

Increase in gas prices associated with increase in child maltreatment

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Credit: Washington University in St. Louis

Increases in gasoline prices are associated with increases in child maltreatment referral rates, finds a new study from the Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis.

"Because fluctuations in the price of gas affect the amount of [disposable income](#) available to families, the results suggest that changes in disposable income predict changes in child maltreatment," said Michael McLaughlin, doctoral student and author of the study "Less Money, More Problems: How Changes in Disposable Income Affect Child Maltreatment," published in the upcoming May issue of the journal *Child Abuse & Neglect*.

"Due to the nonexperimental nature of this study, one cannot conclude that changes in [gas prices](#) directly cause changes in the incidence of child maltreatment," McLaughlin said.

"A spike in the price of gas, however, is an important exogenous shock to families' income that may result in parental stress, material hardship, or other factors that commonly lead to child abuse or neglect."

Each year, more than six million children in the United States are reported to Child Protective Services for child abuse and/or neglect. The cost of this maltreatment was estimated at \$124 billion in 2010.

An increase in gas prices makes families worse off financially and potentially increases [child abuse](#) and neglect, the study finds. The price of gas is not only useful as an exogenous shock to families' disposable income, but also an important economic indicator that has been linked to a number of social outcomes. Gas prices are associated with rates of physical activity, obesity and life satisfaction.

The study focused on annual national data reports from 2000-2010 on both [child maltreatment](#) referrals and average [gasoline prices](#).

"Money matters to families, and economic fluctuations could lead to an increased number of children being placed in harm's way," McLaughlin said. "This knowledge is critical because it informs child protection

workers regarding child welfare risk factors and provides legislators with information relevant to family policy."

More information: Michael McLaughlin. Less money, more problems: How changes in disposable income affect child maltreatment, *Child Abuse & Neglect* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.03.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.03.006)

Provided by Washington University in St. Louis

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