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Do Laypersons Conflate Poverty and Neglect?

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Abstract

Objective: Child neglect is often initially identified via adults who come into contact with children and report their suspicions to the authorities. Little is known about what behaviors laypersons view as constituting neglect and hence worth reporting. We examined laypersons' perceptions of neglect and poverty, particularly how these factors independently and jointly shaped laypersons' decisions about what warrants official reporting of neglect, and how laypersons' socioeconomic background related to their decisions.

Hypotheses: We anticipated that neglect would be correctly perceived as such, but that extreme poverty would also be perceived as neglect, with these latter perceptions being most pronounced among laypersons of higher socioeconomic background.

Method: In 2 studies, adults read vignettes about a mother's care of her daughter and rendered decisions about whether the mother's behavior met the legal standard of neglect and should be reported. In Study 1 ($N = 365$, 55% female, mean age = 37.12 years), indicators of poverty and neglect were manipulated. In Study 2 ($N = 474$, 53% female, mean age = 38.25 years), only poverty (housing instability: homelessness vs. not) was manipulated.

Results: Laypersons often conflated poverty and neglect, especially in circumstances of homelessness. Laypersons of lower socioeconomic background were less likely to perceive neglect in general and to report an obligation to make a referral (R^2s ranged from 17–26%, odds ratios ranged from 2.24–3.08).

Conclusions: Laypersons may overreport neglect in circumstances of poverty. Increasing public awareness of how to recognize and separate neglect from poverty may enhance identification of vulnerable children and families.

Keywords

neglect; poverty; homelessness; perceptions; reporting decisions

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Although neglect comprises the vast majority of reports received, investigated, and responded to by the child welfare system, misreporting remains a significant problem (Hussey et al., 2005; Institute of Medicine & National Research Council, 2014), in large part because of the challenges associated with identifying and confirming when neglect has occurred. Legally, neglect refers to a caregiver's failure to meet a child's basic physical, emotional, and intellectual needs (e.g., see California Welfare and Institutions [WIC] Code, Section 300(b); Welfare and Institutions Code, 1976), regardless of whether that failure is intentional or not (Dubowitz, Black, Starr, & Zuravin, 1993). A range of behaviors constitute neglect, including many acts of omission (e.g., abandonment, inadequate health care provision, and an unsafe home environment) rather than acts of commission (e.g., as is the case with physical abuse), the former of which do not have easily identifiable or overt signs of their occurrence (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2006; Dubowitz et al., 1993; Dubowitz, Papas, Black, & Starr, 2002). Difficulties in identification have led to two types of misreporting, both of which may reflect a general misunderstanding of what legally constitutes neglect. One involves underreporting, with many instances of neglect—and children who have experienced neglect—failing to be identified. The other involves overreporting or incorrectly claiming neglect when none exists (Worley & Melton, 2013). Both types of misidentification have profound implications for the health and safety of children and families and the ability of the child welfare system to respond effectively to children in need.

Regardless of whether claims of neglect are valid or not, neglect is often identified based on reports from individuals with whom children interact in their daily lives, such as close family friends, relatives, or other adults (e.g., neighbors, landlords, religious or tribal leaders, teachers, or community members) who encounter the children on a regular or semiregular basis (USDHHS, 2019). These adults make important evaluative decisions based on their encounters that lead them to report their concerns to Child Protective Services (CPS; USDHHS, 2019).

To date, very little is known about how these adults—or laypersons generally—make decisions about when to report suspected neglect and what factors influence their decisions. Knowledge concerning their decisions, however, is much needed. On the one hand, when laypersons fail to recognize neglect (i.e., underreport), children's needs and well-being may continue to be endangered, and their risk for lasting harm increases. On the other hand, when laypersons incorrectly label behavior as neglect (i.e., overreport), children and their parents may be needlessly involved in social service investigations and possibly dependency cases, experiences that may be deeply traumatic and have long-lasting effects on entire families (for a review, see Cleveland & Quas, 2020; Kemp, Marcenko, Hoagwood, & Vesneski, 2009). Child protective agencies as well may be overburdened by these inappropriate reports, limiting their ability to respond promptly and effectively to children in real danger (Besharov, 1993, 2000). The purpose of the present research was to provide this knowledge. In two studies, we examined laypersons' perceptions of child neglect, specifically focusing on potentially influential conditions that may shape laypersons' tendencies to over- versus underreport neglect.

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Research on public perceptions of neglect is sparse, likely a consequence of a broader lack of clarity and consensus surrounding how to define child neglect (Dubowitz, Klockner, Starr, & Black, 1998). Of the few studies that have been conducted, findings converge in showing that laypersons tend to view possible cases of neglect similar to or even as more concerning than do child welfare workers and other professionals who routinely come into contact with maltreated children (e.g., lawyers, psychologists, and law enforcement). For example, when reviewing vignettes depicting different forms of maltreatment, laypersons rate virtually all indicators of neglect (e.g., a child is left unsupervised; the home environment is unclean or unsafe) as highly serious and harmful to children (Dubowitz et al., 1998; Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979; Portwood, 1998, 1999; Rose & Meezan, 1995; Rose & Selwyn, 2000). Moreover, when asked to describe behaviors that constitute neglect, laypersons' answers often reflect a generally adequate understanding of neglectful experiences shown to be harmful to children (e.g., inadequate provision of food, shelter, nurturance, or health care, or lack of supervision; Korbin, Coulton, Lindstrom-Ufuti, & Spilsbury, 2000; Spilsbury et al., 2018).

More nuanced findings, however, have emerged when laypersons are asked about caregivers' culpability in potential situations of neglect and when caregivers' potentially neglectful behavior is placed in context. In one investigation, for example, Dickerson, Lindner, Scurich, and Quas (2017) had laypersons read brief vignettes describing neglect of a child by a parent (i.e., the parent would leave the child unattended, and the pair lived in a long-term motel) and rate their perceptions of the caregiver's intent to harm and whether the caregiver's behavior constituted a legal form of neglect (it did). Laypersons' ratings varied as a function of their own but also the child's and caregiver's gender. Same-gender neglect (e.g., a mother neglecting her daughter) was rated as more harmful and more likely to meet the legal definition of neglect than was mixed-gender neglect, especially among male respondents (Dickerson et al., 2017).

One of the challenges in interpreting Dickerson et al.'s results, and in fact, a challenge with the definition of neglect itself, concerns its potential confounding relationship with poverty. Many of the behaviors indicative of neglect are directly related to and may actually be a consequence of poverty (e.g., inadequate provision of food, shelter, and health care) rather than neglect per se (Sedlak et al., 2010; Slack, Holl, McDaniel, Yoo, & Bolger, 2004), and, in Dickerson et al.'s research, although the caregiver's behavior met the legal definition of neglect, the caregiver and child were also described as living in a motel. Most state laws recognize that omissions in care solely related to poverty do not constitute child neglect (Dubowitz et al., 1998). Whether laypersons distinguish the two when rendering decisions is less clear.

However, there are several reasons to suspect that laypersons might have considerable difficulty separating poverty and neglect. For one, individuals living in poverty are often held at least partially responsible for their circumstances (e.g., Adeola, 2005; Belcher & DeForge, 2012). In fact, in cases of extreme poverty, such as homelessness, impoverished individuals are often perceived as nonproductive, deviant, and dangerous (Harris & Fiske, 2006; Kidd, 2007; Knecht & Martinez, 2009). Moreover, the circumstances surrounding highly impoverished individuals are often thought to be the result of their own failings

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(Parsell & Parsell, 2012), and they are often described negatively (e.g., as lazy, uneducated, and irresponsible; Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001). Such beliefs could lead to perceptions that impoverished parents are intentionally or willfully neglectful and are choosing not to provide for their children's basic needs (e.g., food, shelter, and safety), rather than, for example, the parents' behavior being the result of external circumstances. Punishment of the parents' perceived neglectful (but actually poverty-driven) behavior, therefore, may be seen as appropriate.

Second, growing awareness about the adverse effects of poverty and homelessness on children (e.g., David, Gelberg, & Suchman, 2012) could lead laypersons to consider extreme poverty as a form of neglect. In the United States, poverty and homelessness have become a public health crisis, and families with children comprise the fastest growing segment of the homeless population (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2018). Legislative and policy debates have focused on how best to tackle this crisis, debates well-described in the media. Americans have taken notice: National polls show that a majority of Americans cite child poverty as one of the most critical areas in need of intervention in the nation (Jones & Cox, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2012). The public's attention on homelessness and laypersons' concerns about its effects could lead them to hold particularly harsh views of parents of children living in poverty, especially extreme poverty. Laypersons may feel that such experiences constitute neglect from which children need protecting.

Empirical evidence provides some support for this perspective: Poverty, especially homelessness, is associated with higher rates of both actual and reported maltreatment, including neglect (e.g., Fluke, Yuan, Hedderson, & Curtis, 2003; Jonson-Reid, Drake, Chung, & Way, 2003; Slack et al., 2004). However, professionals also acknowledge that such associations may reflect a poverty or "class" bias in maltreatment reporting, where poor families are overreported simply because of their circumstances (Kim, Drake, & Jonson-Reid, 2018; Jonson-Reid, Drake, & Kohl, 2009). Similar recognition has been noted for race, specifically that racial bias affects neglect reporting and substantiation trends (Rivaux et al., 2008; Sedlak et al., 2010). As a result of this recognition, professional agencies (e.g., dependency courts, social welfare systems) have raised caution about the influence of biases on maltreatment reporting (Charlow, 2001; Fluke, Harden, Jenkins, & Ruehrdanz, 2011; Pimentel, 2019). Laypersons, in contrast, may not have this awareness. In Illinois, for example, laypersons were more likely than mandated reporters (e.g., teachers, doctors, and law enforcement) to report lower-income families to CPS (McDaniel, 2006). Whether laypersons specifically see poverty as a direct contributor to neglect, however, is not yet clear and needs to be examined directly.

Of note, laypersons' potential tendency to blame impoverished individuals for their circumstances and consider extreme poverty in parents as a form of neglect may depend on laypersons' own experiences with poverty. In general, individuals of higher socioeconomic status tend to attribute poverty to internal characteristics (e.g., a lack of effort) of the individual in poverty, while individuals of lower socioeconomic status tend to attribute poverty to external causes (e.g., low wage job, single parenthood; Adeola, 2005; National Public Radio. Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, and John F. Kennedy School of Government, 2001; Tompsett, Toro, Guzicki, Manrique, & Zatakia, 2006; Toro & McDonell,

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1992; Tsai, Lee, Shen, Southwick, & Pietrzak, 2019). These attributional differences could lead laypersons of higher compared with lower socioeconomic status to assign responsibility to impoverished parents for their situation and label poverty-driven behavior in those parents as neglect.

Study 1: Is Poverty Seen as Neglect?

In Study 1, we assessed (a) whether laypersons differentiate legal neglect from poverty when making decisions about what warrants official reporting of neglect, and (b) the influence of layperson demographics, particularly socioeconomic background, on their perceptions. Adult participants read a vignette describing a single mother's care of a 7-year-old daughter. Indicators of poverty and neglect were manipulated via a 2 (poverty v. no poverty) × 2 (neglect v. no neglect) between-subjects factorial design. Neglect was reflected in behaviors that were versus were not consistent with the legal definition in California (i.e., WIC Code, Section 300(b); Welfare and Institutions Code, 1976). Participants then rendered judgments about whether the mother's behavior met the legal standard of neglect, their likelihood of reporting the mother to the authorities, and their perceptions of the harmfulness, neglectfulness, and intentionality of the mother's behavior.

We hypothesized that participants would perceive neglect as such, consistent with prior work showing laypersons are generally adept when rendering judgments about neglect (e.g., Dubowitz et al., 1998). However, we also expected poverty to be perceived as neglect and hence warranting official reporting. These latter perceptions were expected to be most pronounced among participants who had not experienced significant poverty, reflected in them reporting that their basic needs have been met. Finally, we expected the mother to be rated more negatively in actual situations of neglect versus no neglect and when the family was living in poverty rather than without poverty, especially among individuals whose basic needs were being met.

Method

Participants.—The final sample was comprised of 365 participants, recruited from Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) Prime, a web-based crowdsourcing platform that allows interested individuals to complete tasks for compensation (Mason & Suri, 2012). Participants had to be at least 18 years of age, reside in the United States, and be able to read and write in English. Participants' age ranged from 20–75 years ($M = 37.12$, $SD = 12.44$), 55% were female ($n = 199$), and they were located throughout the United States. Most identified as White (72%), followed by African American (12%), Asian (7%), Latinx (5%), multiracial (3%), and other (1%). A majority had attended college: 27% completed some college, 41% completed a 4-year degree, and 13% completed a professional degree or doctorate; 9% completed a high school degree or equivalency. Less than half (43%) reported having children, 7% reported having had contact with social services in childhood, and 5% reported having been convicted of a felony. A majority of the sample (81%) indicated they had never been a mandated reporter; whereas 6 and 9% reported that they had previously been or currently were a mandated reporter, respectively (4% were unsure). Fifty-three additional participants completed the survey but were excluded because of failing one of two

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attention check items (Oppenheimer, Meyvis, & Davidenko, 2009). A priori power analysis indicated that a sample size of 365 was sufficient to detect medium-sized main effects and interactions with power = .80 and $\alpha = .05$.

Materials and procedures.—All procedures were approved by the University of California, Irvine Institutional Review Board. Following consent, participants completed an anonymous online survey. First were demographic questions assessing participants' age, gender, racial background, education, occupation, and parental status, and whether participants had ever been in contact with CPS or had any felony convictions. Participants then rated the extent to which their basic needs were currently being met on a scale of 1 (*basic needs not being met*) to 10 (*basic needs definitely being met*; Hicks & Streeten, 1979). This index measured beliefs about one's socioeconomic position and was preferred over an income scale, given that income can be confounded by number of household members, community, and region (Howe, Hargreaves, Ploubidis, De Stavola, & Huttly, 2011; Operario, Adler, & Williams, 2004; Posel & Rogan, 2016). Scores ranged from 1–10 ($M = 7.56$, $SD = 2.06$) and were not overly skewed.

Next, participants read one of four randomly assigned vignettes (see Appendix A) detailing a single mother's (Tina's) care of her 7-year-old daughter (Destiny), modeled after substantiated cases of neglect (names selected to be racially neutral). The race of the parent and child was intentionally unspecified. Poverty and neglect were experimentally manipulated. In the poverty vignettes, the mother and child were homeless (i.e., slept overnight in the car), the mother worked part time at a local restaurant, and the child received most meals at school. In the neglect vignettes, the mother often left her child unattended at a park until the evening, her phone was regularly turned off and not accepting calls, and on at least on occasion, she failed to pick her daughter up. Across vignettes, the mother's intent to harm and harm caused were unclear.

After reading the vignette, participants were given the following excerpt from the legal definition of neglect from the State of California: The California State Penal Code Section 11164–11174.3 defines neglect as: "the negligent failure of a person having the care or custody of a child to provide adequate food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision" (CA Penal Code Sections 11164–11174.3; Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act, 1980). California is the most populous state in the United States, making it an ideal reference; its definition is also similar to that of several other states (e.g., Florida, Kansas, and New York; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Participants then indicated yes/no whether the mother's behavior met this definition. Next, they rated whether they should report the child to CPS, how harmful the mother's behavior is, and the intentionality of the mother's behavior (e.g., "How intentional was Tina's behavior toward Destiny?"), all on 5-point Likert scales (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *a great deal*). Each item was followed by an open-ended question asking about the rationale behind the participant's response (e.g., "Why [was Tina's behavior intentional]?). These were mainly included to confirm participants' understanding of the vignettes. Responses suggested understanding and the open-ended questions are not considered further.

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Results

Descriptive statistics for key study variables and correlations among them are presented in Table 1. Preliminary analyses revealed that participants' age, gender, and race (dichotomized as White vs. non-White) were unrelated to their perceptions of neglect or reporting decisions, *r*s(363) .09, *p*s .09 (point-biserial correlations where relevant), χ^2s(1) .91, *p*s .34, Φs | .05 |. Likewise, whether participants had contact with CPS during childhood or were parents were unrelated to their perceptions or reporting decisions, *r*s(358–363) .05, *p*s .33 (point-biserial correlations where relevant), χ^2s(1) 1.59, *p*s .21, Φs | .07 |. These characteristics were not considered further. Finally, when mandated reporting status was examined via a one-way (never, currently, or previously a mandated reporter) analysis of variance (ANOVA), the effect of reporting status was significant for participants' perceptions of the mother's intentionality, $F(2, 349) = 3.49$, $p = .03$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$. Participants who were currently mandated reporters ($M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.30$) viewed the mother's actions as more intentional than participants who had never been mandated reporters ($M = 1.40$, $SD = 1.32$), 95% confidence interval (CI) of the difference in means [0.19, 1.18], $p = .04$, Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons. Reporting status was unrelated to participants' other perceptions and reporting decisions, $F(2, 349) = 2.06$, $p = .13$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, $\chi^2(2) = 1.37$, $p = .51$, $\Phi = .06$, 95% CI of Φ [0.003, 0.13]. The small number of participants who reported that they were or had been a mandated reporter (i.e., 9 and 6% of the sample, respectively) and these participants' distribution across conditions precluded us from including mandated reporter status in the main analyses. We nonetheless return to the issue of mandated reporting in the Discussion.

Legal standard for neglect.—Of primary interest in the study was whether laypersons perceived mothers living in poverty as meeting the legal standard for neglect, even when the mothers' actual behavior did not meet that standard. When provided with the excerpt of the legal definition of neglect, according to California law, and asked whether the mother's behavior met that definition (yes/no), across conditions, 55% of the sample answered affirmatively.

To determine whether this percentage varied depending on condition (whether the vignette described extreme poverty, neglect, or both), a logistic regression was conducted. Both manipulations and their interaction were entered as predictors (Figure 1 shows percentages by condition). Given our additional interest in determining whether ratings of neglect and/or poverty differed depending on socioeconomic background, participants' reports of the extent to which their current basic needs were being met (i.e., "needs met") and its interaction with the poverty manipulation were also included as predictors. Main effects were entered first in Model 1 followed by the interactions in Model 2. The overall model fit was statistically significant at both steps, $\chi^2(5, N = 365) = 38.49$, $p < .001$ (see Table 2), but the inclusion of the interaction terms in Model 2 did not significantly improve the overall model fit, $p > .05$.

According to Model 1, both experimental manipulations were significant: Participants were more likely to indicate that the mother's behavior met the legal definition of neglect when indicators of extreme poverty (Odds ratio [*OR*] = 2.83, 95% CI [1.82, 4.41]) and when indicators of neglect (*OR* = 2.11, 95% CI [1.36, 3.27]) were present. Participants' basic

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needs rating was also related to their judgments. As participants' perceptions of their needs being met increased, the likelihood of them rating the mother's behavior as legal neglect increased (*OR* = 1.14, 95% CI [1.02, 1.27]). Thus, as expected, participants recognized neglect as such, but they also tended to see poverty as neglect. Those from wealthier backgrounds perceived a wider range of parental behavior as legally neglectful (i.e., they had a lower threshold for what they considered neglect).

To confirm these trends and verify that participants' responses reflected more than simple guessing, we conducted follow-up chi-square goodness of fit tests comparing response frequencies (yes/no) of participants to those expected if responses differed from chance (50%). Comparisons were conducted for each of the four conditions (neglect only, extreme poverty only, both, and neither) separately using Monte Carlo methods based on 10,000 samples to estimate *p* values and 95% CIs. We first considered conditions in which the legal standard for neglect was met (i.e., neglect only and combined neglect and poverty conditions) to which participants should have answered yes when asked if the mother's behavior met the legal definition. In the neglect only condition, 52% of participants correctly responded yes, a percentage that did not significantly differ from chance, $\chi^2(1) = 0.24$, $p = .70$, 95% CI of *p* [0.69, 0.71], *w* [H11005] 0.05. In the neglect and poverty condition, 76% of the participants correctly answered yes, a percent well above chance, $\chi^2(1) = 21.51$, $p < .001$, 95% CI of *p* [0.00, 0.00], $w = 0.51$. In order for participants to label neglect as meeting the legal definition at a rate higher than that expected by chance, therefore, it had to co-occur with extreme poverty.

In the other two conditions, poverty only and neither (baseline condition), participants should have answered "no" when asked whether the mother's behavior met the legal definition of neglect. In the poverty only scenario, this proved somewhat difficult: 60% of the participants incorrectly said "yes" that the mother's behavior met the legal definition of neglect (thus, only 40% accurately answered "no"). This percentage did not significantly differ from chance, $\chi^2(1) = 3.05$, $p = .10$, 95% CI of *p* [0.09, 0.11], $w = 0.19$. Finally, when neither neglect nor poverty was present, 34% of the participants incorrectly said "yes," while 66% correctly said no $\chi^2(1) = 9.57$, $p = .003$, 95% CI of *p* [0.002, 0.004], $w = 0.32$. Here, in what might be considered a baseline condition, significantly more laypersons than expected by chance answered correctly, saying "no" that the mother's behavior did not meet the legal standard of neglect.

Obligation to report.—Regardless of whether participants felt that the mother's behavior met the legal definition of neglect, participants may still vary in their willingness to report the mother to the authorities. That is, perhaps some participants who felt that the mother's behavior met the legal definition took context into account when deciding whether the mother should be formally reported. Such is more likely to have occurred among participants who had personal experiences with poverty than participants who did not. We examined how neglect, poverty, and having one's basic needs being met shaped laypersons' formal reporting decisions. Note, obligations to report and ratings of harmfulness were strongly correlated, $r = .69$. Findings were identical for both measures and, thus, only ratings of obligation to report are considered here.

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A linear regression was conducted with both manipulations, participants' perceptions of their basic needs being met (Step 1), and relevant interactions (Step 2) entered. Results of Step 1, shown in Table 3, revealed significant main effects of poverty, neglect, and perceptions of basic needs being met, *b*s   0.13, *t*s(359)   3.94, *p*s < .001, with the main effects of poverty and neglect being subsumed by a significant interaction at Step 2, $b = -0.65$, $SE = 0.27$, 95% CI [−1.17, −0.12], $t(359) = -2.43$, $p < .05$. Participants' likelihood of endorsing an obligation to report increased concurrent with their perceptions that their basic needs were being met. Regarding the interaction (see Figure 2), as expected, the presence of neglect increased participants' likelihood of saying that they felt obligated to report. In addition, though, when neglect was absent but poverty was present, participants still reported feeling an obligation to report the family to the authorities. Thus, at some level, participants saw poverty as neglect warranting reporting.

Perceptions of intentionality.—In the final set of analyses, we examined participants' ratings of the intentionality of the mother's behavior on a 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*) Likert scale via a linear regression. Predictors included the manipulations, participants' perceptions of their basic needs being met, and relevant interactions. No significant effects emerged (see Table 3). In fact, ratings of the mother's intentionality were highly similar across vignettes (range = 2.33–2.67) and low overall. As such, participants generally seemed to recognize that the mother was not behaving in an intentionally neglectful manner, even though, as already reported, participants still often saw her behavior (correctly or incorrectly) as neglect warranting reporting.

Study 1 Summary

Our primary goal in Study 1 was to evaluate how well laypersons could discern cases where there was and was not evidence of neglect as opposed to poverty. Results confirmed expectations: Participants often conflated the two. They were more likely to rate a mother's behavior as meeting the legal standard for neglect and say that they should report the behavior when the behavior was consistent with actual neglect versus when it was not, but this was primarily true when neglect was paired with extreme poverty. Moreover, poverty itself often led participants to say that they would report, even when legal neglect was absent. Finally, regarding participants' perceptions of their needs being met, as expected, those who tended toward indicating that their basic needs were met were more likely to rate the mother's behavior as constituting legal neglect and say that they should report neglect (regardless of whether the mother's behavior met the legal standard) relative to those who reported their needs were not being met. These trends may indicate that wealthier individuals overgeneralize neglect, viewing a broad range of poverty-driven situations as indicative of neglect and attributing some blame to a parent for placing her child in those situations. Such an interpretation is consistent with work suggesting that wealthy individuals often view others' challenges as a result of personal factors, whereas less wealthy individuals tend to see external factors as being more influential (Tompsett et al., 2006; Tsai et al., 2019). Given that the present study did not test whether such attributions underlie the different perceptions, this question remains in need of direct empirical work.

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Although our results suggested that laypersons often confused poverty and neglect and saw mothers living in poverty as being neglectful toward their child, the study design did not allow us to test why, or rather what it was about poverty that shaped laypersons' views. In the vignette, we had included multiple indicators of poverty (homelessness, a single mother having a part-time job, and the child receiving meals at school). In Study 2, we focused on perhaps the most visible, concrete, and salient of these indicators, namely the dyad's housing situation, and tested how varying levels of poverty reflected in housing type affected participants' views.

Study 2: Is Homelessness Considered Neglect?

Housing instability includes a range of situations related to poor housing conditions, overcrowding, unstable or temporary residences, and, at the extreme and the most debilitating, a complete lack of housing (U.S. Code, Title 42, Chapter 119, Subchapter 1, § 11301; Homeless Assistance, 1988). The levels of uncertainty and challenge that accompany housing instability carry multiple consequences for children and families, particularly when that instability involves homelessness. Defined federally as individuals lacking "fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residences" (U.S. Code, Title 42, Chapter 119, Subchapter 1, § 11301), homelessness includes families living outdoors, in cars, or in motels or other types of temporary housing (i.e., shelters), all of which expose children to numerous health and safety risks (Samuels, Shinn, & Buckner, 2010).

Significant public and policy attention has been directed toward the "homelessness crisis" within the United States, leading to greater awareness in the public of the prevalence and consequences of homelessness, especially on children (Tompsett et al., 2006; Tsai et al., 2019). Such knowledge, though perhaps beneficial in that laypersons increasingly recognize the need for interventions to help homeless children and families, could also lead to some blaming of caregivers for their family's homelessness or for failing to provide adequate shelter for their children. This blame, in turn, may translate into laypersons believing homelessness meets the legal definition of neglect (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). Such lay perceptions may exist even though state laws do not consider lack of shelter because of poverty alone as constituting neglect (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). The perceptions may also be particularly robust among individuals who have not had personal experiences of poverty, that is those who have their basic needs met.

These possibilities were tested in Study 2. Procedures paralleled Study 1, with adult participants reading a vignette describing a single mother's care of her 7-year-old daughter. The vignettes varied across three levels of housing instability, ranging from unstable (living in a car) to stable (living in a studio apartment) with moderately unstable (living in a motel) in the middle. Unlike Study 1, neglect indicators were not included. Thus, the behavior of the mother did not meet the legal standard of neglect. Instead the vignettes were differentiated exclusively by housing type. Also, unlike Study 1, in which the names of the mother and child were kept racially neutral, race was systematically varied in Study 2. This was done to account for potential confounding of poverty and race. That is, if left unspecified, laypersons might have implicit biases or hold speculative beliefs about the race of the mother that could shape their responses (Gilens, 1996; Lei & Bodenhausen, 2017).

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These kinds of biases may be especially prevalent in relation to child maltreatment identification. Families from certain racial groups, particularly African Americans, comprise a disproportionate number of the children and families referred to, investigated by, and ultimately substantiated for maltreatment by child protective agencies, and African American children are far more likely to be removed from parental custody and placed into foster care than are children of other racial groups (Dettlaff et al., 2011; Pelton, 2015). Maltreatment may be confirmed at a lower threshold for African American families, raising concerns about racial bias in child welfare decision making (e.g., Dettlaff et al., 2011). Therefore, we informed participants of the mother and child's race to test for any influence of race on participants' responses, including in interaction with housing instability, which would provide further insight into the existence of racial bias, particularly among White participants. We included three mother-child race pairs: White, African American, and Latinx, the three most common racial/ethnic groups in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

The study conformed to a 3 (housing type, unstable to stable: car, motel, studio apartment) × 3 (race: White, African American, Latinx) between-subjects design. Participants read one vignette and then indicated whether the mother's behavior met the legal definition of neglect (to which the correct answer should be no) using the same excerpt from the CA legal standard included in Study 1. Then participants indicated whether they would report the mother to CPS and rated the harmfulness and intentionality of the mother's behaviors.

We predicted that housing instability, especially when the mother and child were described as living in the car but also potentially when living in the motel, would increase participants' willingness to label the mother's behavior as legally neglectful and say that they would notify the authorities. We expected a similar pattern to emerge for ratings of intentionality. We also expected these perceptions to vary based on socioeconomic background, with participants who rated themselves as having their basic needs met holding harsher views of the mother and being more likely to report her behavior than those who did not rate themselves as having their basic needs met. Finally, with regard to race, exploratory analyses tested whether biases relevant to poverty and race influenced participants' responses such that mothers described as Black or Latinx were more likely to be rated as neglectful than mothers described as White.

Method

Participants.—The final sample contained 474 adult participants, recruited from MTurk Prime. Eligibility criteria were identical to Study 1. Participant age ranged from 18–87 years ($M = 38.25$, $SD = 13.30$), 53% were female ($n = 249$), and participants came from across the United States. The majority of participants identified as White (71%), followed by African American (13%), Asian (6%), Latinx (6%), multiracial (2%), and Other (2%). With regard to highest level of education completed, 1% had completed some high school or less, 9% had completed a high school degree or equivalency, 18% had completed some college, but had not obtained a 4-year degree, 9% had completed a 2-year degree, 49% had completed a 4-year degree, and 14% had completed a professional or doctoral degree. More than half of the sample had children (62%), 14% reported having had childhood contact with CPS, and

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15% reported having been convicted of a felony. A majority of participants (66%) indicated that they had never been a mandated reporter, 12% indicated that they were previously a mandated reporter, and 15% indicated that they were currently a mandated reporter (7% were unsure as to their status). One hundred and thirty seven additional participants were not included in the final sample because of failing one of two attention check items (for similar procedures, see Oppenheimer et al., 2009). A priori power analysis indicated that a sample size of 474 was sufficient to detect medium main effects and interactions with power = .80 and = .05.

Materials and procedures.—Procedures were identical to those of Study 1. After answering demographic and background questions, participants read one of nine randomly assigned vignettes (see Appendix B for an example). Each vignette began with a brief introduction indicating that participants would read a vignette about a single mother caring for her child. This included a brief summary of demographic details about the age (7) and gender (girl) of the child, and the race of the mother and child, both described as White, African American, or Latinx. Then participants read the vignette, which described the mother as providing for her child's basic needs (e.g., food, clothing, and supervision). However, the mother and child's housing type was varied across vignettes, such that the family lived in either a car, a motel, or a studio apartment. Thus, the mother's behavior did not meet the legal standard for neglect, but housing instability, at varying levels (i.e., unstable to stable), was clearly noted.

Immediately after the vignette, participants answered questions identical to those in Study 1: Participants were given the except from the California Penal Code describing neglect (see CA Penal Code Section 11164–11174.3; Child Abuse and Neglect Reporting Act, 1980) and were asked whether the mother's behavior met this definition (yes/no). They then rated whether they felt that they should report the child's circumstances to CPS, how harmful the mother's behavior was, and the intentionality of the mother's behavior on the 5-point Likert scales (1 = *not at all* to 5 = *a great deal*). Open-ended questions followed each of these items to assess the rationale behind participants' responses. These were included to confirm participants' understanding of the vignettes. Participants responses indicated general understanding and, thus, these questions are not considered further.

Results

Descriptive statistics for main study variables are shown in Table 4. Preliminary analyses revealed no differences in participants' evaluations of neglect and reporting decisions based on their race (dichotomized: White vs. non-White), point-biserial *r*s (471–472) −.09, *p*s .06, $\chi^2(1) = 3.97$, $p = .05$, $\Phi = -.09$, 95% CI of Φ [−0.18, 0.00]. However, participants' age, gender, status as parents, and childhood contact with CPS were significantly related to their evaluations of the mother. Younger age participants, men, parents, and those with childhood CPS contact endorsed a greater obligation to report the family to the authorities, *r*s(471–472) −.10, *p*s .02 (point-biserial correlations, as appropriate). Men were more likely than women to perceive the mother's behavior toward her child as intentional, as were parents and those with childhood CPS contact, point biserial *r*s (471–472) −.10, *p*s .03. Likewise, parents and individuals with childhood CPS contact were more likely to rate the

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mother's behavior as constituting legal neglect, χ^2s(1) 17.11, *p*s < 001, Φs | .19 | . Although similar associations were not apparent in Study 1, the larger sample in Study 2, along with differences in demographic characteristics between the studies' samples (e.g., % prior CPS involvement—7 to 14%; % parents—43 to 62% in Study 1 vs. 2, respectively) may have contributed to these differences, a point to which we return in the Discussion. Relevant variables were covaried in subsequent analyses.

Finally, separate one-way mandated reporting status (never, current, and prior) ANOVAs and a Chi-Square analysis revealed significant effects for perceptions of neglect (i.e., intentionality and whether the mother's behavior met the legal standard of neglect) and obligations to report, *F*s(2, 437) 13.43, *p*s < .001, $\chi^2(2) = 24.65$, $p < .001$, Φ = .24, 95% CI of Φ [0.15, 0.34]. That is, current and previously mandated reporters endorsed more stringent views of what legally constituted neglect and how intentional the mother's behavior was toward the child and felt a stronger obligation to report than did participants who had never been mandated reporters. Because of the relatively low numbers of mandated reporters (15 and 12%, current and prior mandated reporters, respectively) across conditions, we were unable to include reporting status in main analyses. We return to this issue in the Discussion.

Legal standard for neglect.—We first tested the hypothesis that laypersons would be more likely to rate a mother who was homeless (i.e., living in a car) as legally neglectful than a mother living in a residential housing environment (i.e., studio apartment), with the mother living in a motel falling in the middle. A logistic regression was conducted. Predictors included type of housing (i.e., car, motel, or studio apartment; reference group = car, given that this comprised the most unstable living environment) and the mother and child's race manipulations (i.e., White, African American, and Latinx; reference group = White), along with gender, parental status, childhood contact with CPS, and participant's perceptions of their basic needs (range = 1–10; $M = 7.84$, $SD = 2.15$) being met in Model 1. The housing type (e.g., car, motel, or studio apartment) by basic needs and housing type by mother/child's race interactions were included in Model 2. Model 1 was statistically significant, $\chi^2(9, N = 474) = 62.47$, $p < .001$. Model 2 did not significantly increase the amount of variance explained. (We did not have sufficient variability to include participant race as an additional factor. Nonetheless, to ensure that the diversity of our participants was not reducing potential race effects, analyses were repeated with only White participants. Findings remained virtually identical.)

In Model 1, the housing manipulation, parental status, and childhood contact with CPS were all significant. As shown in Table 5 and Figure 3, and generally consistent with predictions, participants were significantly more likely to indicate that the mother's behavior met the legal standard for neglect when the mother and child were living in a car versus living in a motel or in a studio apartment (ratings of the latter two types of housing did not significantly differ from each other). Specifically, the odds of a participant rating the mother's behavior as legally neglectful were 68 and 55% *lower*, respectively, when the family was living in a motel or studio apartment versus a car. Being a parent ($OR = 2.21$, 95% CI [1.44, 3.39]) and childhood contact with CPS ($OR = 3.02$, 95% CI [1.64, 5.56]) were in contrast both associated with a greater likelihood of viewing the mother's behavior as legally neglectful.

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Obligations to report.—We next tested whether participants' obligation to report differed based on the family's housing type, directly and in conjunction with participants' own experiences of poverty (i.e., basic needs being met) and the mother/child's race (again, obligations to report were strongly correlated with ratings of harmfulness, $r = .60$; findings were identical for both measures and, thus, only ratings of obligation to report are considered here). A linear regression analysis was conducted, with obligations to report, scored on a 5-point scale, as the dependent measure and the housing and race manipulations (dummy coded; reference groups=living in a car and White, respectively) and participant's perceptions of their basic needs being met as predictors (Model 1), again along with age, gender, parental status, and childhood contact with CPS, followed by relevant interactions in Model 2. Both models were statistically significant, but Model 2 did not significantly increase the amount of variance explained (see Table 6). In Model 1, again, the race manipulation was nonsignificant, suggesting that, regardless of race, mothers were generally perceived similarly. A significant main effect of housing type emerged, however: Participants more often endorsed an obligation to report when the family was living in a car versus living in a motel, $b = -0.59$, $SE = 0.14$, $t(463) = -4.24$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.87, −0.32], or studio apartment, $b = -0.67$, $SE = 0.14$, $t(463) = 4.79$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [−0.94, −0.39] (the latter two did not significantly differ from each other). Other significant main effects included: age, $b = -0.01$, $SE = 0.004$, $t(463) = -2.77$, $p < .01$, 95% CI [−0.02, −0.004], parental status, $b = 0.64$, $SE = 0.13$, $t(463) = 5.14$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.40, 0.89], and CPS contact, $b = 0.62$, $SE = 0.17$, $t(463) = 3.62$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.28, 0.96]. Younger participants, parents, and those who had prior contact with CPS more often endorsed such an obligation. Contrary to predictions, participants' perceptions of their basic needs being met, directly or in conjunction with housing type, did not significantly predict their obligation to report. Finally, when analyses were restricted to only White participants, who may be most likely to show a racial bias in reporting decisions, findings remained the same.

Intentionality.—When we tested perceptions of the mothers' intentionally via a linear regression analysis (predictors identical to those reported above), only participant gender and CPS contact were significant. Men, $b = 0.38$, $SE = 0.13$, $t(463) = 2.90$, $p = .004$, 95% CI [0.12, 0.63], and those with childhood CPS contact, $b = 0.68$, $SE = 0.19$, $t(463) = 3.58$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [0.31, 1.05], were more likely to perceive the mother's behavior as intentionally neglectful. Again, findings did not substantively change when only White participants were considered.

Study 2 Summary

Findings from Study 2 suggest that housing instability plays a salient role in shaping laypersons' perceptions of neglect and reporting decisions. Relative to other types of housing, including living in a motel or a small apartment, living in a car, arguably the most unstable living arrangement, was viewed most often as legally constituting neglect and warranting official reporting. Participant demographics, including their gender, parental status, and childhood contact with CPS, were also related to their likelihood of labeling poverty, that is homelessness, as a form of neglect in need of reporting. The mother's and child's reported race, in contrast, did not affect participants' perceptions of the neglectfulness of her behavior, directly or in conjunction with housing instability. However,

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this latter manipulation was fairly subtle, involving a brief summary of the family's demographic details before each vignette. Had we included more overt or salient indicators of race, for instance, photographs of mothers of different races, differing perceptions may have emerged, a possibility warranting further empirical attention.

General Discussion

Laypersons, particularly those who come into regular contact with children—professionally or in their family or community environments—are often in positions of having to evaluate and make decisions about children's well-being and safety. Their decisions can lead to legal interventions that have significant and long-lasting consequences for the children, their parents, and entire families. It is of importance, therefore, to ascertain how laypersons make decisions to report suspicions of neglect and determine whether their decisions are consistent with the actual occurrence of neglect. Our study focused on these very issues. We found both competencies and limitations in participants' evaluations. On the one hand, participants did have some sense of situations that are potentially harmful to children and, when neglect was present, they generally recognized it as such and endorsed a willingness to report. On the other, however, participants' decisions were significantly influenced by poverty, and participants often labeled extreme poverty as a form of neglect, seeing it as sufficiently serious to warrant reporting. Thus, laypersons conflated neglect and poverty, and routinely mislabeled poverty as neglect, especially when that poverty involved homelessness.

First, turning more specifically to situations in which legal forms of neglect were included (i.e., Study 1), when asked whether the mother's behavior in the vignette met the legal definition of neglect, participants were consistently more likely to endorse reporting the neglect to the authorities when it met the legal definition than when it did not, and participants performed at above chance levels in recognizing neglect when the vignettes described actual neglect. However, this was only true when actual neglect was combined with poverty. Accordingly, participants could recognize neglect but mostly when it was accompanied by significant poverty, a situation that makes parenting and family life especially difficult, and a situation that participants may have seen as especially harmful.

Second, and related, in situations in which legal forms of neglect were entirely absent (i.e., half of the vignettes in Study 1 and all of the vignettes in Study 2), participants often still thought that neglect was occurring, labeling poverty, especially homelessness, as neglect. Thus, in both studies, participants' perceptions reflected a general misunderstanding of what constitutes neglect, with them often perceiving neglect where it did not exist. Such misconceptions are troubling in suggesting that laypersons may show a tendency toward overreporting neglect, especially in situations involving poverty. This tendency could lead, at the very least, to unnecessary investigations, causing children and families to face unwarranted intrusion and disruption and potentially overwhelming services meant to protect children in real danger. At the same time, however, these misconceptions may reflect participants' knowledge of the harms that can arise when children grow up in highly impoverished home environments.

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Poverty, especially homelessness, is often associated with poorer functioning, lower educational outcomes, and greater risk for exposure to community violence (Duncan, Magnuson, Kalil, & Ziol-Guest, 2012; Jetelina et al., 2016; Masten et al., 2014). With greater public awareness of extreme poverty and homelessness, participants may see the situation as warranting intervention and see reports to social service as a vehicle through which intervention can occur. An interesting follow-up would be to assess what laypersons believe about the role social services plays (or should play) in families' lives. For instance, laypersons may see child protection services as a resource for high-risk families, including those in need because of situations like homelessness, rather than as an agency primarily focused on interventions for children at risk for or who have experienced maltreatment and their families. Of note, our participants' reactions are consistent with other research showing that, although poverty is associated with referrals for neglect, poverty is not associated with substantiation (Jonson-Reid, Drake, & Zhou, 2013). Both social workers and legal professionals are better at distinguishing poverty and neglect and are more likely to file cases when the parent's behavior is actually neglectful versus when it is driven primarily by poverty (Jonson-Reid et al., 2013).

Beyond the experimental manipulation of poverty, participants' own experiences with poverty, at least according to their perspectives about whether their needs have been met, were related to their perceptions of neglect. Those who reported not having their needs met were less likely to view the mother as being neglectful and to indicate they felt an obligation to report the child's situation to the authorities (Study 1). Such perceptions make some sense in that those who have experienced poverty are likely more sensitive to challenges that impoverished parents might face relative to those who have not experienced poverty (e.g., Tsai et al., 2019). However, having one's needs met did not interact with the poverty manipulation, in either study. Thus, it was not the case that not having one's needs met made participants especially sensitive to the mother's situation when she was experiencing high poverty. Instead, such individuals were generally less likely to see the mother's behavior as meeting the legal standard of neglect. Perhaps, therefore, those who have not had their needs met are more reluctant to report individuals generally. Such individuals may not feel as though the reports will be helpful, possibly because of their own experiences. Subsequent work should unpack these trends further, for instance, by specifically examining poverty with both self-reported and objective indices and separating poverty in childhood from current poverty. Given that one's own experiences may well predict willingness to report neglect, it is important to understand why.

We also found, in Study 2, that having a background of childhood contact with CPS was consistently associated with a higher tendency to view poverty, as reflected in homelessness, as neglect, to feel a stronger sense of obligation to report poverty, and to view the mother's behavior in poverty scenarios as intentional. At face value, some of these trends seem perhaps contradictory: having personal experience with poverty may have made laypersons more sensitive to the differences between poverty and neglect, and reduced their tendency to rate poverty as a form of neglect, while having had childhood contact with CPS—often related to poverty (Jonson-Reid et al., 2009)—made individuals more likely to rate a mother living in extreme poverty as being neglectful. Having had personal experience with CPS and possible maltreatment exposure could lead to a greater sensitivity to the occurrence of

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neglect (or at least the occurrence of situations that can harm children and need intervention), and, thus, a lower threshold as to what warrants reporting, regardless of one's own experience with poverty. This possibility could not be adequately tested in the present research, given low variability in rates of childhood CPS contact in Study 1 (the study in which actual neglect was varied), but will be an important direction for future research.

A few other findings are worth mentioning. First, differences emerged across studies in the effects of demographic predictors on participants' evaluations of potential situations of neglect. In Study 2, not only did we find variation, as mentioned, in laypersons' identification of and willingness to report neglect based on their own personal experiences with CPS, but also variation as a result of their gender, parental status, and age. Men, parents, and younger individuals often held more liberal views as to what constituted neglect and were more likely to endorse an obligation to report what they perceived as neglect. Although these findings are generally consistent with prior work suggesting that men versus women, younger versus older individuals, and parents versus non-parents may differ in their conceptualization of neglect (e.g., Price et al., 2001), these same effects were not apparent in Study 1. Such differences may be attributable to both the larger sample size and hence power to detect statistically significant effects in Study 2, as well as its slightly different composition (e.g., a greater proportion of participants in Study 2 were parents and endorsed childhood contact with CPS) relative to Study 1. Although we could not disentangle these differences in trends, a concern of future work will be to test more comprehensively the role that demographic and experiential characteristics may play in laypersons' decision-making regarding neglect.

Another potentially important characteristic for such research to consider (and one that could not be tested in the present study because of low variability across conditions) involves participants' mandated reporting status. Such is of particular interest as states in the United States move toward universal mandatory reporting (see Ho, Gross, & Bettencourt, 2017). We found hints that mandated reporters (former and current) were generally more likely to feel an obligation to report, including in situations (Study 2) where no neglect was present. Such a willingness to report suggests on the one hand that mandated reporting is increasing the salience of cues of potential harm to children. Such is perhaps a positive trend in light of anecdotal evidence from some high-profile civil cases suggesting low reporting for other crimes, like child sexual abuse, among mandated reporters (e.g., see Green, 2019; Kelly, 2013). Given that mandated reporters seemed to have felt a greater obligation to report in Study 2, when neglect was not present, additional training for mandated reporters about what does (and does not) constitute neglect is warranted. Also warranted is additional research with larger samples of mandated reporters to ascertain how reporting status interacts with indicators of neglect and poverty to shape laypersons' perceptions and responses.

Finally, we found no differences in perceptions or reporting decisions based on the mother's and child's race, including in interaction with housing type, and based on participants' race. Our findings are somewhat inconsistent with those of prior work, which have revealed differences in perceptions of neglect as a function of participant race (e.g., Dubowitz et al., 1998; Rose & Meezan, 1995), and differences in reporting rates based on families' racial

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backgrounds (e.g., Ards, Myers, Malkis Erin, & Zhou, 2003). We also found no differences in Study 2's results when we examined only White participants, who, theoretically, might have stronger biases about race and poverty than non-White participants. We had relatively few non-White participants, though, precluding more complex analyses across the participants' and the mother's and child's race. In addition, as mentioned, our manipulation of race was subtle, involving only demographic details presented at the beginning of each vignette (see Appendix B) and, thus, it may have been of limited salience to participants. Findings may have differed had more overt indicators of race been included. As there continue to be disparities in rates of CPS referrals and social service involvement among racial-minority children and families (Font, Berger, & Slack, 2012; Shaw, Putnam-Hornstein, Magruder, & Needell, 2008), as well as the potential for racialized perceptions of neglect (Ards et al., 2012), continued attention to the conditions under which racial differences in reporting emerge is needed.

The current research offers new insight into how laypersons differentiate actual neglect from poverty when making decisions about harm to a child and willingness to report. Yet limitations should also be noted. First, although we screened out participants who were blatantly inattentive and failed the manipulation check question, inattention to transcript details was still possible. If participants failed to fully attend to or comprehend the scenarios or legal standards, this could lead, on the one hand, to a bias toward interpreting a wider range of parental behavior as legally neglectful. On the other hand, it could lead to more conservative decisions. While participants' responses to open-ended narrative questions in the present study indicated that housing type was an influential factor in their reporting decisions, suggesting some level of comprehension, it will nonetheless be important for future work to test for differences in perceptions in relation to comprehension and attention. Second, despite the inclusion of participants from across the United States, results may have been affected by a respondent bias in who opted to participate in the study, however, there was a wide range in demographic backgrounds of the participants, limiting concerns about this possibility. Third, in both studies, participants responded to a single, brief vignette involving a mother and daughter. Although having laypersons read and respond to such vignettes provides insight into their general perceptions, it will be important to supplement such data collection procedures with a variety of other scenarios and populations, and with actual interactions or videos of children's situations rather than just vignettes. Such work should also include variations in the level of contact laypersons have with families and the duration and range of children's potential neglect or poverty experiences. Doing so will test the generalizability of findings and further pinpoint perceptions of neglect and decision-making processes in laypersons. Finally, our depiction of poverty may reflect urban rather than rural poverty, the latter of which may look very different, particularly in terms of housing options, children's and family's visibility, and services available to communities. Whether variations exist in laypersons evaluations of neglect based on the specific context of poverty (i.e., rural vs. urban) will be an interesting and important area for future work.

In summary, the findings across our two studies suggest that laypersons may lack an adequate understanding of what legally constitutes neglect, how neglect differs from abject poverty, and how they should respond to families living in poverty. This may lead to potential overreporting of neglect, and hence a burden on the child welfare system to parse

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true occurrences of neglect from a range of reports of suspected neglect that may actually reflect poverty instead. Increasing public awareness of how to recognize legal neglect, and to separate this from poverty, may help the general public to not conflate the two; thus, decreasing the burden of false alarms in the child welfare system, without decreasing true positives. At the same time, greater education regarding services available for (and responses relevant to) impoverished families will be critical. Because poverty and neglect warrant different social system responses, such education may help reduce overburdens to each system because of unnecessary reports and expedite service delivery in domains families need most.

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Appendix A

Study 1: Sample Vignettes

Four vignettes were presented in Study 1. Poverty and neglect indicators, described below, were manipulated via a 2 (poverty v. no poverty) × 2 (neglect v. no neglect) between-subjects factorial design (see Study 1 Method section). Below are representative examples of these vignettes.

Vignette I: Poverty and Neglect Present

Seven-year-old Destiny and her mom, Tina, live in a large city. Tina is Destiny's only caregiver. Tina works part-time at a fast-food restaurant [**poverty indicator**], and Destiny attends a local school. After school, Destiny typically walks to a park where she waits for her mom to pick her up by car. Tina picks Destiny up at the park around 7 p.m., and they then sleep in the car overnight [**poverty indicator**]. In the morning, Destiny walks to school and gets breakfast and lunch at school [**poverty indicator**]. She says that her mom always finds something for them to eat in the evening and that she gets enough to eat every day. Destiny attends school regularly. Sometimes Destiny can get ahold of her mom on her mom's cell by using a friend's phone when she needs to, and sometimes her mom's number is out of service and her mom's phone is not accepting calls [**neglect indicator**]. Destiny says that she has felt scared waiting for her mom, and that yesterday her mom did not come pick her up at all, so she walked to a friend's house for the night [**neglect indicator**]. Destiny and her mom, Tina, both agree that they are the most important people in each other's lives.

Vignette II: Poverty and Neglect Absent

Seven-year-old Destiny and her mother, Tina, live in a large city. Tina is Destiny's only caregiver. Tina is a high-level executive at a large firm in the city, and Destiny attends a local private school. After school, Destiny typically walks to a park where she waits for her mom to pick her up by car. Destiny eats breakfast at home, brings a lunch to school, and says that

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her mother always finds something for them to eat in the evening. She says she always gets enough to eat every day. Destiny attends school regularly. Sometimes Destiny can get ahold of her Mom on her mom's cell by using her own cell phone, and sometimes her mom's phone is turned off and not accepting calls. Tina tells Destiny that when she cannot get ahold of her mom, she should go to her best friend's house to wait for her mom. Destiny and Tina both agree that they are the most important people in each other's lives.

Appendix B

Study 2: Sample Vignettes

Nine vignettes were presented in Study 2. Housing type and mother/child race were manipulated via a 3 (housing type: car, motel, studio apartment) × 3 (race: White, African American, Latinx) between-subjects design (see Study 2 Method section). Below is a representative example of these vignettes.

Vignette I: Studio Apartment Housing Type and African American Parent/ Child Race

CHILD: Destiny L. Female, age 7, 2nd grade, Black/African American [**race indicator**]

PARENT: Tina L. Female, age 27, Black/African American, Single [**race indicator**]

LOCATION: Primary School, Los Angeles, CA

Seven-year-old Destiny and her mother, Tina, live in Los Angeles. Tina is Destiny's only caregiver. Tina works at a fast-food restaurant downtown, and Destiny attends a school nearby. After school, Destiny typically walks to a park where she waits for her mom to pick her up by car. Destiny and Tina then go to their studio apartment [**housing type indicator].** In the morning, Destiny walks to school and gets breakfast and lunch at school. She says that her mother always finds something for them to eat in the evening and that she gets enough to eat every day. Destiny's clothes are out-of-date, but clean. She attends school regularly and enjoys school, and she keeps up with her work assignments. Sometimes Destiny can get ahold of her mom on her mom's cell by using a friend's phone when she needs to, and sometimes Tina's number is out of service and her mom's phone is not accepting calls. Tina tells Destiny that when she cannot get ahold of her mom, she should go to her best friend's house to wait for her mom. Destiny and Tina both agree that they are the most important people in each other's lives.

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Public Significance Statement

The current research shows that adults often conflate neglect with poverty when deciding whether to report suspected child neglect, saying that even behavior resulting exclusively from abject poverty (e.g., being homeless) is neglectful and warrants reporting. This tendency to see poverty as neglect highlights the crucial need for public education focused on enhancing understanding of neglect versus poverty and services relevant to each.

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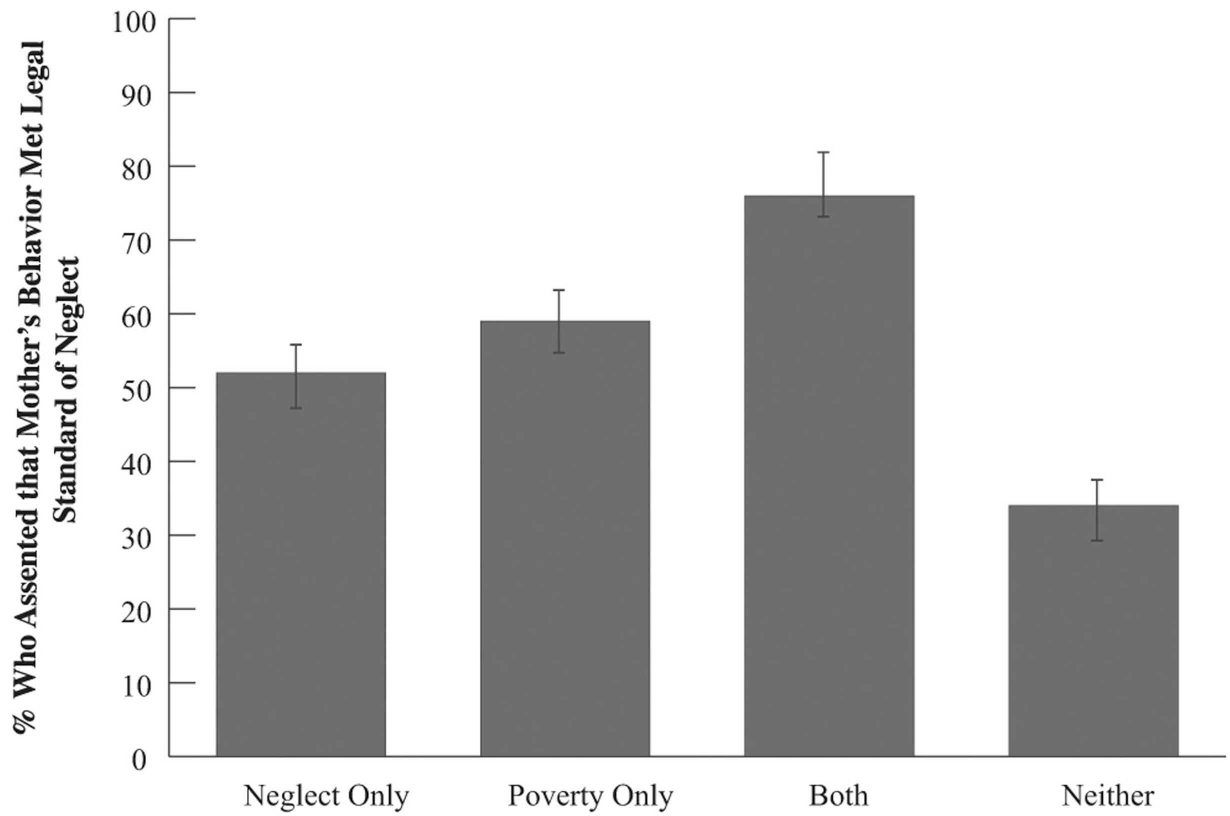

Figure 1.
Percentage of participants who indicated that the mother's behavior met the legal standard of neglect (0 = no, 1 = yes), presented separately by condition. Error bars are ±1 *SE*.

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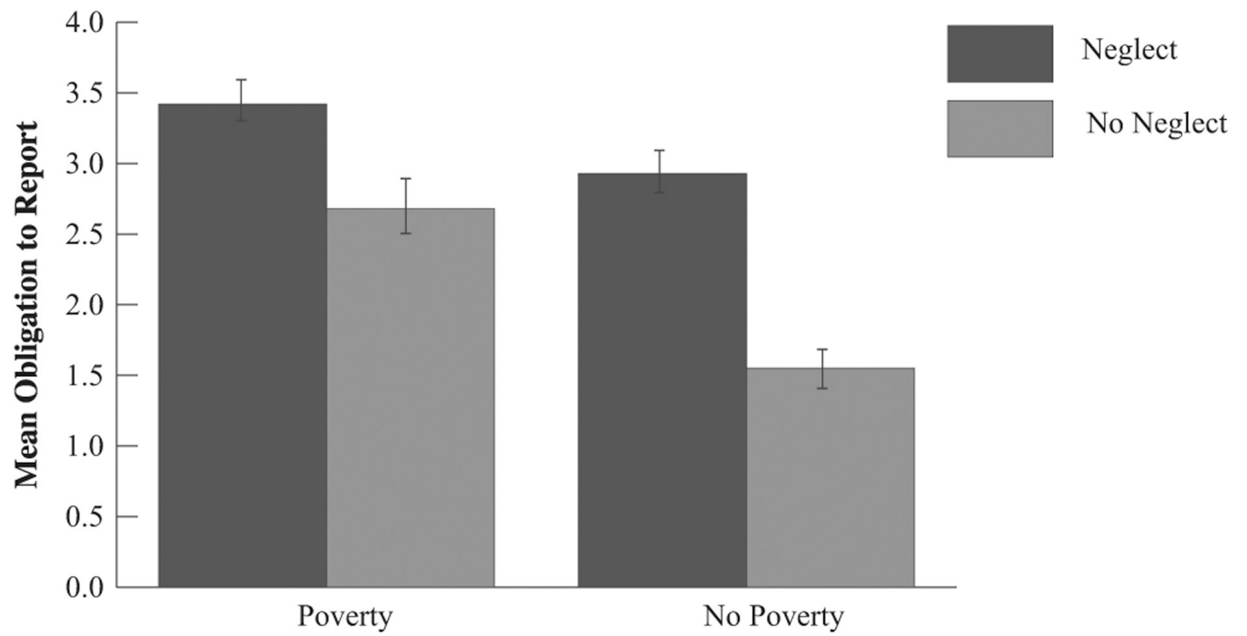

Figure 2.
Effect of neglect and poverty manipulations on participants' obligation to report. Ratings ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *a great deal*. Error bars are ±1 *SE*.

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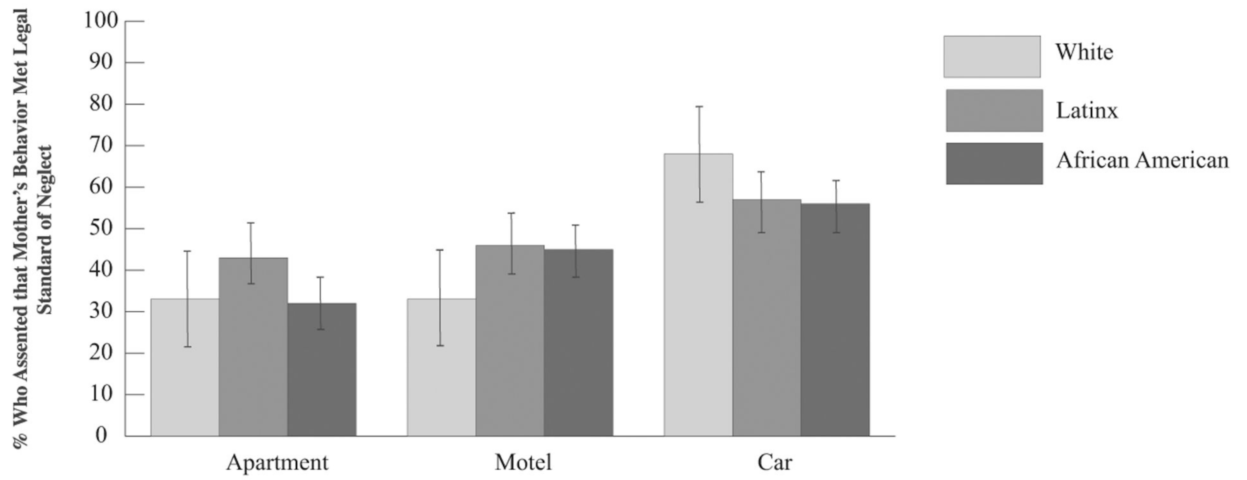

Figure 3.
Percentage of participants who indicated that the mother's behavior met the legal standard of neglect (0 = no, 1 = yes), presented separately by housing type and mother/child race. Error bars are ±1 *SE*.

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Table 1

Correlations and Descriptive Statistics of Key Study 1 Variables (N = 365)

			1		2		3		4	
Variables	***M***	***SD***	***r***	***p***	***r***	***p***	***r***	***p***	***r***	***p***
1. Perceptions of basic needs	7.56	2.06	—	—						
2. Behavior meets legal standard for neglect (1 = yes)	0.55	—	0.14	.01	—	—				
3. Obligation to report	2.63	1.47	0.20	<.001	0.52	<.001	—	—		
4. Intentionality of behavior	2.45	1.32	0.08	.11	0.12	.03	0.22	<.001	—	—

Note. Correlation coefficients (*r*) are presented, followed by exact *p* values (*p*). Coefficients for the dichotomous legal standard variable (yes/no) are represented by point-biserial correlations. Ratings for the perceptions of basic needs variable ranged from 1 (*basic needs not being met*) to 10 (*basic needs being met*). Ratings for both the obligation to report variable and intentionality variable ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*).

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Table 2

Study 1: Predictors of Ratings That the Mother's Behavior Met the Legal Standard for Neglect (N = 365)

Predictors	*B*	*SE*	Wald $\chi^2(1)$	*p*	*OR*	95% CI [*OR*]
Model 1						
Neglect	0.75	0.22	11.19**	.001	2.11	[1.36, 3.27]
Poverty	1.04	0.23	21.20***	<.001	2.83	[1.82, 4.41]
Perceptions of basic needs	0.13	0.05	5.73*	.02	1.14	[1.02, 1.27]
Constant	−1.65	0.46	12.77***	<.001	0.19	—
Model 2						
Neglect	0.75	0.29	6.43*	.01	2.11	[1.18, 3.77]
Poverty	1.10	0.89	1.52	.22	3.01	[0.52, 17.29]
Perceptions of basic needs	0.14	0.08	3.28	.07	1.15	[0.99, 1.33]
Neglect × Poverty	−0.002	0.45	0.00	.99	0.99	[0.41, 2.42]
Poverty × Basic Needs	−0.01	0.11	0.005	.94	0.94	[0.80, 1.23]
Constant	−1.68	0.62	7.56*	.01	0.19	—

Note. OR = odds ratio; CI = confidence interval. The overall model fit was $\chi^2(5) = 38.49$, $p < .001$. The fit of Model 1 was $\chi^2(3) = 38.49$, $p < .001$. The addition of the interaction terms in Model 2 was nonsignificant, $\chi^2(2) = .005$, $p = .99$. For the neglect variable, no neglect is the reference group, and for the poverty variable, no poverty is the reference group.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

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Table 3

Study 1: Regression Analyses Predicting Ratings of Participant's Obligation to Report and Intentionality by Neglect and Poverty Manipulations

	Obligation to report					Mother's intentionality				
Predictors	***b***	***SE***	***t***	***p***	**95% CI**	***b***	***SE***	***t***	***p***	**95% CI**
Model 1										
Neglect	1.09	0.13	8.10***	<.001	[0.82, 1.35]	0.16	0.14	1.13	.26	[−0.12, 0.43]
Poverty	0.81	0.14	5.99***	<.001	[0.54, 1.07]	−0.20	0.14	−1.47	.14	[−0.47, 0.07]
Perceptions of basic needs	0.13	0.03	3.94***	<.001	[0.06, 0.19]	0.06	0.03	1.63	.10	[−0.01, 0.12]
Overall model	$F(3, 361) = 39.27$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .25$					$F(3, 361) = 2.06$, $p = .11$, $R^2 = .02$				
Model 2										
Neglect	1.38	0.18	7.65***	<.001	[1.03, 1.74]	0.27	0.18	1.47	.14	[−0.09, 0.64]
Poverty	0.79	0.53	1.51	.13	[−0.24, 1.80]	−0.16	0.54	−0.31	.76	[−1.23, 0.90]
Perceptions of basic needs	0.11	0.04	2.42*	.02	[0.02, 0.19]	0.05	0.05	1.07	.29	[−0.04, 0.14]
Neglect × Poverty	−0.65	0.27	−2.43*	.02	[−1.17, −0.12]	−0.26	0.28	−0.94	.35	[−0.80, 0.28]
Poverty × Basic Needs	0.05	0.06	0.70	.49	[−0.08, 0.17]	0.01	0.07	0.19	.85	[−0.12, 0.15]
Overall model	$F(5, 359) = 25.10$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .26$, $R^2 = .01$, $p = .04$					$F(5, 359) = 1.41$, $p = .22$, $R^2 = .02$, $R^2 = .002$, $p = .64$				

Note. CI = confidence interval. For obligation to report and intentionality, the scale ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *a great deal*.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

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Table 4

Correlations and Descriptive Statistics of Key Study 2 Variables (N = 474)

Variables	*M*	*SD*	1		2		3		4	
			r	*p*	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*	*r*	*p*
1. Perceptions of basic needs	7.84	2.15	—	—						
2. Behavior meets legal standard for neglect (1 = yes)	0.46	—	0.08	.10	—	—				
3. Obligation to report	2.30	1.35	0.11	.02	0.42	<.001	—	—		
4. Intentionality of behavior	2.45	1.41	0.10	.03	0.15	.001	0.22	<.001	—	—

Note. Correlation coefficients (*r*) are presented, followed by exact *p* values (*p*). Coefficients for the dichotomous legal standard variable (yes/no) are represented by point-biserial correlations. Ratings for the perceptions of basic needs variable ranged from 1 (*basic needs not being met*) to 10 (*basic needs being met*). Ratings for both the obligation to report variable and intentionality variable ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*).

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Table 5

Study 2: Predictors of Ratings That the Mother's Behavior Met the Legal Standard for Neglect (N = 464)

Predictors	*B*	*SE*	Wald $\chi^2(1)$	*p*	*OR*	95% CI [*OR*]
Model 1						
Male	0.24	0.20	1.38	.24	1.27	[0.85, 1.89]
Childhood CPS contact	1.10	0.31	12.56***	<.001	3.02	[1.64, 5.56]
Parental status	0.79	0.22	13.21***	<.001	2.21	[1.44, 3.39]
Age	−0.01	0.01	1.49	.22	0.99	[0.98, 1.01]
Motel condition	−0.81	0.24	11.10***	<.001	0.45	[0.28, 0.72]
Apartment condition	−1.13	0.25	21.21***	<.001	0.32	[0.20, 0.52]
Black condition	0.04	0.24	0.03	.85	1.05	[0.66, 1.67]
Latinx condition	0.14	0.25	0.30	.58	1.15	[0.71, 1.86]
Perceptions of basic needs	0.04	0.05	0.77	.38	1.04	[0.95, 1.14]
Constant	−0.32	0.53	0.36	.55	0.73	—
Model 2						
Male	0.25	0.20	1.50	.22	1.29	[0.86, 1.92]
Childhood CPS contact	1.02	0.31	10.48**	.001	2.77	[1.50, 5.15]
Parental status	0.86	0.22	14.85***	<.001	2.36	[1.52, 3.65]
Age	−0.01	0.01	1.14	.28	0.99	[0.98, 1.01]
Motel condition	−3.58	1.14	9.79**	.002	0.03	[0.003, 0.26]
Apartment condition	−1.84	0.96	3.66	.06	0.16	[0.02, 1.05]
Black condition	−0.41	0.41	0.99	.32	0.66	[0.29, 1.48]
Latinx condition	−0.44	0.42	1.07	.30	0.65	[0.28, 1.48]
Perceptions of basic needs	−0.04	0.08	0.28	.59	0.96	[0.83, 1.11]
Motel × Basic Needs	0.26	0.12	4.25*	.04	1.29	[1.01, 1.66]
Apartment × Basic Needs	0.04	0.11	0.11	.74	1.04	[0.84, 1.29]
Motel × Black	0.99	0.58	2.88	.09	2.70	[0.85, 8.52]
Motel × Latinx	0.45	0.60	0.55	.46	1.57	[0.48, 5.11]
Apartment × Black	0.99	0.63	2.50	.11	2.71	[0.78, 9.34]
Apartment × Latinx	0.80	0.60	1.79	.18	2.23	[0.69, 7.21]

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Predictors	*B*	*SE*	Wald $\chi^2(1)$	*p*	*OR*	95% CI [*OR*]
Constant	0.57	0.73	0.61	.43	1.77	—

Note. CPS = Child Protective Services; CI = confidence interval; *OR* = odds ratio. The overall model fit was $\chi^2(15) = 70.72$, $p < .001$. The fit of Model 1 was $\chi^2(9) = 62.47$, $p < .001$. The change in χ^2 due to the addition of the interaction terms in Model 2 was nonsignificant, $\chi^2(3) = 8.26$, $p = .22$. For the demographic variables, reference groups are as follows: females, individuals without childhood contact with CPS, and nonparents. For the housing manipulation, living in a car is the reference group. For the race manipulation, White is the reference group.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .001$.

*** $p < .001$.

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Table 6

Study 2: Regression Analyses Predicting Ratings of Participant's Obligation to Report and Intentionality by Neglect and Poverty Manipulations (N = 464)

Predictors	Obligation to report					Mother's intentionality				
	b	*SE*	*t*	*p*	95% CI	*b*	*SE*	*t*	*p*	95% CI
Model 1										
Male	0.22	0.12	1.91	.06	[−0.01, 0.45]	0.38	0.13	2.90**	.004	[0.12, 0.63]
Childhood CPS contact	0.62	0.17	3.62***	<.001	[0.28, 0.96]	0.68	0.19	3.58***	<.001	[0.31,1.05]
Parental status	0.64	0.13	5.14***	<.001	[0.40, 0.89]	0.22	0.14	1.62	.11	[0.05, 0.50]
Age	−0.01	0.004	−2.77**	.01	[−0.02, −0.004]	0.002	0.005	0.44	.66	[−0.01, 0.01]
Motel condition	−0.59	0.14	−4.24***	<.001	[−0.87, −0.32]	0.04	0.16	0.28	.78	[−0.26, 0.35]
Apartment condition	−0.67	0.14	−4.79***	<.001	[−0.94, −0.39]	−0.03	0.15	−0.22	.82	[−0.34, 0.27]
Black condition	0.03	0.14	0.24	.81	[−0.24, 0.30]	0.24	0.15	1.57	.12	[−0.06, 0.53]
Latinx condition	−0.10	0.14	−0.71	.48	[−0.38, 0.18]	−0.02	0.16	−0.15	.89	[−0.33, 0.29]
Perceptions of basic needs	0.04	0.03	1.48	.14	[−0.01, 0.09]	0.06	0.03	1.88	.06	[−0.003, 0.12]
Overall model	$F(9, 463) = 10.83$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .17$					$F(9, 463) = 4.19$, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .08$				
Model 2										
Male	0.23	0.12	2.00	.05	[0.004, 0.46]	0.37	0.13	2.85**	.005	[0.11, 0.62]
Childhood CPS contact	0.62	0.17	3.58***	<.001	[0.28, 0.96]	0.65	0.19	3.39**	.001	[0.27,1.02]
Parental status	0.65	0.13	5.14***	<.001	[0.40, 0.89]	0.25	0.14	1.84	.06	[0.02, 0.53]
Age	−0.01	0.005	−2.74**	.006	[−0.02, −0.003]	0.002	0.005	0.47	.63	[−0.01, 0.01]
Motel condition	−0.74	0.61	−1.22	.22	[−1.93, 0.46]	−1.47	0.67	−2.19*	.03	[−2.79, −0.15]
Apartment condition	−1.00	0.55	−1.84	.06	[−2.07, 0.07]	−0.50	0.60	−0.83	.41	[−1.68, 0.69]
Black condition	0.25	0.24	1.06	.29	[−0.22, 0.72]	−0.05	0.26	−0.18	.86	[−0.56, 0.47]
Latinx condition	−0.11	0.24	−0.48	.63	[−0.59, 0.36]	−0.11	0.27	−0.39	.69	[−0.64, 0.42]
Perceptions of basic needs	0.01	0.04	0.18	.85	[−0.08, 0.09]	0.002	0.05	0.05	.96	[−0.09, 0.10]
Motel × Basic Needs	0.04	0.07	0.59	.56	[−0.09, 0.17]	0.17	0.08	2.24*	.03	[0.02, 0.32]
Apartment × Basic Needs	0.05	0.06	0.79	.43	[−0.07, 0.17]	0.03	0.07	0.43	.67	[−0.10, 0.17]
Motel × Black	−0.36	0.33	−1.09	.28	[−1.02, 0.29]	0.36	0.36	0.96	.33	[−0.37, 1.08]
Motel × Latinx	−0.15	0.36	−0.41	.68	[−0.85, 0.56]	0.14	0.39	0.35	.73	[−0.61, 0.88]

Predictors	Obligation to report					Mother's intentionality				
	b	***SE***	***t***	***p***	**95% CI**	***b***	***SE***	***t***	***p***	**95% CI**
Apartment × Black	−0.29	0.34	−0.83	.41	[−0.96, 0.39]	0.55	0.38	1.46	.14	[−0.19, 1.29]
Apartment × Latinx	0.14	0.36	0.40	.69	[−0.54, 0.82]	0.13	0.38	0.35	.73	[−0.64, 0.92]
Overall model	$F(15, 457) = 6.66, p < .001, R^2 = .18,$				$R^2 = .005, p = .81$	$F(15, 457) = 3.05, p < .001, R^2 = .09,$				$R^2 = .02, p = .24$

Note. CPS = Child Protective Services; CI = confidence interval. For obligation to report and intentionality, the scale ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *a great deal*. For the demographic variables, reference groups are as follows: females, individuals without childhood contact with CPS, and nonparents. For the housing manipulations, living in a car is the reference group. For the race manipulations, White is the reference group.

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

*** $p < .001$.

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