



A RESEARCH AGENDA

for Public Child Welfare

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Chapter 1

Setting a Public Child Welfare Research Agenda

The Beginning: Why

The National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators (NAPCWA) believes that few previous research agendas have included large numbers of the leaders and managers of America's public child protection agencies in the development of those research agendas. These administrators and the staff of their agencies constitute the largest population of child welfare research users. There is little irony in the fact that those who daily administer child protection systems and who are responsible for assuring that over 3 million children are safe each year have historically had little input into decisions about the focus of child welfare research.

The child welfare research provider industry, if it may be called that, largely exists in three forums - contract research organizations, internal agency research units and faculty and staff of universities. The federal government conducts the considerable bulk of contract research and the related research agenda appropriately reflects federal policy needs. For the most part, internal agency research units focus on program evaluation. The research interests of university faculty are largely derived from individual intellectual interests. While it may be said that each of these forums conducts research relevant to some part of the broad array of need for additional information, it is also fair to say that the immediate relevance to current needs of state and local public child welfare systems varies.

The members of NAPCWA never formally articulated what they define as their most pressing research questions. To some extent this may be because they have never been asked. But more importantly, they have never formalized making the child welfare research agenda a part of their collective operations and public policy initiative.

Though functioning in a multi-disciplinary environment, child welfare services has historically looked to the profession of social work for its primary practice base and source of research. Social work education also identifies child welfare as one of its core constituencies. However, there are natural forces within universities and within schools of social work that limit the size and focus of a child welfare research agenda.

In universities, the focus of research is more often derived from individual faculty interests than institutional commitments to specific fields of research. With the exception of a few larger graduate social work education programs, most programs cannot afford to devote more than a small number of faculty positions to teaching and research in child welfare. Given the average size of the graduate faculty in a school or college, this may be as few as two or three faculty.

Still, there is considerable reason for optimism. Over the past 30 years, some schools of social work have established research institutes or centers. In many cases these centers have been devoted to general child and family research activities. In a few instances they reflect specific partnerships with the state child welfare agency. Through these mechanisms more focus is being placed on state agency defined research needs.

Partnership efforts between social work education and public child welfare systems are already well along in other areas. Through leadership of the Children's Bureau, National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators, the Council on Social Work Education and Schools of Social Work, a strong base of exchange and collaboration around training has emerged. This foundation serves as a tremendous base to take further steps toward discussions about research priorities. A basic first step is the formation of a public child welfare research agenda.

The Process: The Agenda's Development

Under the sponsorship of the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators (NAPCWA), 151 public child welfare administrators and university representatives convened at five sites. The five sites were Chicago, Illinois; Atlanta, Georgia; Houston, Texas; Portland, Oregon; and Burlington, Vermont. The state child welfare agency in each state, along with its research partner university, served as the host of each meeting. Each state agency was invited to send as many as ten participants. States were asked to include state and local managers as well as deans and faculty of schools of social work, along with other research colleagues. When completed, 151 persons participated in the regional forums representing 24 states and two Native American tribes.

During the regional sessions, participants were asked to identify research interests in five areas:

Practice Research. These questions focus on interventions, specific practice techniques, variables associated with best or effective practice and basic research regarding factors influencing child maltreatment and the course of intervention.

Program Evaluation. These questions focus on evaluation of larger scale program effectiveness and factors influencing effectiveness of agency program efforts.

Policy Research. These questions focus on research designed to evaluate the impact of public policy, e.g. ASFA provisions, or population trends in the child welfare system.

Research Synthesis. These questions focus on areas of existing research which need analysis and interpretation.

■
Prognosis Research. These questions focus on areas in which treatment prognosis needs to be better established.

In nominating a research topic, participants used one criterion: “If we knew the answer to this, public child welfare agencies could take a significant step toward improving outcomes for children and families.”

Following this procedure, participants ranked their top ten choices in each area with ten being the highest and one being the lowest choice among their top ten. Using these numerical weightings, a prioritized list was developed for each of the five research areas in each of the five regions.

Chapter 2 A Public Child Welfare Research Agenda

The following research agenda reflects the work of 151 child welfare administrators and researchers. Unlike the research priority lists from the regional forums, this agenda is presented without order or priority. Each topic or area has value to public child welfare administration. While a weighting system could have been applied at this point, the final work group elected to present a broad agenda that reflects the diversity of need across the nation.

Practice

- What do differences between physical abuse and neglect as family dynamics imply for differences in assessment and intervention?
- Which families would fare better without a CPS intervention?
- How do we distinguish between immediate and imminent danger and harm?
- Which caseworker characteristics influence case outcomes?
- Which risk and protective factors should be targeted in screening, assessment and intervention?
- What are the relationships between family characteristics and differential intervention?
- Which cultural variances imply different interpretation in assessment and intervention?
- What are the characteristics of the population now being served by CPS?
- Which variables influence caseworkers in making decisions about which people are to be served?

What do differences between physical abuse and neglect as family dynamics imply for differences in assessment and intervention?

To a large extent, child welfare agencies have treated most forms of child maltreatment similarly in assessment and intervention. This is reflected in the use of single assessment protocols when planning for child maltreatment interventions and in the similarity of case plans regardless of the nature of the abuse. There are a number of child welfare administrators who, based on their experience, believe this has not served child neglect interventions well. Research is needed that examines the similarity and differences in family dynamics involving physical abuse and neglect.

Which families would fare better without a CPS intervention?

Experience suggests that intervention is not always positive. Although early intervention sounds like a positive step, it may be reasonable to assume that some families would fare better without an intervention by the public child welfare agency. Research is needed to determine in which cases public agency intervention may be a detriment to a family.

How do we distinguish between immediate and imminent danger and harm?

The current focus of most safety assessment protocols is on immediate danger. Protocols direct caseworkers to recognize factors that imply an urgent and immediate necessity for intervention. Often severe harm may be presumed within a very short time. However, there are also cases in which the danger of severe harm may not be immediate, but it appears imminent. For example, the early stages of failure to thrive may not appear as an immediate threat of death, but if left unaltered will imminently result in death or severe harm. Research is needed to better distinguish present or emerging threats of severe harm that imply imminent safety concerns for a child.

Which caseworker characteristics influence case outcomes?

While there is considerable discussion regarding education, values and other personal traits of caseworkers in relation to job performance and agency outcomes, little illuminating research seems to guide these discussions. Since characteristics of the intervenor have been identified in a number of human service settings as having an influence on client outcomes, knowing more about the child welfare agency's main resource, the caseworker, would be highly beneficial.

Which risk and protective factors should be targeted in screening, assessment and intervention?

Considerable research has been conducted to identify sentinel variables that may be used to identify families at risk of future child maltreatment. In some instances, these variables are dynamic, meaning that they may be changeable through intervention. In others, the variables are unchangeable, such as history. Intervention can only focus on dynamic or changeable variables. As well, it is possible that risk variables already identified in correlational studies may be co-occurring but not causal. Further research is necessary to examine dynamic variables which, when changed, result in lowered levels of child maltreatment.

What are the relationships between family characteristics and differential intervention?

The value of individualized service plans has been held by child welfare agencies for a long time. The reality is often much different. Persons performing case record reviews often note that the family frequently gets what is available rather than what is needed. Frequently case plans look alike even when the presenting problems are different. Child welfare administrators believe that there is little current research available to guide differential assessment and intervention. They need to know which family characteristics indicate a better response to selected interventions and what can be done to improve the response of families that now respond poorly.

Which cultural variances imply different interpretation in assessment and intervention?

The constructs of cultural competence and responsiveness have become prominent in the child welfare field during the past decade. Yet, while values and polemics run strong, there is little concrete research that specifically describes the interaction of culture and child maltreatment in a way that illuminates culturally determined family behavior that is not maltreatment, but likely to be interpreted as such. Similarly, there is little concrete information that can be used to guide culturally responsive interventions without stereotyping families. Finally, distinctions need to be made in research between what is considered the consequences of cultural ignorance and those that are the direct result of institutional and other forms of racism.

What are the characteristics of the population now being served by CPS?

While much is known about the demographics of the current CPS population, less is known about the distribution of underlying and dynamic conditions presumed to be causally related to the occurrence of child maltreatment. Studies have tended to focus on single phenomenon, such as substance abuse or domestic violence. Child welfare administrators need a more comprehensive survey of the population served that reveals multiple patterns of the ecological variables associated with maltreatment, including frequency of co-occurrence.

Which variables influence caseworkers in making decisions about which people are to be served?

State policies, procedures and protocols are designed to influence caseworkers' decision making by specifying the criteria used to make decisions. Yet, little is known about the fidelity of the caseworker to these criteria or the existence of other criteria used by caseworkers. This information is necessary to better understand how decisions are

actually being made in the field and what influences exist on caseworkers to deviate from agency-specified criteria.

Program Evaluation

- What is the quality of actual implementation of current programs?
- How should outcome variables be defined?
- What is the effectiveness of current cross-system collaboration efforts?
- What is the effectiveness of wrap-around mental health services for children in out-of-home care?
- How does the organization of child welfare services affect outcomes?
- What are the components of a successful service program?
- What outcomes are evidenced by community and family partnerships?
- What have we learned from the past two decades about the state-of-the-art of program evaluation in child welfare?

What is the quality of actual implementation of current programs?

Evaluations of certain programs (e.g., family preservation services) have been challenged due to variations in the way the programs were implemented. Actually, little is really known about the quality of program implementation in states. While many have made efforts to become family-centered or strengths-based in their practices, little is really known about the extent of actual application of these practices in the field. The same is true with elements of program design. While local adaptation is an expected experience, little is known about the extent to which these adaptations create a real departure from the core elements of the program.

How should outcome variables be defined?

Though not a specific research topic, conceptual development in this area is essential to effective program evaluation. It is possible for the program to be effective, but the theory to be incorrect. For example, a program may improve an aspect of family functioning, but this effect is inconsequential in reducing further child maltreatment. Conversely, nothing may have changed in a family, but there has been no re-occurrence of child maltreatment that has been detected.

What is the effectiveness of current cross-system collaboration efforts?

Cross-system collaborative efforts continue to be a focus throughout human services. Child welfare administrators seek to know what the outcomes of these efforts have been and their relative cost benefits. What conditions make collaborative efforts work and under what conditions should they not be attempted?

What is the effectiveness of wrap-around mental health services for children in out-of-home care?

Considerable attention has been given over the past two decades to the use of wrap-around mental health services to reduce the incidence and expense of residential treatment and to maintain children in community settings. Child welfare administrators wish to know the effectiveness of these efforts and for which populations of children the effects have been most apparent.

How does the organization and management of child welfare services affect service outcomes?

Reorganization is a common solution to organizational performance problems. Yet, little seems known about how different structures affect outcomes. Are there clear differences in performance between locally and state administered child welfare systems? What are the differences in agency performance when intake is local rather than centralized? How do management practices and organizational culture impact child welfare agency performance? These and many related questions need answers so that child welfare administrators can better align structure and management practices.

What are the components of a successful service program?

What distinguishes a successful service program from less successful ones? How are these differences in infrastructure and organizational practices best implemented? While poor performance has often been documented in states during the disclosure phase of class action lawsuits, little research has been done to document the organizational dynamics and characteristics of these poor performing systems compared with better performing systems.

What outcomes are being evidenced by community and family partnerships?

The child welfare field is prone to rapidly adopt practices and strategies with little supporting research. Current among rapidly expanding processes are community partnerships and partnering with families. What is the relative effectiveness of these efforts and what is their level of cost benefit?

What have we learned from the past two decades about the state-of-the-art of program evaluation in child welfare?

This area is more descriptive in nature. Evaluation of systems in motion is difficult. Research often prefers a stable environment where relevant variables are adequately controlled. The field rarely, if ever, offers such opportunities. What has been learned from program evaluation efforts that can guide current agency evaluation practices?

Policy

- What are the elements of strong private sector performance outcomes?
- How does court involvement affect the outcome of a case?
- How do current practices and policies contribute to the overrepresentation of minority children and families in child welfare systems?
- How do differences in state laws influence differences in state performance indicators?
- What have been the impacts of ASFA, MEPA, IEPA and ICWA requirements on child and family outcomes?
- How are efforts to increase or decrease the criminalization of child maltreatment impacting program outcomes?
- How are courts implementing ASFA requirements?
- How do you construct incentives in policy and funding that support desired outcomes?

What are the elements of strong private sector performance outcomes?

A number of jurisdictions have historically engaged in significant levels of purchase of service from the private sector. As well, in the past few years two states, Kansas and Florida, have legislatively committed to more extensive privatization of the entire child welfare system. Though there has been a common belief that the private sector is more responsive and effective, little research exists comparing private and public sector performance. Even more important, where private sector performance is strong, what accounts for these improved outcome levels?

How does court involvement affect the outcome of a case?

Rates of court involvement vary throughout the United States. There appears to be little information describing how court involvement affects the dynamics of the case and its eventual outcome. It may be reasonable to expect that some cases have improved outcomes as a result of court involvement and others might not. Research is needed to distinguish among the effects of court involvement.

How do current practices and policies contribute to the overrepresentation of minority children and families in child welfare systems?

The disproportionate penetration of minority children through the child welfare system continues to increase. Some have cited child welfare staff's lack of cultural competence as an explanation. Others reference racism, both direct and institutional, as an explanation. The highly emotional and consequential nature of this discussion demands relevant data to better inform practice and policy.

How do differences in state laws influence differences in state performance indicators?

States define child maltreatment differently. As well, states vary widely on rates of substantiation, entry into care and types of permanency outcome. To what extent does a state's laws and related policies explain these differences? Since national outcome measures will now be used to measure states' performance, more information is needed to know to what extent legal definitions or actual performance explain differences.

What has been the impact of ASFA, MEPA, IEP and ICWA requirements on child and family outcomes?

Several new laws have been implemented to support new policy at the national level. It is important to examine what the impact of these legislative acts has been and the relative achievement of their stated policy objectives.

How are efforts to increase or decrease the criminalization of child maltreatment impacting program outcomes?

Advocates argue both for the increased criminalization and prosecution of perpetrators of child maltreatment and for the decriminalization of other forms of child maltreatment. Arkansas and Florida have moved to place investigation with police departments. In contrast, North Dakota and Missouri have moved to eliminate investigations for all or some categories of reports. Evaluation research is needed to understand the impacts of these disparate approaches.

How are courts implementing ASFA requirements?

The courts are clearly one of the most critical partners of the child welfare agency in addressing child safety and permanency. Unlike child welfare systems that operate under common elements of state policy and seek often to limit variance, courts appear freer to make individualized interpretations of laws and their applications. Child welfare administrators need to understand how courts are implementing ASFA provisions, particularly as national outcome standards are applied as measures of system performance.

How do you construct incentives in policy and funding that support desired outcomes?

It is often stated that a number of fiscal and other incentives reward placement and thereby limit a focus on prevention and early intervention. The Child Welfare Reform Act of 1979 in New York and Purchase of Service Redesign in Illinois in 1995-96 reflect different approaches to influencing outcomes; one applies fiscal sanctions while the other uses fiscal incentives. Through waivers and other means, states are attempting

to change incentive systems to better support desired outcomes. Research is necessary to evaluate the effects of these efforts and to build better models of system performance enhancement.

Research Synthesis

- What is known about the relationship of staff qualifications to program outcomes?
- What are the implications of attachment research for child welfare practice?
- What is known about factors influencing retention and turnover among child welfare staff?
- What is known about the social ecology of child maltreatment?
- What is known about how to measure quality of parenting and changes in quality of parenting?
- What is presently known about factors influencing the penetration of families of color into the child welfare system?
- What is known about the impact of TANF; effectiveness of substance abuse treatment; effectiveness of domestic violence interventions; effectiveness of treatment for persons with dual diagnoses; effectiveness of child mental health treatment, and the effectiveness of residential treatment and what are the related implications for child welfare interventions?
- What is known about effective means of translating research into practice?

What is known about the relationship of staff qualifications to program outcomes?

Entry-level qualifications for child welfare staff vary greatly throughout the country. Where some jurisdictions require an M.S.W. or equivalent, others do not even require a high school diploma. Does prior professional education and training make a difference in program outcome achievement? Can on-the-job training establish an equal basis of performance as prior professional training? As agency pressure grows to improve performance, child welfare administrators need information that illustrates where investments in staff can have the most impact.

What are the implications of attachment research for child welfare practice?

Though the concepts of attachment and bonding are universally referenced in child welfare work, there is no known compilation of this research and its specific implications for different aspects of child welfare intervention. Are strongly held beliefs supported by available research? Does practice actually reflect what research on attachment implies?

What is known about factors influencing retention and turnover among child welfare staff?

Many child welfare systems are facing enormous rates of turnover. Speculation about causes abounds, but little sound research seems immediately available to guide agency strategy. Considerable research has been devoted to this subject in business and industry but not systematically applied to child welfare agency environments.

What is known about the social ecology of child maltreatment?

Much of how child welfare agencies intervene focuses on individual caretaker and family characteristics. Yet scatter plots of child abuse and neglect cases often reveal high concentrations of cases in a small number of neighborhoods. Historical analyses often show that other problems, e.g., crime and delinquency plot to the same locations and do so over time even though the neighborhood may have changed its ethnic and racial makeup. What is known about the social ecology of neighborhoods and their impact on rates of child maltreatment and implications for intervention at the neighborhood level?

What is known about how to measure quality of parenting and changes in quality of parenting?

Quality of parenting is presumed to be a factor in both neglect and physical abuse. Clients are routinely assigned to parenting skills classes, for the most part without any concrete identification of which skills relate to quality of parenting or how to measure improvement. Child welfare administrators need a synthesis of current research on quality of parenting and means of measuring improvement in this area.

What is presently known about factors influencing the penetration of families of color into the child welfare system?

Although the penetration of children of color into the child welfare system is known to be higher and their exit rate slower and lower, child welfare administrators need information from available research that clearly identifies factors that can be targeted for change. What is known about the contribution of factors presently forwarded as explanations and where does this lead the field?

What is known about the impact of TANF; effectiveness of substance abuse treatment; effectiveness of domestic violence interventions; effectiveness of treatment for persons with dual diagnoses; effectiveness of child mental health treatment, and the effectiveness of residential treatment, and what are the related implications for child welfare interventions?

Child welfare agencies confront problems of social functioning that have many roots. This often means that child welfare agencies are dependent on the functioning of other human service systems for their ultimate goal attainment. What is known about the treatment effectiveness of these systems and what are the implications for families under ASFA time lines?

What is known about effective means of translating research into practice?

Published research more often seems to identify implications for future research than for direct practice application. Child welfare administrators believe that much relevant research exists but that current means of translating research findings into practice are ineffective. How can this process be made more expedient without rushing preliminary and possibly wrong findings into practice?

Prognosis

- What are the implications of families' presenting problems for reasonable efforts, aggravated circumstances, concurrent planning and compelling reasons?
- What are the effects of assignment of prognosis on eventual outcomes?
- How is prognosis currently being understood and used by the field?
- What is the prognosis that a child will be better off with a child welfare intervention than without one?
- How do we identify factors that can be used in prognosis?
- Which caseworker characteristics influence prognosis?
- What are the child welfare system's current success rates with different forms of child maltreatment?
- Which treatment paths work for which conditions?

What are the implications of families' presenting problems for reasonable efforts, aggravated circumstances, concurrent planning and compelling reasons?

ASFA requirements and ASFA-related time frames raise a number of questions about family conditions and their implications. Effective implementation of ASFA policies requires better information about the prognosis implications for certain family conditions and an agency's ability to meet time requirements.

What are the effects of assignment of prognosis on eventual outcomes?

Expectancy theory suggests that prognosis may be self-fulfilling. Research in several fields has shown that when the professional expects good results, they are more likely to occur than when the professional expects poor outcomes. Do agencies respond differently when a poor prognosis is determined?

How is prognosis currently being understood and used by the field?

Though the term is not commonly used in child welfare, the practice occurs widely. Safety and risk assessment are forms of prognosis. Concurrent planning is applied to cases with a low prognosis for reunification. Less well known is how caseworkers use prognosis in assigning resources to cases and in selecting service options. When an agency seeks an exception at the end of 15 months in care, it is essentially arguing that prognosis is high if the time frame is extended. More information is needed about the prognostic elements of different child welfare decision-making.

What is the prognosis that a child will be better off with a child welfare intervention than without one?

While the child welfare profession may be prone to assume that intervention is better than no intervention, many children and families might challenge this position. Some postulate that child welfare agencies waste resources intervening where there is no hope for success. Alternatively, interventions may occur under the guise of “early intervention and prevention” that result in labeling effects and other iatrogenic effects of intervention.

How do we identify factors that can be used in prognosis?

Perhaps this is the most challenging question of all in this arena. What level of evidence should be necessary to say that a factor is a predictor of a successful or unsuccessful outcome? How should this evidence be assembled?

Which caseworker characteristics influence prognosis?

Since attributes of the helper have an effect on treatment outcomes, it is important to know what attributes of caseworkers may affect prognosis for different families.

What are the child welfare system’s current success rates with different forms of child maltreatment?

Available performance indicators suggest widespread outcomes among child welfare agencies. As the field moves toward overall benchmarks for safety, permanency and well-being, it is important to examine differences in success rates for the various forms of child maltreatment.

Which treatment paths work for which conditions?

There is much criticism of the “one size fits all” approach. Conversely, there appears to be limited research to guide individualized responses to various conditions contributing

to maltreatment in a family. It may be possible to individualize a course of action with a family based on the family's perception of need. Yet, what is known about the success of the selected treatment path?

Next Steps

Ultimately, the components of this agenda must become more developmental, with coordinated research to assure that later studies narrow the field of uncertainty and widen the field of confidence in the practice and administration of public child welfare services.

The National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators is currently working with the National Association of Deans and Directors to identify ways to enhance the development of research partnerships.

Chapter 3 Research Needs Identified by the Regional Research Forums

Participants in five regional forums identified the top research interests of public child welfare agencies in five areas: practice; program evaluation; policy; prognosis, and research synthesis (analysis of prior research).

Participants' suggestions of research priorities were guided by one hypothesis: "If we knew the answer to this, public child welfare agencies could take a significant step toward improving outcomes for children and families."

With this criterion in mind, participants first identified research priorities in each of the five areas. Then they ranked these identified items to produce a top ten list for each research area.

The diversity of responses was enormous. Preliminary analysis of these findings suggests significant differences between public child welfare administrators' rankings and those of university staff and faculty. Although this report does not examine those differences, this variance underscores the importance of having a diverse body develop a national research agenda.

Following are the lists of research priorities identified by participants in each forum. The research choices are numerically weighted with ten being the highest and one being the lowest priority among the top ten.

Regional Research Forum Results

Site: Chicago, Illinois

Research Area 1: Practice.

This research area focuses on intervention, specific practice techniques, variables associated with best or effective practice and basic research regarding factors influencing child maltreatment and the course of intervention.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	How does the organization of the service system contribute to success or failure?
2	What interaction effects between caseworker, family and services impact success?
3	What variables, if impacted, produce the greatest degree of outcome?
4	Is child maltreatment a unique social behavior or a symptom occurring as a consequence of other family conditions?
5	How do time mandates for concurrent planning match time frames for change?
6	What interventions are successful with multi-generational neglect?
7	What variables must be impacted (conditions within the client system) for change to occur?
8	What aspects of system design support good practice?
9	What interventions reduce recidivism?
10	What interventions are necessary when there is a co-occurrence of child maltreatment and domestic violence?

Research Area 2: Program Evaluation.

This research area focuses on evaluation of larger scale program effectiveness and factors influencing effectiveness of agency program efforts.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	Evaluation of cross systems collaboration – mental health, substance abuse and domestic violence courts.
2	Evaluation of the organization of child welfare programs and how they impact workers, clients and families.
3	Evaluation of comparative community-based CPS diversion strategies.
4	Comparative evaluations of reunification strategies.
5	Evaluation of child-focused, family-centered community-based service models (i.e., family conference, family preservation and wraparound models).
6	Evaluation of permanency options.
7	What accounts for variations in outcome within state systems?
8	Evaluation of training education. Does it improve outcome of workers, clients and families?
9	Comparative evaluation of distinctive approaches to transitioning youth to independent living.
10	Implementation research.

Research Area 3: Policy Research.

This area focuses on research designed to evaluate the impact of public policy, e.g., ASFA provisions, on population trends in the child welfare system.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	What incentives best drive policy for best outcomes? (Funding mechanisms)
2	What social, cultural and economic factors account for racial and ethnic disparities in the population rate at which children are reported to CPS and later removed from their families and placed into substitute care?
3	What impacts do the new permanency initiatives and concurrent planning have on achieving permanent homes for children?
4	What are the real outcomes for child welfare? What should they be? What does “federal outcomes” mean?
5	Studies of the organization of child welfare programs themselves to improve outcomes for children in the child welfare system.
6	Studies of the impact of selective diversion (i.e., screening practices and inclusion strategies) on child welfare caseload dynamics.
7	Do the foster care time frames for achieving permanency under ASFA provisions and current planning practices increase adoption disruption and dissolution?
8	Do MEPA and IEP reflect best interests for children?
9	What impact does provision of TANF funds to community initiatives have on child welfare?
10	What is the implication of the variance in the implementation of federal policy state by state?

Research Area 4: Research Synthesis.

This research area focuses on areas of existing research which need analysis and interpretation.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	What is known about the larger rate of penetration of families of color into the child welfare system?
2	The social ecology of child protection (i.e., how do neighborhoods contribute).
3	What is known about how to assess and impact currently identified variables (e.g., motivation to change, social isolation, expectations, etc.)?
4	Research on the organization of child welfare services/agencies.
5	Iatrogenic effects of interventions (e.g., placement).
6	What is the evidence of training's impact and transfer of training to field practice?
7	What is the evidence base to support strengths-based practice in child maltreatment intervention?
8	What's working for whom?
9	Effective aspects of performance monitoring systems.
10	Kinship care.

Research Area 5: Prognosis Research.

This area focuses on areas in which treatment prognosis needs to be better established.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	What factors predict successful outcomes?
2	How do we understand prognosis? How do we identify risk and protective factors which can be used in prognosis?
3	What is the impact of availability of services on prognosis?
4	How do we operationally define success?
5	What will prognosis do? How will it affect child welfare services? (Will it become a self-fulfilling prophecy?)
6	What factors/characteristics predict successful outcomes?
7	What may predict future outcomes?
8	How do we define intervention effectiveness and assessment of risk and protective factors? How do we step-up or step-down services and the direction of intervention?
9	Will prognosis affect which clients receive services?
10	What theoretical framework should be used for decision making around service provision?

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Regional Research Forum Results

Site: Portland, Oregon

Research Area 1: Practice.

This research area focuses on intervention, specific practice techniques, variables associated with best or effective practice and basic research regarding factors influencing child maltreatment and the course of intervention.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	What factors influence the successful adoption of different practices by experienced workers, supervisors and managers?
2	What contributes to the disparate paths in child welfare for different races?
3	What factors influence supervisors' impact on practice for successful client outcomes?
4	What factors contribute to success in employing concurrent or multiple treatment interventions?
5	What difference would a comprehensive ecological assessment upfront have on long-term child and family outcomes?
6	What is the impact of multiple caseworkers and multiple case transfers on case outcomes?
7	What factors influence successful outcomes of adoptions? What process results in the most effective consideration of these factors by the agency and prospective family in decision making?
8	What individual and ecological factors influence client engagement? How do these factors influence engagement?
9	Does the intervention bear any relationship to the assessment?

Research Area 2: Program Evaluation.

This research area focuses on evaluation of larger scale program effectiveness and factors influencing effectiveness of agency program efforts.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	What are the elements/feedback mechanisms of program evaluation that lead to successful client outcomes?
2	How to design a data collection system that informs training and program evaluation (e.g., what data systems are needed).
3	What is the relationship between drug and alcohol, mental health and domestic treatment and child welfare outcomes?
4	How to develop a continuum of evaluations from the single case to the program level.
5	What is the role of informal supports and extended family in successful outcomes for children?
6	Is there some way to generalize from exceptional casework to effect better casework program design?
7	What are the intermediate indicators of successful outcomes?
8	What are the characteristics of families most responsive to individuals or packages of services?
9	What can event history analysis provide to the evaluation of systems success?
10	How do we measure community capacity to support the child welfare system?

Research Area 3: Policy Research.

This area focuses on research designed to evaluate the impact of public policy, e.g., ASFA provisions, on population trends in the child welfare system.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	Why do kids end up in the system (randomness)?
2	What are the child well-being outcomes for various permanency decisions?
3	Does any of the research we are doing make a difference?
4	Would our resources be better spent with a broader child welfare mission (impact of blended funding)?
5	What is the relationship between mandatory substance abuse treatment and CPS investigation versus voluntary treatment?
6	How legitimate is it to intervene early – systematically for prevention?
7	Is child well-being an appropriate outcome for under-resourced systems?
8	What are the different value sets that states apply regarding kinship and which have better results/outcome?
9	What is the relationship of the ASFA direction and the preference for kin placement (practical support)?
10	How do we determine what children want/need?

Research Area 4: Research Synthesis.

This area focuses on areas of existing research which need analysis and interpretation.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	What do we know about how to measure change in the level and quality of parenting?
2	What does the intervention research on dual diagnosis, domestic violence and substance abuse tell us about effective approaches and strategies for child welfare families?
3	What are the key research indicators, variables or measures across mental health, child welfare, juvenile justice, and education and how are they determined?
4	What do we know about the effectiveness of multidisciplinary approaches to substance abuse treatment in child welfare?
5	What do we know about the effects of neglect on child development, especially brain development?
6	What can we learn from Pathways research in other fields that is applicable to child welfare?
7	What do we know about (comparative help taking and help giving) behaviors and the match between them?
8	What can be learned from the research on child welfare practice from other countries?
9	What do we know about the impact of parental mental illness on children in the welfare system?

Research Area 5: Prognosis Research.

This research area focuses on areas in which treatment prognosis needs to be better established.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	How is a prognosis influenced by caseworker background (education, culture, years of training, supervision)?
2	What are the indicators/predictors for successful reunification?
3	What are the factors relevant to accurate prognosis?
4	To what degree do training and supervision improve the accuracy of casework team prognosis?
5	Does consultation improve prognosis?
6	To what degree does a comprehensive assessment inform the prognosis?
7	How do we assure that prognosis is not biased by factors such as race, economics, education, etc.?
8	How does the prognosis influence the intervention?
9	How does resource availability influence prognosis?
10	Are there effective risk assessment tools that can be used in the development of prognosis (length, assessment of strengths, family engagement, knowledge of experienced workers)?

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Regional Research Forum Results

Site: Atlanta, Georgia

Research Area 1: Practice.

This research area focuses on intervention, specific practice techniques, variables associated with best or effective practice and basic research regarding factors influencing child maltreatment and the course of intervention.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	How do attributes of the caseworker influence outcome?
2	What specific skills are required to achieve outcomes?
3	How do we test the validity and reliability of risk assessment instruments?
4	How do we improve retention of staff?
5	What happens to cases that are called in and screened out (that are unsubstantiated)?
6	What aspects of community involvement truly lead to prevention?
7	What are the essential components of prevention?
8	What are the essential components of an effective intervention?
9	What does the caseworker have to do to achieve safety, permanency and well-being?
10	What is the effectiveness of “family signed safety plans”?

Research Area 2: Program Evaluation.

This research area focuses on evaluation of larger scale program effectiveness and factors influencing effectiveness of agency program efforts.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	How effective are wraparound mental health services for children in out-of-home care?
2	What are comparative outcomes and the strongest predictors of success for out-of-home intensive services?
3	What are comparative outcomes and the strongest predictors of success for in-home wraparound services?
4	What are comparative outcomes and the strongest predictors of success for court programs?
5	What is the relationship between agency structures and program effectiveness?
6	What kind of parent training programs are most effective in reducing the risk to children – what programs for what populations and for which problems?
7	What are the key indicators for gauging the effectiveness of community-based programs?
8	What are the unintended consequences of kinship care when states determine that kinship care is the selected type of placement?
9	What are the predictors of recidivism for repeat reports of same child/family (i.e., risk assessment, law enforcement, agency response)?
10	How do new laws on infant abandonment impact child safety, permanency and well-being?

Research Area 3: Policy Research.

This research area focuses on research designed to evaluate the impact of public policy, e.g., ASFA provisions, on population trends in the child welfare system.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	How are the courts implementing ASFA in terms of compelling reasons?
2	How does ASFA impact child well-being, specifically recurrence of maltreatment, disruption and achieving permanency?
3	What is the impact of the allocation resources to high-end services versus prevention?
4	How will ASFA impact which children are removed?
5	What is the relationship between research, policy and practice?
6	What are the safety implications of dual track or parallel process (investigations versus service assessment) in CPS?
7	How is technology (SACWIS) driving practice?
8	To what extent does availability of resources impact decision-making?
9	What is the relationship between permanence and well-being?
10	What factors influence use of research by practice?

Research Area 4: Research Synthesis.

This area focuses on areas of existing research which need analysis and interpretation.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	What is known of educational/experience requirements in states or districts in relation to child outcomes?
2	What are the causes of worker turnover?
3	How do we help organizations develop, grow and change?
4	What is known about mental health services and guidelines for these services for children in out-of-home care?
5	What is known about individual and family risk and safety factors integrated with ecological and environmental factors?
6	What is known about how family and child outcomes areas are affected by shifts in policy, particularly high-profile cases?
7	What are the key indicators of successful practices and their relationship to outcomes?
8	What do we know about recidivism factors or characteristics for repeated maltreatment, subsequent reports and re-entry into foster care?
9	What do we know of welfare reform and what should we expect in terms of impact on child welfare?
10	What is known about comparative data on models within residential care – their efficacy and outcomes?

Research Area 5: Prognosis Research.

This research area focuses on areas in which treatment prognosis needs to be better established.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	What are the skills that workers need to determine prognosis?
2	Upon which variables should prognosis be based?
3	How does service availability affect prognosis?
4	How is prognosis different for different types of services?
5	What is the reliability and validity of prognosis decisions?
6	How do we identify cases where change is highly unlikely and do it quickly?
7	How does time influence prognosis?
8	Are some forms of maltreatment more amenable to change?
9	How do systemic variables (e.g., caseload, training) influence prognosis?
10	What are the variables that contribute to poor prognosis?

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Regional Research Forum Results

Site: Houston, Texas

Research Area 1: Practice.

This research area focuses on intervention, specific practice techniques, variables associated with best or effective practice and basic research regarding factors influencing child maltreatment and the course of intervention.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	How do we identify imminent danger as opposed to immediate danger?
2	How do family characteristics imply different interventions?
3	How do external variables influence agency practice?
4	How does the timing of intervention impact eventual outcomes?
5	What is the effectiveness of wraparound services?
6	How long does it take to improve negative family conditions?
7	What are the unique features of the CPS worker and family relationship? How do they impact outcomes?
8	How does the court impact CPS interventions?
9	What is the impact of various service delivery systems on outcomes?
10	How do we understand and improve decision-making?

Research Area 2: Program Evaluation.

This research area focuses on evaluation of larger scale program effectiveness and factors influencing effectiveness of agency program efforts.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	What are the components of a successful outcome/program?
2	How does making families/communities partners in the assessment/service delivery affect child welfare outcomes?
3	What are the attributes of an effective child welfare system?
4	How can the critical elements of successful practice be imported into public child welfare systems?
5	How does the child welfare work so that people (funders, politicians) understand it?
6	What are the desirable outcomes of our programs?
7	What do families say that we do that helps make them successful/unsuccessful?
8	How do we know what programs we should provide?
9	What is our target population? Who should/can we serve?
10	What is the effect of intensive, time-limited programs (i.e., Home Builders revisited)? Do children served by these programs stay out of foster care on a long-term basis?

Research Area 3: Policy Research.

This area focuses on research designed to evaluate the impact of public policy, e.g., ASFA provisions, on population trends in the child welfare system.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	How are the courts implementing ASFA in terms of compelling reasons?
2	How are the courts implementing ASFA in terms of differences in court practices and decisions?
3	How will ASFA impact which families come into the system?
4	How will ASFA impact which children are removed?
5	What is the interface between safety and poverty?
6	What are the permanency outcome differences for children in poor families?
7	What are the characteristics of successful adoptive/foster care families?
8	What is the relationship between research, policy and practice?
9	Have automated systems brought expected results?
10	What factors influence use of research by practice?

Research Area 4: Research Synthesis.

This area focuses on areas of existing research which need analysis and interpretation.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	What is known about staff qualification and program outcomes?
2	What is known about outcomes (e.g., present, preferred, explanation of variance)? What is it telling us?
3	What is known about recidivism characteristics?
4	What types of data analysis presentations are most useful for administrators making decisions?
5	What should be the taxonomy of child maltreatment?
6	What do we know about the interaction of poverty and maltreatment, resources, social status and economics?
7	What is known about the relative efficacy of strengths-based practice in child maltreatment intervention?
8	What are the models of child maltreatment intervention?
9	What do we know about actual CPS strategy?
10	What is known about prevention in general and how does it apply to the child welfare system?

Research Area 5: Prognosis Research.

This research area focuses on areas in which treatment prognosis needs to be better established.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	What is the level of staff competence required for making prognosis decisions?
2	How can worker bias and the effects of self-fulfilling prophecy be controlled?
3	How is the adequacy of information to inform the prognosis decision determined?
4	Common definitions of prognosis to be studied. How is the concept applied (across the process)?
5	What are the implications of a legal intervention (court order plan) in terms of prognosis? What are other ways/forms for creating case plans?
6	What influence does front-end CPS activity have on prognosis?
7	How to differentiate criteria for prognosis?
8	What is the comparison of long-term outcomes for children returned home based on well-being versus safety?
9	What kinds of intervention designs contribute to success?
10	What is the basis for prognosis?

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Regional Research Forum Results

Site: Burlington, Vermont

Research Area 1: Practice.

This research area focuses on intervention, specific practice techniques, variables associated with best or effective practice and basic research regarding factors influencing child maltreatment and the course of intervention.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	What levels of intervention are most effective with abused and neglected children and families? How can we include extended family, community and the faith community?
2	What risk and protective variables should be targeted (e.g., cognitive, behavioral, environmental, cultural) in screening and assessment?
3	What prevention/early intervention programs reduce recidivism for families?
4	How do we ensure that our practice helps children and families develop lifetime supports?
5	How do we address the variety of ethnic communities in assessment and treatment?
6	How do models of service delivery impact effectiveness (e.g., one worker versus multiple workers)?
7	How many cases should a worker have? What activities are required to reunify a family and what frequency?
8	What situations put workers at the most risk? How can worker safety be enhanced?
9	How can organizations better support practice?
10	What is the correlation between agency structure and casework outcomes?

Research Area 2: Program Evaluation.

This research area focuses on evaluation of larger scale program effectiveness and factors influencing effectiveness of agency program efforts.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	What strategies are most successful in engaging families?
2	How should the criteria for success be defined?
3	How does timing of the legal process interact with timing of the casework process and impact success?
4	What are the relative outcomes of the more non-adversarial models of child protection?
5	How does timing of service impact family receptivity to services?
6	What determines a family's ability to use services?
7	How can federal outcome measures be used as success indicators in program evaluation?
8	How do characteristics of the organizational system impact outcomes?
9	How do service design characteristics interact with different cultural patterns?
10	What conditions of services allow families to feel safe in participating in case planning?

Research Area 3: Policy Research.

This area focuses on research designed to evaluate the impact of public policy, e.g., ASFA provisions, on population trends in the child welfare system.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	What is the rate of accuracy for substantiation?
2	What policies are most effective in determining and improving permanency, etc.?
3	What components of ASFA have been most effective in achieving outcomes for children and families?
4	Should there be a different level of intervention and can you identify early on families in terms of high risk and in terms of successful outcomes?
5	What genuinely constitutes permanency? What happens to children who age out and reunite with their biological families? What is the implication for permanency planning? What is the implication for policy?
6	What percentage of kids in custody are incarcerated for 2+ years?
7	What differentiates the predictors for achieving permanency outcomes?
8	What do we mean by successful outcomes?
9	Compare outcomes per MEPA for same race/ethnicity; different race/ethnicity and their impact on placement.
10	Should there be a different approach for families where the type of abuse and the child's circumstances pose a high risk for the child?
11	At what length of time is it reasonable to keep cases on the Central Registry?

Research Area 4: Research Synthesis.

This research area focuses on areas of existing research which need analysis and interpretation.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	How does existing research on attachment translate to practice?
2	How does the word get out about successful models, research, etc.?
3	What is known about the influence of supervision in effective practice?
4	What is the impact of multiple service provision and what is its impact on families?
5	What is safety and how do workers determine/assess safety?
6	How do administrators' beliefs, knowledge and management style impact policy, practice and workers?
7	How do we access and integrate multiple disciplines in child welfare?
8	Based on how trauma affects early brain development, how should this knowledge translate into treatment, intervention, etc.?
9	Is there well-established theory on child maltreatment, family functioning, etc.?
10	What skills do social workers need to do effective practice in child welfare (MSW, BSW)?

Research Area 5: Prognosis Research.

This research area focuses on areas in which treatment prognosis needs to be better established.

Priority Ranking	Research Question
1	What is the accuracy of various risk assessment systems?
2	What is the prognosis for different types of child maltreatment?
3	How does severity of abuse impact prognosis?
4	What factors might improve prognosis for specific sub-populations?
5	What is the prognosis for abuse when neglect has previously been substantiated?
6	How do you translate population probability into case specific risk assessment?
7	What is the present prognosis for reunification in sexual abuse cases?
8	What is the basis of judicial decision-making about prognosis?
9	What is the prognosis that a sexually abused child will become a sex offender if no intervention occurs?
10	What is the effectiveness of treatment based on different prognoses given different contextual factors in maltreatment?

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