



THE GREAT RECESSION AND HIGH-FREQUENCY SPANKING

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This brief is part of a new series of research briefs by Princeton University's Center for Research on Child Wellbeing (CRCW) and Center for Health and Wellbeing and the Columbia Population Research Center (CPRC) and The National Center for Children and Families (NCCF) at Columbia University. The briefs look at the impacts of the recent "Great Recession" on low-income families' and children's wellbeing. These briefs distill findings from analyses of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study. Please direct questions or comments to Christopher Wimer, Director of Special Projects at CPRC, at cw2727@columbia.edu.

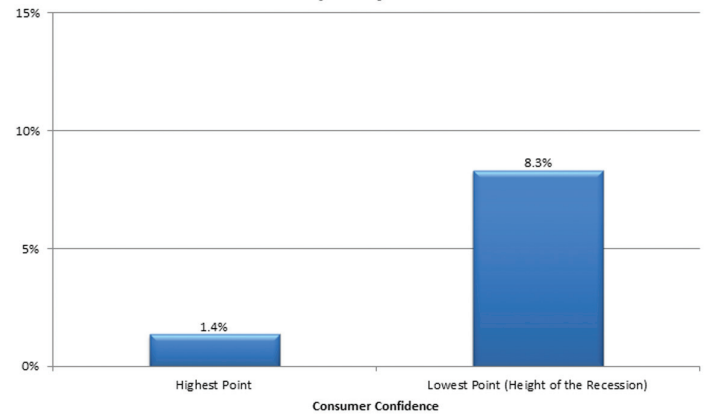
The Great Recession severely disrupted the economy and led to an unprecedented fall in consumer confidence, as well as large spikes in the unemployment and foreclosure rates. Yet its impact on parenting and child wellbeing is still poorly understood. Harsh economic conditions may result in harsh parenting practices, as parents respond to the fear and stress associated with deteriorating economic conditions – but little is currently known about the extent of such responses in the Great Recession.

In a recent paper, the Columbia Population Research Center's Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, William Schneider, and Jane Waldfogel offer new insight into the connection between economic distress and child wellbeing. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS) [See text box], the authors investigate whether the Great Recession was associated with increased use of high-frequency maternal spanking, which previous studies have shown elevates the risk of child abuse. Three key findings emerged:

- 1) Declines in consumer confidence, but not unemployment or foreclosure rates, were associated with increased risk of high-frequency spanking;
- 2) High-frequency spankers were three times more likely as other parents to have been contacted by Child Protective Services (CPS); and
- 3) The link between declining consumer confidence and high-frequency spanking was especially pronounced among more educated and higher-income mothers.

Declines in consumer confidence are associated with increased use of high frequency spanking. High frequency use of spanking – defined as use of spanking 11 or more times in the previous year – rose as consumer confidence fell, even after controlling for previous use of spanking as well as unemployment and foreclosure rates. For each 5-point decrease in consumer confidence, the percentage of children spanked at high frequency increased by approximately one percentage point. When consumer confidence was at its best, just over 1% of children were spanked at high frequency (as might be expected, since 9 year olds are not usually spanked that frequently). But at its worst at the height of the recession, more than 8% of the children in the sample were predicted to be spanked at high frequency (see Figure 1). The authors note that consumer confidence is a strong measure of fear and insecurity about the surrounding economy, which may be why it is a more important predictor of harsh parenting practices than actual unemployment or foreclosure rates.

Figure 1: Percent of Children Spanked at High Frequency



Families that use high frequency spanking are more likely to be contacted by Child Protective Services. Families that reported using high frequency spanking were three times more likely to have been contacted by Child Protective Services (CPS) in the past year than non-spankers. The authors found that nearly 7% of families that used high frequency spanking were contacted by CPS, while only 2% of families that never spanked were contacted (see Figure 2 on next page). This means that high frequency spanking, which increased during the recession, may indicate elevated risk for child abuse.

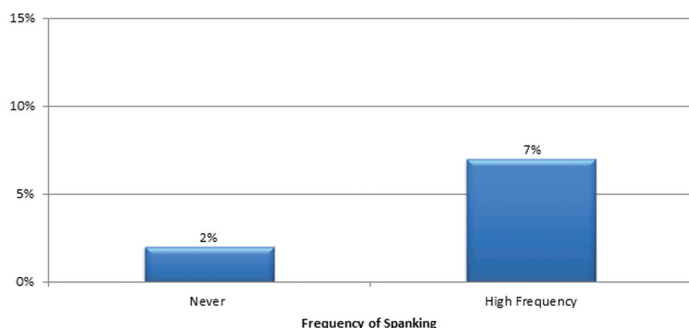
The Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study follows a cohort of nearly 5,000 children born in large U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000 (roughly three-quarters of whom were born to unmarried parents).

The Study consists of interviews with both mothers and fathers at birth and again when children are ages one, three, five, and nine, plus in-home assessments of children and their home environments at ages three, five, and nine. The interviews collect rich information on attitudes, relationships, parenting behavior, demographic characteristics, health (mental and physical), economic and employment status, neighborhood characteristics, and program participation. The in-home assessment collects information on children's cognitive and emotional development, health, and home environment. Several collaborative studies provide additional information on parents' medical, employment and incarceration histories, religion, child care and early childhood education.

The Fragile Families study provides a unique window into the impacts of the Great Recession, as data were collected from these families when their children turned 9 years old, which happened between 2007 and 2009—precisely the years over which the Great Recession fell.

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Figure 2: Percent of Families Contacted by CPS



The link between low consumer confidence and increased use of high frequency spanking was particularly strong for more educated and higher-income families. For families with more than a high school education, each one-point drop in consumer confidence increased the odds of using high frequency spanking by 9%. For families with income greater than 200% of the federal poverty line, the odds of using high frequency spanking increased by over 30% for each one-point decline in consumer confidence. More advantaged families therefore increased their use of spanking during the Great Recession. However, for less-advantaged families, defined as those with income below 200% of the federal poverty line or with a high school education or less, there was little evidence of an association between consumer confidence and the risk of high-frequency spanking. The authors speculate that more educated and higher-income families may have owned homes or stock that lost value as a result of the recession or they may have been more aware of the media coverage of the recession, making them more susceptible to a stressful response to the economic climate.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the Great Recession did indeed lead to harsher parenting practices, especially among more advantaged families who otherwise would have been unlikely to engage in frequent spanking. And given that high-frequency spanking is a risk factor for child abuse, these findings suggest that the experience of the Great Recession exacerbated the risks of child maltreatment.

Source

Brooks-Gunn, J., Schneider, W., & Waldfogel, J. (2013). The Great Recession and the Risk for Child Maltreatment. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 37, 721-729.

This research summary is a brief description of key findings from work carried out under the Russell Sage Foundation's Great Recession Initiative. More detail about that initiative and the projects funded can be found on the RSF website at russellsage.org/research/social-effects-great-recession.

Russell Sage has also co-sponsored a website to disseminate scholarly work on the effects of the Great Recession. The Recession Trends website can be found at stanford.edu/group/recessiontrends/cgi-bin/web.

In addition to a data-graphing utility that allows users to graph trends in key recession-related indicators, the research summaries, along with the more detailed working papers and research briefs can also be found at the Recession Trends website.