Protecting Children from Abuse and Neglect: Analysis and Recommendations

On December 15, 1997, the cover of People magazine showed the solemn and frightened face of a two-year-old named Peter who was on his way to a New York City shelter after violence broke out in his home. The article inside the magazine, called “A Day in the Life,” was unusual in its approach to the emotional issue of child abuse. Rather than give a wrenching account of Peter’s experiences, it focused on the unseen adult holding Peter’s hand—one of the child protection caseworkers described here as “the last line of defense for America’s children.”

Responding to calls from doctors, police, teachers, and grandparents who believe a child has been mistreated, caseworkers knock on doors, ask personal questions, look inside refrigerators, and check children’s bodies for bruises and burn marks. They have the power to take children temporarily from their homes and parents, if the risk of harm appears severe. They also have the discretion to determine that nothing serious happened, or that it is safe for the child to remain home while the parents are urged to change. The stakes are high. Overestimating the degree of danger could needlessly shatter a family and rupture the child’s closest relationships. Underestimating the danger could mean suffering or even death. The decisions caseworkers make every day would challenge King Solomon, yet most of them lack Solomon’s wisdom, few enjoy his credibility with the public, and none command his resources.

The nation’s fight against the heartbreaking problem of child abuse and neglect is led not by Solomon but by child protective services (CPS), the government agency that employs the caseworkers described above and that is charged with investigating and responding to allegations of child abuse and neglect. Child protection is a function of state government that is ruled by state law but supported by significant federal funding and—in
many states—carried out by local government entities. For simplicity, the generic term “CPS” is used here to refer to these varied state and local agencies.

Compared to the schools that most of us attended and to the police departments we see in our communities and on TV dramas, CPS is a mysterious agency. We know it is there to tackle the “national nightmare”1 of child abuse and neglect that most of us cannot bear to think about. Few of us want to know the details. But without public attention to those details, there cannot be a consensus on the expectations, boundaries, powers, or budgets that should frame government efforts to protect children from harm by their parents or caretakers.

The details, as reported in this journal issue and a flurry of recent reports,2–7 indicate that CPS is overmatched by the scope and complexity of its task. The spread of substance abuse among parents, rates of family breakup, deepening pockets of poverty, and cuts in government services have intensified family problems and reduced options for helping. In 1995, nearly 3 million children were reported to CPS as possible victims of child abuse or neglect—triple the number of reports made just 20 years ago. CPS has the dubious distinction of being among the most maligned public agencies. In 1991, the National Commission on Children charged: “If the nation had deliberately designed a system that would frustrate the professionals who staff it, anger the public who finance it, and abandon the children who depend on it, it could not have done a better job than the present child welfare system.”8

Expected to straddle two core values of U.S. society—the protection of children and respect for the privacy of the family—CPS is accused of both “unwarranted interference in private life” and “irresponsible inaction” when children are truly threatened.9 It is called incompetent, “confused, mismanaged, and staffed with untrained workers.”10 An inadequate knowledge base undergirds the actions of its staff.11–13 But, because children’s lives are at stake, CPS cannot stop its work while the public debates its mission, or while researchers discover which interventions might help which families. This plane must be fixed while it flies through the air.

Against this backdrop of controversy, this journal issue examines how CPS agencies tackle the challenge of child protection.14 The articles place typical agency practices in a historical context, and consider the dimensions of the child maltreatment problem and the anatomy of government funding. They examine the help that community-based programs and kin
caregivers can offer vulnerable families, and they review proposals for restructuring the nation’s approach to child protection. The main section of the journal closes with four commentaries on policy dilemmas and directions for reform, which give a sampling of the ideas being considered by experts and policymakers.

This article reviews the main themes of the journal issue by explaining how CPS, other government entities, and the community at large respond to child abuse and neglect. It reviews the emergence of the government role in child protection and summarizes current debates over the parameters of that role. Then the article examines three key issues regarding the shared responsibility for child protection, and offers recommendations with regard to each:

1. How should the role of CPS be framed, its efforts focused, and its decision making improved?
2. What prevention and treatment resources should broader service systems offer to families, to complement the protections CPS can provide to children?
3. What will it take to make lasting improvements in the child protection system?

There are no easy or inexpensive answers to any of these questions. Instead, the path toward more effective protection for children will require public debate over appropriate societal goals related to child maltreatment. It will demand a new emphasis within CPS on prioritizing, decision making, and creating partnerships with service providers. It will require an ongoing commitment to capacity building and practical research. And it will take significant government resources to create and sustain a safety net for poor families and a service system for troubled families.

**Overview of the Child Protection System**

Today, state and local child welfare departments bear the primary responsibility for child protection. As the article by Patricia Schene in this journal issue explains, these departments identify and respond to cases of child abuse and neglect; they help maltreating families resolve their problems so they can keep or regain custody of their children; and they provide substitute living arrangements in foster care, residential settings, or adoptive homes for children who cannot safely return home. In most states, these responsibilities are divided among a CPS agency or unit, which responds to reports of maltreatment, and sister units that oversee family preservation programs, foster homes, and adoption proceedings.

The legal foundation for CPS intervention into family affairs comes from state laws that prohibit parents or caregivers from “harming or threatening a child’s health and welfare by physical and mental injury, sexual abuse, neglected treatment, or maltreatment.”¹⁵ (The article by Diana English in this journal issue discusses the varying definitions of maltreatment.) Professionals in all states and laypersons in some states are required to report suspected abuse or neglect to a CPS hot line. In 1995, more than half of the reports (53%) came from professionals such as teachers (15%), law enforcement personnel (13%), doctors (11%), and others. One-fifth (19%) came from family members of the victims, and the remainder were from friends and neighbors (9%), other reporters (7%), and anonymous individuals (12%).¹⁶ These reports are investigated by CPS caseworkers, sometimes
Protecting Children from Abuse and Neglect: Analysis and Recommendations

working with law enforcement. Within 24 to 72 hours, the caseworker decides whether maltreatment has taken place and whether the child’s safety and family ties can best be protected by immediate removal, agency oversight and mandated services to address family problems, or no intervention beyond referrals to voluntary services.

For CPS to place the child in substitute care or impose requirements on the parents, the juvenile or family court must grant temporary custody of the child to the state after weighing the details of the case, the rights of the parents, and the safety risks to the child. In many instances, however, the family voluntarily participates in services and no court involvement is needed. As the article by Schene explains, when the CPS agency “opens” a case for oversight and services, a caseworker and the court monitor the child’s safety and the family’s progress. A CPS case may be closed when the risk to a child who remained home subsides, when a child who was placed has been safely reunified with his or her family, when the court reassigns guardianship or terminates the rights of the parents to allow adoption, or when the child becomes 18 and is no longer considered a dependent.

Significant costs are associated with CPS activities and the child welfare system’s efforts to help the victims of child maltreatment. As the article by Mark Courtney in this journal issue reports, direct government expenditures on child welfare amounted to about $11.2 billion in 1995. Federal funds accounted for 42%, state funds for 49%, and local funds for 9% of the total. Cost breakdowns showing the activities that child welfare budgets support are hard to come by. Extrapolating from data from Ohio and Texas, one report estimated that nationally about $1.7 billion is spent on investigations (at $813 per case) and $1.2 billion is spent on in-home services (at $2,702 per case). Courtney reports that the per capita costs of foster care placements, group homes, and residential treatment centers approach $22,000 per year. Protecting children is not only difficult; it is expensive.

CPS caseworkers are central players in the government’s response to child abuse and neglect, but they are decision makers and case managers rather than service providers. By screening and investigating cases and making referrals to services, they open some doors to particular children and families, and they close others. In doing so, they act in concert with other entities: community members who report suspected maltreatment, the courts that decide outcomes in serious cases, and community agencies that provide services to families. In the past, child protection was not a government activity at all, but was undertaken selectively by private charities. As the next section explains, government involvement has expanded the scope of efforts to protect children, but it has also led to controversy.

The History of Child Protection

The history of concern for the protection of children has been marked by several themes: respect for the privacy of most families, impatience with the perceived failings of poor and immigrant families, and reliance on the strategy of removing mistreated children from their homes and neighborhoods to be raised in government-sanctioned (though often inadequate) environments. Until the middle of this century, champions of child protection hesitated to intervene in most families, but they closely scrutinized child rearing by the very poor and had few compunctions about sending children from those families to institutions or homes far away, where the children might make a new start on life.

From Private Charities to Government Action

The idea that children should be protected from cruelty, exploitation, and want was not always present. Past standards for child rearing treated floggings, child labor, confinement, and deprivation of food as acceptable methods that families might use to discipline and train their children. Only in the past century did any organized intervention emerge on behalf of children whose parents failed to care for them in a manner considered acceptable at the time, as the article by Schene in this journal issue explains. Only in the past 25 years has the government assumed a major role in child protection.

Until the late 1800s, Schene reports, community leaders felt responsible for
protecting only orphaned or abandoned children, whom they placed in grim institutions, or sent to work for their board as apprentices or servants. In the early 1900s, poverty, neglect, immorality, and ignorance preoccupied the reformers who created Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Children’s Aid Societies, and settlement houses. The aim of these charities was most often to rescue the child from the perceived degradation of the family and its surroundings; little thought was given to the claims such struggling parents might have to their children. Physical forms of cruelty received much less attention, since choices of discipline were considered the province of the parents.

Neglect and the material aspects of child rearing were also central to the government’s first efforts to improve the lot of children, which came with the Social Security Act of 1935. That landmark legislation not only established a cash assistance program that helped widowed and abandoned mothers to provide for their children; it also offered the states funds for child welfare, which usually went to pay for foster care.

Attention to child abuse, as distinct from child neglect and poverty, burst forth in the mid-1960s with the identification by doctors of “the battered child syndrome,” a pattern of unexplained physical injuries such as multiple burns or broken bones. A new image of child maltreatment seized the public eye: behind the closed doors of their homes, parents from all social classes might brutally beat their children, then escape detection by fabricating accidents and falls. The reaction of governments across the United States was swift and consistent. Spurred by the 1974 Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, which provided model legislation and limited federal funding, all of the states passed mandatory reporting laws and set up procedures for investigating suspected cases of child abuse and neglect. The government entity known as child protective services was born—a product of public outrage at the shocking physical evidence of unchecked parental power, anger, and violence. Unfortunately, experience soon demonstrated that outrage over a problem may not bring with it the political consensus, tax dollars, or know-how required to solve that problem.

**Foster Care or Family Preservation?**

During the next 24 years, the problems the new CPS agencies were charged with addressing seemed to become only more widespread and more difficult to solve. Public concern for children’s safety, codified in reporting laws, led to a rapid escalation in the identification of mistreated children, whose suffering was previously seen as a private matter. The consensus that abuse by parents was repugnant also made the removal of their children seem an appropriate, justified response. The numbers of children placed in the foster care system grew, in part because state laws and agency regulations created a process for removing a child from home but said far less about how to help families or decide whether to return a child home. Stays in foster care turned out to be long and chaotic for many children, who were moved from place to place and sometimes mistreated in their foster homes.

Awareness of the problems children faced once they entered foster care swung the pendulum of child welfare practice toward appreciation of the role that birth-families play in children’s lives. In 1980, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act required CPS agencies to make “reasonable efforts” to provide family services that might prevent placement or permit the child to return from foster care. Increasingly, child welfare leaders embraced the philosophy of family support and preservation, discussed in the articles by Jacquelyn McCroskey and William Meezan and by Jill Berrick in this journal issue. This philosophy “emphasizes the inherent strengths of virtually all families, considers the family to be the best place for children to be raised, and gives priority to preserving the permanence of the child’s intimate relationships with family members when at all possible.”

While the value of family ties was embraced in many social service circles, explains the article by Courtney, government spending still tilted toward out-of-home care. The 1980s saw sharp reductions in federal and state funding for the traditional services that support struggling families—from mental health care to child care to crisis assistance. Moreover, the mandated investigations of maltreatment reports
had first call on limited child welfare budgets, further constraining the resources available for services. In 1993, the federal government attempted to redress this imbalance by providing modest new funding for family support programs designed to prevent child abuse and neglect, and for family preservation programs designed to help families with maltreatment problems remain together safely. McCroskey and Meezan argue that this legislation’s focus on family-centered service strategies provided a needed counterweight to the emphasis on child removals through its hopeful presumption that many troubled families can be saved.

Experience demonstrated, however, that the family-focused services that offer critical help to some children and families fail to help others, sometimes leading to tragedy. (The commentary by Lowry in this journal issue discusses this problem.) Critics called attention to the limited evidence that family preservation service models were effective, and a rash of sensational cases highlighted in the media depicted the risks to individual children who were left in the care of abusive families. Consequently, the pendulum of child welfare practice has recently swung back with the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (Public Law 105-89), which declares the priority of child safety. While it increases the funds for family support and family preservation programs, this law also shortens the time parents have to regain custody of their children before the state initiates proceedings to terminate their parental rights. Adoption is now promoted as a solution for children who are not safe at home.

The CPS Mandate

In sum, the 25- to 30-year history of CPS, the nation’s experiment with empowering a government agency to identify and intervene in families where children are abused or neglected, shows the public’s passionate desire to “do something” about child abuse. But it also reveals the nation’s ambivalence about what to do, and its impatience with the efforts of CPS to do the right thing. Few government agencies have a charge that is as emotionally laden as the CPS mandate to protect child victims of abuse and neglect, and to recommend abrogating the rights of parents to raise their offspring. Controversy about the goals of CPS and frustration with the strategies available to achieve those goals have impeded the success of the entire undertaking.

Many debates turn on two of the three questions noted earlier in this analysis. Should the CPS role of intervening in families be broad or narrowly focused? And—beyond CPS—what supports and services should society offer vulnerable families to prevent maltreatment and heal the wounds it causes? These two questions are examined below, accompanied by recommendations for action. The third question raised at the start of this article—what will it take to move toward an effective system of child protection—is addressed in the conclusion of this article.

Focusing and Strengthening CPS

If almost no one is happy with the current expectations, funding, and performance of the child protection system, what options exist for clarifying the role CPS plays in the protection of children? The number and variety of reports that require investigation by the agency have grown steadily, fed by reporting laws, public awareness, and societal problems. Some experts argue that CPS is attempting to respond to a mandate that has become too broad and that outstrips the agency’s capacity and resources. Questions arise of how limited resources should be allocated across a diverse caseload. The capacity of CPS caseworkers to make wise decisions about which families can be helped is also uncertain, given their limited professional training and the lack of objective knowledge to guide them.

The process of defining an effective role for CPS should involve identification of the problems that CPS is best and least prepared to address, followed by strategic decisions regarding which tasks should remain in the CPS “job description,” and investments to strengthen the capability of the agency to perform the tasks assigned to it. These changes within CPS must, however, be matched by reforms that create broader child and family service systems that are more able to prevent the occurrence of child maltreatment and to treat its consequences. Changes to strengthen community protections for children are discussed in a subsequent section of this article.
**Reports and Investigations**

CPS is mandated to respond to reports of suspected maltreatment by investigating their validity, assessing the risk to the child, and developing a case plan to protect the child and strengthen the family. The idea that all suspicions could be investigated seemed feasible in the 1960s, when physicians naively estimated that perhaps 300 families nationwide battered their children.\(^{28}\) The nature of the investigation itself—which gathers facts about, and assigns blame for, a single incident—also stems from the original concern with battered children whose injuries could be seen and documented through medical evidence. Legally, it is the evidence of a maltreatment incident that justifies the government’s intrusion into the family’s affairs. But experts now worry, as the article by Waldfogel explains, that the CPS investigation has become the most prominent element of the government’s response to concerns about child maltreatment.

As mentioned above, in 1995, CPS agencies investigated reports of maltreatment involving close to 3 million children. (Note that in most states, this number does not include all calls made to the CPS hot line, but only those that the hot line staff determined fit state definitions of maltreatment and included sufficient information to make investigation possible.) Only one quarter (25%) of the nearly 3 million cases involved physical abuse. The others involved neglect (52%), sexual abuse (13%), emotional injury (4.5%), and “other” (5.5%).\(^{16}\) The latter types of maltreatment are more challenging than physical abuse to detect and document, although, as the article by English points out, their consequences for children can be equally severe.

About one-third of the investigated reports are substantiated, or found to involve evidence of abuse or neglect that violates state laws. This rate of substantiation yielded a total of 994,586 identified child victims in 1995.\(^{18}\) Some unsubstantiated reports concern minor incidents or even crank calls, but many identify families who are experiencing significant problems, even if the specific incident investigated did not meet all the criteria required for substantiation. A review of case records from one California county found that 71% of families with unsubstantiated reports had prior or subsequent reports for child maltreatment.\(^{29}\)

The rate of substantiation appears to have dropped as the total number of reports has increased, as the commentary by Besharov points out, for a variety of reasons. On the one hand, there is some overreporting of problems that do not involve serious abuse or neglect. Broad definitions of abuse and neglect make it difficult for laypersons to decide if an incident is truly maltreatment, and it is appropriate for that determination to be left to trained CPS workers. Several articles in this journal issue suggest that relatively minor maltreatment is sometimes reported to CPS to secure scarce resources for the family, even though the price tag for those services includes “the stigma of being labeled an abuser.”\(^{30}\)

On the other hand, low substantiation rates also reflect the fact that CPS agencies with limited resources have raised the threshold of seriousness that is required before a case is substantiated and opened for services.\(^{31}\) In one survey, 45% of state administrators said their agencies were using “triage policies” and did not even investigate reports that would have been pursued five years earlier.\(^{32}\) As a result, cases involving only moderate risk are less likely to be investigated or assisted, even though families whose problems are not severe or entrenched could benefit from services and perhaps avert more serious maltreatment. Whatever the reasons, many investigations now undertaken by CPS consume agency resources but do not lead to interventions that benefit the child or the family.

**Mandatory Reporting**

Some experts suggest that the mandatory reporting laws passed in the mid-1970s are no longer needed to elicit reports from professionals or the public.\(^{4,23}\) Moreover, they argue, the reporting laws give the misleading impression that CPS is able to follow up on reports to help the family and protect the child. In fact, no services at all are provided to the child or the family in one quarter of cases involving substantiated abuse or neglect.\(^{33}\)

On its own, mandatory reporting is not child protection—nor was it intended to be.
The mandatory reporting laws prompt continued attention to the problem of child maltreatment, and they are important for that reason. Rather than roll back these laws, reforms are needed to ensure that CPS and community service systems can follow up on the indications of risk to children that the reports represent.

**Adversarial Investigations**

One strategy for improving the government’s response to reports of suspected maltreatment would create an alternative, less adversarial system for handling reports that appear not to present a serious threat to the child’s safety. This suggestion is motivated by concerns that low-risk reports do not require a rigorous, adversarial CPS investigation, since these cases seldom reach the courts. If the families involved were offered services that might stop their problems from escalating, many would respond voluntarily. Indeed, as the commentary by Pelton suggests, the heavy hand of CPS authority may impede the willingness of families to work independently to resolve their problems.

If the CPS hot line staff could be given criteria for distinguishing low-risk reports (although such predictions cannot be made with confidence), they could divert these reports to a different information-gathering entity, within or separate from CPS. That entity would engage the family in a voluntary assessment to evaluate risks and family strengths, and would recommend services. An intrusive and costly CPS investigation would be reserved for cases in which court-ordered placements or involuntary interventions were likely, ensuring that the evidence collected met the standards of the judicial system. Such a “differentiated response” approach is already being implemented in several states. As the article by Waldfogel explains, Missouri has used this two-track approach since 1994, and approximately 80% of reports of suspected maltreatment are handled in the voluntary “assessment” track.

Of course, the success of this approach depends upon the ability of hot line screeners to judge the factors involved in a given case. Risk-assessment checklists and scales have been developed that record information on key variables associated with the risk of future maltreatment (see the article by English in this journal issue). Clearly, no checklist can predict the future or substitute for clinical wisdom, but recent efforts suggest that these tools can help sort cases into low-, medium-, and high-risk groups, which can be assigned different priority for investigation, services, and CPS oversight. For instance, one study in Oklahoma found that 57% of families assessed as “high risk” had another substantiated incident of abuse or neglect within 18 months, compared with only 15% of those assessed as low risk and 4% of those rated very low risk.

The most serious concern about the proposed new approach is that families who are classified as lower risk and not drawn into the CPS system will go unseen and unserved. In fact, the triage policies mentioned earlier mean that these cases currently receive little attention. A California study of 646 CPS case files with substantiated maltreatment found that 10 (1.5%) of the children were removed from home, 60% of the parents received counseling by CPS staff (who often lack professional training), 13% were referred to parent training, and 8% were sent to emergency shelters. Fewer than 1% were linked to substance-abuse treatment, even though drug or alcohol problems were noted in half of the case files. In other words, even the seriously troubled families now in the CPS system receive few of the services they need. A later section of this analysis addresses services provided outside the context of CPS.

**RECOMMENDATION**

- State legislatures should allow, and local agencies should undertake, experiments with screening systems that differentiate between reports of maltreatment representing higher or lower risk to the child, and that build in evaluations tracking outcomes for both groups. Differentiation should guide the manner in which further information about the report is gathered, and help to prioritize cases for services and CPS oversight.
**Case-by-Case Decision Making**

At the heart of child protection lie decisions and judgments about individual cases: the reporter’s choice to call CPS regarding a given suspicion, the screener’s determination that one report is urgent and another can wait, and the caseworker’s conclusion that immediate removal from home is the only way to protect an individual child. Each case is pressing because a child is involved, yet each is unique and deserves a tailored response. How prepared are CPS staff to offer wise, balanced, tailored responses to the cases they see? How able are agencies to monitor their own performance and implement best practices throughout the agency?

Critiques abound of the lackluster performance of CPS bureaucracies, but relatively little attention has focused on the staff’s professional qualifications, or on the knowledge base that informs their actions. The pendulum swings of child welfare policy discussed earlier have cyclically shifted the decisions of caseworkers in one direction or another,\(^38\) but reforms have seldom sought to improve the ability of caseworkers to make good decisions on a case-by-case basis. Yet, it is the caseworker who must juggle agency goals and priorities along with information about a particular child’s family problems and strengths to decide what action is necessary and right for that child, at that time. At the front lines, as one former caseworker put it, “There is no system, there are only people—children don’t fall through cracks, they fall through fingers. I know because a little boy fell through mine.”\(^39\)

**Staff Qualifications**

Child protection, like most human services, is a labor-intensive undertaking. Professional qualifications and compensation, which often go hand in hand, both tend to be low in the CPS workforce. Although CPS staff are commonly referred to as social workers, a 1988 study of 5,000 personnel in 16 states found that only 28% held a social work degree.\(^40\) Indeed, many do not have a college degree at all. This is largely explained by the field’s low salaries. A national survey of child welfare agencies in 1995 revealed that the median salary in state child welfare agencies was about $28,000 for direct service workers with four-year college degrees, and less than $33,000 for those with master’s degrees in social work.\(^41\) Salaries for workers who lacked college degrees were not reported.

Such low pay and caseloads that run well above professional standards\(^19\) combine with emotional stress, low status, and a bureaucratic work environment to contribute to high turnover. New staff are therefore a regular feature of the CPS workforce, but—like professional qualifications—preservice training requirements are low. A 1995 survey uncovered eight states (out of 43 that responded) that had no preservice training requirements for direct service workers in child welfare agencies.\(^18\) Surely more attention should be paid to the qualifications and compensation of those to whom society assigns the daunting task of protecting children from harm by their parents.\(^12\)

**RECOMMENDATION**

- Given the crucial decision making that is delegated to CPS caseworkers, CPS agencies should raise staff qualifications in terms of general education, social work courses, and competency-based preservice training. State legislatures should ensure that local agencies have sufficient funding to offer competitive pay scales matched to those higher qualifications, and to compensate workers for experience and excellent performance.

**Knowledge to Guide Practice**

Detailed decision-making guidelines explaining when to intervene and which intervention strategy to use are a crucial means of assuring that CPS actions are consistent and fair, especially when front-line staff lack professional training. However, policy manuals often provide only general directives without defining the terms that drive the caseworker’s decision.\(^12\) For instance, staff may be instructed to use placement only when necessary or appropriate to ensure a child’s immediate safety. But what is the threshold of necessary? And how does
one determine appropriateness? Such vague language may provide valued “wiggle room” for staff who are professionally trained to make decisions on a case-by-case basis, but that level of discretion is problematic in the hands of untrained and inexperienced workers.

Making policy manuals more explicit will be difficult, however, because the vague directives camouflage differences of opinion among experts about what is known in the field of child welfare, and about how any partial knowledge should be applied in practice. Indeed, the National Research Council concluded in 1993 that the scientific study of child maltreatment is “in its infancy,” and that research regarding the assessment and case-planning decisions made by CPS agencies is “minimal.” In recent years, a number of research groups have focused attention on issues that lie at the heart of child welfare practice, such as caseworker decision making, the use of risk assessment, the effectiveness of prevention and treatment approaches, and the pathways followed by children through the child welfare system. Nevertheless, the distance separating CPS agencies from the goal of “research-based child welfare practice” remains great.

Because CPS is a decision-making entity rather than a service provider, its caseworkers especially need information to guide them in assessing risk and choosing interventions suited to the child’s needs and the family’s problems. The challenge of risk assessment was briefly discussed above. The challenge of prescribing appropriate interventions is complicated by uneven knowledge about the effects that available treatment programs and services will have on troubled families. This subject is addressed in more detail in the next section of this analysis.

Data systems that connect family and child risk profiles with their intervention histories and outcome information would, as McCroskey and Meezan point out, begin to provide the practical information required. While they await the necessary research-based knowledge, however, CPS agencies must continue to investigate and intervene in cases of child abuse and neglect, trying as best they can to recognize the critical distinctions among troubled families and to choose the most promising course of action. Which families might benefit most from attending parent-education classes, from a child care program for a preschooler, or from having a homemaker visit to help organize the household? Which families would fare best in family therapy? When is a referral to a battered women’s shelter more appropriate? Front-line caseworkers and the children they serve deserve a concerted effort to gather knowledge and apply it to the problems practitioners face.

RECOMMENDATION

Despite limitations in available research on child maltreatment and the interventions that reduce its occurrence and recurrence, existing knowledge must be translated into operational guidelines to inform staff decision making. Increased research funding by federal agencies and private sources is required to support studies that will fill key knowledge gaps, resolve inconsistencies in existing findings, illuminate how caseworkers use knowledge in decision making, and link interventions to outcomes for children and families.

Prevention and Treatment Resources

CPS agencies may be the most visible battalion on the front lines of the fight against child abuse, but they are not alone. In fact, as the previous discussion indicated, the services and treatment programs that CPS workers call on to help abused or neglected children are usually provided outside CPS, by other government agencies or by community organizations. Both prevention and treatment services are critical, although they are linked to the CPS system in different ways. Prevention services, such as home visiting or family support programs, may be designed with an eye to reducing the incidence of maltreatment, but they seldom connect directly to CPS. In contrast, treatment services such
as family therapy are (or should be) at the crux of the service plans CPS caseworkers write for the families they see, whose problems have usually become serious and established.

Prevention and treatment services are provided and paid for in a jumble of different ways. Under varying names, the social service departments of state governments and their local-level counterparts have long funded programs to help those who face specific difficulties such as developmental disabilities, mental illness, substance abuse, and juvenile delinquency. Private community agencies and local professionals provide most of the tangible and interpersonal helping services that CPS-involved families use—from child care to counseling to emergency shelters. Many nonprofit social service organizations rely on both charitable contributions and government contracts to provide specific services to a set number of individuals facing particular problems. Publicly funded social services have been roundly criticized for being categorical and deficit oriented—one gains access to them by suffering a specific problem. Nevertheless, when the categorical federal funding most states used to support these services dwindled in the 1980s, the dollars and services were both sorely missed—especially by CPS and its clients.

CPS Service Plans
To help a troubled family make the changes that are necessary for its child’s safety, the CPS case plan typically specifies services intended to remedy key family problems. The caseworker refers the family to a local service provider, and may require that the family participate in the service or risk losing custody of the abused or neglected child. In principle, the service plan could span a wide range of needs, encompassing family therapy, parent education, and substance-abuse treatment; emergency shelter, housing referrals, and cash assistance; and homemaker help, crisis intervention, respite child care, and child therapy. In practice, as was suggested above, resource limitations and daunting caseloads make many service plans sparse.

Certain treatment responses are more applicable in cases of physical or sexual abuse and others are more suited to cases of neglect, but individual variations in the constellation of family needs overshadow contrasts based on the type of maltreatment that occurred. The variety of needs that are compounded within families makes it difficult to know how to select interventions for individual cases. Moreover, when services are bundled together, it is difficult to assess the contribution each makes to client outcomes. One author, describing the many therapeutic approaches used in cases of abuse and neglect, concluded that “all methods have sometimes achieved success and sometimes resulted in failure.” This should not come as a surprise: changing routine behaviors of adults—even discrete habits such as smoking—has not proved easy in any field.

The Case of Family Preservation
In the past decade, many experts and practitioners embraced family preservation programs that sought to make it unnecessary to place some abused or neglected children in out-of-home care. These programs typically combine direct crisis and counseling assistance with case management efforts that refer family members to material resources and therapeutic services provided by community organizations. Some models are short-term intensive programs that assign only a few families to each caseworker, who works with each family in its home and is available on a 24-hour basis for four to six weeks. Other models provide less intensive intervention for a longer period of time.

The article by McCroskey and Meezan in this journal issue explains that these models have attracted funding from governmental and philanthropic sources to support demonstration efforts and evaluations. Hopes rose high at the end of the 1980s that these concentrated, individualized programs could effectively strengthen families that feared they would lose their children to out-of-home placement. As has been the case with other innovations embraced as a “silver bullet,” however, the promise suggested by early but flawed evaluations was followed by disappointing findings from more rigorous studies. For example, a statewide study in Illinois found similar outcomes in terms of placement prevention, subsequent maltreatment, and rates of case closure in both program
and control groups, although some “softer” indices of family functioning suggested short-term improvements among the program participants. The Illinois evaluators concluded that no single service program works well with all types of abusive and neglectful families, and so “we must continue to experiment with service approaches” that can be targeted to specific family problems.

Case managers, program developers, and policymakers must also be realistic in estimating how much change any specific service or intervention is likely to produce in a given family’s situation. Treating serious and chronic problems with weak, diffuse, or short-term interventions wastes scarce service resources and too often leaves children at risk. Sometimes, long-term, intensive services can shore up troubled families that are motivated to make difficult changes to provide a safe home to their children.

**The Research Agenda**

To make CPS service plans more like the prescriptions written by doctors—individualized, specific, and relatively confident—far more understanding is needed about which families are most likely to benefit from which types of services. Instead of studies designed to prove that a specific approach either “works” or “fails,” research should seek to establish realistic expectations regarding the likely outcomes of interventions for different groups of families. Caseworkers encounter many types of families (teen parents with little understanding of the demands of parenting; cases of abusive treatment by a mother’s new boyfriend; neglect resulting from drug addiction, from poverty, or from a mother’s depression). They are in a position to direct these families to many types of services, but they need research evidence to help them identify specific service options that are likely to be beneficial for individual families.

---

**RECOMMENDATION**

Efforts to evaluate key interventions, programs, and services used to address the problems of abusive and neglectful families should be redoubled, with a focus on identifying the types of families that benefit most and least from specific services or bundles of services. Federal and philanthropic funds should support applied research that can guide case planning for families with differing risk profiles.

---

**Access to Services**

Although every community offers at least some resources to help families succeed with the challenge of child rearing, specific services are unevenly distributed. No assurances exist that a given community offers the programs that would help an individual family, that limited funding and waiting lists will not delay service delivery, or that the caseworker knows enough about the community and the family to make the appropriate referrals. Tragically, substance-abuse treatment programs suitable for families with children are among the services that are hardest to find. State child welfare administrators surveyed in 1996 reported that, while two-thirds of the parents involved with the child welfare system needed alcohol and drug-abuse treatment, they could link fewer than one-third to services.

Even when services exist, the mechanisms by which they are funded can create access problems. Centralized government contracts support many community-based service organizations, giving the nonprofits a stable funding base and control over their caseloads and intake procedures, but limiting the flexibility of caseworkers to secure assistance for families. Despite public funding for an array of services for vulnerable families, no guaranteed space exists for a particular client in a particular program. Caseworkers faced with waiting lists can seldom purchase similar services from organizations that do not have government contracts, nor can they secure services that are not covered by those contracts. Recognizing that children at risk cannot safely be made to wait, innovative reform efforts in Oregon and Alabama have provided unrestricted funds to local CPS offices, which staff can use to purchase services on an “as needed” basis.
essentially “handing a checkbook to each worker.”51

RECOMMENDATION

Flexible funds are essential to remedy the family problems that lie behind child abuse and neglect. Noncategorical federal and state funding streams must be created that allow communities and public social service departments to establish varied helping and treatment services targeted to the needs of vulnerable families. The urgency of protecting vulnerable children demands that CPS caseworkers also have access to unrestricted funds to purchase specific services or resources to meet children’s needs and stabilize their families.

Preventive Supports for Families

In contrast to treatment services, which tend to be discrete and provided through interagency referrals, the services and supports that may prevent child abuse and neglect are by their nature broad and often diffuse. The most common may not even be seen as having to do with child maltreatment. Friendly visits by neighbors are social events that also relieve isolation and give a chance for child-rearing advice. A child care program exists to supervise children and promote their development, but it also gives a stressed parent a reprieve and a chance to see other ways of guiding children’s behavior. Government “safety net” programs such as cash assistance and food stamps combat poverty, and in so doing, they help poor families to keep the lights on and the refrigerator stocked.52 Two types of preventive supports that exist outside the CPS system are examined here: government cash assistance programs and informal neighborhood ties.

Poverty and Cash Assistance

The demographics of the CPS caseload highlight the link that exists between poverty and child maltreatment (especially, though not exclusively, neglect). National data indicate that abuse or neglect are 22 times as likely to occur in families earning less than $15,000 per year as they are in families earning more than $30,000 per year.53 Children in poor families are more likely to be abused and neglected, and accusations against their families are more likely to be pursued than is the case for children in wealthier families and neighborhoods.54,55 The article by English in this journal issue indicates that it appears to be the combination of poverty with other problems, such as social isolation, stress, or the lack of parenting skills, that predicts maltreatment. Many of the social ills that often accompany poverty (unemployment, drug abuse, exposure to violence) play a role in child abuse and neglect, as well.54

In families that struggle with both poverty and child-rearing problems, access to a reliable safety net offering cash assistance and help with food and shelter can be critically important in keeping the family together and keeping the child safe. As the article by Courtney in this journal issue explains, the 1996 welfare reform law changed the provisions of that safety net (most notably changing the Aid to Families with Dependent Children entitlement program into the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families block grant), and it changed the conditions under which families can access its supports.22 If those changes significantly increase poverty, they may also fuel rising rates of child maltreatment; if poverty declines, rates of maltreatment may subside. Even if overall trends are positive, the consequences for individual families may be severe. Poor families already involved with the CPS system who lose the material security of cash assistance may lose the ability and right to care for their children and have little chance of later reunification. CPS caseworkers can link families to counseling, but there is no service program that offers the ongoing financial support that cash assistance has traditionally provided.

The article by Courtney argues that the policy debates regarding the crisis of child maltreatment and those regarding welfare reform have almost never intersected, even though the populations served by the two human service systems overlap substantially. Alleviating the harm that poverty causes to families is beyond the scope of the child protection system. But a renewed commitment by government to help meet the financial
and material needs of vulnerable families could go a long way to preventing maltreatment and relieving pressures on the child protection system—where children from economically struggling families too often wind up.

**RECOMMENDATION**

- If the public and policy leaders are serious about government’s responsibility to protect children from abuse and neglect, they must take steps to reduce poverty among families with children. In the short term, creative collaborations between child protection and welfare reform caseworkers will be needed to ensure that both children and adults benefit from new opportunities provided by the welfare system, and are not jeopardized by deep poverty.

**Informal Community and Family Ties**

Complementing government “safety net” programs are more informal community resources that also help to prevent maltreatment, as extended families, neighbors, and community groups assist and support their own. As the articles by Waldfogel and by McCroskey and Meezan note, the past decade has seen a surge of interest in efforts to strengthen social support networks, rebuild communities, and restore what the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect called “a neighborly society” in which adults “resolve to be good neighbors—to know, watch, and support their neighbors’ children and to offer help when needed to their neighbors’ families.”

The prospect of drawing residents of all communities into the fight against child abuse and neglect evokes wide support. According to a recent report by the National Conference of State Legislatures, reforms designed to increase the involvement of extended families and communities in child protection have been popular with liberals and conservatives alike. The commentary by Weber in this journal issue emphasizes the important role such informal resources can play in child protection, once it is conceptualized as something larger than an intervention by CPS into a family.

For example, innovative programs described in the article by Waldfogel have sought to bring CPS staff into closer contact with local service providers and residents, to enrich CPS workers’ understanding of the communities they are serving, and to overcome the mistrust and hostility with which community members and CPS caseworkers often regard one another. In a more structured way, innovations such as family group conferencing draw kin and family friends into the actual process of deciding what steps should be taken to protect a given child.

The article by Berrick in this journal issue discusses how important kinship ties can be in guiding child rearing, sharing the care of children, and helping parents cope with difficulties. These ties have been especially significant in African-American communities. Kinship relationships play a growing role in the child welfare system itself, since many children who are not safe with their parents live in the homes of kin, either informally or in kinship foster care placements. Policy debates have swirled around questions of how much financial compensation and government oversight are appropriate when children are formally placed with kin. Striking an ethical, workable balance between private and public responsibilities for the well-being of children has proved to be a difficult task.

Efforts to expand partnerships between CPS agencies and such community entities as churches, neighborhood associations, and private individuals may well confront similar tensions as they try to link a large government agency with the most informal of helpers. Capitalizing on the promise of these partnerships will require creativity, attentiveness to the consequences of government policies (intended and unintended), and understanding of the strengths of informal and formal helpers. As a leader in a community network mobilized to protect children in one Los Angeles neighborhood commented, “Just because I’m in the community and wish these families well and pray for them and want to be supportive, that’s...
not necessarily enough. A balanced approach that does not exaggerate or undermine the capacity of neighbors, pastors, and friends to address family problems is needed to capitalize on the supportive power of neighborliness.

RECOMMENDATION

Informal community ties and kin can play a crucial role in preventing child abuse and neglect and helping families resolve their child-rearing problems. Government agencies should recognize and support their efforts by including attention to informal resources in case planning, by linking informal helpers to professional service systems, and by providing financial and material resources to enable community members to help in an effective way.

Lasting Reform

As urgent as it is to focus the efforts of CPS and to strengthen the treatment and prevention resources provided outside CPS, lasting improvements in the child protection system to benefit vulnerable children will require broader changes, as well. Public support for a new vision of child protection—with the stable legislative mandate and enhanced funding for CPS that such support should yield—will be necessary if more specific reforms are to bear fruit.

Lofty expectations, vague mandates, and resource limitations are a dangerous mix, and, as this analysis has suggested, all pertain in the case of CPS. Indeed, this relatively young arm of government has undergone almost continual reform, either led by innovators or imposed by elected officials and the courts. To an unusual extent, reforms in this human service system have been driven by tragic individual cases that once picked up in the media, provoke a furor among advocates, agency heads, and elected officials. An investigation by a high-level task force may follow, leading in turn to recommendations for reordering the priorities of CPS. The public attention may then persuade elected officials to provide new funds to restructure and strengthen CPS—funds that might have been requested and denied earlier. Such a method of setting goals for and judging the performance of large public agencies is impractical, at best. Although individual CPS systems have made important leaps forward through this reform process, rapid-fire demands for change impede the development of a balanced, flexible, and fair approach to the trauma of child abuse and neglect.

An Informed Public Debate

Who should set the course for the nation’s efforts to prevent and respond to child abuse and neglect? While administrators can and often do galvanize their agencies, their efforts are constrained by parameters they do not control. Much of the responsibility, given the design of the nation’s system of law and governance, lies with elected state officials. They hold the power to define the bounds of the responsibility the state will accept for the safety and well-being of children. They assign a mission and set broad rules for the actions of state agencies. Most importantly, they determine the size and allocate the resources of the state budget. The current crisis faced by CPS reflects the fact that state legislatures across the land have broadly defined the state’s responsibility for children, but they have not allocated commensurate resources to the agencies charged with fulfilling that responsibility. This imbalance has led to what one observer calls “a national myth” that children will be protected, and this myth should be challenged.

RECOMMENDATION

Broader public consensus must be sought regarding the nation’s goals for child protection and the role that the CPS agency should play in achieving those goals. If CPS is to be effective, state legislatures must give it clear, manageable, and stable parameters along with resources befitting the responsibilities assigned.
In a democracy, responsibility for the actions of elected officials ultimately falls at the feet of the voters and the public. In the words of a former chair of the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, “Ultimately, public awareness must be turned into public policy.”64 One vehicle for mobilizing that public awareness could be harnessing the power of the press, but that will not be easy. Media attention to child abuse and neglect can keep these issues “on the front burner” in the minds of elected officials and the public, helping to rally public support for needed reform.65 On the other hand, journalism is an impatient enterprise, and the tragic, bungled case will always be more newsworthy than the small successes of family reunification or the incremental process of reform. Journalists who can balance their roles as dramatists, watchdogs, and teachers are in a unique position to help ensure that the public cares about child abuse and neglect, is appropriately skeptical of the nation’s current efforts to protect children, and understands how complex the problems are and the solutions must be.

The true test of American concern about child protection will be whether legislatures and voters are willing to do the hard work of defining where the public responsibility for children’s safety begins and ends, and whether they are willing to undertake reforms and then pay what is necessary to make good on the public promise of child protection. Then, the even harder work of learning how to prevent and respond to the tragedy of child abuse and neglect can go forward in earnest.

Mary B. Larner, Ph.D.  
Carol S. Stevenson, J.D.  
Richard E. Behrman, M.D.

The editors wish to acknowledge the significant contribution made by Stephen Page to this analysis and journal issue.

14. The journal does not provide a comprehensive analysis of the causes and consequences of child abuse and neglect, nor does it focus on substitute care arrangements such as foster care and adoption, although these are critical parts of the child protection system.  


30. See note no. 4, Gelles, p. 88.


34. A number of reform proposals would give responsibility for the investigation of child abuse (which can be seen as an assault on children by their parents or caretakers) to law enforcement, or otherwise ensure that the police play a more routine and visible role alongside CPS. See note no. 10, Karger and Stoesz, pp. 126–27; and note no. 5, Lindsey, pp. 157–83.


38. For instance, decisions about child placements are steered by laws that oblige explicit efforts to keep families together, or that limit the amount of time families have to make changes before losing custody of their children.


42. See note no. 13, National Research Council, p. 15 and p. 254, respectively.


49. See note no. 11, Schuerman, Rzepnicki, and Littell, p. 246.


55. By contrast, children from ethnic minority families are not significantly more likely to be identified by community professionals as abused or neglected, although they are over-represented in the CPS and foster care caseloads. See note no. 53, Sedlak and Broadhurst, p. 8-7.


63. See note no. 6, Schorr, p. 218.
