

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

Scandalous Politics: Child Welfare Policy in the States . By Juliet F. Gainsborough. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010. Pp. 216. \$26.95 (paper).

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1z27w3z3>

Journal

Social Service Review, 85(4)

ISSN

0037-7961

Author

Berrick, Jill Duerr

Publication Date

2011-12-01

DOI

10.1086/664680

Peer reviewed

reside. A question worthy of careful study is whether the effects of these influences on youth in disadvantaged neighborhoods differ substantially from their effects on youth in more affluent communities. Also deserving of careful investigation is the likelihood that differences in these effects will have different action implications.

The effect of unemployment and poverty today may further disadvantage youth in poor neighborhoods; society appears unwilling to address income inequality or disadvantage caused by lack of access to suitable housing, education, and community centers. It also seems to lack a willingness to provide employment opportunities for adults who can serve as positive role models for youth. What are the causes and correlates of violence that confront youth in these neighborhoods? Does violence begin in the poor schools that fail to recognize their needs and abilities? Does it result from domestic conflict in families where parents are poor because of unemployment or are forced to live in housing that provokes conflict? Or, does violence emerge because social agencies are unable to provide the social services, recreational programs, and sports that are readily available and even prescribed for youth in middle-class and affluent neighborhoods? Some of the variable responses and behavior of boys in the middle-class neighborhood of Lower Mills suggest that there might be some validity to this question. When adolescents in poor and disadvantaged neighborhoods see no economic opportunity in their future, and have no resources to respond to their environment in socially acceptable ways, it is not surprising that violence erupts and has to be responded to in the many ways that Harding describes. Earlier studies by Terry Williams and William Kornblum follow young people facing the challenges of violence, poverty, and racism in the housing projects in New York (*Growing Up Poor* [Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1985]; *The Uptown Kids: Struggle and Hope in the Projects* [New York: Grosset/Putnam, 1994]). They provide evidence that these youth are able to endure and succeed because they receive a helping hand. Williams and Kornblum point out the talent, drive, and energy in those and other cities' housing projects, arguing that such resources can be harnessed for the common good or can be driven underground. Just coping with violence is not an inevitable response. A far more appropriate response is to craft better social policy that advances opportunity and supports reduction in racial and income inequality.

Rosemary C. Sarri
University of Michigan

Scandalous Politics: Child Welfare Policy in the States. By Juliet F. Gainsborough. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010. Pp. 216. \$26.95 (paper).

For the public, the newspaper story is gripping: "(Nubia's) death is a frustrating reminder that two decades of child-welfare reforms in Florida haven't done enough to keep vulnerable kids safe" (*TheLedger.com* [Lakeland, FL], "'Toxic-Truck' Death: DCF Overlooks Danger Signs," March 22, 2011). For the child welfare administrator, the inevitable has happened again. A child should have been protected, child welfare professionals are blamed, the public is incensed, and something must be done. A child death review team will deliberate. The case will be dissected by the agency, by the legislature, and by the press. Lessons will be learned about investigations or monitoring, risk assessment or commu-

nication. System adjustments will be applied. And the question persists: how can one prevent it from happening again?

According to federal sources, an estimated 1,740 children died as a result of maltreatment in 2008 (US Department of Health and Human Services, *Child Maltreatment 2009* [Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2010]). That number was almost unchanged from the year before and represents about 2.3 children per 100,000 nationwide. Other investigators suggest that rates of maltreatment-related fatalities are at least 50 percent higher than the federal figures.¹ According to estimates from data in the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) and from other sources, somewhere between 15 and 20 percent of child-maltreatment-related deaths involve children who received services from a child welfare agency.² The great irony, of course, is that publicly supported child welfare services are ostensibly designed to protect children from harm; public outrage is therefore swift and fierce when a child's preventable death occurs. In *Scandalous Politics*, Juliet Gainsborough examines what child welfare administrators already know if they have faced tragedy: heads roll, administrative rules change, and state policy making is certain.

Gainsborough, a newcomer to child welfare, is a veteran of public policy analysis. She has studied a range of metropolitan policy issues, such as transportation, sports complexes, and suburbanization, so her foray into the social services offers a fresh perspective. She writes that her interest in child welfare was borne out of her personal experience as a volunteer on a citizen review panel. Her policy lens is thought provoking, yet her recent immersion into the thorny world of child welfare sometimes serves as an impediment to a deep understanding of the field.

Largely drawing on John Kingdon's notion that "focusing events" provide impetus for public policy making (*Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, 2nd ed. [New York: Longman, 1995], 95), Gainsborough examines high-profile child-welfare-related deaths, which she refers to as "scandals" (11). In addition to the drama encapsulated in a vulnerable child, portrayal of an adult as grossly immoral or inept, and errors or omissions by government-sponsored actors, Gainsborough highlights the important role of the media, "policy entrepreneurs" (149), the courts, the election cycle, and the complicated intergovernmental relationships among federal, state, county, and contracted agencies. All of her analyses point in a similar direction: a child welfare scandal is typically followed by public policy making and administrative rule making to regulate bureaucratic functioning. These are efforts to redeem public confidence in the protective mission of children's services. Despite such efforts, additional funding to support vulnerable children and families, or the agencies designed to help them, is often in short supply.

Gainsborough's quantitative analysis examines the role of scandals in child welfare policy making and state-sponsored funding. The approach includes variables regularly seen in the child welfare literature (e.g., foster care prevalence, child victimization) as well as variables more often applied in the public policy arena (e.g., Democratic legislature, Democratic governor, public opinion liberalism, professionalism of the legislature). Through a regression analysis, she finds that several factors are associated with public policy making following a child welfare scandal. Child welfare policy making is positively associated with the professionalism of the legislature and with the state median income. It is negatively associated with county-level administration of child welfare services, a location in the northeastern United States, and the size of the state's African American population.

Her findings on state child welfare funding suggest that states with a more liberal-leaning population spend more, per child, than other states. State per-

child funding of child welfare services also is positively associated with county- (not state-) level administration of those services, with Democratic control of the legislature, and with a location in the Midwest. A more disturbing finding is that state child welfare spending per child is negatively associated with the proportion of the state population that is African American. Gainsborough indicates that child welfare scandals do not appear to be related to state child welfare funding.

Rather than use the NCANDS-developed measure of child death or child death following child welfare contact, Gainsborough developed her own measure, "scandal," which is said to occur "when the state's highest-circulation newspaper carries three or more stories about the way in which the actions or inaction of the child welfare agency contributed to the death or injury of a child" (69, n. 1). This measure may be problematic, however. It unfortunately combines deaths that occur at the hands of parents with those at the hands of foster and adoptive parents. Both high-profile events are likely to cause policy and practice responses, but the responses could differ substantially, depending on the homicide suspect. For example, Gainsborough's examination of out-of-home placement rates following scandal is based on the widely held view that child welfare agencies are risk averse following a child death and that such events increase the likelihood that staff will remove children from high-risk homes. The hypotheses do not hold true in the three states examined by her qualitative analysis (Florida, Colorado, and New Jersey). Some of the scandals highlighted in these states center on maltreatment-related mortality that occurred at the hands of parents (the deaths of two of four children reported in Colorado), and others center on deaths that occurred at the hands of alternative caregivers (a foster mother in Florida, a foster father and a mother's boyfriend in Colorado, and a family friend in New Jersey). Child welfare system entries may rise following a death at the hands of a birth parent but decline after a high-profile fatality in foster care.

Public outrage following a child-maltreatment-related death seems to have no analogy in other spheres. Criminals recommit crimes following incarceration, yet public opprobrium is rarely heaped on police for having missed the evidence of risk. Regardless of whether such a public response is appropriate, negative community reactions are unlikely to change unless the public understands the complexity of the work, child welfare administrators are better able to use the media to publicize the positive outcomes associated with child protection, and the field of child welfare is better armed with data to guide fatality prevention practice.

Emily Putnam-Hornstein's work in this context is instructive ("Do 'Accidents' Happen? An Examination of Injury Mortality among Maltreated Children," PhD diss. [University of California, Berkeley, School of Social Welfare, 2010]). Using data from a population-based cohort of infants born in California between 1999 and 2006, she examines intentional and unintentional injury deaths from birth to age 5. Specifically she examines injury deaths due to child maltreatment including neglect or abandonment, finding that a full 37 percent of the children are reported to child protective services prior to their death. These children are not randomly distributed across the child population. Instead, they are clustered among children who share common features. These deaths cluster among children born with a known health risk (i.e., low birth weight or a birth abnormality), African American children, males, children whose birth is paid by Medicaid, children born to young mothers, children whose mothers have low educational attainment, and those whose fathers are not identified on the birth certificate.

Gainsborough's work informs child welfare administrators to be wary of their

assignment if an election looms, if policy advocates are well organized, and if the media is hungry. These administrators would also be well advised to use emerging data to target preventive and intensive treatment services to families at greatest risk of infanticide.

Jill Duerr Berrick
University of California, Berkeley

Notes

1. Marcia E. Herman-Giddens, Gail Brown, Sarah Verbiest, Pamela J. Carlson, Elizabeth G. Hooten, Eleanor Howell, and John D. Butts, "Underascertainment of Child Abuse Mortality in the United States," *Journal of the American Medical Association* 282, no. 5 (1999): 463–67; Tessa L. Crume, Carolyn DiGiuseppi, Tim Byers, Andrew Sirotiak, and Carol J. Garrett, "Underascertainment of Child Maltreatment Fatalities by Death Certificates, 1990–1998," *Pediatrics* 110, no. 2 (2002): e18.

2. Susan Sorenson and Julie Peterson, "Traumatic Child Death and Documented Maltreatment History, Los Angeles," *American Journal of Public Health* 84, no. 4 (1994): 623–27; Nancy Peddle, Ching-Tung Wang, Javier Díaz, and Robert Reid, "Current Trends in Child Abuse Prevention and Fatalities: The 2000 Fifty State Survey," report (National Center on Child Abuse Prevention Research, Chicago, 2002); US Department of Health and Human Services (2010).

Laughing Saints and Righteous Heroes: Emotional Rhythms in Social Movement Groups. By Erika Summers Effler. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010. Pp. 256. \$70.00 (cloth); \$23.00 (paper).

Most studies of social movements examine aspects of their collective or institutional features: their origins in long-term grievances, their evolving structures, their processes of mobilization, their patterns of leadership, their effect on politics or policy, their use of symbols, the effectiveness of their strategies and tactics, and the reasons they become institutionalized or fade into obscurity. There has been less scholarship, however, about the motives of individuals who join (and remain in or leave) social movements, about the emotional effect of social movement participation on participants' daily lives, and about the effects of often high-risk behaviors and frequent organizational setbacks on social movement groups, particularly at the local level. A well-constructed ethnographic study, Erika Summers Effler's *Laughing Saints and Righteous Heroes* explores these questions in an insightful, provocative, highly personal, and occasionally frustrating manner.

Professor Effler bases her book on 3 years of in-depth participatory research among two high-intensity social movement groups: a Catholic Worker community and STOP, an anti-death penalty organization. She was intrigued by the reasons that such groups maintain the commitment of their members despite frequent, high-cost failures. Rather than pursue this inquiry through collective investigation, as have many previous scholars of social movements, she seeks "to understand the emotional dynamics of such groups, and how group dynamics either motivate the production of collective goods or drain participants of their feelings of efficacy and enthusiasm" (1). Her goal is "to describe the processes that support collective efforts to work toward visions of the common good" (xvii).