

CSWS Research Matters

“Gender-Specific Measures of Economic Conditions and Child Abuse”

Data collected from California counties produces stark results

BY JASON LINDO, Assistant Professor, University of Oregon Department of Economics

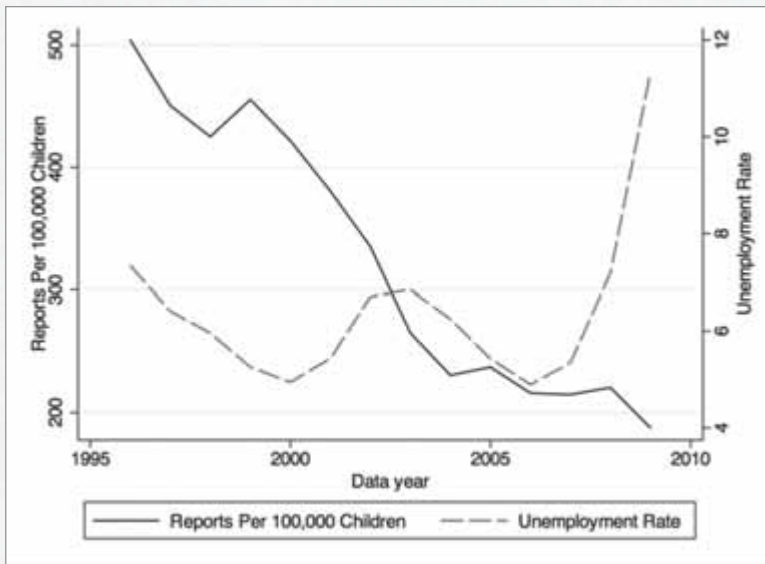


Jason Lindo

The steady decline in rates of child abuse in the United States over the past two decades presents something of a puzzle for researchers. A huge literature spanning several disciplines suggests that poverty is a key determinant of abuse. Yet there hasn't been even a slight uptick in rates of abuse during either of the most recent recessions, despite substantial increases in poverty. Moreover, prior studies that have analyzed the link between measures of local economic conditions and child abuse have found mixed results.

To try to understand this puzzle, “Economic Conditions and Child Abuse” (joint with Jessamyn Schaller and Benjamin Hansen) takes a different perspective on the issue than prior studies. In particular, the analysis is motivated by the notion that economic conditions facing males and females may have different effects on child abuse since they may have different effects on income, childcare provision, and stress, among other important aspects of the household.

To investigate the potentially heterogeneous effects of economic conditions facing males and females, we use data from California counties spanning from 1996-2009. Child abuse rates are based on reports to the California Department of Justice, from Child Protective Services and law enforcement agencies. We combine these data with data on the number of males and females involved in a mass layoff in each county in each year from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.



Recognizing that it would not be informative to compare counties with strong economies to counties with weak economies, because they are likely to be different among many other dimensions that also influence the prevalence of child abuse, we focus on changes within counties over time. That is, we examine the extent to which a county's abuse rate diverges from its trend when its economic conditions diverge from trend.

The results from this analysis are stark. Consistent with prior studies, we find no evidence that overall measures of local economic conditions, such as unemployment rates, are significantly related to

Continued on other side





UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

1201 University of Oregon

Eugene OR 97403-1201

Research Matters

Research Matters is published by the Center for the Study of Women in Society. For more information, call (541) 346-5015, or visit our website: csws.uoregon.edu

An equal-opportunity, affirmative-action institution committed to cultural diversity and compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. This publication will be made available in accessible formats upon request.
© 2013 University of Oregon

Continued from other side

rates of abuse. However, by focusing on aggregate measures of economic conditions, prior studies have been missing the story. Male layoffs increase rates of child abuse while female layoffs reduce rates of child abuse. Specifically, the estimates indicate that a 0.1 percentage point increase in the fraction of working-age males being laid off increases the abuse rate by 3.1 percent. In contrast, the estimates indicate that a 0.1 percentage point increase in the fraction of working-age females involved in mass layoffs reduces abuse by 3.3 percent. These results hold even after accounting for changes in employment in sectors that are responsible for most reports of child abuse (education, law enforcement, social work, and health care).

As such, the fact that the typical economic downturn does not affect rates of abuse is not surprising. When roughly similar numbers of males and females are laid off, the effects on child abuse offset one another. However, downturns that disproportionately affect industries with a large concentration of males increase rates of abuse, while downturns that disproportionately affect industries with a large concentration of females reduce rates of abuse.

As mentioned above, there are many reasons why male and female layoffs might affect child abuse in different ways. However, it is much harder to explain why they affect child abuse in different directions altogether, especially in light of earlier research showing that male and female layoffs both negatively affect income, male and female layoffs both increase the incidence of divorce, and male and female layoffs have similar effects on health outcomes. An explanation based on household bargaining is also ill-suited to explaining the pattern of our results. For example, one might think that a woman's bargaining power would fall after she was laid off, thus making it more difficult for her to protect her children. But our results suggest just the opposite if the household is viewed in this manner.

We believe that focusing on the link between employment and childcare provision is the key to understanding the heterogeneous effects of male and female layoffs. The fact that men have much higher propensities to abuse children than women implies that child abuse rates can change dramatically in response to changes in the distribution of childcare.¹ In particular, we would expect male layoffs to increase abuse rates by increasing the amount of care provided

by the riskier parent to be around (fathers). In contrast, female layoffs could reduce rates of child abuse by reducing the amount of care provided by the riskier parent to be around (fathers). Using data from the American Time Use Survey, we show that parents' time with children does indeed respond in this manner to changes in employment.

Naturally, there is much more work to be done on the topic of economic conditions and child abuse. In this study, we hope to have taken a large step forward by demonstrating that there is a significant link but that it is too complex to be detected by crude measures of economic conditions that ignore gender.

Editor's Note: Jason Lindo received funding toward this project in the form of a Center for the Study of Women in Society Faculty Research Grant in 2012.

Footnote

1. Males play a role in 62 percent of abuse cases despite the fact that mothers spend 50-160 percent more time with children than fathers, depending on how one defines "time with children."

Research Matters is published three times a year by the Center for the Study of Women in Society at the University of Oregon. For more information, call (541) 346-5015, or visit our website: csws.uoregon.edu