

Do state child welfare policies impact the rate of reported and substantiated child maltreatment?

DAY, E., TACH, L., & MIHALEC-ADKINS, B. (2021). STATE CHILD WELFARE POLICIES AND THE MEASUREMENT OF CHILD MALTREATMENT IN THE UNITED STATES. *CHILD MALTREATMENT*.

What can we learn from this study?

States have tremendous discretion in child welfare policies and practices, resulting in variation across the country and, over time, within individual states. Given the traumas associated with child protective service investigations and family separation, child welfare leaders, policymakers, and other stakeholders need to understand the impacts of specific policies and practices on whether children and families ultimately come to the attention of the child protection agency.

Study details:

- **Data sources:** National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS), Child Maltreatment Reports, and State Commentary Appendix of the annual Child Maltreatment Report
- **Methodology:** Binomial models with state and year fixed-effects
- **Dates:** 2005 to 2018

What are the critical findings?

The researchers looked at eight state-level policies and practices to examine their impact on trends in the numbers of children involved in both reports and substantiated reports of maltreatment over a 14-year period. The policies and practices they examined were: data reporting; differential response; mandatory reporting; child welfare workforce; centralized intake procedures; standards of proof; the definition of child maltreatment; and public awareness campaigns.

- States implementing three of the most common policy changes — adding mandated reporters, centralized intake, and increased staffing — had an estimated 32% higher rate of maltreatment reports than had those changes not been made. Adding centralized intake was associated with the largest increase in reports (14% to 16%) but a decline (5% to 6%) in substantiated reports. Adding mandatory reporters and staff each were associated with an 8% to 9% increase in reports, but no change in substantiated reports. Expanding the scope of maltreatment also was associated with an increase in reports (5%), but a decline in substantiations.
- States implementing both differential response and higher standards of proof showed a 24% decrease in substantiated reports, with implementation of differential response associated with 11% of that decrease, and raising the standard of proof accounting for the remaining 12% to 13%.

Why is this important for our work?

States have substantial power to define maltreatment, as well as dictate and structure how maltreatment is reported and how they respond. Their policies and practices, in turn, often cause [harm and trauma](#) for the children and families involved.

This summary synthesizes the findings from a single research study. To learn more about this area of study, please review the following resources: [Do higher standards of proof for child abuse and neglect impact rates of substantiation?](#) and [What can we learn from how states define neglect?](#)

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