No Surprise: The Rate of Fatal Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities Is Related to Poverty

Robert W. Block, MD, FAAP

In this issue of Pediatrics, Farrell et al describe research linking poverty with child maltreatment fatalities. The American Academy of Pediatrics has addressed the overall issue of the effects of poverty in a recent policy statement. An increasing number of reports linking ecology with outcomes for both adults and children have been published describing risk factors for overall health, brain health, and lifetime health trajectories. Given the sociologic, economic, medical, and myriad other challenges related to poverty, it is not surprising that the authors report a significant increase in fatal child maltreatment related specifically to socioeconomic status. What may be surprising is that although this fact is both intuitive and now statistically proven, given the significant percentage of children living in poverty, the United States has yet to develop a comprehensive plan to address the issue.

Toxic stress, allostatic load, and childhood adversities have all been explored during the last 15 to 20 years, usually concluding that childhood brain development, as well as childhood skill acquisition, social competence, hope, and empathy, are negatively affected by the challenges encountered by families living in poverty. Usually impoverished families live among other families grouped together in impoverished neighborhoods within geographical portions of a larger community. Consequently, the pediatrician in practice cannot address a single family’s economic issues without involvement of other programs aimed at reducing poverty in a community. Acknowledging a high rate of poverty, and educating community leaders to work together to address both the economic and child health and development challenges of poverty, could lead to a reduction in frustrations, drug use, family violence, and other negative factors influenced by the toxic stress of poverty.

It is important to note that although poverty is often a reflection of generations of impoverished parents and their children, poverty is sometimes the result of changes in the overall economies of the country, thrusting previously lower to middle-class families into an era of new challenges. Either way, the stresses related to poverty (eg, food insecurity, poor education, unsafe neighborhoods often involving gun violence, access to jobs) can create a frustration level for parents that results in fatal maltreatment of their children. “That’s how I was raised,” has been heard nationally after high-profile child maltreatment cases reached the press. Finding a way to provide parenting education to folks who are increasingly worried about rent payments, food, finding a job, recovering from addictions, suffering from a low level of education, and other challenges is a daunting task. Developing health plans, including contraception, and addressing the social determinates of health are more than a health system.

Department of Pediatrics, University of Oklahoma/Tulsa University School of Community Medicine, Tulsa, Oklahoma

Opinions expressed in these commentaries are those of the author and not necessarily those of the American Academy of Pediatrics or its Committees.

DOI: 10.1542/peds.2017-0357

Accepted for publication Feb 14, 2017

Address correspondence to Robert W. Block, MD, FAAP, Department of Pediatrics, University of Oklahoma/Tulsa University School of Community Medicine, 4502 E. 41st St, Tulsa, OK 74114. E-mail: rblock@aap.net

PEDIATRICS (ISSN Numbers: Print, 0031-4005; Online, 1098-4275).

Copyright © 2017 by the American Academy of Pediatrics

FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE: The author has indicated he has no financial relationships relevant to this article to disclose.

FUNDING: No external funding.

POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST: The author has indicated he has no potential conflicts of interest to disclose.

COMPANION PAPER: A companion to this article can be found online at www.pediatrics.org/cgi/doi/10.1542/peds.2016-1616.

or individual physician responsibility. Unless the United States begins to emphasize the prevention of new poverty, and finds ways to create resiliency among both parents and children, our current situation will not change. Although we may find ways to significantly reduce poverty, the article by Farrell et al. is an important reminder of the significant consequences thrust upon an overrepresented portion of our children.

REFERENCES
No Surprise: The Rate of Fatal Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities Is Related to Poverty
Robert W. Block

*Pediatrics* 2017;139; originally published online April 24, 2017;
DOI: 10.1542/peds.2017-0357

Updated Information & Services
including high resolution figures, can be found at:
/content/139/5/e20170357.full.html

References
This article cites 3 articles, 1 of which can be accessed free at:
/content/139/5/e20170357.full.html#ref-list-1

Subspecialty Collections
This article, along with others on similar topics, appears in the following collection(s):
*Child Abuse and Neglect*
/cgi/collection/child_abuse_neglect_sub

Permissions & Licensing
Information about reproducing this article in parts (figures, tables) or in its entirety can be found online at:
/site/misc/Permissions.xhtml

Reprints
Information about ordering reprints can be found online:
/site/misc/reprints.xhtml

PEDIATRICS is the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics. A monthly publication, it has been published continuously since 1948. PEDIATRICS is owned, published, and trademarked by the American Academy of Pediatrics, 141 Northwest Point Boulevard, Elk Grove Village, Illinois, 60007. Copyright © 2017 by the American Academy of Pediatrics. All rights reserved. Print ISSN: 0031-4005. Online ISSN: 1098-4275.
No Surprise: The Rate of Fatal Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities Is Related to Poverty

Robert W. Block

Pediatrics 2017;139; originally published online April 24, 2017;
DOI: 10.1542/peds.2017-0357

The online version of this article, along with updated information and services, is located on the World Wide Web at:
/content/139/5/e20170357.full.html