The Effect of the Great Recession on the Risk for Child Maltreatment

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Abstract

This paper evaluates change in maternal spanking, and physical and psychological aggression towards children, in the context of the Great Recession (December 2007 – June 2009).

The study draws on the 9 year wave of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (N = 2050) which took place between May 2007 and February 2010, and includes the period of the Great Recession as well the period before and after the recession. The study also employs data from the Consumer Sentiment Index, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the Mortgage Bankers Association. We find that the Great Recession is associated with increased risk of maltreatment, as the decline in consumer confidence was associated with increased levels of high frequency spanking and physically and psychologically aggressive parenting.

Child abuse and neglect remains a pervasive problem in the United States. Nationally, nearly 2 million reports of child maltreatment warranted a response from Child Protective Services and approximately 695,000 unique instances of substantiated child abuse were reported in 2010 (United States Children's Bureau, 2010). Child abuse includes physical, psychological, and sexual abuse and has been linked to higher risk of poor developmental outcomes in childhood and later life. Children who experience abuse are more likely to display externalizing behaviors such as aggressive and antisocial behavior as well as a variety of mental health problems (Gershoff et. al., 2012; Taylor et. al. 2010). In addition, a large body of research has shown that abuse in childhood can have long lasting effects (Berger & Waldfogel, 2011; Herrenkohl et. al, 2009; Herrenkohl & Herrenkohl, 2007; Manly et. al., 2001).

Previous research by Elder (1974) and Elder and Conger (2000) has investigated the association between economic hardship and child maltreatment in the context of the Great Depression and the Iowa Farm crisis. Elder and Conger find that the effect of economic stress on child wellbeing is mediated by changes in parenting that result from economic shocks (Conger et. al., 2002). Elder and Conger propose a family stress model wherein economic stress diminishes parenting quality and negatively affects child development (2000). In addition to research specifically focused on large scale economic changes, a range of research has demonstrated a link between low-income, stress and child abuse (Paxson & Waldfogel, 2002; Berger, 2004; Berger et. al., 2009; Gilert et. al, 2009; Drake & Pandey, 1996; Slack et. al., 2011; Waldfogel, 1998; Gil, 1970).

In this analysis we examine the effect of the Great Recession on frequent maternal spanking, and other measures of physically and psychologically aggressive parenting. While not constituting child abuse in and of themselves, frequent spanking and other aggressive parenting practices may signal elevated risk for child maltreatment (Bugental & Happaney, 2004; MacKenzie et. al., 2011). The Great Recession, beginning in December 2007 and officially ending in June 2009 (NBER, 2012), severely disrupted the American economy and family life, including events such as the fall of Lehman Brothers in September 2008 and the ensuing stock market crash. In addition, it serves as an exogenous economic shock allowing us to investigate the link between economic instability and indicators of potential child abuse. To this end we employ three measures of economic distress - consumer sentiment, unemployment rates, and home foreclosure rates. To assess risk for child maltreatment, we focus primarily on frequency of maternal spanking, but also run a set of supplemental analyses for maternal physical and psychological aggression towards children. Specifically, we ask whether declining consumer sentiment and increasing unemployment and home foreclosures were associated with increased levels of parenting behaviors such as frequent maternal spanking that may signal a risk for child abuse.

The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study is particularly well suited for examining the effects of the Great Recession on families and children. The 9-year follow up survey was collected beginning in May 2007 and ending in February 2010, providing us with a survey frame which includes the Great Recession as well as data prior to and after the recession.