

CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT  
The Myth of Classlessness

Leroy H. Pelton

Child abuse is not a black problem, a brown problem, or a white problem. Child abusers are found in the ranks of the unemployed, the blue-collar worker, the white-collar worker and the professional. They are Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Baptist and atheist (Fraser, 1976-1977).

[C]hild abuse and neglect occur among families from all socioeconomic levels, religious groups, races and nationalities (Steele, 1975).

The problem of child abuse is not limited to any particular economic, social, or intellectual level, race or religion (Fontana, 1977).

[C]hild abuse and child neglect afflict all communities, regardless of race, religion or economic status (Besharov & Besharov, 1977).

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While such oft-repeated statements are true, they are only half-true. Child abuse and neglect have indeed been found among all socioeconomic classes, and within all of the other groupings mentioned. But these statements seem to imply that child abuse and neglect occur without regard to socioeconomic class, or that they are distributed proportionately among the total population. The impression that these problems are democratically distributed throughout society is increasingly being conveyed by professionals writing in academic journals, and to the public through the news media, despite clear evidence to the contrary.

This chapter will be concerned primarily with three issues: (1) the extent and nature of the evidence associating child abuse and neglect with social class; (2) the reasons why the myth of classlessness continues to be promulgated; and (3) the damaging effects of the myth on our ability to understand and deal with the problems.

#### WHAT THE STUDIES SHOW

There is substantial evidence of a strong relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect. Every national survey of officially reported incidents of child neglect and abuse has indicated that the preponderance of the reports involves families from the lowest socioeconomic levels.

In the first of these studies, a nationwide survey of child abuse reports made to central registries, Gil (1970) found that nearly 60% of the families involved in the abuse incidents had been on welfare during or before the study year of 1967, and that 37.2% of the abusive families had been receiving public assistance at the time of the incident. Furthermore, 48.4% of the reported families had incomes below \$5,000 in 1967, compared with 25.3% of all American families who had such low incomes. Only 52.5% of the fathers had been employed throughout the year, and at least 65% of the mothers and

55.5% of the fathers had not graduated from high school. On the other side of the coin, only 3% of the families had incomes of \$10,000 or more (compared with 34.4% of all American families for the same year), and only 0.4% of the mothers and 2.2% of the fathers had college degrees.

More recent data have been collected by the American Humane Association (AHA) through its national study of official child abuse and neglect reporting. For the year 1975 (AHA, 1975), family income information was provided by 20 states and territories on a total of 12,766 validated reports. For 53.2% of these reports, the yearly income was under \$5,000, and 69.2% of the families had incomes of less than \$7,000. In fact, less than 11% of the families had incomes of \$11,000 or over.

The AHA 1976 data (AHA, 1978) on 19,923 validated reports, from a greater number of states and territories, show that 49.6% of the families had incomes under \$5,000, and 65.4% were under \$7,000. Forty-two percent of the families were receiving public assistance, mostly Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). Only 14.9% of the reports indicated family incomes of \$11,000 or more, and only 9% of the families had incomes of \$13,000 or more. The median family income was \$5,051 (which is at the 1976 poverty level for a family of four), compared with about \$13,900 for all American families in 1976. For reports of neglect only, the median income dipped slightly to \$4,250, and it rose slightly to \$6,882 for abuse only.

More geographically limited but in-depth studies substantiate this poverty picture. In her classic study of child abuse and neglect in the early 1960s, Young (1971) examined the case records of 300 families, taken from the active files of child protection agencies in several different urban, suburban, and rural areas of the country. She found that: "Most of the families studied were poor, many of them very poor." Her data indicate that 42.7% of the families had been on public assistance at some time, and that only 10.7% of all of the families "were financially comfortable and able to meet their physical needs." In 58% of

the families, the wage earner had not held one job continuously for as long as two years; in 71% of the families, the wage earner was an unskilled laborer. Furthermore, few of the families lived in adequate housing: "Poorly heated, vermin-ridden, in various states of disrepair, much of the housing was a hazard to health."

A recent study (Pelton, 1977, see Chapter 4 of this book) in which a random sample of active cases from the state child protection agency caseload in Mercer County, New Jersey, was carefully screened for abuse and neglect, and the case records thoroughly analyzed, revealed that 81% of the families had received public welfare benefits at some time. Seventy-nine percent of the families had an income of \$7,000 or less at the time of case acceptance. Two-thirds of the mothers had left school by the end of the tenth grade.

Many more available statistics lead to the same unmistakable conclusion: The lower socioeconomic classes are disproportionately represented among all child abuse and neglect cases known to public agencies, to the extent that an overwhelming percentage—indeed, the vast majority—of the families in these cases live in poverty or near-poverty circumstances.

Those who uphold the myth of classlessness do not generally dispute such findings. Rather, they offer several disclaimers. Poor people, it is suggested, are more available to public scrutiny, more likely to be known to social agencies and law enforcement agencies, whose workers have had the opportunity to enter their households. The family lives of middle-class and upper-class people, on the other hand, are less open to inspection by public officials; they are less likely than people in poor neighborhoods to turn to public agencies when help is needed. Thus, injuries to children of the middle and upper classes are less likely to arouse outside suspicion of abuse and neglect; even when they do, the private physicians whom the parents consult, and with whom they may have a rather personal relationship, will be reluctant to report their suspicions to public authorities.

Therefore, it is claimed, the socioeconomic distribution of

reported child abuse and neglect cases does not reflect that of all cases. It is further implied that there are proportionately more *unreported* cases among the middle and upper classes than among lower-class families, to such an extent that child abuse and neglect are more or less proportionately distributed among all socioeconomic classes.

While the premises are valid—poor people *are* more subject to public scrutiny—the conclusions do not follow logically from them. We have no grounds for proclaiming that if middle-class and upper-class households were more open to public scrutiny, we would find proportionately as many abuse and neglect cases among them. Undiscovered evidence is no evidence at all.

Although poor people are more susceptible to public scrutiny, there is substantial evidence that the relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect is not just an anomaly of reporting systems. The public scrutiny argument cannot explain away the real relationship that exists.

First, while it is generally acknowledged that greater public awareness and new reporting laws have led to a significant increase in reporting over the past few years, the socioeconomic pattern of these reports has not changed appreciably. The findings already reviewed here indicate that an expanded and more vigilant public watch has failed, over the years, to produce an increased proportion of reports from above the lower class.

Second, the public scrutiny argument cannot explain why child abuse and neglect are related to *degrees* of poverty, even *within* that same lower class that is acknowledged to be more open to public scrutiny. In studying only poor families, Giovannoni and Billingsley (1970) found the highest incidence of child neglect to have occurred in families living in the most extreme poverty. A large, more recent study (Wolock & Horowitz, 1977) in northern New Jersey compared AFDC recipient families known to the state child protection agency and identified as having abused or neglected their children, with AFDC families not known to that agency. The maltreating families were

found to be living in more crowded and dilapidated households, to have been more likely to have gone hungry, and, in general, to be existing at a lower material level than the other AFDC families. The mothers in the maltreating families had fewer years of education than the mothers in the other families. The investigators concluded that the abusing and neglecting families are the poorest of the poor.

Third, the public scrutiny argument cannot explain why, among the reported cases, the most severe injuries have occurred in the poorest families. In his study of child abuse reports, Gil (1970) found that injuries were more likely to be fatal or serious among families whose annual income was below \$3,500.

Severity certainly seems to be an important factor in this regard. If definitions of child abuse and neglect are viewed on a long continuum, and stretched to their most innocuous limits, it may indeed be concluded that, by "definition," child abuse and neglect are rampant throughout society. Moreover, the myth itself conveys the impression that severity, as well as frequency, of abuse is distributed proportionately among the classes. But, as Gil (1970) has pointed out, officially reported incidents are more likely than unreported incidents to involve severe injury, since severity is an important criterion of reporting. As we have seen, the relationship between poverty and severity of injury obtains even among the reported incidents.

A British study (Smith, Hanson, & Noble, 1975) of 134 battered infants and children under five years of age, most of whom had been admitted to hospitals, found that the parents were predominantly from the lower social classes. The investigators concluded that "battering is mainly a lower class phenomenon." They further stated that

... as the criteria for referral of cases were medical we are reasonably confident that if more children from high social class families had been admitted with unexpected injuries then consultant paediatricians would have referred them.

The most severe and least easily hidden maltreatment of children is that which results in death. As a forensic pathologist associated with the Office of the Medical Examiner in Philadelphia, Weston (1974) reviewed the mortality of all children under 16 years of age in that city from 1961 through 1965. During this five-year period, 60 deaths due to child abuse and neglect were found. Among the 24 deaths due to neglect, Weston noted that more than 80% of the families had received some form of public assistance. The investigator divided the abuse victims into two categories, according to prior trauma. Of the 13 children with no previous injury (36% of the abuse victims), he reported that "more than half" came from middle-class homes. As for the 23 children with a history of repetitive trauma (64% of the abuse victims), he noted that, with few exceptions, most came from "homes of extremely low socioeconomic level," and none came from upper-middle or upper-class families.

Kaplun and Reich (1976) studied 112 of the 140 apparent homicides of children under 15 years of age, recorded by New York City's Chief Medical Examiner during 1968 and 1969. Over two-thirds of the assailants in these homicides were parents or paramours. The authors found:

Most of the families of the murdered children (70%) lived in areas of severe poverty, and almost all were known to the city's public welfare agency.

Thus we can conclude from these studies that the vast majority of the fatal victims of child abuse and neglect are from poor families. Unlike certain other injuries to children, in only rare instances can death be hidden. Because of its greater severity and openness to public scrutiny than other injuries, its true causes, too, are less likely to go undetected. Death will prompt an investigation. However, it is probable that some child homicides have been successfully passed off as accidents by the parents, and some people will argue that investigative authorities

have been more readily deceived by middle-class and upper-class parents than by lower-class parents.

Yet there is simply a massive amount of evidence, from our country and many others, that

... the overwhelming majority of homicides and other assaultive crimes are committed by persons from the lowest stratum of a social organization (Wolfgang, 1967)

As Magura (1975) noted, the source of such evidence is not limited to official statistics and, moreover, any presumed bias in the detection of offenses cannot explain the fact that official crime rate differences between social classes are substantially greater for physically aggressive crimes than for property offenses. If anything, as Magura pointed out, since the seriousness of an offense is known to be related to the probability of police intervention, the role of a bias in police recognition of offenses would be expected to be least influential in the detection of the most serious offenses. The rate differentials can only mean that, in actuality, crimes of violence are far more prevalent among the lowest socioeconomic classes. There is little reason to believe that child abuse (leaving aside, for the moment, child neglect, which is an act of a different nature than most violent crimes) conforms to any different socioeconomic pattern than that of violent crimes in general. In fact, the available evidence, including that pertaining to fatal child abuse, indicates that it does not.

#### WHY THE MYTH PERSISTS

That the belief in the classlessness of child abuse and neglect has taken hold with such tenacity among professionals and the public, despite evidence and logic to the contrary, suggests that it serves important functions for those who accept it. Maintenance of the myth permits many professionals to view

child abuse and neglect as psychodynamic problems, in the context of a medical model of "disease," "treatment," and "cure," rather than as predominantly sociological and poverty-related problems. Moreover, like the popular conception of an epidemic disease, afflicting families without regard to social or economic standing, the myth allows the problems of abuse and neglect to be portrayed as broader than they actually are—indeed, as occurring in "epidemic" proportions.

Boehm (1964) has pointed out that the strong psychodynamic orientation in the field of social work has led to the assumption that neglect is a classless phenomenon. Conversely, it can be said that the assumption of classlessness plays a key role in upholding the psychodynamic orientation, as well as the medical model of treatment.

The mystique of psychodynamic theories has captivated many helping professionals, who seem to view the espousal and practice of such theories as conferring status and prestige upon themselves. Unfortunately, the mundane problems of poverty and poverty-related hazards hold less fascination for them; direct, concrete approaches to these problems appear to be less glamorous professionally than psychologizing about the poor and prescribing the latest fashions in psychotherapy. Although concrete services are the ones most attractive to prospective lower-class consumers, they are the services that are least appealing to the middle-class helping professionals immersed in the "psychological society" (Gross, 1978).

Thus the myth serves several functions. It supports the prestigious and fascinating psychodynamic medical-model approach and, by disassociating the problems from poverty, accords distinct and separate status to child abuse and neglect specialists. The myth holds that child abuse and neglect are not, for the most part, mere aspects of the poverty problem. Ultimately, by encouraging the view that abuse and neglect are widespread throughout society, the myth presumably aids in prying loose additional federal funds for dealing with these problems.

Politicians, for their part, have been amenable to the myth of classlessness because it serves certain functions for them. The questioning of David Gil by then-Senator Walter Mondale at the 1973 Senate hearings on the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act was most revealing of this preference. Invoking the public scrutiny argument, Mondale pressed hard to establish that child abuse "is not a poverty problem." As Patti (1976) noted,

... it seems that the Senator wished to avoid treating child abuse as another manifestation of poverty out of a concern that the poverty issue had lost its political appeal.

Berleman (1976) commented on the same hearings:

Some legislators wished to be reassured that abuse was not disproportionately distributed according to socioeconomic class; they were particularly anxious not to have the problem become identified with the lower class. Many witnesses also gave the impression that the problem was not class-related.

Thus both professional and politician, each for his own reasons, are disinclined to see the problems as poverty-related—the former to increase his chances of gaining funding for a medical-model approach, the latter to increase his own chances of getting a bill passed and thus appearing to be aggressively dealing with the phenomenon of child "battering," which the public already perceives as a "sickness."

But the ends (obtaining increased funding) cannot justify the means (presenting a picture of child abuse and neglect not supported by the evidence), even on tactical grounds. When certain claims are made in order to secure funding, these claims will determine the disposition of the funds. If it is asserted that there are millions of undiscovered abuse and neglect cases among the middle classes, then legislators must reasonably conclude that money should be earmarked for finding them. And if it is claimed that the problems are unrelated to poverty, then

money and attention will be diverted from poverty-oriented services.

Well-meaning mental health professionals may be drawn to the myth of classlessness, believing that the association of child abuse and neglect with poverty constitutes one more insulting and discriminatory act toward poor people, one more way to "stigmatize" them unjustly. In fact, the myth does a disservice to poor people and to the victims of child abuse and neglect; it undermines development of effective approaches to dealing with their real and difficult problems, and directs us toward remedies more oriented to the middle classes.

To say that child abuse and neglect are strongly related to poverty is not to say that poor people in general abuse and neglect their children. On the contrary, only a small minority of lower-class parents do so (Pelton, 1977). But the myth of classlessness diverts our attention from the "subculture of violence" (Wolfgang, 1967), the stresses of poverty that can provoke abuse and neglect, and the hazardous poverty environment that heightens the dangerousness of child neglect.

#### HOW THE MYTH SERVES AS A SMOKESCREEN

In the face of the evidence that child abuse and neglect, especially in their most severe forms, occur disproportionately among the lower socioeconomic classes, proponents of the myth of classlessness have provided little substance for their beliefs. Nonetheless, as suggested above, the myth is persistent and powerful enough to blind many of us to the real poverty-related problems of most abuse and neglect cases. For poverty is not merely "associated" with child abuse and neglect; there is good reason to believe that the problems of poverty are causative agents in parents' abusive and negligent behaviors and in the resultant harm to children.

As Gil (1970) has pointed out, the living conditions of poverty generate stressful experiences that may become precipi-

lating factors of child abuse, and the poor have little means by which to escape from such stress. Under these circumstances, even minor misbehaviors and annoyances presented by powerless children may trigger abuse. Such poverty-related factors as unemployment, dilapidated and overcrowded housing, and insufficient money, food, recreation, or hope can provide the stressful context for abuse. This is not to say that middle-class parents never experience stresses that might lead to child abuse, or that environmental stress always contributes to abuse. Nor does it mean that the additional stresses of poverty cause most impoverished families to maltreat their children. But, given the established fact that poverty is strongly related to child maltreatment, we find that there are sensible explanations as to why poverty might be a partial determinant of it.

Child neglect is a far more pervasive social problem than is abuse, occurring in more than twice as many cases. Moreover, when harm to the child is severe enough to require hospitalization or medical attention, it is from one-and-a-half to two times more likely due to neglect than to abuse (AHA, 1978; Pelton, 1977). In addition, neglect is somewhat more strongly related to poverty than is abuse (AHA, 1978; Pelton, 1977).

Like abuse, neglect may partially result from poverty-related stresses. In leading to neglect, these stresses may produce the mediating factor of despair rather than anger when, for example, a single parent attempts to raise a large family in cramped and unsafe living quarters with no help and little money. The relationship can be seen most clearly in those cases in which a terrible incident, such as a fire devastating the home, also destroys the mother's capacity to cope with poverty any longer.

However, no matter what the origins of neglectful behavior, there is a more immediate way in which poverty causes harm to neglected children. Poverty itself directly presents dangers for children, and very often neglect merely increases the likelihood that those dangers will result in harm.

Neglectful irresponsibility more readily leads to dire con-

sequences when it occurs in the context of poverty than when that same behavior is engaged in by middle-class parents (Pelton, 1977). In middle-class families there is some *leeway* for irresponsibility, a luxury that poverty does not afford. A middle-class mother can be careless with her money and squander some of it, but still have enough so that her children will not be deprived of basic necessities. Identical lapses in responsibility on the part of an impoverished mother might cause her children to go hungry during the last few days of the month. The less money one has, the better manager of money one has to be.

Leaving a child alone or unattended is the most prevalent form of child neglect, occurring in 50% of all neglect cases (Pelton, 1977). A middle-class parent's inadequate supervision will not put the children in as great danger as will that of the impoverished parent, because the middle-class home is not as drastically beset with health and safety hazards. The context of poverty multiplies the hazards of a mother's neglect. Thus poor people have very little margin for irresponsibility or mismanagement of either time or money.

In some cases the mother does not have much choice but to leave her children alone. A welfare mother with many children cannot easily obtain or pay for a babysitter every time she must leave the house to do her chores; in addition, she may find it more difficult to do her shopping than would a middle-class mother. If she leaves her children alone, she is gambling with their safety; if she stays with them, it may mean being unable to provide proper food or other immediate necessities. Thus some mothers are caught up in difficult and dangerous situations that have less to do with their adequacy and responsibility as parents than with the hard circumstances of their lives.

The myth of classlessness diverts attention from the environmental problems of poor households that make neglect so much more dangerous to children than it would be in middle-class homes.

Recognition of the impoverished context of child neglect

points us to the need for concrete services directed at the dangers of poverty, services such as house finding, rat control, in-home babysitter services, installation of window guard-rails, and emergency cash for the repair of boilers or plumbing, the payment of gas and electric bills, a security deposit on a new apartment, or the purchase of food, crib, or a playpen. Such measures will often directly prevent harm to children in protective services cases, and obviate the need for child placement. In addition, by reducing the immediate stresses of poverty these measures may have a rapid and positive impact on the parents' behavior.

Although the stresses of poverty certainly have psychological effects, the strong relationship between poverty and child abuse and neglect suggests that remediation of situational defects should take precedence over psychological treatments. These parents' behavior problems are less likely to be symptoms of unconscious or intrapsychic conflicts than of concrete antecedent environmental conditions, crises, and catastrophes. It is these root causes that must be addressed.

Child welfare agencies can neither enter the housing industry nor raise clients' welfare benefits. But they can seek to remedy many of the health and safety hazards that attend poverty and inadequate housing and that, in combination with parental factors produced in part by those very hazards, place children in danger of harm and abuse.

### CONCLUSION

Both evidence and reason lead to the unmistakable conclusion that, contrary to the myth of classlessness, child abuse and neglect are strongly related to poverty, in terms of prevalence and of severity of consequences. This is not to say that abuse and neglect do not occur among other socioeconomic classes, or that, when they do occur, they never have severe consequences. However, widespread reports suggesting that abuse

and neglect are classless phenomena are unfounded and misleading. The myth of classlessness persists not on the basis of evidence or logic, but because it serves certain professional and political interests. These interests do not further the task of dealing with the real problems underlying abuse and neglect; adherence to the myth diverts attention from the nature of the problems and diverts resources from their solution.

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