

Executive Summary

CENTER FOR THE FUTURE OF CHILDREN • THE DAVID and LUCILE PACKARD FOUNDATION


The Future of Children

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PROTECTING
CHILDREN
FROM ABUSE
AND NEGLECT



Protecting Children from Abuse and Neglect



ANALYSIS

- ◆ Nearly 3 million children were reported in 1995 to child protective services (CPS) as possible victims of child abuse or neglect. Of those reports, 52% were for neglect, 25% concerned physical abuse, and the others were for sexual or emotional abuse.
- ◆ Since the 1970s, state and local CPS agencies have been charged with investigating reports of child maltreatment and protecting the victims. These agencies are accused of both interfering in family affairs and failing to act to protect threatened children.
- ◆ State laws require professionals and allow laypersons to report suspected abuse or neglect to CPS.
 - ◆ Half the reports come from professionals such as teachers, police, and doctors; the other half come from family members, neighbors, and anonymous individuals.
 - ◆ The number of reports has tripled in the past 20 years.
- ◆ CPS investigations in 1995 identified nearly 1 million child victims of abuse or neglect, but limited agency resources mean that not all these children or families received assistance.
 - ◆ About one-third of reports to CPS are substantiated as violations of state law.
 - ◆ Children are removed from home in about 1 case in 10.

- ◆ One-fourth of the cases involving substantiated maltreatment receive no services at all.
- ◆ Federal, state, and local governments spent about \$11.2 billion on child protection in 1995. Governments spend an estimated \$813 per case on investigations, \$2,702 on services to families, and \$22,000 per case each year on residential and foster care.
- ◆ Caseworker decisions about specific cases are the heart of child protection, but the CPS system has only a limited capacity to tailor its response to individual conditions:
 - ◆ Fewer than one-third of CPS direct service staff hold social work degrees.
 - ◆ In 1995, the median salary for caseworkers with master's degrees in social work was under \$33,000.
 - ◆ Large caseloads in CPS and cuts in community services curtail agency efforts to help troubled families.
 - ◆ The effects of treatment programs on families with differing risk profiles are not well understood.
- ◆ Resources beyond CPS are needed to prevent and respond to child abuse and neglect.
 - ◆ Family poverty makes maltreatment more likely, especially if parents are unemployed, use drugs, or lack parenting skills.
 - ◆ Government efforts to reduce poverty could therefore help to prevent maltreatment, and relieve pressures on CPS.
 - ◆ Informal community resources should also be mobilized in the fight against child abuse and neglect.
- ◆ CPS reforms are often driven by media attention to individual child tragedies, but such reactive reforms do not yield a balanced and flexible system for protecting children.
- ◆ State legislatures have the power to define the public responsibility for children's safety, and they provide the funds that CPS and service providers need to carry through on the public promise of child protection.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION 1

To guide investigative efforts and prioritize cases, screening systems should be developed and tested that differentiate between reports of maltreatment that represent higher or lower risk to the child.

RECOMMENDATION 2

To improve case-by-case decision making in CPS, agencies should raise training and professional qualifications for caseworkers. Legislatures should provide the funds required to allow CPS agencies to make their pay scales professional and competitive.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Existing knowledge regarding child maltreatment and intervention effectiveness must be translated into operational guidelines for staff. New research should be funded to fill knowledge gaps, resolve inconsistencies, link interventions to child and family outcomes, and show how caseworkers use knowledge.

RECOMMENDATION 4

To guide case planning, evaluations of interventions for abusive and neglectful families should identify the effects of specific services on families with differing risk profiles.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Flexible funds are essential to address urgent child needs and remedy family problems. At state and national levels, noncategorical funding streams allow communities to establish the array of services vulnerable families need. At the local level, reserves of unrestricted funds enable CPS caseworkers to respond promptly to pressing needs.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Government's responsibility to protect children from abuse and neglect requires long-term steps to reduce family poverty. In the short term, child protection and welfare reform caseworkers should collaborate to ensure that children and adults benefit from welfare reform and are not jeopardized by deep poverty.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Because informal community ties and kin can help prevent and respond to child abuse and neglect, government agencies should include informal resources in case planning, and link informal helpers to professional service systems and financial resources.

RECOMMENDATION 8

Broader public consensus is needed regarding goals and public responsibilities for child protection. If CPS is to be effective, state legislatures must establish clear, manageable, and stable parameters for it and provide resources befitting the responsibilities assigned.

ARTICLE SUMMARIES

Past, Present, and Future Roles of Child Protective Services

Patricia A. Schene, Ph.D.

This article explores the historical roots of the nation's response to child abuse and neglect. It examines how today's child protective services (CPS) system evolved from a past of almshouses, orphan trains, and anti-cruelty societies. It also reviews legislation establishing the protection of children as a government function. The author finds that the history of child protection in the United States is marked by a continuing tension between the aim of rescuing children from abusive homes and that of strengthening the care that vulnerable families provide. The article outlines the child protection roles played by the public CPS agency, the police, the courts, private and public social service agencies, and the community at large. According to the author's analysis, the fundamental challenges facing CPS can be captured in two questions: What situations require the agency's intervention? And how can the broader resources of the community be mobilized in the effort to protect children?

The Extent and Consequences of Child Maltreatment

Diana J. English, Ph.D.

A clear understanding of how widespread child maltreatment is, and how it affects the children who are its victims, is essential to guide the development of child protection policies and programs. This article examines controversies surrounding the definition of child abuse and neglect—which provides the legal justification for government intervention to stop actions by parents or caregivers that seriously harm children. The article also presents statistics indicating children's exposure to maltreatment, explains the characteristics of families that are more prone to abuse or neglect, and summarizes current knowledge about the short-term and long-term impacts of maltreatment on children. Finally, it highlights recent efforts by public CPS agencies to responsibly ration calls on their limited resources by using risk-assessment approaches to target scarce services to the children who need them the most.

Family-Centered Services: Approaches and Effectiveness

Jacquelyn McCroskey, D.S.W., and William Meezan, D.S.W.

The nation's child protection system tends to focus on investigations of maltreatment reports and on out-of-home care placements for children who are not safe at home. It often slights the services that help stressed families to prevent child maltreatment, or that enable families with serious child-rearing problems to provide more appropriate care for their children. This article highlights the family-centered service approach, which encompasses family support services for families coping with normal parenting stresses, and family preservation services designed to help families facing serious problems and possible out-of-home placement. The article explains the characteristics of family support and family preservation services, and discusses how these services are accessed and financed. It reviews available evaluation findings showing the modest impacts of the two service types and considers the challenges that evaluators face when assessing these services. Finally, the article discusses planning and service delivery issues such as coordination and system reform, financing, targeting, relationships between workers and families, and efforts to strengthen entire communities.

When Children Cannot Remain Home: Foster Family Care and Kinship Care

Jill Duerr Berrick, Ph.D.

Despite the best efforts of parents, community service programs, and public child welfare agencies, some children are not safe in their homes and must be placed in substitute care settings. This article points out that child welfare authorities are increasingly placing children in the homes of their relatives rather than in traditional foster family homes. The declining availability of foster homes, rising demand for foster care, changing attitudes toward the extended families of troubled parents, and policies regarding payment for the costs of care have all contributed to the rapid growth in kinship foster care. The article discusses

differences in both the characteristics of kin and traditional foster parents and the supports the caregivers receive from child welfare agencies. Research findings suggest that kinship homes can promote the child welfare goals of protecting children and supporting families, but they are less likely to facilitate legal permanence for children through family reunification or adoption. The author argues that a coherent policy toward kinship caregivers must balance the strengths of informal exchanges among family members with the power of government agencies to provide resources and oversight.

The Costs of Child Protection in the Context of Welfare Reform

Mark E. Courtney, Ph.D.

The financing structure of any public service system reveals policy priorities and drives the delivery of services. This article focuses on federal funding for child welfare services, which makes up about half of the \$11.2 billion in public funds spent on this system in 1995. The author points out that federal funds for child welfare primarily pay for out-of-home care (foster care and adoption services), and these expenditures have risen sharply. In contrast, federal funding for child protection investigations, prevention programs, and treatment services is more limited and has not risen apace with reports of maltreatment. The article compares the high cost of foster care with the lower per-capita costs of cash assistance to poor families, child protection investigations, and typical service provision. Pointing out that the majority of families served by the child welfare system are poor, the author argues that child welfare and cash assistance should be seen as interrelated. The article explores the possibility that the 1996 federal welfare reform law may increase the need for child welfare services and drive up the costs of child protection.

Rethinking the Paradigm for Child Protection

Jane Waldfogel, Ph.D.

Mounting pressures on the nation's system for helping children who are abused and neglected have prompted efforts to reform the CPS system to better protect children's safety. As this article explains, many current reform efforts focus on the "front end" of the system in which reports of abuse and neglect are screened and investigated, and caseworkers recommend whether to close a case, provide in-home services, or remove a child from the home. The author identifies key problems of the CPS system which concern reformers, and it closely examines one proposal for reform—the community-based partnership for child protection. The major elements of this approach are that it targets investigations by CPS toward only high-risk families, it builds collaborative community networks that can serve lower-risk families, and it provides a differentiated response to both high- and low-risk families that is tailored to each family's situation. The article describes early experiences implementing these ideas in Missouri, Florida, and Iowa, and it explores both the promise and challenges of reform.

Four Commentaries: How We Can Better Protect Children from Abuse and Neglect

Douglas J. Besharov, J.D., LL.M.

A scholar with legal training who once directed the U.S. National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect, Besharov argues that the maltreatment reporting process should be reformed to encourage more careful reporting and to reduce the prevalence of intrusive investigations into allegations that prove unfounded. He also recommends steps to provide a more realistic, long-term response by child welfare agencies to the devastating effects that drug addiction has on the ability of parents to care for their children.

Marcia Robinson Lowry, J.D.

The director of a child advocacy organization and a lawyer who represents children in class-action lawsuits against child welfare systems, Lowry believes that child welfare reform efforts have been stymied by the managerial and resource limitations of public child welfare agencies. Instead of hiring trained professionals who can evaluate each case, these agencies instruct their workers to apply simple principles across the board (for instance, by striving to preserve virtually all families). The agencies also save money by

offering few helping services to families. Lowry argues that the pressure of class-action lawsuits is needed to propel lasting change in the operations of these bureaucratic agencies.

Leroy H. Pelton, Ph.D.

A professor of social work who focuses on child welfare policy effects on poor families, Pelton finds that the crucial flaw of the public child welfare system is that its structure links a helping mission to support families with a coercive mission to investigate families and remove children. The poor families who are overrepresented in child welfare caseloads might welcome services, but CPS involvement also exposes them to accusation and the risk of foster care. Pelton believes that true reform must separate the investigative and placement powers of CPS from the delivery of supportive family services.

Michael W. Weber

A child welfare administrator with experience in public and private agencies who co-led the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse, Weber argues that CPS agencies are too crisis-oriented, they bear too much of the burden of handling child maltreatment, and their response to maltreatment reports is too uniform. He recommends an array of community efforts to prevent abuse and its recurrence, urges that varied community organizations be drawn into the fight against child abuse, and advocates for a system that differentiates the response that CPS makes to reports that vary in seriousness.

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Eugene M. Lewit, Ph.D., and Nancy Kerrebrock

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