

Social Workers' Perceptions of the Nature of Child Neglect: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract

Neglect is the most common form of child maltreatment in the UK and the USA. This article reviews research about how child neglect is perceived by social workers. We conducted a systematic review and identified fifty relevant studies, using a range of methodologies, published since the 1989 Children Act. The themes were identified iteratively and synthesised using a narrative method. The review found that despite evidence that neglect is associated with several adverse outcomes, neglect is a lower priority for social work intervention compared to other forms of maltreatment. This is particularly true for emotional neglect and neglect of older children. The review

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found that social workers conceptualise poverty and neglect as being distinctly different and try to address poverty through practical, non-punitive interventions. However, assessments could better recognise how deprivation exacerbates other risk factors for neglect. The review found a lack of knowledge about perceptions of neglect in adolescents and children with a disability and about the threshold for intervention when neglect is cumulative. Practice may be improved by better recognising and addressing the societal context to neglect allegations and the risk of long-term harm. Achieving this may have resource and training implications.

Keywords: child protection, child welfare, neglect, perceptions, social workers, thresholds

Accepted: May 2024

Introduction

Neglect is the most commonly documented form of child maltreatment in the UK (Department for Education, 2023) and the USA (US Department of Health & Human Services, 2023). Death or serious injury from neglect is rare (Dickens *et al.*, 2022a). Nonetheless, meta-analyses have shown that neglect, particularly emotional neglect, is moderately associated with adverse outcomes, including suicidal behaviour (Liu *et al.*, 2017; Angelakis *et al.*, 2019, 2020), depression (Liu *et al.*, 2017; Nelson *et al.*, 2017; Humphreys *et al.*, 2020), borderline personality disorder (Porter *et al.*, 2020), psychosis (Peh *et al.*, 2019) and impaired educational achievement (Romano *et al.*, 2015). The strength of the association is comparable to that of other forms of maltreatment (Coughlan *et al.*, preprint).

There has been a longstanding ‘neglect of neglect’ (Wolock and Horowitz, 1984) in public consciousness and social work practice. Recent reviews of practice continue to observe a ‘normalisation’ (Dickens *et al.*, 2022b, p. 52) and ‘desensitisation’ (Brandon *et al.*, 2020, p. 63) to neglect and insufficient professional curiosity (Dickens *et al.*, 2023). There are also concerns that thresholds for intervention are too high (Daniel, 2015; Stokes, 2016).

Research into neglect faces several challenges. First, definitions of neglect are inconsistent (Horwath, 2007), with some considering only past harm and others future risk (Dubowitz *et al.*, 1993; Zuravin, 1999). There is a shortage of evidence-based instruments with which to measure neglect (Haworth *et al.*, 2024). Secondly, there is concern about the overlap between neglect and social disadvantage. The link to poverty is well documented (Esposito *et al.*, 2022; Goldacre and Hood, 2022; Skinner *et al.*, 2023), with some authors alleging that neglect is ‘too often confused with poverty’ (Dewan, 2018; Raz and Sankaran, 2019, p. 1529).

There are also concerns that mothers are judged harshly, overlooking the responsibilities of fathers (Turney, 2000).

Aim

Given the above concerns, this review aims to explore social workers' perceptions of neglect. This question is relevant to practice and academic scholarship, where informant reporting, particularly from social workers is used as an indicator of neglect (Stoltenborgh *et al.*, 2015).

We are aware of only two previous systematic reviews on this topic. One is unpublished and does not include quality appraisal. These concentrated primarily on the views of other stakeholders (Daniel *et al.*, 2010) and non-empirical papers (Chaudhry, 2016).

Method

A systematic review was completed according to PRISMA guidelines (Page *et al.*, 2021) (Supplementary Appendix 1).

Search strategy

Web of Science, Embase, PsychInfo, Scopus and Assia were searched on 7 July 2023 (see Supplementary Appendix 2 for search strategy). Filters identified articles in English, written after the 1989 Children Act (enacted 1991), in which current statutory thresholds are defined.

Snowballing added thirty-nine results, including one piece of 'grey' literature (Horwath, 2001) containing supplementary data from published studies (Horwath, 2004, 2005). This search yielded 2,091 studies once duplicates were removed.

Inclusion criteria were drafted and refined following evidence mapping (Popay *et al.*, 2006), with the addition of the fourth and fifth exclusion criteria (see Supplementary Appendix 3 for PRISMA flowchart). Figure 1 states the inclusion and exclusion criteria. We defined 'neglect' as harmful acts of omission by a caregiver (failure to do something necessary for a child's wellbeing) and excluded acts of commission (proactively doing something harmful to the child; Zuravin, 1999). To ensure relevance, we included only empirical studies which reported discrete findings about neglect. We included the views of child welfare practitioners who had, or were working towards, a social work qualification and of child protection investigators, whatever their qualifications. We included empirical studies of any methodology which explored social workers' responses to hypothetical situations, what might be termed their 'espoused perceptions', and studies exploring

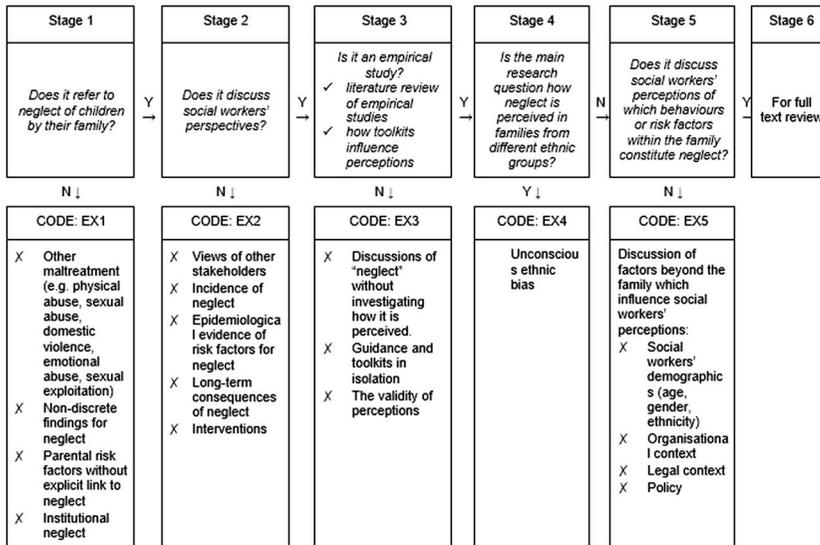


Figure 1: Title and abstract screening decision flow-chart. This flowchart shows the criteria used to decide which of the 2,091 items identified from database searches were relevant to the review's question.

perceptions implicit in practitioners' actions, their 'enacted perceptions'. We excluded studies about the context of perceptions.

Using Rayyan, J.G. screened all titles and abstracts, identifying 108 potentially relevant articles from the total of 2,091. A.M. independently screened 10 per cent of these, with complete agreement. J.G. then extracted and screened full texts. J.G. and A.M. are both social workers.

Quality appraisal and synthesis

J.G. used the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (Hong et al., 2018) to evaluate the studies' merit in their own right, and Gough's Weight of Evidence framework (Gough, 2007) to assess quality in relation to this review's question. Supplementary Appendix 4 details data extraction and quality appraisal.

The selected studies used a wide range of methodologies. Several vignette studies (Segal, 1992; Rose and Meezan, 1995, 1996; Rose, 1999; Proctor, 2012) were inspired by the same study (Giovannoni and Becerra, 1979) but instruments and reporting practices varied. Meta-analysis was not, therefore, feasible and we instead used an adapted form of narrative synthesis (Popay et al., 2006) (see Appendices 5 and 6). Recurrent themes were identified iteratively, and quantitative data were translated into themes. Themes were tabulated, alongside study

characteristics to allow for comparison between studies. Relationships in the data were then explored to develop a preliminary synthesis.

To add rigour, J.G. discussed findings with social work (A.M. and S.P.) and non-social work collaborators (academics B.C., T.M. and R.D. and experts by experience, F.C.R., T.D., D.G. and J.S.) and reflected on how her positionality as a practising social worker shaped her interpretation.

Results

Fifty articles, describing forty-six discrete studies, met the criteria.

Three studies were theses, one a report and the remainder was articles from peer-reviewed journals.

Twenty-four studies were rated as high-quality, and twenty-six as medium quality.

Most studies were conducted in the USA (nineteen) or the UK (eleven).

Respondents were predominantly female, in line with the demographics for the profession (Department for Education, 2022). Two studies recruited students.

Thirteen papers used interviews and/or focus groups to look at social workers' 'espoused' perceptions. Most were conducted in the UK (eleven) or Ireland (two); seven were conducted after 2010. Eleven of these were assessed as high quality. A further seventeen studies, of which two were from the same project (Rose and Meezan, 1995, 1996), used surveys containing case vignettes. The majority of these were completed in the USA (thirteen) and prior to 2000 (ten); five were rated as high quality.

Of studies of 'enacted' perceptions (perceptions implicit in practice decisions), seven studies conducted qualitative analyses of case files and one of serious case reviews. These were all conducted in the UK and Ireland. Seven were of high quality. Three reported findings from the same project (Horwath, 2001, 2004, 2005). Finally, eleven analysed administrative records, of which six were high-quality. These were conducted in the USA, Canada and Australia. Finally, two studies, of which one high-quality study, observed social workers' practice.

The main themes identified in the selected studies were:

1. Definitions of harmful neglect
2. Perceived risk factors for neglect
3. The priority afforded to neglect.

Definitions of harmful neglect

Neglect is a multi-faceted issue

Qualitative studies selected found that social workers had complex and diverse understandings of neglect (Stone, 1998; Coope and Theobald, 2006).

Perceived components of neglect included child and parent factors, family dynamics, compliance and wider societal issues (Stone, 1998). Neglect was perceived to manifest in relation to both physical and psychological needs (Horwath, 2001; Coope and Theobald, 2006).

Definitions of neglect are not fixed

Several studies demonstrated that social workers' views about neglect were not entirely consistent (Ashton, 1999; Berrick et al., 2020; Bolton et al., 2021). The agreement was lowest, at one point as low as 16 per cent, about vignettes classified by an 'expert' as constituting moderate harm (Arruabarrena and De Paúl, 2012; Bolton et al., 2021) and about age-appropriate levels of supervision (Youssef and Atta, 1998; Arruabarrena and De Paúl, 2012). Training in standardised assessment tools only partially improved consistency (Arruabarrena and De Paúl, 2012).

Social workers recognised this complexity. Sixty-seven per cent agreed with the statement, 'subjective information influences decision-making in cases of child neglect' (Horwath, 2001, p. 58). Qualitative studies reported reflections such as 'there are no systems to say when enough is enough' (Horwath, 2001, p. 93) (see also Chaudhry, 2016, p. 80; Casey and Hackett, 2021, p. 2105).

Perceived risk factors for neglect

Younger children are perceived to be more vulnerable

The selected studies did not test child variables systematically. Only three survey vignettes featured children over eleven and none depicted children over fourteen years. Results were sometimes reported in broad categories, for example, '6–17s' (Bérubé et al., 2017).

Nonetheless, there was evidence that age influences social workers' perceptions of neglect. In their espoused and enacted perceptions, social workers were more likely to be concerned about basic care, emotional warmth and guidance (Bérubé et al., 2017) and recommend removal (Mandel et al., 1995) for younger children. Practitioners commented that teenagers could take some responsibility for their own needs (Hicks and Stein, 2015).

Analysis of child protection services databases showed no significant difference in the likelihood that social workers would substantiate allegations of neglect for younger children and adolescents (Raissian et al., 2014). However, adolescents were less likely to be referred in the first place, so it is possible that any referrals were for particularly serious matters, explaining this difference.

Mothers are more frequently held to account for neglect than fathers

One study found that, once identified as perpetrators of neglect, males and females had comparable odds of their child being removed (Crawford and Bradley, 2016). However, when first identifying perpetrators, there was evidence that assessments and interventions more frequently focused on the mother (Horwath, 2004, 2005; Farmer and Lutman, 2014; Bérubé *et al.*, 2017). One explanation is linked to the prioritisation of physical care needs (discussed below), which tradition depicts as a mother's responsibility (Scourfield, 2000). An alternative explanation is of pragmatism since attempts to engage fathers were not always successful (Horwath, 2005; Farmer and Lutman, 2014); however, worryingly, sometimes no effort was evident (Daniel and Baldwin, 2001; Horwath, 2005).

Parental substance misuse, mental ill-health and learning difficulties are perceived risk factors for neglect

The selected studies suggested that social workers believed that certain parental factors increased the risk of neglect including substance misuse (Stone, 1998; Forrester, 2000; Horwath, 2001; Coope and Theobald, 2006; Bérubé *et al.*, 2017; Freisthler *et al.*, 2017), learning difficulties/disability (Proctor, 2012; Tefre, 2017) and mental ill-health (no studies differentiated between mental illnesses). It was felt that these parental factors led to neglect through inadequate supervision, inadequate safety, stimulation, emotional warmth and guidance and boundaries (Bérubé *et al.*, 2017), failure to meet immediate needs (Roscoe *et al.*, 2021) and financial difficulties which made basic necessities unaffordable (Horwath, 2001). There was also evidence that the social acceptability of parental behaviour influenced perceptions, with greater concern about misuse of illegal drugs than of alcohol or prescription drugs (Forrester, 2000; Freisthler *et al.*, 2017).

Nonetheless, the studies found that social workers still felt sympathy towards parents with learning disabilities (Proctor, 2012) and mental ill-health (Tufford *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, one study found that student social workers over-identified with the parent and failed to address the risk to the child during a practice observation (Tufford *et al.*, 2015).

In decision-making about neglect, social workers may place more weight on indicators of future risk, such as parental factors, than on harm that has already occurred

Two studies suggested that parental factors were the strongest influence on perceptions of neglect (Stone, 1998; Tefre, 2017), one child factors (Chaudhry, 2016). However, the latter study placed child factors at the

top of a list of survey responses, which may have led respondents, whereas the former studies coded answers to open questions.

Although social workers stated that they would consider the impact on the child (Hicks and Stein, 2015) there was little evidence of this in case files (Daniel and Baldwin, 2001; Horwath, 2005; Horwath and Tarr, 2015). Rather, assessments often discussed parenting in a ‘vacuum’ (Horwath and Tarr, 2015, p. 1388) and treated siblings as an undifferentiated group (Casey and Hackett, 2021). This may reflect a lack of recording or difficulty measuring the impact on a child.

Material deprivation of itself is not considered to constitute neglect. However, practitioners do not always fully recognise how poverty exacerbates other risk factors

In both high-income (UK) (Stone, 1998) and low-income (Guatemala) (Coope and Theobald, 2006) countries, social workers reported that poverty often coexisted with neglect.

In their ‘espoused’ perceptions, social workers stated that material deprivation did not itself amount to neglect, rather, a deficit of caregiving also had to be present (Stone, 1998). Studies of ‘enacted’ perceptions (practice) confirmed that caregiver concerns were present in 99 per cent of neglect investigations (Palmer et al., 2022) and that the presence of such risk factors predicted social workers’ response better than poverty (Gordon and Gibbons, 1998) or housing (Hirsch et al., 2015) alone. Some social workers also recognised that emotional neglect could occur within affluent families (Bernard, 2019; Bernard and Greenwood, 2019).

In instances where the link between poverty and neglect was obvious, such as a lack of essentials, social workers exercised flexible thresholds: ‘Is there no food in house because it is dole day...?’ (Horwath, 2001, p. 59). Furthermore, two older studies found that if all other factors were kept equal (including parental risk factors), social workers were less likely to escalate interventions when responding to case vignettes (Mandel et al., 1995) or actual cases (Gordon and Gibbons, 1998) concerning children from certain low-income groups, for example, lone parents. This suggests that social workers were influenced by parental capacity and intent. Non-punitive interventions might be offered in such circumstances (Coope and Theobald, 2006; Beck and Vornanen, 2019; Abdullah et al., 2021). Indeed, there was evidence from serious case reviews that sometimes practitioners sometimes overcompensated, ‘normalising’ neglect in the context of poverty and overlooking more serious concerns (Taylor et al., 2024).

Thus, in their discourse, some social workers claimed to achieve a binary distinction between poverty and neglect, for example, ‘it is not because of a lack of will, but... a lack of resources’ (Beck and

Vornanen, 2019, p. 23) (see also Coope and Theobald, 2006, p. 531; Casey and Hackett, 2021, p. 2105).

Nonetheless, there was evidence that in practice social workers did not always differentiate between poverty and neglect as neatly as they believed. They sometimes underestimated the prevalence of hardship (Bérubé *et al.*, 2017) and failed to fully recognise how poverty contributed to parental risk factors. Comments in the ‘environmental’ section of assessments were often tokenistic and not integrated with the rest of the assessment (Daniel and Baldwin, 2001; Casey and Hackett, 2021). Some social workers recognised this risk of perpetuating structural inequalities: ‘it does feel like you are ... persecuting women for the inadequacies of society’ (Scourfield, 2000, p. 379). They were also frustrated by barriers when pursuing concerns about more affluent, powerful families (Bernard, 2019; Bernard and Greenwood, 2019).

The priority afforded to neglect

The greatest concern is for physical and supervisory neglect

Vignettes concerning physical needs featured in ten of the survey studies and inadequate supervision in nine (one did not break findings down into neglect subtypes). These were almost entirely rated towards the higher end of the severity scale (Craft and Staudt, 1991; Segal, 1992; Rose and Meezan, 1995, 1996; Dubowitz *et al.*, 1998; Youssef and Atta, 1998; Ashton, 1999; Rose, 1999; Proctor, 2012). The only exception was a medium-quality study, which reported the average for a group of vignettes at slightly below the half-way mark (Rose and Meezan, 1995, 1996; Rose, 1999). Concern was highest when the risk of harm was imminent, such as failure to give essential medical care, and lowest when the harm was more distal, such as wearing ill-fitting clothing (Craft and Staudt, 1991).

Emotional neglect was featured in seven vignette studies; two reported distinct findings about behavioural neglect. These were rated as slightly above the middle of the seriousness scale (Segal, 1992; Rose and Meezan, 1995, 1996; Dubowitz *et al.*, 1998; Rose, 1999), other than very extreme examples, for example, ‘... parents have kept their child locked in since birth ...’ (Segal, 1992). Fewer than 30 per cent of social workers thought the emotional neglect vignettes would meet the threshold for statutory intervention (Craft and Staudt, 1991).

Only three studies included discrete findings about educational neglect (Craft and Staudt, 1991; Segal, 1992; Youssef and Atta, 1998). More than half of social workers considered these to amount to maltreatment (Segal, 1992; Youssef and Atta, 1998), yet a minority felt that concerns would meet the threshold for statutory intervention (Craft and Staudt, 1991). Vignettes featuring non-school attendance were considered to be

much more serious (28–50 per cent would substantiate) than a lack of toys (4 per cent) (Craft and Staudt, 1991).

Comparing the relative priority of these neglect subtypes, two high-quality studies agreed that physical and supervisory neglect were perceived as the most serious and most likely to meet the threshold for substantiation, whilst emotional neglect was the lowest priority (Craft and Staudt, 1991; Youssef and Atta, 1998). Three other studies found that emotional/psychological neglect was rated higher than physical (Rose and Meezan, 1995, 1996; Dubowitz *et al.*, 1998). However, the latter study's data appear to contain an error. The quality of these studies was also impaired by including in this category vignettes which could equally be classified as inadequate supervision or physical abuse.

A slightly contrasting picture emerged when social workers were asked about their priorities in abstract terms. More agreed with the statement 'the most damaging environment for children is one of high criticism and low warmth' (53 per cent, $n = 21$) than 'the essential aspect of parenting is providing for a child's physical needs and safety' (33 per cent, $n = 13$) (Horwath, 2001, 2004). This may reflect a disconnect between social workers' values and their ability to respond to emotionally harmful actions in practice. Nonetheless, there remained a sizeable minority of participants who prioritised physical over emotional needs (Horwath, 2004).

Unfortunately, few studies of perceptions 'enacted' in practice differentiated between neglect subtypes. Those which did suggest a similar order of priority: abandonment and lack of supervision were the most common reasons for investigations (Palmer *et al.*, 2022) and court proceedings (Farmer and Lutman, 2014). Educational neglect was the least likely (Van Wert *et al.*, 2018). Two older studies found that emotional neglect was rarely mentioned in case files (Horwath, 2004) and there was instead a 'preoccupation with dirt, disorder and diet' (Scourfield, 2000, p. 377). Unfortunately, we found no more recent evidence.

Neglect is a lower priority than other forms of maltreatment

The selected studies provided evidence of how social workers prioritise neglect in comparison to other forms of abuse. Only three such survey studies were rated as high quality (Abner, 1996; Youssef and Atta, 1998; Stokes and Taylor, 2014) but the same trends were seen in medium-quality studies (Ashton, 1999; Rossi *et al.*, 1999; Beck and Vornanen, 2019), namely that vignettes depicting neglect were consistently rated as less serious than those featuring physical or sexual abuse. Interestingly, this pattern held even when the physical consequences from neglect were more serious (Abner, 1996), suggesting that parental intent influenced perceptions.

Studies of perceptions 'enacted' in practice showed a similar picture. High-quality analyses of administrative data showed that children investigated for neglect were less likely to be placed on the child protection

register (Gordon and Gibbons, 1998) and to be removed from their parents (Crawford and Bradley, 2016) or referred for mental health support (Fong *et al.*, 2018) than those investigated for other forms of abuse. Removal often only happened after a child had experienced a different form of maltreatment (Barber and Delfabbro, 2009; Farmer and Lutman, 2014). One exception to this found that children investigated for neglect were more likely to receive ongoing child welfare services than those investigated for other forms of maltreatment once other variables were controlled for (King *et al.*, 2021). This difference may be because the study area used an assessment tool which considered future as well as past harm.

Discussion

This review is the first to explore how social workers define neglect. It contributes to the wider literature in several ways.

First, neglect is a complex, multi-faceted issue and practitioners' definitions are not entirely consistent.

Secondly, there is evidence that social workers' working definitions of neglect encompass the risk of future harm as well as past events, with particular emphasis on parental risk factors.

Thirdly, there is a suggestion that social workers consider parental intent when assessing neglect. This may reflect a belief that intent predicts recurrence and also anxiety about blaming vulnerable parents who cause harm unintentionally. Nevertheless, this concern with parental interests could mean that the child's needs get overlooked.

Fourthly, this review suggests that, although social workers recognise children's emotional needs, in practice, priority is afforded to the imminent physical needs of younger children. Sometimes, this may be a response to high-profile child deaths (e.g. in Scourfield, 2000) but it appears to be a wider issue which we suspect reflects the difficulty of evidencing emotional harm.

The review also suggests that social workers may not prioritise neglect as much as other forms of maltreatment. Given the adverse effects of neglect cited in the introduction, this review raises the possibility that children experiencing neglect, particularly emotional neglect, may receive insufficient support, especially at an early stage. Social workers may also be intervening unnecessarily with children who experience deprivation but are emotionally well (Scourfield, 2000). Caution is needed, however, since much of the literature on the long-term sequelae of child neglect uses participant self-reporting, which carries recall bias (Stoltenborgh *et al.*, 2015). To better understand whether social workers' attitudes to neglect are proportionate, further evidence is needed about outcomes for children where neglect allegations are not substantiated, ideally from a prospective cohort study or administrative data.

A final contribution from this review is that social workers have good intentions in relation to poverty but may not always fully realise these. The review found a lack of discussion from social workers about how poverty relates to other perceived risk factors for neglect. This may be a product of the studies' research design but there was some evidence that opportunities to consider structural factors were not always utilised optimally. The reasons for this are unclear but it is possible that social workers only documented factors that they could influence.

Gaps in knowledge

The review highlighted several gaps in knowledge of how social workers perceive neglect.

A first limitation is about emotional, educational and behavioural neglect, which featured infrequently in the selected studies. Additionally, since most knowledge comes from vignette studies published pre-2000, evidence is lacking about contemporary issues such as preventable childhood obesity, dental decay or online supervision.

A second limitation is about perceptions of neglect of older children and those with disabilities. This is at odds with the needs of practice. Epidemiological studies have shown that children with disabilities are more likely to be referred due to concerns about neglect (Sullivan and Knutson, 2000). Furthermore, in 2021 in England, 38 per cent ($n = 9540$) of children subject to a child protection plan for neglect were aged ten or over (Department for Education, 2023). Academic literature is also increasingly recognising the link between adolescent neglect and exploitation (Hicks and Stein, 2015; Raws, 2019).

A third limitation is about cumulative harm. Neglect is frequently a chronic problem (Stone, 1998), yet the vignette studies only contributed to knowledge about isolated incidents or risk factors. This risks under-representing the perceived seriousness of neglect. Further information is needed about where the 'tipping point' is believed to be for intervention. Detailed analysis of case files would be beneficial here, as would questionnaires asking about responses to a series of vignettes.

A fourth limitation concerns differences in perceptions over time and between countries. Knowledge was hampered by the lack of a consistent instrument with which to measure perceptions and a change in dominant methodologies, from vignette survey studies prior to 2000 to qualitative methods since.

A final comment is about the overall quality of studies. Fewer than half of the studies selected were of high quality. Sampling strategies were a persistent weakness. Convenience methods dominated and their implications were not always adequately evaluated. This means that social workers' views are likely to be more diverse than the selected studies suggest.

Limitations of this review

The search strategy only included articles in English, creating a geographical bias.

This review also only included studies with discrete findings about neglect yet as many as half of the children referred experienced more than one form of maltreatment (Euser *et al.*, 2013). This may have resulted in some over-sharp distinctions in findings about neglect and limits generalisability to practice.

Only one researcher assessed the quality of studies and their subsequent weight of evidence, creating some risk of bias.

This review also did not consider the context to social workers' perceptions.

Conclusion

For practice, this review leads to the following conclusions. First, social workers may need to give higher priority to neglect, particularly emotional neglect and neglect of older children. To achieve this, they need to recognise the risk of long-term harm and better evidence of how neglect affects individual children. Achieving this, whilst simultaneously responding to referrals concerning imminent physical risk, will have training and resource implications. Secondly, social workers should ensure that they explicitly capture information about the societal context to neglect allegations, including the role of poverty and gender. This will make assessments fairer and ensure that opportunities for intervention are not missed.

For child welfare researchers, the review implies that when administrative data state that an allegation of neglect was substantiated, this most likely involved physical or supervisory neglect, and an imminent risk of harm. Children may have experienced emotional, behavioural or educational neglect without this being substantiated. It also suggests that practitioners' perceptions vary somewhat, which might help explain outlying results. Finally, there is evidence that social workers have good intentions regarding poverty and make some attempt to address this, within the limitations of resources.

Supplementary material

[Supplementary material](#) is available at *British Journal of Social Work Journal* online.

Funding

Jennifer Gibbs currently receives funding via an National Institute for Health and Care Research Pre-Doctoral Fellowship, award number NIHR302735. The article was largely complete by the time that the fellowship commenced but some fellowship time was spent finishing the work.

Conflict of interest statement: None declared.

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British Journal of Social Work, 2024, 54, 3619–3637

<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcae102>

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