

# CHILD WELFARE & CHILD WELL-BEING

New Perspectives From the National Survey  
of Child and Adolescent Well-Being

EDITED BY

Mary Bruce Webb, Kathryn Dowd, Brenda Jones Harden,  
John Landsverk, and Mark F. Testa

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**OXFORD**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2010

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Published by Oxford University Press, Inc.  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Child welfare and child well-being : new perspectives from the national survey of child  
and adolescent well-being / edited by Mary Bruce Webb . . . [et al.].

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-539846-5

1. Child welfare—United States. I. Webb, Mary Bruce.

HV741.C45 2009

362.70973—dc22

2009013845

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

Printed in the United States of America  
on acid-free paper

## Child Welfare and Child Well-Being

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not have been possible without the children, the caregivers, and the child welfare caseworkers and administrative staff who provided the data for the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW). It is remarkable to think that thousands of individuals who live and work under sometimes extreme stresses are willing to look beyond their own circumstances to contribute to a project that will result in no immediate or obvious benefit to themselves.

Of the hundreds of individuals who have contributed over the past decade to the planning and management of NSCAW, a few deserve special notice. Carol Wilson Spigner, as the Associate Commissioner of the Children's Bureau when the work began, understood the opportunity to examine the interactions across the various dimensions of the child welfare system, and supported the planning of a survey with ambitious breadth and reach. Matt Stagner must be credited with the vision that NSCAW would become a resource for the child welfare research and policy community. Gaynel Abadie ensured that the complex mechanics of funding were balanced with the scientific needs of the survey. Janet Griffith, Jeannie Newman and their colleagues at Caliber Associates/ICF played a major role in persuading local agencies to participate. Richard Barth, one of the original principal investigators for the study, made immeasurable contributions through his thorough and practical knowledge of child welfare practice and policy. Another principal investigator in the early years, Desmond Runyan, guided much of the conceptual development around antecedents and sequelae of maltreatment. A dynamic workgroup of consultants was generous in sharing time and expertise, and their knowledge enabled a true multidisciplinary approach; members have included John Landsverk, Brenda Jones Harden, Mark Testa, Steve Barnett, Cheryl Boyce, Rob Clyman, Jill Duerr Berrick, Peter Digre, Greg Duncan, John Eckenrode, Byron Egeland, Diana English, John Fairbank, Michael Foster, Charles Glisson,

Robert Goerge, Kimberly Hoagwood, Sally Horwitz, Kelly Kelleher, Jess McDonald, Robert Ortega, and Karabelle Pizzigatti. Ron Haskins, who was instrumental in the authorizing legislation for NSCAW, has continued to work through the Brookings Institution and the Annie E. Casey Foundation to promote wide dissemination of results. Elliott Smith and others at the National Data Archive for Child Abuse and Neglect have provided many hours of advice to analysts using the NSCAW data.

Numerous individuals at Research Triangle International (RTI) were responsible for the successful implementation of the study, and a listing of all those who made contributions is not possible here. The fact that many of the RTI field staff and managers who are now conducting NSCAW II have been on the staff since the beginning of NSCAW I speaks to their commitment to this work and to the families who are represented here. Special mention must be made of Paul Biemer, who developed the survey design, and who has continued to be a creative leader and patient teacher. Mike Weeks, the first NSCAW Project Director at RTI and subsequent senior advisor, saw that the contract was carefully managed through many difficult times. Finally, Jenny Foerst's sensitive editing of all the chapters in this book has greatly improved its readability.

The National Survey for Child and Adolescent Well-Being is funded through the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation at the Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The information in this volume should not be construed as reflecting the official views of the Department of Health and Human Services, or of the Administration for Children and families.

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# INTRODUCTION

The chapters in this book are based on a single data source, the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW). This landmark study marks the first effort to gather nationally representative data, based on firsthand reports, about the functioning and well-being of U.S. children and families who encounter the child welfare system through a child maltreatment investigation by child protective services (CPS). Before NSCAW, no nationwide source of data existed that could be used to describe the developmental status and functional characteristics of children who come to the attention of CPS; moreover, almost no information of any kind existed about the many children who remain at home after a CPS investigation.

Much of the large-scale child welfare research before NSCAW was limited to tracking service histories and service outcomes, such as number of placements or length of stay in foster care. Little knowledge was to be found of how these service pathways were associated with the needs of the children and families involved. By contrast, NSCAW is longitudinal; contains direct assessments as well as reports about each child from multiple sources; and is designed to address questions of relations among children's characteristics and experiences, their development, their pathways through the child welfare service system, their service needs, and their service receipt. Most of the chapters in this volume take full advantage of data collected during the first 3 years of the study, in order to capture a sense of how these children are faring over time.

The data collection instruments used in NSCAW were built around the central notion that children's needs should drive the actions taken on their behalf by child welfare caseworkers. Using an ecological framework (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), the design team began with a focus on the children, identifying measures of health, cognitive, social, and emotional functioning appropriate to each age group. With the children as the focal point, the team then moved outward in the framework to obtain measures of environmental factors likely to support or

impinge on the children's growth, development, and well-being. These factors encompassed family, service system, and community influences.

In Chapter 1, Biemer, Dowd, and Webb present the NSCAW design features that inform the subsamples and measures used for analysis in all the chapters that follow. As will be seen, NSCAW has contributed to the body of child welfare knowledge by availing researchers of relatively objective data about children's characteristics and functioning, data that can serve as an assessment of service need, which in turn enables researchers to compare that need with services actually received. The advancement of research methods to accommodate the exploration of the complexities of child welfare research is another contribution of the NSCAW work and constitutes an underlying theme across all the chapters.

Academic disciplines tend to rely on and reinforce their own traditions and methodological preferences, while no single academic approach is likely to embrace the methods that would be useful for addressing the broad array of questions relevant to child welfare. The NSCAW project intentionally recruited researchers from across the disciplines to bring a diversity of theoretical and methodological perspectives to the work. The longitudinal nature of NSCAW, the possibilities for multiple levels of analysis, the use of age-specific variables and information from multiple respondents, the ambiguities in defining key constructs, and the complex sampling—all have been challenging to analysts, and the reader will find examples of these challenges (and the approaches used to address them) throughout the chapters. These chapters represent thoughtful, increasingly sophisticated approaches to the problems not only inherent in analyzing NSCAW data but also characteristic of child welfare research in general. The authors of chapters in this volume represent perspectives from the fields of developmental, educational, clinical, and organizational psychology, epidemiology, sociology, social work, economics, statistics, pediatrics, public policy, and public health.

After the description of NSCAW in Chapter 1, the book is organized around three substantive themes. Beginning with an emphasis on the children themselves, the authors examine how children's needs and characteristics interact first with the child welfare system and then with the larger system of services for children and families. Part 1 takes as its focus the characteristics, functioning, and developmental status of children in four separate age groups and employs methods and concepts that will be familiar to developmentalists who study attachment and early stimulation, resilience, and developmental psychopathology. Part 2 turns to topics of particular interest for child welfare policy and practice, taking into account the interactions between children's developmental status and system emphases and features. Part 3 provides a window into the interaction between the child welfare population and the broader child service system, using the children's mental health system as an exemplar. The use of children's and caregivers' characteristics to define service needs and service outcomes is a significant contribution of Part 3.

## Conceptual Foundations of Child Well-Being

The lack of definitional clarity plagues many constructs in the social science and services literatures. Within the child welfare service sector, the construct *child well-being* suffers from particular ambiguity because of distinct conceptualizations among various disciplines; inclusion of multiple, far-reaching constructs; and the relatively recent appearance of well-being on the child welfare policy agenda. Seaberg (1990) asserts, in fact, that the challenge in defining *child well-being* within child welfare stems from the field's lack of a conceptual framework for this construct.

Early work provided a moral definition of *well-being* and proffered that the term could be defined from a variety of perspectives, including one arising in the context of an individual's needs and desires (see Gleeson, 1986). From the perspective of positive psychology, *well-being* is defined as life satisfaction or as individuals' positive evaluation of their lives (Diener & Seligman, 2005; Seligman, 2002). Another approach involves major social indicators to define *well-being* (Brown & Moore, 2005). Such an approach relies heavily on the contexts within which children live. Consequently, indicators associated with adverse child outcomes (e.g., child living in poverty, with single parent, with unemployed parent) are used in discussions of child well-being (McLanahan, 2000). Some indicators are more directly related to child functioning, such as rates of low-birth-weight infants, infant mortality, child death, teen deaths by homicide, teen births, school dropouts, and youth nonattendance at school or work (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2009). Although these indicators of well-being are relatively easy to obtain and allow for population-based monitoring, in the child welfare arena they are less informative for policy development.

Attempts by child welfare scholars, policy makers, and practitioners to address well-being have focused largely on the contexts that promote or hinder it instead of on child functioning in itself. It is well documented, for example, that providing children safety and stability is linked to their well-being, or developmental functioning and mental health (Jones Harden, 2004; Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000). Other contextual variables documented to be related to the well-being of children in the child welfare system include having fewer psychosocial problems among birth parents, living with relatives, experiencing minimal moves, experiencing a shorter duration of out-of-home care, and living in the least restrictive environment possible (Altshuler, 1998; Barth, 2005; Farrugia, Greenberger, Chen, & Heckhausen, 2006). In what is perhaps the most widely used measure of well-being in the child welfare field, Magura and Moses (1986) defined *child well-being* by way of specific dimensions of the child's caregiving environment, as well as in terms of the child's adjustment; in fact, only 4 of the 43 scales in this measure address children's functioning. One particular environmental construct increasingly used in developmental psychology and other fields is *social capital*, which emphasizes such features of social interaction as trust, obligations, expectations, and reciprocity in an individual's network of relationships (Coleman, 1990).

Testa's introduction to Part 3 and several of the Part 3 chapters employ this social capital framework.

A focus on the contextual correlates of child well-being can inform practitioners' decisions about the kinds of environments that best predict child well-being. Despite the apparent appeal of this approach, however, it should be used with caution because the link between child context and child outcome is imperfect. The literature on children's resilience, for example, documents the relatively high functioning of children who have experienced adversities commonly expected to result in poor child outcomes. Furthermore, Seaberg (1990) recommends that specific contextual factors, because of their relative importance for the child (e.g., survival needs versus life satisfaction), be weighted differentially and that the effects of crises and multiple risk factors be accounted for. Although a contextual approach is informative, a conceptualization of child well-being that focuses on child-specific factors would more accurately characterize implications of the child welfare context for children.

Using a developmental heuristic to define *child well-being* would represent a major step toward definitional clarity. Such an approach would entail a focus on the functioning of the child, instead of on contextual variables that predict child well-being. The rich empirical literature addressing the influences on and trajectories of child development offers such a definitional basis for *child well-being*. Expanding on the developmental knowledge base, Wulczyn, Barth, Yuan, Jones Harden, and Landsverk (2005) assert that *well-being* should be defined in terms of how children are functioning across time, relative to the children's biology and environmental situations. These authors highlight the interdependent trajectories of child development and systemic experiences of children in the child welfare system. Because of current child welfare data on the unique experiences of children who enter the child welfare system during specific developmental periods, these authors suggest a focus on children "starting out," those starting school, and those starting adolescence.

Most research on child development specifies "domains" of child functioning, which typically translate into children's physical/health, cognitive/academic, and socioemotional functioning. Some agreement exists among scholars and practitioners of various disciplines about what constitutes normative functioning for children in each domain. For example, the American Academy of Pediatrics (Hagan, Shaw, & Duncan, 2007) has outlined standards of physical health for American children, such as appropriate weight and gross motor capacities. The psychological and educational fields have conducted numerous studies and established multiple assessments that articulate normative ranges for the American child population's developmental, cognitive, and academic skills (e.g., Sattler, 2001). Although not as well established as in the cognitive arena, normative development in the socioemotional arena, as well as the clinical range for mental health problems, has been documented (e.g., Achenbach, Dumenci, & Rescorla, 2003; Denham, 1998).

It can be argued that child well-being entails normative functioning across developmental domains. Developmental theory and research has considered such

normative functioning as representing children's competence. Notably, a segment of the developmental literature addresses the competent functioning of children who have experienced extreme environmental adversity (e.g., maltreatment). Children who achieve this level of functioning are referred to as "resilient" (Cicchetti, Rogosch, Lynch, & Holt, 1993; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Shaffer et al., Chapter 3, this volume). The constructs undergirding this work can inform the child welfare field as it struggles to establish a definition of *well-being*. For example, early conceptual work to define *competence* in children argues for a focus on the "whole" child (Zigler & Styfco, 2004; Zigler & Trickett, 1978). Emanating from this model, a focus on well-being would mean addressing children's functioning in the following areas: physical health, fine and gross motor skills, cognitive development, academic achievement, social relationships, mental health and behavioral functioning, and adaptive skills.

A developmentally based definition of *well-being* seems well suited for the child welfare system; it would emphasize the functioning of individual children in the context of the performance of other children exposed to similar risk factors. It would entail a focus on the "whole" child across developmental domains, including physical health and growth, cognitive and academic skills, and interpersonal relationships and mental health. Additionally, child well-being would be addressed over time, with attention to the developmental transitions that typically occur for children and the time-specific factors relevant to the child welfare system. Finally, it would require a consideration of the biological and environmental factors that affect children's development, particularly those emanating from their involvement with the child welfare system. This more focused and developmentally based definition could facilitate clearer child welfare policies and, in turn, inform services relevant to child well-being.

## Child Development and The National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being

The design of NSCAW was informed by a developmental framework and is operationalized through measures designed to capture the experiences, growth, and development of the children who come into contact with child welfare services. This emphasis on children's functioning is perhaps the single most important contribution of NSCAW. Part 1, edited by Brenda Jones Harden, is organized around child experiences and development unique to specific age groups. The availability in NSCAW of descriptive information about the characteristics and functioning of the children and families is in itself an important contribution, but the study design also allows researchers to examine how child and family characteristics interact with systems and service-level variables to influence pathways through the system and outcomes over time. The availability of information on children's functioning and outcomes from multiple informants enables the conceptualization of models of risk and resilience from a variety of theoretical and



methodological perspectives. The diversity of perspectives that can be brought to bear in examining developmental outcomes for children is reflected across Part 1: Each chapter focuses on a specific developmental age, and each takes a unique approach in its treatment of risk and resilience factors likely to influence outcomes for children who are exposed to adverse circumstances.

The first chapter in Part 1 (Chapter 2), by Jones Harden, Vick, Hancock, and Wang, examines outcomes for infants and the youngest children in the NSCAW sample; in particular, it examines placement stability and the quality of the caregiving environment. Developmentalists have identified the early childhood period as particularly important for children's language development, social development, and readiness for formal schooling. Researchers who study the development of young children have been especially concerned about the effects of children's early attachment to caregivers, as well as the cognitive and emotional stimulation in the caregiving environment. Children who encounter child welfare services are thought to be at a particular disadvantage in both regards, because economic deprivation and unstable caregiving relationships are thought to be all too typical of their environments. The chapter illustrates that these two factors, attachment and quality of the caregiving environment, are complex: When both are considered, their respective influences are not straightforward.

The next chapter, Chapter 3, turns to the topic of children in their beginning school years. For children involved with child welfare, the transition to school brings new opportunities but also may present new obstacles to those who lack stability in their home or community environments. Shaffer, Egeland, and Wang scrutinize a major developmental construct—*resilience*—defined as adaptation in the face of adversity. The chapter identifies some factors that appear to promote more competent functioning in this high-risk group of school-aged children. Interestingly, potentially modifiable factors are found to be important, including school engagement and placement stability.

Adolescents are the focal group for Chapter 4. In it the authors turn to what may be considered the most significant risk factor in a child welfare population: the experience of maltreatment. Historically, the variation among definitions of *maltreatment* has proved to be a substantial methodological weakness in child welfare research (Feerick & Snow, 2006); any examination of sequelae of maltreatment necessarily hinges on how maltreatment is captured and described. Izzo and colleagues take advantage of the availability in NSCAW of multiple sources for determining children's maltreatment experiences, including adolescents' self-reports of their own experiences. This chapter advances the definitions and analysis of maltreatment and its consequences; in addition, it offers new information about the relationship between maltreatment and socioemotional outcomes in adolescents.

Closing Part 1, Chapter 5 by Gardner, Kelleher, and Pajer extends across age groups to describe the experiences of children who live in families affected by domestic violence. This chapter capitalizes on another unique contribution of NSCAW: information about the vast majority of children who remain in the