

Creating systems synergy across the social welfare policy landscape

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TAKEAWAYS

While child abuse rates have declined significantly in recent decades, rates of child neglect have remained steady and high.

Failing to acknowledge financial hardship as a causal factor in child neglect allows federal policy to omit the alleviation of financial hardship as a strategic solution to child neglect.

Approaches encompassing all families experiencing significant financial hardship are more likely to reduce neglect than targeted approaches focusing only on the families deemed “high risk” for maltreatment or only on those who have already experienced maltreatment.

Systems synergy, a flexible model of cooperation or coordination of agencies and services, places safe and consistent care of children at the center of all human services agencies and programs, focuses agency efforts on supporting families in providing safe and consistent care for their children, and reduces opportunities for policies to have unintended and negative consequences.



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Caregivers' ability to provide safe and consistent care of children is a cornerstone of successful parenting. Fortunately, the past three decades have seen large declines in child physical and sexual abuse rates in the United States. In contrast, high rates of child neglect, which comprise 75% of child maltreatment reports, have remained steady.¹ Scholars, practitioners, and policymakers face a conundrum: Why have child neglect rates remained seemingly intractable while abuse rates have solidly declined?

It's important to note that child neglect and child abuse are different, though they sometimes occur to the same children. As an act of omission, child neglect involves a failure to act, resulting in real or imminent harm. In contrast, child abuse is an act of commission—a chosen action—resulting in real or imminent harm to a child.

As delineated in the following pages, we propose that the immobility of neglect rates has two root causes: (1) a collective failure to acknowledge financial hardship as a causal factor in the perpetration of child neglect and (2) the design of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, the original federal child maltreatment policy, to purposefully omit the alleviation of financial hardship as a solution to child neglect.

Based on this premise, we offer a path forward, a model for policy change we call systems synergy.² The basic premise is that by providing families with sufficient resources, parents will be more able and likely to provide safe and consistent care; children will benefit from greater family stability, financial and otherwise; and the number of families needing the response-focused services of Child Protective Services (CPS) will decrease. Such a decrease will in turn alleviate high levels of service demand on CPS and allow the agency to deploy limited resources more effectively.

The United States has numerous poverty alleviation programs and policies, but people facing economic hardship have rarely been able to fully benefit from these policies simultaneously. The siloed structure of county, state, and federal programs—operating independently rather than cooperatively—has led to many missed opportunities by policymakers to improve baseline conditions for child safety among families facing economic hardship.

Safe and consistent care must be the central responsibility of every family-oriented social service program in the United States. In the current framework, this responsibility falls solely to CPS, but CPS is a response agency, not a prevention agency. Alleviating financial hardship is crucial to preventing most forms of neglect yet this type of large-scale prevention will forever remain outside of CPS's scope. Financial hardship alleviation is the goal of numerous antipoverty programs, however. Successful systems synergy would better serve families through coordinated and complementary services while diverting many families from CPS involvement altogether. In that case, if a family does come before CPS, the systems synergy model would ensure that essential family services were already in place, making the job of CPS potentially more efficient in its response-oriented functions.

Systems synergy is not only achievable but also the most pragmatic response available. Building on social systems currently in place will enhance program efficiencies and, most importantly, increase the safe and consistent care of children nationwide.

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Child abuse versus child neglect

Though much of the medical and sociological child maltreatment literature conflates child abuse and child neglect, they are different.³ One strain of research argues that both child abuse and child neglect are the result of poor parenting, which can be addressed by interventions designed to improve parenting skills.⁴ A second line of research contends that both are caused by psychopathology and can be addressed through mental health services.⁵ Other theories rely on social stress explanations,⁶ which examine interactions between individuals and their social contexts,⁷ while more nuanced models strive to account for the multiple, overlapping, and interactive spheres in which families live.⁸ Although some models point to the need for interventions external to the family, child welfare interventions typically focus on family behaviors rather than family circumstances.

Poverty, or low socioeconomic status, is a significant risk factor for child neglect.⁹ A growing body of literature has sought to identify causal relationships between poverty and child neglect. Researchers have used innovative methods—leveraging plausible variations in neighborhood characteristics, macro-policy, and business cycles, for example—to examine causal links between family poverty and child neglect.

If the causes of neglect and abuse differ, then effective treatment or prevention strategies for neglect may also be fundamentally different than those for abuse. Neglect is often unintentional and encompasses a range of unmet basic needs for a child's safe and consistent care. This type of maltreatment contrasts with physical and sexual abuse, which are entirely a result of parental or caretaker behaviors that (usually) occur intermittently. The inverse of abuse is to not engage in abusive acts, often replacing this behavior with more positive behavior and/or removal of the perpetrator from the home. In cases of abuse, it is appropriate to provide the family with psychosocial interventions. However, the inverse of neglect is more complex; it is to provide safe and consistent care for a child's basic needs all of the time.

One reason that child neglect rates have remained steady and high may be because neglect prevention efforts need to fundamentally differ from those that have been successful in reducing rates of abuse. If neglect stems primarily from poverty rather than parenting behaviors, then prevention efforts focused on parenting modifications alone may be useful, but such efforts will likely be insufficient.¹⁰

Numerous parenting or parent behavioral training programs are offered to, and sometimes mandated for, families at risk of maltreatment. Evidence that parent behavioral training programs reduce neglect is slim, however. An exception is SafeCare, which undertakes parent education in participants' homes and has a particular focus on home safety, and which has shown significant reductions in recurrent neglect.¹¹ Promoting safe and consistent care requires a complex focus on family life circumstances, home and community contexts, and parental capacity for needed change.

While poverty and neglect do not share a deterministic relationship, empirical evidence points to a probabilistic causal relationship— as financial hardship increases, the likelihood of neglectful circumstances also increases.¹² As such, preventing neglect involves preventing or reducing family financial hardship. Historically, economic hardship has been one of the few preventative factors not directly addressed in the realm of child welfare policy.

Underlying causes of neglect and the potential of systems synergy

The misdiagnosis of the underlying drivers of neglect has led to inappropriate and ineffective treatment strategies—even as they are well intentioned. The sole assignment of neglect cases to CPS perpetuates the misidentification and mistreatment of underlying problems. While a complete understanding of all potential causes and relevant mechanisms leading to neglect would be beneficial, children and families cannot—and should not have to—wait for such discoveries before policy solutions are offered.

Due to the stressors of financial hardship and other factors, neglect occurs far more frequently in resource-poor families and communities.¹³ At the individual level, research has found that poverty and low income are associated with increased risk for child neglect¹⁴ and child maltreatment overall.¹⁵ Similarly, extensive evidence has linked community-level indicators of poverty to increased risk for child maltreatment.¹⁶ This work indicates that social disorganization, resource availability, and concentrated poverty all contribute to child abuse and neglect. A growing body of research has also sought to leverage variations in policies—such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC),¹⁷ the minimum wage,¹⁸ and child support enforcement¹⁹—to examine the impact of economic hardship on child maltreatment.

Macrosystem policies have a role in facilitating and preventing maltreatment. Recent attention has tried to refocus maltreatment prevention efforts on this broader context.²⁰ Here we see compelling evidence that poverty is causally linked to child maltreatment. If we accept that poverty, at least in some way, is a causal factor in the perpetration of neglect, we can begin to reduce neglect (and its consequences) long before the exact mechanisms are understood. Housing policy, food policy, employment opportunities, and transportation all factor into the macrosystem. A more supportive macro context—emerging through intentional public policy decisions and implementation—creates contexts for communities, families, and individuals to flourish by providing the foundations for safe and consistent care of children.

Moving from neglect to safe and consistent care

Providing safe and consistent care depends a lot on caretaker contexts and available resources. Contexts of care vary widely and are largely shaped by the financial, social, and structural resources available to a family. Proactively facilitating access to economic supports would divert many families from any CPS contact. For families that did become involved in CPS, more accessible and coordinated services outside of CPS would allow the agency to focus on specific issues of child safety, and more economic stability would improve the effectiveness of individual interventions.

Traditional primary maltreatment prevention has focused on expanding the accessibility of targeted programs more closely related to parenting, including promoting child health and development.²¹ But expanding program access will only be effective if (1) those programs also address the root factors of the neglect, and (2) programs are able to identify and engage with the “right” families. With respect to the first, expansion of traditional primary prevention has been an effective strategy for abuse reduction but, because the causes (and thus interventions) for neglect are different than those of abuse, there are not currently

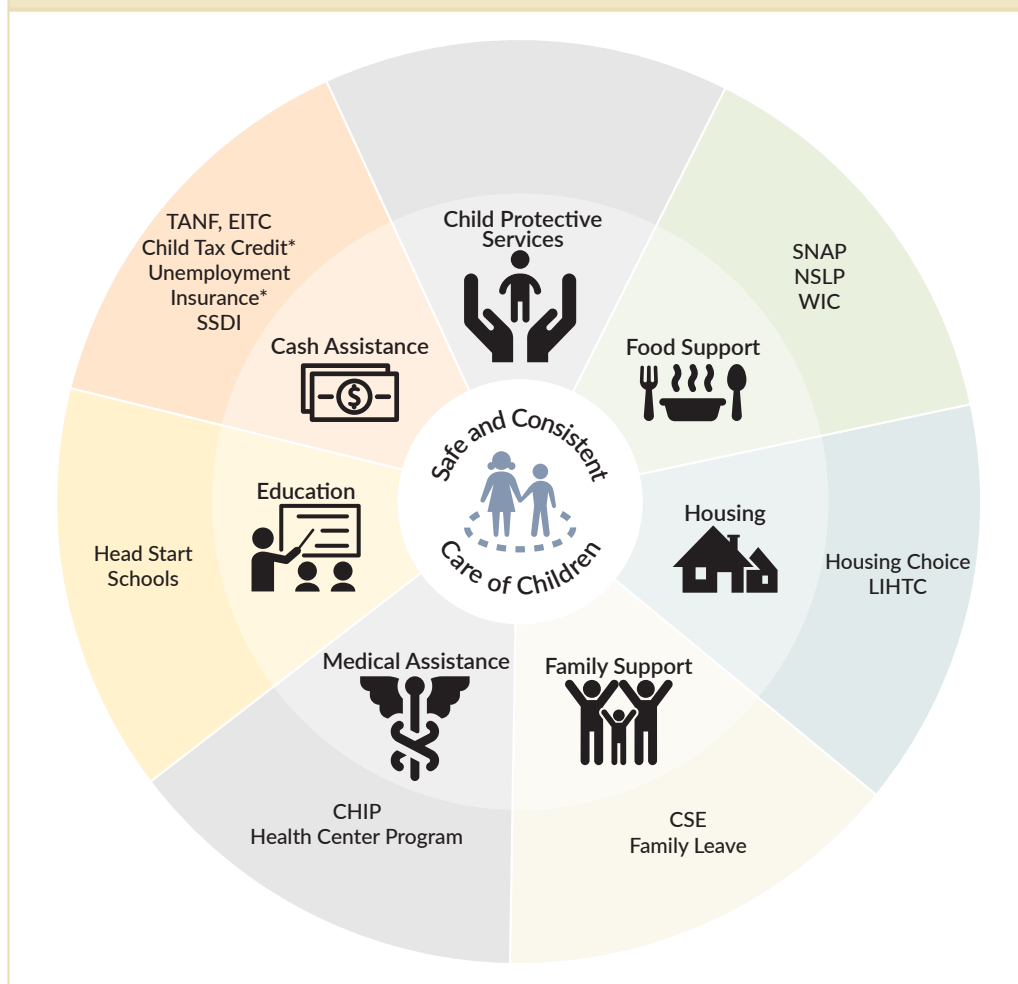
effective interventions for primary prevention of neglect to simply expand upon; they need to be created.²²

Identifying and engaging with at-risk families is crucial. The state of current research and the complex nature of providing safe and consistent care make it difficult, however, to accurately identify which families are most at risk for child neglect. Efforts to correctly identify only high-risk families miss many families who will be reported for maltreatment.²³ These challenges suggest that broad (or more universal) approaches encompassing all families experiencing significant financial hardship is more likely to reduce neglect than targeted approaches focusing only on the families deemed highest risk. Adopting broader approaches will require concerted and coordinated efforts across social service systems.

Systems synergy: How a new approach to policies could support systems collaboration

The systems synergy model is a robust and integrated policy framework aimed at supporting families and protecting children. It is a child-centered approach like that illustrated in Figure 1. Systems synergy centers family and child needs and adds promoting safe and consistent care as an additional outcome for all family-focused programs are

Figure 1: Seeking to achieve safe and consistent care of children.



Source: Feely, M., Raissian, K.M., Schneider, W., & Bullinger, L.R. (2020). The social welfare policy landscape and child protective services: Opportunities for and barriers to creating systems synergy. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 692(1), 140–161.

responsible for. Creating a common goal improves the likelihood that the full range of children's needs will be addressed by the social service system. Systems synergy also requires family services agencies to anticipate the impacts of their service provision, to understand its consequences—both intended and unintended—and remain accountable for their core mission outcomes alongside the safe and consistent care of children.

There are two key components of this approach. The first is a shift in policy focus and development where children's holistic needs are considered as the primary concerns of policies. A related, but slightly different, issue is that the unintended consequences for children would become a central concern. The end result is that if policies—and the agencies and programs implementing them—are held accountable for unintended consequences for children, agencies and programs will have an incentive to increase families' access to and uptake of other social programs. This would increase the breadth of family resources and stability, allowing more children to experience safe and consistent care, thus reducing neglect.

If we accept that poverty is a causal factor in the perpetration of neglect, we can begin to reduce neglect (and its consequences) long before the exact mechanisms are understood. Identifying and engaging with at-risk families is crucial.

Achieving systems synergy: How do we get there?

Make maltreatment visible in policy development and analysis

Making maltreatment—both abuse and neglect—rates and costs more visible in policy development is vital. Visibility will drive and reward action and innovation in related areas. All social service agencies and programs can contribute to promoting safe and consistent care. Incorporating accountability for safe and consistent care would increase the sense of shared responsibility across programs and make it easier to assess the impact of more distal policies on maltreatment. Standard assessments of policy impacts should center safe and consistent care while adverse impacts on children should be considered a program deficit. Conversely, programs that reduce maltreatment should be credited for doing so. For example, many proposed federal or state policies are assessed for their potential impacts on environmental systems or employment rates. Protecting children from abuse and neglect should be a required outcome to be proactively assessed as well.

Perhaps the reason that positive and negative externalities of policies on children have not been accounted for is that the outcomes are not immediate and are difficult to measure. While true, this challenge has been successfully addressed in other contexts. The environmental sustainability movement provides an example. By emphasizing the effect that individuals' decisions have on climate change, this movement has effectively brought a distal outcome to the forefront for many. However, the ultimate goal of the environmental movement is—as it should be for child welfare advocates—to create policy that affects not only individuals but systems writ large. Just as macro-systems produce the lion's share of pollution, systems-level actors also have a hand in promoting—and potentially preventing—child maltreatment. Systems synergy among social service providers can be helpful at the local scale, but individual and incremental improvements to programs are simply not enough to confront the larger issues of macro-scale change needed.

Incentives for innovation and accountability

Systems synergy may not be an easy task across all policy domains, of course. One way to facilitate the process is to provide incentives for adopting this model. Incentives awarding federal funds to states that develop successful cross-system efforts to promote safe and consistent care would encourage systemic innovation. States could be laboratories potentially producing different models for effective collaboration, with assessment built into the models. Tested and effective strategies could then be incentivized for later-adopting states.

President Obama’s “Race to the Top” program provided a roadmap for such a process. Race to the Top allocated nearly \$4 billion in funding to states to spur innovation in education policy. In particular, it focused on developing data systems and rigorous interventions. A race to the top in child neglect prevention could encourage states to accelerate and expand the integration of relevant data systems to facilitate planning, practice, and evaluation across agencies; develop innovations for merging siloed social welfare policies and practices; and prioritize safe and consistent care as a primary outcome across government agencies.

Limitations

Our proposal does not come without necessary trade-offs and possible drawbacks. The financial costs of creating systems synergy are not known. Processes enacting systems synergy will necessarily involve training not only CPS workers, but also a host of administrators and providers across social welfare agencies. To the extent that resources would get diverted from CPS to adopt this model, there may be less funding for these families in crisis. Furthermore, there could be substantial trade-offs, since, at least at the state level, most budgets need to be balanced. Similarly, it may be that other social welfare programs are insufficiently funded, have lower benefit levels than needed, or are not universally available. In this case, it may be that even systems synergy cannot provide the resources necessary for families to provide safe and consistent care. However, it may also be that the process increases uptake of these programs and that, when combined, they have complementary effects that magnify their power to promote safe and consistent care. Although there are potential obstacles, the evidence consistently shows that financial support is positive for families; therefore, we should invoke the precautionary approach of public health interventions and take action, even if the specific outcomes are uncertain.

The scope of the solutions proposed here are, indeed, untested. One study provides a glimpse into this idea: Project GAIN (Getting Access to Income Now) provided families with closed CPS investigation cases support in obtaining access to programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), housing, and transportation benefits.²⁴ See Research to Watch on page 15. However, GAIN did not significantly reduce subsequent reports of child maltreatment. One potential explanation for GAIN’s lack of success is that the support remained below the thresholds of adequate amount and duration. In other words, the program offered dimes when families needed dollars. Additionally, this intervention differs from our recommendations insofar as it does not link child welfare and social welfare agencies to a common goal or better integrate siloed systems—rather, families were referred to economic support workers after already having been reported to CPS. We propose that synergy in this manner will prioritize prevention of child neglect and provide added benefits.

In the context of families and economic stability, similar to Project GAIN, there may be a threshold effect. In other words, there is a minimum level of resources that will prevent the family from tipping into crisis and allow them to adequately provide safe and consistent care. Services and programs that provide a small amount of relief—either in finances, time,

or stress—may not lead to incremental improvements but result in no measureable change. Even with systems synergy, these programs may be insufficient to get a family over the threshold of economic stability that allows them to provide safe and consistent care, which could limit the efficacy of this model. Under current policies for safety net programs the economic limitations imposed by benefit cliffs, (i.e., the abrupt drop in level of support from the program at a specific income) may be an additional barrier to economic stability.

CPS provides services to families that are in dire situations with a focus on child safety. However, effective universal prevention of child abuse or neglect cannot only be the responsibility of CPS. Neglect rates have remained steady for decades; the future of our most vulnerable children depends on new directions in policy and practice. That direction moves away from siloed inefficiency and towards effective systems synergy. ■

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