

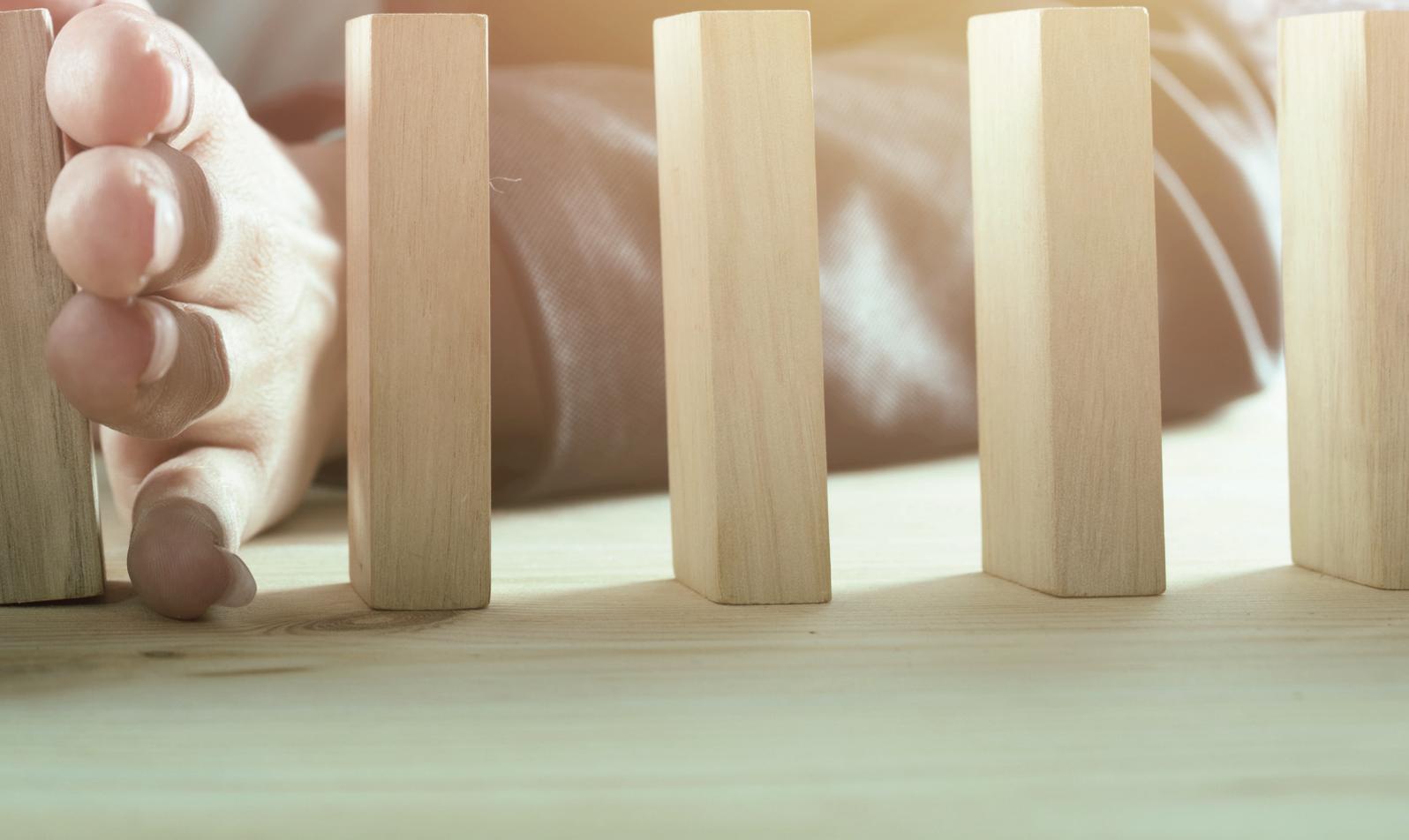


Achieving Improved Child and Family Well-Being Through Prevention

A Call for System Adaptation

By Dana Weiner

Adaptations to the COVID-19 pandemic have prompted an important debate in child welfare, a system that has been designed and oriented to detect and respond to suspected child maltreatment. The practical limitations of maintaining engagement with children and families during the pandemic, increased federal and local support for expanding prevention, and our growing awareness of systemic racism have called into question the role of mandated reporters, particularly in the context of our education system.



Mandated Reporting

The child protection system is designed to detect child maltreatment through mandated reporting laws.¹ The mandate requires specific professionals who routinely interact with children to report suspected child abuse and neglect to child welfare hotlines. While the engagement of mandated reporters with children and families provides valuable opportunities to detect family needs, we have equipped mandated reporters with only a single, insufficient option: to place a child welfare hotline call that may initiate a lengthy, intrusive investigation. In the absence of other tools and pathways to provide linkage to services and supports that could stabilize families, much of what mandated reporters submit to child welfare elicits an unnecessarily punitive (and expensive) response.

In light of this, COVID-19-related closures have led to concerns from child welfare system leaders over the diminished exposure of children to the professionals who might detect abuse and neglect. Despite their calls for enhanced reporting, the data suggest that an increase in reports does not correspond to an increase in safety. In fact, while teacher reports comprise one-fifth of all calls to the child abuse hotline, only 11–15 percent of these calls are ultimately confirmed as child maltreatment, according to reports published by the federal Children’s Bureau.²

It is likely that the economic conditions and stress associated with COVID-19 are impacting the rate of child maltreatment (abuse and neglect), but it is unlikely that increased mandated reporting by teachers will detect or address these changes. To inform strategies to

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respond to unseen events, Chapin Hall has conducted a series of analyses and developed a simulator tool that can forecast the need for intervention and the capacity required to deliver it.

By leveraging publicly available data to examine historical and seasonal patterns in reporting child maltreatment, we can evaluate trends in detection of maltreatment. Analyzing county-level data on economic and other stressors in combination with historical child protection data will better inform our understanding of the impact of the current economic conditions on the phenomenon of child abuse and neglect. This will allow child welfare agencies to plan for fluctuations in their response to reported child maltreatment.

A series of analyses apply this conceptual frame to an analytic process and an empirically derived tool to help system leaders forecast and plan responses to child and family needs. These dynamic data-driven tools can help child welfare system leaders project changes in detection and adapt their responses to unprecedented conditions. A recently released Chapin Hall brief presents the tools and the analyses behind them. It can be accessed at www.chapinhall.org/research/covid-19-and-child-welfare/.

Stop Punishing Poverty: Separating Abuse from Neglect

When children are inadequately fed, clothed, housed, or supervised, many of our current state and county child welfare systems are primarily resourced to initiate intrusive action: a child welfare investigation that can punish, stigmatize, and traumatize a child and a family in need of help. The current child welfare system was

not built to respond appropriately to these cases, so we are left with options that are either heavy-handed or unresponsive. The extensive resources we devote to investigations can be more effectively directed to prevention and support services. Our teachers, and our systems, need alternative strategies to protect children through enhanced support to their families.

We must refine our definitions of child maltreatment to distinguish and address poverty-related neglect from child endangerment or abuse. Findings on substantiation by reporter type as well as time-series analyses suggest that hotline reports consisting solely of neglect allegations (i.e., “neglect only”) may be a phenomenon that is distinct from child endangerment. While lack of supervision, food, clothing, or shelter can surely jeopardize the safety of children, addressing these directly through concrete supports may be more efficient and effective than initiating a child welfare case that punishes families for living in poverty.

The Prevention Opportunity

The Family First Prevention Services Act (P.L. 115-123) provides new flexibility and opportunity to fund and expand the delivery of community-based preventive interventions. Similarly, some states have implemented alternative response pathways that provide a non-investigative alternative for assessing and meeting family service needs. A robust preventive service array and clear pathways for connecting families with the things they need may alleviate the need for child welfare systems to investigate a large proportion of reports by mandated reporters. Building the availability of community-based supports may include those addressing concrete needs, such



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as free or low-cost child care, economic supports for food, housing, and other basic needs (such as rent subsidies), and respite for parents who may be overwhelmed by full-time child care and education responsibilities.

Additionally, many child welfare systems have implemented mobile resource referral tools that can provide timely and accurate service referral information. These tools can speed responsive decision making about how best to help families when they are in need of services or concrete supports. The ease with which mobile technology allows us to shop, reserve, and research suggests we can mobilize the same strategies to promote family stability. If made available to education personnel and others, these tools can shift the role of “mandated reporters” from surveillance to support. In this way, child welfare systems can leverage the engagement of teachers and other school personnel to drive supportive solutions as alternatives to hotline calls and investigations for neglect-only concerns, leveraging technological referral tools, community organizations, and alternative responses.

Predicting Undetected Maltreatment: Analytic Approach to Developing a Latent Event Simulator

To help child welfare system leaders understand, project, and respond to unseen incidents, Chapin Hall pursued an empirical inquiry to understand:

- What patterns of reporting and substantiation in previous years tell us about what to expect during COVID-19;
- The relationship between county-level economic stressors and reporting of child abuse and neglect; and
- The projection tools states and counties can use to inform preventive service needs and plan for fluctuation as we continue to adapt service systems in the context of the pandemic.

This analytic work is predicated on the analysis of drivers of local service needs and changes in the social-ecological context at the local level. Data analyses suggest substantial variation in the relationship between community

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drivers and child and family needs across geography. Unemployment is a powerful predictor of fluctuating rates of child abuse, but to fully understand this relationship it will be important to incorporate data on the chronicity and duration of economic hardship, as well as mediators such as mental health, stress, and isolation.

To apply this work to refine plans and system structures, child welfare jurisdictions should partner with data analysts to (1) access publicly available community-level data to generate geographically specific predictors of fluctuation in maltreatment; (2) incorporate the “weights” (coefficients) of these community-level predictors into the simulator tool; and (3) adjust reports by type (neglect only vs. neglect and abuse) to reflect child exposure to reporters, to project the number of cases in need of support, service, or investigation. In this way, system leaders can forecast capacity adjustments that will be required for hotline, investigations, or support staff to respond appropriately to child and family needs.

Adaptive System Changes

What can our systems do to collaboratively address child and family needs through prevention and avoid more intrusive and expensive entanglements?

While the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted child welfare system operations in countless ways, it has

challenged us to think strategically about how to re-orient our systems to promote child and family well-being. Children at increased risk of maltreatment are likely a small subset of the families that come to our attention. Rather than promoting increased surveillance by mandated reporters, systems should redirect collective resources to provide preventive services to a broad array of families. This will mean shifting capacity to respond appropriately to reports requiring investigations and those needing services, as well as expanding the responsibility for child and family well-being beyond the child welfare system. The entire family and child services sector, in partnership with communities, must provide swift and comprehensive supports to families in need. Additionally, child welfare systems and system partners should:

- Separate abuse from neglect when analyzing data on child maltreatment
- Broaden the array of community-based supports
- Partner with families directly to identify what resources they need to address their challenges and safely care for their children
- Leverage technological tools to make information about preventive resources available to education personnel

In this way, interagency collaboration, redefined roles, and supportive structures can allow us to build a child and family well-being system that is resourced and coordinated. Such a system would provide necessary supports and promote the health and strength of families. 

Reference Notes

1. Sedlak, A. J., & Ellis, R. T. (2014). Trends in child abuse reporting. In J. E. Korbin, R. D. Krugman, & S. Miller-Fellows (Eds.), *Handbook of child maltreatment* (pp. 3-26). New York, NY: Springer.
2. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children’s Bureau. National child abuse and neglect data system (NCANDS) child file, FFY2018 [dataset]; updated 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.ndacan.acf.hhs.gov>