



Why U.S. States Vary in Their Responses to Child Abuse and Neglect

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More than one in twenty U.S. children can expect to be separated from their families and enter foster care by the time they turn eighteen, and more than 400,000 children are currently in foster care. Surprisingly, however, the number of youngsters in foster care varies widely across the states – and the politics and policies characteristic of different states affect those numbers along with the risk factors known to predict child abuse and neglect. Comparing states with similar rates of abuse and neglect, my research shows that states with more punitive criminal justice systems tend to remove children from their homes far more frequently than those with generous and inclusive welfare systems. Configurations of state-level social and criminal justice policies make a big difference in how family malfunctions and child abuse and neglect are handled.

How Policy Regimes and Stakeholders Affect Child Welfare Efforts

Child welfare agencies are tasked with protecting children from abuse and neglect and frequently offer critical services to vulnerable children. Foster care placements are one tool used to protect children, but the experience of foster care is inherently disruptive for children and families and can be very traumatic. It is important to ask why some states place children into foster care at dramatically higher rates than others, and why children in foster care receive varied kinds of services.

My research shows that a state's general approach to managing social problems – what we can call its “policy regime” – helps explain why a child's state of residence plays an important role in the kind of services they receive. U.S. states with relatively punitive criminal justice systems and meager and restrictive welfare benefits are more likely to utilize disruptive tactics to handle child abuse and neglect. In contrast, states with broad and inclusive welfare benefits and less punitive criminal justice systems tend to separate children from their families less frequently. These relationships among criminal justice, welfare, and child protection work in three ways:

- Before families encounter child protection agencies, social policies play a direct role in increasing or decreasing the incidence of child abuse and neglect. When welfare benefits are generous and easy to access, families can get additional resources and critical services such as medical care, child care, and food assistance, alleviating the stress and uncertainty associated with deep poverty. Conversely, when a parent or multiple family members are sent to jail or prison, their children's risk of ending up in foster care entry increases significantly, because the remaining kin find it hard to provide care.
- The outlooks of state officials also matter – reflecting institutionally preferred styles for responding to social ills like child abuse and neglect. Policymakers prefer interventions that align with their common sense about how the world works. If they believe that crime and poverty are caused by moral failure, they are very likely to take a similar view toward child abuse and neglect and prefer disruptive approaches that separate children from parents perceived to be failures. In this context, even if an official or street-level worker disagrees with a disruptive approach, alternative tools to support a family in crisis are not likely to be available or easy to deploy.
- Child welfare agencies don't operate in a bureaucratic vacuum. They depend on law enforcement, doctors, teachers, welfare workers, and other public service professionals to monitor children for abuse and neglect and provide services to children and families when caseworkers decide to intervene. The frequency with which kids have contact with these professionals required by law to report suspected child abuse and neglect, as well as their ideas about what child abuse and neglect look like, play a critical role in determining when a child becomes the subject of an official report.

Estimating the Impact of State Policy Regimes

My analysis shows that policy variations do indeed lead to big differences in the rates of foster care across states, even taking into account demographic and political variations. States with punitive criminal justice systems tend to place an average of 1.5 more children per 1,000 into foster care annually than states with less punitive criminal justice systems. For a state with an average child population, this translates to 2,200 additional foster care entries per year. States with generous and inclusive welfare programs tend to place 0.8 fewer children per 1,000 into foster care, compared to states with meager welfare programs.

Policy regimes also relate to where children and teens in foster care are placed. Restrictive residential treatment centers and other forms of highly regimented group placements are far less common in states with generous and inclusive welfare systems than in states with meager and restrictive welfare benefits. For states with average foster care caseloads, this difference amounts to about 530 more children placed in restrictive settings in less generous states. However, states with both generous welfare benefits and large welfare bureaucracies tend to have slightly higher rates of foster care entry than do states with generous welfare programs and small bureaucracies. This finding suggests that when more families come into contact with service providers, officials have more opportunities to detect and report suspected abuse and neglect.

Reducing Foster Care Caseloads Requires Broad Reforms

Child advocates have long called for a decreased emphasis on family separation as the primary government response to abuse and neglect. This call has been widely heard, with average foster care caseloads declining by around 20 percent over the last 15 years. Nevertheless, my research suggests that further reductions in the use of disruptive foster care placements may depend on overall improvements in states' welfare supports – to make Medicaid, cash, and in-kind benefits more adequate and available to poor families. In addition, state criminal justice systems will need to become less severe, so that fewer parents are incarcerated and authorities take a less punitive approach to social problems. Results from this research – along with other scholarly studies – suggest that such interrelated policy reforms would both reduce the incidence of child abuse and neglect, and change the way that public officials respond to this worrisome social problem when they encounter it.

Read more in Frank Edwards “Saving Children and Controlling Families: Punishment, Redistribution and Child Protection,” *American Sociological Review* 81, no. 3 (2016).