 to 12 months. If a child has been placed by the state in out-of-home care, and has been kept there for 12 months, a hearing must be set and held to determine whether the child will be returned home or placed for adoption. If a child has been in foster care for fifteen of the most recent 22 months, states must file a petition to terminate parental rights, as well as identify, recruit, process, and approve an adoptive family. ASFA also authorizes adoption incentive payments to states.¹⁸

Viewed as a response to high numbers of children remaining in foster care too long, this law could be considered a decisive action taken to remedy this problem. Viewed as a response to high numbers of children being placed in foster care more often than necessary in the first place, this law can be seen to speed up the process of permanently

separating the family of origin. ASFA gives parents whose children have been removed from the home less time to earn a reinstatement of their parental rights. In many cases, this means less time to stabilize financially.

It is noteworthy, and perhaps no more, that there were two clients interviewed for this study who had not (ever) had any child removed from their care; each of whose case or cases had taken place well before 1997, and one of whose case lasted three years. There were four clients interviewed who had experienced long-term removal of at least one child from their home; all of whose cases took place after 1997.

Vigorous criticism attracted by ASFA, for its swiftness in dealing with terminations of parental rights, seems to have taken some effect; at least ten states have enacted or considered legislation that would allow the restoration of parental rights when in the best interests of the child.¹⁹ To date, Michigan is not one of them. Nor has the state, as others have also done, included specified definitions of neglect, or guidelines officials could use to more effectively separate family poverty from child neglect, in its statutory language.²⁰

In the meantime, and in the words of a 2009 report by the Michigan Child Welfare Improvement Task Force, deteriorating economic conditions have affected state and agency service provision, and in Michigan, “these challenges result in removals from homes when community-based services might stabilize families.”²¹

5. Conclusion

This study, using an exploratory, grounded theory approach, aims to begin helping examine how poverty shapes ties between neglect cases (of both the alleged and substantiated varieties) and client involvement with the child welfare system. The three types of client involvement delineated during participant interviews (parent initiation as a client, case processing, and parent client participation) underline that in order to better understand the tri-partitioned web of poverty, neglect, and client involvement, it may be wise to keep in mind that the relationship between the three can be characterized differently depending upon just how “involved” a client is, or is not, in a given circumstance or case. For example, clients may have less influence on the initial stages of their involvement with the agency, as well as on the organizational aspects of case processing that the agency is solely responsible for carrying out; but more influence on their own efforts, decision-making, and participation in case planning and follow through.

Insights into whether and how poverty affects client involvement in these cases did vary greatly, ranging from “I don’t see what poverty has to do with that” to poverty perceived as a causal factor leading to involvement and continued interaction with child welfare agencies. Most data indicate that factors related to a lack of access to material resources can be linked to important points over the course of a case. Taken together, these poverty-related factors or situations can, at times, be connected, directly or indirectly, to case outcomes. Workers, to a greater degree than clients, articulated a conception of relations between poverty, neglect, and client involvement in child welfare proceedings that includes an association between poverty and child removal from the home.

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