

## 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.”

## Introduction

While the story featured earlier is fictional, it represents a real situation that people go through and child welfare professionals see in their day-to-day interactions with families. Janet, the teacher, followed her duty as a mandated reporter and she was right that, by North Carolina's definition, what was happening with the family is considered a case of neglect; the mother was not providing a suitable environment for the kids to have everything necessary to live healthy lives. However, it seems like the mother has every intention of doing her best to provide the children with the resources to be in good health. This leads to a few questions:

- Is the misfortunate situation this family finds themselves in due to neglect or due to not having sufficient financial means to ensure the children's well-being?
- Should the situation be dealt with differently if the circumstances are determined to be a result of poverty?
- If it should, how?

These questions highlight the issue that will be discussed in this paper: differentiating and disentangling poverty from child neglect in the realm of child welfare.

## Defining Willful Neglect and Poverty

Even though neglect and poverty are terms frequently used in the child welfare realm, there is a lack of a standard way to differentiate between what these terms mean. Neglect is a subtype of maltreatment, where maltreatment refers to the quality of care a child is receiving from the legal guardians of the child;<sup>2</sup> the two words are often used interchangeably. Neglect is defined as when a parent or guardian doesn't give proper attention to a child, whether they made the conscious decision to or not. What you might hear more often is the phrase "willful neglect," which is when a parent or guardian intentionally and recklessly fails to do what they are supposed to do to meet a child's basic needs.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, the guardian deliberately disregards the child's right to health, safety, and welfare.<sup>4</sup> In 2021, 97% of maltreatment cases in North Carolina were determined to be neglect.<sup>5</sup> Out of the confirmed cases of neglect, Black, American Indian, and individuals who identify as more than one race were disproportionately represented in North Carolina's child welfare system.<sup>6</sup> While there are many factors for why this could be the case, one question that has come to scholars after analyzing the data is if mandated reporters and child welfare professionals are confusing poverty for willful neglect.

Willful neglect can look like a child having inadequate clothing, food, shelter, medical and emotional care, living in an unsafe environment, exposure to substance abuse, and lack of supervision.<sup>7</sup> It can be alarming to think that some of the listed characteristics of willful neglect overlap with what you would see in impoverished families. This is why scholars in the field have started to bring attention to the fact that poverty is a risk factor for neglect but does not equate to neglect.

## What Does This Look Like In The US and North Carolina

Poverty is measured by the United States Census Bureau and is determined by comparing an individual's or family's income to what is considered the minimum amount of income needed to cover basic needs, like housing and food. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the US experienced a short-term decrease in child poverty rates. The decrease was due to stimulus payments and the temporary expansion of government programs (i.e., Unemployment Insurance and Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as SNAP). The effort was more inclusive than pre-pandemic financial programs, allowing for children previously left behind to receive assistance. This includes BIPOC children, children in large families, and children in rural areas. In 2021, the nation saw a 43% reduction in child poverty. However, once these resources stopped, overall poverty rates in the US significantly increased, going from 5.2% in 2021 to 12.4% in 2022.<sup>8</sup> Mona Hanna-Attisha, a public health advocate, put it best when she expressed that our society has a history of disinvestment in the disadvantaged, as seen in this circumstance.<sup>9</sup>

There is also a misconception that urban areas experience greater rates of poverty. However, research has shown how those in rural and suburban areas are more likely to be considered deeply under-resourced. In "Places in Need: The Changing Geography of Poverty"<sup>10</sup> by Scott W. Allard speaks to how many low-income families live in suburbs than in cities in the US. Widespread misconceptions on this topic can lead to families being denied assistance and attention from scholars and policymakers. The Index of Deep Disadvantage is a measure created by the University of Michigan's Poverty Solutions Initiative and Princeton University's Center for Research on Child Wellbeing to expand typical income-based measures of poverty.<sup>11</sup> By using this measure researchers found that 80 of the top 100 most under-resourced communities in the US are rural. A potential reason for this is a lack of investment in these areas. Given that over two-thirds of North Carolina is rural and two of the top 100 most under-resourced communities are located in the state, it may be necessary to adopt a new perspective when examining poverty in our region.

**Table 2: Racial and Ethnic Disparities In Cases of Maltreatment and Poverty**

	All	White	Black	Hispanic or Lat-inx	Amer-ican Indian/Alaskan Native
<b>Popula-tion (2022)<sup>13</sup></b>	NA	69.9%	22.2%	10.5%	1.6%
<b>Children reported for mal-treat-ment<sup>14</sup></b>	NA	44.9%	32.5%	11.6%	2.8%
<b>Living in poverty</b>	12.0%	3.9%	21.5%	29.5%	11.8%
<b>Median house-hold income (USD)<sup>15</sup></b>	65,127	72,137	47,137	35,168	47,908

## The Disproportionate Effect of Poverty

Poverty disproportionately affects BIPOC communities. People of color experience higher rates of poverty because of ongoing effects of systemic racism, including discrimination in housing, education, and employment. These disparities exist for a multitude of reasons, including a long history of discriminatory practices in employment and a long history of mortgage market discrimination that makes it

## Dive Deeper

Review resources on the critical issues of poverty and neglect in North Carolina discussed in this Light Paper. Scan the QR code below to explore a curated webpage featuring additional resource links, providing you with comprehensive insights.

[instituteforfamily.org/light-lab/poverty-neglect-links](https://instituteforfamily.org/light-lab/poverty-neglect-links)



more difficult for Black individuals to be homeowners.<sup>12</sup>

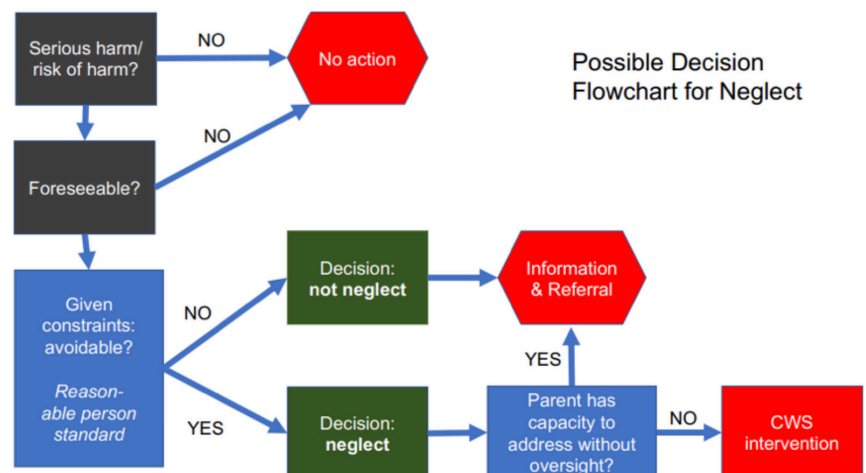
Across the board in North Carolina, BIPOC communities face worse economic conditions and are overrepresented in child maltreatment cases. See table 2 to preview insights on the current situation.

Compared to their white counterparts, Black, Hispanic or Latinx, and American Indian/Alaskan Native populations face an economic disadvantage when it comes to their likelihood of living in poverty, as well as earning potential. In addition, when comparing the percentage of the population of each race/ethnicity with the percentage of child maltreatment cases, all groups in North Carolina, except White people, are overrepresented in neglect cases. Many scholars have noticed this pattern over the years and have concluded that this disproportionality must be addressed if we want to equitably serve families.

## The Issue of Confusing Poverty for Neglect

When the decision is made to remove a child from their legal guardian, it should be made with the certainty that such a life-altering intervention is in the child's best interest. Poverty alone is not enough reason to consider placement in the substitute care system. Whenever possible, care should be taken to attempt the least invasive solution, such as recommending families to services. Unnecessary investigations of families can lead to greater harm and trauma, especially when the children are very young. When a child is taken from their primary

**Table 3: Possible Decision Flowchart for Neglect**





caregiver, they can experience high levels of distress and feelings of helplessness.<sup>16</sup> These children might experience an impact to their resilience to stress, ability to fight off illness, and a delay of development.

In the Disentangling Neglect from Poverty Summit hosted by PennState Social Science Research Institute, Dr. Sarah Font proposes those charged with the duty of child welfare need to consider the reasonability and conditions of “neglect”. Dr. Font proposes we need to bring consistency, fairness, and transparency to the process of assessing and adjudicating incidents of child neglect.

Table 3 presents the chart she created, serving as a guide to differentiate between poverty and neglect. This resource is also valuable in determining when it may be more appropriate for child welfare services to recommend family support services rather than initiating an investigation.

There is a push on the national level from Representative Gwen Moore of Wisconsin, to pass a bill requiring states to distinguish poverty from child neglect.<sup>17</sup> Currently, it is up to each state to write its definitions for poverty and neglect. If lawmakers fail to provide clear distinctions, it can result in ambiguous policy that ends up harming the families they intend to help. More than half of US states do not include financial inability to provide for their children in the state definitions of neglect.<sup>18</sup> If the distinction were made between “what is neglect” versus “what is due to solely characteristics of poverty,” mandated reporters and child welfare professionals could have clearer guidelines and be able to make decisions with less ambiguity. Then people in the position to report, when appropriate, could prioritize referring families to services (i.e. affordable housing, childcare services, and school enrollment resources), instead of resorting to CPS investigation and separation.

## Strengthening North Carolina’s Approach to the Issue

The issue of distinguishing between neglect and poverty in child welfare is a necessity if North Carolina wants to commit to best practices for serving families and causing the least amount of stress on guardians, children, and the system alike. Here are four strategies that could strengthen North Carolina policies and clarify the distinction between poverty and neglect.

- 1. North Carolina needs to develop a definition for neglect that distinguishes and separates from the overlap of poverty.** One of the best ways to differentiate the effects of poverty on a family versus child neglect is to include language around a family’s ability to financially meet their child’s needs. North Carolina’s current definition, which was embedded in the intro story, is vague and leaves significant room for subjective interpretation. Some US states have started to rework their definitions of neglect to clarify poverty does not equate to neglect. For example, Iowa has shifted its definition of neglect to, “the failure on the part of a person responsible for the care of a child to provide adequate food, shelter, clothing, medical or mental health treatment, supervision, or other care necessary for the child’s health and welfare when financially able to do so or when offered financial or other means to do so”.<sup>19</sup> Currently, North Carolina is one of many US states that does not specifically exempt financial inability to provide for their child from the definition of

neglect or child maltreatment.<sup>20</sup> Additionally, people in BIPOC communities are impacted the most from the gray area that the definition of neglect allows. For North Carolina to truly prioritize family well-being, it is crucial for policymakers to recognize the potential impact that lacking a definition exempting financial situations could have on the observed racial disparities within our child welfare system. Overall, in taking the initiative to add the stipulation of financial ability in the definition of child neglect, North Carolina would be shifting the narrative to one of prevention and support of all families, removing some of the subjectivity that currently exists for evaluating family circumstances. This way, systems can become more proactive than reactive. This will create a focus for CPS to identify and refer for supportive services when appropriate instead of investigation.

- 2. Mandated reporters need comprehensive training.** Mandated reporters may be the most underutilized asset for tackling the issue of neglect versus poverty. Mandated reporters include educators, medical professionals, people licensed to provide emergency medical care (i.e. EMTs and firefighters), psychologists, and any adult or institution that suspects a juvenile to be subject of a welfare offense. Mandated reporters make the majority of reports of child neglect and yet, in most US states, receive inadequate training or none at all on how to make the best judgments.<sup>21</sup> In 2019, a bill was passed in North Carolina that required all school districts to select and deliver an employee training program for reporting and preventing child sex abuse (Senate Bill 199).<sup>23</sup> While this was a step forward, child sex abuse is only a piece of the problem. Comprehensive guidelines and training for mandated reporters are essential to guiding these individuals in determining which situations warrant reporting and which could benefit from a recommendation of services or aids available within the community.<sup>24</sup> Projects like the “iLookout For Child Abuse Project” epitomize this effort by providing free online, interactive courses for mandated reporters on a range of topics related to child well-being, including resilience, trauma-informed care, adverse childhood experiences, substance use disorders, and other important information. These trainings currently meet US state requirements for reporters in Maine and Pennsylvania. The Institute for Family aims to extend the impact of “iLookout for North Carolina.” Our organization, Institute for Family at the Children’s Home Society of North Carolina, has recognized this gap in mandated reporter training and is exemplifying the effort in North Carolina through a new training platform, [The Institute for Family Center for Learning](#). The “Be the Change” learning module section offers mandated reporters tools on how to distinguish between poverty and neglect. Center for Learning courses also offer resources that review the decision-making process of how to decipher between a case of poverty and a case of neglect. The interactive and multimedia format of on-demand courses encourage engagement and provide mandated reporters a safe place to challenge their current perceptions and adopt best practices.
- 3. North Carolina should invest in a data system or data management to understand the scope of the problem.** Effective data management is crucial in providing transparency to the public and for producing evidence-based interventions. Currently, the database that North Carolina has is from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. While there is key information on this platform about child welfare (i.e., number of children in custody and length of time in custody), the [database](#) is not user-friendly and inhibits people’s

ability to access the information in an accessible format. A centralized data system with high-quality data organization can inform policy, budgets, and plans for improved access to specific resources that communities need.<sup>25</sup> The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families CPS [Dashboard](#) is an exemplary model for publishing, organizing, and ensuring readability for anyone who comes across the page. The Dashboard also allows for users to interact with the data in graph format, table format, and map format, appealing to a wider range of ways people may understand information (i.e., visual and auditory learning). North Carolina could use Wisconsin's database as a guide to establish a more user-friendly, appealing dashboard. In terms of poverty and neglect, a value-added component of such a platform would be adding a breakdown of the cases CPS investigated for neglect into each financial bracket for each of North Carolina counties or showing how many of those investigated cases were for families categorized as under the poverty line.

- 4. North Carolina could benefit from creating a state-specific poverty measure.** As considered previously, having accurate and accessible data is an indispensable tool for informing decisions from the individual to the societal level. While the current measures of poverty in the US provide a general idea of the circumstances in the country, having a North Carolina state specific measurement would elevate community knowledge. US states such as California, Oregon, and New York have created customized measurements of poverty to account for state-specific programs, giving them a more accurate insights of poverty patterns in their states.<sup>26</sup> A state-specific poverty measure for North Carolina that considers research recommendations for improving the current systems would elevate the understanding of poverty in the state. This measurement could also be featured on the centralized data system.

Working towards a shift in the child welfare field that embraces definitions that highlight the unique qualities and needs of a willful neglect case versus a case of poverty requires a multifaceted approach and a continuous effort from child welfare staff and leaders, mandated reporters, decision-makers, and elected officials.

## Additional Information and Opportunities

As previously highlighted, our attention turns to an important group: mandated reporters. We are soon releasing a comprehensive worksheet designed to guide you through various situations, aiding in the discernment between neglect and poverty. For firsthand insights into the challenge of distinguishing poverty from neglect and its impact on families, we recommend tuning in to [Season 1, Episode 1](#) of the Seen Out Loud Podcast by the Institute for Family, titled "What if We Didn't Have to Wait Until Bad Enough." This episode vividly illustrates the nuances of poverty versus neglect through the poignant words of spoken word poet Slam Anderson and her mother, Lillie Lee-Williams. They share a compelling account of how pre-intervention resources and support could have significantly benefited their family, which would have helped their family avoid a 14-year separation.



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