



# Street-level policy aims of child welfare workers in England, Norway and the United States: An exploratory study



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## ABSTRACT

This study, which is based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with a total of 92 child welfare workers in California, England and Norway conducted between January 2008 and June 2010, analyzes how child welfare workers view the principles underlying their respective child welfare system. We address this question using Lipsky's (1980) understanding of street-level bureaucracy. While we know about the policy principles of governments, we know little about how street-level bureaucrats view these principles. We call workers' perceptions of policy principles 'street-level policy aims.' We found that Norwegian street-level policy aims are child-centered and child welfare-oriented. English street-level policy aims are safety-oriented and child-centered; and U.S.-American street-level policy aims are safety-oriented and family-centered, and that in the U.S., 'permanency' was understood as family preservation. We also found that workers in Norway perceived fewer organizational barriers in implementing policy aims. We discuss the implications of these findings on future research.

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## 1. Introduction

Through their assessments, decisions and interventions in the lives of children who are at risk of maltreatment, front line child welfare workers create child welfare policy 'on the ground.' This exploratory paper compares child welfare workers' views on the principles that underlie their work in England, Norway and California (USA). For the purpose of this article, we define workers' own views and perceptions of the principles laid out by governments as 'street-level policy aims,' building on the theoretical platform developed by Michael Lipsky, in his 1980 book on street-level bureaucracy. Lipsky's innovative study explained how street-level bureaucrats such as child welfare workers constitute public policy in action. He understood bureaucrats' interactions with service users in the context of the structural conditions in which they work (Brodkin, 2012): what drives front-line policy is not necessarily bureaucrats' attitudes and preferences, but policy aims and organizational conditions, including the availability of financial resources and the extent of managerial control of workers' discretion (Brodkin, 1997, 2012). Governments outline policy aims that may be clear or contradictory; they may be knowable, or not knowable; and workers may

(or may not) be able to implement them given organizational conditions (Brodkin, 2012).

In the area of child welfare, the principles underlying the systems are clearly laid out in legislation and policy documents; however, they can be quite vague and contradictory as illustrated by the (possibly conflicting) principles of best interest and family preservation. If policy aims are contradictory or cannot be known (if, for instance, there are so many new rules that workers simply cannot keep up with them), or if they cannot be implemented (because of a lack of financial backing), this creates dilemmas for workers that they need to resolve. Workers may exercise the discretion they enjoy as street-level bureaucrats to deal with these dilemmas, and their resulting actions and decisions may be contradictory to the original policy aims. For instance, in the context of child welfare in the United States, Smith and Donovan (2003) found that, as a result of resource limitations, practices of frontline foster care caseworkers conflicted with best practice guidelines in several ways, ultimately not meeting the time limits for reunification established by the 1997 Federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA).

We have taken Lipsky's focus on the importance of policy aims and organizational conditions as a starting point to explore how child welfare workers view the policy aims embedded in the legislative principles undergirding their child welfare system. It is important to analyze street-level policy aims because we know little about how child welfare workers in countries with similar policy aims, such as England, Norway and the United States, view these aims. While studies focusing on child welfare in a single country can pinpoint the causes of the dilemmas that

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child welfare workers face in that particular country, only a cross-country study can begin to shed light on the relative impact of institutional context, including the character of policy aims (contradictory, etc.), organizational conditions and financial resources, on street-level bureaucrats' views of policy aims and dilemmas. This study, which is based on rich, in-depth qualitative interviews, explores these questions and develops hypotheses and theories—one of the strong suits of qualitative data (Goodwin & Horowitz, 2002).

In particular, we analyze the following questions: (1) Which principles do child welfare workers in England, Norway and the United States identify as the basic principles underlying their child welfare systems? (2) Are there cross-country similarities in workers' perceptions of the overarching aims of the child welfare systems in the countries under study? (3) Do the street-level policy aims embraced by child welfare workers concur with their country's policy aims at the time of the interview? If not, why not? (4) What do workers think of the principles they perceive, i.e. how do they reflect on street-level policy aims?

To our knowledge, there is no previous cross-country study that explores the policy aims of child welfare workers and analyzes how street-level policy aims in the area of child welfare compare to the policy aims stated by governments. It is therefore difficult to develop hypotheses based on previous research. In the following, we discuss the legislative principles underlying the child welfare systems in Norway, England and California (USA) that we expected the child welfare workers in our sample to identify before turning to workers' own perceptions.

## 2. Policy orientations and legislative principles

The English and U.S.-American child welfare systems have been categorized as 'child protection systems,' whereas the Norwegian child welfare system is considered a 'family service' system (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011). A child protection system is characterized by a comparatively high threshold for intervention, with a focus on preventing and stopping serious risk that can harm the child's health and safety (Gilbert et al., 2011). The USA represents this type of system more so than England. England has been moving towards a family service system on some dimensions, as is perhaps most clearly illustrated by the Common Assessment Framework (Department of Health, 2000; Stafford, Parton, Vincent, & Smith, 2011). Family service systems aim to promote a healthy childhood and seek to prevent serious risk and harm through the provision of universally available public services, based on the therapeutic idea of people's ability to improve their lifestyle and behavior with the help of early intervention (Skivenes, 2011). In a country like Norway, the basic presumption is that the child welfare system should provide services to prevent more serious harm, and thus prevent out-of-home placements. The threshold for intervention is low compared to systems with a child protection orientation (Skivenes, 2011).

There is some overlap between the basic principles underpinning the child welfare systems in England, Norway and the United States. The following basic principles are typically highlighted in law and policy-related publications in all three countries: the *best interest and/or well-being of the child*; *family preservation*; *permanency*, and *safety*. (In addition, policy documents also mention the principles of least intrusion, and of the child welfare system only having the secondary responsibility for children compared to the family.) (Berrick, 2011; Children Act, 1989; Department of Health, 2000; Goldman, Salus, Wolcott, & Kennedy, 2003; Skivenes, 2011). However, the degree to which governments focus on individual principles differs across countries, as we show below. In addition, the principles are also contradictory: for instance, the principles of permanency and family preservation contradict each other in the case of a child who is removed from home.

Different countries balance these principles in different ways. In the context of the family service orientation of the Norwegian child welfare system, three principles are prevalent: the first is the child's best interest, the second one, which is quite pronounced, is family preservation, and the third is permanency for the child (Skivenes, 2011). The best

interest of the child is a principle that has a strong standing in Norway and has gained more strength over the past ten years. Despite the fact that the principle of family preservation has had a long historical legacy in Norway and is very significant at present, we could not find many explicit statements in policy documents about how family preservation is to be balanced with the child's best interest. Permanency is another principle that has also had a strong tradition in the Norwegian child welfare system; it is emphasized in the *Child Welfare Act, 1992* in the paragraph on the child's best interest:

When applying the provisions of this chapter, decisive importance shall be given to framing measures which are in the child's best interests. This includes attaching importance to giving the child stable and good contact with adults and continuity in the care provided (*Child Welfare Act, 1992*, Section 4-1).

The interpretation of the permanency principle has traditionally been related to the family preservation principle and therefore encouraged in-home services to secure permanency in the original family (Skivenes, 2002).

In England, the main legislative principles are quite similar to the Norwegian system, with a focus on the child's welfare and safety, permanence and family preservation (*Children Act, 1989*). According to the *Children Act, 1989*, it is the duty of local authorities "to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need; and so far as it is consistent with that duty, to promote the upbringing of such children by their families, by providing a range and level of services appropriate to those children's needs" (Department of Health, 2000: 4). England has also increasingly emphasized permanence for children in care in relationship to adoptions and permanent foster care (Boddy, 2013).

In the United States, the stated policy aims are, first, ensuring the child's safety, followed by permanency, and, third, child and family well-being (Berrick, 2011; Goldman et al., 2003). Goldman et al. (2003: 9) summarize the principles established by the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA):

**Safety** All children have the right to live in an environment free from abuse and neglect. The safety of children is the paramount concern that must guide child protection efforts.

**Permanency** Children need a family and a permanent place to call home. A sense of continuity and connectedness is central to a child's healthy development.

**Child and family well-being** Children deserve nurturing environments in which their physical, emotional, educational, and social needs are met. Child protection practices must take into account each child's needs and should promote healthy development.

Based on the differences in orientations between the child protection-oriented systems (England and the United States) versus the family service system represented in this study (Norway), and given the overlapping principles embraced by the three countries, we expected to see similarities as well as differences in workers' perceptions between Norway, England and the United States. We expect variation in relation to child safety—a theme which we expect to be more prevalent in England and the United States than in Norway. We also expected to find statements about conflicting policy aims, such as the tension between the principle of the child's best interest and the principle of family preservation.

## 3. Methods

This study, which was funded by the Norwegian Research Council, is part of a larger research project comparing child welfare systems in

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