

Why is research important?

Research provides data and information for decision-making, from an individual case level all the way up to an agency-wide level. The office of Reporting, Analytics & Implementation has prioritized Child Welfare in developing the first round of research and research-informed decision support tools. The research falls into six broad categories, which will be explained below.

Safety along the Life of a Case

There are many important decisions Child Welfare workers make during the life of a case. In an effort to maintain safety for a child, knowing the likelihood of a child's safety could influence a decision. Equations provide estimates by identifying the outcomes of similar situations with similar families. However, there may be unique attributes of some families that influence safety estimates and increase safety which are not included in the equation; conversely, there may be other family characteristics that decrease the likelihood a child will remain safe. The equations provide the average estimates for similar families – Child Welfare staff working with the families must use their professional discretion and weigh other factors not included in the equations.

Capacity and Service Matching

Children/youth placements in Oregon have been dictated by bed availability with limited recognition of child needs and provider capability. One arm of this research will estimate the number of service level beds needed to optimally serve the substitute care population through a two-step process. First, we will choose a random sample of children/youth and then identify their ideal service level. Statistical analysis will then be used to identify the best outcomes of similar individuals placed in various service levels. The differences in these two results will refine estimates of what capacity is needed to create an optimal continuum of care.

The other arm will create equations that identify which of the current array of services and programs will generate the best results for specific children and families. These equations will be generated by identifying the types of children/families with successful outcomes for a particular service/programs, and matching families/children entering Child Welfare with these profiles. Although this simplified explanation identifies the population best served by particular programs, equations for each program identify the relative effectiveness of each program for a particular family.

Caseload and Workload

To further ensure child safety and improve outcomes for children and families, there is a need to optimize caseworker caseloads and workload. Proper caseloads allow caseworkers to provide family support and meet the business obligations of their cases. Caseloads too large and family outcomes suffer, caseloads too small and the extra time per family does not generate better outcomes. Some cases require more time to assess, provide support, and successfully achieve the desired outcome than others.

With this in mind, workload research analyzes time devoted to different tasks and allows equity of work among caseworkers. If case characteristics (i.e. type of maltreatment, parent characteristics, child characteristics, type of care, number of siblings, time since foster care entrance or time to adoption, etc.) are associated with more caseworker time/effort, researchers can quantify the time

required to serve different families. In theory, all caseworkers should work 40 hours per week and maximize the family outcomes.

Recruitment & Retention

In Oregon, the number of caseworkers leaving their jobs is high, with many leaving after a year or two. This leaves few experienced caseworkers in the agency. The high turnover rate with casework and supervisory positions could be attributable to recruiting the wrong individuals or could be attributable to factors associated with retention (e.g. workload, lack of support, etc.). This research will identify if the real issue is recruitment or retention. To do so, a profile of desired caseworkers will be developed through discussions with supervisors and caseworkers along with an analysis of administrative data. This profile will then be paired with exit interviews of those who resigned to determine if the effective or ineffective staff are resigning. If it is primarily ineffective staff resigning, that would indicate that the primary issue is recruitment. If it is predominantly effective staff resigning, that would point to retention as the primary issue.

A similar methodology will also be applied to the recruitment and retention of foster families. This will lean heavily on exit interviews, as foster parents leave the agency for a variety of reasons, and retention interventions look different if foster families are leaving the system due to successful adoption than if they are leaving due to reasons associated with the agency.

Community Engagement

Building a healthy relationship between Child Welfare and our communities improves outcomes for children and families. When community engagement is working well and Child Welfare and our communities have healthy working relationships, the threshold for contacting Child Welfare will generally be lower and Child Welfare will rely on the community to support children at home. There is no measure for community engagement, but a good estimate can be made by the measures of safety coupled with safety in the community, the proportion of children/youth not returned to foster care, and when expected maltreatment is substantially lower than what would be expected.

Ethnic and Racial Disparities

Disproportionate minority involvement is well documented in the Child Welfare system. The Child Welfare system can exacerbate ethnic and racial disparities if their programs are not equally or more effective with minority populations. By using a research methodology of “propensity matching”, we can compare the outcomes of ethnic minority youth who participate in a service with a “twin” of the same ethnic minority who doesn’t participate in the same service. This allows us to quantify effectiveness of a program for specific ethnic minority children and youth and provide feedback to improve the existing system.

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