

## **Differential Response in Child Protection Services: A Comparison of Implementation and Child Safety Outcomes in Eight States**

A Dissertation Proposal Presented to  
the Faculty of the Heller School for Social Policy and Management  
Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts

By  
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Recurring maltreatment can have devastating, lifelong consequences for children who are victims of abuse and neglect. The primary mission of child protection services (CPS) agencies is to prevent the recurrence of child maltreatment by offering families services designed to prevent future maltreatment. In order for these services to be effective, however, families must actually engage in them. This study focuses on how differential response programs impact families' successful engagement in services as indicated by long-term child safety outcomes.

Differential response refers to a dual track system that allows public CPS agencies to respond to accepted reports of child abuse or neglect with either a traditional investigative response (TR) or an alternative response (AR). The AR is designed to be a less authoritative and less adversarial approach to families presenting a low- to moderate- risk of maltreatment. The AR involves collaboration with the family in a comprehensive assessment of the family's needs, risks and strengths and a referral to services on a voluntary basis. Methods of implementing DR systems vary considerably from one state to the next. The goal of this study is to determine which methods of implementation of DR are most effective and for which types of families by comparing child safety outcomes in the different states implementing DR.

This study proposes a three-part design. First it employs a pre-post design to examine the child safety outcomes of children whose cases are assigned to the AR compared to a similar group of children drawn from a matched non-DR state. Next this study will compare the various ways that the AR track has been implemented in eight states with DR systems and how this impacts child safety. Finally child safety outcomes will be compared between children assigned to the AR and those assigned to the TR within each DR state. The analyses use propensity score matching and Cox proportional hazards regression.

Data for this observational study will be drawn from the 2000-2012 data in the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) child files. Child safety will be measured by re-reporting, re-reporting with substantiation and subsequent foster care placement. Data will also be gathered from a survey of DR administrators.

The theoretical model underpinning the proposed study is McCurdy and Daro's (2001:113) Integrated Theory of Participant Involvement (ITPI) which outlines a conceptual model of parental engagement in services, "anchored in ecological and family systems frameworks." The adapted model of ITPI used for this study suggests that the way DR is implemented determines the individual, provider and program characteristics which impact enrollment and retention in services.

The results of this study will provide useful information to state policy makers in deciding the best ways to implement differential response. By assessing whether or not the AR overall is associated with improvement in child safety, states without DR may consider implementing it. One limitation of this study includes its reliance on re-reporting as a measure of child safety given that many incidences of child maltreatment go unreported.

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