

CEU ARTICLE NO. 7

Unemployment and Child Abuse

Loring Jones

ABSTRACT: *The author reviews the evidence linking unemployment with increasing rates of child abuse. Professionals who work with children and families need to become aware of the relationship between psychosocial and economic functioning. The mechanisms accounting for the observed relationship between abuse and joblessness are discussed, and implications for practice with families are identified.*

UNEMPLOYMENT IS A STRESSFUL life event for families. Children experience stress in that their material resources are reduced and parental effectiveness may be weakened. There is no clearer indicator of the deterioration of the parent-child relationship than the evidence linking the increasing unemployment rate with a rise in the reported cases of child abuse and neglect.

The last recession brought the social service system into contact with unemployed working-class individuals who may never have had previous contact with that system. These individuals are distinct from the chronically unemployed population that the child welfare system is accustomed to serving (Briar, 1983). Changing patterns of industrial production have led to a situation wherein these unemployed persons have found it difficult to return to work at their former status. Long bouts of unemployment have led to underemployment and significant strain in family life for many (Bluestone & Harrison, 1982). These new clients lack knowledge about available services and how such services could be used. On the other hand, professional helpers sometimes do not know how to meet the needs of this group. The vocabulary, ideologies, and technologies of helping professionals are alien to working-class individuals. For example, distress is not usually

expressed in psychological terms but is often expressed in economic terms and physical symptoms (Gore, 1978; Kasl & Cobb, 1978).

This article reviews the research evidence linking abuse with unemployment and provides various explanations for the relationship. Professionals who work with children and families need to understand how economic factors affect psychosocial functioning. Interventive strategies for practice with unemployed families are suggested.

Research Linking Abuse With Unemployment

Using national data statistically representative of the U.S. population, Gil (1971) found that 50% of abusive fathers were unemployed during the year they perpetrated abuse and nearly 12% were unemployed at the time of the abuse. Krugman, Lenherr, Betz, and Fryer (1986) cited data from cases treated by the child protective team of Colorado University Hospital during a 15-year period. The number of children treated for abuse and the severity of abuse increased with

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the rising unemployment rate. During the period 1970-1985, 49% of the abusive fathers were unemployed. Both Light (1973) and Galdston (1976) reported that the most frequently occurring variable describing abusive families was the father's unemployment. Justice and Duncan (1978) found that many of the life events reported by abusing families were related to economic functioning and that the life events considered the most significant were those that led to a reduction in financial status.

Madge (1983) reviewed British studies that investigated the relationship of unemployment with child abuse and found that fathers and step-fathers who were receiving services from child protective service agencies were three to six times as likely as the general population to be unemployed. Margolis and Farran (1983) also found that unemployed fathers were three times more likely to abuse than were employed fathers. Steinberg, Catalano, and Dooley (1981) as well as Brenner (1984) concluded that declines in the overall work force were related to an increase in the reported rates of child abuse. Steinberg et al. (1981) reported that abuse occurs approximately two months after loss of job. These two studies differ from the other studies in that they may not be working with a chronically unemployed population but rather with families whose employment was interrupted by macroeconomic decline. Zuravin (1989) cited four unpublished studies that found positive associations with either reported or verified incidents of child maltreatment. Three of these studies supported the time lag between unemployment and onset of abuse found by Steinberg et al. (1981).

Grubb and Brody (1984), citing data from the 1981-1982 recession, found that 21 of the 29 states with abuse and neglect reporting procedures reported that both the number and severity of abuse cases were increasing. Reports from Wisconsin, Michigan, and Oregon indicated that abuse problems were greatest in counties with the highest unemployment rates. At the same time, 32 states reported significant reductions in child protective services because of federal cutbacks. Three case studies document an upsurge in child welfare service utilization after a plant closure in the Midwest (Buss & Redburn, 1983; Perrucci & Targ, 1988; Root, 1984). Seventy-four percent of family service agencies responding to a survey stated that family violence increased during the last recession (Sunley & Sheek, 1986).

However, there are significant problems with the reported research. Most of the studies are either cross-sectional analyses of abusive populations or are aggregate studies linking measures of labor market activity with abuse and neglect rates. The cross-sectional data and the absence of comparison groups do not allow one to assess the direction of relationships. The research also fails to identify the intervening variables between economic change and abuse. Moreover, the literature does not distinguish between the circumstances of job loss and does not separate the recently unemployed from the chronically unemployed. Such distinctions are important because these populations may be affected differently by macroeconomic change and thus be in need of different treatment responses.

The aggregate studies have been criticized for making the ecological fallacy since these studies compare rates of unemployment with rates of child abuse. With these kinds of data, it is possible that people other than those who have lost jobs are responsible for increases in abuse. However, these studies suggest that a recession is stressful for those who maintain continuous employment as well as for those who lose a job. It is also difficult to isolate unemployment from other societal factors that might account for increased abuse.

A number of longitudinal studies compared small samples of former workers with groups of employed workers in specific situations such as plant layoffs. However, the small samples create major limitations. Also, it is nearly impossible to obtain baseline measures of functioning prior to notification of job loss. None of these studies was designed to look at the incidence of abuse in unemployed families; the samples were too small to obtain significant numbers of a relatively rare occurrence such as child abuse. However, the ethnographic nature of the studies is helpful for clinicians because these studies allow one to ponder the changes that occur within families that may lead to abuse. Studies using small purposive samples are criticized for being difficult to generalize from their results. However, criticism can be partially answered by the fact that these studies are replications of one another with a variety of populations in different contexts. Thus, converged findings of these studies demonstrate that job loss is a critical determinant of family and individual functioning.

Explanations for Abuse

Belsky (1981) proposed an ecological explanation for why abuse occurs at a particular time in

a specific family. Previous explanations for abuse have focused on the developmental history of the parent or looked at the characteristics of the child that might elicit abusive behavior (Patterson & King, 1976). Belsky points out that not all abused children become abusive parents. Therefore, having been abused as a child is not sufficient in itself for explaining abusive behavior. Unemployment may be one of many conditions that increases the potential for abuse by increasing stress in "at risk" families. Gil (1971) proposes a similar "last straw hypothesis," suggesting that families suffering from a range of difficulties prior to job loss find that the changes caused by unemployment further reduce parents' ability to cope with children.

The research literature suggests a framework for examining the interaction between unemployment and family stress in order to explain increased abuse:

A deterioration in the psychological state of the unemployed is probably the most consistent finding in the literature.

Economic stress is the obvious culprit. A study released by the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (1988) found that families with an income less than \$15,000 a year in 1986 were four times as likely to commit all forms of abuse as were those earning more than that amount. Liker and Elder (1983) found that economic stress accentuated the irritability, tenseness, and moodiness of husbands. These changes are responsible not only for an increase in marital tension and discord, but are linked to more punitive and arbitrary parenting behavior by the father. Liker and Elder's work was a retrospective study of a Depression era population, but more recent studies have also found increased marital discord in unemployed families (Atkinson, Leim, & Leim, 1987; Brinkeroff & White, 1978; Jones, 1988; Larson, 1984; Leim & Leim, 1988; Madonia, 1983; Zvonkovic, Guss, & Ladd, 1988). Abuse in families with marital discord is viewed as displaced anger (Green, 1976). The parenting behaviors described by Liker and Elder are associated with temper tantrums and difficult behaviors in children that may elicit abusive responses in parents.

A deterioration in the psychological state of the unemployed is probably the most consistent finding in

the literature. Fairly rigorous research using longitudinal investigative strategies and comparison groups of continuously employed workers has established this deterioration, which extends to wives of unemployed males over time (Buss & Redburn, 1983; Dew, Bromet, & Schulberg, 1987; Fineman, 1984; Leim & Rayman, 1982; Leim & Leim, 1988; Penkower, Bromet, & Dew, 1988). The explanation for the time lag in the wives' reactions is that their response is mediated through the spouses' reactions. The husband's role performance and supportiveness decrease as his psychological distress increases; the wife develops symptoms as this change in her husband occurs. Such stressful changes make it difficult for spouses to parent their children effectively. When parents are psychologically stressed, they may overreact when dealing with their children, which may lead to abuse. The time lag between job loss and abuse noted by Steinberg et al. (1981) may mean that the mother's ability to protect and remain patient with her children gradually decreases as unemployment works its psychosocial effect on the family.

Job loss lowers the breadwinner's status within the family. This effect is most pronounced in families with traditional role orientations. Abuse grows out of attempts by the father to reassert his status (Madge, 1983; Elder, 1974). Komarovsky (1940) stated that the unemployed man shows a greater propensity toward overasserting his power with his children than he does with his wife. Whether unemployment leads to spousal violence appears to be more open to debate than does whether unemployment leads to an increase in child abuse. Qualitative studies claim that spousal violence increases with unemployment, but little quantitative data support this assertion. One explanation for this lack of evidence may be that spousal abuse has not received sufficient attention from unemployment researchers. One associational study noted that the husband's unemployment is a frequently occurring variable with abused wives (Lewis, 1987). However, abusive behavior toward children may occur more often because the unemployed man feels more vulnerable in his relationship with his wife. The unequal division of labor and power found in many American marriages is supported and justified by the husband's playing the provider role (Cutright, 1971); when the provider role is disturbed, so too is the labor and power balance between spouses.

The more qualitative studies have identified increased alcohol and substance abuse as an outcome of job loss. Excessive alcohol and substance use has been linked to child abuse (Bensman & Lynch, 1987; Borrero, 1980; Dail, 1988). Although quantitative data support the claim of increased drinking, these data have shortcomings. Kessler, Turner, and House (1987) reported their findings from a large epidemiological study. The major improvement of their study over other research efforts was that their data enabled them to sort respondents into categories according to the reason for job loss. They found that increased drinking occurred only among those who were "at fault" for losing a position. Buss and Redburn (1983) followed a randomly chosen sample of unemployed persons for two years and found only a moderate increase in drinking. Brenner (1984) cited aggregate data linking increases in cirrhosis-related diseases with economic downturns. He concluded that this outcome is related to increased drinking during recessions. Because this conclusion is based on aggregate data, one cannot determine whether the unemployed alone increased their drinking.

A number of studies have suggested that a risk situation occurs when an unemployed father provides child care (Johnson & Abromovitch, 1985; Justice & Duncan, 1978; Steinberg et al., 1981). Steinberg et al. reach this conclusion in attempting to explain findings from a study using aggregate data gathered in Southern California. Johnson and Abromovitch used a small purposeful sample of unemployed fathers in Toronto in an effort to gather information on how losing a job affects parenting. The presumed reason that abuse occurs when the father provides child care is that he is unfamiliar with the task and thus cannot cope with its stresses.

A striking feature of the literature on unemployment and abuse, which differs from other research on abuse, is the identification of the father as the more likely perpetrator of abuse. Research in which unemployment is not the explanatory variable has focused on the mother as the most likely perpetrator of abuse (Vondra, 1986; Straus & Gelles, 1980). During periods of low unemployment, child protective services caseloads consist disproportionately of single-parent female-headed households, which may reflect this difference. In a recession, such as those that have occurred since the late 1970s, disproportionately more men than women lose jobs, which thus would put more children at risk (Flaim & Sehgal,

1985). Job loss may lead to more abuse in two-parent families. Single-parent families are vulnerable at all times.

Increased family contact in the home at times of stress coupled with a corresponding decrease in contacts outside the home is a potential cause of family violence. Increased isolation as a consequence of unemployment was first noted with the qualitative Depression-era studies. The later, more quantitative studies found that social support decreased as a result of job loss (Aiken, Ferman, & Sheppard, 1968; Atkinson et al., 1987; Bakke, 1940; Fineman, 1984; Jones, in press; Komarovsky, 1940; Steinberg et al., 1981; Swinbourn, 1981). Research has linked isolation to abuse (Garbarino, 1976; Light, 1973). Bakke (1940) noted that outside relationships are important for

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sustaining family stability because they provide emotional support, encouragement, financial assistance, job leads, and social pressure to maintain family integrity. Outside contacts may also provide witnesses who inhibit abuse. Outside contacts may also provide activities that are stress reducing as well as distance from the children when parents are stressed.

Komarovsky (1940), Friedman (1986), and Morris (1985) noted that the nature of marital relations during the course of unemployment was predicated on the state of the marriage prior to job loss. Egalitarian relationships based on love and respect were more likely to promote and continue family stability during a stressful period. Komarovsky also found that unemployment more often than not intensified the pre-unemployment parent-child relationship rather than changed the quality of the relationship. A parent who had a poor, coercive relationship with a child before job loss would probably see that relationship deteriorate further after unemployment. In some instances a child may use the parent's changed status as an excuse to resist parental authority, causing the parent to become even more coercive in an effort to control the child.

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long-term unemployment, resulting in tense and bitter family interactions. This study suggested that a new job does not necessarily solve a family's problems if the new job is at a lower status level than the lost job. Most longitudinal studies of unemployment state that psychological and health symptoms expressed by the unemployed person and spouse will recede with reemployment, but only if the status of the new job approximates that of the former position (Leim & Rayman, 1982; Fineman, 1984; Warr & Jackson, 1985). Virtually all studies of workers who lost their jobs as a result of a plant closing indicate that a large proportion of these workers end up taking jobs at a lower pay and status (Bluestone & Harrison, 1982; Buss & Redburn, 1983; Flaim & Sehgal, 1985; Parnes & King, 1977).

Steinberg et al. (1981) describe an "uncovering hypothesis," which asserts that unemployment may create conditions wherein pre-existing abuse is not as easily concealed. Child welfare experts have long noted that the reported rate of child abuse may actually represent the "tip of the iceberg" in terms of the actual incidence of abuse. With this hypothesis, behavior doesn't change for the worse; rather, the tolerance of others within the unemployed person's social network changes. For example, an abusive parent may have been tolerated because he was providing financially for the family. High unemployment in a community may also mean that there are more witnesses in residential neighborhoods to view and report abuse.

Implications for Practice

An increasing number of programs that serve the unemployed are appearing in the literature. Some of these programs are based on empirical findings; however, no field tests have been published. Thus, these programs need to be evaluated in order to develop an empirically based practice with this population. Data need to be collected directly from the spouse and children in order to precisely isolate the effect of unemployment on families. Most research focuses on the unemployed person. Therefore, almost any intervention based on research needs to be taken as tentative.

Helping professionals can provide data to researchers by recording the psychosocial aspects of job loss. The type of effort by Krugman et al. (1986), wherein agencies routinely collect data on client employment status, thus allowing re-

searchers to link economic change with psychosocial functioning, would be useful in advocacy efforts on behalf of the unemployed. Knowledge of the psychosocial aspects of unemployment would help broaden the economic policy debate and might weaken the tendency of government policymakers to accept increasingly higher levels of unemployment as an economic necessity. For example, child welfare agencies can monitor social indicators such as increases in the number of reported and substantiated cases of abuse and neglect during economic downturns in order to help policymakers become aware of the relationship between the functioning of the economy and family violence.

Because unemployed persons become isolated socially and tend to avoid social services, aggressive outreach is needed with this population. This population needs help securing benefits and services before their resources are depleted. By bolstering a family's resources, stress is reduced and abuse may be avoided.

One possible outreach approach is to establish connections with the health care system. Using the health care system for outreach is important because many unemployed persons react to psychological distress by exhibiting somatic complaints (Kessler, House, & Turner, 1987; Kasl & Cobb, 1978; Kahn, 1981). Margolis and Farran (1983) reported that children of unemployed blue-collar workers appeared to be at a greater risk of illness than were the children of a similar group of retrained workers. Adolescent and younger children of unemployed parents were twice as likely to be admitted to a pediatric emergency room for a suicide attempt than were children with employed parents (Gnedza, 1984).

Psychosocial supports for this population are needed. The unemployed are for the most part healthy people who react to a stressful life event. The deterioration in psychological health noted in the empirical findings is usually reversed with reemployment. Mental health services can help alleviate stress in families and help prevent the development of problems. Services might also help the unemployed person remain focused on his or her search for work.

When plant closings are anticipated, a preventive strategy can educate families about what to expect with regard to the psychosocial and financial effects of job loss. Such efforts should also include information about the availability of services. The crisis intervention literature has demonstrated that "to be forewarned is to be fore-

armed." Education helps inoculate families against the worst aspects of unemployment by reducing anxieties and helping families avoid predictable pitfalls. Knowledge about services also enables families to seek appropriate help when in need.

Taking a family treatment approach to intervention guards against the spillover of symptoms from the unemployed person to the family. A family approach also makes valuable use of a potential source of social support. The gains associated with family counseling, such as conflict resolution, improvement of communication skills, and communication of caring and concern, are valuable to unemployed persons. Vinkor and Caplan (1987) found that the social support supplied by a significant other facilitates job-seeking activity by helping to guard against burnout. The potential for problems might be reduced by helping unemployed workers to reframe job loss as an opportunity to find more satisfying work and to restructure their family life. Komarovskiy (1940) stated that a husband's unemployment provided women in traditional marriages with an opportunity to rearrange their marriages along more equitable lines.

In times of high unemployment, the focus of intervention in abusive families might need to be shifted from mother to father, because research indicates that the father is the more likely abuser in times of economic stress. Evidence also suggests that the father is often neglected in child and family treatment settings. This change in emphasis does not mean that women's unemployment is not important, but rather that the wife's or mother's unemployment is a far more ambivalent situation for the family and less conducive to abuse (Hartley, 1987; Jones, 1989; Marsden, 1982; Moen, Kain, & Elder, 1983; Root, 1984). These studies indicate that women describe more positive features to their own unemployment than do men. Because of the socialization women experience in this society, they are more likely to use their increased time at home in more productive ways. There is no evidence to indicate that men will become more involved in domestic activity because of job loss (Shamir, 1986; Clark, 1987).

Initially, intervention should help the worker and family grieve the job loss and avoid directing anger at family members (Amundsen & Bergen, 1982; Fineman, 1984; Hurst & Shephard, 1986; Krystal, Sackett, & Lantoni, 1983). Attributions about the reasons for unemployment are important in determining the adaptations made by the family. Larson (1984) reports that older children

are likely to react with anger and withdrawal unless efforts are made to explain the reasons for job loss. Young children, because of their egocentric view of the world, are open to blaming themselves for the change in both their parents and family environment (Rayman, 1988).

Group self-help strategies are the most consistently suggested interventions for the unemployed. Some empirical evidence asserts that group services are the preferred way for the unemployed to receive services (Briar, 1983; Buss & Redburn, 1983; Dooley, Catalano, & Rook, 1988; Fedrau, 1984; Kasl & Cobb, 1978; Keiselbach & Svensson, 1987; Madonia, 1983; Shelton, 1985; Shore, 1984). Self-help groups deliver services in a nonstigmatized manner, replacing lost social contacts and providing a sense of empowerment and usefulness to the individual.

Conclusion

Grubb and Brody (1984) noted that the increase in reported cases of abuse that occurred during the last recession was coupled with a reduction in resources devoted to social welfare. The risks for the unemployed may be greater in the next recession because it will occur at a time when a great many people are already out of work. Those who lose their jobs will find less support than job losers found in earlier times. Such a situation does not provide a promising base upon which to launch innovative service programs. Line workers will continue to be in danger of staggering under overwhelming case loads and may find it difficult to deliver even minimal services. Private agencies will face a population unable to pay for services.

Clinicians not only need to know how to work with these families, but they need to be involved in the political process as advocates on behalf of the unemployed. Services are needed to help families avoid difficulties and jobs need to be maintained or new ones created. The United States has two choices as to how it can deal with widespread joblessness: (1) the country could develop full-employment policies as a primary-prevention mechanism or (2) develop supports that strengthen families and enable at-risk families to survive during predictable economic downturns, for example, universal health insurance and a guaranteed national income. In the absence of such policies and programs, abuse rates are likely to rise with the unemployment rate.

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CEU Test No. 7

1. What two unemployment-related stressors do children experience?

1. _____
 2. _____

2. Among working-class individuals, distress is often expressed in _____ and _____, as opposed to _____.

3. The author is satisfied that existing research makes a clear connection between unemployment and child abuse. True or false _____.

4. One retrospective study found that economic stress accentuated the _____, _____, and _____ of husbands.

5. Parenting behaviors are associated with _____ and _____ in children that may elicit abusive responses.

6. According to the author, what is the most consistent finding in the literature on the unemployed?

7. How do experts explain the time lag between the husband's and wife's reaction to unemployment?

8. In families with traditional role orientations, abuse arises from the father's attempt to _____.

He is more likely to overassert his power with _____ than with _____.

9. How does the literature on unemployment and abuse differ from other research on abuse? _____

10. Outside relationships sustain family stability because they provide these five advantages:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

11. One researcher found that unemployment often _____ the parent-child relationship rather than _____ of the relationship.

12. Studies of workers who lost their jobs as a result of plant closings indicate that a large proportion of these workers end up _____.

13. What does the "uncovering hypothesis" assert?

14. Routinely collecting data on employment of clients may ultimately be useful in _____

15. Because unemployed persons become isolated and tend to avoid social services, _____
_____ is needed with this population.

16. Using the health care system is important because many unemployed persons react to psychological distress by exhibiting _____

17. When unemployment is anticipated, a preventive strategy can educate families about what to expect with regard to the _____
and _____ effects of job loss

18. A _____ approach

to intervention guards against the spill-over of symptoms from the unemployed person to the family.

19. Job loss can be reframed as an opportunity to
1. _____
2. _____

20. Initially, intervention should help the worker and family _____ and avoid _____

21. With a parent's job loss, older children are likely to _____,
whereas young children may _____
_____ for the change.

22. Empirical evidence asserts that _____
_____ are the preferred way for the unemployed to receive services.

23. Of the two options the author says the United States has to deal with joblessness, which seems to you the more realistic object of advocacy, 1 or 2?

OPEN FACULTY POSITION

UCLA School of Social Welfare Director of Field Instruction

The UCLA School of Social Welfare is seeking applications for the position of Director of Field Instruction effective July 1, 1991.

The School offers programs designed to prepare MSW graduates for clinical and planning and management positions, particularly in the areas of health, aging, mental health, families and children. Its curriculum gives special emphasis to social work practice in a multicultural context. The field work program is viewed as central, not only to the school's instructional mission, but to its research and community service missions as well.

The Director of Field Instruction serves as a member of the faculty with specific responsibilities to develop and sustain relationships with community agencies required to support the school's program. The Director should have a master's degree in social work, 5-10 years' experience in social work practice and experience in the design and implementation of an accredited field instruction program. The capacity to teach and to administer an academic program in a multicultural community setting is essential. A doctorate in social work or a related field is preferred.