

Should Politics or Research Drive Child Welfare Reforms?

This [Child Welfare Monitor article](#) summarizes a paper by Richard Barth et. al. analyzing “10 commonly held misconceptions” about child protection and foster care.

The authors are concerned that current efforts to reform these programs are often based on theories that are politically popular but aren't supported by research.

To take one of their examples, poverty increases maltreatment rates across all demographics, but one product of systemic racism is that concentrated poverty is three to five times higher in Black and Indigenous communities. This turns out to have a significantly greater impact on disproportionality in child protection than caseworker bias, which is a frequent target of disparity efforts. This suggests that a larger proportion of our political capital should be devoted to increasing incomes – for example by promoting access to good jobs, boosting pay equity, and making Biden's child allowance permanent.

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The article that this blog talks about was published this year, 2021, by 7 authors in the journal *Research on Social Work Practice*. Unfortunately, access to it is behind the firewall so unless you have an association with a college or university you would have to pay to read it. However we provided a link to an article in the *Child Welfare Monitor* which does an excellent job of summarizing the main points.

Each of the seven authors has some area of special expertise in research on the policies and practices where the “10 misunderstandings” are occurring.

And when you see the list of the misunderstandings that the authors deal with it's clear that they don't shy away from talking about highly sensitive topics. They address questions including:

- Whether implicit bias plays a role in which cases get reported to child protection
- Whether racial bias is a major reason for the disproportionate number of black families in child protection
- Whether racial bias plays a significant role in decisions to substantiate maltreatment reports or in decisions whether to place children in foster care
- Whether caseworkers routinely confuse child neglect with poverty
- Whether Research Supported Practices, or I usually hear them referred to as Evidence-Based practices are ineffective for families of color
- Whether too many children grow up in foster care, and
- Whether foster care is responsible for poor outcomes for the children who have been in it

In the initial couple of pages the authors engage in some academic handwringing – and I don't mean that in a pejorative sense, their worries are reasonable – and they are concerned that that people who are making child protection policy are too often doing so based on myths, which are largely of political origin, than evidence that is well-founded and actually true. So this is another case of political beliefs being more important and carrying more weight than facts. It's not just a problem on the right.

The authors cite numerous studies for each point that they make, and they are upfront about all of the caveats or areas that research has not yet quite pinned things down. So the basis for their list of misunderstandings is not some single study that has been done recently by graduate students and hasn't been corroborated. These are studies that have accumulated over years and sometimes decades which are consistently pointing in the same direction and can be relied upon at least as much as any other evidence-based information in the field. They also point out areas that are still not well researched and where you have to make policy decisions based on experience and the best information available.

Of course the author's concern is that not paying attention to research may, and let's be honest actually does, lead to ineffective or harmful policies. This echoes a theme that we have repeatedly brought up which is that many practices in child welfare today, particularly regarding the very heavy preference given to family preservation often to the detriment of the child, or to child protection practices known generically as Differential Response, or in Minnesota as Family Assessment, are simply not backed up by any empirical evidence and are continually putting children at great risk. So we share the perspective of these authors that we need to hold policy makers accountable for justifying child protection and foster care practices based on real facts and not on ideology.

It would take a long time to go through all of the 10 misconceptions so I recommend the Child Welfare Monitor article to your reading, or the Barth et. al. article if you can get a hold of it. But let me give you a flavor of arguments they make in several of these areas.

Regarding the question of whether a disproportionate number of Black children are referred to child protection due to racial bias, they focus on the relationship between concentrated poverty and child maltreatment. To cut to the chase, what they are saying is that there is a lot of evidence that concentrated poverty drives increased child abuse across all demographic groups. If you want to test this idea against the White population, think of Appalachia, or of the White projects where I grew up. The reason there are more Black and Indigenous children in child protection is because they are about 3 to 5 times more likely to live in deep poverty than White children. It is really important to understand that the opposite is not true. The authors point out that most parents living in poverty do not maltreat their children. Nevertheless, uncomfortable though it may be, poverty is powerfully associated with child maltreatment and that is true for all communities. The authors maintain that once poverty is controlled for, several studies show that Black children are at similar, or perhaps slightly lower risk of

being reported for maltreatment than White children and that “When we make an economically fair “apples to “apples” comparison, the overrepresentation of Black children disappears.”

Some people may not like to hear that, but it appears that the studies behind this are really solid and it’s important to know because the policy implications for this are huge. A great deal of our political efforts in child welfare are addressed at dealing with racial bias within child protection and foster care programs. While this is important to do, the research more than suggests that we would make a much bigger impact by focusing more attention on the systemic racism that produces deep and widespread economic inequalities. In the author’s words their motivation is to “shine a light directly on the issue that racially based economic stratification is a profound and crippling societal flaw which must be addressed.”

One of the sections for example describes a study in which modest increases in access to the Earned Income Tax Credit made a noticeable impact on reducing the incidence of child maltreatment in a particular community. I would expect that President Biden’s child tax credit, which reports indicate will lift 50% of children out of poverty, should lead to a noticeable reduction in child maltreatment across the board.

This is reminiscent of the familiar conundrum discussed in management research known as the 80/20 rule. The concept is that 80% of problems in a business process such as errors and inefficiencies, whether in manufacturing or some other field, is due to 20% of the underlying problems. Historically, businesses tend to focus on chasing down the 80% individual errors rather than fixing the 20% that is driving the rest.

So the issue here is that we are spending a large amount of our political capital and energy on one area, getting racial bias out of decision-making out of child protection and foster care, which is really important, I’m not suggesting we stop working on this, but is not nearly as powerful in reducing the number of Black and Indigenous families who get into child protection as would an improvement in income equity. So perhaps we need to talk about reallocating our political capital. We only have so much time and money to impact public policy and perhaps child advocates should be reallocating those resources to spend more time on things like improved access to high-quality education, equal access to well-paying jobs and careers, access to child care and healthcare benefits that make it easier for people to stay in the workforce, and wages that are actually enough for people to live on. This would appeal in theory at least to the conservative agenda as well because the impact of these types of policy changes would be to reduce the number of families who have to interact with the government to survive. In other words, if people are independent economically and can make their own decisions they will, among many other benefits, be less likely to show up at the front door of child protection, and less likely to lose their kids.

Another area that may be controversial is that the authors point to a number of studies showing that, controlling for poverty, Black children are actually slightly less likely to be referred to child protection or be placed in foster care. That’s really unexpected. For

example they cite “recent studies using population-based samples (that suggest) that Black substance-exposed infants were less likely to be referred for maltreatment than White or Hispanic substance-exposed infants.” Similarly, the authors say that research shows that once Black children are in the system they are actually compared to White children less likely to have their allegations of child maltreatment be substantiated or removed into foster care. This and similar findings raise the interesting question of whether we are more willing to tolerate Black children being abused than White children.

The authors also point out that the assumption that Black children are being over-reported child protection due to racial bias is not consistent with other measures of child well-being, for example infant or child mortality. In fact the percentages of Black children in those types of categories are similar, indicating that again poverty is the primary culprit not bias within one particular system.

In another widely discussed topic they address is whether child protection caseworkers regularly confuse poverty with neglect. They take great pains to point out that the negative effects of poverty and neglect are sometimes overlapping but actually quite different. Child neglect has effects distinct from poverty in areas such as mental health, criminal justice involvement, and academic outcomes in adulthood maltreatment, and in addition neglect is more likely to recur and frequently co-occurs with other forms of maltreatment. They also remind us that “narratives that conflate poverty and child neglect unfairly characterize low-income families, the majority of whom provide appropriate care for their children”. Regarding the child protection response to this, they cite data that only about one fourth of neglect reports are based on lack of material resources, and only about one fourth of those are substantiated.

As we have discussed in other podcasts, neglect is not relatively less damaging than physical abuse. In fact it often has more serious long-term lifelong effects than physical abuse, and is more dangerous as indicated by the fact that year after year in the federal child maltreatment reports child neglect is responsible for over 70% of child fatalities due to maltreatment.

Several issues in the area of foster care are examined, but one in particular is whether foster care is responsible for poor outcomes for the children who have been through it. They go into this in some detail but the bottom line is that, by and large, the treatment that children experienced before they got into foster care is the main reason why they have poor outcomes later in life, not their experience in foster care. One interesting aspect of this is surveys of children in foster care, in which 8 out of 10 fosters felt that the removal from their bio homes was necessary, and a majority of whom had positive things to say about their foster care experience. There are many issues in the way foster care is being managed by states and counties, and we have not been shy about pointing them out, but we also want to raise the fact that there are many foster parents out there doing great work even as the system allows people to foster who are not well vetted and who lack appropriate oversight.

There are other interesting findings that we commend to your reading. We will touch on all of them but this would then be a very long podcast.

But for me the main takeaway is that the authors are tackling a really distressing tendency in child welfare to politicize rather than professionalize policies and procedures, and that this is leading us to invest money, training, and political capital in approaches that simply don't have an empirical basis, that from the advocates point of view waste a lot of our resources focusing on areas that are important in themselves but contribute to improving inequities in the system to only a small degree, and which most importantly are not contributing to the safety and well-being of children, which is the primary mission of child welfare.

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