

BACKGROUND

CHILDHOOD TRAUMA

- Exposure to an event/events experienced as emotionally or physically harmful, or which threatens the life of a child, the mental, physical, or emotional effects of which persist after the event itself and affect daily life [1].
- Wide-ranging impacts on children's **development**, including their **language skills** [2–5].

IMPACT ON LANGUAGE SKILLS

- Among children who have experienced maltreatment, language difficulties are seen at a rate of 35–90%, compared to 7–20% in the general population [6–9].
- Language difficulties are seen across language domains (i.e., using and understanding language, social communication), and are already **significant by 3 years of age** [10].
- Some children struggle more with language than others with the same experiences [11].

FACTORS INFLUENCING LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Language development in the context of trauma could be impacted by:

- **Type, timing, and duration** of trauma [2, 12],
- **Individual child factors** (e.g., cognitive level, disability) [10, 13, 14],
- **Family factors** (e.g., parent education level, attachment, parent–child interaction) [14–17], and
- **Community factors** (e.g., socioeconomic status, social support) [11, 18, 19].

While some of these factors have been presented in the literature, the extent of their impact and their relative importance is not yet clear.

OBJECTIVES

What is known about children's **language development** in the context of **trauma**?

- Amount and type of research available;
- Language outcomes across different domains;
- Type, timing, and duration of children's trauma exposure;
- Individual, proximal, and distal factors.

METHODS

- **Scoping review:** Arksey and O'Malley [20].
- PRISMA-ScR [21]; guidance for large reviews, Alexander et al. [22].
- Search terms related to **language, trauma, and childhood**.
- Databases: Medline, Scopus, psychINFO, ERIC, LLBA, Child Development, and CINHAL.
- Theoretical framework: **Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of development** [23].

INCLUSION CRITERIA

- Original research, published in English, in 1991 or later

Population:

- Children 12 years and under
- **Trauma experience, such as:**
- Maltreatment
- Refugee/war exposure
- Institutionalization
- Community violence
- Harsh punishment

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Measurement

- Standardized language assessment
- Language sample analysis
- Sentence- or word-repetition

At least one additional variable:

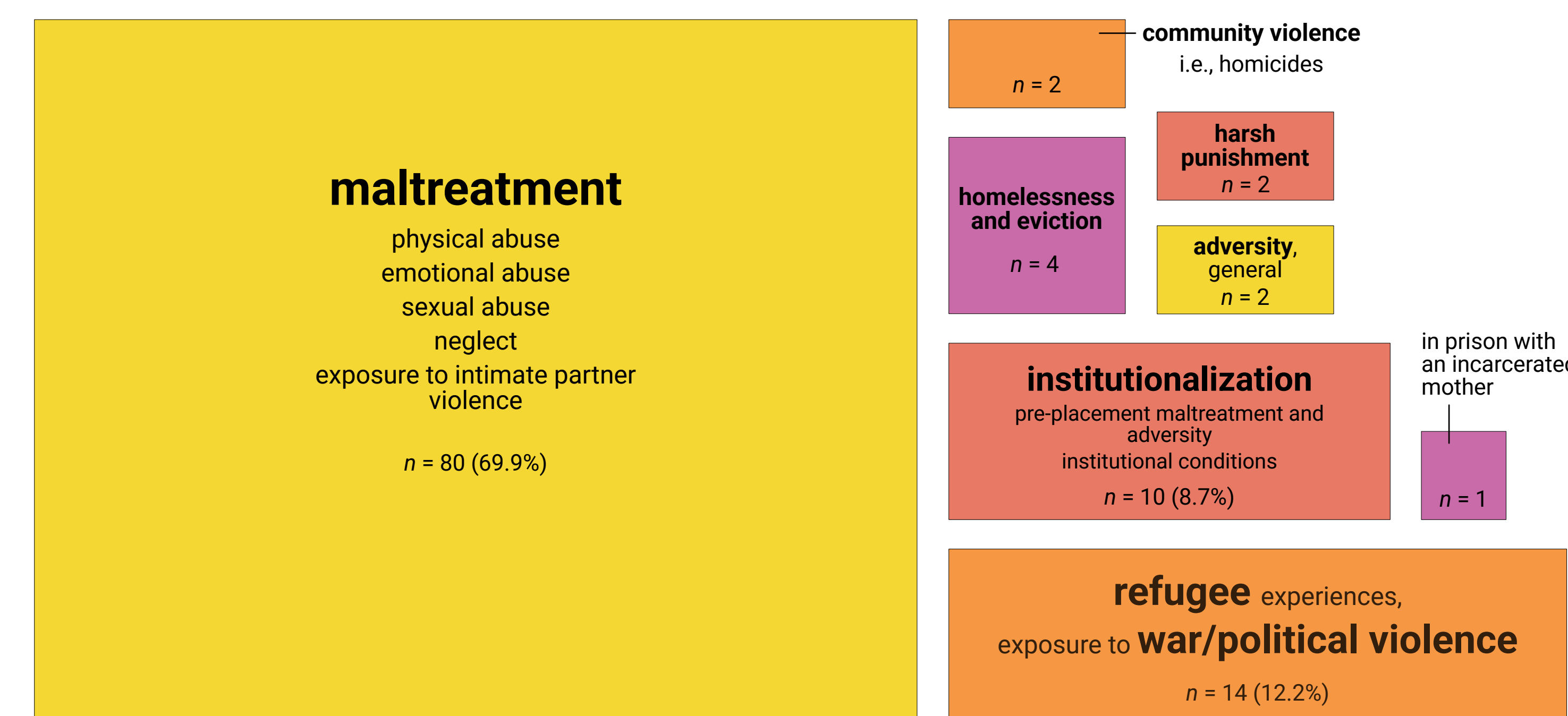
- Individual child characteristics
- Parent/family factors
- Community factors

RESULTS

Objective 1: Amount and Type of Research Available

- 5,252 papers screened and 115 papers included
- 60.9% from North America
- Primarily observational designs; 56.1% had a comparison or control group

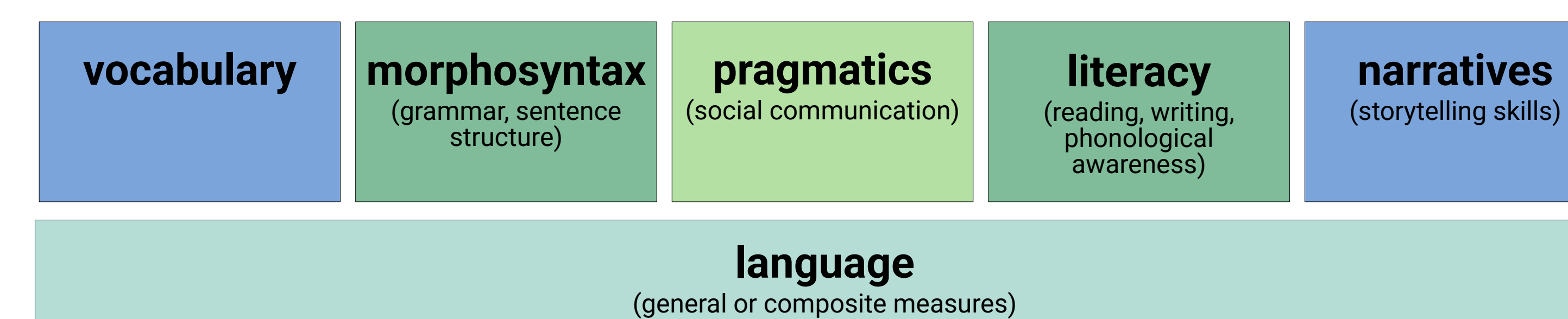
Included trauma types:



Objective 2: Language Outcomes Across Domains

- Trauma associated with poorer language skills **across trauma types**

Associations reported between trauma exposure and the following language domains:

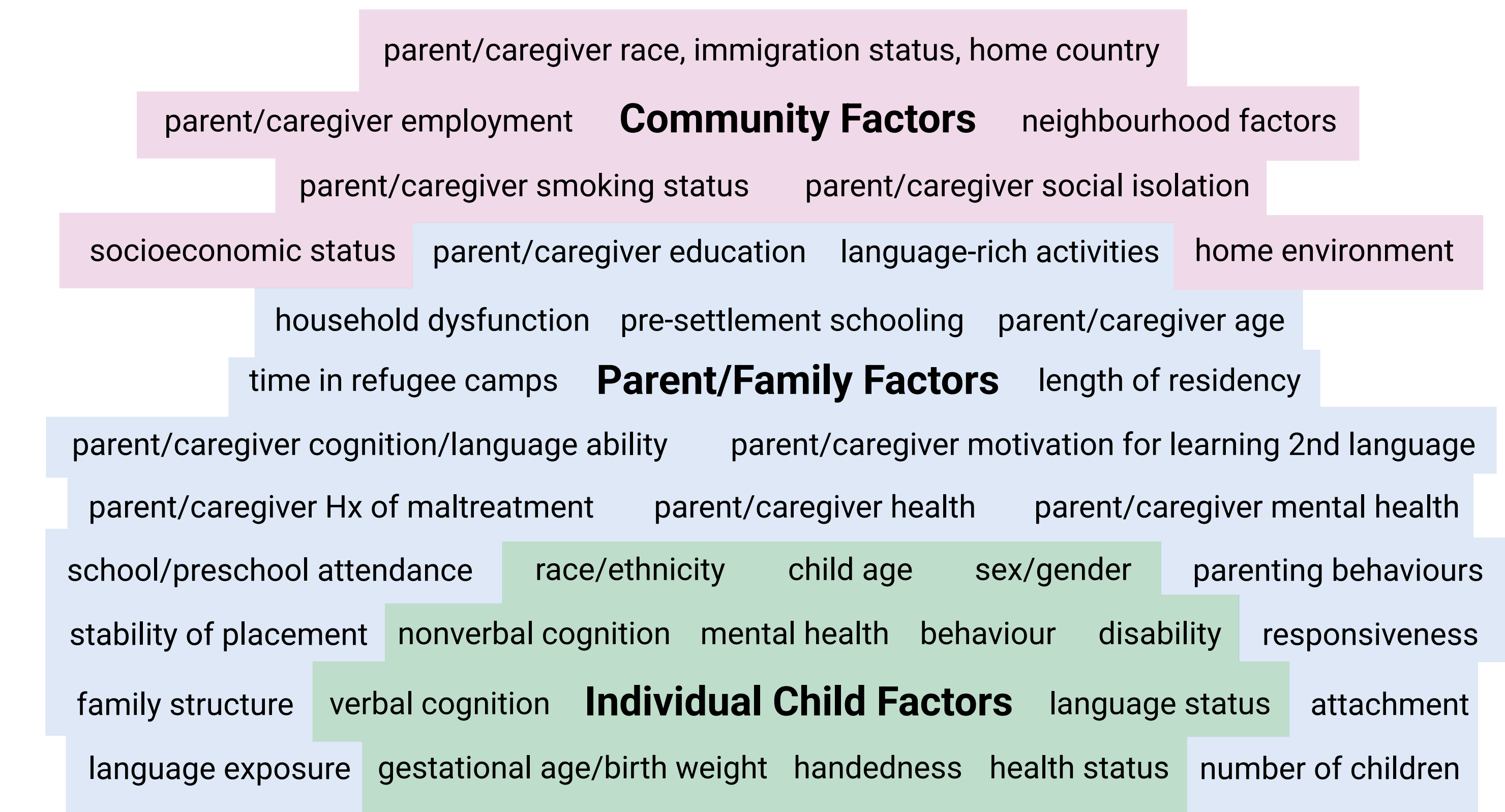


Objective 3: Type, Timing, and Duration of Trauma

- **Neglect** most often associated with poorer language outcomes
- Greater **severity/longer duration**
- **Earlier age of onset** of trauma particularly detrimental

Objective 4: Individual, Proximal, and Distal Factors

- Studies reported on 40 additional variables:



GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

- Language status was often not reported; monolingualism assumed as a default
- Inconsistency in measurement of language learning environment (e.g., language input and parent–child interactions)
- Few studies comparing refugee to non-refugee L2 learners
- Community-level factors not often considered

CONCLUSIONS

- There is an important role for **speech-language pathologists (SLPs)** with children who have experienced trauma [24, 25].
- Considering the type, timing, and duration of trauma may assist SLPs in the assessment of **relative risk** and service prioritization.
- Language development is complex and multifactorial; SLPs must keep in mind **social determinants of health** and health **equity** in their services for children who are at risk of language difficulties, especially in the context of trauma exposure [26, 27].

References:



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Read the paper:

Hryciw, T., Filiatrault-Veilleux, P., Ehnes, A., & Charest, M. (2026). Factors Affecting Language Development in the Context of Childhood Trauma: A Scoping Review. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*. https://doi.org/10.1044/2025_AJSLP-25-00111

