Building a 21st-Century Research Agenda: Using Evidence to Promote Better Outcomes for Families

Executive Summary

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Purpose and Collaborators

The purpose of building a 21st-century research agenda to support child and family well-being is to:

1. Form a broad-based coalition of research partners to identify research gaps to support child welfare;
2. Articulate clear research questions relevant for jurisdiction leaders and policy-makers that need to be addressed;
3. Identify and implement strategies for conducting research that will close the gaps and answer those key questions; and
4. Help agencies use the research findings to improve policy, program, and practice strategies.

While previous efforts have been made to convene researchers and reports have been written on specific topic areas, there have been no recent efforts to create a comprehensive national research agenda for a modern-day child welfare system that addresses key knowledge gaps. Casey Family Programs (CFP), the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF), and the William T. Grant Foundation have partnered with philanthropic organizations; researchers; diversity, equity, and inclusion experts; policy analysts; agency leaders; and people with lived experience in the child welfare system to form three expert workgroups to identify research gaps and to support the use of findings in decision-making to improve practice and policy. Organizations in this effort include Black Administrators in Child Welfare, the National Indian Child Welfare Association, the Child Trends Hispanic Institute, the American Public Human Services Association, the Child Welfare League of America, and the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare.

High-Priority Research Gaps

While over 300 research gaps have been identified, which of the gaps appear most urgent to address? The answer to this question depends on context and perspective, and so we offer the gaps discussed here for consideration in the spirit of *"If everything is important, then nothing is important."* These high-priority gaps are clustered in three areas that align with the expert workgroups:

1. Community-Based Prevention ("CBP")
2. Child Protective Services and Prevention of Foster Care ("CPS")
3. Out-of-Home Care ("OOHC")

Within each area, gaps are presented as questions (rather than statements) and are listed in no particular order. The research gaps are numbered to align with their order in the main report; thus, for community-based prevention and out-of-home care, the numbers are not sequential. (The CPS group identified eight high-priority gaps.) For sub-questions that accompany many of the research gaps, see the main report.

Community-Based Prevention

CBP 1. What are the core components, effectiveness, sustainability, and transferability of community mobilization efforts for increasing access and use of supports and services?

CBP 5. What are the core components, effectiveness, sustainability, and transferability of efforts to embed prevention programs and services within settings visited by families for increasing access and use of supports and services?

CBP 7. What are the impacts of local and federal policies, supports, and programs that attempt to address inequities in systems (e.g., lack of access to high-quality childcare, the criminalization of poverty) on community, family, and child well-being?

CBP 9. What policies, programs, services, and supports can help increase access to safe, stable, and affordable housing and how do they impact maltreatment and child, family, and community well-being?

CBP 10. How can Community-Based Child Abuse Prevention (CBCAP) and other funding sources be leveraged to support the infrastructure needed to implement and sustain community-based prevention efforts?

Child Protective Services and Prevention of Foster Care

CPS 1. What is the level of effectiveness among existing practice and policy interventions that are aimed at preventing initial and recurrent child protective services (CPS) contact and out-of-home placement?

CPS 2. What can we learn from cultural practices, best practice models, and models considered less adversarial (e.g., ICWA courts, Healing to Wellness Courts) used with subpopulations (e.g., ICWA and active efforts) that can help transform our approach to child welfare?

CPS 3. What is the effectiveness of innovative and transformative programs and interventions that are currently in place but have not yet undergone a full-scale outcome evaluation and comparison to traditional intervention methods?

CPS 4. To what extent are risk factors commonly associated with CPS involvement (e.g., domestic violence, parental mental health, trauma histories, extreme poverty) experienced differently by families with varying dimensions of family diversity?

CPS 5. Are helplines more effective than hotlines at reducing CPS involvement, reducing out-of-home placement, and improving parent and caregiver well-being?

CPS 6. To what extent do income supports (e.g., universal basic income, antipoverty programs, paid family leave, tax credits) prevent CPS involvement and out-of-home placement?

CPS 7. How are partnerships between child welfare agencies formed with other entities, including researchers and community and institutional partners (e.g., public health, schools, legal advocates, courts, faith-based organizations, parents, foster care alumni/parents) in order to reduce CPS involvement and out-of-home placement and improve parent and caregiver well-being?

Out-of-Home Care

OOHC 1. Which child welfare and related policies and practices contribute to the most successful outcomes for children and youth placed in out-of-home care? This includes children and youth of all identities, acknowledging that there are certain groups that the data tell us are more vulnerable to experiencing inequities in services and outcomes, such as American Indian/Alaska Native, Black, Latinx, and GLBTQQ children.

OOHC 2. Does the involvement and consultation of foster care alumni, youth who are currently in care, parents, kinship parents, and other caregivers help improve the quality and safety of out-of-home care?

OOHC 3. What are ethnic-racial patterns of out-of-home care (e.g., type, quality, restrictiveness)? What factors drive these patterns, and how do they affect child well-being?

OOHC 4. What child welfare services are effective in promoting safe, stable, and timely reunification, adoption. and legal guardianship? Reunification services include intervention models and strategies that are based on a set of shared values concerning the centrality of family in practice.

OOHC 5. What are effective strategies to reduce re-entry to care for different age groups, such as infants or teens in out-of-home care? How might the provision of post-reunification services (e.g., timely in-home crisis intervention services or other services) promote stable reunification and prevent re-entry?

OOHC 8. What are effective strategies to promote permanency outcomes for infants and very young children in out-of-home care (including situations in which infants and young children are in out-of-home care with their mothers)? Are there any inequities in services or outcomes for these young children and their families?

OOHC 9. How can we develop evidence-based recruitment, screening, and matching practices to engage highly effective resource parents for children in out-of-home care? (The meaning of "highly effective" would be defined in the RFP but might include such dimensions as the ability of the resource parents to support the overall case plan, coordinate with birth parents, and support child development and well-being.)

Summary

The full report contains a large array of research gaps that need to be addressed to inform a 21st-century system to support children and their families. While we call out the need for greater housing, income, mental health, and substance abuse treatment supports for families, these are areas where other systems beyond child welfare need to do more to help families and to do so in a more coordinated manner. This report also contains recommendations for ***how*** research should be undertaken. It should be viewed as a starting place for the field: a research agenda to be refined and updated over time. While the lack of replication studies poses a significant challenge across many areas of child welfare, we do have a foundation of research to build on for many of them. But given geographic and other population variability, many research questions must be framed in the context of local communities, and interventions need to be tested in multiple jurisdictions. Because of advances being made in child welfare and other related fields, we are confident that with the proper research funding, many of these knowledge gaps can be addressed over the next 10 years.