

# Economic Insecurity and Child Physical Harm

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### Abstract

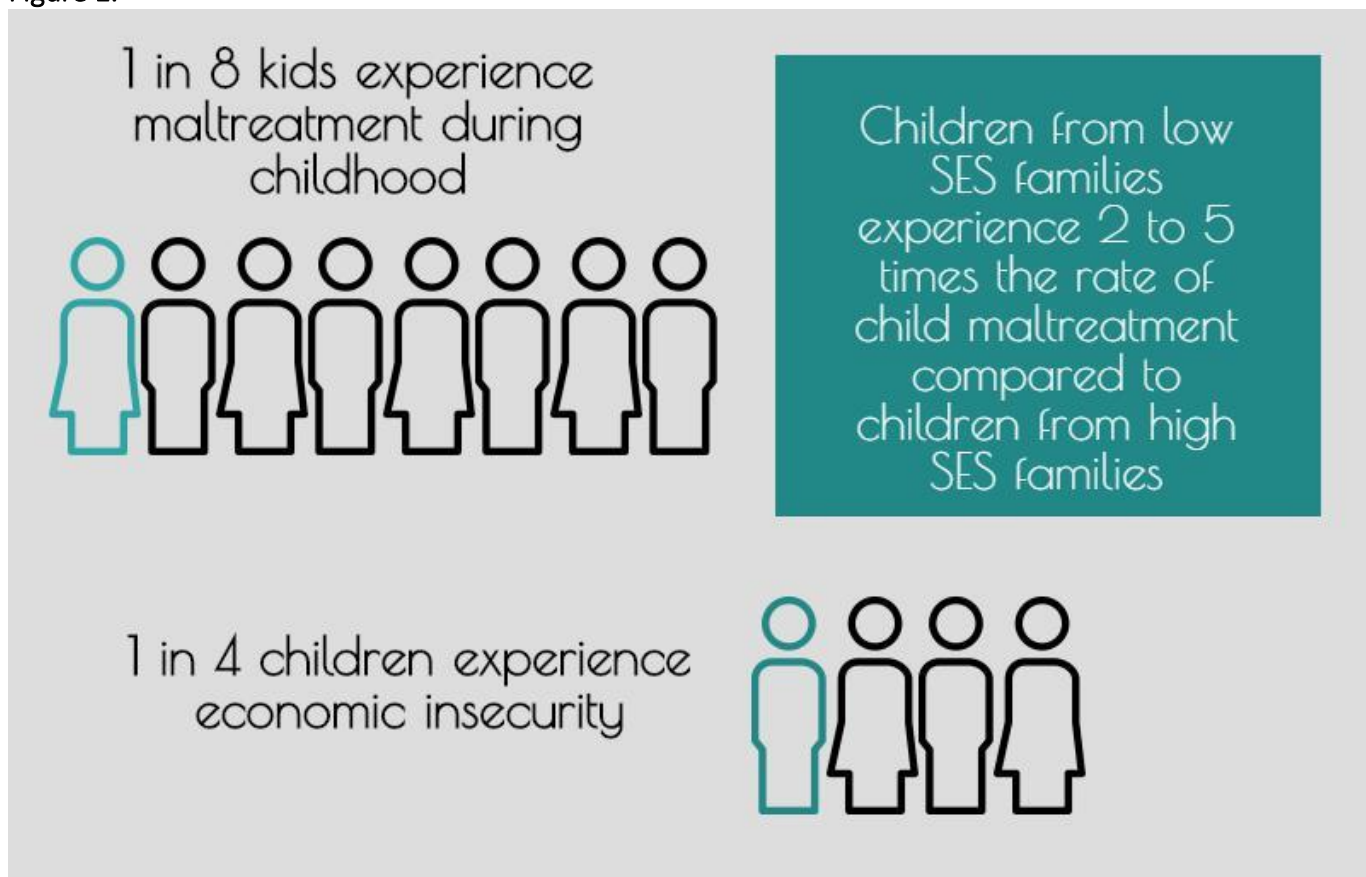
- Despite the established link between economic insecurity and risk for child maltreatment, we don't know whether the co-occurrence of multiple forms of insecurity (e.g., income, food, housing, and bill-paying hardship) are associated with maltreatment.
- Using a large, multi-site study of family well-being, we found four distinct classes of economic security, and linked these classes to mothers' use of physical harm and spanking with their young children (age 5).
- We find that poor mothers who reported higher hardships, such as inability to pay bills, were more likely to perpetrate physical harm compared with mothers who reported lower hardship.

## The Issue

Children from economically insecure families are more likely to experience physical harm than children from economically secure families.<sup>i</sup> Economic insecurity can be demonstrated by things like poverty, receipt of government benefits transfers (e.g., Medicaid, food stamps, child support, cash assistance), medical insurance, and material hardship (e.g., bill-paying, housing, medical insecurities). Approximately one in four children experience economic insecurity during childhood, and one in eight children experience maltreatment during childhood.<sup>ii</sup> Children who experience maltreatment are at a greater risk of psychological and social problems, poor health, risky behaviors, and academic failure.<sup>iii</sup>

Research shows a link between economic insecurity and child maltreatment; economic insecurity is typically indicated by income poverty or a family's socioeconomic status (SES). It is not clear whether particular combinations of economic insecurity are more associated with maltreatment. Families are likely to experience multiple types of economic insecurity at the same time, and these different combinations of insecurity may influence child maltreatment in various ways. Understanding these differences can help create better policies and interventions for families experiencing economic insecurity and child maltreatment.

Figure 1.



Note. SES is socioeconomic status, a measure of economic and social position based on income, education, and occupation.

## The Study

Our study included data from 4,134 biological mothers of five-year-old children from the Fragile Families and Child Well-Being Study (FFCWS)<sup>iv</sup>, a large, multi-site study of family well-being that began in 1999 and oversampled low-income families. Our aims were to (1) identify different combinations of economic insecurity, and (2) examine their relationship to child physical harm. To determine economic insecurity, we looked at income transfers and hardships. Income transfers included receipt of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (SNAP, or food stamps), and money borrowed from friends or family. Hardship included reports of housing instability, as well as difficulty paying bills, buying enough nutritious food, and seeing a doctor when necessary. To measure physical harm, we looked at mothers' reports of prevalence and chronicity of physical aggression (e.g., pinching, slapping, shaking, hitting with a hard object), as well as spanking. We employed a Latent Class Analysis (LCA), which estimates distinct combinations (referred to as *classes*) of income transfers and hardships based on the families in our dataset. That is, we did not pre-specify the number of classes, or the combinations of insecurities and hardships that made up each class; the analysis finds the most prevalent constellations of risk factors. Once the number, type, and prevalence of the classes were known, we estimated how those classes were related to physical abuse and spanking outcomes.

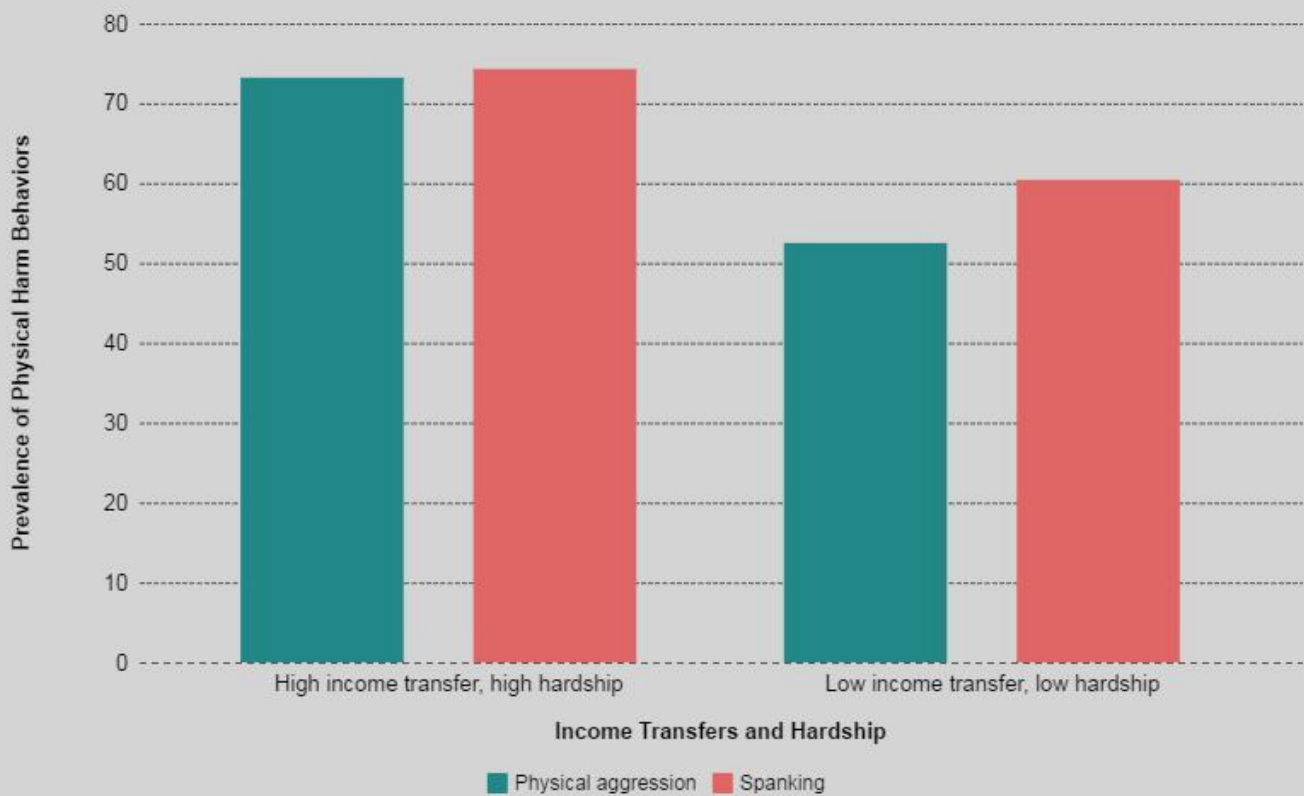
## What We Found

We found that 50% of mothers were members of a class that was not poor and experienced no economic insecurity, while the other 50% fell into classes of low-income mothers that experienced distinct mixtures of income transfers and economic hardships. Specifically, approximately 16% of the sample was very income poor, received TANF and SNAP benefits, often needed to borrow money, and experienced food and bill paying hardships. Another 16% of mothers reported incomes around 185% of the federal poverty line, reported the same economic hardships, but were not receiving any income transfers. Both sets of these mothers were the most likely to physically harm their children by slapping, hitting, and spanking them, and were most likely to use them more frequently compared to other mothers. A final group of 18% of mothers reported incomes below the federal poverty line and received income transfers, but were not likely to report economic hardships. These mothers were the least likely to physically harm their children, even when compared to mothers who were economically secure. In sum, we found that economic hardships, more so than income transfers or level of poverty, were the most associated with physically harmful and spanking behaviors. In Figure 2, we display the percent of mothers who report any spanking or any physically harmful behaviors; results are shown for the group with the highest level of need (i.e., high income transfers, high economic hardship) versus the group with the lowest level of need (i.e., low income transfers, low economic hardship).

## Figure 2.

Mothers who experienced economic insecurity were more likely to use physically harmful behaviors.

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Our findings suggest four important conclusions: First, when mothers report experiencing hardship, they are likely to report multiple forms of hardship, including food and bill-paying hardship. Second, using income to understand maltreatment risk ignores the role of economic hardship; that is, low income in the absence of hardship does not confer the same risks as higher income in the presence of economic hardship. Third, economic hardships, regardless of income or income transfer status, emerged as the most consistent and strong predictors of physically harmful and spanking behaviors. Fourth, the receipt of income transfer does not necessarily confer risk for physical harm. Mothers who received income transfers but did not report hardships used physical harm behaviors less than mothers who did not have income transfers or hardship.

### Implications

- Many states are reducing social assistance programs, but these programs are a necessity for families experiencing economic insecurity. These programs must continue to be funded in order to reduce economic insecurity and lower the risk of child maltreatment.
- Eligibility guidelines for federal assistance programs, like Medicaid and food stamps, should be adjusted to allow more families to access these resources.
- Child harm prevention programs should be available to families from all income ranges. They should also assess families' financial wellbeing and provide material supports or cash assistance to help reduce food hardship and bill-paying hardship.

### Sample Tweets

- Study examines link between different types of economic insecurity and childhood. #maltreatment @dorisdukefellows
- Economic insecurity linked to child #maltreatment. Better supports are needed for families. @dorisdukefellows

### Notes

This research was generously supported by the Doris Duke Fellowship for the Promotion of Child Well-Being, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. All errors and omissions are those of the authors.

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