

# Do perceptions of risk impact how mothers interact with social service providers?

FONG, K. (2018). CONCEALMENT AND CONSTRAINT: CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES FEARS AND POOR MOTHERS' INSTITUTIONAL ENGAGEMENT. *SOCIAL FORCES*, 97(4), 1785-1810.

## What can we learn from this study?

Over 3 million children and their families are involved in a child protective services (CPS) investigation each year, and research consistently identifies poverty and concentrated disadvantage as the strongest predictors of CPS involvement. Given that mandatory reporters are part of the social support systems low-income families rely on, members of low-income families may be wary of potential CPS involvement stemming from their interactions with providers. This study examines how low-income mothers limit their engagement in needed services for fear of triggering a referral to CPS.

### Study details:

- **Population:** 83 low-income mothers in Providence, R.I., from racially diverse backgrounds (34% White; 31% Black; 28% Hispanic; 4% Native American; 4% Multiracial)
- **Data source and methodology:** Detailed in-person interviews (including some follow-up interviews)
- **Dates:** Between 2015 and 2017

## What are the critical findings?

Mothers expressed concern about CPS involvement in three primary areas: 1) housing and material hardship, 2) stressors and adverse experiences in their home environments, and 3) harsh discipline of children. More specifically:

- **Over half of the mothers interviewed (57%) reported concealing information** in one of these three areas due to fear of CPS involvement.
- **One in six mothers reported declining services** due to concerns about potential CPS reports. For example, mothers reported avoiding homeless shelters and home visiting programs.
- **Mothers with a history of CPS involvement and those with more adverse experiences were more likely to conceal information from providers.**
- Some of the mothers described the engagement of mandatory reporters (including social service providers) as judgmental. However, **when mothers learned that specific providers had committed to a helpful rather than punitive orientation, they shared more information and trusted that they would not call CPS.**

## Why is this important for our work?

Although mothers did not avoid interacting with systems of support completely, they were selective about what information they shared. By withholding information about their circumstances, they deprived themselves and their families of much-needed services. Given that mothers are more likely to be forthcoming when they anticipate support rather than punishment, policies and practices that facilitate the holistic and supportive engagement of families are critical.

This summary synthesizes the findings of a single research study. To learn more, please review additional resources on cross-team collaboration and child welfare, including: [Do place-based programs, such as Family Resource Centers, reduce risk of child maltreatment and entry into foster care?](#) and [How can supportive housing help improve outcomes for families in the child welfare system?](#)

For additional information, [see the abstract](#), [read this interview](#) or [KMResources@casey.org](mailto:KMResources@casey.org).