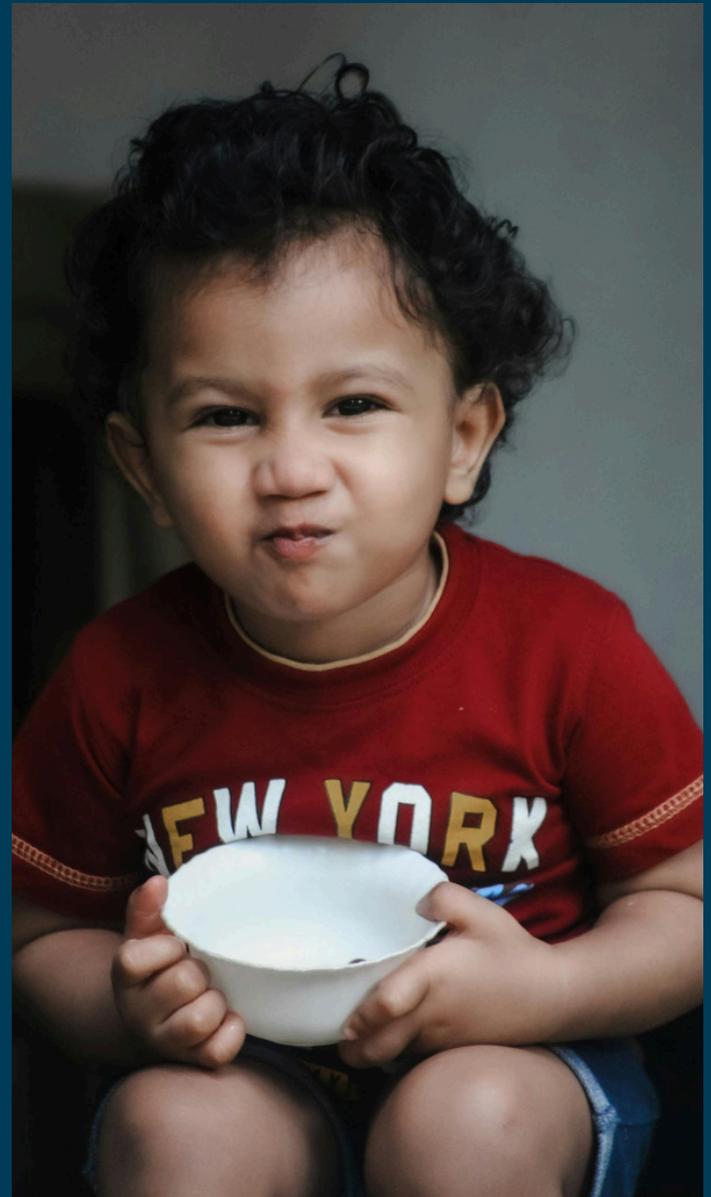


The Blurred Line Between Poverty and Neglect

Considerations for Mandated Reporters



NATIONAL CENTER TO ADVANCE PEACE
for Children, Youth, and Families

The National Center to Advance Peace for Children, Youth, and Families (NCAP) is a coalition led by Caminar Latino and includes Ujima: National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community, the Alaska Native Women's Resource Center, the National Indigenous Women's Resource Center, and Futures Without Violence.



Why a Resource like this?

**A note on language:*

Child protective services (CPS) and child welfare are terms used interchangeably in this guide.

Mandated reporters and CPS workers often struggle to distinguish between identifying poverty and the willful neglect of a child's needs. Poor families have similar needs to most families. Their everyday worries resonate with most parents and caregivers: **housing** instability, lack of **childcare**, absence of **health insurance**, **food** insecurity, and lack of access to **transportation**. These basic necessities, however, are often misinterpreted as neglect, resulting in families facing unnecessary scrutiny, surveillance and separation.

This guide is intended for mandated reporters and child and family serving organization staff who work with and engage with families experiencing poverty. This guide is also for child welfare staff that may face the difficult decision of whether to substantiate (screen-in), investigate and/or open a child welfare case due to a neglect allegation.

The focus is to provide insight for professionals who may be at the decision-making moment of:

- ✦ whether to call CPS due to poverty-related concerns, or
- ✦ whether to substantiate, investigate, or open a case for neglect allegations related to poverty

Our hope is that the reader, regardless of their role or position, is inspired to take action by implementing the strategies illustrated here, ultimately making them better suited to differentiate between poverty and neglect while focusing on family preservation, when it is safe to do so.

Defining Neglect

There are many factors to consider at the decision-making moment on whether a case is in fact neglect. A challenge for child welfare systems is that definitions for child neglect are often broad and vary from state to state, creating inconsistency that may impact how neglect is understood and handled. While state definitions vary, legal standards typically define neglect as **“a failure of parents or caregivers to meet a child’s basic needs, including the provision of adequate food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision”**. Many have pointed out, however, that such definitions overlap strongly with circumstances of poverty. In fact, research has shown that neglect is often the direct result of, and indistinguishable from, poverty (Roberts, 2022, 2003; Pelton, 2015, 1997; Bailie, 1998).

Despite this, only about 12 states and the District of Columbia include explicit exemptions for parents who lack the financial means to meet their child’s needs, and only if the allegations of neglect are found to be the sole result of the family’s poverty (Pimentel, 2019). In many cases, such a determination is very difficult to make.

The high correlation between poverty and neglect creates concern that child welfare mischaracterizes poverty as neglect, resulting in a rate of child welfare intervention among poor families that outweighs the risk of harm to children (Milner & Kelly, 2020 ; Raz & Sankaran, 2019; Pelton, 2015). Rather than providing resources and support to impoverished families, moreover, the strategies used by the child welfare system tend to penalize families for being poor while offering little to alleviate their poverty (Roberts, 2022, 2003; Johnson, 2021; Pimentel, 2019; Lee, 2016; Reich, 2005). In fact, the burdens placed on poor families by the child welfare system may further exacerbate their economic disadvantage, as families may be forced to miss work (potentially even losing their job) in order to complete mandated services, pay for services out of pocket, such as parenting classes or counseling, and possibly even pay child support to the state for children that are removed from their custody. Parents may even face criminal charges associated with their alleged neglect. This amounts to punishing and criminalizing families for being poor.

What We Know About Neglect Allegations:

1

A majority of substantiated child maltreatment allegations – 64% in 2023 – are for neglect alone (USDHHS, 2025).

2

Neglect is a primary contributing factor for a majority of children entering out-of-home care (USDHHS, 2022).

3

Families living in poverty are disproportionately represented among the child welfare system, and largely for allegations of neglect (Berger et al., 2017).

4

Approximately 85% of families investigated for neglect have incomes below 200% of the poverty line. Neglect referrals are disproportionately concentrated among families who are not employed, receive public assistance, and live in impoverished neighborhoods (Herd et al., 2022).

5

Poverty has also been found to be the best predictor of child removal, with 'inadequate income' serving as a primary determinant in removal decisions (Walsh, 2010; Barth, Wildfire, & Green, 2006; Lindsey, 2004).



What We Learned From the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed how quickly families can fall into crisis when support is inaccessible. Job loss, housing instability, school closures, and limited childcare intensified stressors linked to poverty, often resulting in spikes in neglect allegations even when there was no change in parental intent or care.

COVID confirmed the need for prioritizing prevention strategies that address economic hardship directly, expanding flexible resources, and strengthening community-based support for families in need.

Distinguishing Poverty from Neglect

While there may be overlap between poverty and neglect, poverty alone should not be the sole indicator or driver of whether a case is initially referred to CPS or substantiated. However, attempting to distinguish between poverty and neglect can be a challenge for even the most seasoned child welfare professional or mandated reporter.

Factors such as liability, fear of losing one's job, being sued, and other legal and non-legal complications are just some of the considerations mandated reporters face while also attempting to adhere to the mandate of reporting for neglect. Making the best possible decisions for families at risk of CPS involvement **takes care, clarity, and caution**, factors which are often lost in fast-paced, high-crisis and acute working environments.

Institutionalizing organizational policies such as team decision making practices, prioritizing family-centered approaches, group and reflective supervision, open discussions during all staff meetings regarding potential neglect cases and grand rounds, are all strategies that can be implemented as means to support mandated reporters while also providing a learning experience for other staff.

Additionally, depending on the role of the professional, whether they are a policymaker, a child and family service provider, law enforcement, school staff/administrator, or a CPS worker, there may be important actionable steps to consider.

Below are some examples that illustrate poverty related circumstances and how they may be and often are misinterpreted. They are meant to demonstrate what poverty versus willful neglect may look like.



For Policymakers:

Poverty-Related Circumstance	How It May Be Misinterpreted as Neglect	Legitimate Neglect
<p>A fifth-grade child and their parent sleep in their insured car after eviction, relying on access to a local shelter for meals, hygiene and bathing.</p>	<p>Viewed as “failure to provide adequate housing.”</p>	<p>Parent with stable housing and financial means locks a child out of the home for long periods.</p>

Actionable Takeaways:

Policymakers should ensure that statutory definitions and funding structures clearly distinguish economic hardship from neglect. Additionally, they should prioritize unrestrictive funding and cash assistance for housing, utility assistance, and family stabilization programs.

For Child and Family Serving Providers:

Poverty-Related Circumstance	How It May Be Misinterpreted as Neglect	Legitimate Neglect
Parent misses their child's medical appointments due to lack of transportation or childcare.	Viewed as "failure to provide needed medical care."	Parent refuses essential medical services for their child despite having access, insurance, and transportation.

Actionable Takeaways:

Child and family serving organizations should implement safe and supportive training and connect families to resources (transportation vouchers, food pantries, childcare supports) before defaulting to neglect reporting and calling CPS. Additionally, when possible, organizations serving families, including community health centers, clinics and hospitals, should consider purchasing electronics such as laptops, iPads, and cellphones, making them accessible to families for virtual/tele-health appointments.



For Law Enforcement:

Poverty-Related Circumstance	How It May Be Misinterpreted as Neglect	Legitimate Neglect
Family of 6 living in overcrowded conditions to save on rent, i.e., a one bedroom apartment.	Viewed as “unsafe or unfit living environment.”	Parents with resources expose children to hazardous environments (e.g., drugs, weapons) despite having safer options.

Actionable Takeaways:

Law enforcement should be trained to recognize poverty conditions and differentiate them from endangerment, focusing enforcement on genuine safety threats rather than economic hardship.



School Administrator/Staff:

Poverty-Related Circumstance	How It May Be Misinterpreted as Neglect	Legitimate Neglect
A child brings minimal lunch due to low income.	Viewed as “parent failing to provide adequate meals.”	Parent with resources sends child to school without food despite having the means to pack meals or provide lunch money.
A child is frequently absent due to unstable housing or lack of transportation.	Viewed as “educational neglect or truancy.”	Parent with resources consistently withholds a child from school without valid reason.

Actionable Takeaways:

Schools should strengthen food access programs, virtual or pre-recorded course options, transportation supports, and housing support for housing-insecure students, while ensuring staff understand the difference between poverty and educational neglect.

Frontline CPS Workers:

Poverty-Related Circumstance	How It May Be Misinterpreted as Neglect	Legitimate Neglect
Family struggling to maintain utilities after job loss.	Interpreted as “failure to provide adequate shelter/environment.”	Parent deliberately refuses to maintain utilities despite financial ability, creating unsafe conditions.
Child left unsupervised briefly because parent cannot afford consistent childcare.	Viewed as “lack of supervision.”	Parent leaves a young child home alone for extended periods while ignoring available childcare resources.

Actionable Takeaways:

Child welfare systems should prioritize ongoing training, implementing strategies such as decision-making guides, group and reflective supervision, and defining poverty from neglect, advocating for a clear distinction between both. Additionally, ensuring interventions that prioritize family support and family preservation when poverty is the root cause.

Promising Practices, Considerations, and Strategies

The following considerations and strategies have been organized by role, as a way to offer guidance and also give the reader an opportunity to critically think about prevention-focused approaches while centering family needs.

For Policymakers:

Considerations:

Statutory Clarity: Is poverty explicitly excluded from neglect in your state statute?

Funding Priorities: Would neglect still exist if the family had financial means?

Strategies:

- Develop clear neglect policies, fund ongoing staff training, move away from “when in doubt, report to CPS practices.”
- Redirect foster care funds toward cash assistance and stabilization programs; prioritize family preservation and reunification.
- Track disproportionality with data; mandate bias and equity training; implement inclusive practices in policy.

For Child & Family Serving Providers:

Considerations:

- Build awareness and understanding on domestic violence protective factors.
- Consider if there are other issues (DV, mental health, substance use, immigration, transportation) impacting the family.
- How do barriers (i.e., inability to provide services in the family’s primary language) affect the family’s ability to seek help?

Strategies:

- Build community-coordinated responses, fund partnerships with trusted community leaders, community-based organizations, and culturally specific agencies.
- Prioritize and increase flexible cash assistance; create family advisory boards; prioritize lived experience in policy.

For Frontline CPS Staff:

Considerations:

- Consider how CPS workers' own implicit assumptions influences the case at all levels (i.e.-investigation, screening-in, open case)
- How do barriers influence outcomes for families?
- What resources, tools, and supports do CPS workers need to build capacity around decision-making?

Strategies:

- Provide tools and resources around decision-making, team decision-making, group supervision, and reflective supervision.
- Emphasize child and family preservation.

For School Administration/Staff:

Considerations:

- Schools are among the top sources of neglect reports (USDHHS, 2025).

- Poor attendance, food insecurity may result in a referral to CPS.
- Without any formal supports in place, school administrators and staff may default to reporting.

Strategies:

- Train and build ongoing capacity for staff to distinguish poverty from neglect.
- Build in-school resources for families – food pantries, clothing closets and resume workshops.
- Prioritize building community partnerships, including culture specific ones.
- Through data, track referrals to CPS and monitor disproportionality in referrals.
- Host quarterly community conversations and events for parents and caregivers, establish healthy working relationships with parents.
- Train staff on having difficult conversations about abuse and neglect, before reporting.

For Law Enforcement:

Considerations:

- How can first responders increase capacity in differentiating poverty and neglect?

Strategies:

- Develop collaborations and partnerships with community organizations to connect families to community resources.
- Develop training and capacity building opportunities on poverty and neglect.



Conclusion

While poverty may contribute to circumstances that lead to allegations of neglect, not all families experiencing poverty are neglectful. Each case has its own complexities and must be handled with care, clarity, and caution.

Preventative strategies should begin with increased understanding by those who work with children and families. By being able to distinguish between lack of access and willful neglect, mandated reporters can help preserve the family unit, ensure that they are connected with the supports they need and avoid unnecessary systems involvement.

When funding priorities focus on supporting parents in meeting their children's needs and alleviating poverty, outcomes for children improve. Resources currently allocated toward removals in response to neglect allegations would be more effectively spent addressing underlying poverty circumstances and strengthening parents' capacity to care for their children.

The opposite of poverty is not simply wealth—it is thriving communities where families are supported, and resources are consistent and available. It looks like communities where resources are shared, re-distributed, re-purposed. Where the most vulnerable have systemic and reliable access to help when they need it. It also looks like child welfare staff and family-serving practitioners practicing from a strengths-based perspective—prioritizing safety, family preservation, and family support over surveillance and punishment.

Poverty should be recognized as an opportunity to increase tangible support for the most vulnerable amongst us, our children. When we do shift our perspective, more families will remain together and more children will thrive. ***Let's create that world together!***

Contact



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