CHILD WELFARE RESEARCH

Advances for Practice and Policy

EDITED BY
DUNCAN LINDSEY AND ARON SHLONSKY

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To Larry Shlonsky (1923–2006), a scientist and skeptic who always rooted for the underdog

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Child Welfare Research: An Introduction

Duncan Lindsey
Aron Shlonsky
Alan McLuckie

The modern child welfare system represents our collective effort on behalf of needy and dependent children. In the early history of the United States, child welfare took the form of orphanages and almshouses that served poor and orphaned children. Over the years, the child welfare system has changed and evolved into a complex system designed to care for maltreated children in family-like settings. Research in child welfare, for better or worse, has both guided and been driven by this monumental shift. In 1964, Wolins and Piliavin wrote the first major review of research in the child welfare field *Institution or Foster Care: A Century of Debate*. Their extensive review of the research up to that time indicated that, for the previous century, the major focus had been on what to do with orphaned and abandoned children. Yet, by the middle of the 20th century, child welfare was primarily concerned with the development and expansion of the modern foster care system. As such, Wolins and Piliavin lamented the dearth of empirical research in child welfare with which to guide practice and policy, particularly in the area of foster care.

The emergence of empirical knowledge in the child welfare field began shortly after World War II, but the accumulation of evidence began slowly. In 1970, Alfred Kadushin wrote in the introduction of what was the first child welfare research book, "Many articles in the field make general statements of dubious validity, use words and terms imprecisely, and enumerate conclusions categorically. Many undergraduate and graduate social work students are more scholarly than is the literature in the field, and they are impatient with and irreverent toward it" (p. ii). We have come a long way in the child welfare field from this solemn assessment. Although there is still much we do not know, the quantity of research in the field has substantially advanced, as has its quality and rigor. Research in the child welfare field is now viewed by most as central to improving services and ensuring quality.

The last half-century has also seen the scope of child welfare and its composition of services fundamentally shift from assisting needy and disadvantaged families to essentially providing a child protection

system (Lindsey, 1994, 2004). While there is evidence in the 21st century of a tapering of the number of children in foster care in the United States,[1] the number of children in care has rapidly and consistently increased since the mid-1980s (see the chapters by Testa and by Trocmé in this text). Between the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006a) and Canada (Trocmé et al., 2005), there were an estimated 3 million child abuse investigations in 2003, and as of 2006, there were over 0.5 million children in foster care in the United States (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006b).

As the studies in this text illustrate, research has often been ahead of the field and has pointed the way to the development of new services and to new ways of conceptualizing child welfare. In this book, we embrace a broad definition of the child welfare field. The traditional definition of child welfare developed by Kadushin almost five decades ago reflected the convergence of understanding in the field during the beginning of the 20th century. This viewpoint represented the normative aspirations of child welfare professionals for most of the 20th century. Over the years, the definition achieved the character of a paradigm. This traditional view has shaped our understanding of the child welfare field and the nature of the problems to be solved. But it is a view which is no longer adequate. It is too limiting in its vision. Further, the nature of the problems confronted by child welfare agencies has changed with such trends as increased divorces and corresponding changes in family situations (see Lindsey, 1994, pp. 91–118). Consequently, the paradigm which guides our understanding of child welfare has broadened in response to the shifting ground. Kadushin's traditional definition of a system that limits itself to the neediest children no longer captures the essence of contemporary child welfare. Thus a new understanding of the limits and possibilities of child welfare which reflects the enriched knowledge base in the field and an awareness of the social conditions within which child welfare services operate has emerged.

When considering the scope of child welfare research and its influence over the last 50 years, several seminal studies come to mind that have shaped child welfare policy and knowledge development within the field. First, C. Henry Kempe and colleagues' (1962) groundbreaking investigation of young children who were severely injured by their caregivers is credited with helping to bring about the development of mandatory reporting laws, which were codified in the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 (Pecora et al., 2000), and has been seen by some as prompting a shift from broader child welfare concerns to the protection of children from abuse (Lindsey, 1994, 2004, in press; Pelton, 1989).

Shortly before "battered child syndrome" was famously identified by Kempe et al. (1962), Henry Maas and Richard Engler (1959) released their book *Children in Need of Parents*. This representative, large-scale investigation of the child welfare system amounted to an exposé, pointing to the fact that many children "temporarily" placed in care spent years "drifting" in the foster care system, without familial contact, and often experiencing multiple placements. Another academic exposé came some 20 years later when Fanshel and Shinn (1978) released their study of New York City's foster youth. The importance of this study was not only that it confirmed many of Maas and Engler's (1959) findings with respect to parental contact and placement moves, but it also introduced the use of a more rigorous longitudinal design, a method that would later become the standard in child welfare research.

These studies, and others, influenced the development and passage of the landmark Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980. Responding to the identified need of children to be raised by permanent caregivers rather than in a series of temporary homes, this act codified permanency planning into law and specifically linked federal funding to the provision of placement prevention programs and adoption services (Pecora et al., 2000). In addition, it required child welfare agencies to begin monitoring the characteristics, whereabouts, and service history of children in foster care, making possible (with the later funding of statewide automated child welfare information systems) the subsequent large-scale collection of child welfare data that would drive research into the next millennium.

As individual states designed and implemented management information systems in order to meet federal standards, this information was accessed by a handful of innovative scholars who revolutionized the field. Using such administrative data to describe broad trends in child welfare, these scholars and the policy makers with whom they worked were able to use evidence to shape policy and system response. In particular, Wulczyn and Goerge (1992) began using state administrative data in New York and Illinois to model

foster care caseload dynamics and introduced the use of event history analysis to correctly model time-sensitive data. These advances were quickly followed with work by Mark Courtney, Richard P. Barth, Jill Duerr Berrick, and Barbara Needell in California (see, for example, Courtney, 1994; Courtney and Needell, 1997; Berrick, Needell, Barth, & Jonson-Reid, 1998) and with the establishment of the multistate data archive at the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall. Advances in the use of administrative data have informed us about the unique trajectory of infants in the foster care system (Goerge & Wulczyn, 1998; Berrick et al., 1998) and the existence of, and potential reasons for, racial disproportionality in foster care (Courtney, Barth, Berrick, & Brooks, 1996; Ards, Meyers, Malkis, & Zhou, 2003; Needell, Brookhart, & Lee, 2003) and have facilitated the development of reliable and valid risk assessment instruments (Johnson, 2004), to name just a few.

As well, the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) and the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) rely heavily on state administrative data to provide detailed estimates of the characteristics and number of children adopted or in foster care. Advances to come in this area include performance monitoring and integration of administrative data with detail-rich survey data.

Whereas administrative data are limited to providing fairly broad assessments of trends, experimental and detailed survey designs can provide national incidence estimates, more nuanced information about the effectiveness of interventions, and detailed information about how children and families fare within the child welfare system. The National Incidence Study (Sedlack, 2001), now in its fourth iteration, and the Canadian Incidence Study (Trocmé et al., 2005), now in its third iteration, are surveys designed to determine the prevalence and characteristics of maltreatment in the United States and Canada. Over time, trends in reporting and response can be monitored and policy adjustments made.

Though still rare in child welfare, experimental studies have also begun to inform practice and policy. Of these, Schuerman, Rzepnicki, and Littell's (1994) random controlled trial of the Homebuilders model of family preservation in Illinois stands out as exceptionally rigorous and informative. While family preservation continues to survive in many jurisdictions, its expansion has been more cautious as a result of the null findings of this study. The federal Title IV-E Waiver Demonstration has also prompted some experimental studies, most notably the Illinois evaluation of the availability of subsidized legal guardianship as a permanency enhancement (Testa, 2002). This study reveals that a "net increase" in permanence results from allowing caregivers to assume legal guardianship of their wards while continuing to receive a stipend equivalent to the foster care board rate. Strong evidence of effectiveness lends support for the expansion of permanence to include subsidized guardianship.[2]

Still other studies using interview and survey designs have influenced, and continue to influence, practice and policy. For example, Trudy Festinger's (1983) study of 277 young adults who had left foster care between the ages of 18 and 21 documented the substantial challenges facing former foster youth, particularly those emancipating from residential group care, including limited employment opportunities and reliance on public assistance programs. Moving well beyond the limited information found in administrative data, Festinger asked youth to share their feelings about the foster care system and what could be done to make it better. This study garnered considerable attention and was instrumental in prompting the 1985 Independent Living Initiatives Program (PL 99–272) followed by the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999 (PL 106–169). Building on this earlier research, Mark Courtney and colleagues (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, & Nesmith, 2001; Courtney et al., 2005) used survey methods to track a cohort of youth aging out of foster care. This study has drawn renewed attention to this issue and substantively informs the development of emerging policy.

Increasingly, standard administrative information is being augmented with rich data sources such as surveys to escape the confines of crude explanatory factors and to shed light on what is truly happening within the child welfare system. A fine example of such work can be found in Glisson and Hemmelgarn's (1998) study of the internal and external functioning of child welfare agencies, which found that child outcomes are better explained by an agency's internal environment than its service coordination efforts with related agencies.

Large-scale representative samples of children followed over time, such as the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (Dowd et al., 2002), have also begun to provide more detailed information about the lives of children involved with the child protection system. While child well-being may seem like an

obvious consideration, it has not been adequately defined or, more accurately, it has not been adequately constrained to a set of constructs that are easily measurable and lend themselves to intervention (Shlonsky, 2006). The combination of administrative data, child well-being information, and rigorously tested service interventions (see, for example, Wulczyn, Barth, et al., 2005) offers a more nuanced and promising line of inquiry, ultimately leading to interventions that are based on evidence and are aligned with child developmental theory.

Against this backdrop of increasingly rigorous and useful research on the residual child welfare system, there are lingering questions about whether the system is serving the best interests of children and families. Specifically, the broad association of child poverty with increased rates of maltreatment (Lindsey, 1994, 2004; Pelton, 1989) and lower measures of child well-being may mean that large effects could be achieved through better prevention efforts. And there is promise in this area. The work of David Olds and colleagues (Olds, Henderson, Kitzman, et al., 1998; Olds, Henderson, Cole, et al., 1998) has shown that home visits by public health nurses to new mothers deemed to be at high risk may reduce the risk of child maltreatment. Parenting programs for high-risk families using applications derived from social learning theory have also been rigorously evaluated and show great promise for improving the lives of children and families (Barth et al., 2005).

Despite the associations among poverty, maltreatment, and child well-being, increases in income alone may not translate into broad gains in functioning for the generation of children currently involved with child protection services. For example, children exposed to poverty at a very young age appear to fare less well than children who experience poverty later in life (Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Maritato, 1997). Thus, the emerging research in child welfare, as a broad concept including child maltreatment and well-being, might best be understood and utilized through the multipronged public health approach taken by Geraldine Macdonald (2000). That is, child welfare must take a larger view by addressing the needs of both maltreating families (secondary prevention and tertiary treatment) and families at risk of entering the system (primary prevention). Such an approach, while not explicit, is evident in the chapters to follow.

The book is organized into six parts, beginning with the context of child welfare and the research in this area, and then moving to evidence-based practice, research on permanency, advances in child welfare decision making, broader policy concerns, and, finally, international perspectives on child welfare.

PART I: CHILD WELFARE RESEARCH IN CONTEXT

Part I begins with a review of the trends in child maltreatment in the United States and Canada by Nico Trocmé that demonstrates the importance of rigorous research and the use of epidemiological data in order to inform policy at the population level. Leroy Pelton then examines the nature of the child welfare system and the quality of the research conducted within it. Pelton provides a note of caution and healthy skepticism about what can be accomplished by research within the current child welfare framework.

PART II: EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE IN CHILD WELFARE

All evidence is not created equal. Furthermore, the techniques used to evaluate the quality of research must themselves be scrutinized. Often, what appears to be decision making that is informed by high-quality research is nothing of the sort. Here, Eileen Gambrill discusses the emergence of evidence-based or, more correctly, evidence-informed practice, and the contributions of the medical field and other professions to shaping the way in which we think about and use evidence. Specifically, she introduces the process of evidence-based practice and juxtaposes this with other forms of decision making. Next, building on her experience conducting a controversial systematic review of multisystemic therapy for the Campbell Collaboration,[3] Julia Littell articulates how evidence can be misused and offers rigorous procedures for establishing the quality of studies and their synthesis.

PART III: RESEARCH ON PERMANENCY: ADOPTION, GUARDIANSHIP, AND FAMILY TIES

During the 21st century, there has been a substantial reduction in the length of time that children linger in long-term foster care. Most important, there has

been a substantial increase in the number of children adopted through public child welfare agencies. This shift is largely the result of changes in public policy brought about by advances in child welfare research, and there are other shifts taking place as well. In this part, we review recent advances in permanency.

Trudy Festinger demonstrates how high-quality research can drive child welfare policy. Festinger details a random controlled trial of an intervention designed to speed adoptions by streamlining the court process in cases where adoption is likely. One of the few experiments conducted in child welfare to date, this study is an example of how researchers and child welfare authorities can design and carry out rigorous and relevant studies to answer difficult questions lingering in the field.

Many have heralded the importance of Mark Testa's work in the area of kinship care, permanency, guardianship, and adoptions. Reacting to years of benign neglect in the child welfare and foster care fields, the judiciary in the state of Illinois placed the state's child welfare program under court supervision and mandated research-based interventions. As part of a federal Title IV-E Waiver Demonstration Project, Testa promoted and rigorously tested the use of subsidized guardianship as a permanency alternative, leading to a substantial increase in permanency for children in the state. Testa's chapter in this volume outlines the theoretical foundations of the use of kinship care as a placement resource of choice, drawing on an emerging body of evidence to support his position.

At any given time, there are more than .5 million children in the foster care system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, 2007). Millions of children enter and exit the foster care system over the course of their childhood, yet little is known about what happens to children who leave foster care when they become adults. Amy Dworsky's chapter reviews the literature on youth who "age out" of the foster care system, documenting the disappointing outcomes that many foster children seem to experience. Also highlighted is the extent to which extending foster care for these youth might improve their life chances.

The last two chapters in this section focus on emerging research related to domestic violence and its impact on child welfare and, more particularly, child protection. Colleen Friend looks at efforts to intervene at the crossroads of child protection and domestic violence. She begins with the all-important task of reviewing the theories that have guided intervention in this area. Friend then describes an innovative program designed to maintain the safety of women and children in battering relationships by extensively utilizing cultural, familial, and community resources. Lynette Renner, Kristen Shook Slack, and Lawrence Berger use the Illinois Families Study to examine the intersection of domestic violence and child protection. The authors explore the issues confronting child welfare workers engaged with cases where both the mother and the children are victims of family violence. Moreover, the authors examine the multifarious problems involved in "failure to protect" cases, especially when they also include interpersonal violence directed at the mother. This area is increasingly being examined by systematic investigations and the authors set an agenda for future research.

PART IV: DECISION MAKING IN CHILD WELFARE

The linchpin of child protection and the more general field of child welfare is decision making at the individual, agency, and policy levels. In "Decision Making in Child Welfare: Constraints and Potentials," Eileen Gambrill details the individual and structural impediments to sound decision making and offers a framework for a transparent, client-involved system that learns from its own mistakes. Eileen Munro follows this broader systemic focus with an analysis of the problematic nature of individual decision-making strategies as they relate to key child welfare judgments. Munro describes the difference between probabilistic and expert decision making and provides guidance on how and when to use each.

Risk assessment is part and parcel of any decision-making process, and this is certainly true in child protection cases. Judith Rycus and Ron Hughes review the literature on risk assessment in cases of child maltreatment and explicate how standardized safety and risk assessment instruments can be used in conjunction with clinical expertise to better inform casework decisions. This chapter is followed by Ira Schwartz, Peter Jones, David Schwartz, and Zoran Obradovic's introduction of neural network programming, an innovative computational process for predicting the recurrence of child maltreatment. While still in the

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