

Flexible Assistance to Families Encountered by Child Welfare Systems: Focus on Housing and Housing-Related Help

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This paper briefly describes changes in child protection services (CPS) in several states that provided opportunities for greater flexibility in assisting families reported for child abuse and neglect. We have evaluated several multi-year programs that involved flexible assistance to families. Four of these are considered in this paper. The programs are examples of a general trend in CPS toward family-centered and preventative services. The programs operated at three different points in the flow of families through CPS. They represented a “broadening” of services to families, which occurred in two ways. First, assistance was provided to families who in the past would have been ignored or helped only minimally. Secondly, the types of assistance offered were often of kinds that would not have been available to families seen by CPS in the recent past.

Flexibility is a key concept in these reforms. Practitioners were permitted and encouraged to assess the needs of families more broadly and to offer assistance and services that enhanced the general welfare of families. The latter included material assistance of various kinds such as cash assistance, food, clothing, transportation; help with utilities and household needs and assistance in finding or retaining housing. These are the primary concern of this summary paper.

Flexible assistance is possible under two conditions: when flexible funds are available directly to the agency that may be used for the full range of needs of families and/or when relationships with community providers, both formal and informal, are enhanced to facilitate referrals of families.

The traditional CPS system

In **Figure 1**, we show a highly schematic view of the “traditional” CPS system as it developed and existed in most states after the enactment of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) in the 1970’s. The widths of the flow-arrows are supposed to indicate the volume of flow at various points in the system, but they are only illustrative since the actual volume varies greatly from state to state and among local offices within states. Child abuse and neglect reports are reported via telephone hotlines to state or local offices (1) where intake workers screened them to determine whether the maltreatment being reported falls under the child abuse and neglect laws of the state (2). Reports that do not or that provide insufficient information for a response are screened out (3). The proportions of reports screened-out differ substantially from state to state but generally significant minorities are judged inappropriate for CPS and the families receive no response from the agency. In the traditional system screened-

in reports were investigated (4). CPS investigators conduct home visits and often also visit schools to interview children separately. In most offices, maltreatment cannot be substantiated in the majority of investigated reports. In the states and localities we have studied, this was the outcome in 60% to 70% of investigations (5). These families also pass out of the system at this point, although service responses or information about services are provided in a minority of cases. Child abuse or neglect is determined to have occurred in the remaining reports. Various terms are used—substantiated, indicated, founded, and others—to label these reports as appropriate for further intervention by child protection (6). Among these families, a subset—often the majority—receive minimal help beyond monitoring by workers (7). A minority of families, the size of which varies among offices, receive ongoing services of various kinds (8). In traditional CPS, these were typically therapeutic and counseling services. Depending on availability they may have been referred to mental health providers. Parenting classes were made available in some jurisdictions. Finally, in the most severe cases, families are referred to the juvenile (or family) court. In most of these cases the children will have been removed and placed in out-of-home care, although in some cases, children remain at home but under the supervision of the court (9).

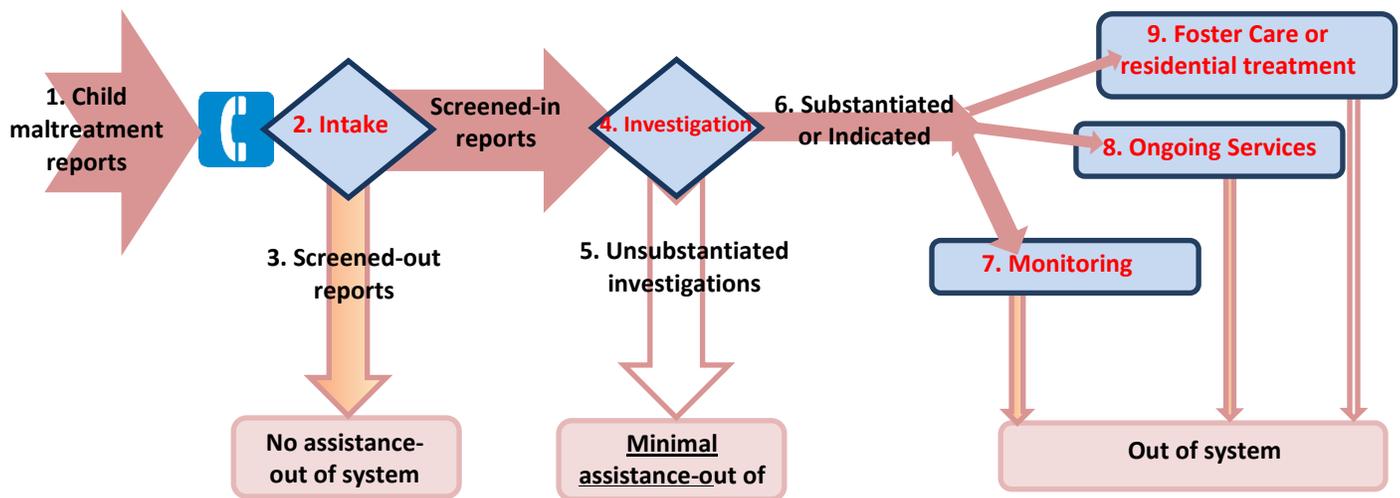


Figure 1. A Schematic representation of the flow through the Traditional Child Protection Services System

The revealing thing about this diagram is how small a percentage of the total families reported to the system receive any assistance. The bulk of the money is spent on the small proportion of families that become court-involved (9). The naïve viewer of this diagram will say, so what? Why should we be concerned about the screened-out families or the families in unsubstantiated investigations (flows 3 and 5)? If child abuse or neglect did not take place, what services do they need? After all, the mission of CPS is to insure that children are protected, and if the children in these families were threatened wouldn't they have passed through in the flows to 7, 8 or 9? A different picture emerges, however, when these flows of reports and families are viewed over multiple years—something that has become easier to do as large management information systems have been developed within CPS. It is fairly simple to show that a relatively large proportion of the families in the flow of reports at 1 in the

diagram have been encountered by the system before, and many of them were in flows 3 and 5. This suggests that *reports of child maltreatment are the important risk factor*, not being screened-in or having a substantiated/indicated investigation. Many families, whose reports are screened-out or unsubstantiated today when reported again will pass through to the other side of the system in flows 7, 8 and 9.

A second issue that is not apparent in the diagram is that the *types of reports received by the agency* are very different in nature and involves widely divergent threats to the safety of children. Most are for child neglect, specifically lack of supervision and proper care or failure to provide for basic needs, such as food, clothing, safe and clean homes, and medical or dental care, and in some states, education. On the abuse side, most involve less severe forms of physical abuse that resulted in bruises, scratches, abrasions, and the like, and most of these arise from inappropriate and overly severe discipline. Depending on the jurisdiction, perhaps 8% to 15% of reports are for sexual abuse. A small set of cases, usually 1% to 2%, involve very severe physical abuse, such as fractures, concussions, burns, etc. or severe neglect, such as abandonment, starvation, imprisonment, etc.

Finally, a third issue is that the large majority of families encountered by CPS have low incomes (see, for example, Sedlak et al., 2010). Most have yearly incomes below or slightly above the poverty line. Rates of single parenthood, unemployment, dependence on public assistance are very high for families reported to CPS. Some information on family poverty in these studies is provided below.

Introducing flexible assistance into CPS

Greater flexibility is possible at various points in CPS. In **Figure 2** we show how differential response reforms changed the flow of families through the system and have labeled three points at which flexible assistance was evaluated.

Differential Response Reforms. During the past 20 years more and more practitioners and policy makers have asked whether a different approach might be more appropriate and effective. While most will agree that investigations should be conducted for very severe physical abuse and neglect and most cases of sexual abuse, there is concern about investigating the large majority of other reports. The objective of investigations is to determine whether child maltreatment occurred. Investigations involve gathering evidence from interviews and observations to prove or disprove this. Reformers have asked whether investigations might be unnecessary in many cases and, indeed, might be counterproductive to the long-term safety and welfare of the children. This was the motivation for the differential response reforms discussed below. The first change introduced under Differential Response (DR) is illustrated in **Figure 2** at the point labeled **(1)**. Under DR, a second examination of reports takes place and a decision is made whether to assign the report to a traditional forensic investigation or to a non-adversarial family assessment (FA). Family assessments involve child safety assessments and a broader assessment of family needs and strengths from the time of the very first visit with the family. There is a greater emphasis on family participation in decision making. FAs *are not*

voluntary when child safety issues are discovered, although they are voluntary when no child safety issues are found. The dashed arrow in the diagram at this point shows that the assigned track can be changed from FA to investigation or investigation to FA after initial assessments have been conducted. DR reforms that involve only this change will be referred to as *two-track* systems. In some states and jurisdictions DR reforms involve work with families whose reports would have been screened out of the system. This shown in **Figure 2** at the point labeled **(2)**. In most traditional CPS systems, little or nothing is done with these families, although some intake systems involve help lines or offer information and referral of such families to other agencies and services. As we have noted, one of the justifications for working with such families is that they reappear with new reports at a fairly high frequency. In addition, a substantial portion of these families (depending on the state and locality) have had previous encounters with CPS.

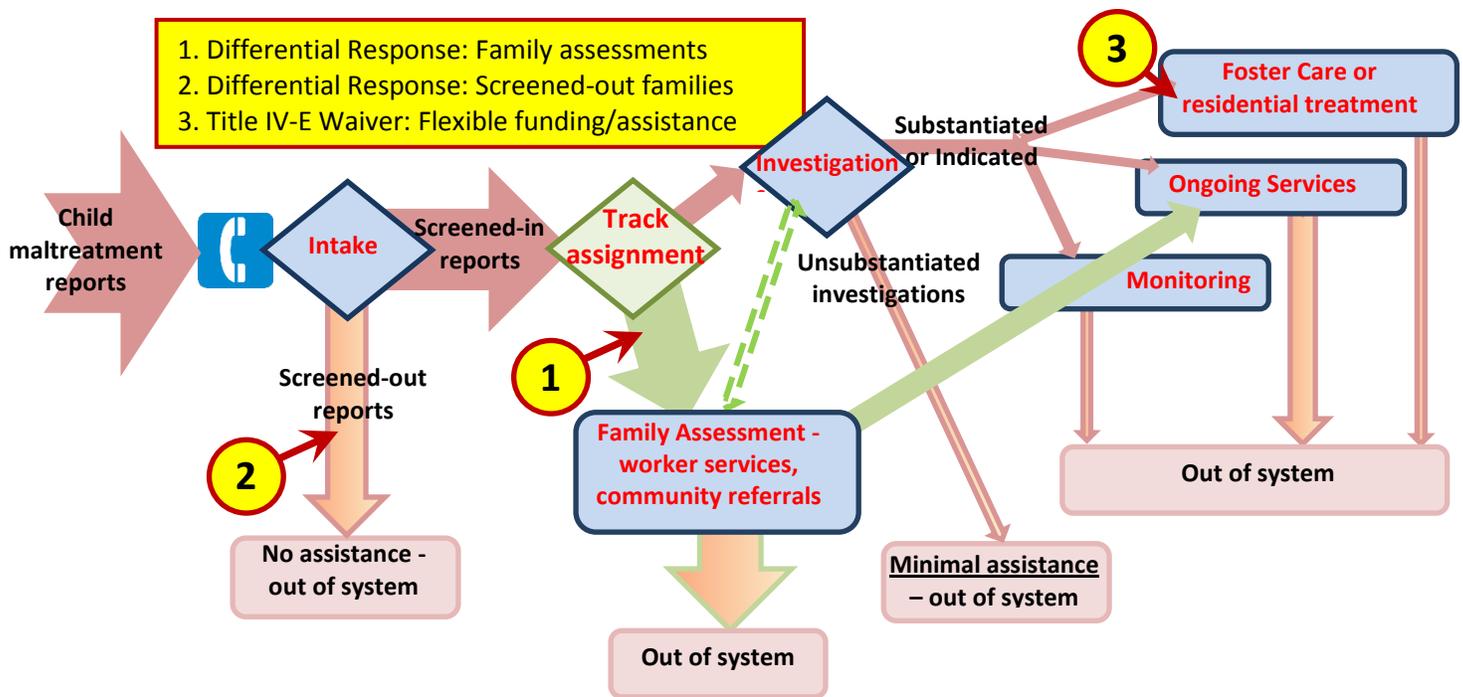


Figure 2. Schematic representation showing the introduction of Differential Response into Traditional CPS and Three Points at which Flexible Assistance has been Introduced

Title IV-E Waivers. A characteristic of CPS that is not evident from the size of the flow arrows is the disproportion that exists in spending. Although the flow of families and children at point 9 in **Figure 1** is the smallest in the system, foster care and residential treatment accounts for the bulk of the funds spent in CPS. Foster care costs are measured in thousands of dollars per child per year and residential treatment costs are more expensive reaching several tens of thousands of dollars per year for children in specialized facilities. Foster care is paid by state (and local) agencies but states may also claim reimbursement from the Federal government under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act for 60% or more of foster care costs. Starting in the mid-1990's the Federal Government has permitted states to apply for waivers

under Title IV-E to spend funds that were formerly restricted to maintenance payments for out-of-home care for other purposes. Several states applied for waivers that would permit the flexible use of IV-E monies to pay for services that would avert out-of-home placement or assist in the reunification of children with their families. This illustrated in **Figure 2** at the point labeled **(3)**.

Differential Response Systems

In this section we examine the characteristics and needs of families that are served under DR systems and how assistance to families changes in comparison to the traditional approach. Under two-track systems, services may be provided to families screened-in to CPS in Track 1 who are investigated and in Track 2 who receive a family assessment (FA). In three-track DR systems, services may also be provided to families screened-out of CPS. We will examine material assistance with an emphasis on housing issues in two studies of two-track systems and in a third study that was focused on families in the third track.

Two-track systems. In this section we consider families in Track 2. We have evaluated two-track DR systems in several states. In two of these, Minnesota and Ohio, the evaluation design included random assignment to experimental and control conditions. The families studied were all first determined to be appropriate for an FA response, which we will refer to as *FA-Appropriate families*. After the evaluation was completed families of this kind all received a family assessment, but during the evaluation only families assigned to the experimental condition received an FA, while families assigned to the control condition received a traditional investigation. In this way we were able to determine whether and in what way FA's made a difference for these kinds of families compared to investigations.

In both states, extra money was provided during the evaluation period by national foundations for workers to use in assisting FA families. Thus, the *experimental treatment* in both states involved *both a change in approach to families, as already described, and additional funds for services to families*.

Detailed information on the needs of families and assistance provided to them was obtained via *subsamples* of experimental and control cases. In the following charts the experimental side shows what happened for families when family assessments were offered while the control side reveals what happened for families that were treated in the traditional way. In other words the control side shows *what would have happened to all families of this type before the DR reforms were introduced*.

In Minnesota, 47.0% of the families in the evaluation were considered low socio-economic status (SES). Of these, the large majority (89.4%) had yearly incomes of less than \$15,000 in the 2001-2002 period in which these data were collected (Loman and Siegel, 2012). Minority families were more likely to be in the low SES group: 62.5% of African American families and 82.5% of American Indian families were low SES compared to 42.7% of Caucasian families (Loman and Siegel, 2012). Such large proportion of very impoverished families is not

unusual. The fourth National Incidence Study (NIS) of Child Abuse and Neglect measured low socioeconomic status (SES) by combining measures of income, education and participation in poverty programs. Low SES children (i.e., those living in families in poverty) were approximately five times more likely to experience maltreatment than children not in low SES families (Sedlak et al., 2010).

In traditional investigations, the provision of services is more directly related to the report of maltreatment and the formal finding of abuse and neglect. Under family assessments, while issues relating to the present and long-term safety of children are the first priority, services may address more tangential factors that are preventative in the long term. Because so many families are exceedingly impoverished, service increases tend toward assistance with basic material needs, although increase in more traditional counseling and therapeutic services were seen as well. An indication of changes the former types is evident in **Figure 3**. Because they were randomly assigned, experimental and control families, as groups, had very similar needs. Yet under DR where greater flexibility in services was permitted and encouraged, various material services, including housing, were provided substantially more often to experimental families

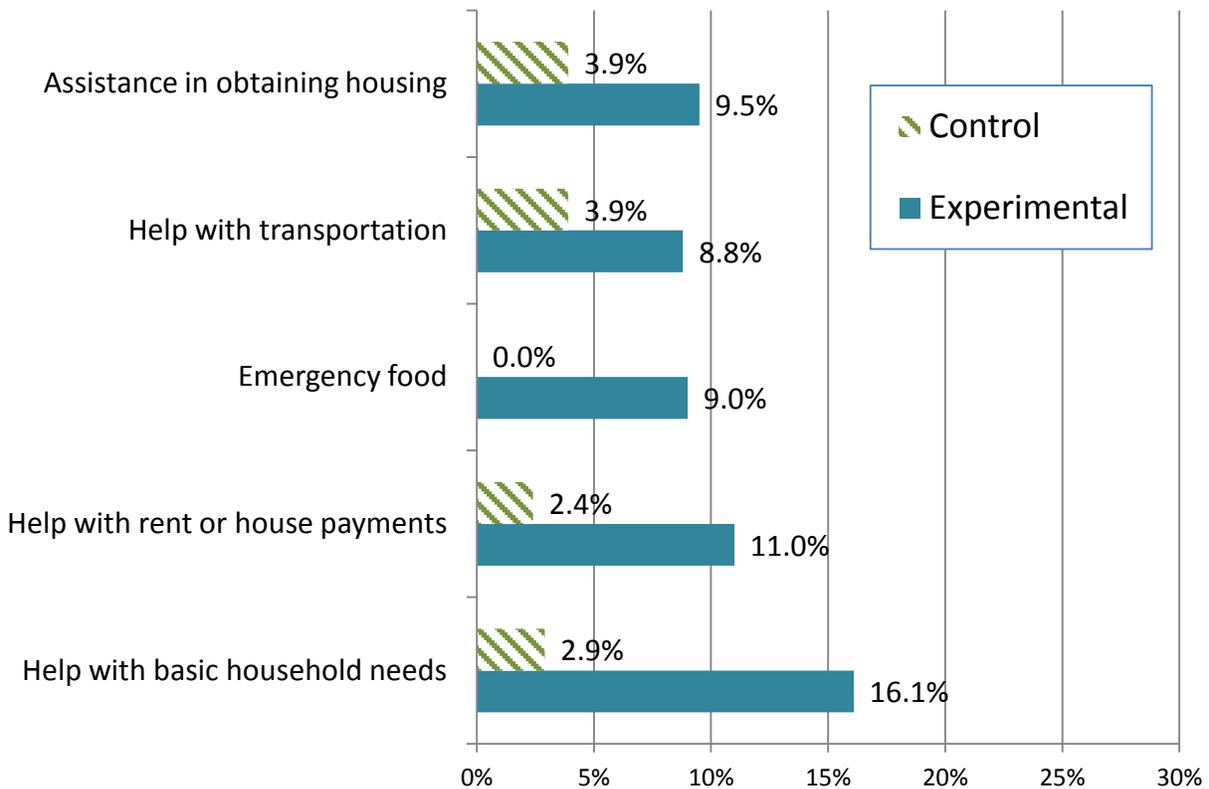


Figure 3. Housing and other material services provided to FA-Appropriate families under experimental and control conditions (Minnesota DR Evaluation: information provided by workers in the case-specific subsample, Loman and Siegel, 2004, p. 55)

In Ohio, 68.1% of families had yearly incomes of less than \$15,000 and 93.9% had incomes of less than \$20,000. (Data were collected in 2008 and 2009 during the Great Recession.) A substantial portion (31.2%) had not finished high school. Most parents (mainly female) were not married and were managing a household on their own. High participation in various cash and non-cash welfare programs was found. About 8 in every 10 families (79.9%) were receiving food stamps and 40.4% were participating in school breakfast/lunch programs. Two-fifths of the families in the subsample (41.3%) indicated that they had changed their residence at least once in the past year and of these, nearly half indicated they had moved two or more times (Loman, Filonow and Siegel, 2010). When families were asked about their participation in support programs, 17.2 percent indicated that they were receiving housing assistance and 26.6% were getting utilities assistance (Loman, Filonow and Siegel, 2010, p. 55). As is evident from **Figure 4**, the Ohio project resulted in similar increases in services to families.

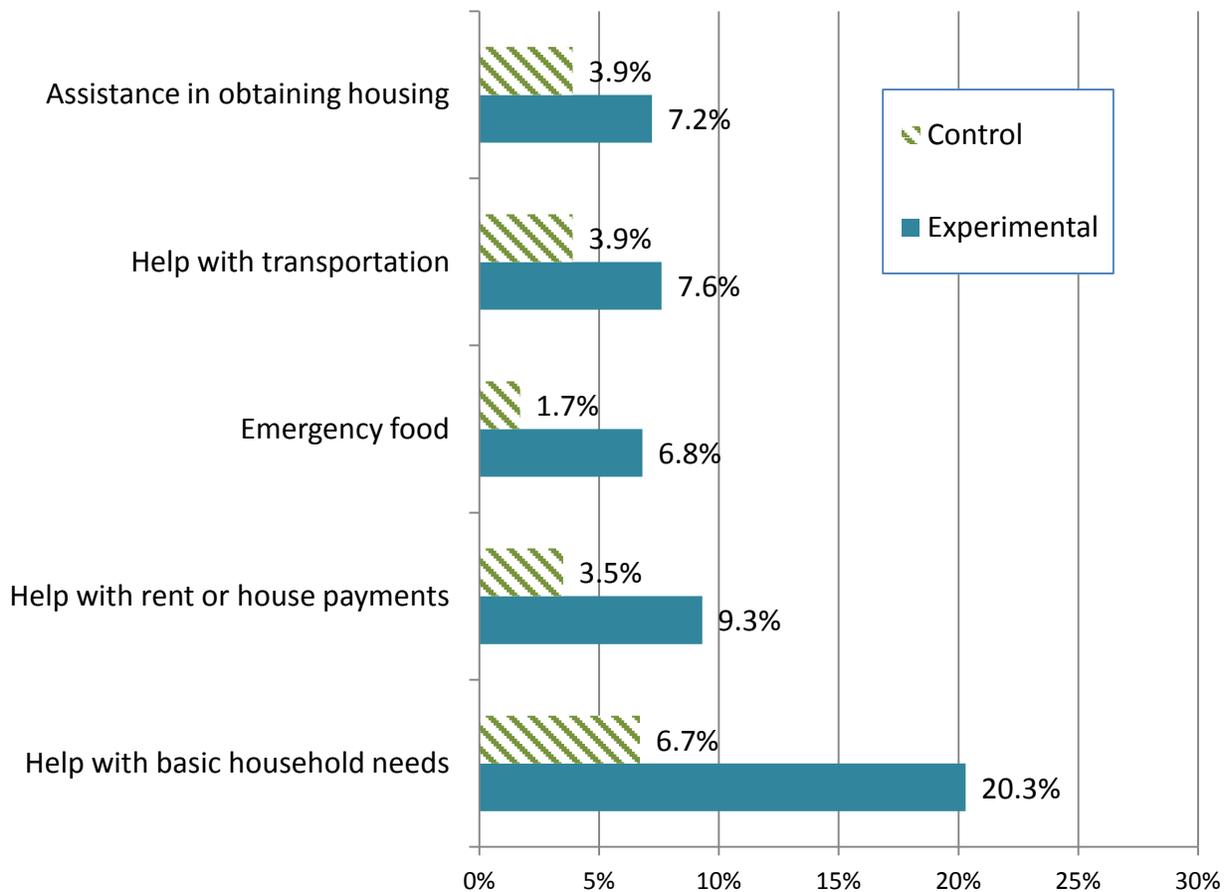


Figure 4. Housing and other material services provided to FA-Appropriate families under experimental and control conditions (Ohio DR Evaluation: information provided by workers in the case-specific subsample, Loman, Filonow and Siegel, 2010, p. 72)

Third-track systems. Some states have developed a third track in their DR system. In Minnesota the program is referred to as the Parent Support Outreach Program (PSOP). Originally, PSOP was limited to families reported to CPS for child maltreatment but whose

reports were screened-out as inappropriate for a CPS response. Later the program accepted referrals from outside CPS, for example from TANF and work program workers. Formerly no contact would have been initiated with these families. Indeed, such families would never have known they were reported to CPS. Under PSOP, contacts were initiated with the families and assistance and services were offered to them. In some counties, workers with the public CPS agency were assigned to make these contacts. In others, private agencies were contracted to conduct this work. PSOP was a completely voluntary program (Loman, Filonow and Siegel, 2009).

A chart from the final report showing services provided to PSOP families is reproduced in **Figure 5**. This figure shows the *number* of families served in various categories out of 3,841 families who agreed to participate in PSOP. The categories that correspond to those in Figure 3 and 4 are highlighted in boxes. There was no control group in this study, but in this project the *control counts and proportions would have been zero*, since none of these services would otherwise have been offered to these families. In the four categories considered here the proportions of families actually provided the service ranged from 5.2% for housing to 19.3% for basic household needs.

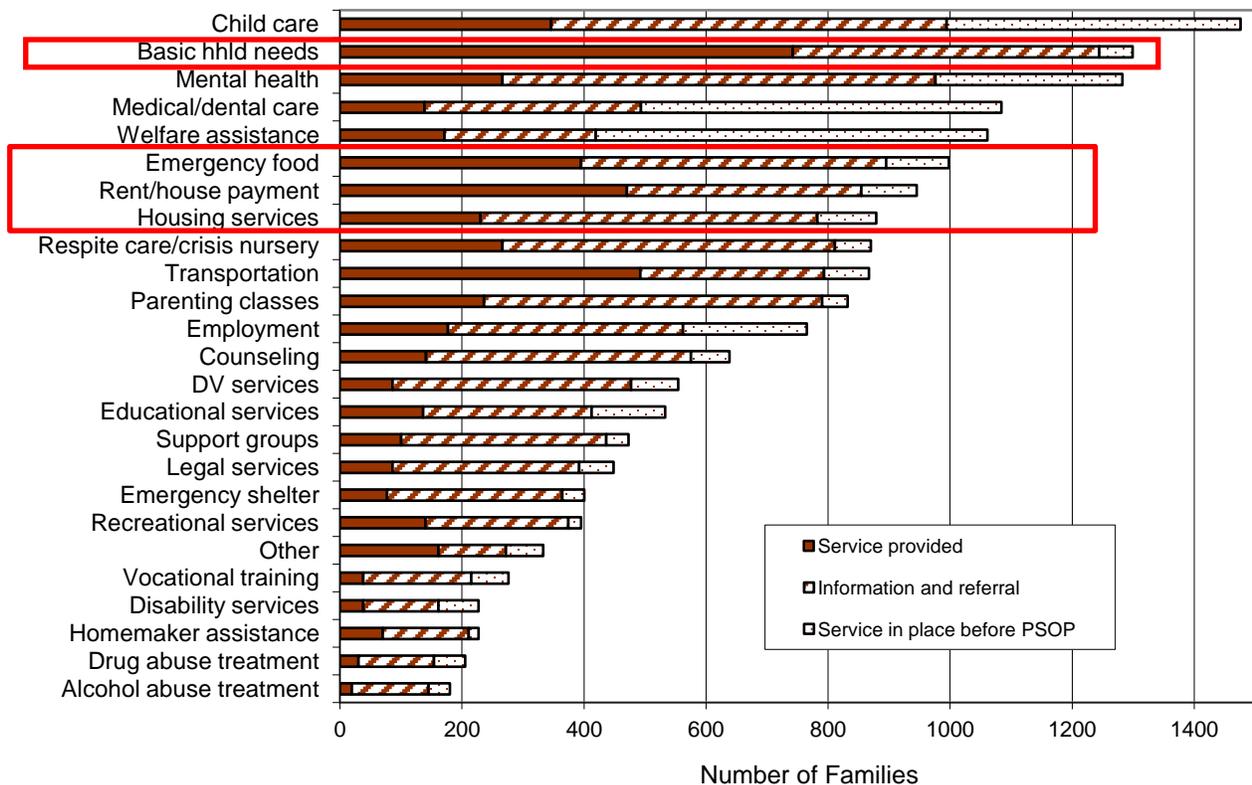


Figure 5. Services made Available to PSOP families in Three Categories: Service Provided, Information and Referral, and Service in Place before PSOP (Loman, Filonow and Siegel, 2009, p. 47)

We have seen that under DR two-track approaches, a little less than 1 in 10 families received housing assistance, with higher rates in other assistance categories. This represented a doubling or more of these kinds of help to families, as is evident from comparison to the control groups. For the third track, where such services would not have been available at all under the traditional system, housing assistance was provided to 1 in 20 families with greater amounts under other categories. These studies support the assertion that the flexibility under DR results in greater material assistance to families, including housing and housing-related assistance, than would have occurred under traditional CPS.

Title IV-E Waiver Programs

We evaluated flexible funding programs in Indiana and Mississippi that were funded under Title IV-E. Here we show some results from the Indiana waiver evaluation (Loman, Filonow and Siegel, 2011). The Indiana study compared slightly less than 10,000 children assigned to waiver status to children that were matched with waiver children. Services to children and their entire families were considered. Each comparison child was similar to his or her waiver match on demographics, such as age, gender, race, family size, rural-urban locale, etc. They were also matched on case characteristics, including previous out-of-home placements and for children who were already placed, the length of time in placement before matching. Thus, the differences in types of services provided were in most cases attributable to the waiver and not to other differences between the cases.

Like the populations in the three previous studies, the families in this study were also largely low income. In order to qualify for Title IV-E assistance family income is usually at a level that would make them eligible for cash welfare assistance. The Indiana waiver, however, permitted the state to serve certain cases under the waiver with incomes above the low-income limit set for Title IV-E. Service levels overall were higher for the poorer families in the study, showing that when flexible funds are available flexible assistance tends to be directed toward services to relieve poverty (Loman, Filonow and Siegel, 2011, p. 104).

In **Figure 6** we have created a chart based on a table in the final report comparing services delivered to children and their families under the waiver. For control children, Title IV-E funds could only be spent on out-of-home care maintenance payments. For waiver children the workers and supervisors had the option of redirecting those funds for other purposes. As can be seen in the chart, in nearly every category workers assisted more children and families. Housing assistance to families nearly doubled from 6.7% of control cases to 13.5% of waiver cases. Similar results occurred for basic needs and other types of financial assistance. Help with transportation increased from 10.7% to 16.1%,

Families were assisted in multiple ways under the waiver. Housing and housing related assistance were important because in many cases inadequate or unhealthy current housing or inability to pay rent and utilities were among the primary problems that made it likely that children would be removed or that hindered the reunification of the children with their families. The final report on the Indiana Waiver contains some summary descriptions of cases

that included housing assistance (Loman, Filonow and Siegel, 2011, pp. 85-93) but a more extensive set of cases can be found in a companion report (Sapokaite, Filonow and Siegel, 2011). In this document, many descriptions of housing assistance and housing needs will be found.

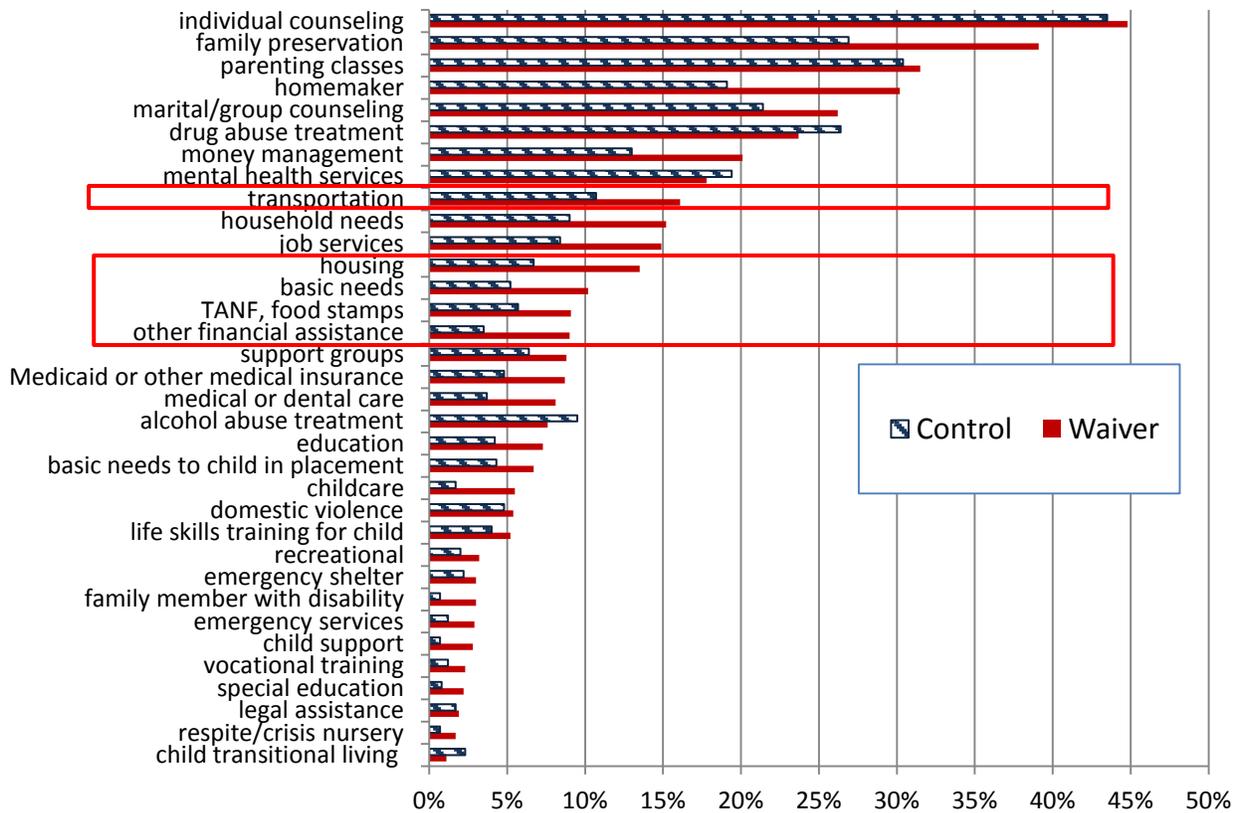


Figure 6. Community-Based Services made available to Waiver and Comparison Children (Loman, Filonow and Siegel, 2011, p. 99).

Like the DR programs, flexible assistance under Title IV-E led to more anti-poverty and material services, including housing services. Services were broadened because funding restrictions were lifted, permitting more flexibility to workers and their supervisors in deciding what would improve the welfare of families and the safety of children.

The continued feasibility of flexible funding in child welfare programs

Outcomes. The so-what question has not been addressed in this paper but the reader who reviews the reports referenced here will find that flexible assistance and the consequent increase in material assistance had significant long-term effects on the safety and welfare of children, with reductions in subsequent reports of child maltreatment and subsequent removals and placements of children.

These programs are representative of the more general movement within child protection toward family-centered services that address broader needs than were considered under the traditional CPS approach. Child safety is affected not simply by the psychological

state of caregivers but by the social and financial circumstances of families. Addressing more general needs of families encountered by CPS, therefore, has consequences for longer-term child safety. This is a logical outcome for programs that serve families who are most often reported for various forms of child neglect, since this type of child maltreatment is most likely to be influenced by family poverty and in some cases may actually be family poverty masquerading as child maltreatment.

The pervasiveness of Child Protection Services. In the United States, CPS has a presence in virtually every county and city. Few other agencies are so widely and universally located, and this provides an opportunity. If the goal were to provide services designed to prevent child maltreatment and improve child welfare to a wider set of families, CPS is an already existing vehicle. No need to create a new agency. The Minnesota PSOP program, for example, involves precisely this kind of expansion. The program addresses families that would have been ignored in the past. Some have already been seen by CPS; others are likely to be encountered later. Following this model, CPS may be transformed into a more general child welfare agency. A new agency is unnecessary. CPS may simply be expanded and transformed to fulfill an existing but unmet need.

Funding and Relations with other agencies. The four programs discussed in this paper all had extra funding or in the case of IV-E redirected funding, available for use with families. This along with the poverty status of large proportions of populations served explains the increases observed in various kinds of material assistance to families. However, even under the most generous funding, most of the assistance provided by CPS workers in these programs was short-term in nature. Its primary purpose continues to be remediation of child maltreatment and assistance and services to promote longer term child safety. For example, assistance with utilities and rent payments usually amounted to payment of delinquent bills and short-term support. Housing assistance sometimes meant specific repairs of homes. However, long-term housing assistance is beyond the current capabilities of CPS agencies.

Another change observed in both the DR and IV-E programs, however, was increased linkages with other community agencies. This was found to occur under DR programs, whether or not extra funds were available. This was particularly critical in reference to long-term anti-poverty needs like housing assistance. In many cases the assistance provided came by connecting the family with agencies capable of longer-term assistance. Connecting to other agencies is most successful when workers remain in contact with families and facilitate the transition to services. Although not discussed in this paper, this was a part of another change discovered as we studied flexible assistance approaches—an increase in direct assistance from workers.

Worker knowledge and available resources. Linkages to other agencies can only happen when relationships have been established and cultivated and when workers are knowledgeable. Some workers encountered in our studies were very knowledgeable about resources in their community. Others were not. Part of the reason for this is that worker turnover in many CPS offices is particularly high and new workers are often ignorant of

available resources. The learning curve regarding available resources takes several months to reach useful levels. In the absence of a training program that focuses on resources and how to link families to resources, some workers will remain ignorant. The other side of the issue is that workers may be very well-informed that there *are no* available resources! Some communities, particularly those in rural areas, have few resources to meet family needs. The help that families need is often many miles away and the families encountered in these programs very often lack adequate transportation. This is why the increase in transportation assistance, as shown in the charts in this paper, is so important.

Examples of Housing Assistance

Case examples of housing assistance are available in all the reports cited but particularly in the Title IV-E reports and the PSOP study. The reader is encouraged to peruse those studies for case descriptions. Here are some examples from across our studies:

- In Mississippi, a child was in danger of removal from his grandmother's home because porch flooring was rotten. Title IV-E funds were used to repair the porch instead of paying for foster care for the child.
- In Minnesota, funds available as part of the differential response reforms were used for a trailer home in need of repair. The mother was given a voucher to buy repair materials and made the repairs herself. This averted removal of the children from the unsafe home.
- In one of our first studies in Missouri, a family was on the verge of eviction. The family assessment worker had no extra funds but under differential response was able to devote time assisting the family in contacting and using housing services to obtain stable housing.
- In Indiana, Title IV-E funds were used to purchase and install a fence around the yard to enable a mother to control her hyperactive four-year old child who had been found on a busy street and was in danger of being removed to foster care.
- In Minnesota, a family living in a tent in a state park was assisted in finding stable housing as part of the Parent Support Outreach program.

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