

# Researchers look at factors outside the family that cause child neglect

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A recent paper by two UConn researchers and their colleagues highlights the importance of examining factors outside the family that contribute to child neglect. This research strategy could help policymakers and social

agencies design programs to reduce child maltreatment—specifically, neglect.

Neglect reports are a major concern for the [child welfare system](#). About three quarters of all [child maltreatment](#) referrals nationwide allege neglect, and eighty percent of maltreatment-related child fatalities can be attributed to neglect. Moreover, the rate of [child neglect](#) reports has been increasing over time. Despite these facts, the cause of child neglect is not fully understood, says Kerri M. Raissian, an associate professor of public policy in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at UConn and one of the four scholars who collaborated on the paper titled "Heed Neglect, Disrupt Child Maltreatment: A Call to Action for Researchers" published in the International Journal on Child Maltreatment: Research Policy and Practice.

"Neglect remains intractable. The question that our research team considered is: why does neglect remain intractable and what can we do to get it on the decline in a way that we're seeing other forms of child abuse [decline]?", Raissian says. "We don't know what causes neglect. Without knowing what causes neglect, it's really hard to design policy and programs that are going to make a difference in people's lives and reduce this problem."

Raissian's collaborators included Megan Feely, an assistant professor in the School of Social Work at UConn; Lindsey Bullinger, an assistant professor of public policy at Georgia Tech; and William Schneider, an assistant professor of [social work](#) at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. All the scholars are Doris Duke Fellows for the Promotion of Child Well-Being.

The researchers suggest a new approach in reducing child neglect should focus on macro-level factors such as economics, labor markets, and government safety net programs because they play a key but

underexplored role in [family](#) circumstances that can influence parents' ability to consistently provide safe and sufficient environments for their children. They note that in 2016, Child Protective Service agencies in the United States received 4.1 million referrals involving approximately 7.4 million children, indicating year-over-year increases in child maltreatment referrals.

Feely says most child neglect seems to be the result of a gap in safe and consistent care and a lack of basic services for families. Particularly when it comes to preventing a first instance of neglect, looking beyond traditional child welfare practices and policies will help identify ways to better support a family's ability to care for their children.

"Social work really looks at the person in the environment as the central theory of our work, but we often ignore how those contextual factors may facilitate or impede functioning within the family," she says. "It is easier to care for your children when the environment you're living in is more supportive and less stressful and requires less effort just to get your [basic needs](#) met."

Raissian says the traditional approach when child protective service agencies receive a complaint about child [neglect](#) is to look at the family and try to change the family's behavior. The paper terms this the "streetlight effect"—looking for the problem where it appears easiest to see. Instead, looking at issues that are not evident may provide better clues to improving the family situation.

"We have theories from social work and many other disciplines that tell us families exist in society and in context," Raissian says. "For example, we can look at increasing the minimum wage, a step that Connecticut has recently taken, which will hopefully help families that are struggling with economic hardship so it's easier to parent—I find it a lot easier to parent when I can pay my bills versus when I can't pay my bills."

She points to how public policy has worked to provide safety for children in other contexts, such as motor vehicle deaths. The driving environment was changed by improved speed limits, safer roads, seat belts and requirements for child safety seats.

"We thought about all these ways we could make the driving environment safer, thereby making kids and cars safer and reducing motor vehicle deaths and injury. It worked and is considered one of the top 10 public health interventions in our lifetime," Raissian says. "We need to do that with [child](#) maltreatment. We need to think about how to make the environment better for families so they can better care for their kids."

**More information:** Lindsey Rose Bullinger et al. Heed Neglect, Disrupt Child Maltreatment: a Call to Action for Researchers, *International Journal on Child Maltreatment: Research, Policy and Practice* (2019). [DOI: 10.1007/s42448-019-00026-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s42448-019-00026-5)

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