Investing in Families Prevents Child Welfare Involvement[1]

Center *for the* Study *of* Social Policy
Ideas into Action

The path forward is clear: strengthening household financial security can reduce child abuse and neglect by improving the opportunity for parents to meet their children's basic needs, provide developmentally appropriate child care, and reduce parental stress and depression, both risk factors for child abuse and neglect.[2] Overall, research has shown that children in households with low socioeconomic status experience "neglect" at about seven times the rate of other children and that risk factors for child abuse and neglect include low parental income, parenting stress, community violence, and concentrated neighborhood disadvantage (e.g., high poverty and residential instability, high unemployment rates).[3]

Systemic racism compounds these challenges associated with poverty for families of color, driving them to the attention of child welfare at disproportionate rates.[4] In some situations, poverty is equated with neglect when families living in poverty are unable to meet their basic needs[5] and other times, poverty can be a compounding factor and contribute to circumstances that lead to neglect as families living in poverty have a significantly higher likelihood of experiencing crises. Research has also shown that stress from factors associated with poverty, and the stress of not being able to provide day-to-day necessities, can increase the risk of parenting difficulties and can lead to parents feeling anxious, depressed, fearful, and overwhelmed.[6]

To truly take an anti-racist approach to prevention, child welfare and safety net policies must address the organizational structures and injustices contributing to and perpetuating systemic racism and to meet the underlying economic and concrete needs of children and families. The policies highlighted below can make a significant impact for children and families when implemented as part of a multi-pronged approach to supporting the needs of children and families outside of child welfare.

Expand Tax Credits: Recent research examined the effect of Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) on foster care entries by comparing states with and without a state-level EITC. After controlling for poverty rates, unemployment, education, and race/ethnicity, researchers found that state-level EITC is associated with an 11 percent decrease in foster care entry rates.[7] Research on the expanded Child Tax Credit of 2021 found that it reduced parental stress while improving food and financial security, especially for Black, Latinx, and other families of color.[8] The impacts on child poverty were dramatic, as it reduced monthly child poverty by an estimated 30 percent overall, lifting 163,000 Asian children, 737,000 Black children, 1.4 million Latino children, and 1.4 million White children above the federal poverty line.[9]

Expand Medicaid Coverage: A recent study of Medicaid expansion found that in states that expanded Medicaid, there was a decrease in overall cases of neglect (422 per 100,000 children) for young children. This study also found that between 2013 and 2016, rates of neglect decreased in the 31 states that expanded Medicaid on or after January 1, 2014, and in the remaining 19 states that did not expand Medicaid, child neglect rates increased.[10]

Increase the Minimum Wage to a Livable Wage: The effect of minimum wage increases on child maltreatment has been studied by analyzing hotline reports between 2004 and 2013 using data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System. For every dollar increase in the minimum wage, there was a corresponding 9.6 percent reduction in neglect reports. These reductions were seen primarily for young children under age 12.[11]

Expand Access to Food Security Support Programs: Access to healthy food is critical to a family's ability to thrive and reduces parental stress. A recent study found that states with expanded eligibility and family-supportive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) policies, including transitional benefits for families who leave the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, had fewer children involved with child welfare.[12] Currently, Black and Hispanic households are more than twice as likely compared to White households to experience food insecurity and data gathered during the COVID-19 pandemic found that Black and Latinx families suffered disproportionately during this time,[13] highlighting the importance of food security an essential anti-racist, family strengthening strategy.

Increase Strategies to Meet Families' Concrete Needs through Financial Supports: Research shows that financial supports are critical to reducing maltreatment.[14] Income supports to parents who were members of the Eastern Cherokee tribe were found to lead to positive outcomes for children including greater educational attainment, beneficial changes in children's emotional and behavioral health, and fewer behavioral problems such as conduct disorders.[15] Another study found the provision of concrete supports through differential response in Minnesota was associated with reduction in hotline reports and foster care entry.[16]

Increase Access to Home Visiting: Research on the impact of home visiting programs has found that 81 percent of home visiting programs yielded positive improvements in maternal and child health with one program showing a 48 percent reduction in child abuse and neglect.[17] Research regarding one home visiting program that also provided concrete supports to families who were engaged in the program highlights the impact of concrete supports on not only increased engagement and retention in home visiting but also reduced child welfare involvement.[18]

Increase Access to Healthy Housing: When families have stable housing, it reduces parental stress and supports an environment where family members can focus on meeting their other needs–including those that when left unmet, can be associated with child abuse and neglect. Research has shown that a supportive housing program in Connecticut reduced foster care entry and increased reunifications with families who were newly involved with child welfare and had high service needs including housing instability.[19] Specifically, the study found that the provision of supportive housing and/or case management services resulted in a lower proportion of children who were removed from home (9% vs. 40%) and a greater proportion who were reunified (30% vs. 9%) compared to families who did not have access to either.[20]

Eliminate Eligibility Restrictions for Immigrant Families: Research shows that eliminating eligibility restrictions for nonqualified parents and children and for all noncitizen parents and children in the SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income, and other means-tested federal programs would lead to an important reduction in poverty for children in immigrant families.[21]

Implement Meaningful Paid Leave Policy: Research has shown that access to paid leave reduces maternal depression, has a positive impact on child health, and can reduce risk factors for child abuse.[22] Further, some researchers have concluded that "unpaid maternity leave may actually increase disparities because it only benefits those mothers who can afford to take it".[23] Implementing a comprehensive paid leave program that covers all families when they need it (including those who are working part time, contingent, self-employed, and those with limited work history), provides more support for workers who need it the most, recognizes families as they define themselves, and protects workers against discrimination and retaliation is critical in reducing poverty and associated risk factors for children and families of color.[24]

End Notes:

1. For more information on these strategies are part of an anti-racist approach to supporting families in their homes and communities, please see: Citrin, A., Martin, M. & Anderson, C. (forthcoming). Investing in Families through Economic Supports: An Anti-Racist Approach to Supporting Families and Reducing Child Welfare Involvement. Child Welfare Journal Special Issue focus on anti-racism in child welfare. CWLA Press. This excerpt is not for distribution.
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