

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN WELFARE REFORM AND CHILD WELFARE: A RESEARCH AND POLICY DISCUSSION

This report is the result of a one-day conference held on October 31, 2001, to explore research in progress on the effects that welfare reform may be having on the involvement of families in the child welfare system and to identify the research-based information needs of child welfare and welfare policymakers. Organized by the Research Forum on Children, Families and the New Federalism at the National Center for Children in Poverty of Columbia University's School of Public Health, and funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the conference was intended to stimulate the development of a research agenda on the relationships between welfare reform and child welfare that is grounded in the needs of policymakers and practitioners in two social program domains that have both historically focused on the well-being of children.

Why Examine the Intersection of Welfare Reform and Child Welfare?

When the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) was passed in 1996 placing time limits on cash assistance for families with few resources and requiring parents in welfare households to engage in work or work-directed activities 30 to 40 hours per week, there was little research evidence to predict how these changes would affect the children in welfare families. One vision of "welfare reform," as brought about by PRWORA, was that formerly dependent adults would get jobs, earn more, be able to provide for their families' basic needs better than the entitlement-based Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program had done, and serve as positive, productive role models for their children.

Another vision was worrisome: The least capable welfare parents would not find jobs, or not be able to keep jobs, or not comply with program rules, and their families would bear the brunt of tougher program sanctions and time limits on cash assistance, leading to greater child deprivation and child neglect and abuse, and more children being placed in substitute care. A federal government study noted that if only 1 percent of children who began receiving aid under TANF (the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program that replaced AFDC) entered foster care, foster care caseloads would

increase by 25 percent.¹ Other concerns about the effects of welfare reform on children included decreased supervision by parents who were able to work but could not afford or find adequate substitute care for their children; increased stress on parents working in low-wage jobs; and reduced progress toward reuniting families with children in foster care because, between work, welfare system requirements, and requirements of the child welfare system, there would be too much for parents to juggle.

The 1996 welfare reform prompted major new research to examine its effects – principally, effects on the employment, earnings, and income of adult recipients of cash assistance, but also effects on various child outcomes, such as health, school achievement and behavior. A few studies were launched to determine the effects of welfare reform on families’ involvement in the child welfare system – the publicly-funded services system that responds to reports of child maltreatment and provides foster care and adoption services for children who cannot be cared for by their parents. What happens at the intersection of the reformed welfare system and the child welfare system – which also began to undergo a transformation about the time of PRWORA – is the subject of a small, but growing, body of research.

Many of the people conducting this research gathered for the October 31, 2001, conference, held in Washington D.C., to formulate a summary of the evidence available at that time on key aspects of the interaction between welfare reform and child welfare and to discuss issues of methodology. This evidence was then presented to a group of child welfare and welfare policymakers and program administrators, who were invited to present their own perspectives on the interaction and their priorities for research-based information. (The conference agenda and a list of participants are included in the report Appendix.)

While it is too early to draw conclusions about the effects of welfare reform on many aspects of family functioning and the well-being of children – in part because the PRWORA-established time limits on cash assistance were just about to take effect in many jurisdictions as the conference was happening -- enough research evidence is

¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, 2000. *Dynamics of Children’s Movement Among AFDC, Medicaid, and Foster Care Programs Prior to Welfare Reform, 1995-1996*. Washington, D. C.: ASPE. Cited in Rob Geen, Lynn Fender, Jacob Leos-Urbel and Teresa Markowitz, February 2001. *Welfare Reform’s Effect on Child Welfare Caseloads*. Washington, D. C.: The Urban Institute.

available to suggest cautions about the reforms because of their apparent effects on particularly vulnerable families. There is an identifiable subset of families receiving welfare that is involved in the child welfare system and this group has distinctive characteristics, including a substance-abusing parent or parent with mental health problems, families with a large number of children, and unstable housing or homelessness. These families may not be helped as much as other welfare families by the PRWORA incentives to work and when they do work, it may be more difficult for them to keep their families together or reunite them. However, there are major gaps in research-based knowledge about what are causes and what are effects in these situations. One researcher who participated in the conference described how this looks to the people who make decisions about the welfare of children in difficult circumstances:

Child welfare agency officials are now asking themselves a somewhat different question about reunification, which is this: Given that we can't assume constancy of income from welfare, is it safe to return a child home in the presence of existing conditions and circumstances? That's a very different question than they used to ask before welfare reform. It is these pre-existing conditions and circumstances, such as mental health problems, substance abuse problems, homelessness, domestic violence, etc., for some portion of the child welfare population that is undermining their ability to both work and to parent.

The Genesis of the Welfare Reform-Child Welfare Conference

Irene Skricki of the Annie E. Casey Foundation told the conference participants how it came about:

The credit goes elsewhere for the idea for this meeting. For years, the Casey Foundation has funded in the area of welfare reform and also in the area of child welfare, although the people responsible for those two portfolios don't often talk substantively. My colleague at the foundation, Lisa Paine Wells, has the child welfare portfolio. We work on the same floor and we chat, but our work hasn't actually coincided much.

When the welfare reform bill passed in 1996, we were approached by Dr. Kathleen Wells at Case Western Reserve University about looking at the impact of changes in the welfare system on child welfare caseloads. It seemed like an interesting overlap for us and we have been funding that project since then. It's nearing completion. Kathleen and I were talking a year or so ago and she said "I've heard of other studies" and I had heard of a few and it really seemed to make sense, particularly as welfare reform is coming towards its reauthorization point next year, to think about bringing people together. It was really Kathleen's idea to bring people together.

I look back on when we first made that grant in 1997, when people in the welfare field were concerned that millions of people were going to be pushed into poverty. We didn't know what the impact would be. Now, a few years later, we know some about what has happened, and in some ways things weren't as bad as we first predicted. Of course, some populations have done better; they've moved into the ranks of the working poor -- which isn't necessarily an improvement, but it suggests a different set of policies. And some people are worse off. Probably in the research on the child welfare connection we are learning about those families who are worse off. Those findings will be very helpful in the TANF reauthorization debate to help us think about what changes we want to make to the welfare system.

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES AND COMMON GROUND

Two distinct perspectives on the welfare reform/child welfare topic emerged from the two-part conference. A morning session of researchers, which considered how welfare reform seems to be affecting the demand for child welfare services, the environment for providing child welfare services, and the demands of work and family on low-income families, presumed the possibility of direct links between changes in welfare policy and changes in such child welfare system indicators as rates of reported child maltreatment and placement in substitute care, and the rate and speed of family reunifications. One reason for this presumption is that poverty strongly predicts child neglect and, although not as strongly, other forms of child maltreatment.² In most states, recipients of cash assistance have been among the poorest of the poor for at least two decades and welfare families have long constituted a significant portion of child welfare cases.³

In an afternoon session of the conference, during which child welfare policymakers and program administrators joined the research group and identified their key challenges and concerns, a contrasting theme emerged: Compared to other influences on their agency operations, welfare reform was barely “on the radar screens” of the policy and program participants. It was not perceived to be either a “driver” of caseload trends or directly linked to the primary family conditions that generate the need for child welfare services. Child welfare program administrators cited the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act – a major national child welfare reform law – funding issues, litigation, the needs of foster parents, adoptive parents and kinship caregivers who work, and the availability of high-quality, affordable child care as operational concerns. As evidence of a mismatch between the interests of child welfare administrators and the child welfare research community, one conference participant cited an initiative of the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators (NAPCWA) to set a public

² Ann Collins and J. Lawrence Aber. 1997. *How Welfare Reform Can Help or Hurt Children* (Children and Welfare Reform, Issue Brief 1). New York: National Center for Children in Poverty.

³ [Need reference here.]

child welfare research agenda, which involved a process to rank questions of interest. Of 248 specific research questions identified, only two mentioned TANF.⁴

The research and policy perspectives did come together, however, in a recognition of the need to probe and understand more subtleties and complexities in the connection between welfare reform and child welfare, especially in terms of sequences of events in the lives of families, and in an acknowledgement of overlapping populations of major concern, especially “dually-involved families” -- families involved in both the welfare and child welfare systems -- that are affected by substance abuse, mental health problems, housing issues (including homelessness), and child care issues. Olivia Golden, recently appointed Commissioner of the District of Columbia Child and Family Services Agency (the public child welfare agency), characterized the common ground in this way:

It is interesting to people in child welfare to think about the overall ability of families to survive economically and care for their children, particularly in a time when we're worrying about what's going to happen to our local economies [in the wake of the September 11, 2001 events]. But the hard thing about framing it in terms of TANF is that that's a very small piece of the overall question, “What's going to enable families to succeed and care for their children?” That big question affects how you think about TANF and how you think about child welfare. So, maybe the suggestion for researchers is to think about those overlapping pieces, and, therefore, some of the issues about housing, and substance abuse and child care.

Mark Courtney, Director of the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, identified a convergence of research findings and program wisdom:

There is research going on right now that supports a lot of what [policymakers and program administrators] have been saying. We find homelessness, self-reported substance abuse – not many people report it, but those who do are almost twice as likely to be involved with the child welfare system – number of children, large families, parental stress, mental health problems, depression, the things that when you talk to practitioners and administrators, they will say, “This is what we're worried about and who we think is there [in the group at high risk of child welfare involvement].” Our research right down the line basically supports that, looking at a TANF population.

⁴ National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators and National Resource Center on Child Maltreatment. February 2001. *A Research Agenda for Public Child Welfare*. Duluth, GA: National Resource Center on Child Maltreatment.

Another research formulation of some common ground centered on the varieties of instability in family life that are predictors of involvement in the child welfare system and the ways in which welfare reform might trigger or contribute to such instability, especially in economic downturns. Kristin Shook Slack, Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Wisconsin-Madison synthesized some of these findings.

Some of the research findings discussed today are around how instability [for welfare families] is associated with involvement in the child welfare system, whether it is breaks in welfare coverage or periods of time not receiving health insurance. Other research shows that events like housing moves and births are predictors of involvement with the child welfare system [for welfare families]. Several people have shown that economic hardship, like utility stoppages, things like that, predict involvement.

Professor Slack further commented that “the Promoting Safe and Stable Families programs⁵ are going to be really important as the welfare caseloads start going back up and the economy starts going down if we want to avert some of these short-term crises around the instability factors...to make sure that [there are not] huge pressures put on the child welfare system.”

This comment reflects an assumption common to researchers and program administrators – that economic conditions affect both the demand/need for cash assistance and for child welfare services. Mark Testa, Research Director of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services and Associate Professor at the University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign, carried that assumption a step farther:

In 1997, we worried that welfare reform was going to overwhelm the child welfare system. It turned out that it didn't happen...Now, we're poised to test the other side of that experiment. As the TANF population expands [due to a slowdown in the economy], will we see the size of intake into child welfare increase? That's what we're worried about now. We have an important opportunity to state our hypotheses in advance and then carefully track what happens as that TANF population grows and whether we do see more and more involvement with the child welfare system.

⁵ These are funded under Title IV-B of the Social Security Act; funds are distributed to states based on a formula that considers their child food stamp caseloads and are used for family support services, family preservation services, time-limited family reunification services and adoption promotion and support services in accordance with five-year plans developed by the states. The federal fiscal year 2001 appropriation for the program was \$305 million.

While the researchers who participated in the October 31 meeting press ahead in their efforts to measure the strength of relationships between welfare reforms and child welfare system indicators and features, policymakers and program administrators will need to be convinced, first of all, that welfare reform plays an important role in the child welfare world and, second, that there is practical value in research findings. The challenges are significant. Variations in state and local welfare reform policies, and variations in implementation of policies, affect the degree to which research findings can be generalized and thus the degree to which the findings are useful to child welfare policymakers and administrators in a particular jurisdiction. Similarly, variations in child welfare policies and practices, especially uses of different funding streams and kinship care resources, affect the degree to which researchers can consistently describe and measure changes in child welfare caseloads and outcomes.

The next section of this report describes the state of the research evidence about welfare reform-child welfare connections, as presented and discussed on October 31, as well as methodology issues and the gaps in knowledge and in research underway that were identified in that discussion. Even before hearing the perspectives of the policy and program people who participated in the conference, the researchers were acutely aware of the difficulty of drawing conclusions at this early stage of most of the work, and of translating early findings into policy or program tools. Nevertheless, with Congressional reauthorization of TANF slated for 2002, they were eager to contribute to an effort to compile and examine what is being learned.

THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE

The discussion of research on the connections between welfare reform and child welfare was organized into three panels, each addressing a single question, with each panelist presenting succinctly the three or four most important items of evidence from his or her work to answer the question. Participants were specifically asked not to present research papers. Instead, summaries of the papers, and copies, were provided to all who attended the conference. (The summaries are included in the Appendix to this report.) The panel discussions were facilitated by J. Lawrence (“Larry”) Aber, Director of the National Center for Children in Poverty at Columbia University. He set the research in a

context of politics and policy, emphasizing the high stakes for clear communication about findings.

We're going to be challenged by communicating in a way that is effective in informing and guiding policy. At least one paper here says that during TANF, things got a lot worse for children. It's a very good study and resembles a child welfare outcomes study we [at the National Center for Children in Poverty] are doing on family incomes, which also shows that things have gotten worse for children, if you net out the effect of the business cycle, and control for state of residence, and some other things like that.

These results fly in the face of what the conventional understanding is. The conventional understanding is that welfare rolls are down and so is child poverty. So, how can you say welfare reform is not working? That will be the evidentiary base in the public debate. Welfare rolls are down. Poverty is at an all-time low. It has to be working. But the business cycle, the EITC [Earned Income Tax Credit for low-income workers], and demographic changes all could have explained that. We don't know about the unique effects of TANF unless we struggle with the issues of causality.

Our job here is to try to understand the evidence as clearly as possible. Just over the horizon -- whether we find good news or bad news or mixed news -- will be the challenge of how to communicate that evidence in a way that brings light not heat and isn't summarily rejected. There is a big national public frame is on this right now. All the members of Congress are running on the success of welfare reform; most of them voted for it. All the governors are running on the success of this. The non-controlled evidence suggests the success of it. The small amount of evidence that says that there might be another part of the story is important to understand, to the degree that we can, and our job will be to communicate that information effectively, if and when we understand it. That puts the stakes high in synthesis and summary. We're trying to achieve a level of insight in this area that rises above the details. It has to be founded in the details, but it has to rise a level above the details.

Panel #1: Has welfare reform affected the demand for child welfare services and interventions?

Panelists: Bong Joo Lee, Assistant Professor and Research Fellow
Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago

Jane Waldfogel, Associate Professor of Social Work and Public
Affairs, Columbia University School of Social Work

Barbara Needell, Research Specialist, Center for Social Services
Research, University of California at Berkeley

Bong Joo Lee:

The short answer is that it is still too early to tell because we are looking only at the very short period after welfare reform. In a study that Bob Goerge [also of the Chapin Hall Center] and I did in Illinois to follow all the children entering cash assistance from 1991 through 1998 to look at the trends for them of having a foster care placement or having an indicator of an abuse or neglect report, using administrative data [for AFDC/TANF] linked to foster care data and child abuse and neglect data, we found that the rate of foster care placement and having a substantiated indicator of abuse or neglect during or after welfare reform has been going down substantially in Illinois. ***At least at the trend level, through the period of welfare reform, we haven't seen any negative effect of welfare reform on foster care caseloads or abuse and neglect among the TANF population.***

The abuse and neglect rate began going down in 1996 and the foster care placement rate in 1997 and the decline continued in 1998. ***However, one of the key findings was, when we looked at the trends controlling for other variables, the children on AFDC or TANF were twice as likely as those who had left AFDC/TANF to have an abuse or neglect report or placement in foster care.*** This is a little counterintuitive because -- given all the attention to welfare leavers -- you expect that the children leaving might be more vulnerable. But being on TANF -- if you follow children from the entry point -- signals their families' hardship, which increases their likelihood of being involved with the child welfare system. This finding was consistent even after controlling for a variety of other factors.

In a more recent study with Kristin Shook Slack, we looked at a cross section of the population because one of the concerns has been that with a shrinking TANF caseload, the remaining group will be the very hardest-to-serve group. In this study, looking at very current data, we found that outside of Cook County [outside the Chicago area, also called "downstate"], the caseload has been going down rapidly. For example, between 1998 and 1999 the TANF caseload went down 50 percent, although the rate of decline seems to be slowing down in recent years, suggesting that it might reach that "core" population where you cannot expect any more departures from TANF. ***When you look at the "downstate" Illinois region -- where TANF caseloads declined rapidly -- the rate of having a substantiated abuse or neglect report and having a child welfare intervention [foster care placement] has been increasing for TANF families. This shows something about the interaction between the composition of the TANF population and needing a child welfare services intervention.*** In Cook County, only in the recent period, in the year 2000, did the caseload decline stabilize, so that point might have come in Cook County about 2 or 3 years later and we see a little bit of evidence of child welfare case opening rates inching up. Again, it's still too early to tell, but we might have come to a point where we might see some

different interactions going on in Illinois given the changes in the TANF population.

Jane Waldfogel:

What effects of welfare reform might we expect on child welfare? Some of the earlier work that Christina Paxson [of Princeton University] and I had done showed connections between single mothers working and higher rates of reported and substantiated maltreatment. One of the intended effects of TANF is to get more single mothers working. So if there is a link between single mothers working and reported or substantiated maltreatment, then that would be an expected effect of welfare reform.

There may also be effects of welfare reform on fertility. The authors of the [welfare reform] law had that in mind; one of the aims was to reduce non-marital childbearing through measures such as the family cap. We should also be concerned about “mechanical effects” – welfare workers being more observant about families’ behaviors, doing more home visits as part of sanctioning activities or case review activities, being required to report certain families to child welfare agencies. These are things that could drive up demand for child welfare services. We conclude that the recent welfare reforms *may* have increased the demand for child welfare reform services.

We used state-level data from child welfare systems for 1990 to 1998 to look at whether recent welfare reforms have increased or reduced the incidence of reported and substantiated cases of maltreatment, abuse and neglect, and numbers of children in out-of-home care. [The state is the unit of analysis.] We have data through 1998 and the welfare reforms had been in effect only a short time, so these are preliminary results. In terms of welfare reforms, we look at family caps, lifetime limits, work requirements, sanctions for non-compliance, restriction of welfare benefits to immigrants, welfare benefit levels, and state EITC programs.

Overall, we found strong evidence that reductions in states’ welfare benefit levels increase cases of neglect and numbers of children in out-of-home care: When welfare benefits are lower, there are more cases of neglect in a state and more cases of children in out-of-home care. A number of the welfare reform measures are positively and significantly related to the numbers of children in out-of-home care. Those measures are family caps, short lifetime limits, immediate work requirements, and tougher sanctions. We found some evidence that short lifetime limits for TANF, full family sanctions, and sanctions of longer duration are related to higher levels of maltreatment and we find mixed results on family caps. These findings are descriptive; they don’t allow us to draw causal inferences, but they are suggestive.

Child welfare is an extremely reactive crisis-oriented system. In our study, when we asked administrators – county and state – what their impressions of welfare reform were, it was like asking them whether they thought that the color of

toothpaste being purple was important or not. It wasn't in their frame of reference. They had to deal with child deaths, they had to deal with litigation, they had to deal with so many other things that are not policy but have a much greater impact on screening rates, on substantiation rates, on money. All of those things are complicated to tease out. I'm pessimistic about our ability to draw causality, which is going to rely on understanding all those other things that go beyond causality.

The mechanics of the child welfare system are substantially different from the mechanics of the welfare system. The child welfare system is much more likely to be supply-constrained and so the relationship between foster care and the supply or capacity to deliver child welfare services ought to be considered as a mechanical explanation. For example, welfare benefits may not be an indicator not of the relationship between poverty and the size of the caseload. Instead, the magnitude of welfare benefits or the stringency of the requirements associated with welfare may be a measure of state investment in social services in general. Low investments in social services might mean having shut the door on the flow of children into the child welfare system – i.e., fewer CPS workers, fewer foster homes. That's an area of mechanics that we have not explored.

In our study, we control for foster care payments to try to get at supply issues. ***When foster care payments are higher, more children are in foster care.*** In theory, it could go either way when foster payments are higher. You might raise the rates when you have a shortfall of foster homes, but also when you pay more for foster parents, more foster parents are going to become available and so then you're going to have more children in foster care if caseloads are responsive to supply.

We found that a greater proportion of children were in foster care 18 months or more after welfare reform than before. We also found that children after welfare reform were being reunified more slowly. The difference in speed was 65 percent. We found that a mother's average monthly total income also affected reunification – the more money a mother had, the greater the speed with which her child returned home. However, the greater the proportion of that income that is due to work, the greater the decrease in the speed with which children return home. That is to say, the amount of income matters, but so does its source. We've also found that mothers' loss of a significant amount of income from welfare slows the reunification process.

In this type of research, we need to be concerned about the ecological fallacy problem. We are using state level data; we don't have individual-level data. So, although we know that when more single mothers are working or when welfare benefits are lower in a state, more children are in out-of-home care. But we don't know that those children are the children of single working mothers. This could be just spurious correlation. Something else could be going on. We would really like to see results from other studies that find similar results with different methods and data. The more that our results are in synch with other researchers'

results using different data sets and different methods, the more confident we become.

Barbara Needell:

The paper that's available presents an analysis of the relationship between welfare and child welfare that is entirely before welfare reform. It serves as a baseline for future work. We looked at children new to welfare between 1990 and 1995 and examined their likelihood of experiencing child welfare events – referrals, investigations, substantiations and placements in foster care. ***In that population-based study, which followed over 60,000 children in 10 California counties who were new to welfare between 1990 and 1995, we found that a large proportion had some contact with the child welfare agency within five years. Over 25 percent – 27 percent – had at least a referral; 21 percent had an investigation; 8 percent had a substantiation; and 3 percent entered foster care.*** While the fact that over a quarter were known to the child welfare system does not mean that nearly all these children entered foster care, that number was still surprisingly high at the time. Other research has since confirmed that there is considerable overlap in the welfare and child welfare populations.

Contrary to a lot of the research on the relationship between race and ethnicity and child welfare outcomes, among the population of children new to welfare considered in this study, Caucasian children were more likely than other children to have a later child welfare event. In most of the work we do in child welfare, we see a strong effect of negative outcomes related to African American children. That is something to watch as welfare caseloads go down because these caseloads apparently go down disproportionately among racial groups in many places.

Lack of prenatal care and low birth weight were strong predictors of a child welfare event. Controlling for total time on aid, breaks in welfare receipt and breaks in Medicaid were also associated with the likelihood of a child welfare event.

In California, as welfare reform began to be implemented, the state and the counties became concerned and aware of the relationship and the need for integration of welfare and child welfare departments. There's a child welfare statewide partnership with an emphasis on prevention. This is going to cloud the effect of welfare reform – in a good way – because these collaborations may make things better for children. We're seeing co-location of workers, with child welfare workers being placed in welfare offices and in employment offices, and a lot of creative use of funding – such as TANF funding to support substance abuse, mental health, and domestic violence programs for mothers of children in the child welfare system. Ultimately, we would expect these efforts to reduce abuse and neglect, act in a preventive way, and counteract what might be the negative effects of welfare reform.

There are enormous data challenges in continuing to measure this relationship between welfare and child welfare in California with statewide data. Administrative data allow us to know when somebody leaves welfare, but not why, for example. Interpretation of the trends is difficult.

Discussion of Panel #1 Research Evidence

- Welfare caseload dynamics and child welfare caseload dynamics are different and they interact in complicated ways. The timing of changes in each system is one factor that may produce different relationships between the welfare and child welfare caseloads from state to state.

For example, the study in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, by Kathleen Wells of Case Western Reserve University and Shenyang Guo of the University of Tennessee at Memphis, found different results from the Illinois findings using a similar caseload dynamics analysis. Using the number of abuse and neglect reports divided by the general population age 18 and under (controlling for the age structure) to examine the child welfare trends on a monthly basis, the study found that from 1995 to December 1998 – a point just one year after welfare reform -- the number of abuse and neglect reports, controlling for population changes, increased. Comparisons with the Illinois study are not straightforward because different child welfare measures were used in each, but an important part of the story has to do with the *independent* activity in the child welfare systems of each state. Bong Joo Lee, an investigator of welfare reform effects on child welfare in Illinois, explained:

We're talking about the caseload changes in two different systems that have their own sets of reforms. While TANF is happening, there have been a lot of things going on in the child welfare side, too, that can definitely make changes in the caseload size. In Illinois during that period, there had been significant reforms going on in child welfare, so one of the conclusions of our study was that at least we found that TANF has not hindered the effort of the child welfare system to reduce the caseload on the child welfare side.

- The composition of the welfare population may be different from jurisdiction to jurisdiction depending on when welfare reforms were implemented. It is important to understand the populations being studied in any comparison.

Welfare caseloads have declined nationally, but more in some places than others and over a longer period of time in some places than others. These differences may explain, in part, why the study of changes in Illinois' child welfare caseload after welfare reform suggest that TANF has not hindered child welfare reforms aimed at reducing the foster care caseload, while in Wisconsin, where the welfare caseload dropped significantly due to state-initiated reforms before TANF was implemented, a study by Mark Courtney and others found a very high level of child welfare involvement among TANF applicants. (Half of the TANF population was involved with child welfare -- half had been investigated at least once and, on average, three times by the child welfare authorities.) In 1999, Wisconsin's TANF caseload was probably a smaller percentage of that state's early 1990's caseload, according to Dr. Courtney, than the comparable percentage for the Illinois caseload studied by Bong Joo Lee and Bob Goerge.

The evidence for welfare caseload composition changes affecting child welfare outcomes is mixed, however. Mark Courtney's view was: "When it gets down really low, there may be the beginnings of a conditional increase in child welfare involvement among the welfare population. As the residual caseload gets a lot smaller, there's some evidence that that population is more likely to be involved with the child welfare system." Howard Rolston, Director of Planning, Research and Evaluation of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, reported that "most of the studies that directly look at whether the welfare population is getting more disadvantaged haven't found it yet." The findings from Wisconsin, he added, "might be evidence that it is. We haven't been getting the right measures before and certainly this kind of measure that suggests a higher rate of movement to out-of-home placement might suggest [that the welfare population is getting more disadvantaged]."

- Developing an accurate picture of trends is confounded by new ways of paying for, categorizing, and counting forms of non-parental care, especially kinship care.

Mark Testa, director of research for Illinois' public child welfare agency, expanded on the explanation of findings from the study of Illinois to illustrate this point:

Illinois has mirrored a lot of trends for child welfare. If you look at the size of the entering AFDC/TANF caseload, it went from 120,000 children in 1991 to 40,000 in 1998, a huge drop. You would think that as the population shrank to the most vulnerable, the most disadvantaged, that the rate of child welfare involvement and foster care would have gone up because you're dealing with a more difficult population. But it went down. This remarkable finding, along with Bong's

finding that welfare itself doubled the risk of child welfare involvement, prompted us to look at what is it about welfare participation and TANF participation itself that may be an independent predictor. There was a lot going on on the child welfare side, particularly around kinship care reform. And the decline coincides almost exactly with the implementation of kinship care reform in Illinois. We're going to have to be a little more careful about disaggregating foster care trends so that we take into account the difference between traditional forms of foster care and the new phenomenon of kinship foster care and how that may be implicated in distorting some of the comparisons in trends we make.

On this point, Rob Geen of the Urban Institute urged that researchers use *entries* to out-of-home care, rather than children in out-of-home placements as a measure to avoid confusion about foster care caseload changes. "We know that entrants are greater than exits. Looking at the available evidence, it would appear that entrants have declined over the last three or four periods or maybe they have stayed the same, but there is absolutely no evidence to suggest that entrants have gone up. In analyses that use children in out-of-home placements, you get involved in length of stay and everything that's affecting length of stay and that's very problematic."

Dr. Geen also noted the difficulties of using foster care payment rate data:

Those are not really the rates that foster parents get. They're also complete apples and oranges. Some states include a variety of supplements whereas others don't include them in their basic rate. The other thing is, with kinship care, the number of foster parents actually getting a foster care payment may be widely different in two states because of the kinship care rate and the fact that many kinship care families don't receive foster care payments.

- "Welfare reform" is a package of changes, some of which might be expected to produce changes in child welfare outcomes in one direction and some in another direction, offsetting each other and making interpretation difficult. A key strategy for interpreting research in this area is to look for convergence of findings.

An exchange between Howard Rolston and Jane Waldfogel illustrates these concerns:

[Howard] The relationship between Jane Waldfogel's study and the Delaware results – from an experimental study of welfare reform effects, including effects on out-of-home placement and rates of child maltreatment by Abt Associates -- seems coherent because the Delaware experiment seems to measure the effects of the whole package. In that way, it is directly relevant to [Jane's] overall analysis, especially because Delaware did have a family cap. On the other hand, because the follow-up period was short and the control group was contaminated pretty quickly in Delaware [i.e., because they were subject to new statewide welfare

reforms], it is difficult to know whether or not the family cap would have had any measurable effect. But do the Delaware results run parallel to the effect of the whole package? It doesn't sound like they do because [Jane] found decreases for the whole package of welfare reform.

[Jane] We found decreases nationally for the packages that were in effect nationally, but if Delaware had the most stringent of all elements – they had the family cap, which we would have predicted would have reduced neglect slightly, but they had the toughest of the other reforms – [which would predict increases in maltreatment].

[Howard] Another thing that's puzzling is why [the effect of] benefit levels would run in one direction and the family cap in another direction. Although certainly the great majority of people who would have had children in the absence of the family cap are still likely to have children, we can assume that the family cap has some marginal effect on that, but the main average effect ought to be to reduce benefits proportionally to the family size. It makes one wonder why the guarantee [the maximum allowed welfare benefit] would run in one direction and yet the benefits available to a family of a given size would run in another direction.

- For many aspects of the child welfare domain, there is no research to illuminate pre-welfare reform trends and processes, so it is very difficult to identify effects of welfare reform on the incidence of maltreatment, entries to and exits from substitute care, family reunification, caseload composition, or other child welfare outcomes or processes.

Fred Wulczyn, of the Chapin Hall Center for Children, identified a need to understand age, period [epoch], and cohort effects in the population of children in foster care because much of the foster care caseload that was in the system at the end of the 1990's "is a legacy caseload from the late 1980's." He reported that 10 percent of the adoptions that were done in 1999 were children admitted before 1990. Further, "we need to understand child welfare from a causal perspective: Is the effect of poverty and its related and antecedent conditions on admission processes separate and distinct from its effect on discharge processes?"

The relation of children's age to the risk of maltreatment is another area of little understanding, according to Dr. Wulczyn: "We're treating these populations as undifferentiated populations when there's a substantial degree of heterogeneity with respect to risk of maltreatment." The relationship between poverty and maltreatment is not perfectly clear either. While it *is* clear that a poor child has a greater risk of being

maltreated than a child who is not poor, within a population of poor children, we know little about who is most at risk. “If you look at a population of children who’ve been maltreated, you’re going to find lots of poor children, but we don’t know as much about the variation where you have lots of poor children: What’s the relationship to the prevalence or incidence of maltreatment?” Finally, Dr. Wulczyn identified a need for good comparative geographic research at the state, county or census tract level.

Nandita Verma of MDRC described a project in which there is learning about spatial distribution of child maltreatment. As part of the Urban Change research MDRC is conducting, which looks at the effects of welfare reform in four large metropolitan areas, child maltreatment rates are being tracked at the census tract level of the entire county, along with other neighborhood indicators. The results so far provide another piece of the complex story of effects of welfare reform and confirm that it would be useful to understand the neighborhood-level patterns in poor communities prior to welfare reform.

We’re not just interested in looking at the rate for the county overall, but also in how maltreatment manifests itself in neighborhoods with high levels of welfare concentration, neighborhoods with high levels of poverty. The trend is very flat. In neighborhoods with high poverty or high welfare concentration in the (1996-1999) period, you see a very flat rate. In Cuyahoga County (Ohio), where we have the most complete data, you see a decline in 1996 and it goes down very consistently across the board. We have similar information for Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Miami and we see a very consistent trend in those cities as well.

You would expect, based on all the hypotheses about the effects of welfare reform on child maltreatment, that the trend would go up in areas with high concentrations of urban poverty and reproduction. We’re using substantiated reports of abuse and neglect for children under age 18 as the base and as welfare caseloads start shrinking – and we’re seeing precipitous declines all over the country – the question is: Should we just be focusing on TANF populations? If the population at risk is no longer on welfare, what is that measure getting us?

- The introduction of “full family sanctions” for non-compliance with TANF requirements was controversial in 1996 and is likely to be a focus of debate at the time of TANF reauthorization. Evidence to date about the effect of sanctions on child welfare outcomes suggests that sanctioned families are more disadvantaged than families not sanctioned, but it is not clear that there is a causal connection to child welfare outcomes.

Larry Aber noted two reasons why policymakers and program administrators should be concerned about sanctions. “One is if sanctions had a causal effect on referrals to child welfare. The other is if sanctions are a marker for a high-risk population. You could have policy interest in your findings independent of causality.”

A study by Michele Derr, of Mathematica Policy Research, of welfare reform in Utah found that sanctioned families were no more likely than families not sanctioned to have a child welfare case opened, but once they did have a child welfare case opened, the case was likely to be open for longer during a three-year follow-up period. Kristin Shook Slack judged this finding to be consistent with “some of the things we are finding with reunification rates and the loss of welfare income – that there may be some back-end effects of welfare reform; it may affect the front end of the child welfare system in one way – possibly not at all -- but it may slow reunification and keep children in care longer.”

Barbara Blum, Director of the Research Forum on Children, Families and the New Federalism, and organizer of the conference, has been concerned, since the passage of PRWORA in 1996, about the relationship of child protective cases and sanctioned families. “My hypothesis was that where you have a protective case, a family would be more at risk of sanction because those are families that tend not to function well, that tend to be using drugs.” She asked whether the work in California by Barbara Needell and others had uncovered any operational changes in the welfare-child welfare connection that would enable both systems to identify these families. Barbara Needell’s response highlighted another area of research of interest to many conference participants – i.e., new, integrated approaches to delivering welfare and child welfare services:

There are attempts now for the two cultures to work together – and it is an enormous culture challenge for the child welfare workers and TANF workers to learn how to work together and how to communicate, and to realize that the TANF case plans and the child welfare case plans are often in conflict with each other or are impossible for a person to complete. This [integration or coordination] work is just beginning as is the realization that things are made very hard for child welfare-involved families. One major difficulty is the rule, the option of how long you can stay on TANF if your child gets removed into care and whether or not you take advantage of the option to keep your [TANF] case – whether the parent can continue even to receive benefits or

services during the time the child is put in foster care. We know that a lot of children come into foster care and go home very quickly, but if during that time the benefits are taken away and the services are taken away from the recipient, they can lose a house and a bunch of other things that make reunification very much less likely.

Rob Geen noted that in some states CPS (child protective services) cases are exempt from all work requirements and maybe from time limits, so it may not even be possible for them to be sanctioned. This piece of the picture of sanctions under welfare reform highlights the importance of understanding the timing and sequence of events when families are involved in both the welfare and child welfare systems. Families first receiving welfare, then sanctioned, then involved in the child welfare system are subject to a different set of requirements and circumstances than families either involved in both systems before welfare reform, or families with CPS cases before they begin receiving welfare.

Mark Courtney addressed the problem of causality *versus* co-occurring conditions with sanctioned welfare families that are involved in the child welfare system.

We're not randomly assigning people to sanctions. And so, we don't know if we found a higher level of child welfare involvement among TANF families that are sanctioned whether it could be simply because these are folks that are having a harder time in general. In an update of our study, we don't find any relationship between sanctions among our TANF applicants and child welfare involvement after we've controlled for things like parental depression, homelessness, etc. However, there is clear evidence from our study, at least in Wisconsin, that the families that are sanctioned are worse off in terms of behavioral health than those not sanctioned.

Data problems contribute to the inconclusive findings on the effects of TANF sanctions on child welfare involvement. Kristin Shook Slack reported that "it is very difficult to identify who has been sanctioned. There is no clear marker in the data that says 'this family has been sanctioned,' so you have to make some pretty significant inferences about who's been sanctioned." Bong Joo Lee added: "Especially if you're trying to figure out who's been sanctioned from state administrative data. First, it is very difficult to identify, but second, the practice has been changing so much that what was called a sanction six months ago might mean an entirely different thing from what you're seeing as a sanction now."

Michele Derr pointed out an alternative view of the potential effects of sanctions in TANF:

With sanctions in the welfare system, it varies hugely from state to state, and one issue that Donna Pavetti [of Mathematica Policy Research], who has done some research on this, has raised is that in some places a lot of the people who are sanctioned perhaps didn't really need welfare in the first place. Perhaps for them it is too much trouble to go in [to the welfare office] and they may be working under the table. So the assumption that they're much worse off [when they are sanctioned and their cases are closed] is not clear. While some of those who are sanctioned are going to have serious problems and that's why they're sanctioned, others [are in a different situation]. That may vary depending on the sanction policy from state to state, but we can't just say, by definition, someone sanctioned is in a terrible situation. Apparently, the most common reason for sanctioning, at least in some places, is they just don't show up for their next appointment with their caseworker. It may be because it simply didn't seem to be worth the effort.

Howard Rolston reported on the studies that look specifically at sanctioned cases and compare them to cases that are not: "They do tend to show, on average, more disadvantage."

Larry Aber summarized the panel presentations and discussion in two major points:

- The issue of the relationship between welfare reform and child welfare is a vibrant, important question.
- The evidence is uncertain about whether welfare reform has affected the demand for child welfare services and interventions.

We can't draw firm conclusions right now. One base constraint in drawing firm conclusions is that the data we have post-implementation of TANF are of relatively short duration. A second constraint is research design: It is very hard to determine causality with non-experimental data. The non-experimental data *suggest* that there might be some recent uptick in the demand for child welfare services and interventions in a few places and we have Jane [Waldfogel]'s data for national trends. Right now there are only a few experimental studies with results.

Jane Waldfogel supplemented this summary by noting that "the effects of welfare reform, if they're there, don't just come about through income and poverty, but through a complex set of impacts on families that have to do with moving into employment, changing the terms of employment, through breaks in health insurance, conflicts between work requirements and responsibilities to the child welfare system."

Status of Research Findings

The current research situation is similar to the evaluations of fiscal incentives in the income security area only a few years ago: We're waiting for some of the experimental findings to come in. Neither the experimental nor non-experimental findings are going to be conclusive on their own. We're going to be looking for some convergence as the experimental findings become available, as we have longer post-welfare reform time trends for the non-experimental findings, and as we try to do better forms of control in the non-experimental studies. When we see things converging in the experimental and non-experimental studies, our confidence in the findings goes up.

J. Lawrence Aber

Director, National Center for Children in Poverty

Panel #2: Has welfare reform altered or contributed to change in child welfare policy or practice or in the environment for child welfare services?

Panelists: Rob Geen, Senior Research Associate, The Urban Institute
Laura Feig Radel, Senior Social Science Analyst, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation
Mark Courtney, Director, Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago

Rob Geen:

Yes, welfare reform has altered or contributed to changes in child welfare funding policy and practice. New unpublished data answers the questions about child welfare financing and funding and resources – one of the factors in the environment for providing child welfare services. There were many reasons to

think that child welfare financing might have been affected by welfare reform: Emergency assistance was eliminated and those funds were rolled into the TANF block grant (many states used emergency assistance for child welfare); there were changes in the Social Security Block Grant (SSBG) with some cuts and allowing transfers from TANF to SSBG; there were changes in eligibility for Supplemental Security Income (SSI), which could affect the number of children in foster care receiving SSI, which in turn could affect other funding sources; and some other more minor changes.

[The new, unpublished data handed out at conference consist of two graphs on financing and one figure on areas of TANF-child welfare collaboration. The graphs show data on money going through child welfare agencies, not TANF spending on families that might be involved in child welfare. Insert the first graph here. **Need to get permission from UI and updated data, if available.**]

Child welfare spending has increased significantly over the four-year period 1996-2000. These are preliminary data, not from all states. The numbers may change but the trends probably will not. These are real changes. The graph does not reveal that there are tremendous differences across the states. While you may see a 23 percent increase overall in child welfare financing, many states have seen a decline and the volatility from year to year is amazing – e.g., 120 percent increases one year and then declines of 50 percent the next year. This does present an interesting context within which to interpret what’s happening with welfare.

The amount of money coming from the federal government as a percentage of all funds has increased significantly. In 1996, 44 percent of all child welfare spending was federal, in 1998 it was 45 percent, and our best guess for 2000 is that it’s 49 percent.

It also appears that there is a large increase in prevention spending. For example, there was \$1.5 billion in what we call “other funds” in 1998 and it was \$2.4 billion from only 43 states in 2000, a \$900 million increase and we haven’t even accounted for 8 states. ***The out-of-home placement spending has leveled off and there has been a large increase in adoption spending,*** which shouldn’t be a surprise. There is a significant increase in contracted services, and a possible decline in the reliance on residential care compared to family foster care, or at least in spending on residential care.

[Insert the second graph here.]

Between 1996 and 1998, we saw a dramatic decrease in TANF spending on child welfare. There are several possible explanations. One is that the TANF final rules did not come out until January 1999 and there were a number of states that were concerned about whether these funds could be used, how they could be used for child welfare, and the state administrators did not fully understand what their flexibility was. ***Between 1998 and 2000, there was a 165 percent increase.***

So the states are now spending considerably more than they were even in 1996 under emergency assistance. Out of about \$1.3 billion in TANF spending for child welfare, only \$800 million was categorizable by the states in terms of what they are spending it on: Half of that is being spent on out-of-home placement; about \$242 million on “other services,” which is the large prevention and CPS category; \$100 million on relative programs – programs for kinship caregivers; about \$28 million on adoption; and \$17 million on subsidized guardianship. These are very preliminary data but they give some sense of trends.

The SSBG funds spent on child welfare went up even though that funding stream was cut by 15 percent. A lot of that has to do with transfers from TANF because a transfer is included in reported SSBG (not TANF) funding. There is about \$260 million so far that we have identified as being transferred from TANF to SSBG. One of the reasons that we may be seeing an increase in prevention funding is that TANF and SSBG are considerably more flexible than Title IV-E (which can only be spend on foster care maintenance and administration and, in a separate category, adoption assistance).⁶

We found through our qualitative work that ***TANF and child welfare collaboration has increased following welfare reform***, which is an easy finding considering that anything more than zero is an increase. It was remarkable how many people said that they had never spoken to their counterparts in the other agency prior to welfare reform planning. They had never even known who the other person was. So, an increase doesn’t mean that collaboration is happening everywhere. There is more interest, something is happening in a few places. The program in El Paso County, Colorado, is certainly a model. It is happening in a different way there. At the casework practice level, there is some joint casework planning going on, for example, in Illinois where they are coordinating welfare plans with child welfare plans. In many places, child welfare activities are counted toward TANF work requirements or people in child welfare are simply exempt from any requirements whatsoever. We found quite a bit of TANF reporting to child welfare, especially on sanctioned families. In Florida and a couple of other states, there is a requirement that there must be a referral to child welfare for families sanctioned a second or third time, that is, a child abuse and neglect referral that needs to be investigated. With the increased attention on domestic violence under TANF, child welfare is seeing new referrals related to children witnessing domestic violence – not because there is necessarily an increase in domestic violence, but simply greater attention to it.

[Insert the figure on areas of TANF-child welfare collaboration here. Insert also a description from Barbara Drake of El Paso County of what they are doing.]

In the program development area, TANF and child welfare administrators have noticed that there are a number of populations that they’re both serving – kinship care is one that there has been a lot of money spent on; also, domestic

⁶ “Title IV-E” refers to the section of the Social Security Act that authorized these expenditures.

violence; teen parents who don't want to live at home are often assessed by child welfare; programs for the hard-to-serve; and some types of prevention programs are being coordinated between the two agencies.

Organizational infrastructure is another area of coordination. There are a number of interagency committees that have been developed to talk about coordinated responses to “dually-involved” families. There is concern and the questions include: how do we deal with it, how do we communicate, do we send lists of sanctioned families or people reaching their time limits to child welfare? Staff training is another area of potential coordination. Training child welfare staff in TANF has been minimal but it has occurred in some places; training of TANF staff in child welfare has occurred in some instances because TANF started referring every single family they saw to child welfare because of poverty. There is increased co-location to have some knowledge building -- placing a child welfare staff person in a welfare office, placing a welfare person in a child welfare office.

[UI published a paper not listed among those for the conferences about changes between 1996 and 1998 in the funds available for child welfare agencies, which will be updated by the current data and carried through 2000. **Need to summarize it and add it to the Appendix group of summaries.**]

For what we still need to know, the gaps in knowledge, SSI and child care spending stand out. We have SSI data from two years but very few states are able to provide it and so we don't really understand either the trend or the magnitude. Anecdotal evidence suggests that foster children have lost SSI and that we see an increase in IV-E and other spending on out-of-home placement because of it, but it is not clear how widespread that is. Also, we don't have good information about Child Welfare's access to child care dollars; in some states it appears that it has increased, in other states it has decreased. We know that child care is an important service for child welfare families for a variety of reasons and their access to that service may have either increased or decreased. Finally, ***explanations are hard to come by for large year-to-year changes in child welfare spending and for the enormous variation by state.***

[Insert table showing the sources of funding for child welfare, the allowable uses of each, and eligibility of families for each – e.g., TANF, IV-E, IV-B, SSI.]

Laura Radel:

The Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services) funds a lot of research in the area of welfare reform and child welfare, including some conducted by the conference participants. Drawing on information from four different studies conducted for OASPE during the last couple of years, there is information on three areas in which some changes may be occurring: (1) kinship care, (2) family reunification, and (3) Title IV-E eligibility determinations.

[Two of these studies need to be added to the list of summaries in the Appendix.]

Kinship Care

Most clear are changes that we're seeing in policy governing relatives caring for children. *In the flexibility of its funding, welfare reform has provided options to states about how to provide services to relative caregivers. In many places, this has prompted the establishment of new service options for children in -- what we hope are safe and stable -- living arrangements with grandparents, aunts, other caregivers.* The evidence that this is going on is pretty clear. All states except Wisconsin have chosen to continue child-only cases under TANF and those cases are becoming a greater portion of the TANF caseload as other cases decline. In some counties, we're seeing that child-only cases now make up more than half of the welfare caseload and kinship child-only cases are the largest portion of those child-only cases. In addition to child-only cases, about half of the states have established subsidized guardianship programs for relative caregiver families – most of them created since 1996. These have been made possible by the flexibility in TANF funding and most of these programs are funded entirely or in part through TANF, although several are operated through IV-E waiver demonstrations. *Virtually indistinguishable programs are now being operated both under Title IV-E and under TANF.*

There is also evidence that child-only and guardianship elements of TANF programs are related to child welfare – evidence found in the reasons these children came to be cared for by the relatives. In some cases, the children are, in fact, in foster care but their payments are being made through TANF [or AFDC before that] because they are not IV-E eligible and some states are paying for them that way. Beyond that, in three counties that we looked at, in each case *the top three reasons that children were in child-only TANF cases while living with relatives were: parental desertion or abandonment; parental substance abuse; or parental incarceration.* Those three reasons accounted for between 58 and 61 percent of the kinship child-only TANF cases. Those are the reasons we see many kids in the child welfare system as well.

What we're lacking is information on the implications of these changes for children and whether it matters which system serves these families. If they are the same kinds of families, does it matter where they're going? Does it matter whether they have the protective elements of the child welfare system if the kinds of financial assistance they're getting are the same?

Family Reunification

A second possible area of impact on the child welfare environment from welfare reform is in the area of reunification – the “back-end effect.” There is a case to be made here, although it's not clear how much of what we're seeing is tied to

welfare reform *versus* implementation of the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act or other related state practice changes that have been going on simultaneously. In the past, when maltreatment issues were resolved and reunification was contemplated, if the mother [in single parent families] was not working, welfare was there and you could reunify a family with the notion that there was some income coming in and you didn't have to worry about that. That is not the case any longer.

While it is too early in most of the states to see much impact from TANF time limits, TANF participation requirements are making it more difficult for child welfare-involved families to receive support in some places, and the ineligibility of drug felons also affects the child welfare population. Without the potential for welfare support and with the additional requirements competing for families' attention, reunification for some families may be more difficult and problematic. But it's hard to disentangle what's going on from ASFA. ***We do see reunification rates dropping pretty consistently both across states and over time. But, one of the confounding factors is that a number of states are now defining exits to relatives as family reunification. The changes in reunification rates may be more pronounced than the numbers are showing if returns to relatives are now being classified as reunification.***

Eligibility for IV-E Assistance

There were changes in the procedure of eligibility determination for IV-E assistance as a result of TANF caused by what we call the "look back date." The requirement which tied future IV-E eligibility to a family meeting now-defunct AFDC requirements from 1996 has had operational effects on child welfare agencies. This change required them to devote more resources to eligibility determinations. Before, the child welfare agency could rely on the welfare agency to do that; if the family had been AFDC eligible they didn't need to go any farther. Now, they always need to go farther than that. It ties up valuable resources and, because there was no inflation escalator in the law, over time we should inevitably see fewer families being IV-E eligible just because the income/resource level is out of date.

Although we have not yet done the analysis to determine whether there is an observable effect, federal data would be able to tell us overall whether there has been a decline in the proportion of the child welfare caseload that is IV-E eligible. What the federal data won't tell us, but state administrative data might, is whether for entry cohorts after TANF reform, the proportion of IV-E eligible children in out-of-home care is going down compared to earlier cohorts. If eligibility rates have declined, this is likely to be of considerable interest to Congress as they revisit this set of issues and they would want to take that into account in thinking about whether to keep this provision in the law or to think about ways of changing it.

Mark Courtney:

While interstate variation in how child welfare systems have responded to welfare reform is one challenge in studying impacts of welfare reform on child welfare, ***there is considerable intrastate variation within county-administered states***, and model programs, like the one in El Paso County, Colorado, tend to be found in county-administered TANF programs. In Wisconsin, there are a few counties doing really interesting things collaboratively with their caseloads; there are other counties that have done absolutely nothing, where the child welfare and welfare directors don't talk to each other, where they actively encourage their workers to think of themselves as distinct entities – that goes on within the same state.

A clear way in which the environment for child welfare services has changed is that public assistance caseloads are down, and not just most notably the TANF caseload. ***Historically, the majority of children in the child welfare system came from families that were AFDC-eligible*** – whether or not they were actually receiving assistance, but many were. Historically, getting cash assistance to get a family reunified was not contingent on work. Moreover, as the TANF caseloads have gone down, fewer of the families involved in the child welfare system will be involved in the welfare system so even if there were some kind of collaboration between the two systems, there is less potential payoff to that in the future. Historically, there was some interaction between the two systems, typically to leverage compliance when the client was a no-show – the welfare worker would ask the child welfare worker to call in the client, or the child welfare worker would ask the welfare worker to hold the client's assistance check.

Programs that are an important part of the environment for child welfare services, such as Medicaid and SSI, are not being studied much in this context. Medicaid enrollment is down, which is a concern of states. Many children in out-of-home care were receiving Medicaid before they went into care and, arguably, fewer are involved in that program now. SSI is more narrowly defined now. Not only do we not know much about funding, we do not know anything about how that has affected the context for child welfare services. In the past, child welfare workers could rely on that program to get funding for some children.

One aspect of kinship care that is not well understood is the way in which welfare reform has led states to think critically about the use of kin and to develop child welfare diversion programs. Rob Geen has some anecdotal evidence that there are some pretty radical diversion programs associated with using TANF funds – or not using TANF funds. Laura Radel reported instances of kinship care populations being funded in one jurisdiction with TANF funds and in another jurisdiction with IV-E funds. What does that do in terms of service availability to the parents? TANF has no obligation to work with parents around substance abuse problems, mental health problems, etc., with respect to parenting -- as opposed to work. In this area, we don't know much about how the system has changed or if it has changed. There are clear examples of change where that

was a deliberate part of the policymaking discussion – an attempt to avoid increased involvement of people in the child welfare system through diversion policies that, in effect, divert families away from help for parents.

Welfare reform casts a very long shadow over fiscal reform in child welfare services. There has been discussion for a long period of time of fiscal reform in child welfare services, especially related to the IV-E entitlement, which is widely considered a counter-intuitive way to go about funding child welfare services because the incentives are in the wrong place when funding for out-of-home care is more available than funding for preventive or support services that would keep children in their families or enable reunification.⁷ Welfare reform and the use of a block grant has cast a long shadow over the potential for reform of child welfare funding. When you get into discussions with some Congressional members and staff about what are rational ways to reform child welfare funding mechanisms at the federal level, very quickly any discussion of a block grant approach – even a block grant approach tied to demand – tends to be thrown out. The distrust and dislike of the block grant approach, in general, for funding has come more to the fore because of welfare reform. There’s a growing body of research [**from the state child welfare IV-E waiver demonstrations ?**] that suggests that [the IV-E entitlement] is a bad way to fund child welfare programs, but that hasn’t had any impact in the legislative arena.

Discussion of Panel #2 Research Evidence

- The potential downside of increased use of TANF funds for child welfare services is that, when TANF caseloads rise and more funds are needed for cash assistance, child welfare will lose the TANF dollars and not have alternative sources. This is a problem, in general, with the block grant approach to funding services, including block grants for child welfare.

Mark Testa pointed out the connection between the recent pattern of increased TANF spending for child welfare purposes and the block grant approach to funding:

We heard from Rob Geen about the growth in the TANF spending on child welfare and from Laura Radel about the use of TANF for kinship care. As states increase their position on the TANF side with this funding, how vulnerable are those programs going to be when the demand for TANF begins to rise? As we look at the recessionary forecast, we’re likely to see some impact on TANF. There is going to be some fierce competition for those funds that have already been invested in child welfare. I think the winner is going to be TANF cash assistance. I’m worried that the IV-E program is losing a little of its role in child welfare funding and that TANF has increased quite a bit. We all need to be concerned about that particular shift. The

⁷ For a discussion of reform options, and a description of child welfare financing, see Karen Spar and Christine Devere. August 13, 2001. *Child Welfare Financing: Issues and Options*. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service.

other changes in IV-E eligibility, besides the look-back date, are worrisome as well -- particularly the changes around how we claim administrative IV-E payments for foster care [**what does this mean?**] and the shift away from allowing administrative payments for children in unlicensed relative care. That's a \$50 million loss in Illinois. We need to look very carefully at the relationships around financing and the relationship of TANF and IV-E because this large position that some states are getting in TANF for child welfare is a worrisome development.

Mark Courtney did not have this particular worry, but urged federal attention to the question of whether different funding sources – i.e., TANF and IV-E -- for care of children living with relatives is acceptable.

The issue on the child welfare side is that the diversity of practice in terms of how non-IV-E funding mechanisms are used is much greater now than it was before welfare reform. I think states will be just as creative if suddenly TANF rolls go up and they can't use TANF funds for child welfare. I think some states are going to change their child welfare policies in that circumstance in order to take more children into the child welfare system. The issue is that there has not been a whole lot of thought at the federal level – at least that is reflected in policy -- about how these two systems are related, including the different mechanisms of funding children to live with relatives, either with or without child welfare involvement. The discussion of TANF, given that it is now funding a big part of the child welfare system, needs to focus on this issue. To what extent, at the federal level, do we care which funding streams are being used for kinship care, specifically, or for child welfare, generally? Is it fine that states can do whatever they want? Shouldn't we start thinking creatively about these programs as being linked in terms of supporting out-of-home care of children?

- Kinship care is the child welfare practice around which revolve many of the issues of funding, system change, and welfare reform effects that are of concern to researchers.

Rob Geen highlighted the policy importance of kinship care in terms of the proportion of child welfare caseloads this form of care constitutes:

People often ask me, “Why do you spend so much time worrying about kinship care – it's a peripheral issue, it's so tiny?” In fact, in many places, kinship care is half the child welfare caseload. It would be considerably more than half the caseload if we defined kinship care correctly. Laura Radel pointed out that placement with a relative is considered reunification in some places. There are a number of states that are placing children with relatives, opening a child welfare case, maybe even adjudicating them, but not taking them into state custody. These children are not foster children because they are not in state custody. In some states, that can be 50, 60, 70 percent of their entire foster care caseload. So, if you look at what states report as foster care, it could be one-third of what we

would have considered foster care in the past. It is an enormous issue; it's not just a small segment of the child welfare population. That definition obscures the policy import of this issue, as does the state variation and county variation in how kinship care is defined, financed and reported.

Jane Waldfogel spoke to the difficulties posed by these issues for understanding the effects of welfare reform on child welfare:

It also obscures -- if we don't include the children who are not officially in foster care -- our thinking about the impacts of welfare reform on numbers of children in the child welfare system. If we think of these children as still being with their parents and they're not -- they're with kin, they're being reunified with kin, they're child-only TANF cases with kin, they're not technically called foster care -- we may be missing a big piece of the action. If Laura Radel and Mark Testa are right that the unaccounted for segment of the child welfare caseload is big and getting bigger, we may be seriously mis-estimating impacts of welfare reform.

Matt Stagner of the Urban Institute suggested a big picture hypothesis -- that the environment is changing in a way that child welfare is losing its definition.

Maybe 10 years ago we knew what we meant by child welfare more clearly than we know now, in terms of who are the kids and what are the services they are getting and who is funding those services through what funding streams. A question is whether welfare reform is contributing to the environmental changes that affect these old certainties and how.

Howard Rolston contributed trend information to try to understand the issue of the child-only caseload in TANF.

The high point for numbers was 1996. At that point (1996-1997), about 60 percent of the child-only cases had a parent in the household; in about 40 percent, it was a relative in the household. In 2000, the data show it is between 50 and 60 percent of the child-only TANF cases that had a parent in the household -- so it has come down toward the relatives, but the numbers are still lower than in 1996. It doesn't sound like we have a large and growing child-only caseload in the TANF welfare system.

Fred Wulczyn suggested a refinement of Matt Stagner's comment that child welfare may be becoming less clearly defined:

One way to spin that would be to put a negative connotation to what Matt was describing, but it's possible to spin it the other way -- that the child welfare system is moving to a more realistic position *vis a vis* the continuum of services that families need. One way to think about this is to focus on understanding the

effects of TANF on child welfare, but a more proactive position would be to ask: Going forward, what is the combination of policies and programs that ought to be brought to bear on the next wave of issues that this whole situation is going to produce? On the finance side, such a proactive position would suggest that, with respect to the movement of the TANF-funded child welfare cases and the IV-E funded cases together, counties and states should be afforded the flexibility to deal with the idiosyncrasies of how these problems come together in their jurisdiction. We may well be moving toward a more realistic understanding of what – not a child protective system but – a child welfare system should look like when it has a much more global appreciation for the child development perspective, and that could be a very healthy thing in terms of the research agenda.

Laura Radel concurred with Howard Rolston that the numbers of child-only TANF cases have not been growing, but argued that

because they are such a large proportion of the caseload in so many places, that in itself makes them a policy issue that we should pay attention to. The fact that the policies that we have don't make a lot of sense for these families or don't address these families in particular is something that we need to think about. Also, the fact that because we see so many of these families not considered foster care cases when, in the past, we would have considered them in foster care, has two sides. In the past, a lot of children with relatives would never have been brought into the child welfare system in the first place. They would not have been considered foster care before funds were available to make payments to relatives for kinship care. Now, we may be considering more families as foster care cases than we would have in the past, not necessarily fewer.

Rob Geen explained what the difference between foster care and TANF might mean for the relative caregiver:

First of all, the difference in payment is enormous, but that's just where it starts. Then, the difference is between foster care and *being eligible for TANF*, not actually receiving TANF; we know that many relatives don't receive TANF even though they're eligible. Their take-up rates are even lower than the general population, so they're not even getting the TANF. But there are also a lot of things that come with the foster care payment that don't come with TANF. There are supplements for clothing and other things; there are special needs payments, which can be 3, 4 or 5 times as much when you have a very hard-to-serve child; and then there are also child welfare services themselves that may come with it. And one more very specific TANF-related point is important: The definitions of "kin" and "relative" are sometimes different in the child welfare system and in the welfare system. In the child welfare system, they often include neighbors, godparents, family friends, and if you go to TANF and you're a godparent, you're ineligible. You may be caring for a child that is in the custody of the state, not

receiving foster care and not eligible for TANF. That's actually the state's problem because the state can change the definition of relative under TANF. That is a TANF decision; it wasn't a [state] decision under AFDC, but I only know of one state – actually only one county [in Alabama] -- that has changed their definition to include broader relatives.

Bong Joo Lee reported that the Chapin Hall researchers did not have detailed information on trends in child-only TANF cases but did see that:

The general number has been very consistent throughout the whole decade of the 1990's, although it has become a bigger proportion of the child welfare caseloads. When we talk to TANF administrators, the child-only caseload is not a big concern. It is always taken out of their whole notion of welfare-to-work and, in fact, what they want to show is what they call, from the TANF side, an “available to work” caseload. That's their concern. The child-only cases have been very consistent, very stable, so we haven't really looked at it.

Larry Aber's summary of the evidence presented by the second research panel and discussion pointed to the topic of the third and final panel discussion:

- There is a complex set of issues that are changing how we understand kin care and reunification.
- There are lots of changes in the broader environment, raising questions about whether the image, the vision, the mission of child welfare is changing.
- The three main reasons for entries to child welfare and to the child-only TANF caseload – abandonment, substance abuse, and incarceration -- imply other systems, other than just TANF and child welfare. What about the criminal justice, mental health and substance abuse systems?

“In the next panel, we will be talking about ‘Has welfare reform altered the context in which low-income parents balance demands of work and family?’ I would add to work and family, ‘other needs and emergencies.’ Family in this context is not just childrearing, it's coping with mental health, substance abuse problems, criminality, etc.”

Panel #3: Has welfare reform altered the context in which low-income parents balance the demands of work and family?

Panelists: Kathleen Wells, Associate Professor, Mandel School of Applied Social Services, Case Western Reserve University

Kathleen Wells:

Before answering the panel question, it is useful to say a bit about the term “context.” We have to consider the context of the service system in a particular community, and by service system I mean not only welfare and child welfare, but the mental health system context, the drug treatment system context, housing, the educational system as well. Then there is the agency context, both child welfare and welfare as well as the others; the context of the family; the context of the individual, and that would include both children and parents. So when we ask the question, “Has welfare reform altered the context...?” it implies multiple contexts.

As far as I can tell, *we have little evidence regarding this question*. We have an ethnographic study by Laura Frame [of the University of California at Berkeley, which is summarized in the Appendix] that suggests that increasing poverty does affect childrearing practices in a negative way, and my work [with Shenyang Guo], which is descriptive in nature, but does not allow us to draw causal inferences. We started with a child welfare system population in Cuyahoga County (Ohio), not with a welfare system population, and we looked at an entry cohort of foster children prior to welfare reform and a similar group of children who entered foster care after welfare reform. We followed both groups for 18 months after first entry. Then, we looked at rates of reunification before welfare reform compared to after welfare reform as well as the effects of a variety of factors, especially work and welfare, and how they affect speed of reunification.

The researchers found that post-reform foster care children differed significantly from pre-reform children in several ways, although the design of the study did not allow them to attribute the differences to welfare reform. For example, a greater proportion of post-reform children spent 18 months or more in foster care (38 percent versus 24 percent) and pre-reform children were unified with their families at a rate that was 65 percent faster than the reunification rate for post-reform children.

Kathleen Wells commented on gaps in knowledge, noting that agency practices for responding to substantiated reports of maltreatment over time are an unknown factor that can affect both placement rates and reunification speed.

The informal standards for taking children into care may very well change over time and dramatically affect rates of placement. There may be other policy changes that increase rates of placement that have nothing to do with welfare reform. In our own county [Cuyahoga], a dramatic example is a couple of years ago our child welfare agency decided that every child with a positive toxicology test result [for drugs] would be immediately placed in foster care and our

placement rates skyrocketed. So this is a complex picture that we are trying to disentangle.

Fred Wulczyn:

The answer to the question, “Has welfare reform altered the context...” is unequivocal: It has altered it; the question is whether or not the low-income parents recognize it as such – that is, to what extent does it enter into their world view? The summary of Laura Frame’s research⁸ suggests that it does penetrate their world view. However, most of the studies on balancing work and family life and its relationship to efficacy, especially on the part of mothers, deal with the general population where the decision to work is an instrumental decision, but essentially voluntary, as opposed to the mandate that is in the welfare reform context. *The analysis that the Urban Institute staff have done of the UI National Survey of American Families⁹ suggests that working poor families spend their time differently than the non-working poor, the dependent poor. By becoming workers, they are going to spend their time differently, and the way they spend their time is going to affect their kids. They spend less time with their kids.*

This is an example of how the coming together of these two policy domains actually creates interesting opportunities for child welfare research because we have not traditionally looked at this set of issues in quite this way. In most of the research on the link between working and efficacy, the assumption is that caretakers would feel better about themselves and that would translate into better parenting, all things being equal. Better parenting would presumably lower the demand for child welfare services, so there is some reason to believe that after a period of time, the effect of working might be positive with respect to child maltreatment, but we have not looked at the issues of maltreatment in quite this way.

Dr. Wulczyn agreed with Kathleen Wells that “there just isn’t that much research out there that we could pull together” to answer the panel question about the context in which low-income parents attempt to balance the demands of work and family.

Discussion of Panel #3 Research Evidence

- The big picture of families, work, income and child well-being when people work but remain poor – which is the likely result of welfare reform based on evidence to date – includes a host of unproven connections to both positive and negative child welfare outcomes.

⁸ Refer to summary of Frame research in appendix.

⁹ Describe NSAF [from UI website].

Matt Stagner introduced a note of caution about giving too much importance to welfare reform as a major change in the world compared to other potential causes of changing circumstances of low-income families:

It is important in this conversation to recognize that many more low-income single mothers were working in the late 1990's and that we don't really know why that was. Some of that might have been related to welfare reform and it may not have. But as a contextual issue for child welfare, Fred Wulczyn is right that the child welfare world has not thought of the changing work structure of the low-income population as a concern in how it thinks about its services. We should be careful about over-interpreting causation about why that is happening, but it certainly is a new context, or a changing context, for low-income families.

Larry Aber pointed out a theme of the research findings across the three panel discussions:

There is this theme that, in general, work and income from work is risky for this population. It is associated with greater risks of reports and slower reunification. There are four or five strands of that in the discussion so far, and if those strands are more true than not true, people gain confidence in them. They run so counter not only to pre-existing values, but to people's beliefs about what's good, in general, that there is going to be a tricky message associated with it.

We're coming out of the larger studies of the effects of welfare reform on income and child outcomes with the understanding that when welfare reforms increase income, children do better. It might be that when they decrease income, children do worse. We're also learning that there are some things that moderate those effects and that more vulnerable families (more vulnerable defined in several ways – less education, more barriers to work) may be not as advantaged by more work and income or they may be more disadvantaged by losses in income.

Those findings are coming out of this larger literature on the effects of welfare reforms. Maybe what we're observing in the child welfare population about the negative effects of work is convergent with the notion that for the more vulnerable groups in the larger cash assistance population as well, the effects of these welfare reforms aren't the same for them as for others.

Mark Testa offered an alternative interpretation for the riskiness of work for child abuse:

This goes back to David Gill's findings in 1970¹⁰, which showed that the risk of child abuse actually increased the more time the child was in front of -- or in the face of -- the parent. As you reduce the exposure time that you have with your child, also child abuse risk declines. On the other hand, the work finding has to be understood in terms of the alternative caregiving arrangements that are being made while the mother is away from the child in a work setting. Work could become a risky situation if the child care is less desirable. For example, leaving a child under the supervision of a friend or boyfriend might actually put the child at greater risk of child abuse than when the mother takes care of the child, but leaving that same child in the care of an aunt or a grandparent may decrease the risk of child abuse. So, we need to think about this work-child abuse relationship in a very nuanced fashion and ask the question: What is the alternative child care arrangement that's being made and is that more likely or less likely to increase the risk?

Kathleen Wells added that finer distinctions are also important in regard to the amount of income available to families, noting that 20 percent of the families in Cuyahoga County study had no income at all from work or from welfare.

Mark Courtney's research findings in Wisconsin do not support the hypothesis that work involves a risk of child welfare involvement for TANF recipients. He described these findings in this way:

In our study, which is a welfare population -- we're not studying a child welfare population, but looking at child welfare involvement of welfare recipients -- we found in an earlier analysis that connection with the workforce either currently or recently was associated with a *decreased* risk of child welfare involvement looking forward. Now, we've got another year's worth of data and many more events. That early finding of a decreased risk is no longer statistically significant, but we're not finding in that welfare population -- which is very much a residual welfare population in Wisconsin -- that work *per se* is related to the likelihood of CPS involvement.

Jane Waldfogel suggested another possible explanation for the divergent evidence that maternal employment might be associated with some types of maltreatment, especially neglect, and results of the MDRC studies, which have found that maternal employment is positively associated with child outcomes: The MDRC studies do not include any data on children who were infants at the time their mothers were involved in

¹⁰ Check spelling and get reference.

the welfare reforms and thus do not address the effects of maternal employment for very young children, who are a very vulnerable group in terms of the child welfare population.

The MDRC evidence for preschoolers and school-age children is positive and the evidence is negative for adolescents, who again are a big chunk of the child welfare population. In terms of subgroups and who is at risk, the contradiction may not be so great.

Larry Aber pointed out that a survey sample of welfare parents picks up children of all ages, and when the analysis is looking at effects on children, there is the possibility that the effects have to do with either the children or the parents. At a single point in time, adolescents have parents who are older and have been on welfare longer than the younger children. Therefore, different effects of welfare reforms found for children of different ages might result from the fact that welfare reform is hitting parents who have been in the system longer. Dr. Aber asked: “So, is it an adolescent effect or is it an older parent with other characteristics effect?”

Rob Geen stressed the importance of measuring personal benefits of work that were posited in the 1996 debate about welfare reform:

We’re focused on the positives and negatives of going to work, the positives being income-related and the negatives being potentially putting children in unsafe positions. We are not talking about some of the other positives from work. These are self-esteem, motivation, modeling good behavior for your children, and certainly for child welfare families those could increase reunification rates. Using survey measures like parental stress and other things to measure some of the benefits we get from work beyond income is important.

Larry Aber warned against confounding work and income. “My reading [of the results of the welfare-to-work research] is that there are not net gains in income, that you lose benefits faster than you gain keepable income from work.”

Barbara Needell reported an important policy development related to alternative child care arrangements:

The transitional child care that’s available for families that have gone off welfare would be another issue; it may be in danger in California because of budget cuts.

- In order to understand how the world of low-income parents may be changing, and how those changes may be affecting child welfare outcomes, it is important to understand the child welfare system that generates the “outcome” data.

Kristin Shook Slack discussed some of the mechanical explanations for changes in child welfare outcomes that might derive from the changing context for low-income families:

The model we use in our study takes into account two things that might be going on: There might be actual changes in child and family well-being that are correlating with changes in employment, income, and health care coverage, but then there is this question of how any changes in context for the children or the family are related to visibility and observability for being reported to child welfare authorities. For example, if you take this question about child care, you could have more children ending up in informal arrangements, which may or may not be substandard and that may, in fact, increase the risk for certain forms of maltreatment, but those very contexts might be less likely to report problems or be less visible to reporters and we may see declines in reports for those reasons. The same thing could happen with health insurance coverage. As children get off of health insurance coverage, they are seeing their physicians and other medical people less often – people who are important reporters of suspected child abuse and neglect. So we need to be careful about relying too heavily on involvement with the child welfare system as our indicator of whether or not welfare reform is affecting maltreatment rates because it could be affecting the visibility of maltreatment as well.

Larry Aber drew the implications of these effects for research methods:

This raises the enormously important issue of the potential value of general population-based surveys as opposed to service-system-defined population surveys. Without the general population-based surveys, it is hard to measure changes, but it cuts several ways. There is the potential visibility reporting bias. In a certain way, though, whether a person is worried enough to report suspected maltreatment is a more sensitive measure than most of the other measures we have about how well children are doing “at the deep end.” Even though there are false negatives and false positives, child maltreatment reporting is still a fairly sensitive measure.

Barbara Needell noted the interaction between the sensitivity of reports of child maltreatment as a measure of and public perception of the child welfare system’s capacity:

Reporting is also influenced by the general population's -- and professional mandated reporters' -- estimate of the system's ability to respond. There is the phenomenon of: "I'm not going to report because they're not going to help."

Kathleen Wells described the practical impact of welfare reform at the child welfare agency level:

Agency officials are now asking themselves a somewhat different question about reunification, which is this: Given that we can't assume constancy of income from welfare, is it safe to return a child home in the presence of existing conditions and circumstances? That's a very different question than they used to ask before welfare reform. It is these pre-existing conditions and circumstances, such as mental health problems, substance abuse problems, homelessness, domestic violence, etc., for some portion of the child welfare population that is undermining their ability to both work and to parent.

Kristin Shook Slack emphasized the importance of understanding the time dimension in studies of the welfare reform-child connection:

The families that are more likely to be working at a later point in time are going to be different families. There could be short-term effects of employment that are very different from the longer-term effects and we need to look at the simple status of being employed or not with more complexity, including with things like quality of employment and duration.

Policy Interests of Researchers

- The people studying the effects of welfare reform on child welfare hope to contribute to the policy debate on TANF reauthorization and they have a number of recommendations for how the questions are framed.

Mark Courtney's questions – and implied recommendations -- are:

I wonder how much the policymakers see discussions about the reauthorization of TANF as talking about welfare reform the way David Burns of El Paso County, Colorado, talks about it. Is TANF a family support program *and* a child welfare program? That was not reflected in the original legislation, but a lot of what we're saying here is, in fact, that's what the program is. To what extent will that be part of the discussion about the reauthorization of TANF? Or are we just going to consider it a work program that replaced this cash program where we sort of forgot that it was about "aid to dependent children"? My bias is that we ought to be talking about TANF as a family support program that is based on moving people into the workforce *when we think that's a good idea*. But that wasn't the nature of the debate last time. Will that be the nature of the debate this time?

Larry Aber observed that before September 11th there was a convergence of opinion about how to make the second phase of TANF about work support *and* family support. “How much that holds up under the recession and what may be a deteriorating partisan situation in Congress is in question.”

Mark Testa articulated a concern about whether the reauthorization discussion would encompass the “care of dependent children” side of TANF:

We’re going to cover the work-related aspects of TANF pretty well, but I wonder whether this time we can talk about the care of dependent children side of the TANF program, which goes to the whole issue of kinship care. Can we have a discussion about what is the appropriate role for non-parental care in the care of children -- whether it should be part of the TANF child-only system or part of the foster care system or entirely outside of that under a new act around older Americans? We keep missing having that debate, even when we convened a kinship care panel at the national level. I would hate to see this reauthorization go through without, once again, having that question on the table. Every time we talked about it in the past, it was marginalized. Rob Geen described people asking: “Why are you worried about that small problem?” It’s a big problem now and we ought to integrate it into one of the goals of TANF -- in addition to work and preserving the family care of children.

POLICY DISCUSSION

The goal for the first part of the policy discussion, which was facilitated by Matt Stagner of the Urban Institute, was to address the question, “What are the decisions that policymakers in child welfare are facing and what do they need to know?” As Dr. Stagner described it,

This is not just a description of the key questions, but also some reflection on how the research community could be answering these. We hope that in some cases research has been helpful over the last few years, we hope that there is some research that’s just coming to see the light of day that will be useful in the short term, and again we hope that as we move forward together on a research agenda for the next few years we’ll be even more on target than we have been in the past.

Three conference participants in key policymaker/program administrator roles offered their views for this part of the discussion. They were Lynda Fox, formerly Commissioner of the Maryland Department of Human Services, which encompassed both of that state’s welfare and child welfare programs; Olivia Golden, Commissioner of the

Child and Family Services Agency (the child welfare agency) of the District of Columbia; and Kate Jesberg, Administrator of the Income Maintenance Administration (including the TANF, Medicaid and Food Stamp programs) of the District of Columbia.

Lynda Fox:

At this point states are looking at reauthorization of TANF, they are looking at tighter state budgets, they are looking at an economy with fewer jobs and more uncertainty, they are looking at increasing caseloads in child welfare and, in some cases, in TANF. The time is really ripe for a lot of states to now go back and revisit the frameworks for both child welfare and TANF policy and look at how the two interact.

Specifically, in the realm of welfare reform, we are now reaching the point where those states that did not choose earlier time limits than the 1996 PRWORA provided will be approaching those federal time limits. They are now going to be interested in that issue – in what happens to TANF families that come to the end of their eligibility for cash assistance. The issue of sanctions and whether sanctions are hurting families and causing children to end up in the child welfare system is going to be important. What are permissible work activities will begin to be reexamined if there aren't jobs out there. Whether substance abuse treatment counts as a work activity will be an issue. Some states will want to reexamine their family formation policies and their family cap policies.

On the child welfare side, states are concerned with high caseloads, with the impact of continuing substance abuse problems on the system. The estimates are anywhere from 70 to 85 percent of the families involved in child welfare have substance abuse problems, so that is of concern. States are going to be asking, "What's working, what's not?" They are going to be particularly concerned about any policies on the welfare side that are contributing to the problems on the child welfare side. Part of what states want to know is the numbers of families who are involved in child welfare either during their tenure on TANF or post-TANF. They want to know which came first. Did the family have involvement with child welfare causing the removal of a child and then causing a TANF case to be closed, or was a TANF case closed for non-compliance or time limits or sanctions or some other reason and did that have something to do with the child then entering the child welfare system?

It is also extremely important to know who these families are. Are there some predictors? For example, anecdotally, it seems that families in the child welfare system, particularly substance-abusing families, have more children. Is that a predictor? When we look at families that have been on TANF and their TANF cases close and they show up in child welfare, we want to know what their previous child welfare history was. To the extent that states could have research which would inform them about which families are most likely to have dual involvement with the two systems or leave TANF and then be involved with child

welfare – if they could have some predictors -- they might be able to develop some more effective policies and practices and programs to address that. Most states have had a real struggle in identifying TANF recipients who have addictions and engaging them in treatment and having them succeed in that treatment. Because we know that families in child welfare are disproportionately affected by substance abuse, the more we could learn about that the more useful it would be in trying to forge some policies that would be helpful in both TANF and child welfare.

Olivia Golden:

The simple question of “Does welfare reform affect child welfare caseloads?” doesn’t pop out at the top of my screen, but a whole lot of other relationships do pop out if we’re looking in a more complicated way at these families. Much more interesting than welfare reform in itself is the circumstances of low-income working families and the ways in which welfare reform and other supports do or don’t help them. One big area is how that has affected the lives of foster parents and what it implies for what we need to do to support, recruit and keep foster parents. The agency that administers early childhood programs in the District will be a critically important partner for our agency, not only because some of the early childhood programs will matter for children in our care, but because there is no way we can hold onto foster parents if we’re not effectively supporting their work -- because they are all working. So that’s one connection.

Second, on the caseload question, when I think about why we’ve had some recent spikes in children coming into care, there are a whole lot of things I think of before anything to do with welfare reform, but some of them may have relationships to welfare reform. There is the fact that we have restructured our child welfare system; there are potential changes in worker behavior in relation to publicity about bad outcomes; there is the question about whether the stress of this last month [post-September 11, 2001] has affected families; clearly, there are substance abuse issues; and perhaps housing issues. Housing is an issue for which the work on welfare reform and working families might be more subtle and helpful, particularly if researchers think about extended families. What happens to the capacity of extended families to care for children if people end up unable to keep their housing? It is not simple to figure out the direction of causality at all, but part of how you’d want to think about it is: If low-wage work doesn’t succeed in the housing market, the solution is not necessarily a TANF solution. It may be another kind of solution.

Large families are a question. There is commonality on that question between the welfare and child welfare research, the question of whether the people having the hardest time have large families and what we need to do about it.

Finally, if we think of TANF not only as a funding stream for work and cash assistance, and potentially for child welfare, but also as a major national funding stream for child care and child development, then how do we build a system that

supports children's development? We're not anywhere near there but we want to be there in the future.

Kate Jesberg:

Child welfare is on our agenda in ways that have very practical interaction, practical intersections, which to people who run agencies make sense. One way, clearly, is when we provide Medicaid. All of our frontline workers actually know when a child is in the child welfare system because of the way we carry the Medicaid cases, so we know when there are issues about providing the Medicaid that are more of an operational nature but are sometimes difficult.

In the District of Columbia, we have a program that is the exact nexus of these two worlds in a practical operating environment. We call it the general assistance for children program, which for years was locally supported and which many other states do not run. It is for children who reside with people who are unrelated. It was an outgrowth of the former AFDC program where children would be living with paternal relatives but paternity wasn't established and under the old quality control rules of AFDC, these situations generated errors. So we treated those as local cases and funded them with local dollars. At some point, when the child welfare system in the District nearly went out of control, it became a dumping ground and what we used to call "bootleg foster care." Now, we review every single case of general assistance for children to make sure that the children are not removed for abuse and neglect and placed in totally unlicensed facilities – remember, these are not care providers -- and we work very closely with the child welfare agency staff. But, clearly, there is a great deal of pressure on the foster care system that can lead to "dumping" families out of the system.

We have grantee agencies that provide home visiting services to all sanctioned customers and now they are starting to visit all long-stayer customers -- those who have received welfare continuously since the inception of welfare reform. The home visitors are trained to make referrals to child welfare, naturally, if those kinds of problems surface. We find that many of the long-stayer families tend to be more fragile and they definitely have a lot of children. It is not uncommon to find women who are thirty or thirty-two years old with ten children. If we developed a screening instrument that looks at characteristics of people in the welfare system in order to predict child welfare issues, having large families very definitely is one of those characteristics. Substance abuse is no doubt one as well, but you can't get people to admit to it, so it is of limited use for most of our screening.

- The environment for funding child welfare services – which was identified by researchers as changed, partly as a result of welfare reform – is of concern to policymaker and program administrators. There are questions about the ability of states to sustain child welfare services.

Lee Posey, of the National Conference of State Legislatures, informed the conference group about the results of a recently completed report and the implications of those results for future welfare reform and child welfare funding:

It shows that 30 states have significant revenue shortfalls. They're having trouble. They know their caseloads are going to creep up. If the caseloads creep up, they put more money into cash assistance and there are fewer funds to do other things. In Washington State, for example, 20,000 people lost Boeing jobs. There's a multiplier effect. For each of those jobs, three other jobs are impacted. When you look at those kind of numbers, states are alarmed.

Here in Washington, it's hard to keep the issues of children and families at the top of the agenda. We know that there's still a lot to do in welfare reform, but we may have trouble protecting the funding for welfare reform. We're going to have to make sure that Congress understands that welfare is about so much more than a cash assistance check. That is where good research that shows us the kinds of connections with other programs, including child welfare programs, is so important. Research that can help us identify the population that we know we're going to have to be serving can help us explain why these programs are so important.

Who? [**check the tape again**] explained some of the ways in which funding for child welfare has changed:

The biggest child welfare funding stream is IV-E and there are two parts to it, the foster care part and the adoption assistance piece. The number of children that have been placed for adoption in the last several years has increased dramatically. The Adoption and Safe Families Act required moving children faster to permanency, so the adoption assistance side of child welfare expenditures is growing very rapidly. That is a significant recent trend. States themselves run their own adoption subsidy programs and, in times of revenue shortfall, one of the areas that states often take a look at is whether they want to do that or take the routes that they can take for children who are IV-E eligible and get adoption assistance that way.

The other new aspect of permanency is the kinship care revolution, if we wanted to call it that. Then, there are the child-only TANF grants. Many policymakers – some in the research community, but it was primarily politicians -- had no idea when welfare reform was under discussion six years ago that there were such things as child-only grants. Now that welfare caseloads are down, all these child-only cases are more visible. Those are children who go back and forth – from child-only grants to relative care to foster care and other methods for finding permanency for them.

Lynda Fox explained why there was a decline in welfare spending for child welfare services for the first couple of years after TANF came into being, which has become an issue again:

There was a lot of reluctance on the part of policymakers to use TANF monies for child welfare because people were concerned about having enough money if TANF caseloads went up. They did not want to support child welfare with TANF dollars fearing that those TANF dollars might not be available in the future. Once states began using TANF monies for child welfare, they did so in large part because of the restrictions on the IV-E child welfare funding stream. You can't use IV-E funding for preventive services and TANF became the font out of which we could support the kinds of supportive services to low-income families – not just TANF-eligible families.

There is concern about whether some of those services will be able to be sustained in the current environment. To the extent that TANF caseloads rise, you return to spending more of your TANF budget on cash assistance payments, which leaves you with fewer resources to do the things that are prevention in child welfare or to assist with substance abuse treatment or to connect people with the mental health system or to do the kind of skills development that so many people need.

- Convergence and overlap of funding for TANF and child welfare suggest to some a changed – and broader – mission or vision of child welfare, but the future relationship between the two realms is not clear, especially in light of predicted increases in TANF caseloads and expenditures for cash assistance.

Mark Courtney and Matt Stagner raised the question about mission and vision of child welfare in two different ways:

[Mark] The child-only TANF caseload remaining large, and the extensive use of kin as a placement option where half or more of the child welfare populations in many jurisdictions are children living with kin, raise the question that is at the heart of both TANF and child welfare policy: What is the role of government in supporting non-parental care of children?

[Matt] An issue is whether welfare reform has shifted child welfare's ability to line up its definition of its mission with its resources and its ability to achieve the mission. The research discussion was leaning in the direction of an expanded mission for child welfare. TANF funding made that supportive role for families more possible, but child welfare systems are still facing a set of constraints around how they intervene with families, what they can do with those families, and placement monies are still constrained.

Olivia Golden answered the question from the perspective of a policymaker who had experience with both systems:

It feels as odd to be thinking about the welfare reform legislation as driving change and vision of child welfare as it would to be talking about whether the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) drove a change in how we think of economic support to

working families. They're related, but there was major work done on the vision within child welfare since ASFA. The vision in child welfare crystallized over these last years. ASFA forced a focus on safety and on permanence and on giving meaning to permanence as well as on the role of adoption and on genuinely trying to move children through the system. Part of why it may be hard for us to answer the question about whether the welfare reform legislation changed the mission is that there was this huge other act/activity focused directly on that system.

Mark Testa noted that the sense that the child welfare mission may have changed varies by state.

I would agree with Olivia that the ASFA's focus on safety and permanency gave direction to child protective systems in places like Illinois, which enabled the system to narrow its focus rather than broaden it. One of the changes that Illinois went through was trying to keep separate its child dependency system from its child protective system. The foster care caseload had grown enormously between 1990 and 1995 because of the failure to protect the boundary between child dependency and child protection.

One of the reasons why the child welfare mission in Illinois has remained focused on safety and permanency is because we didn't dip into the TANF fund, precisely for the reason we're worried about right now nationally – i.e., if you increase your position for child welfare in the TANF side, and the TANF caseload does begin to rise, who's going to win in the competition for those scarce resources? It's going to be the families who are in need of those assistance payments and that will leave a huge void for funding on the child welfare side, which will result in many states cutting back. My fear is that cutbacks will be in the two areas that we felt were most important to invest in to improve permanency -- adoption subsidies and guardianship subsidies.

Susan Orr, designee to head the Children's Bureau of the Administration for Children and Families as Associate Commissioner, reframed the question about the relationship between welfare reform and child welfare:

Maybe we shouldn't ask the question: Is welfare reform on the radar screen of child welfare? There are two possible reasons why it is not. One is that there are just too many other problems. The other is that it really didn't affect child welfare as badly as we thought it would. But maybe what we should be asking is: Is child welfare on welfare reform's radar screen? Because there are two laws. Child welfare was rightly focused on ASFA. But there are two time limits that could affect one another and the families very pertinently. One is the ASFA time limit for getting the children who are in substitute care into permanent families and the other is the TANF time limit on receiving cash assistance. Do welfare workers know if a family is child welfare-involved? Are they concentrating on the fact that the mother might have to meet support requirements in order to get custody of her children and to get her out of the child welfare services system?

Betsey Rosenbaum, of the American Public Human Services Association, added:

There is another time limit, which applies to substance abusers and further complicates the issues of competing clocks. You have 15 out of 24 months under ASFA to get your act together as a parent as opposed to what is alleged in the substance abuse community, which is that you have to go through five or six relapses before you have everything together -- considerably more than 15 months. For some of the research questions that are asked, a recurring theme is how those two time limits play out. In the conversations that we had with state agency heads recently, out of a group of about 25, almost every single one of them had substance abuse as one of their key priorities, that and mental health.

Mark Testa noted that two-way discussions between child welfare and welfare policymakers are occurring, “but they’re occurring more easily in jurisdictions in which the responsibility sits in one agency. When the responsibilities sit in two agencies, the discussion occurs, but it is painful, takes a long time, and you easily lose track of all this collaboration, so it’s a difficult mix.”

- Program administrators want practical applications of research on welfare reform-child welfare interactions. One example – indicators of risk of child welfare involvement for screening tools – is less useful in a TANF agency setting than in a more personalized social service situation.

Mark Courtney pointed out the potential for and questions about using research in this way:

There is a handful of studies, including one we’re doing in Wisconsin, that identify risk factors for involvement in CPS. In Wisconsin, very practically, I’m going to go sit down with the TANF managers and the child welfare managers and say, “I can tell you that folks who walk into your office who have the following three characteristics have a greater than 50/50 chance of being investigated by child welfare agencies, all else being equal, in the next year or so. What do you want to do with that?” That raises the question of what do you actually do with that information, but there is research going on right now that will do some of that for you. If I’m a program administrator running a TANF program, I want to know among my population who’s at risk for what – in other words, who I need to intervene with and what are the problems that I need to intervene with. I think that there’s some work going on out there that will be helpful in that regard.

Rob Geen also described some of the issues in the practical application of information about predictive factors for child welfare involvement:

One of the interesting things about Mark Courtney's findings – and we found the same thing in California and a couple of other studies have found these things – is that if you take a look at all the factors that seem predictive of child welfare involvement, it's not income, it's not employment, it's not sanctions, it's not the types of things you easily get from an application for TANF; they are things you need to screen for. It does raise implications for how you can use this practical information. It is relatively easy to get income information; you can find out if someone is working. But how do you find out if they're depressed? How do you find out the information needed for some of the better measures that we have that are more predictive? That does raise the issues of designing the screening instruments.

Kate Jesberg, who urged researchers to find practical applications for their work, did not agree that screening instruments were helpful in the TANF context:

All these screening instruments down front at welfare intake don't tell you anything, but you're under enormous pressure because it has a certain amount of facile appeal to ask people these questions which they don't answer honestly. I wouldn't either. Especially, I wouldn't answer the welfare worker because it's a mixed mission. You also have to ask all of the child support questions. We're just a step above the cops. It's not a warm fuzzy environment. But our vendors, who have constant interaction with people, and the home visitors, who actually develop rapport with people, get much more to the heart of the matter. It's really people at that level, who have a sustained interaction to gain people's trust, who are then able to decide, let us know, and try and do the appropriate service delivery. But a great deal of the effort that's going into developing screening instruments for use in the intake side or at TANF recertification -- other than screening for obvious known barriers, physical barriers -- it's not really useful.

During the research discussion, Kristin Shook Slack expressed the practical view of experimental research findings:

I'm very excited about the Delaware study and about the prospect of other experimental studies, but to some extent I don't really care whether it's the fault of welfare reform or some other set of explanatory factors that's predicting involvement in the child welfare system. If some of these non-experimental designs help us identify which groups are at highest risk for getting involved, whether it is the fault of welfare reform or some other constellation of forces, that's going to help us act and do things that need to be done.

I'm interested in Barbara Needell's early work on gaps in health insurance coverage because some of the early data we have from our micro-level analysis is that breaks in health insurance coverage for children is associated with an increase in indicated reports of maltreatment. It affects a very small number of children at this time with the data that we have, but it is something to be watching. We should be not only looking at what is happening with the cash assistance, we should be looking at what is

happening with Food Stamps, with health insurance coverage and how that relates to the risk of involvement with the child welfare system as well.

- Anticipated increases in TANF caseloads due to economic downturn and rising unemployment suggest more coordination between welfare and child welfare programs to avert increases in child welfare caseloads.

Kate Jesberg described the deepening effect of economic trouble in Washington, D.C. and the TANF agency's responses:

We're really struggling right now – probably since mid-October when the layoffs hit – with TANF applications going up 50 to 70 percent on a daily intake basis. Like New York, we have been particularly hard-hit, and like Miami and other tourist-dependent cities. That is going to extend well into next year because all the big groups we depend on for convention business are canceling out.

This obviously creates a whole host of pressures. It's a truism, but when people feel better about themselves, they stop beating on their kids, generally, and they're happy and they're not depressed. So getting people to work, getting them to feel good about themselves, is a big thing. It lessens child welfare intake and the parents aren't home and they're not depressed. Now we are having those people come back on the welfare rolls.

What do we design as an alternative very quickly for people to move into because we're losing jobs, people aren't exiting welfare and we're going to get some first-time people on welfare as well? That will create the tensions that unemployment always does – child abuse, spouse abuse, etc. So then the question becomes: Where do we put people? We're in a work-first strategy that doesn't emphasize other activities but all we can do is skills building at this point, which many of our people desperately need anyway, so it's not a bad thing. It's the most productive use of time – to do some skill upgrades and training and some basic education.

For those of us who live and die by work participation rates and caseload reduction, it's looking like a big disaster. The best we can do is place people in activities that don't actually count under the federal TANF rules, but are certainly better than letting people stay home and become depressed – because some will clearly act out in ways that don't indicate good anger management skills.

Howard Rolston reported what research says about the skills-building strategy:

The research doesn't suggest that keeping people busy in basic skills training is particularly promising either for employment or for their income. The research suggests not very good outcomes – especially for more disadvantaged people, the people who might be most at risk of child welfare issues. We don't fully understand why, but by and large, they don't like it and they have trouble complying with it.

Kate Jesberg responded:

I agree with that. One of the most difficult things we've looked at is structuring programs that teach basic skills when the bulk of our recipients are reading third to sixth grade. It's an extraordinary need. And we need to know how you structure that in a skills training program – such as the CET model,¹¹ which is probably the most promising of all of them. How do you take research and look at the most promising models, albeit maybe not very promising, and teach practitioners how to implement it? Until very recently, there was no contextual training -- as the CET model is called -- in the District of Columbia and we had a real struggle in trying to even see what to do. Some cities are more advanced than that, but if that's the best model, then how do you translate it?

Olivia Golden suggested how to use previous research to formulate strategies for the current situation:

When I think about what I know from the welfare reform research, one of the things that this last part of the conversation prompted for me is that maybe we should look back at all the studies that have findings about family stress or parental stress and think about preventive implications. In Project New Hope,¹² we had some reductions in parental stress [resulting from working less]. If you're thinking about a time of potential economic change, the implications may be about health care and child care supports but they may be about support for possibly part-time work – or in the New Hope case, they may be about not overtime work. On the Early Head Start side, it's about supporting parents and children, but thinking about whether there are ways of supporting different kinds of work arrangements in this economic time and how that might relate to parental and family stress might be an area of research that would be useful for both welfare and welfare reform.

Research Needs of Policymakers and Administrators

Olivia Golden formulated four requests for the researchers.

First, related to how the climate for work affects foster parents and kinship families, I would ask the researchers to pay some serious attention to foster parents, adoptive parents and kinship caregivers, to what can we tell about how welfare reform, low-wage work and its supports affect the ability of families to be part of the child welfare system and care for abused and neglected children. That has lots of policy implications.

¹¹ CET is the acronym for the Center for Employment Training, a combined job skills and basic education program developed in California in the 1970's that has been replicated nationally.

¹² Cite final New Hope report.

Second, I would request that the researchers think a lot about what we've learned from past welfare reform studies -- tease out the effects of welfare reform on a range of variables that might be of interest to child welfare. That includes whatever we can learn in those studies about effects on parental stress, on stability of housing, child outcomes, extended family exchange of resources. There's a lot of interesting stuff which we could look at from this angle.

The third request comes out of my concern about the welfare reform-child welfare framework. We really don't know anything about which comes first -- welfare changes or child welfare events -- or whether something else comes first or how it all plays out. Could you look at a group of people, perhaps a neighborhood, a group of low-income families where you could see the most interaction between the welfare and child welfare factors? The idea would be to look at economic stress and a variety of things about parental circumstances, community supports, and substance abuse, and to follow how people went in and out of the welfare and child welfare systems and low-wage work and discover which happened first and how it related -- so you understood the journey.

The fourth request is totally unrelated to the others. As I was listening I was thinking "What hypotheses do we have about effects the other way?" The hypothesis that I'd want us to start testing is: If, in the country as a whole we've started reaching permanence earlier for children who come into the child welfare system, and fewer children are aging out of foster care, we should expect that would, in turn, have positive impacts on reducing dependence on welfare. I'm curious about whether any jurisdictions have gone far enough [with permanence improvements] that we could learn about that yet or find out whether there's been an impact as children are adopted younger. Are we seeing better results or outcomes?

Lynda Fox's requests for research were focused on understanding what to expect from marriage promotion initiatives:

I want to talk about the "M" word. People on the Hill are very interested in marriage promotion and if there is a reauthorization debate, they're going to be talking about it. When you talk to state policy people, they don't even want to hear the word. Part of the reason they don't want to hear about it is because they're really puzzled about whether marriage among low-income parents with disadvantaged backgrounds really does make a difference or whether all these studies that say children growing up in a two-parent married family are better off are really just pointing to things that are co-existing and not necessarily cause and effect. So, some research that would tell us whether marriage *per se* benefits children of low-income parents is one request. Then, are there any effective strategies for promoting marriage or at least promoting dual parenting? There are some obvious things like fatherhood programs that we think might work, but there is a need for some research in this field. Then maybe we'd get more comfortable talking about it.

Mark Testa summarized some of the relevant research and the issues of interpretation:

There's evidence that marriage of the birth parents of a child or the same children is a good thing, but there's some disagreement in the child welfare literature about marriage among families that aren't related is always a good thing, too. We need to be very careful about what we mean about marriage being a good thing. Under certain conditions it is a good thing; under other conditions it may not be a good thing.

Rob Geen added:

This also relates to adoption among single parents, which we've seen to increase significantly, largely due to kinship care, and there are questions about whether that is good for children or not.

Betsey Rosenbaum expressed a concern that the research perspective reflected a unified national picture of child welfare and requested research attention to the state and local variation:

One item that was of concern to administrators in the 1996 welfare debate was flexibility, which was one of the reasons for the block grant. And yet I didn't hear a thing about flexibility in the presentation of research findings. Flexibility addresses the option of letting states create a new variety of things in different ways, and yet as I listened, everything seemed so very unified like it was a totally national picture. There are a lot of variations state to state so making singular statements about things makes me uncomfortable. I could say that five do this and ten do that and fourteen do that, but trying to put it all together into a single picture or single statement -- I don't know how true that actually is.

Barbara Blum suggested that the researchers' discussion of the ways in which the child welfare system has changed "is actually getting very indirectly at the issue of flexibility and we need to be talking the same language. There was a fair amount of discussion about collaboration between some welfare offices in certain places and child welfare and that gets to flexibility as well, but it wasn't explicit." When researchers talk about "variation," they often mean the same thing that administrators mean when they talk about "flexibility."

Matt Stagner reported to the policymakers and program administrators that there was a lot of discussion about different findings from people doing research in different

localities, but he concurred with Betsey Rosenbaum that “the field is striving for a view of child welfare that is somewhat universal as opposed to locally determined – that is a correct reflection of where the field is. Whether it needs to become more locally focused or more recognizing of that diversity is certainly an important question.” Matt further suggested that studies of local variation in child welfare offers a major advantage for practice:

It has a benefit. These different ways of doing things in different child welfare systems give us as researchers an opportunity to potentially understand what works and what doesn’t more than a unified system would. So in that sense, the variation is good. It also makes it harder to take the evidence from California, Illinois, Wisconsin and North Carolina and put it together in a way that feeds back to either national or state policymakers and make sense of it other than to say, “Things sure look different.”

Kate Jesberg pointed out some of the results of flexibility on the TANF side, where some TANF programs are much more workforce-focused and are structured to separate the workforce agency from a social service agency.

That’s like a third variable. When there is a child welfare system and a workforce issue that’s related to TANF, you have these non-assistance types of things that the workforce agencies are providing. Trying to get a sense of all that and how it might impact on the child welfare system or on families is complicated – but necessary.

Sally Flanzer, of the Children’s Bureau, described her organization’s experience compiling national data in a circumstance of state variation:

Our experience at the Children’s Bureau from the AFCARS and NCAN data collections – the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Reporting System and the National Child Abuse and Neglect data system – and from the activity that we call the annual report on outcomes [required by the Adoption and Safe Families Act], shows us that there is considerable, understandable variation. Those are state administrative data. We run those data pages by state and we return that information to the states and the states return them to us with extensive comments and complaints. What we have found in all three of those activities is that the differences between and among states make sense. They grow from a different definition or different legislative mandates or a different sense of what their resources and their goals are, but they make sense. So the challenge with state comparisons is to do them in a way that honors the system each state has constructed but also allows us to make those comparisons. It is a very difficult thing to do.

Research Strategies that Respond to the Needs of Policymakers and Administrators

Mark Courtney concluded the policy discussion of the intersection of welfare reform and child welfare by proposing several types of research that could be helpful to policymakers and program administrators in the next phase of both types of programs.

Population-based studies that look at the population of children in general, such as the National Survey of American Families conducted by the Urban Institute, which is a very large survey.

You can focus on low-income populations and try to see how they're doing and look at issues of child welfare. The nice thing about those studies is that you can look more broadly than just CPS involvement and foster care. You can look at actual issues of child well-being and see whether changes in policy are making a difference there. The limitation is that it is very difficult in most cases to say anything about programs in these population-based surveys. You just don't have enough people in a particular program to say anything about that program.

Studies of TANF populations' involvement with child welfare services.

Looking at a service population in the TANF program or some other welfare program to understand why these families get involved with child welfare programs can tell us a lot about practice. The down side of that is you've got a real selection problem in terms of understanding where these people come from. As the TANF population has declined, you have to ask yourself, "Well, what about other low-income working families? What's happening to them?" Obviously, a lot of them get involved in the child welfare services system. You can't really learn anything about them from these types of studies.

Studies of the child welfare services population to try to understand its involvement with welfare programs.

Betsey Rosenbaum has said, "We've had foster care for a hundred years." Since 1935, we have had an ADC program, and since 1961, we have been funding some of our foster care program with federal Title IV money, but we never looked much at the overlap, how the cash assistance and other welfare programs either helped or hindered child welfare agencies in doing their job. Those are important studies. They're very practice-relevant. They can answer some of the questions policymakers and managers are concerned about. Again, the problem is that it is a very selected population.

Experimental and/or really strong quasi-experimental studies that examine model approaches or distinct approaches in the new era to helping families manage work and parenting.

There has been a lot of experimentation, including collaborative models, and very little serious study of what's going on in those models, even in terms of organizational research to understand the variation in approaches, let alone whether they are related to different outcomes. As Betsey Rosenbaum says, it's a flexible world out there right now; states and counties can do a lot of different things with TANF and a lot of different things with their child welfare programs. We really need to learn whether variation in those approaches makes a difference in terms of child and family well-being and their involvement with and outcomes of the child welfare system. Experimental studies, particularly, could answer a lot of the questions that policymakers are coming up with.