NEW DIRECTIONS: QUESTIONS TO GUIDE FUTURE CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT RESEARCH

New Directions in Child Abuse and Neglect Research, a report by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) and National Research Council (NRC), **emphasizes that child abuse and neglect are serious public health issues**. Building on research findings gleaned during the past 20 years, the report calls for a systems approach to child abuse and neglect research and highlights the importance of adopting a critical stratification lens[1] in considering the impact of social and economic factors on child abuse and neglect.

Addressing these public health problems will require an expanded research response that is grounded in the complex environments and systems within which child abuse and neglect occur (see figure pg. 2). The purpose of this document is to guide researchers toward new directions in child abuse and neglect research.

TRENDS

Research has revealed strong evidence indicating that sexual abuse has declined substantially in the past two decades, as well as a decline in physical abuse, especially the more common and less severe forms. There is no evidence, however, that neglect is declining overall. These disparate trends and their causes currently are not well understood. Future research in this area could focus on the following questions.

- What accounts for the declines in the rates of sexual abuse and the most common forms of physical abuse (areas for study might include the development and availability of effective prevention interventions, the decline in intimate partner violence, or successful public awareness campaigns)?
- What explains the inconsistent trends across types of child abuse and neglect?
- What explains significantly different rates of neglect across states in terms of whether they are increasing, decreasing, or remaining constant (e.g., variations in definitions of neglect, differences among data sources used for analysis, or real differences in rates related to availability of resources)?

1. Stratification involves the rank ordering of people based on their social and economic traits.

RESEARCH PRIORITIES IN CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

- Improve understanding of the separate and synergistic consequences of different forms of child abuse and neglect.

- Initiate high-quality longitudinal studies of child abuse and neglect.

- Target innovative research on the causes of child abuse and neglect.

- Improve understanding of the behavioral and neurobiological mechanisms that mediate the association between child abuse and neglect and its sequelae.

SERVICES IN COMPLEX SYSTEMS AND POLICY

- Explore highly effective delivery systems.

- Develop and test new programs for underserved children and families.

- Identify the best means of replicating effective interventions and services with fidelity.

- Identify the most effective ways to implement and sustain evidence-based programs in real-world settings.

- Investigate the longitudinal impacts of prevention.

- Encourage research designed to provide a better understanding of trends in the incidence of child abuse and neglect.

- Evaluate the impact of laws and policies that address prevention and intervention systems and services for child abuse and neglect at the federal, state, and local levels.

DISENTANGLE THE ROLE OF CULTURAL PROCESSES, SOCIAL STRATIFICATION INFLUENCES, ECOLOGICAL VARIATIONS, AND IMMIGRANT/ACCULTURATION STATUS.

APPLY MULTIDISCIPLINARY, MULTIMETHOD, AND MULTISECTOR APPROACHES.

LEVERAGE AND BUILD UPON THE EXISTING KNOWLEDGE BASE OF CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT RESEARCH AND RELATED FIELDS, AS WELL AS RESEARCH DEFINITIONS, DESIGNS, AND OPPORTUNITIES.

THE INTERPLAY OF RISK FACTORS, PROTECTIVE FACTORS, RESILIENCY, AND OUTCOMES

A body of knowledge exists that identifies associations among a variety of potential risk factors and child abuse or neglect at each of the ecological levels (individual-level, family, community, and contextual factors). Many of the risk factors that have been identified are interrelated and seldom are present in isolation. All of these factors describe circumstances surrounding elevated risk for child abuse and neglect, but none of these individual or contextual factors has been shown to "cause" child abuse and neglect. In terms of prevention, relatively little is known about factors that protect at-risk children from being abused or neglected. Future research in this area could focus on the following topics.

- How does the complex interaction among multiple risk and protective factors influence resiliency of children who have experienced child abuse and neglect?
- Which factors (across multiple levels of the social ecology) put children at risk for one or more types of abuse or neglect?
- Which factors (across multiple levels of the social ecology) protect children from experiencing one or more types of abuse and neglect in families at risk?
- How do different types of abuse impact a child's developmental trajectory?
- What leads some individuals and families to benefit more or less from prevention and treatment programs?
- What are the behavioral, neurobiological, social, and environmental mechanisms that mediate the association between exposure to abuse and neglect and their behavioral and neurobiological sequelae?
- What factors or processes increase the likelihood that some children and families experience different outcomes when faced with the same risks?
- What factors are linked to differential sensitivity of children across similar types of abuse?
- Why do certain factors result in abuse or neglect in some situations but not others?
- Are there differences in how risk and protective factors play out across diverse cultural groups?
- How do characteristics of alternative or complex family structures (e.g., single parent, nonmarital cohabiting partners, or having children by multiple partners) influence risk and protective factors in child abuse and neglect?
- How can we better identify families at risk in order to guide prevention efforts?
- What are the paternal characteristics that place children at risk for, or serve to protect at-risk children from, abuse and neglect?
- What role does a community's acceptance of elevated levels of violence or social attitudes about violence play in relation to rates of physical abuse?

APPROACHES, PRACTICES, AND STRATEGIES WITH EVIDENCE FOR EFFECTIVENESS

Significant progress has been achieved in developing strategies to reduce child abuse and neglect, ameliorate its consequences, and improve parental capacity. Research advances made during the past two decades provide a solid base for moving forward. Future research in this area could focus on the following questions.

- How many and what types of interventions should be readily available for families in the child welfare system?
- Is a single evidence-based intervention more effective for both child and system outcomes than multiple services designed to address the many different problems families may have?
- What strategies need to be devised for better reaching, engaging, and retaining target populations?
- What are the core elements of evidence-based programs, that is, those required elements that fundamentally define their nature and produce their main effects that should not be altered when adapting a program to local contexts and needs?
- Are evidence-based practices equally effective with understudied ethnic and cultural groups who are at risk for or experience child abuse or neglect?
- Do understudied ethnic youth have a greater benefit from culturally adapted interventions?
- Under what circumstances should evidence-based interventions be culturally adapted, and how should the adapted interventions be assessed?
- What strategies are needed to sustain the positive impacts of home visiting approaches when proven models are taken to scale?
- What factors guide successful implementation of differential response and ensure desired outcomes, and to what extent does this approach work within different contexts?
- In terms of the effectiveness or impact of differential response approaches, how do different definitions of abuse and neglect, varied criteria for the assessment pathway, unique approaches to service provision, and adequate funding for services contribute to outcomes?
- Are the mental health services available to youth in foster care effective at improving psychosocial and well-being outcomes for the children served?
- Are services offered and available to children in the child welfare system appropriate to meet their individual needs?
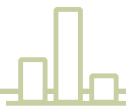
SYSTEMS IMPROVEMENTS

Children are embedded in interactive structures that affect them (e.g., family, community, school, culture, society). All of the systems that work with children must work in concert to achieve effective results. Future research in this area could focus on the following questions.

- What are the organizational strengths and weaknesses of service delivery agencies that maximize or minimize the impact of evidence-based models and proven approaches?
- What organizational change strategies are evidence based and effective for improving workforce retention in service delivery agencies, particularly child welfare systems?
- How do the organizational climates of service delivery agencies influence psychosocial improvements for the children served by those systems?
- How can a service delivery agency alter the standards of practice throughout the agency in ways that improve the overall service delivery process, provide incentives for staff to adopt new ideas, improve program implementation, and thereby enhance participant outcomes?

CHILD WELFARE

- What is the impact of varying state administrative structures (i.e., county- versus state-administered systems or extent of privatization) on the performance of child welfare systems?
- What is the effectiveness (and cost-effectiveness) of specific privatization efforts in the child welfare system?
- What are the mechanisms of the links between child welfare practice outcomes and workforce issues (including role conflict, burnout, supervision, caseload/workload, organizational culture and climate, or education and training requirements)?
- To what extent are quality-improvement strategies in child welfare agencies well developed, implemented, effective, and sustained?
- What are the effective strategies for bringing in the interdisciplinary knowledge necessary to carry out all the diverse functions of a child welfare agency, including evidence in medicine, social work, nursing, early childhood, law, and other subject areas?
- What is the level of effectiveness, quality, and scope of mental health care received by children in the child welfare system, and to what extent does mental health care received by children in the child welfare system lead to improved child well-being outcomes?
- What factors account for the significant variation among and within states in the length of time children remain in foster care?
- What is the impact of multiple foster care placements, especially the separate effects of a child's age at time of placement, movement patterns, the timing of moves, and movement among levels of care?
- How do agency responses to child abuse and neglect reports, as well as out-of-home placement rates, vary in the child welfare system with respect to poverty, racial, ethnic and cultural variations, and other social conditions?
- Why do child welfare systems in some high-poverty areas place many more children in foster care per thousand than other areas with equally high poverty rates?
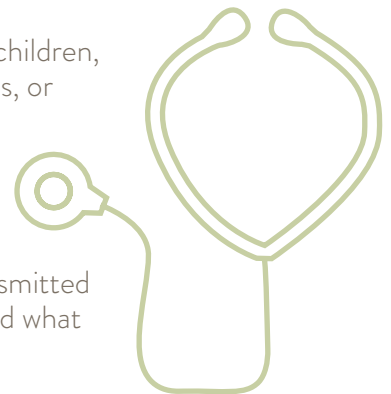
DISPARITIES AND DISPROPORTIONALITY

There is a continuing need to understand the roles and interactions of culture, context, and structural factors, including poverty and historical trauma, in the causes, consequences, prevention, and treatment of child abuse and neglect, particularly in light of the increasing heterogeneity of U.S. families. Future research in this area could focus on the following questions.

- Why are African American and American Indian children referred to child protective services at disproportionate rates relative to their representation in the general population?
- Why are Asian American and Latino children referred to child protective services at disproportionate rates relative to their representation in the general population?
- What are the differences in the experiences of children in the child welfare system based on race, socioeconomic status, and culture?

MEDICAL EXAMINATIONS TO DETECT CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Research is needed to further explore the processes and outcomes of medical evaluation, to support the development of more uniform approaches to practice, and to arrive at a medical consensus regarding thresholds for reporting neglect. Future research in this area could focus on the following questions.

- In suspected cases of physical abuse, what are the clinical indications for performing a radiographic skeletal survey, a computerized tomography exam, or a magnetic resonance imaging study?
- In suspected cases of physical abuse, what are the yields of X-rays in different populations of children?
- In suspected cases of physical abuse, what is the utility of follow-up X-rays where data suggest improved sensitivity and specificity at the expense of increased radiation and monetary costs?
- In suspected cases of physical abuse, what are the most sensitive, specific, and cost-effective methods for identifying skeletal injuries, with consideration of the hazards of increased radiation exposure?
- What is the specificity of ano-genital warts for a sexual abuse diagnosis in children, and how is this altered by the age and gender of the child, site of the lesions, or human papillomavirus type?
- In suspected cases of sexual abuse, what sensitivity and specificity do nucleic acid amplification tests have in detecting infection for the range of potential sexually transmitted infections?
- In suspected cases of sexual abuse, which diagnostic tests for sexually transmitted infections should be used for which parts of the body and at what time, and what are the appropriate clinical indications for these tests?

POLICY

Since the 1993 NRC report *Understanding Child Abuse and Neglect* was issued, numerous changes have been made to federal and state laws and policies designed to impact the incidence, reporting, and negative health and economic consequences of child abuse and neglect. Research evaluating laws and policies on child abuse and neglect can make it possible to anticipate and respond to predictable problems that may occur as a result of their implementation. Further, state variations in laws and policies provide a myriad of opportunities to examine the impact of policy change on outcomes for children and families, as well as the systems responsible for implementing the policies. In cases of incremental changes to existing legislation—such as the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA)[1]—research is needed on the implementation and augmentation of the law or policy, rather than the core law or policy itself. New methods, such as propensity scoring and difference-within-difference analyses, can be powerful tools for examining policy-relevant questions. Future research in this area could focus on the following questions.

- What are the relationships between the variations in abuse and neglect definitions used in different states and their impact on child safety or well-being?
- Have there been improvements in child safety or well-being associated with the inclusion of educational neglect, medical neglect, parental drug abuse, or exposure to intimate partner violence in abuse and neglect definitions?
- Does the breadth of inclusion in mandatory reporting laws (e.g, teachers, law enforcement officials, social service providers, and physicians) make a difference in rates of reporting?
- How does a state's definition of a perpetrator of abuse and neglect affect children's protection from abuse and neglect overall?
- What is the impact of the broadened CAPTA definition of sexual abuse (now to include acts related to the production of child pornography, statutory rape, and prostitution of children) on the protection of children?
- How do differences between the provisions of the Victims of Child Abuse Act (VCAA)[2] and those of CAPTA (i.e., what to report, when to report, who must report, cross-reporting obligations, immunity for reporters, penalties for failure to report, and training requirements for prospective reporters) impact child abuse reporting, investigation, and intervention?
- Does the Child Victims' and Child Witnesses' Rights law[3] have an impact on reducing system-related child trauma?
- Has the Indian Child Protection and Family Violence Prevention Act of 1990[4] had an impact on the incidence of or responses to child abuse in Indian country?
- How has the Indian Child Welfare Act[5] been implemented and what effect has it had on the experiences of American Indian children in the child welfare system?
- In states that impose enhanced criminal penalties for perpetrators who commit domestic violence in the presence of a child, what effect, if any, do those laws and policies have on deterrence, and have they resulted in changes in the number of victims seeking help?

1. CAPTA Reauthorization Act of 2010, Pub. L. 111-320, Dec. 20, 2010, 124 Stat. 3459.
2. Victims of Child Abuse Act, 42 U.S.C. § 13001, et seq.
3. Child Victims' and Child Witnesses' Rights, 18 U.S.C. § 3509.
4. Indian Child Protection and Family Violence Prevention Act, P.L. 101-630, 18 U.S.C. 1169.
5. Indian Child Welfare Act, 25 U.S.C. § 1902.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Research on child abuse and neglect is especially complex, involving multiple fields, disciplines, methodologies, and levels of analysis ranging from the individual child to national statistics, as well as ethical issues that are particularly complicated. Integrating multidisciplinary perspectives into research across these domains can allow researchers to examine the many contextual factors surrounding incidents of abuse and neglect, to disentangle its consequences from the many co-occurring risk and protective factors, to examine the many outcomes of interest from the implementation of programs and services, and to understand the interactions among services from the many providers that encounter abused and neglected children. Sustained systems-level thinking can lead to improved theories and more rigorous research designs that can advance knowledge and program or service implementation, as well as progress from addressing symptoms to focusing increasingly on core causes and solutions that draw more effectively on the strengths of multiple actors and domains. Child abuse and neglect has no single cause or consequence; therefore, tackling the problem strategically at multiple levels is required to make a substantial impact on the problem.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Additional information and resources, including the Report, Interventions for Child Abuse and Neglect, Video, and Infographic are available at:

WWW.IOM.EDU/CHILDMALTREATMENT