Hospitals in Recession-hit Areas See Increase in Serious Cases of Child Abuse

Statement of Problem

The recent economic recession raised concerns that child physical abuse rates would increase after a long period of decline, but federal data sources were not detecting such increases. According to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), the primary source of surveillance for child maltreatment in the U.S., the number of cases of physical abuse had been declining over the past 15 years. In light of severe and prolonged economic hardship since late 2007, there was concern by small regional studies and case reports that prior trends may had been reversed, and that child physical abuse rates were actually increasing.

Description

Examining data from 38 children's hospitals nationwide, the team described trends in hospitalizations for child physical abuse in the context of economic trends in unemployment and housing foreclosure. The study detected a significant increase in children admitted to the nation's largest children's hospitals due to serious physical abuse over the last decade and also found a strong relationship between the rate of child physical abuse and local mortgage foreclosure.

Next Steps

Identifying ways to collaboratively monitor the safety of children at a population level using multiple sources of information, including hospital data, can inform a more comprehensive response to child maltreatment. An accurate understanding of the relationship between the trend of child physical abuse and housing security issues could stimulate dialogue and collaboration among health care, child welfare, and housing agencies. This type of collaborative effort would enable a more targeted response to the needs of children. Further research is needed to examine community-level impact of the housing crisis on child wellbeing and safety.

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