Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Child Abuse & Neglect

Entryway into the child protection system: The impacts of child maltreatment reporting policies and reporting system structures

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to assess the impacts of maltreatment reporting policies and reporting system structures on four aspects of entry into the child protection system (the maltreatment referral rate, the percentage of referrals screened in for investigation, the screened-in report rate and the substantiated report rate). Using secondary data from several sources, eight multiple linear regression models were created and analyzed. Results from a sample of 44 states indicated significant effects for system structure but no effects for reporting policies. Specifically, states with decentralized reporting system structures were significantly more restrictive in access than other states. These results have implications for child welfare administrators and policymakers seeking to maximize access for maltreated children and their families.

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In 2011, child protection systems in the United States received 3.4 million referrals for suspected child maltreatment (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). As this reporting process is the primary means by which maltreated children and their families receive services, this entryway into the system is an important subject of study. To come to the attention of the child protection system, a child must be reported. This first step requires that an individual in the community submit a referral to the system. Once this referral is received, the system's employee must decide whether the referral meets the criteria to be accepted and investigated. This second step represents the screening process. After a referral has passed through the screening process, the case is then investigated. Following the investigation, the report is classified into a variety of categories, one of which represents substantiation. Thus, this entryway is characterized by four key measures: the maltreatment referral rate, the percentage of referrals that are accepted for investigation, the screened-in report rate and the substantiated maltreatment report rate. The research literature includes scant attention to the variables that influence these measures, leaving policymakers and child welfare administrators with little guidance in the selection of child maltreatment reporting policies and reporting system structures. This study addresses this gap through an examination of the impacts of policies and organizational structures on each of these steps.

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Background

Reporting system structure

One important element in the study of child maltreatment reporting is the structure of the system that receives these reports. Though the research literature includes no empirical study of the system structure's impact on the maltreatment referral rate, the percentage of referrals screened in for investigation, the screened-in report rate or the substantiated maltreatment report rate, debates regarding the merits of various structures are present in historical literature. The primary division in these debates is between centralization and decentralization. Centralized systems have one statewide entryway (i.e., one statewide hotline) that is staffed by one unit. Decentralized systems have multiple entryways (i.e., a separate hotline for each local unit). Each of these systems is believed to have its own advantages in terms of facilitating the receipt of reports. Centralization may increase the likelihood that a reporter will follow through with the submission of a case, since one statewide hotline provides a clear entryway that is easy to locate (Cohen & Sussman, 1975). On the other hand, decentralization may promote the likelihood of a report's submission, since reporters may be more familiar with the local office and may feel more comfortable discussing the case with local workers known to them (Cohen, 1975). Neither of these arguments has been empirically tested.

Research regarding reporting system structure in the United States has identified the presence of both centralized and decentralized systems and a shift over time in the structures selected for these systems. The first study of structure occurred immediately following the passage of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act. De Francis and Lucht (1974) identified 15 states with a centralized social service reporting system, 22 states with a decentralized social service reporting system, and 4 states with a hybrid social service system that received reports at the both the state and local levels. (Note that the remaining states required reports to be submitted only to law enforcement units.) Thirty years later, these systems had shifted toward a greater degree of centralization (Steen, 2011). This literature indicates that child welfare administrators are experimenting in the structural design of reporting systems with little research to guide their selections. In order to meet this need, the impact of these system structures should be assessed.

Child maltreatment reporting policies

One of the strategies designed to ensure that maltreated children come to the attention of the child protection system is the legislative mandate to report. While the federal government provides general guidelines for reporting policies, most of the details are left to the states. As a result, state policies vary in terms of the groups mandated to report, the penalties for failure to report, and the types of activities that must be reported (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2008, 2009a, 2009b). Research regarding the impacts of these policies has taken on two forms: survey research on the individual reporter level and secondary analysis of administrative data on the state level. Both types of research identify a relationship between policies and reporting, though the impacts vary based on the aspect of the policy being assessed.

Survey research with mandated reporters consistently points to the importance of reporting laws. Regardless of the nature of the sample, professionals repeatedly list the state mandate to report as one of the primary reasons for submitting cases of suspected maltreatment (Bryant & Milson, 2005; Hawkins & McCallum, 2001; Zellman, 1990). Further, when mandated professionals receive training on requirements found in the law, their references to this mandate substantially increase in survey responses (Hawkins & McCallum, 2001). A more rigorous analysis of this link identified a significant relationship between professionals' interpretations of the law and their intent to report (Ashton, 2009). Based on these results, the idea that child maltreatment reporting policies would impact reporting behaviors is a reasonable assumption. On the other hand, survey measures regarding reporting intent and reporting behaviors are vulnerable to social desirability bias, and thus, additional research regarding the actual report rate should be considered.

Studies of state-level data have identified the impacts of various policies on the maltreatment report rate and the substantiated report rate. The report rate was significantly related to the severity of the penalty for failure to report, with higher report rates being found in states with harsher penalties. In this same study, no significant effect was identified for the specificity of the definition of emotional abuse or the degree of certainty required for a report (i.e., suspicion versus certainty). Though these results are an important first step in considering the impact of policy, the dependent variable was limited to reports received from medical professionals and the analysis was limited to bivariate statistical techniques (Faulkner, 2009). Similar research regarding the substantiated maltreatment report rate identified a significant effect for the degree of evidence required in reports of emotional abuse, with lower emotional abuse rates being found in states that had more rigorous evidentiary requirements (Hamarman, Pope, & Czaja, 2002). To progress forward in this line of inquiry, research is needed with additional policy variables and more sophisticated methods of analysis.

Research questions

This study was designed to assess the impacts of child maltreatment reporting policies and reporting system structures on the child maltreatment referral rate, the percentage of referrals accepted for investigation, the screened-in report rate and the substantiated maltreatment report rate. The first set of research questions focused on the impact of the reporting system structure, specifically the use of a centralized structure, decentralized structure, or a combination of the two. The