

Behind Closed Doors: Socioeconomic Inequality and Children’s Exposure to Violence in the Home

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Introduction

Children who witness violence in the home are at a greater risk for a range of negative outcomes, including emotional distress, behavioral challenges, and poor cognitive development. These impacts are often shaped by broader social conditions—particularly family socioeconomic status (SES), which includes parental education levels, family income, and household resources (Davis-Kean et al., 2021).

Lower SES households are more likely to experience stressors that increase the risk of domestic violence. Parents with less education often have fewer financial opportunities, higher levels of stress, and limited access to parenting or coping resources (Hunter & Flores, 2020; Martins et al., 2023). These stressors may increase the likelihood of harsh discipline, conflict, or physical abuse in the home. Evidence also shows that low parental education is tied to poor child outcomes, including lower academic performance and more behavioral issues (Meltzer et al., 2009).

Despite this, few studies have explored the long-term, links between SES and child exposure to domestic violence. This research addresses that gap by examining data from the National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH). We focus on how SES and parental education levels relate to the likelihood of children witnessing violence in the home. Given known social and economic pressures, we expect to find that lower SES families face a higher risk of such exposure.

Research Question

- **How does family socioeconomic status (SES) influence the likelihood of children witnessing violence in the home?**

Hypothesis

- **Children from lower SES families are more likely to witness domestic violence than children from higher SES families.**

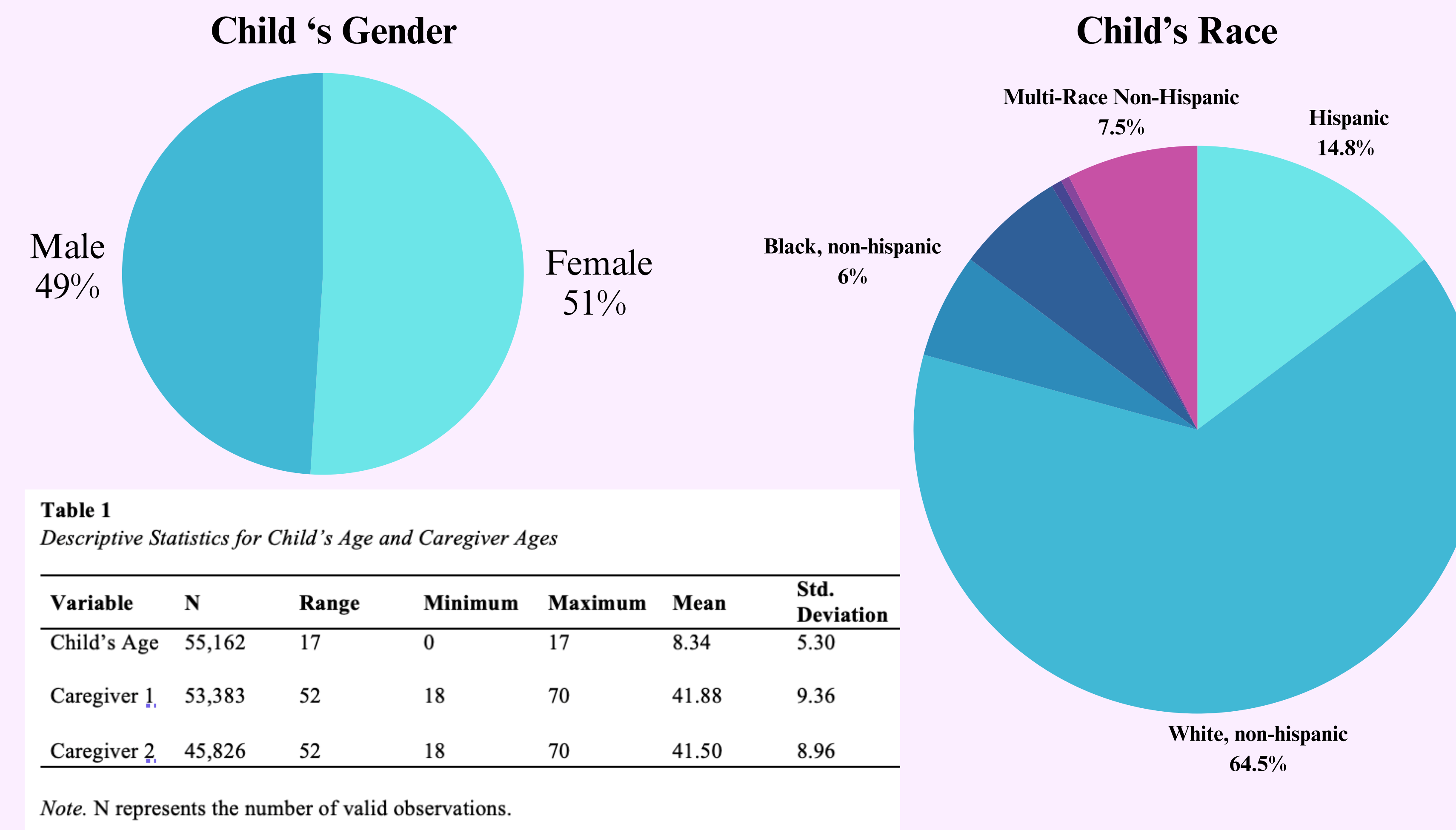
Methods

This study utilized data from the 2023 National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH), conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau. A cross-sectional design was used to perform a secondary data analysis exploring the relationship between family socioeconomic status (SES) and the likelihood of children witnessing violence in the home.

Participants

The dataset included responses from 55,162 children aged 0 to 17 years. For this analysis, the sample was restricted to cases with valid responses for three key variables: (1) household income, (2) parental education level, and (3) whether the child had witnessed violence in the home. These variables were used to assess SES and exposure to domestic violence.

Demographics



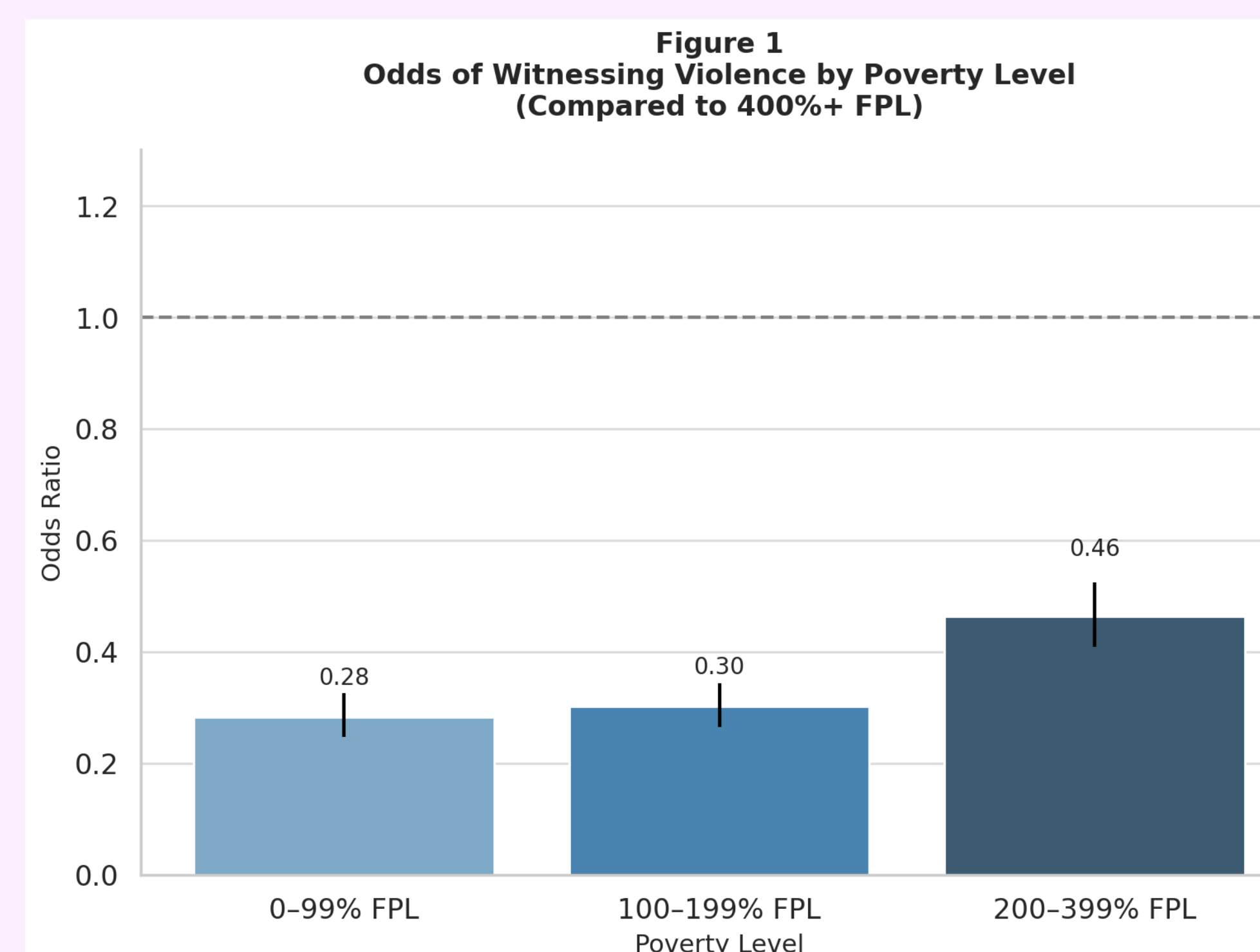
Results

A binary logistic regression was conducted to examine whether adult education and household poverty level predict the likelihood of a child witnessing violence in the home. The model was statistically significant ($\chi^2(4) = 1105.08, p < .001$), indicating the predictors reliably differentiated between children who had and had not witnessed violence.

Higher adult education was associated with a slight decrease in the likelihood of witnessing violence (OR = 0.989, 95% CI [0.988, 0.990], $p < .001^{**}$), suggesting a protective effect.

Poverty level was also a strong predictor. Compared to children from households at or above 400% of the federal poverty level (FPL), those from lower-income households had significantly greater odds of witnessing violence:

- Below 100% FPL: OR = 0.283 (72% higher odds), 95% CI [0.247, 0.325], $p < .001^*$
- 100–199% FPL: OR = 0.301 (70% higher odds), 95% CI [0.264, 0.343], $p < .001^{**}$
- 200–399% FPL: OR = 0.463 (54% higher odds), 95% CI [0.409, 0.524], $p < .001^{**}$



Discussion

We found that children from lower-income families are more likely to witness violence in the home. Poverty emerged as a strong predictor—children living in households earning less than 400% of the federal poverty level faced significantly higher odds of exposure compared to those from higher-income families. This suggests that economic hardship is closely linked to environments where domestic violence is more common. While adult education showed a statistically significant protective effect, its influence was modest compared to household income.

These findings align with previous research indicating that financial stressors such as food insecurity, housing instability, and limited access to social support, can increase family conflict and violence (Hunter & Flores, 2020; Martins et al., 2023). Economic pressures can heighten tension and reduce coping resources, thereby raising the risk of violent interactions within households.

However, it is important to note the limitations of the study’s model. Although socioeconomic status was a significant factor, it accounted for only a small portion of the variation in children’s exposure to violence. This highlights the complex nature of domestic violence, which is influenced by a wide range of psychological, social, and contextual factors beyond SES. Future research should therefore incorporate multiple risk and protective factors to better understand and address cases of family violence.

Limitations

- Limited explanatory power: SES accounts for only a small portion of children’s exposure to violence.
- Domestic violence is influenced by many psychological, social, and environmental factors not included in the model.
- Potential reporting bias due to reliance on self-reported data.
- Cross-sectional design limits ability to establish causality.
- Other relevant variables like family dynamics and community context were not fully addressed.
- Findings may not generalize to all populations or settings.

Acknowledgements

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References

