

## Light Paper: Poverty Versus Neglect in North Carolina



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### Consider This Story

Janet is a fourth-grade teacher who cares deeply about her students. Recently, Janet noticed a change in Tonya and Tyler, 9-year-old twins who moved to Janet's town from another state six months ago. The twins have been late to school almost every day and have missed enough days of school to be in danger of truancy. Janet was worried, so she had a parent-teacher conference meeting with Tyler and Tonya's mother.

The children's mother let Janet know that she was having a tough time lately. The mother is a single parent who works a few jobs and sometimes leaves for work too early to get her children ready to catch the school bus. Her hours at work were recently cut, so she can't afford Before-School Care. The twin's mother knows things need to change. She's been interviewing for jobs with higher pay and regular hours. She committed to doing better going forward. As the weeks progressed, Janet noticed that the children were still missing school. Not only that, but they also told Janet on several occasions that they had been missing meals because there was no food at home. Most recently, Tonya confided that they had been home alone every night that week because their mom had to work. Mom usually would check-in by phone in the evenings, but the phone they had been using for contact was shut off yesterday.

As the bell rang for the end of the school day, Janet worried about how Tonya and Tyler would get by that night. Would they be safe? Would they have something to eat? Would mom find a way to check on them? Janet was conflicted about what to do next. She sat down at her desk and typed in the search bar on her laptop, "What is the North Carolina definition of child neglect?" The first result was from the North Carolina School Health Program Manual. Janet decided to call the local county Department of Social Services (DSS) and share information about the family and why she suspects neglect. DSS let her know that they would assess the situation. Janet felt relief that she had done something, but she was still conflicted about her decision to call.

## Summary

This Light Paper will explore a question that mandated reporters like Janet and child welfare professionals across the country have begun to examine critically: how do we differentiate and disentangle poverty from child neglect? How can organizations connect families to resources that address the root of the problem, i.e., affordable housing opportunities and food assistance programs, instead of disrupting families with monitoring and potential separation? The definition of child neglect in North Carolina comes from the “North Carolina School Health Program Manual,”<sup>1</sup> see Table 1.1. This definition does not distinguish between a

case due to willful neglect and a case due to financial inability being the basis for failure to care for a child. The inability to differentiate between the two has many adverse implications. Child Protective Services (CPS) and child welfare professionals must ensure the safety and well-being of children. However, the removal of a child based on poverty alone can have more traumatic effects than favorable for the family.

Additionally, black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) are subjected to higher rates of poverty due to many factors, including the ongoing impacts of systemic racism in housing, education, and employment. People in this community are also overly represented in child maltreatment and neglect cases.

This Light Paper will explore a scholarly consensus: the connection between the disproportion of those living in poverty and the overrepresentation of groups of people in child welfare cannot be denied and must be addressed if professionals and advocates want to serve families.

This paper will end the discussion with four vital actionable items:

- Recommendation for comprehensive training for mandated reporters so, when appropriate, we can prioritize referrals to resources over referrals to CPS.
- An improved North Carolina definition of neglect which specifies financial ability alone is not grounds for a neglect case.
- State-specific poverty measures.
- Data management in child welfare in North Carolina.

**Table 1: North Carolina School Health Program Manual Definition for Neglect**

“In North Carolina, a neglected juvenile is one who:

- Does not receive proper care, supervision, or discipline from the parent, guardian, or caretaker.
- Has been abandoned.
- Has not been provided necessary medical care.
- Lives in an environment injurious to their welfare.
- Has been placed for adoption or care in violation of the law.”

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