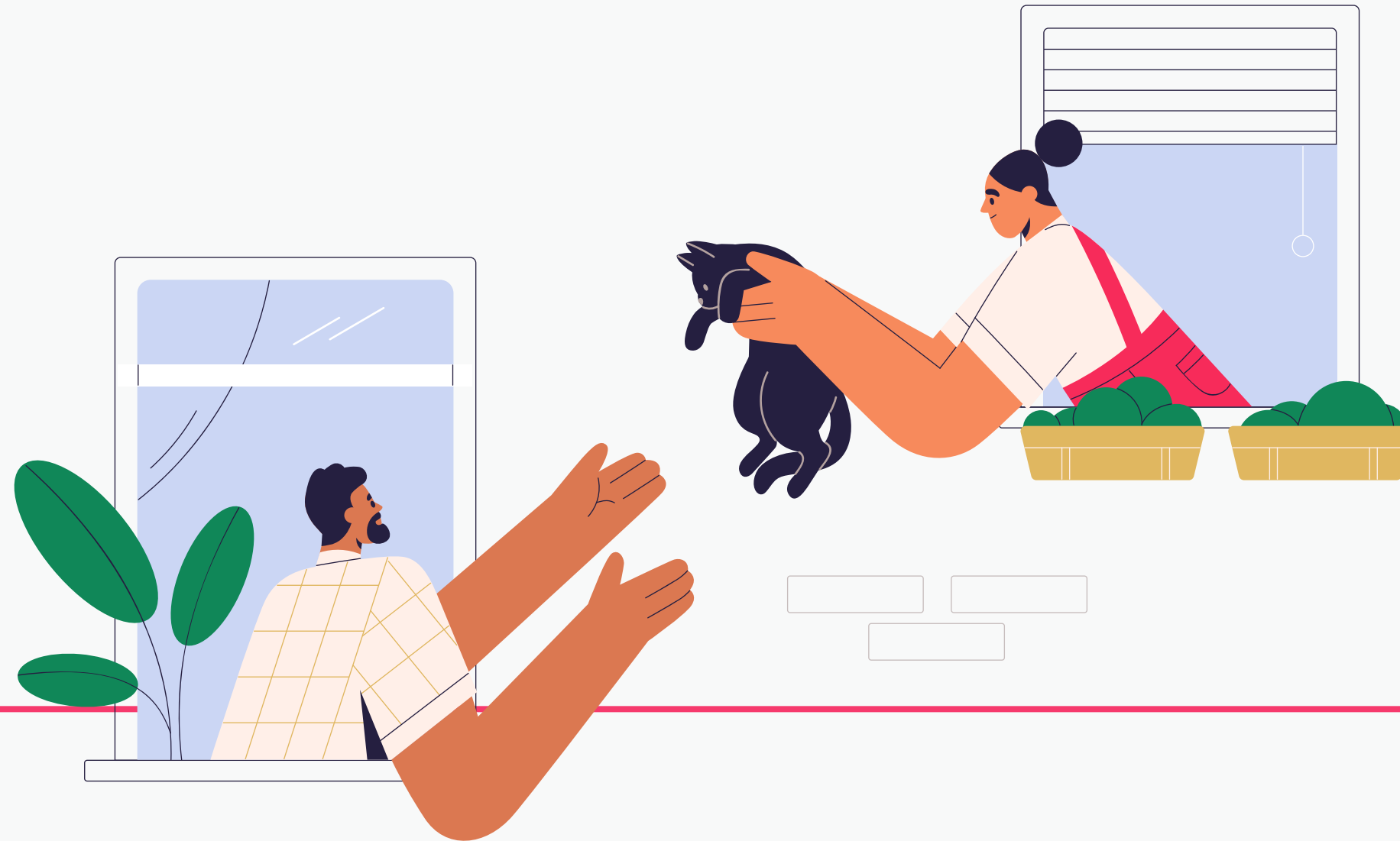




How Neighborhood Conditions Can Shape Child Welfare Involvement

A review of the research

A growing body of research suggests that neighborhood conditions have an independent effect on child maltreatment and child welfare involvement — and that placed-based strategies can offer another tool to support families and combat family separation

FPP's full explainer: [**How Neighborhood Conditions Can Shape Family Life and Influence Child Welfare Involvement, Explained.**](#)

This slide set highlights 23 studies on two major areas of neighborhood research:



For a deep dive into dozens of studies, read our [Explainer](#)

The explainer and slide set are not comprehensive research reviews; FPP reviewed 95 articles in preliminary screening and selected 31 based on relevance to the key areas outlined in the explainer. See the full list of studies reviewed [here](#).

Built Environment

Physical features of a neighborhood that shape everyday family life:

- greenspace & playgrounds
- libraries
- walkability
- housing quality
- access to affordable food and transportation
- availability of services, like healthcare, and social resources like community centers



How Might Neighborhood Built Environment Influence Child Maltreatment? Caregiver Perceptions (Haas et al., 2018)

400 caregivers identified direct and indirect impacts of the built environment on child welfare involvement:

- Shared public places act as “relief valves” that give children outlets and allow caregivers to rest and connect with others
- Neighborhood disorder and lack of resources affect families’ thresholds for navigating other everyday pressures
- The neighborhood's physical condition impacted caregivers' internalized sense of well-being

An illustration of a park scene. In the foreground, a woman in a green jacket and blue pants is walking towards the left, holding a small object in her hand. A young boy in a white hoodie and blue pants is sitting on a stone ledge, looking down at something in his hands. A white duck is standing on the ground near the boy. In the background, a man in a blue jacket and white pants is walking towards the left, and a woman in a grey coat and white pants is walking towards the right. There are trees with orange and yellow leaves, suggesting autumn. The sky is blue with some clouds.

BUILT ENVIRONMENT

“Community centers, playgrounds, libraries... things that the children can do that are positive, so parents can kind of get that reprieve...maybe be at home prepping dinner or just having a moment to relax.”

— (Haas et al., 2018)

A colorful illustration of a diverse neighborhood scene. On the left, a man in a yellow jacket and backpack walks past a barber shop with a sign that says 'BARBERSHOP'. In the center, a woman in a white shirt and red headscarf sits on a black suitcase. To her right, a woman in a green jacket and a man in a black jacket walk together. Further right, a woman in a white shirt and brown skirt carries a large bag of groceries. In the background, a man in a white shirt and brown jacket walks, and a building with a fire is visible on the far right.

DISORDER

From Neighborhood to Household: Connections Between Neighborhood Vacant and Abandoned Property and Family Violence (Fleckman et al., 2024)

From surveys of 218 mother-child pairs:

- Mothers living in neighborhoods with more vacant/abandoned buildings had over 2x the rate of self-reported maltreatment and neglect
- Suggests a unique and direct effect of physical neighborhood characteristics

DISORDER



“Community-engaged efforts to improve the built environment by mitigating or maintaining neighborhood vacant and cited property should continue to be a focus of interventions for reducing family violence”

– Fleckman et al., 2024

DISORDER



- Less physical disorder (i.e. graffiti, litter, abandoned cars) and social disorder (street harassment, public intoxication) was associated with lower rates of indicated reports (Molnar et al., 2016)
- More positive neighborhood perception (i.e. less litter, drug activity) was related to lower self-reported maltreatment — though not neglect (Solomon et al., 2023)

DISORDER



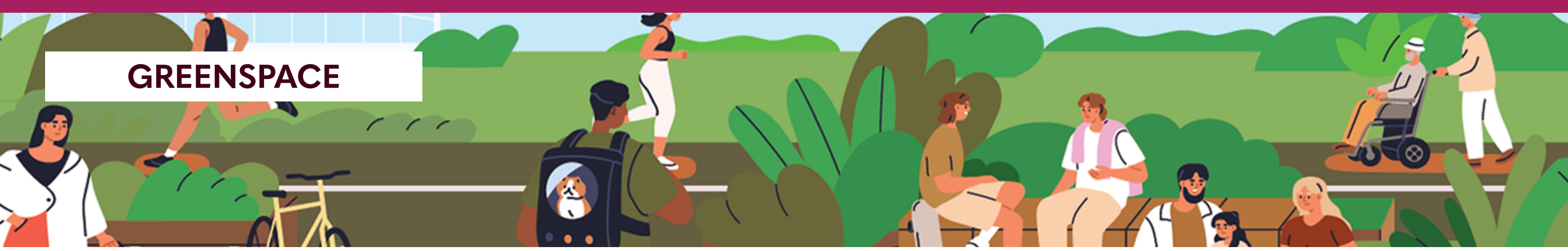
“Neighborhoods with high levels of problems may lack opportunities for children to play outside and engage with peers, increasing behavior problems that strain caregivers.”

— Solomon et al. (2023)

GREENSPACE



- Areas with the lowest tree canopy and green space had the highest reports of child abuse and neglect (Barboza-Salerno, Duhaney et al., 2025)
- More neighborhood greenery, like tree cover and park space, was associated with decreased risk of substantiated child maltreatment, cases accepted for services and foster care placement – even when controlling for poverty and other factors (He et al., 2024)

An illustration of a park scene. In the foreground, a woman in a white jacket and red skirt stands on the left. A yellow bicycle is parked nearby. A man in a green shirt and backpack with a dog's face on it is walking. A woman in a black top and white pants is running. In the background, a group of people are sitting on a wooden bench, and an older man in a white hat is being pushed in a stroller by another person. The scene is set in a park with green grass, bushes, and trees under a blue sky.

GREENSPACE

Associations Between Micro-Neighborhood Greening and Child Maltreatment (Sokol et al., 2022)

In almost 10,000 micro-neighborhoods, summer lawn maintenance of vacant properties (greening) was associated with fewer maltreatment reports:

- Greening vacant properties was associated with 57% fewer reports
- Relationship remained after adjusting for other variables (e.g., neighborhood disadvantage, poverty and crime)
- Pattern also remained “within-neighborhoods,” meaning more maintenance in the same neighborhood was associated with fewer reports

RESOURCES & SERVICES



- The accessibility of stores that accept SNAP associated with fewer hotline calls (-4.4%) and fewer substantiated investigations (-11.3%) (Bullinger, 2021)
- Results are mixed on whether closer access to social services (i.e. substance abuse, mental health) are associated with fewer maltreatment reports. Some found this pattern, others found the opposite or no relationship (Morton et al., 2014; Maguire-Jack & Klein, 2015; Maguire-Jack & Negash, 2016).

NEGATIVE BUILT ENVIRONMENT



- Results are also mixed on how negative features like liquor stores impact involvement and maltreatment.
- Some found a higher density of bars was associated with higher rates of physical maltreatment, reporting and foster care entries over time, although others found mixed or opposite patterns (Freisthler et al., 2007; 2014; Morton et al., 2014, Freisthler & Holmes, 2012).

NEGATIVE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

“Family violence occurs in the context of deeply rooted structural and social inequities that are reflected in the built environment.”

– Fleckman et al., 2024



SOCIAL FABRIC

Relationships that knit a community together; between people and between informal groups, neighborhood orgs and institutions.



Collective efficacy describes a sense of place and belonging that enhances shared responsibility and prompts action to address concerns. Neighborhoods with high collective efficacy have:

- lower crime
- stronger civic engagement
- greater resilience during crises

SOCIAL FABRIC

- Several child welfare studies show that stronger social networks and higher participation in community life are linked with lower child welfare involvement (Ma et al., 2018; Molnar et al, 2016)
- Participation in neighborhood institutions (such as churches or community-based organizations) was associated with lower self-reported maltreatment (Cao & Maguire-Jack, 2016)
- Higher neighborhood poverty was linked to more substantiated maltreatment because of weaker social cohesion in these neighborhoods, not poverty alone (McLeigh et al., 2018)

SOCIAL FABRIC

Social Capital and the Nonprofit Infrastructure; an Ecological Study of Child Maltreatment (Mayer, 2023)

Neighborhoods with higher civic engagement and nonprofit density had fewer maltreatment reports:

- Each 1% increase in civic engagement was linked to a 3% drop in the reporting rate
- More nonprofits also linked to lower maltreatment rates, each 1% rise in density predicted a 14% decrease
- These reinforce one another too: civic engagement had a stronger link to lower reporting in neighborhoods with more nonprofit density

SOCIAL FABRIC



“Nonprofits may spark activism, fostering or maintaining social networks, and motivating residents to improve their communities.”

– Mayer, 2023

COLLECTIVE EFFICACY

- Neighborhoods with a stronger social fabric had lower substantiated cases of neglect, physical abuse and sexual abuse, even after taking into account factors like poverty, according to a study that used 1995-2005 data from Robert Sampson's landmark study on Chicago neighborhoods to examine the impact of collective efficacy and other social processes (i.e. social fabric) on child welfare involvement (Molnar et al, 2016)
- Several studies found that higher perceived collective efficacy was associated with lower maltreatment; although others found no direct relationship (Wang & Frost, 2025; Kim & Maguire-Jack, 2015; Freisthler & Maguire-Jack, 2015; Maguire-Jack & Font, 2017; Barnhart & Maguire-Jack, 2016).

The Effect of Collective Efficacy on Child Welfare Involvement in NYC

Data analysis by the Columbia University Center on Poverty and Social Policy found that, in New York City, collective efficacy has an independent effect on child welfare involvement at the Community District level.

Neighborhoods with higher collective efficacy had lower indicated investigation rates and foster care entries in 2022, even after taking into account neighborhood poverty and other disadvantage.

Analysis by Christian Baclao, Christopher T. Wimer and Sophie Collyer, Poverty Tracker at the Columbia University Center on Poverty and Social Policy. Data provided by ACS.





“Strategies to mobilize neighborhood-level protective factors may decrease child maltreatment more effectively than individual and family-focused efforts alone.”

– Molnar et al., 2016

Questions?

Contact FPP!

info@familypolicynyc.org

