Introduction

In recent years social, environmental and family disadvantage and their effects have increasingly been the focus of political, sociological and medical studies (4–6, 15, 21). The relationship between the overall degree of disadvantage experienced by a family and the likelihood of childhood behavioural disturbance has been investigated in New Zealand (9, 10), in the USA (20) and in Germany (3). In each of these, greater familial disadvantage or adversity was clearly linked to increased risk of disturbance within the children, although this association tended to be weaker in older children (3). Disturbed family functioning has been postulated as one link between social and family adversity and childhood disturbance (10, 20) but the focus of these studies has been upon the functioning of the individual child and not upon that of the family or upon family relationships separate to adversity. Despite the extensive body of research into the family and aspects of family functioning there has been little formal study within individual families of the relationships between disturbance of family functioning and degree of disadvantage experienced.

The existence of a relationship between family and environmental disadvantages and disturbed family functioning is well accepted although its precise nature has not been fully explored. Until now present conceptions have tended to owe more either to demographic studies associating population variables or to psychodynamic or political and social theories than to any systematic empirical study of a cohort of individual families (4, 21, 22).

Previous research (12–15) has defined six particular types of environmental disadvantage, which may have predictive utility. These are the dependence of the family

Abstract  The co-existence of types of social, environmental and family disadvantage and domains of family dysfunction is explored through individual interviews and use of the Family Assessment Device in a cross-sectional study of 143 inner city families. The dependence upon social welfare by the family and the overall degree of disadvantage experienced both correlate significantly with all forms of family dysfunction. Marital disruption, poor physical care of the home or of the child(ren) and poor quality of mothering correlate significantly with difficulties both in role allocation and in affective involvement. Those families suffering more types of environmental disadvantage are more likely also to be dysfunctional in each domain of family life. Some possible mechanisms for these associations are highlighted and their implications for planning of effective interventions discussed.

Key words  Disadvantage – adversity – resilience – family functioning
upon social welfare, poor parental health, marital disruption, poor physical care of the child or home, poor quality of mothering and parental educational disadvantage. This paper reports on data from a further study of 143 inner city families each individually studied in depth as to the extent of these disadvantages that they were experiencing and for aspects of family dysfunction. Other aspects of this study including the beneficial effects to the children of play therapy intervention have been reported elsewhere (1, 2, 11).

Hypothesis

The initial hypothesis was that there would be significant specific associations between the various forms of social, environmental and family disadvantage and the different types of family dysfunction. A cross-sectional study cannot yield definitive information regarding causal mechanisms but by postulating in advance which specific associations might be found it can test some hypotheses regarding possible linkages and interactions.

Our basic hypothesis is that social and family disadvantage links adversely with a family’s ability to function across a range of domains. There is the further question: is any individual type of disadvantage adversely linked to particular areas of how a family might function? Here secondary hypotheses are that dependence upon social welfare (indicating significant financial stress or poverty) would be linked with impaired family functioning in a number of respects, that parental educational disadvantage could limit the potential of the family to develop healthy functioning particularly in developing successful problem solving strategies, and that multiple disadvantages and overall degree of disadvantage will be more linked to family dysfunction than will single and milder degrees.

Measures

The mothers were each interviewed by experienced research social workers using a combination of self-rating questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. These together enabled detailed information regarding the extent of disadvantage and assessment of family functioning to be obtained. The disadvantage data was gathered mainly from semi-structured interviews with mothers in their homes whereby also allowing direct observation of the fabric of the home and of mother-child interactions. Often additional information was also available from medical, social work or other statutory agencies. Assessment of family functioning was separately gathered by the mother’s completion of a self-rating questionnaire, the Family Assessment Device (FAD) (8).

Disadvantage is a multi-faceted phenomenon and there is no agreed single measure or definition of it. Our previous research (12–15) has defined and studied six types of environmental disadvantage with predictive utility and of demonstrated reliability and validity (16) which encompass both material disadvantage and disadvantage due to impaired parental functioning. This is in line with the approach adopted in other studies of disadvantage. All have used broadly comparable multifaceted measures although the precise definitions in each have varied slightly (3, 10, 20). The six items studied here are

- family dependence on social welfare (DSW) (receipt of social or welfare financial assistance);
- poor parental health (PPH) (significant physical ill health in either parent);
- marital disruption (MD) (single parenthood, separation/divorce, or serious marital strife);
- poor physical care of the child or home (PPC) (evidence of physical neglect or disregard);
- poor quality of mothering (PQM) (excessive criticism or hostility to child or lack of maternal warmth or understanding);
- parental educational disadvantage (ED) (no educational or vocational qualification).

The presence or absence of each of these for each family was assessed and rated for severity on a scale of 0–3 by the