

**EVIDENCE CENTRE**  
TE POKAPŪ TAUNAKITANGA

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## **RESEARCH BRIEF**

How do welfare and tax settings affect children's involvement with child protective services?

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**ORANGA  
TAMARIKI**  
Ministry for Children

# EVIDENCE CENTRE

## TE POKAPŪ TAUNAKITANGA

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The Oranga Tamariki Evidence Centre works to build the evidence base that helps us better understand wellbeing and what works to improve outcomes for New Zealand's children, young people and their whānau.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## Overview

A large body of international research has shown that low income increases the risk of poor outcomes for children. This report outlines key findings from recent experimental and quasi-experimental welfare and tax policy studies that have examined whether the link between income and child maltreatment is causal. It aims to inform discussions on welfare policy settings. Despite some methodological limitations, this developing area of research suggests that welfare and tax policies that affect incomes, particularly for parents supported by a benefit or with low incomes, can impact on the incidence of child maltreatment.

Due to the limited scope of this research brief and the emergent nature of the experimental and quasi-experimental research, this report should be considered alongside systematic reviews of the wider evidence base. Further research is also required to replicate these findings in a New Zealand context.

## Key findings

A number of the studies described in this brief have found a significant relationship between low income and neglect, but the link with physical abuse or other types of abuse is less clear. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the majority of families, whether living with income poverty or not, do not harm their children – either through neglect or other forms of harm.

- Experimental and quasi-experimental studies show that welfare policies that lower incomes through sanctions or benefit limits can increase rates of child neglect and entry into out-of-home care.
- Conversely, increasing incomes for families receiving a benefit or on a low income can reduce involvement with child protective services, child neglect, and entry into care. Policies that increase incomes can also lead to improved child behavioural and developmental outcomes.
- Investment in financial supports for families experiencing material or financial hardship can substantially reduce downstream care and protection related service costs.

Anticipating fine-grained impacts from benefit deductions or increases is challenging, as income changes can have complex interactions with child, family, and community level characteristics.

- Younger children may be more vulnerable to neglect under conditions of low income, but are more responsive to improvements in educational outcomes when policy packages increase income. Conversely, benefit reductions have been shown to increase rates of care for older more than younger children.
- Research suggests that reductions in income can compound the impact of other risk factors, so benefit reductions may have a greater negative impact on families experiencing chronic need or multiple risk factors. Income changes may also have a greater impact on sole mother families. The impact of lower income may be mitigated by the presence of protective factors, such as social connections and support.
- The impact of welfare policies can also be complicated by non-financial supports or requirements. For example, 'welfare to work' studies suggest that whether children have improved developmental outcomes or are more likely to experience neglect may depend on whether parents can afford or access childcare.

# RESEARCH BRIEF

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## Introduction

Internationally, there is on-going debate about the extent that low income causes poor outcomes for children, above and beyond any individual, family, community, or environmental level factors (Bywaters et al., 2016; Slack, Berger, & Noyes, 2017). This debate has particular relevance for decision-makers who need to understand the potential costs or benefits of different welfare policy settings. If income has at least a partly causal impact on children's outcomes, then welfare policies that increase incomes for families are likely to have positive impacts, while policies that decrease incomes for families are likely to have negative impacts.

The purpose of this report is to give an overview of the international policy studies that examine the causal link between income and child maltreatment outcomes using experimental designs. The remainder of this section briefly discusses the wider evidence base and the methodological benefits and constraints of experimental and quasi-experimental studies.

### **Research shows that low income increases the risk of negative outcomes for children**

There is a large body of research, both internationally and within New Zealand, which has examined the link between child poverty and a range of outcomes. Children living in poverty face a much greater likelihood of negative outcomes relating to health, psycho-social development, housing, education, and involvement with the care and protection and youth justice systems (see Boston & Chapple, 2014; Bywaters et al., 2016; Cooper & Stewart, 2013; Expert Advisory Group on Solutions to Child Poverty [EAG], 2012; Gibson et al., 2017; Mackay, in press; Slack et al., 2017, for reviews). A New Zealand paper (Dominick, in press), using cross-sectional data from the Growing Up in New Zealand (GUINZ) study, shows an association between material hardship and maternal and child outcomes. As longitudinal data becomes available, this may provide an opportunity to better understand the extent and mechanisms whereby poverty influences maternal and child outcomes over time.

### **The relationship between low income and child neglect is well established**

It is also well established that there is an association between low income and child maltreatment, particularly neglect (Bywaters et al., 2016; Coulton et al., 2007; Mackay, in press). For example, the fourth American National Incidence Study on Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-4) notes families with a low socio-economic status have a five times higher rate of overall maltreatment, and a seven times higher rate of neglect compared to families with a high socio-economic status (Sedlak et al., 2010). Drake and Pandey (1996) report a similar pattern of results when examining the link between neighbourhood poverty and rates of reported maltreatment in Missouri. Drake and Pandey found that greater neighbourhood poverty was associated with the steepest increases in rates of reported neglect, followed by physical abuse, with a moderate relationship with rates of sexual abuse.

However, it is important to note that the majority of families, whether in income poverty or not, do not harm their children – either through neglect or other forms of harm. Using the NIS-4 data, Sedlak et al. (2010) estimated that the rate of maltreatment in the American general population is 17.1 per 1000 children, meaning that most children do not experience maltreatment by a parent or caregiver.

## **Low income may lead to negative outcomes for children through increasing stress or material deprivation**

Low income may increase the risk of maltreatment through a number of pathways. Two of the main theories that are used to explain the relationship between low income and child maltreatment are the 'what money can buy' and the 'parental stress' models (Boston & Chapple, 2014). The basic argument of the first model is that higher income enables parents to purchase better quality housing, food, early childhood education and schooling, and live in higher social-economic neighbourhoods, as well as afford extra-curricular activities, all of which contribute to improved developmental outcomes for children. Conversely, if parents have insufficient incomes to meet children's basic needs then this may increase the likelihood of some indicators of neglect, such as inadequate clothing and medical care (Berger & Waldfogel, 2011). The second theory suggests that low income impacts the likelihood of poor child outcomes through increased parental stress. Maladaptive coping mechanisms, parental conflict, mental health issues, or substance use, may be triggered or exacerbated by stress (Bywaters et al., 2016). See Boston and Chapple (2014) for a discussion and rebuttal of the view that poverty and child maltreatment are primarily the fault of the parents.

The stronger link between income and neglect may be due to the more direct effect that constrained finances can have on parents' ability to meet children's basic needs (Raissian & Bullinger, 2017). In contrast, low income may have a more indirect relationship with other types of abuse through increasing parental stress.

## **A number of other factors can influence the likelihood of maltreatment**

While income may be a significant predictor of child maltreatment, it is not the sole determinant. Using data from a longitudinal study in Australia, Doidge et al. (2017) found that both retrospective reports of poverty while growing up and multiple incidences of parental unemployment significantly and independently predicted child maltreatment. They estimated that over a quarter of the maltreatment identified in their study was due to these economic factors. However, the relationship between income and child maltreatment is complex, and a number of factors can influence levels of income and maltreatment. Doidge et al. also found that if economic factors were excluded, independent risk factors for maltreatment included: children's cognitive or behavioural problems, a high number of school moves, and parental factors such as younger mothers, parental separation, and substance abuse. Parental mental health and regional rates of poverty or unemployment have also been linked with rates of maltreatment (see Berger & Waldfogel, 2011; Bywaters et al., 2016; Slack et al., 2017).

## **Experimental designs are needed to identify whether low income causes an increase in the likelihood of maltreatment**

Although a large body of research shows a link between income and child outcomes, the majority of this work cannot be used to understand whether low income *causes* poor outcomes for children (Bywaters et al., 2016). In order to understand whether the link is causal, studies need to use empirical designs to control for bias and confounding factors that may contribute to the incidence of child maltreatment. Experimental designs, or randomised controlled trials, control for these issues through randomly allocating participants from the same sample to either experimental or control conditions (eg. a new benefit policy with financial sanctions compared to an existing benefit policy or business as usual). These designs minimise confounding factors so that any differences in outcomes between the two groups are more likely to be due to the variable of interest, eg. a new welfare policy.

Quasi-experimental designs include natural experiments, where assignment to the experimental or control condition is driven by environmental factors, such as state government decisions to set benefit levels at different rates (Paxson & Waldfogel, 2002; Raissian and Bullinger, 2017). Statistical techniques can be used to approximate an experimental design and identify comparable 'control' individuals.

### **Experimental designs have limitations**

While these studies provide evidence of a causal relationship, identifying the extent to which low income leads to poor outcomes is challenging because completely measuring and eliminating the impact of confounds is not practicable (Bywaters et al., 2016; Cancian, Yang, & Slack, 2013; Millett et al., 2010; Schneider et al., 2017). This is particularly an issue for quasi-experimental studies, where it is often difficult to obtain unbiased samples, sufficient data, and fair proxies. See Lee et al. (2017) for a discussion of how these issues can lead to inconsistent findings. Despite these limitations, the advantage of these methods is that they can control for confounding factors that may influence outcomes, which is not possible using correlational or cross-sectional methods.

### **A developing body of research has shown that family income has a causal impact on children's outcomes**

There is a developing body of international experimental and quasi-experimental research that identifies higher family incomes as having a causal impact on outcomes for children. Evidence is strongest for cognitive development and school achievement, followed by social and behavioural development, but is more mixed for children's physical health and involvement with the youth justice system (see Cooper & Stewart, 2013). In New Zealand, a body of correlational evidence has linked child poverty with poor outcomes (see Boston & Chapple, 2014; Gibson et al., 2017). One longitudinal study has also investigated the link between low income and child outcomes. Gibb, Fergusson and Horwood (2012) collected data on people born in Christchurch in 1977 to age thirty, and found that low family income during childhood is associated with a range of educational and economic disadvantages in adulthood, but is not directly related to increased risks of crime, mental health problems or teen pregnancy.

### **Further work is required to understand the impact of welfare policies in New Zealand**

There is a need for experimental and quasi-experimental designs to examine the impact of different welfare and tax policies on child maltreatment outcomes in New Zealand context. The majority of the policy studies described in this brief have been conducted in the United States of America (USA). While there has been some descriptive research in New Zealand which has examined the destinations of people moving off benefit, this did not examine the impact of benefit sanctions or the impact on children (SUPERU, 2017). Differences in welfare systems, measures of maltreatment, and child protective service practices across jurisdictions limit this brief's ability to make direct comparisons across studies or anticipate exact impacts in a New Zealand context (Bywaters et al., 2016).

## Experimental and quasi-experimental welfare policy studies

This section focuses on recent experimental and quasi-experimental welfare and tax policy studies, which have assessed whether there is a causal link between income and child maltreatment. These studies investigate the impact of lowering or increasing incomes or providing short-term financial supports to meet material needs.

### Lowering incomes can increase rates of child neglect and entry into care

A Danish quasi-experimental study conducted by Wildeman and Fallesen (2017) suggests that reducing welfare payments can lead to substantial increases in rates of out-of-home care. In 2004, the Danish government introduced time-dependent welfare payment ceilings. This policy meant that mothers without unemployment insurance experienced a sharp decrease in welfare payments, which equated to a 30% reduction in their disposable incomes. When compared to an unaffected group of mothers, they found that income change increased children's risk of out-of-home placement by 25%.

Stricter welfare packages, which use benefit deductions to penalise non-compliance with conditions, have also been associated with significant increases in substantiated neglect rates. Using an experimental design, Fein and Lee (2003) examined the causal impact of a welfare reform package in Delaware that used stricter penalties to encourage beneficiaries to obtain employment. When compared to parents subject to existing welfare policies, the experimental group had significantly more benefit deductions, greater employment, and more cases of substantiated neglect. However, they found no significant difference in physical abuse or overall maltreatment rates. These findings are consistent with the wider literature which shows a stronger relationship between poverty and neglect, compared to other maltreatment subtypes (Bywaters et al., 2016; Raissian & Bulinger, 2017).

### Small increases in income can substantially reduce the likelihood of involvement with child protective services, child neglect, and entry into care

Cancian et al. (2013) found that modestly increasing incomes for families experiencing financial hardship can reduce child protective service involvement. As part of a randomised controlled trial in Wisconsin, mothers who made use of temporary financial assistance to meet basic needs (eg. food, housing, utilities), received either a full or partial pass-through of child support payments. At the time of the study, state and federal governments usually retained child support payments to offset the cost of the financial assistance programme. When controlling for potential confounds, this trial found that an average increase in child support payments of \$100 per year led to a 10% reduction in the odds of having a maltreatment report screened-in for further assessment.

This finding is consistent with an earlier quasi-experimental study in the USA that examined state-level variation in benefit levels (Paxson & Waldfogel, 2002). Higher benefit levels were associated with markedly lower rates of substantiated neglect and entry into out-of-home care. A 10% increase in the maximum benefit was predicted to reduce rates of neglect by 39% and the foster care population by nearly 20%. Consistent with Fein and Lee (2003), there was also no significant relationship between benefit levels and physical or sexual abuse.

## **Tax credits or policies that increase earnings can reduce the likelihood of neglect or involvement with child protective services**

Increased income, through more generous tax credits, has been associated with a reduced likelihood of child protective service involvement and neglect. Berger et al. (2017) examined the relationship between income and parent-reported child protective services involvement and parenting behaviours that proxy for child abuse and neglect. This study used survey data and a quasi-experimental design, which made use of differences between states and over time in the amount of refundable tax credit available. A key finding was that a yearly income increase of \$1000 significantly decreased the probability of child protective service involvement by 7–10%. This income increase also led to a modest reduction in rates of parents' self-reported neglectful parenting behaviours (3-4%), however there was no association between income and physical or emotional abuse.

Raissian and Bullinger (2017) complement this study by leveraging changes in the minimum wage across fourteen states to show a direct link between income and neglect notifications screened-in for further assessment. When controlling for potential confounds, the authors estimated that a \$1 increase in the minimum wage was associated with a significant decline in screened-in neglect reports (9.6%). There was also a trend towards an overall reduction in maltreatment reports, although this was not statistically significant. There was no evidence of a relationship between minimum wage rates and other maltreatment outcomes, including physical or other abuse, or entry into care.

## **Policies that increase earnings can also improve child developmental outcomes**

Policies that increase earnings for low-income workers can also improve developmental outcomes for children. Reviews of experimental and quasi-experimental research in the USA show that earning supplements have small, but consistently positive, effects on child development and educational outcomes (Dahl & Lochner, 2012; Hamad & Rehkopf, 2016; Morris, 2004). Research suggests that parents who gain employment use a substantial amount of their increased income on purchasing centre based child-care, which leads to improved educational outcomes for children (Duncan, Morris & Rodreigues, 2011; Morris, 2004). In contrast, policies that encourage employment without increasing income (eg. mandatory work activities or time limits for benefit receipt) do not have clear benefits for children's development (Morris, 2004).

## **Housing subsidies can reduce rates of out-of-home care and violent behaviour by older children**

Reports on the impact of an American national programme suggest that providing housing subsidies to families at risk of homelessness can reduce rates of children's entry into care (The National Centre on Child Welfare and Housing, 2011). Housing subsidies can also lead to positive outcomes for children's academic performance, health, and later employment (Aratani et al., 2011). Evidence that raising income is related to improved child outcomes is also partially supported by research on residential mobility programmes. These programmes are aimed at reducing the concentration of poverty by providing low-income families with financial support to allow them more choice in where to live. Ludwig, Duncan and Hirschfield (2001) conducted a randomised controlled trial in Baltimore on the impact of housing subsidies, and found that both increasing family income and moving to lower-poverty neighbourhoods reduces violent criminal behaviour by older children (11-16 year olds).

## **Evidence on the impact of housing subsidies on developmental outcomes is mixed**

However, evidence is more mixed regarding the impact on child developmental outcomes (Aratani et al., 2011). The impact of these programmes may be dependent on recipients spending this income on goods that have strong links to improved outcomes for children. One study by Jacob et al. (2015) examined the impact of a randomised housing voucher programme in Chicago in 1997, which on average increased incomes by just under a third, and made more income available for non-housing goods (\$5653). Despite these relatively large changes in financial circumstances, there were only weak or null effects on a wide variety of child outcomes, including education, health, and youth justice system involvement. This may have been because recipients did not relocate to neighbourhoods with a higher socio-economic status or higher quality schools. However, a challenge with understanding these null findings is that the researchers had little other information on how income was spent.

## **Financial support for families at risk of child maltreatment can reduce future service costs**

In addition to improving child outcomes, studies also suggest that a preventative investment in financial supports will substantially reduce downstream service costs (Boston & Chapple, 2014). The American National Centre on Child Welfare and Housing (2011) found that a 15 million dollar investment in housing vouchers resulted in an estimated 7500 children either being reunited with their families or not entering care. This represents a saving of over 130 million dollars that would have otherwise been spent on care placements.

Investment in short-term financial supports to meet material needs has also been linked to reductions in child maltreatment outcomes. Rostad, Rogers and Chaffin (2017) made use of a natural experiment in the USA whereby families with both open child welfare cases (mostly relating to neglect) and receiving home-based support services varied in whether they accessed discretionary funds. Rostad et al. found that the group that accessed the funds were 17% less likely to have a re-notification in the next year. From this, they calculated that investing \$3361 in providing emergency material supports would prevent one maltreatment report in the next year. In contrast, estimated service costs were \$5300 for each family with one to three subsequent reports, and \$13,000 with four or more. Other quasi-experimental studies also suggest that addressing short-term material needs leads to reduced rates of neglect-related entry into care (Ryan & Shuerman, 2004; Shook & Testa, 2007). These studies suggest that an initial investment in meeting the material needs of families at risk of abuse or neglect is likely to be offset by a reduction in downstream need and associated service costs.

## **Null or inconsistent findings may reflect a weak relationship or methodological issues**

Some quasi-experimental and experimental studies find mixed results or no evidence of a relationship between income and child maltreatment (see Jacob et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2017; Millett et al., 2010). Null or inconsistent findings can reflect a weak relationship between particular income or child maltreatment measures, or a stronger role for other predictors of child maltreatment.

Null findings may also be driven by methodological issues, such as:

- the use of proxy data points where ‘actual’ measures of a variable are not available. Lee et al. (2017) and Millett et al. (2010) used uptake of food purchasing assistance as a proxy for poverty, as recipients must be living on a low income in order to be eligible. The issue with this proxy is that it will not identify those who do not participate in the programme, due to a lack of knowledge, inability to sign up, or by choice.

- the difficulty of statistically approximating an experimental design and identifying comparable control individuals. Tests conducted by Lee et al. (2017) suggest they did not manage to sufficiently approximate an experimental design and identify comparable control individuals.
- reliance on readily available administrative data. A challenge with understanding the reasons for null effects from increases in income is that additional data is not available on how money is spent (Jacob et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2017). This issue highlights the value of mixed method studies, where administrative data is supplemented by richer qualitative data on individual or family level contexts or responses to programmes.

Due to the emergent nature of the experimental and quasi-experimental research base, further work is required to replicate findings and to better understand the relationship between different measures of economic hardship and child maltreatment.

## Factors that can affect the impact of welfare and tax policies

Taken together, the developing evidence outlined above shows there is a causal association between low income and maltreatment outcomes, suggesting that welfare policies that decrease incomes are likely to contribute to negative outcomes for children. Causal evidence also links increased incomes for at-risk populations to a reduced incidence of child maltreatment. However, anticipating more fine-grained or individual level impacts from benefit deductions or increases is challenging, given that income changes can have complex and differing impacts depending on child, family, and community level characteristics. The following section gives a brief overview of some key factors that may give rise to differential outcomes.

### **Welfare policies may have differential impacts for younger and older children**

Some of the above policy studies also suggest that welfare policy settings can have differential effects depending on a child's age. Compared to older children, younger children may be more vulnerable to neglect under conditions of low income, but are more responsive to improvement in educational outcomes when income is increased (Morris, 2004; Raissian & Bullinger, 2017; Sedlak et al., 2010). Conversely, welfare reforms that lead to benefit deductions have been shown to increase rates of care for older more than younger children (Wildeman & Fallesen, 2017). Further work may be required to assess whether other potential child-level predictors of maltreatment, such as gender, disability or health concerns, also interact with low income (see Wulczyn, 2009).

### **Benefit deductions may have a greater negative impact on families experiencing chronic need or multiple risk factors**

Research suggests that short-term financial supports are more likely to have positive effects on families with no history of involvement with the care and protection system (Loman & Siegal, 2012). In contrast, benefit deductions may have a greater negative impact on families experiencing chronic need or multiple risk factors. Evidence suggests that reductions in income or living with a low income can compound the impact of other risk factors, such as where parents have less than 12 years of education, are long-term beneficiaries, are unemployed or have experienced multiple instances of unemployment, already have prior allegations of maltreatment, or where families live in poorer communities (Berger et al., 2017; Doidge et al., 2017; Maguire-Jack & Font, 2017; Rostad et al., 2017).

The impact of lower income may also be mitigated by the presence of protective factors, such as social connections and support. In a review of correlational and ethnographic studies, Coulton et al. (2007) note that the link between neighbourhood poverty and maltreatment rates is weaker in neighbourhoods where parents are more connected and neighbours rely more on each other for support, such as for childcare.

### **Income increases can have greater positive effects on sole mothers**

Internationally, some sub-populations, including sole mothers and minority ethnic groups, are over-represented in the population receiving benefits (Fluke et al., 2011). Similarly, in the New Zealand context it was estimated that up to 73% of sole mothers were in receipt of a benefit in 2009 (Centre for Social Research and Evaluation, 2010). In addition to this over-representation, there is also some evidence suggesting that income changes may have a greater impact on sole mother families. The quasi-experimental study by Berger et al. (2017) found that increased income through tax credits leads to moderate reductions in rates of neglect behaviours and substantial reductions in rates of child protective service involvement, particularly for sole mothers.

### **Some sub-populations may be disproportionately affected by welfare policy changes**

Stricter benefit policies may be disproportionately applied to sub-populations receiving benefits. Berg and Gable (2013) modelled differences between Canadian states over time in order to understand welfare reforms designed to reduce welfare receipt. These reforms included stricter work requirements, time limits to receiving benefits, earning exemptions to encourage entry to work, and efforts to divert applicants to alternatives to welfare. This study found that single parents, immigrants, native Canadians, and disabled people had greater reductions in welfare receipt compared to other Canadians. This finding warrants investigation in the New Zealand context, given that Māori are over-represented in the benefit population and disproportionately experience markers of disadvantage, so may already experience a greater negative impact from benefit reductions (Department of Corrections, 2007; MSD, 2016; Simpson et al., 2015).

### **The impact of welfare policies can be affected by additional supports or requirements**

Welfare reform packages can include non-financial components, such as health, insurance, and child care supports, or services to help parents gain employment or find housing (Fein & Lee, 2003; Michalopoulos et al., 2002; National Centre on Child Welfare and Housing, 2011). In addition, some welfare reform packages use financial sanctions and incentives to encourage parents on benefit to seek work or increase their hours, meaning that income can change alongside employment. These additional elements may have positive or negative effects on parents, which can make identifying the independent impact of income challenging.

For example, Fein and Lee (2003) suggest that if mothers gain improved self-esteem and mental health from working then this may reduce rates of abuse (see Paxson & Waldfogel, 1999; Schenider et al., 2017). Return to work financial incentives have also been linked to improved educational outcomes for younger children, through parents using a substantial amount of their increased income on purchasing centre based child-care (Duncan, Morris & Rodreigues, 2011; Morris, 2004). However, if work requirements are not associated with an increase in income, and parents are unable to access or afford childcare, then returning to work may lead to an increased likelihood of neglect through inadequate supervision (Fein & Lee, 2003, Paxson & Waldfogel, 1999). Reduced supervision as a result of increased working hours has also been linked to poorer educational and behavioural outcomes for 13-15 year olds (Michalopolous et al., 2002).

## Conclusion

This research brief focuses on recent experimental and quasi-experimental welfare and tax policy studies, which show a causal link between income and child maltreatment outcomes. There are some limitations with the experimental and quasi-experimental evidence base relating to the availability and quality of data. However, the advantage of these methods is that they allow for the control of confounding factors that may influence outcomes, which is not possible using correlational or cross-sectional methods.

A key finding is that policies that lower incomes can increase rates of child neglect and entry into care. Conversely, policies that increase incomes can lead to reduced involvement with child protective services, reduced rates of neglect and entry into care, as well as improved developmental outcomes. Some studies also show that investment in financial supports for families experiencing material or financial hardship is likely to substantially reduce downstream care and protection related service costs.

A number of the quasi-experimental studies reviewed found a significant relationship between low income and neglect, but the link with physical abuse or other types of abuse is less clear. This pattern of results is consistent with the wider literature, which suggests that low income has a stronger association with neglect. However, the majority of families, whether in income poverty or not, do not harm their children – either through neglect or other forms of harm.

Research suggests there are a number of factors that can affect the impact of welfare and tax policies. Income changes can also have complex impacts depending on child, family, and community level factors. Some welfare policies can also have multiple components, which can make teasing out the independent effect of income challenging. Welfare reform packages can include non-financial components, such as health, insurance, and child care supports, or services to help parents gain employment or find housing, as well as employment related requirements.

There is a need for experimental and quasi-experimental designs to examine the impact of different welfare and tax policies on child maltreatment outcomes in New Zealand context. The majority of the policy studies described in this brief have been conducted in the United States. Due to the emergent nature of the experimental and quasi-experimental research base, further work is required to replicate findings and better understand the relationship between different measures of economic hardship and child maltreatment. Additional research is also warranted on the interaction between increasing incomes and work requirements for parents receiving a benefit.

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