

Do reporting professionals overexpose marginalized families to more surveillance due to the dual nature of child welfare services?

FONG, K. (2020). GETTING EYES IN THE HOME: CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES INVESTIGATIONS AND STATE SURVEILLANCE OF FAMILY LIFE. *AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW*, 85(4), 610-638.

What can we learn from this study?

The current child welfare system serves dual purposes: providing needed services and supports to families; and, when indicated, removing children from families. Mandated reporters often make reports to child protective services (CPS) so families can receive services, even when the reporters themselves do not believe children are being severely maltreated. This practice subjects marginalized families to traumatizing investigations and intrusive, expansive surveillance.

Study details:

- **Population:** 37 cases investigated by the Connecticut Department of Children and Families in two area offices (Northeast Corner and New Haven)
- **Data source:** Interviews with mothers, reporting professionals, and state investigators; observations of CPS visits
- **Methodology:** Case studies
- **Dates:** February to August 2018

What are the critical findings?

Many reporting professionals who find themselves unable to intervene effectively with families make reports because they believe CPS is well-suited to matching families with resources and able to coerce families to participate in services — not because they have imminent safety concerns. However, CPS is rarely able to provide the ongoing material support that families need, and investigators are frustrated by reports for which CPS has no meaningful way to intervene, diverting them from high-needs cases and increasing their already high caseloads.

The possibility of child removal engenders fear among mothers, leading to mistrust, suspicion, and avoidance of service providers. Mothers who had strong bonds to professionals who filed reports, such as teachers or therapists, described decreased trust and strained relationships. This may decrease families' engagement with helpful institutions, further distancing them from assistance and increasing marginalization.

Even when reports are unsubstantiated, data on the family is amassed and may be used as evidence if future reports are made. The creation of case files frame parents as potentially harmful, even in cases that are promptly closed.

Why is this important for our work?

More research needs to be conducted on the front end of the child welfare system, particularly given its wide reach and demonstrated racial and class disparities. Well-meaning reporters may make referrals to CPS thinking they are helping families, not realizing that this approach increases fear and trauma, may distance families from helpful systems, and leads to ongoing surveillance. Families of color are referred to CPS at a disproportionality high rate. Reporters need additional guidance around situations requiring CPS intervention, and information and access to alternative pathways for support.

This summary synthesizes the findings from a single research study. To learn about better approaches for supporting children and families, please read [How can helplines serve as a better pathway for families to access support?](#)

For additional information, [access the article directly](#) or email KMResources@casey.org.