

# 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<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3,4</sup> 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

FREE

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](http://www.pediatrics.org/cgi/doi/10.1542/peds.2016-1616).

**To cite:** Block RW. No Surprise: The Rate of Fatal Child Abuse and Neglect Fatalities Is Related to Poverty. *Pediatrics*. 2017;139(5):e20170357

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<sup>1</sup> is an important reminder of the significant consequences thrust upon

an overrepresented portion of our children.

#### REFERENCES

1. Farrell CA, Fleegler EW, Monuteaux MC, Wilson CR, Christian CW, Lee LK. Community poverty and the risk of child abuse fatalities in the United States. *Pediatrics*. 2017;139(5):e20161616
2. Gitterman BA, Flanagan PJ, Cotton WH, et al; Council on Community Pediatrics. Poverty and child health in the United States. *Pediatrics*. 2016;137(4):e20160339
3. Felitti VJ, Anda RF, Nordenberg D, et al. Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study. *Am J Prev Med*. 1998;14(4):245–258
4. Block RW. All adults once were children. *J Pediatr Surg*. 2016;51(1):23–27

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

Robert W. Block

*Pediatrics* originally published online April 24, 2017;

<b>Updated Information &amp; Services</b>	including high resolution figures, can be found at: <a href="http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2017/04/20/peds.2017-0357">http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2017/04/20/peds.2017-0357</a>
<b>References</b>	This article cites 3 articles, 1 of which you can access for free at: <a href="http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2017/04/20/peds.2017-0357#BIBL">http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2017/04/20/peds.2017-0357#BIBL</a>
<b>Subspecialty Collections</b>	This article, along with others on similar topics, appears in the following collection(s): <b>Child Abuse and Neglect</b> <a href="http://www.aappublications.org/cgi/collection/child_abuse_neglect_sub">http://www.aappublications.org/cgi/collection/child_abuse_neglect_sub</a>
<b>Permissions &amp; Licensing</b>	Information about reproducing this article in parts (figures, tables) or in its entirety can be found online at: <a href="http://www.aappublications.org/site/misc/Permissions.xhtml">http://www.aappublications.org/site/misc/Permissions.xhtml</a>
<b>Reprints</b>	Information about ordering reprints can be found online: <a href="http://www.aappublications.org/site/misc/reprints.xhtml">http://www.aappublications.org/site/misc/reprints.xhtml</a>

American Academy of Pediatrics

DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™



# PEDIATRICS®

OFFICIAL JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS

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

Robert W. Block

*Pediatrics* originally published online April 24, 2017;

The online version of this article, along with updated information and services, is located on the World Wide Web at:

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2017/04/20/peds.2017-0357>

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: 1073-0397.

American Academy of Pediatrics

DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™

