

Who Will Challenge the Current Political Order to Protect Children?

This week's webinar speaker, Dee Wilson, co-wrote an article for a 2013 edition of the journal *Child Welfare* dedicated entirely to research on child fatalities.

The [authors' findings](#) are still supported by subsequent studies. What's changed is that their perspective has become unacceptable to those who influence child welfare policy today.

For example the authors recommended that child protection take action before children are harmed based on precursors of child murders such as family violence, or caregivers who have weak emotional ties to their infants.

Preventive child protection action today might be viewed by the political left as racist and as unwarranted intrusion into families by the right.

Should we proactively protect children in high-risk situations? An objective analysis of that question would require child welfare leaders who are in the political mainstream, rather than activists promoting an ideological agenda.

This week's podcast analyzes the 2013 article in more detail and explores the management challenges to implementing its recommendations.

Narrative for Safe Passage for Children 11/4/2022 podcast on Dee Wilson article

This week's blog is based on an article entitled "[Extent and Nature of Child Maltreatment-Related Fatalities: Implications for Policy and Practice](#)". The co-authors are Jennifer Sheldon-Sherman, then a Justice of the Supreme Court of California, along with Dee Wilson, who did the Safe Passage webinar this week, and Susan Smith, both of whom were at Casey Family Programs when the article was published. Dee is now working independently and publishes a periodic blog called the Sounding Board, which is published in an online child welfare newspaper called The Imprint.

As mentioned this article was included in a 2013 edition of the journal called *Child Welfare*, which is published by the Child Welfare League of America, and the entire edition was dedicated to research on child fatalities due to maltreatment. This particular paper summarized the previous 30 years of research on child fatalities. The link to this article is provided in the blog as well as in the transcript for this podcast, both of which are on our website at safepassageforchildren.org.

As mentioned, although this journal edition was published in 2013, the major findings are still valid, and have been reinforced by subsequent research, a primary example being the growth of

predictive analytics, which is a form of statistical analysis that has identified many of the same precursors of child fatalities.

This article focuses particularly on predictors of child fatalities in infants and toddlers, because typically on a national basis over 40% of child fatalities are children under one year of age and 60% or more are children under three. Our research on child fatalities in Minnesota, which is currently ongoing, reflects similar percentages.

Given that children in families with certain risk factors are at a much higher risk of being murdered, the authors conclude that “Waiting for very young children who are known to CPS to be harmed, or to be at risk of imminent harm, before taking steps to mitigate risks... is a dangerous approach to child protection.”

The authors recap research in several places showing that instances of maltreatment that might not ordinarily get screened into child protection services should be rethought as a basis for intervention, including particularly when caregivers demonstrate weak emotional connections to infants and toddlers. Other allegations of abuse and neglect that might not typically be considered severe enough to involve child protection include young children who are chronically referred to CPS for relatively minor injuries, and situations where violent individuals are present in the home, particularly unrelated males.

In this regard they point to a significant population of children who have been “referred to CPS for non-severe allegations that do not generally warrant coercive CPS intervention, yet are still at risk of death from maltreatment”, and recommend that child welfare agencies particularly respond to non-serious allegations of abuse and neglect for children 0-5. Further they recommend that these threats to child safety should require what they call “coercive CPS intervention”. Keep that thought in mind for a little later in this podcast.

In advocating for this proactive approach, the authors also recommend that child protection reach out to other professionals who are in contact with the family such as public health nurses, mental health and substance abuse professionals, caseworkers in other programs, and medical personnel, and that they be trained to identify these risk factors and report them to child protection, particularly situations when parents are emotionally detached from their children. In support of this they mentioned that most estimates are that families had only been previously known to child protection in 20% to 30% of cases, so reaching out to others in related fields is necessary to protect children. This is more relevant in Minnesota where our study of child fatalities is showing that families were known to child protection in more than 50% of child fatality cases. They point out that child protection risk assessment instruments do not generally consider detached parenting and a lack of nurturing, even though a parent’s emotional disconnection from infants and toddlers elevates the risk of a maltreatment death.

As mentioned in the blog, this perspective on the role of child protection could hardly be further from the current philosophy both in Minnesota and in many states nationally. The dominant narrative today is that children are being removed from their families, particularly in BIPOC communities, with little justification, which accounts for the racial disparities in the system. As many of you know, Black children are approximately four times as likely to be in child protection and Indigenous children 10 to 14 times as likely than white children This is attributed first to

caseworkers who are portrayed as clumsy and disrespectful of their clients, ignorant about cultural differences that cause them to interpret varying parenting styles as cases of maltreatment, and who are unable to distinguish poverty from neglect. As we have stated elsewhere, there is no empirical evidence to support any of these widespread beliefs.

What there is, however, is empirical evidence that poverty is a primary driver of child abuse and neglect across all racial groups except Hispanic, but that's a story for another day. So, the fact that BIPOC families, especially Black and Indigenous, are disproportionately poor is the biggest single factor in the racial disparities in child protection and foster care. This especially applies to deep poverty, which is defined as less than half of the federal poverty level, which is supposed to be the minimum amount necessary to live on, but is actually itself too low.

So the evidence does point to the fact that systemic racism is the biggest single reason so many Black and Indigenous families are in child protection but it's the economic systemic racism that drives these families disproportionately into poverty. As result the policy fixes should focus on getting income to these families particularly during points of crisis such as becoming homeless.

The view that families and children are being separated based on superficial or racist understandings of the family situation contributes to a number of ways in which we are failing to protect children in Minnesota. First, we are currently still only screening in around 43% of maltreatment reports, compared to nearly 60% nationally. That translates to somewhere between 8,000 and 10,000 children in Minnesota annually who would get at least an initial assessment by a child protection worker in the average state but don't get it here.

This current, essentially political view of child protection is also underpinning a heavy preference for family preservation, which leads to children being left in abusive situations as long as possible and returning them from out of home placements as soon as possible, even when there are ongoing major risks. Our study of child fatalities is showing, first of all, that two children per month on average are being killed by their caregivers, and that a much higher percentage of these children were already known to child protection than in the average state. It also is showing that, while the majority of children who are killed by the caregivers are younger than three years, older children are often left in highly abusive situations for years at a time, and are frequently left in or returned to homes that are known to be highly abusive and unsafe, with the result that many of them are either damaged for life for murdered. Additionally, of the 88 children in our study, 10% were tortured to death and 10% were in foster care, all but one of them in a kinship placement.

The fact is that these statistics, or for that matter research generally does not significantly influence child welfare policy, but instead policy and practice is typically driven by political ideologies. Unfortunately this is consistent with a long pattern in child welfare. That is probably enough of a topic for an entirely different podcast. But as one example I would point to the fact that predictive analytics, which is a relatively new, heavily quantitative methodology used to identify factors leading to child abuse and particularly, to fatalities, has not been embraced by child welfare agencies across the country. So one of our long term goals at Safe Passage is to continue to challenge child welfare leaders to base their policies and practices on facts, on statistics, and on research.

As many of you are aware, Safe Passage for Children is usually at the front of the line in pointing out the flaws in child protection and foster care, and advocating for ways to improve these programs. But our goal is to make them better, not abolish them as some are recommending, or to unfairly criticize the people in these programs.

Let's acknowledge that the extreme views that are currently dominating the field of child welfare are obviously not isolated, they mirror what is happening in the society at large. The pattern, familiar in other areas, is that unfounded statements about the child protection shortcomings or the allegedly bad behavior of child protection workers are repeated over and over again until many people in the field accept them uncritically as the truth, despite the fact that they have no basis in research, or statistics, or, simply stated, in reality.

Turning this situation around will be no easier in child welfare than it is in the society overall. However we have the advantage that are all motivated to be persistent, because we all have an obligation to challenge politicized attacks on the system and the people in it, so we can instead refocus attention on changes in policy and practices that will improve the safety and well-being of children.

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