ISSUE BRIEF

TRANSFORMING CHILD WELFARE SYSTEMS

How do economic supports **benefit families and communities?**

Access to basic necessities — housing, food, clothing, medical and behavioral health care services, legal representation, transportation, and early care and education — is fundamental to the well-being and economic success of every family.[1] Providing these types of tangible resources can strengthen both families and communities by avoiding and de-escalating crises, reducing parental stress, increasing access to safe housing and reliable child care, and ensuring children have the material items they need to thrive. Research on the use and effects of economic supports — and how they can prevent families from coming to the attention of a child protection agency — continues to grow. Studies show that supporting families to access and receive adequate and effective economic supports can prevent family separation, decrease time to permanency for children who have been removed from their parents, decrease the risk of subsequent abuse or neglect, and enhance child and family well-being.[2]

This brief outlines key themes that are emerging, as well as ongoing areas for work.

Child protection agencies are not in positions to eradicate poverty, but they can initiate and help drive community-based strategies, connections, and collaborations that offer economic supports to address families' basic needs, keeping children safe and families together. These include housing supports,

casey family programs

food assistance, financial supports, employment assistance, early care and education services, legal services, and medical and behavioral health care.

The need

Three-quarters of the 656,000 children found to be victims of child maltreatment in 2019 were victims of neglect, and neglect was the primary reason associated with removal in 63% of cases.

Studies show that children from households with fewer resources are three times as likely to be substantiated for abuse and about seven times more likely to be substantiated for neglect than other children.[3] Concentrated poverty in communities also has been associated with increased rates of child abuse fatalities.[4,5] While a large proportion of the families involved with child welfare have a neglect allegation,[3,6,7,8] **the child protection system response often is not effective at distinguishing between intentional harm** (such as a refusal to provide food and water for one's child) **and harm resulting from a lack of access to adequate food, housing, and other material resources**. The latter conditions are the consequences of structural and social factors beyond a family's control, such as poverty, systemic and structural adversities that exist within their neighborhood, racism, and additional forms of discrimination.

As one of several outside social conditions that pose challenges to families, poverty ought never be confused with neglect. Neglect is defined as the willful withholding of resources from a child.

Poverty alone does not constitute neglect and is not a rationale for child welfare involvement. Much has been written about the conflation of poverty with neglect, and about caseworker and community member biases about families that are poor, which may impact levels of surveillance and likelihood of involvement with the child protection system, including placement into foster care.

A main focus in improving the safety and well-being of America's children should be on providing their families access to economic supports that address poverty-related challenges. These supports will help families thrive and keep children safe, thereby eliminating unnecessary intrusion into their lives from the child protection system.

Attending to the underlying causes of neglect after it occurs is not an effective solution. Child welfare leaders must proactively identify, take advantage of, and forge opportunities to partner with communities and across government agencies to **leverage the availability and accessibility of economic supports that improve the health, safety, and well-being of children and families —thereby helping to prevent child maltreatment in their communities**.

Systemic and institutionalized racism, classism, and other pervasive and deep-rooted discriminatory policies have led to the inequitable distribution of resources and low-quality support services for children and families of color.[9,10,11] Child poverty rates are much higher for Black children (32%) and Latinx children (26%) when compared to white children (11%), and Black and American Indian/Alaska Native children

> There are so many barriers to even knowing about or getting the support you need. You have to prove yourself worthy, and it's a very dehumanizing experience. When families are told they can have this, but not that, it keeps them down. It keeps them in poverty and prevents them from having what they need to care for their children.
>
> **— DEE BONNICK,**
> MSW, PARENT, NATIONAL FAMILY ENGAGEMENT CONSULTANT, EDUCATION ADVOCATE, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE PRACTITIONER, CONNECTICUT

continue to enter foster care at much higher rates than white children and experience negative outcomes as a result, including longer lengths of time spent in foster care, less placement stability, and lower rates of reunification.[12,13,14]

Studies also show that immigrant families, particularly Latinx immigrants, face numerous barriers to accessing economic supports due to issues related to immigration status, language barriers, and a lack of culturally appropriate services and interventions. These issues are exacerbated when one or more of the caregivers is undocumented. For example, in a study of over 500 child welfare cases that involved Latinx immigrants, only 17% of families that received a referral for a service received the needed support, and undocumented parents were even less likely to receive assistance for economic supports given their legal status.[15]

An effective response

The child protection system was not designed to focus on — or to be solely responsible for addressing — the profound issues associated with economic hardship. Helping families address basic needs, however, is an effective way to prevent child maltreatment and involvement with child welfare, and is in keeping with the social determinants of health and the widespread understanding that children must be supported within the context of their families, and families within their communities and cultures.

MASLOW'S HIERARCHY OF NEEDS

It can be challenging for families to effectively engage in any parenting or treatment services when they are hungry, sick, stressed, or overwhelmed with worry about an uncertain future. Scarce economic resources can prevent children and their parents from having access to basic necessities. They may be forced to endure substandard accommodations and services (such as inadequate or unsafe housing or poor-quality child care), making it difficult to achieve emotional and psychological stability, and to develop positive interpersonal connections, healthy parenting techniques, and strong family and community networks. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, if basic needs are not met, the human body cannot function optimally, with all other needs becoming secondary.

Source: Maslow, AH. A Theory of Human Motivation. Start Publishing; 2012.

Many child protection agencies currently provide financial assistance for basic needs, including rent and utility assistance, and vouchers for furniture and clothing. However, this financial support usually is considered to be emergency assistance, offered on a one-time basis, based on staff discretion and provided only to a limited number of families — and often only after they agree to open a case with the child protection agency, which results in additional surveillance. Given the substantial needs of most families that are low-income, short-term investments such as a one-time rental subsidy may be sufficient to temporarily stabilize families but will neither help achieve the economic stability needed to support their long-term well-being nor make up for the years of disinvestment that has occurred in many communities across the country.

Partnerships between child welfare and other public and private entities that offer economic supports are essential to prevent child maltreatment, particularly neglect, and should be seen

as vital tools in communities for supporting child and family well-being. Some child welfare agencies have found success providing economic supports as part of their differential response programs, noting that doing so results in fewer removals of children and subsequent reports of neglect.[16] Moreover, because the needs of individuals and families are often vast and spread beyond a single program or an organization's service boundaries, a **coordinated approach from multiple systems is required to address the full range of families' needs**. Effective coordination may be even more critical in rural communities, where resources may be more limited.

Housing supports

In 2019, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's point-in-time estimates of homelessness indicated that individuals in families with children made up approximately one-third of the homeless population. Unstable and unsafe housing conditions have been found to increase children's exposure to violence, neglect, and social isolation, and lead to poor educational outcomes throughout life.[17] Homelessness also is associated with a lack of basic needs, experiences with trauma and violence, substance abuse and mental health issues, and high levels of parental emotional stress.[17] Children without stable housing are more likely than their housed peers to have moderate, severe, and chronic health problems, and less access to medical and dental care to address their healthcare needs. When children experience homelessness during their first five years of life, they are more likely to experience developmental delays and suffer from poor education and low well-being outcomes. **Families that experience homelessness also have higher rates of interaction with the child welfare system**, including substantiations of maltreatment and out-of-home placements.[17] Homelessness may also keep families engaged in the child welfare system for longer periods of time, as a lack of stable housing may prevent reunification.[18]

To combat homelessness and its consequences, a broad — albeit under-resourced and under-available — continuum of housing services exists for homeless families, ranging from time-limited temporary housing programs like emergency shelters and transitional housing, to more permanent housing options like Rapid Re-Housing and Section 8. Although these services aim to shelter families and mitigate the adverse experiences associated with homelessness, supportive housing programs **that include affordable housing combined with on-site wraparound services have been shown to be effective in the long term for families experiencing homelessness**, including both transitional and permanent supportive housing.[17] These programs, which include services such as case

EMERGENCY SUPPORTS FROM COMMUNITY PARTNERS

Place-based, community-specific support services — such as family resource centers and crisis nurseries — provide and connect families to emergency supports, offer ongoing assistance to address basic needs, strengthen parenting skills, and build social connections.

> Often families are given Band-Aids rather than support to address the root cause. A huge part of effectively providing economic supports is offering an opportunity to learn, to connect with resources that can help a family plan for the future.
>
> — KEITH LOWHORNE,
> RELATIVE CAREGIVER AND CHAIR, GRANDPARENTS AS PARENTS, ALABAMA FOSTER AND ADOPTIVE PARENT ASSOCIATION

management, employment assistance, mental health counseling, substance use treatment, and connections to public assistance programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid, also have been found to be important supports for families when inadequate housing threatens an out-of-home placement or a delay in reunification for children already placed in foster care.

Food assistance

When a family doesn't have enough to eat, everything else is secondary. Food insecurity, which is estimated to impact nearly 13 million children (approximately 1 in 6) in the United States each year, increases parental stress, which can increase the likelihood of maltreatment and negatively impact children academically and socially.[19,20] SNAP provides cash benefits to households with low incomes for purchasing food, thereby enabling other household income to be spent on other needs. Research **has shown that SNAP decreases family poverty, as well as poverty among children, and that participation in SNAP or the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) is associated with a lower risk of reports of maltreatment.**[20] Applying for SNAP can be a complicated, time-consuming, and lengthy process, and not all families that are food insecure qualify. Quickly identifying and connecting families to community-based resources, including food banks and food pantries, is also an essential support.

Financial supports

Unanticipated events and expenses such as family emergencies and car repairs often can result in significant crises for families with limited access to resources. While public benefits like food assistance and housing assistance often are needed to support families, cash assistance also is critical to address day-to-day and immediate needs and challenges, such as car repairs or transportation to support parents getting to work. Cash assistance also equips parents to respond promptly to needs as they arise — particularly when coupled with opportunities to engage in financial literacy education — instead of at a crisis point that requires public service intervention which, in turn, is further stigmatizing.

SUPPORTIVE HOUSING AND CHILD WELFARE

A recent national evaluation of five supportive housing programs found improved outcomes for families involved with child welfare. Among those families in supportive housing programs, 86% reported living in a house or an apartment with their own lease one year after enrollment, compared to 49% of families in the control group. They also:

- Experienced more housing stability compared to families in the control group, including being less likely to experience rent burden, frequent moves, overcrowding, eviction, and homelessness.
- Were more likely to be reunified and were reunified twice as fast as families without supportive housing.

Tax credits

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine identifies the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and the Child Tax Credit (CTC) as two financial supports that can reduce child poverty and be used to help families with low incomes make ends meet and decrease their risk of child welfare involvement. In 2015, the EITC and the CTC lifted 9.2 million people out of poverty, including 4.8 million children. A recent study examining the impact of the EITC on foster care outcomes found that **foster care entry rates decreased by 7.4% per year in states with a state-level EITC, compared to those without one**.[21] Research also has shown that compared to states without a state EITC, those with a *refundable* EITC had 11% fewer children entering foster care (after controlling for race/ethnicity, child poverty, education, and unemployment), and that **if states without an EITC implemented a refundable EITC, they would experience an annual reduction in foster care entries of nearly 50 per 100,000 children**. A diverse set of public and nonprofit agencies have deepened investments dedicated to informing parents about EITC and CTC credits and assisting them to apply.

Child support

Child support services are designed to ensure that children receive financial support from noncustodial parents to ensure their basic needs are covered. Research has shown that child support payments can help reduce child protection involvement with families. One study on the differences in the amount of child support received by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) participants found a causal relationship between a modest increase in child support and a reduction in reports of child maltreatment. The experimental group, which received on average $100 more per year in child support than the control group, was 10% less likely to be formally investigated by child protective services.[22]

Although helping families obtain child support can decrease maltreatment risk, child protection agencies need to carefully consider, analyze, and address how their child support referral polices might affect families. Traditionally, child protection agencies have partnered with child support agencies to locate noncustodial parents who could potentially serve as placement options. Some child protection agencies also work with child support agencies to locate noncustodial parents in order to establish child support orders or enforce them. Recent research indicates that requiring custodial parents to pay child support and/or redirecting a parent's child support income to the child protection agency to offset the cost of foster care (which is common throughout the U.S.) can result in a substantial loss in resources for families. Estimates from Wisconsin suggest that a $100 increase in the monthly child support order to offset the cost of foster care is associated with a 6.6-month delay in reunification or other permanency options.[23] Taking child support from families already involved with the child welfare system can create financial hardship and significantly increase length of stay in out-of-home care.

Cash assistance benefits

The TANF program offers flexibility to states and tribes to provide supports to families with children, including temporary financial support, employment assistance, and sometimes child care. These services are critical economic supports for families and have been associated with improved child outcomes. Research **shows that state policies that restrict access to TANF are linked to increases in child maltreatment and foster care placements.**

Despite serving many of the same families, TANF programs and child protection agencies historically have not worked in partnership with one another, which has led to conflicting program requirements, such as uncoordinated case plans that force parents to choose to be in compliance with one case plan over the other. Partnerships between public welfare and child protection agencies can take many forms and have the potential to effectively support families with complex needs. In 2000, 13 counties in California started developing partnerships between their TANF and child protection agencies under the Linkages project to improve outcomes for children. The counties tested different mechanisms for strengthening coordination including ongoing cross-agency and family meetings, linked case planning that allowed requirements from one system to satisfy requirements from another, co-locating services, and coordinating case plans for dually served families.[24] By 2006, California, along with

GUARANTEED INCOME

In 2019, **Stockton, Calif.**, began testing a universal basic income project to better understand the economic floor needed to obtain basic necessities for families and test solutions for eradicating poverty and inequality in the U.S. As part of the Stockton Economic Empowerment Demonstration, 125 residents received $500 a month for 24 months without any restrictions. An evaluation of the project indicated that recipients had less stress and anxiety, more family stability, stronger social networks, and fewer incidences of homelessness and skipped meals than their counterparts who did not receive the guaranteed income. The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians has had a similar guaranteed income program since 1997, with similar positive results. Additional communities also are exploring the benefits of a guaranteed income program.

four other jurisdictions, were able to expand this work through Children's Bureau discretionary grants.

Employment assistance

Employment assistance is a critical support for individuals and families that experience economic disparities and hardships, as unemployment is associated with a host of negative factors including poverty and child welfare involvement. One-stop career centers are designed to increase the effectiveness of job-training services through co-location and supports. They provide a full range of services to promote employment, including resume and cover letter support, education and training services, job search and placement assistance, career counseling, mock interviews, and resources for interview attire and transportation. Evaluations of one-stop career centers indicate that the centers provide a multitude of meaningful services to job seekers, and some job development programs have been found to increase participants' earnings. Collaborative approaches can strengthen outcomes for participants by leveraging the resources of each involved agency and integrating case planning.

Early care and education services

Nearly half of the confirmed cases of child maltreatment in federal fiscal year 2019 were children age 5 or younger. Maltreatment at any age is harmful, but the consequences for young children are more significant, including an increased likelihood of severe injury and death.[25] Moreover, because 90% of a child's brain is formed before age 5, early maltreatment introduces trauma during critical periods of brain development, which can have long lasting effects.[25] High-quality early care and education (ECE) programs **are proven strategies for mitigating the risk of maltreatment and promoting the well-being of young children, yet are underutilized for children who come to the attention of the child welfare system.**[26]

Many of the studies that examine the relationship between ECE and child maltreatment outcomes focus on Early Head Start and Head Start programs. A national randomized trial study found that, compared to a control group, children who attended Early Head Start were less likely to have an encounter with child welfare between the ages of 5 and 9, had fewer subsequent child welfare encounters from age 5 onward, and were less likely to have substantiated physical or sexual abuse.[27] A recent study also found that child welfare-involved children who received Head Start services were 93% less likely to be placed in foster care than children who did not receive any ECE services.[28]

There are many ways that Head Start programs may be mitigating the risk of child maltreatment, including: providing respite care to caregivers; linking families to services for basic needs such as housing, health care, and food; helping parents increase their knowledge of appropriate developmental expectations and discipline; and supporting employment and educational opportunities for caregivers, which in turn increases economic resources for the family and reduces family stress. Despite the potential benefits of participating in Head Start programs and the federal government's

> Make sure supports are designed with the family in mind. Sometimes policies unintentionally discriminate against low-income families and create unnecessary barriers or challenges. Standard day-care rates are an example of this, with large penalties for time spent in child care beyond nine hours. For parents relying on public transportation, it may be impossible to avoid these additional and costly fees, and they can be detrimental to economic stability
>
> — **GLORIA TORMA,**
> RESOURCE CAREGIVER, NEVADA

support of ECE-child welfare partnerships, **research shows that less than one-third of young children under child welfare supervision who are still in their parents' care are enrolled in any type of ECE program**.[28] Given that Early Head Start and Head Start programs provide comprehensive child development and support services to families that are low income, and **child welfare-involved families are eligible for no-cost Head Start services regardless of income**, these programs are particularly well poised to support child and family well-being.

Quality child care also is an essential service to support families that are low income. Over 65% of women with children 5 years old and under are in the labor force, yet a significant number of families — particularly families that are low income — do not have access to affordable, high-quality child care that is supportive of their work schedules. The high cost of quality child care forces some parents out of the labor market or requires that they settle for lower quality care. While many families meet federal and state requirements for child care subsidies, including subsidies through TANF, limited child care funding means the subsidies are not available to all eligible families. Nonetheless, **when child care subsidies are available, they are** associated with greater ECE participation**, which can be instrumental in preventing child abuse and neglect**. One study that examined child care subsidy use and stability for children involved in child welfare found that children who remained in their parents' home were more likely to have received child care subsidies, compared to those who were placed in foster care.[29] Another study found that mothers in low-income households who received child care subsidies experienced significantly reduced stress related to parenting and were less likely to have been involved in an investigation for a report of neglect.[30]

OPTIMIZING DECISION-MAKING AND PROBLEM-SOLVING

Families involved with the child protection system often are faced with high-stress situations, particularly as they navigate the legal system. When parents arrive at dependency court feeling hungry or malnourished, their ability to effectively engage may be compromised. Protein for All was established to ensure parents have access to protein-rich foods to optimize their decision-making and problem-solving, and decrease the symptoms of primary and secondary trauma. Cradles to Crayons in Maricopa County, Ariz., implemented this program as part of an effort to create a culture of dignity and respect in dependency court.

Legal services

Legal services also provide a pathway for families to address other basic needs. In general, legal assistance for families facing sub-par housing, denial of public benefits, domestic violence, and other issues that may compromise their health and well-being is often out of reach due to exorbitant legal fees. Some jurisdictions, however, have developed legal advocacy support for families and early access to counsel to prevent children from unnecessarily entering or remaining in foster care.

> The bare minimum is no longer enough, and research shows that people of color make up a disproportionate percentage of the population that experiences poverty and other negative factors linked to low socioeconomic status. We can't just continue to debate about temporary fixes. We must provide ways to achieve long-term solutions.
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> — **ALIYAH ZEIEN,**
> RSW, FOSTER CARE ALUMNUS, STATE YOUTH AMBASSADOR, LOUISIANA

Through medical-legal partnerships, lawyers provide families with legal assistance for everything from examining health care billing issues, to enforcing workplace rights, providing housing and eviction assistance, establishing guardianships for children and resolving other custody issues, and providing assistance with issues related to immigration status. Medical-legal partnerships like Project DULCE in Boston have identified reducing child maltreatment as a top goal. A randomized control trial demonstrated that Project DULCE participants had significantly more success in obtaining economic supports including food, housing, and assistance with utilities, decreasing their risk of child welfare involvement.

Medical and behavioral health care

Research consistently has demonstrated that children and families in low-income households have a higher risk of multiple chronic health conditions and behavioral health challenges, when compared to the general public. For families with children who have significant health care needs, the cost of care may be a contributing factor to a family's economic stability. Many families, children, and young people (up to age 26) currently and previously involved in the child welfare system are eligible for Medicaid services, which can greatly increase their ability to seek needed medical and behavioral health services. A recent analysis shows a reduction in the rate of children reported for neglect in states that opted to expand their Medicaid programs versus those that did not. This evidence speaks to the importance of close collaboration between the child welfare system and Medicaid. Some states, such as New Jersey, have been able to support cross-agency collaboration between child welfare, Medicaid, and behavioral health through a Children's System of Care, which includes Mobile Response and Stabilization Services for all families. This collaboration addresses the needs of at-risk and system-involved families, supports reunification, and reduces the likelihood of re-entry into the system.

Home visiting programs are one of the most studied interventions for addressing medical and behavioral health needs for families, as well as for preventing child abuse and neglect. Home visiting services often are used to reach higher-risk families to deliver a range of health, parenting, and prevention services in their homes. While not all have been found to improve the health and well-being of children and families, long-studied home visiting programs like Nurse-Family Partnership have been shown consistently to improve long-term outcomes for families, and may include economic supports like employment or educational assistance for mothers involved in the program.

Looking ahead

Studies examining the potential reduction of child abuse and neglect when economic supports are provided to families are starting to emerge and contribute to our understanding of the effectiveness of these supports and associated programs and approaches. More culturally inclusive research and evaluation is needed, however. These additional studies — with data disaggregated by race and ethnicity — will be critical to expanding our knowledge as a field and in determining whether economic supports can be **elevated to an evidence-based intervention** to prevent child maltreatment and entry into foster care.

1 Content of this brief was informed by consultation with members of the Knowledge Management Lived Experience Advisory Team in April and May 2021. This team includes youth, parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents with lived experience of the child welfare system who serve as strategic partners with Family Voices United, a collaboration between FosterClub, Generations United, the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, and Casey Family Programs. Members who contributed to this brief include Dee Bonnick, Keith Lowhorne, Gloria Torma, and Aliyah Zeien.

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