

Reducing Child Neglect

What the Evidence Suggests and Where to Go Next

Marla McDaniel

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National statistics on child maltreatment tell a well-chronicled story: Neglect cases vastly outnumber other forms of maltreatment, including physical abuse, sexual abuse, and psychological maltreatment. Most jurisdictions define neglect as a “failure of a parent or other person with responsibility for the child to provide needed food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision to the degree that the child's health, safety, and well-being are threatened with harm” (CWIG 2022). By definition, neglect is about unmet basic needs and perceived harm. In practice, many situations that agencies identify as neglect are closely tied to material hardship, suggesting that the contributing conditions are often economic and preventable rather than indicating willful disregard (NCSL 2023). While many factors influence neglect, this brief centers on income supports and state legislative choices and asks, “What would happen if the child welfare field mobilized around a focused, systemwide effort to reduce child neglect—drawing on proven policies and practices and tracking reductions over time to assess progress?”

Most rigorous experimental and quasi-experimental studies of child maltreatment do not focus explicitly on neglect. This conspicuous shortcoming presents an opportunity for change. Building better evidence will help the field to understand what effectively reduces neglect rates. A second shortcoming is the limited, though expanding, recognition and attention to how policies and definitions of neglect impact child welfare numbers. Understanding these dynamics can help direct the field's attention to addressing the preventable conditions (including policies and practices) that place families under strain.

In this brief, national statistics on child neglect are presented alongside a review of relevant research. After summarizing select studies on mandatory reporting laws and definitions of neglect, the

analysis offers considerations for adopting a deliberate focus on neglect with the specific goal of substantially reducing its incidence. Taken together, the existing evidence points to three central insights: (1) several income-support impact studies have been associated with modest and meaningful reductions in child protective services involvement; (2) because most studies examine “any maltreatment,” we still lack clear evidence about what specifically reduces substantiated neglect; and (3) state policies, including definitions of neglect, reporting requirements, and screening practices, shape neglect rates in measurable ways. Building from these insights, this brief concludes with an outline for a practical learning agenda focused on policy levers with clearer measurement objectives and shared goals for reducing substantiated neglect.

The Field Disagrees on Causes of Neglect but Shares Several Goals That Make a Neglect-Reduction Agenda Possible

The child welfare field is divided on how to solve the problem of neglect. While families, advocates, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers often stand on different sides of the debate (CWIG 2023; Drake et al. 2011; Fong 2017; Merritt 2021a, 2021b), most express similar views on three objectives: (1) prevent harm to children, (2) prioritize families staying together, and (3) reduce child welfare system involvement (AECF 2025; CWIG 2018).¹

Federal legislation under the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) of 2018 also echoes these goals. The act reframes child welfare-system priorities from primarily emphasizing foster care to reinforcing children remaining at home whenever possible. The law attempts this shift by increasing federal funding toward maltreatment intervention strategies (AECF 2025). Shared interests in prevention create opportunities, and this brief proposes what a collective agenda might look like if the field began tracking and measuring success by how many children no longer experience a child neglect incident.

I focus on neglect that a child protective services (CPS) agency has investigated and confirmed, or what the child welfare field calls “substantiated” neglect. Many accept that measuring neglect this way—based on a count of child welfare system cases—is an imperfect proxy for neglect (Kovski et al. 2022; Pac et al. 2023). A child welfare system only knows about cases it sees and can miss others. Also, what counts as neglect and triggers a child protective response in one state may not be considered neglect in another (e.g., some states consider school truancy neglect while others do not). It is also a faulty proxy because it overrepresents children and families disproportionately subject to reports and substantiations due to discrimination and bias (Azimi et al. 2025; CWIG 2023; Kovski et al. 2022; Viswanathan et al. 2024). Despite its limitations, substantiated child neglect remains a meaningful measure of exposure and events that trigger formal intervention—including situations where poverty and economic hardship are counted as neglect.

Agencies reach substantiation determinations after several preceding decision points, as shown in box 1. Operational factors influencing what counts as substantiated neglect in a given state include neglect definitions, legal standards of proof and evidence, and child welfare and court decisions and discretion.

BOX 1

CPS Decision Path and Influences (Simplified)

- **Reports** – sensitive to who a state requires to file a report on any suspected cases of maltreatment to child protective services agencies (e.g., doctors, teachers, police officers) and families' contact with those mandated and nonmandated reporters
 - **Investigations** – sensitive to intake rules, screening requirements, and criteria, including policies around alternative response
 - **Substantiations** – sensitive to neglect definitions, legal standards of proof and evidence, and child welfare and court decisions and discretion
 - **Foster care entry** – sensitive to requirements and thresholds for risks that warrant removal, judicial practices, and available services and placement options
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Many studies and reviews clearly link poverty and neglect, identifying inadequate material resources, parenting capacity, and challenges that poverty magnifies, like substance use, untreated mental health, and family violence (Harden and Berger 2025; Slack et al. 2011). With this clarity on the correlates, we can advance efforts to address them. Researchers hypothesize that income supports and improved access to health, housing, and related interventions can reduce the economic and related challenges that contribute to neglect.

Yet knowing these correlates is only part of what the field needs. System design—including reporting requirements and neglect definitions—sets thresholds for what people report and what agencies investigate and substantiate. Because policies and practices define what the child welfare system is responsible for handling, these policies and practices also influence how many families become involved in the system at all. The field has studied these system-level factors far less and therefore knows much less about how they shape reporting patterns and case outcomes. To reduce neglect, the field must pair its strong understanding of correlates with deeper knowledge of how definitions, policies, and other structural contributors influence outcomes.

Neglect Drives Most Child Welfare Involvement: Reducing Neglect Would Change the Whole System

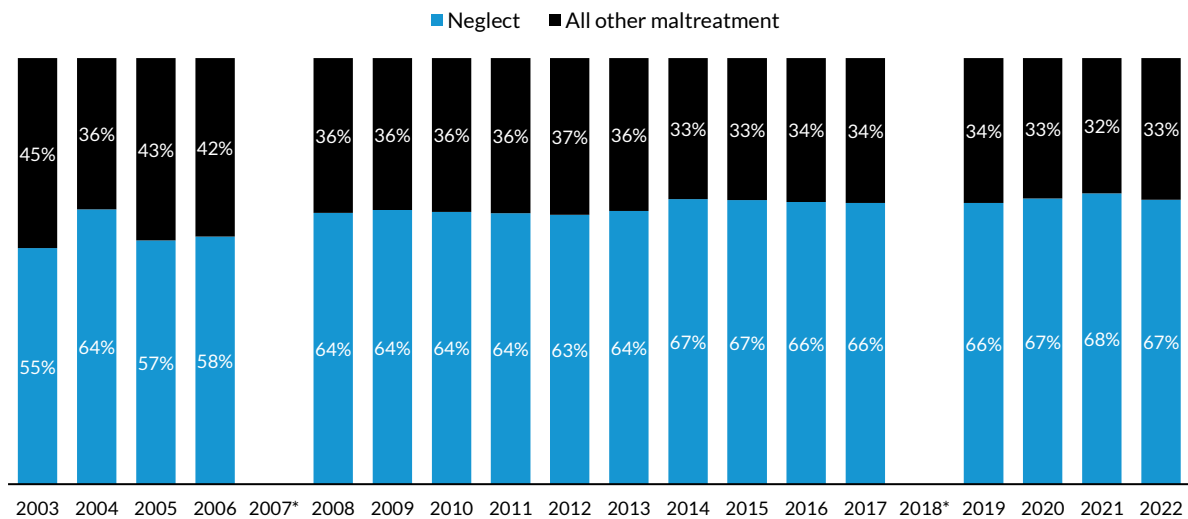
Child welfare systems across US states and territories collect information on reported and investigated child neglect incidents. These data help administrators, researchers, and policymakers monitor prevalence. Since 1989 the US Children's Bureau has tracked how many children nationally have been the subject of a child maltreatment report and investigation. The US Children's Bureau publishes an annual report that includes each state and territory's substantiated maltreatment numbers and types (physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological maltreatment, sex trafficking [since 2018 only], neglect, and medical neglect; US Department of Health and Human Services 2025). Despite notable variation in jurisdictional definitions and in data quality, content, and consistency across years (Williams et al. 2025), these data paint an important national picture and provide a rich resource for understanding the child welfare system.

Between 2005 and 2023 the number of children each year with at least one substantiated form of maltreatment ranged from nearly 800,000 children in 2005 to a little less than 550,000 children in 2023 (US Department of Health and Human Services 2025). Figure 1 shows that neglect represents more than half of all substantiated maltreatment year after year, and its share has increased since the early 2000s.

FIGURE 1

Substantiated Neglect Makes Up the Majority of Child Maltreatment Cases Year after Year (2004–22)

Substantiated neglect as a share of all maltreatment 2004–22



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Source: Author's reproduction and summary of 2003–22 data from US Department of Health & Human Services, *Child Maltreatment 2023*, (Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2025), <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data-research/child-maltreatment>.

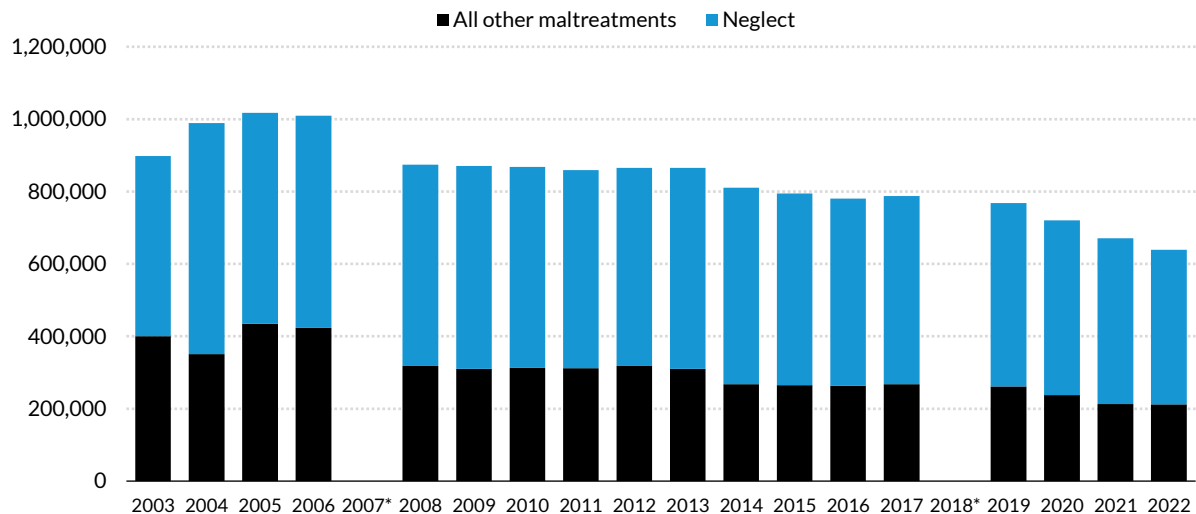
Notes: The Children's Bureau's annually produced "Child Maltreatment Reports" can be inconsistent from year to year. A child on a maltreatment case may have more than one type of substantiated maltreatment (e.g., neglect plus physical abuse). In most years since 2003, the public reports count total maltreatment types, so the totals are larger than the total number of children. For example, in 2022 the national number of children with substantiated maltreatment was 558,899 based on numbers from all 50 states, plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. That same year the total reported number of maltreatments was 638,768, illustrating that some children had experienced more than one type of substantiated maltreatment. In 2023 the report records that out of 546,159 children with substantiated maltreatment, 65,496 (roughly 12 percent or one in nine experienced more than one form of maltreatment). All tables presented in Child Maltreatment Reports draw from data that are archived and available as restricted-use files at the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN) at Cornell University. Researchers may request or conduct special analyses. As noted, the data shown here reproduce published data tables and not original analyses.

*Data from 2007, 2018, and 2023 were presented differently and are excluded.

Figure 2 shows total neglect has generally declined since 2004, and other maltreatments have fluctuated.

FIGURE 2
Neglect Drives Child Welfare System Totals

Neglect versus all other maltreatment types



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Source: Author's reproduction and summary of 2003–22 data from US Department of Health & Human Services, *Child Maltreatment 2023*, (Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau, 2025), <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data-research/child-maltreatment>.

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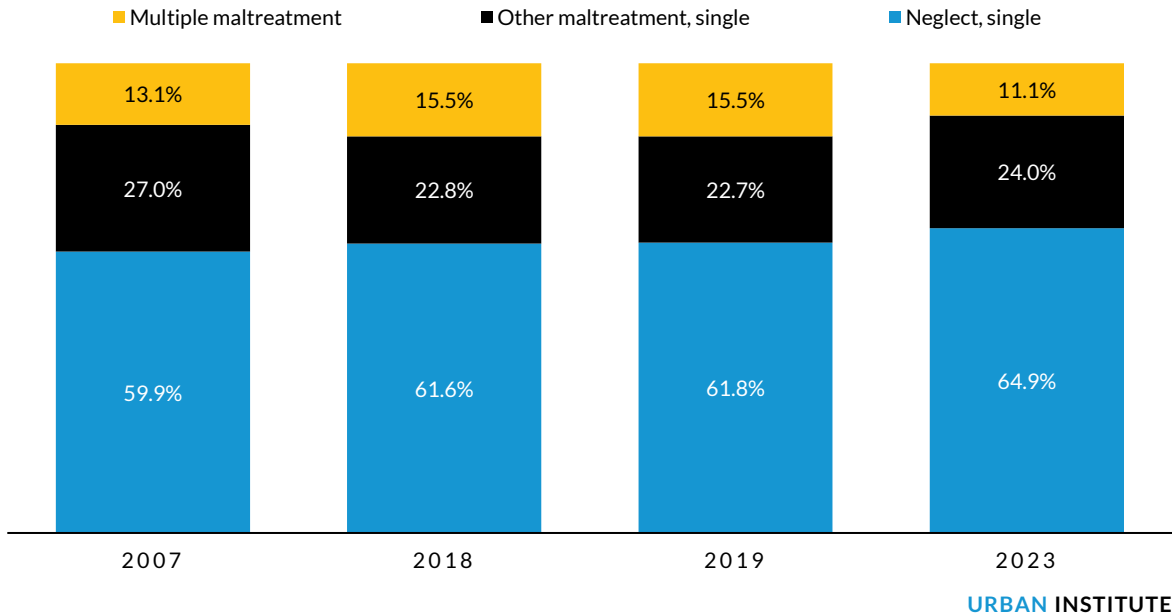
Because Neglect Has Distinct Drivers, We Need Evidence Specific to Neglect, Not Simply Maltreatment Averages

This brief focuses on rigorous impact studies and what might reduce neglect. Neglect is emphasized on its own because other types of maltreatment, like physical or sexual abuse, can have different causes, necessitate different solutions, and have less immediate connection to economic hardship (Cusick et al. 2024; CWIG 2018).

Because individual child maltreatment cases can involve more than one type of maltreatment, segregating the effects in practice is not always feasible. But many cases reflected in state and territory administrative data cite a single type of maltreatment. And among those singular cases, neglect remains

the most common.² Researchers can focus on singular neglect cases as a starting point for tracking reductions in incidence. In 2007, 2018, 2019, and 2023, the Child Maltreatment Reports documented the share of maltreatment cases recorded as a single type of maltreatment, which ranged from 84 percent to 88 percent. Among cases that involved a single type of maltreatment, a majority were neglect-only³ (between 59 percent and 61 percent). Figure 3 shows the share of single-maltreatment neglect compared with single-maltreatment non-neglect, and multiple-maltreatment.

FIGURE 3
Neglect Accounts for the Majority of Single-Type Maltreatment Cases
2007, 2018, 2019, 2023



Source: Author’s reproduction and summary of data from US Department of Health & Human Services, *Child Maltreatment 2023*, (Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children’s Bureau, 2025), <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data-research/child-maltreatment>.

Notes: The Children’s Bureau’s annually produced “Child Maltreatment Reports” can be inconsistent from year to year. Data reflected here from 2007, 2018, 2019, and 2023 were the four years since 2003 that recorded whether a substantiated case included a single type of maltreatment or multiple types of maltreatment. All tables presented in Child Maltreatment Reports draw from data that are archived and available as restricted-use files at the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN) at Cornell University. Researchers may request or conduct special analyses. As noted, the data shown here reproduce published data tables and not original analyses.

To understand what reduces neglect rates and by how much, the field could start by focusing on reducing the incidence of neglect-only cases.

Income Supports Reduce CPS Involvement, but the Degree Is Likely Modest without Other Policy and Practice Changes

Across multiple studies, income supports correlate with fewer CPS events—often single-digit to low double-digit percentage reductions (Biehl and Hill 2018; Cancian et al. 2013; Kovski et al. 2022; Pac et al. 2023; Puls et al. 2021; Rostad et al. 2020). Most of these studies measure any maltreatment or suspected maltreatment (i.e., including neglect and abuse), and not substantiated neglect alone, so we cannot yet tell administrators how much substantiated neglect would fall. The direction is consistent, but the evidence for neglect alone remains incomplete because combined outcomes may dilute neglect-specific effects.

A Children’s Bureau bulletin underscores the imbalance: despite its prevalence, “neglect continues...to receive less attention from practitioners, researchers, and the media” (CWIG 2018). The bulletin points to difficulties in identifying and understanding neglect, which complicate study, prevention, and treatment (CWIG 2018). These gaps justify more neglect-focused research to inform strategies that reduce the numbers.

To understand the current evidence on what reduces child maltreatment, this brief focuses on causal impact studies. Experimental and quasi-experimental designs provide evidence by their designs on whether an intervention or policy directly reduces child maltreatment and by how much. Unfortunately, no studies in this review were designed to distinguish the effects on neglect separate from all maltreatment (or suspected maltreatment) combined, which is a critical limitation discussed further.

What Qualifies as Neglect Varies Widely, So Policy Choices Shape Neglect Rates

A state or territory’s authority to invoke child protective services is guided by a state or territory’s civil statutes. While state neglect definitions vary, they similarly pertain to a “failure of a parent or other person with responsibility for the child to provide needed food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision to the degree that the child’s health, safety, and well-being are threatened with harm” (CWIG 2022). Each state or territory establishes what conduct constitutes neglect. For example, some states add educational neglect or count medical neglect separately; some specify conditions like a failure to thrive, apply terminology like “improper care,” or use different criteria or thresholds to determine risk or harm (Christian 2025; CWIG 2022; Weigensberg et al. 2025). States also set standards for reporting maltreatment and vary widely in which professionals and individuals are mandated by law to make reports, such as physicians, teachers, law enforcement, and others (Lee and Weigensberg 2022).⁴

Providing adequate food, shelter, medical care, clothing, and supervision requires financial and other resources that are more limited for families with lower incomes. Some people have suggested that

supplemental income and other concrete supports prevent child welfare involvement. These propositions have led to several studies focused on whether such supports reduce maltreatment (Cusick et al. 2024; Pac et al. 2023).

Income supports offer a partial explanation, but existing evidence cannot yet tell us how much neglect these supports can prevent. This brief aims to clarify what we know about the relationship while acknowledging that reducing neglect will also require responding to families’ concrete needs, evaluating availability and families’ access to services, scrutinizing child welfare system practices, and attending to state policies.

Income Boosts Show Measurable Reductions in CPS Outcomes, but Effects Vary and Rarely Isolate Neglect

Income supports is a term for federal, state, and local programs that grant income directly to qualifying people through mechanisms like tax credits and public benefits. The programs provide a modest income boost that families sometimes use to offset costs of food, housing, and other expenses. Several recent studies estimate the impacts of the additional income on families (Hill and Rowhani-Rahbar 2022). Most studies examining income supports in relation to CPS outcomes have focused on three sources: tax credits (e.g., the earned income tax credit [EITC], child tax credits), child support, and public benefits (e.g., Temporary Assistance for Needy Families [TANF]). Some recent research also explores guaranteed income programs, but mostly on non-CPS outcomes (Bartik et al. 2025; Vivalt et al. 2025), though studies are underway,⁵ and some hypothesize about its implications for neglect prevention (Webb 2022). Table 1 provides brief descriptions of the EITC, child tax credits, and child support.

TABLE 1
Example Income Support Programs

Income support programs	Description
Earned income tax credit (EITC)	A tax credit available to low- and moderate-income workers calculated as a percentage of earnings (Tax Policy Center 2025 ⁶). Families may owe lower taxes or qualify for a tax refund if the amount of the tax credit exceeds what they owe in federal taxes (CBPP 2025; Internal Revenue Service 2025; Maag 2015). ⁷ Several states also have state-level EITCs that are generally smaller than the federal credit.
Child tax credits (CTC)	A tax credit available to workers with children. ⁸ Depending on a family’s earnings and other qualifying circumstances, the maximum amount available per child has varied. In 2026, it is \$2,200. ⁹ Families with the lowest incomes receive the lowest average benefits. Several states also have state-level CTCs.
TANF child support	A federal-state program and income support that collects and distributes money from noncustodial parents on behalf of children (Congressional Research Service 2025). For children and families receiving cash assistance through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), states can determine whether to give all, some, or none of the collected amount directly to the custodial family. States that retain some or all the payment use it as reimbursement for TANF administrative costs (Tollestrup 2025). ¹⁰

Source: Author’s review of income support program policies.

The EITC, child tax credit, child support, and other income supports from public benefits programs are income sources that may help families provide for a child's basic needs and reduce the risk of neglect while reducing poverty (Grewal-Kök et al. 2025). Researchers have been able to analyze this potential impact, often leveraging state differences in the various programs (Cusick et al. 2024). Importantly, most studies do not isolate substantiated neglect specifically, but they illustrate both the magnitude of plausible effects and the methods available for estimating them.

Refundable Credits Are Consistently Linked to Fewer CPS Events

A small number of studies have used state-level policy variation and policy timing to estimate how refundable tax credits affect child welfare outcomes. Although these studies examine different outcomes (foster care entry, maltreatment reports, CPS investigations) and rely on different designs, they point in a consistent direction: modest increases in income associated with refundable credits are linked to measurable reductions in child welfare system involvement (Biehl and Hill 2018; Kovski et al. 2022; Pac et al. 2023; Rostad et al. 2020).

- **EITC expansions and foster care entry (2009).**
The study analyzed expansions in federal and state EITC spending under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act and found that the uptick in state EITC spending was associated with a 7.4 percent annual reduction in foster care entry compared to states without state EITCs (Biehl and Hill 2018).
- **Refundable state EITCs over time (2000–16).**
The study analyzed variation in state-EITC policies over time and found a refundable state EITC, one that can exceed state income taxes owed, was associated with an 11 percent decline in foster care entries relative to states without refundable credits (Rostad et al. 2020).
- **Tax-season income boosts and maltreatment reports (2015–18).**
The study analyzed weekly child maltreatment reports during tax filing seasons in 48 states and the District of Columbia, making use of a planned IRS refund delay to compare differences in weekly child maltreatment reports across different years. They found that a \$1,000 increase in combined EITC and child tax credit refunds corresponded to a 5 percent reduction in maltreatment reports in the weeks following payment (Kovski et al. 2022).
- **Simulated income-support expansions.**
The study simulated different possible income-support packages—including the expanded EITC, child tax credits, housing vouchers, SNAP, and child support—and estimated that CPS investigations could be reduced by 11 to 20 percent under scenarios that substantially reduce child poverty (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2019; Pac et al. 2023).

Together these studies suggest that refundable tax credits and related income reduce CPS involvement anywhere from 5 to 20 percent, depending on the outcome measured and the policy context.

Broader Benefit Investments, and Even Small Family-Level Income Gains, Can Reduce Maltreatment Indicators

In addition to refundable tax credits, some studies have tested whether spending on public benefits and child support is linked to child welfare outcomes. The studies take different approaches, but they point in a similar direction: additional income is associated with measurable reductions in child maltreatment indicators.

- **State spending on public benefits and substantiated maltreatment (2017).**
The study looked at differences in state spending on public benefit programs—such as cash assistance, housing, child care, tax credits, and medical assistance—and estimated that an additional \$1,000 in state spending per person in 2017 was associated with about a 4 percent reduction in substantiated maltreatment (Puls et al. 2021).
- **Child support pass-through policy and maltreatment reports (late 1990s).**
The study used a randomized controlled trial design to test whether families randomized to receive a full versus a partial amount of child support had different child welfare outcomes. Families receiving a full amount (averaging about a \$100 difference per year) had a roughly 10 percent reduction in maltreatment reports compared to families receiving the partial amount (Cancian et al. 2013). The outcome was child maltreatment reports rather than substantiations, but the findings still offer compelling evidence on how small income changes can affect child welfare indicators.

Together, these studies suggest that public benefit investments may reduce some incidences of maltreatment, and they show that even small, direct income gains may have an effect.

Evidence on Services and Parenting Programs Is Mixed; Structural Supports Show Clearer Signal Than Many Behavior-Only Interventions

As with research on income supports, the research on other basic needs has not often focused on substantiated neglect. For that reason, I do not provide an extensive review. Many studies also focus on parenting and caregiving behaviors, and impacts on CPS outcomes are mixed (Slack et al. 2011). While some randomized controlled trials have shown significant impacts, others have not (Goodman et al. 2021; Viswanathan et al. 2024).

Extensive research has focused on substance-use and family-violence interventions and CPS outcomes, but not as much on impacts on substantiated neglect specifically (Calhoun et al. 2015). The research also primarily involves families already known to CPS (Bruns et al. 2012; Kim et al. 2021; Zhang et al. 2019), providing little insight into whether the interventions might prevent substantiated neglect altogether.

Essentially, these studies have not looked sufficiently at interventions prior to CPS involvement to know how well substance-use programs, for example, reduce neglect. From the limited results, though, the impact studies of policies and concrete income supports suggest broader structural factors affect

child neglect rates potentially more consistently than behavior-only interventions and warrant closer attention.

We Do Not Yet Know What Reduces Substantiated Neglect

Few studies to date have focused on substantiated neglect. An unpublished systematic review noted striking gaps, including too few prospective, longitudinal studies identifying factors that precede and potentially predict neglect (Slack et al. 2018). The review illustrates that the evidence base on neglect is more sparse than generally assumed. From a research-design standpoint, reasons may include sample size considerations and prioritizing an ability to detect impacts on outcomes occurring more frequently—like all maltreatment reports versus substantiations. Plus, research shows families with unsubstantiated reports are often rereported at similar rates as families whose reports are substantiated. Researchers infer the differences between the two groups over time are likely small and justify combining the groups when analyzing factors associated with a maltreatment report (Slack et al. 2023). Another reason that few studies have focused on substantiated neglect may pertain to imprecise definitions and no separate neglect definition established in the federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA). Having no official federal definition leaves discretion to states. As noted earlier, states vary in what constitutes neglect, making examining neglect at a national level difficult. The variation means national statistics pool inconsistent and nonuniform categories, making patterns harder to detect. Related to varied definitions, the lines between abuse and neglect are blurry and overlapping. Also, state-level differences in data content and quality require special considerations and treatment (Williams et al. 2025).

Methodological Constraints Limit What Current Studies Can Tell Us about Reducing Substantiated Neglect

For the purposes of assessing what reduces substantiated neglect, the current evidence base has several additional limitations. Programs such as the EITC and child tax credit are structured as work supports—only households with a working adult related to the child can access the credit, and those with very low earnings in the year may receive only a limited benefit. Effectively, these policies do not reach children at risk of neglect whose parents or caregivers are not working. Additionally, the refunds come during tax season and may not benefit children throughout the year. For example, the Kovski et al. study (2022) cited above illustrates fewer maltreatment reports during weeks when families receive tax refunds. The child welfare field will benefit from additional studies testing the sustainability of such effects.

Another challenge is identifying the mechanisms linking state-level income support policies to state-level maltreatment rates. For example, the studies that showed increases in state-EITC spending significantly reduced foster care entry (Biehl and Hill 2018; Rostad et al. 2020) showed a relationship

between the policies but did not have person-level data that linked actual income increases to direct reductions in foster care entry. The methodological limitations leave room for other plausible explanations for the findings, including the possibility that other concurrent state-level policies (instead of state EITC increases if implemented simultaneously) may have been responsible for the effects. For example, states that adopt state EITCs or CTCs may also simultaneously implement child welfare reforms that independently affect maltreatment rates, complicating causal inference. Ideally, future research would examine family- or case-level relationships between income supports and substantiated neglect to pinpoint which aspects of increased income influence maltreatment outcomes.

Finally, the evidence to date is difficult to synthesize because interventions vary widely in design. For example, state-EITC programs differ in who qualifies and how, which means variation across study samples in addition to differences in the amount of income distributed. As one critique notes, some studies report large effects from modest income boosts, while others show small effects from much larger transfers (Font and Putnam Hornstein 2025). Strengthening the evidence base will require more research conducted under well-specified conditions with clearly articulated parameters.

Future Research Could Reveal Stronger Effects That General Maltreatment Averages Hide

These limitations further affirm why the field can and should focus more directly on substantiated neglect. Neglect is the most common reason for child welfare involvement, affecting hundreds of thousands of children and families each year. Despite the variation and imprecision in neglect definitions, every state and territory reports neglect data, making detailed, cross-jurisdictional analyses feasible.

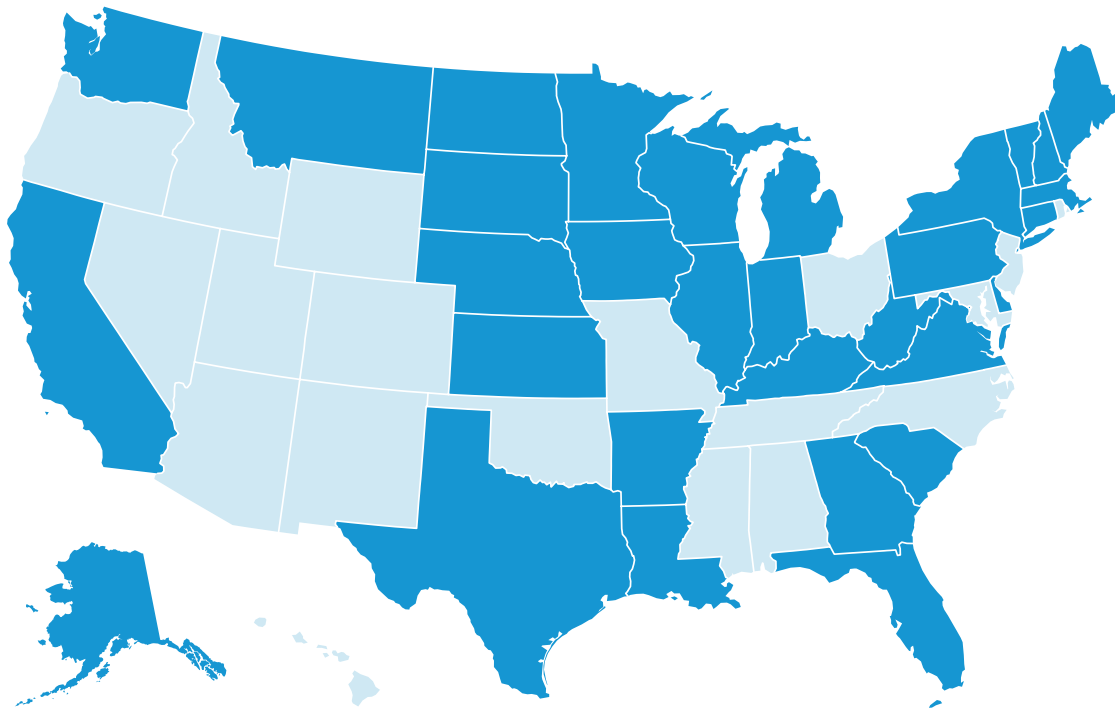
Importantly, many definitions of neglect center on families' resources and to what extent an inability to meet basic needs poses harm to a child. Because these definitions are closely tied to economic hardship, income levels can be more reasonably assumed to influence neglect outcomes than outcomes related to abuse or other forms of maltreatment. This suggests that studies examining income supports may detect larger effects on neglect specifically than on overall maltreatment.

State definitions further reinforce this point. As of 2023, 20 states plus Puerto Rico did not exempt families from CPS action if the families were unable to provide for a child due to financial hardship. In these jurisdictions, financial inability alone can constitute neglect if an agency determines it caused harm (e.g., hunger or danger) to a child, meaning families may become involved with the child welfare system for reasons rooted in poverty. Income support policies may therefore have even greater potential to reduce substantiated neglect in these states. In contrast, 32 states and the District of Columbia exempt families for financial inability to provide (figure 4; Weigensberg et al. 2025). Even so, distinguishing poverty from neglect remains challenging (CWIGF 2023; Cooper and Allen 2024; Slack et al. 2011).

FIGURE 4

State Neglect Definition Exemption Policies on Financial Inability to Provide

■ Exempt financial issues ■ Do not exempt financial issues



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Source: Author's chart with data from Elizabeth Weigensberg, Nuzhat Islam, Milena Raketic, Mary A. Grider, and Jeremy Page. "State Child Abuse and Neglect (SCAN) Policies Database 2023." (National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect, 2025), <https://doi.org/10.34681/w36f-bn91>.

Changing Definitions and Reporting Rules Can Shift Neglect Counts Independent of Family Behavior

Recent studies illustrate how a state or territory's statutes—including neglect definitions and mandatory reporting policies—and procedural functions shape maltreatment numbers and child welfare system dynamics (Day et al. 2022; Weigensberg et al. 2025). Studies show that changes to intake processes and mandatory reporting requirements can substantially affect substantiation rates (Day et al. 2022). For example, instituting alternative or differential-response policies and requiring higher standards of proof reduced substantiations by 24 percent. In contrast, expanding who is mandated to report maltreatment and making workforce-related adjustments tended to increase the number of maltreatment reports (Day et al. 2022). Other research shows that revising mandated reporting policies for substance-exposed newborns reduced maltreatment reports (Khazanchi et al. 2024).

In 2024, the Bipartisan Policy Center assembled a workgroup focused on differentiating poverty from neglect. The workgroup highlights competing perspectives—from concerns that economic hardship is criminalized when poverty and neglect are conflated to concerns that narrowing definitions may reduce necessary and protective oversight (Cooper and Allen 2024). This focus aligns with recent legislative activity across the country. In most cases, state legislatures have sought to narrow neglect definitions and exclude financial inability as a basis for neglect (Christian 2025; Christian and Geen 2023).

Together, this evidence underscores that changes in neglect definitions, reporting rules, and administrative practices can shift measured neglect rates independent of changes in family behavior. These policy choices therefore shape not only who enters the child welfare system, but also how neglect trends are understood (i.e., increases, decreases, or does not change) is interpreted as progress or failure. The next section considers how the field can use variation in state policies, practices, and neglect rates as a learning opportunity to better understand how policy choices influence child maltreatment rates.

A Practical Learning Agenda and Where to Go Next to Measurably Reduce Substantiated Neglect Safely

Strengthening what the child welfare field knows about reducing substantiated neglect will require coordinated, testable steps. The considerations below identify areas where the field can use national and state data and full constituent participation to assess whether a policy or practice contributes to measurable reductions in substantiated neglect. A critical component of this agenda is understanding what enables states to seek and use research evidence to shape child maltreatment policy. A recent national analysis of state child maltreatment legislation shows that states differ in how and whether they incorporate evidence. Factors such as bipartisan sponsorship of a bill and policy innovativeness made a difference (O'Neill et al. 2026). Advancing efforts to reduce neglect will require both better evidence and greater state capacity and incentives to use it in policymaking.

1. **Expand the research on income supports and other basic needs focusing on families *before* CPS involvement**

Current research is a strong start. A next step is to expand the range of income-support policies we study as well as concrete supports like housing, food, and substance use services that are timed prior to any CPS involvement to identify which interventions effectively reduce substantiated neglect.

2. **Set shared benchmarks for tracking progress and ensure reductions occur safely**

Developing common goals for reducing substantiated neglect and monitoring trends before and after policy changes will help the field learn which interventions are most promising. All goals should include child safety indicators to ensure reductions reflect real improvements in child and family conditions.

3. **Use cross-state variation as learning opportunities**

Differences across states—in income-support policies, neglect definitions, mandatory reporting, service availability, and use of alternative response—offer natural opportunities to explore which policy features may align with lower neglect rates using rigorous methodologies as illustrated in the income-supports impact studies.

4. **Build on shared priorities across the field and invite broader participation in sharpening research questions**

The child welfare field agrees broadly on preventing harm, supporting families, and reducing unnecessary system involvement. These shared priorities could help guide ongoing inquiry into what most effectively reduces neglect. Where perspectives differ, those differences can help strengthen study design and evidence.

Engaging families, service providers, child welfare administrators, researchers, philanthropies, national associations, and legislators will help surface new, relevant questions and expand the scope of inquiry to reflect real-world needs and experiences. Following the lead of recent coordinated and collaborative efforts like the National Research Agenda for a 21st Century Child and Family Well-Being System (National Research Agenda Initiative, n.d.) and the Bipartisan Policy Center, future work should strive to bridge ideological divides, bringing the full range of perspectives, including leadership from impacted families and communities.

5. **In addition to researching prevention and early help, attend comparably to system accountability and policy impacts on child neglect outcomes**

Research on neglect typically attends to prevention and interventions, but fewer studies focus comparably on system functioning (e.g., service access and delivery), policy design, and influences that reduce or escalate rates of substantiated neglect. The field should focus on all three to effectively reduce neglect.

- **System accountability** (performance, service delivery, case resolution, outcomes)
- **Policy impacts** (how statutes, definitions, and administrative practices shape neglect outcomes)
- **Prevention and early help** (availability and accessibility of supports such as housing, mental health care, and substance use treatment)

Conclusions

National child welfare data consistently show that neglect drives most child welfare involvement, even as overall substantiated maltreatment rates decline. This brief argues that the field's recurring disagreements about causes and solutions should not obscure areas of shared purpose—preventing harm, supporting families to stay together, and reducing unnecessary system involvement. These shared aims create an opening for a more deliberate focus on reducing substantiated neglect. Yet what we know remains uneven: rigorous causal studies suggest that income supports and related concrete

resources can reduce child welfare involvement, but too few studies have examined substantiated neglect specifically, and the mechanisms remain poorly understood.

The path forward is a more testable and accountable learning agenda that uses rich state and national data to assess whether specific policies and practices measurably reduce substantiated neglect, and under what conditions. This brief underscores the value of leveraging policy variation and administrative data to sharpen what the field can learn about neglect reduction. Just as important will be assessing whether reductions occur safely and correspond to meaningful improvements in child and family well-being.

Notes

- ¹ US Congress. 2018. Family First Prevention Services Act. Pub. L. No. 115-123, div. E, 132 Stat. 64.
- ² It is feasible that states report the most predominant type of maltreatment present within a case and the singular cases of neglect may also include other types. But likely the predominant reported maltreatment type determines the predominant intervention.
- ³ Including medical neglect in states or territories that define medical neglect separately from physical neglect
- ⁴ Most states designate professionals including physicians, nurses, teachers, principals, law enforcement, and social workers as mandated reporters. Some states include probation or parole officers, or employees at recreation centers as well. Also in a small number of states, any person suspecting child maltreatment is required to make a report (CWIG 2023).
- ⁵ Natalie De Rosa, “‘A little bit of cash may help’: Grantees pilot nation’s largest guaranteed income program for child welfare system-involved families,” last updated January 10, 2025, William T. Grant Foundation [blog], <https://wtgrantfoundation.org/grantees-testing-the-largest-guaranteed-income-pilot-program-in-the-u-s-ask-do-cash-transfers-reduce-involvement-in-the-child-welfare-system>.
- ⁶ For example, in 2026 the credit was 34 percent of earnings for a family with one child if the earnings were \$13,020 or less (Tax Policy Center 2025).
- ⁷ For families with children in tax year 2022, the average EITC payment was a little over \$3,000.00 (CBPP 2025). In addition to the federal EITC, 31 states and the District of Columbia have a state EITC (NCSL 2025).
- ⁸ See Tax Policy Center for additional criteria including citizenship and social security number requirements (Tax Policy Center 2022).
- ⁹ In 2025 the maximum federal child tax credit was \$2,200 per child for families with adjusted gross incomes between \$30,000 and \$200,000. Families earning less than \$14,000 in the year were eligible for a partial credit under \$1,700 per child (CBPP 2022; Tax Policy Center 2025).
- ¹⁰ In 2023 half of states provided the payments as a “pass-through,” or income not counted toward the family’s TANF eligibility (NCSL 2023).

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About the Author

Marla McDaniel is a senior fellow in the Family and Financial Well-Being Division at the Urban Institute. Her two decades of research have focused on the intersections and compounding effects of inequities across systems, including health, education, child welfare, employment, and housing. She conducts quantitative, qualitative, and community-engaged research on opportunities for young adults transitioning to adulthood, families involved in the child welfare system, and low-income mothers and fathers of young children. Before earning a doctorate in human development and social policy, McDaniel worked as a case manager with transition-aged youth in foster care.

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