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Child Welfare Reform in the United States: Findings from a Local Agency Survey

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Efforts to improve the public welfare and child welfare system sparked an unprecedented amount of federal legislation in the 1990s, including the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA), the Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 and Interethnic Adoption Provisions of 1996 (MEPA-IEP), and welfare reform. Such reforms allow an unprecedented degree of flexibility, but little is known about their implementation. Researchers administered the Local Agency Survey to the first national probability sample of public child welfare agencies from 1999 to 2000. Findings indicate that ASFA has had the most effect on child welfare service delivery. Welfare reform has had less effect, and MEPA-IEP seems to have had little effect at all.

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Efforts to protect children and ensure their well-being have long been controversial in the United States, reflecting changing and contested notions of childhood, poverty, and the role of race-ethnicity in development (Fass & Mason, 2000). In its most simplistic form, one can characterize this debate as one between parents' rights and children's rights. Currently, the more child-focused approach appears to be in ascendance, after a period of reforms aimed at preserving and supporting birth-parents and -families (Larner, Stevenson, & Behrman, 1998). Several reforms, such as the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) and the Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 and Interethnic Adoption Provisions of 1996 (MEPA-IEP) refocus the child protection system on the child's fundamental right to a safe, permanent home.

In part, this renewed emphasis on child outcomes reflects disillusionment with prior policies. The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (P.L. 96-272) was designed to address criticisms of the public child welfare system by emphasizing due process rights for parents, placement prevention, timely achievement of permanence for children, and subsidies for special-needs adoption. Despite many improvements in services to parents and children resulting from these reforms, children typically still remain in care for more than 18 months and often go home, only to enter again (Stein, 2000; U.S. General Accounting Office [GAO], 1997). Mounting evidence from state and local data showed high rates of placement moves of children who stay in care, barriers to adopting children who were not likely to go home, high reentry rates for children who do go home, and particularly long stays of

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African American children (Berrick, Needell, Barth, & Jonson-Reid, 1998; Goerge, Wulczyn, & Harden, 1996). Researchers have also expressed special concerns regarding the increasing number of infants and very young children in placement (Berrick et al., 1998). Research on brain development has drawn public attention to the birth-to-3-years phase as a critical period for child development (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000).

These findings raised enough concerns to call for a major re-examination of child welfare policy—an effort that resulted in several major pieces of federal legislation in the 1990s. The absence of more definitive child welfare data also encouraged Congress to fund the first national probability study of child welfare services (National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being [NSCAW] Research Group, 2002) as part of welfare reform, passed in the fall of 1996. This survey included questions for agency managers about the implementation of key child welfare and welfare reform legislation, briefly summarized here.

ASFA

ASFA represents a renewed attempt to address these persistent concerns and correct the perceived failures of P.L. 96-272. ASFA shortened timelines for permanency hearings and termination of parental rights and required the documentation of reasonable efforts to develop an alternative plan for permanency, should reunification efforts fail. ASFA expressly allows concurrent planning. Under certain aggravated circumstances, agencies may waive or bypass reunification services for high-risk families. ASFA also authorized funds for incentive payments, authorized in earlier legislation, to states that improve their adoption rates.

MEPA-IEP

MEPA-IEP represents an effort to speed up permanence by reducing barriers to adoption based on race and ethnicity. Prior to

or policies of DHHS. The complete NSCAW Local Agency Survey is available at http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/core/ongoing_research/afc/wellbeing_reports.html.

MEPA, the field widely viewed racial matching in child welfare placements as culturally competent practice (Alexander & Curtis, 1996), and related requirements had even become encoded in state law (Banks, 1998). Due to concerns by some civil rights attorneys (e.g., Bartholet, 1999) and elected officials (e.g., Senator Howard Metzenbaum) that African American children lacked equal access to adoption, the government initiated efforts to reduce or eliminate the role of racial matching in adoption. As a rapprochement between the two perspectives, it passed MEPA in 1993 and strengthened it in 1996 to outlaw discrimination based on race when making placement decisions, but also required diligent recruitment efforts targeted toward potential foster and adoptive parents of color (Brooks, Barth, Bussiere, & Patterson, 1999).

Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity and Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA)

Although not aimed specifically at child welfare, PRWORA, or welfare reform, is also expected to affect the child welfare system (Berrick, 1999). PRWORA replaced Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) with Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), ended the entitlement to cash assistance for poor families, imposed work requirements on recipient families, and established time limits for receiving assistance. Such changes may put additional stress on poor families and potentially blur "the boundaries between destitution and child maltreatment" (Frame, 1999, p. 748). Or, on the positive side, TANF may result in increased coordination and cooperation between income assistance and child welfare agencies.

The Local Agency Survey

Relatively little is known about the implementation of these major pieces of federal legislation or the emerging service delivery models that they generate. The Local Agency Survey (LAS) of

NSCAW, administered from 1999 to 2000, provides a contemporary picture of child welfare administrators' perceptions of and experiences with the implementation of ASFA, MEPA-IEP, and TANF. NSCAW is a multiyear research study funded by the Children's Bureau of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). NSCAW will provide the first information collected from a national probability sample of public child welfare agencies and is primarily intended to yield information regarding the characteristics, needs, experiences, and outcomes for children and families investigated by child welfare agencies following a report of abuse and neglect. As part of this effort, however, researchers have also collected information using LAS from child welfare administrators regarding the characteristics of their agencies, policy environments, and experiences implementing relevant child welfare policy. This article reports the findings most relevant to understanding the effects to date of ASFA, MEPA-IEP, and TANF on child welfare service delivery in the United States.

Method

NSCAW used a two-stage stratified sample design to create a national probability sample of children entering child welfare services; this report is only concerned with the first stage, which involved the selection of 100 primary sampling units (PSUs). NSCAW chose PSUs using a probability-proportionate-to-size procedure so that the sample would include any child who was investigated for child abuse and neglect with equal probabilities. PSUs were geographic areas that encompassed the population served by a child welfare agency. In most cases, PSUs comprised a county or a group of counties; however, in larger metropolitan areas, the researchers defined smaller geographic areas to facilitate sampling and data collection. A few counties did not agree to participate, leaving 92 responding counties and 97 PSUs (some large counties contained multiple PSUs). Details of the sample design and construction of PSUs are documented in previous re-

ports (Biemer, Liu, Iannacchione, Byron, & Cano, 1998; NSCAW Research Group, 2002).

Instrumentation and Procedures

The researchers collected data from local child welfare administrators in two stages. Field staff assigned to each PSU—who were concurrently interviewing children, their caregivers, and their caseworkers—interviewed child welfare agency managers, who also completed a self-administered questionnaire (SAQ). Both instruments included questions about staff resources, foster care resources, and service activities for the most recent fiscal year. Following pilot testing, which involved just the interview, the researchers split the more detailed questions about caseload and financing, which would require input from administrative databases and other agency staff (e.g., personnel managers or fiscal officers), into a second part of the instrument, which became the SAQ.

To improve data quality, the field representative conducted a brief edit check of the completed SAQ when it was picked up from the agency director to ensure that all required items had been completed. The field representatives encouraged the agency directors to provide any missing data or explain why information could not be provided. The researchers did not make an effort to corroborate self-reports with publicly available administrative information.

Weighting

Although researchers interviewed child welfare agency directors from both very small and very large counties, they did not weight answers equally in the final analysis because the responses described child welfare agency characteristics representing very different numbers of children, foster parents, and child welfare workers. To capture the characteristics of the nation's child welfare agencies, the researchers weighted PSUs in proportion to their size.*

* Additional details about weighting are available from the authors.

Approach to Data Analyses

NSCAW is primarily focused on children and families in the child welfare system. Thus, the design did not maximize the precision of the estimates for LAS. The study made adjustments, however, to provide dependable estimates. To account for the unequal probability sampling of agencies, the researchers weighted the data by the inverse of the sample inclusion probabilities. This process, although necessary for valid inferences, can increase the standard errors of the estimates in some situations. To account for the stratified, clustered sample design used for the local agency sample, the authors used SUDAAN (Shah, Barnwell, & Bieler, 1997) to produce the weighted estimates, standard errors, *t* tests, and chi-square tests of significance. They computed the endpoints of the 95% confidence intervals using the logit transformation of the proportion, because the symmetric interval based on the normal distribution sometimes gave negative values for the lower limits of the confidence intervals. Whereas this transformation protects against negative values, it also inflates the confidence intervals on the higher end. As such, the large confidence intervals result in conservative findings.

The authors used a structured set of procedures to ensure that the data analyses addressed the most important questions with the greatest certainty about the answers. They identified a number of key issues and limited the analyses to the comparisons considered most important. They completed all analyses twice—first unweighted and then weighted. All analyses included in this article used the weighted data. On rare occasions, the authors used the unweighted data to confirm findings of marginal differences in weighted data. Of particular interest were any differences in responses by the county characteristics described here:

Administration was defined as either a county-administered (35%) or state-administered (65%) child welfare agency. The study did not include agencies that identified themselves as having other types of administration ($n = 3$) in the analyses involving administration type.

County size was defined as (a) small, fewer than 5,000 children; (b) medium, 5,000 to 24,999 children; or (c) large, 25,000 children or more. Due to the small sample size, the researchers later combined small- and medium-size counties into a group called *other* (32% of PSUs) for comparison with large counties (68% of PSUs).

Poverty level was defined as either (a) nonpoor, 5% or less of county families with children living below the 50% poverty level (49% of PSUs); or (b) poor, more than 5% of county families with children living below the 50% poverty level (51% of PSUs).

Urbanicity was defined according to U.S. Census Bureau definitions, yielding a breakdown of (a) urban (73% of PSUs), greater than 50% of the population living in an urban area, and (b) nonurban (27% of PSUs), all areas that did not meet this requirement.

The study only found one significant association between these PSU characteristics (urban/nonurban X county size were strongly associated, $p < .001$), indicating that urban counties were far more likely to be large than nonurban counties.

Results

The analyses identified high levels of implementation activities, especially in urban areas and state-administered child welfare agencies. This section describes results by policy and in regard to activities undertaken to address the racial disproportionality of minority children in foster care.

The Early Effects of TANF

Child welfare agencies reported few changes in service delivery programs following the implementation of TANF. The authors estimate that only 24% of agencies routinely linked employment services with child welfare services, and only 22% routinely made referrals from TANF to child welfare services when clients were sanctioned. According to agency directors' perceptions, 52% of agencies experienced an increase in the number of child welfare cases handled by the agency after the implementation of TANF,

and 45% experienced an increase in the number of hours spent on a child welfare case. The most common change in service delivery was the creation of multiprogram teams that include both TANF and child protection services caseworkers (about 38% of PSUs reported this response to TANF).

The study found some indication that creation of multiprogram teams was related to type of agency administration: State-administered agencies (66%) were more likely than county-administered agencies (14%) to create such teams ($\chi^2 = 4.33, p = .05$). Likewise, some evidence existed that state-administered agencies (46%) were more likely than county-administered ones (2%) to routinely make referrals from TANF to child welfare services when clients were sanctioned ($\chi^2 = 4.69, p = .03$). The study found no evidence of any differences in the effects of TANF with regard to county size, degree of urbanicity, or county poverty.

The Early Effects of ASFA

According to the authors' estimates, ASFA brought about a greater emphasis on ensuring the safety of the child (versus a family preservation approach) for about 60% of child welfare agencies. For an even greater percentage of agencies (93%), ASFA shortened time frames for decisionmaking to less than 12 months (some agencies had shorter timeframes in place prior to ASFA's passage). More than half of agencies reported an increased post-ASFA emphasis on adoption for older children, whereas almost three-quarters (74%) witnessed an increased emphasis on adoption for children living in kinship foster care.

Smaller changes include expedited access to drug treatment for clients (33% of agencies) and an increase (28%) in the number of families precluded from receiving reunification services. Most agencies (78%) did not indicate any change in the number of cases handled, nor in the agency's client base (79%). On the other hand, approximately 60% of agencies reported an increase attributed to ASFA in the average number of hours spent on a child welfare case. Almost all agencies saw an increase in regulations and paperwork after ASFA.

Some evidence exists that state-administered agencies (53%) were more likely than county-administered agencies (7%) to have experienced an increase in the number of families precluded from receiving reunification services after ASFA ($\chi^2 = 4.61, p = .04$). The study found strong evidence that nonurban counties (84%) were more likely than urban counties (37%) to have increased their emphasis on adoption for children living in kinship foster care after ASFA ($\chi^2 = 7.12, p = .009$). It found no evidence of any differences in the effects of ASFA with regard to county size or county poverty.

Implementation of Concurrent Planning

The estimates suggest that most agencies (87%) have already implemented concurrent planning, which involves making plans for reunification and adoption at the same time and is expressly allowed by ASFA. The study found some evidence that large counties (70%) were less likely to have completed implementation of concurrent planning than other counties (90%; $\chi^2 = 6.49, p = .04$), and that urban counties (65%) were less likely to have completed implementation of concurrent planning than nonurban counties (92%; $\chi^2 = 6.67, p = .04$). The authors noted no differences in relative proportions of poor families or whether the agency was county or state administered.

Adoption

The mean number per agency of children in care with a goal of adoption on the first day of the most recent fiscal year was about 46, 68% of whom were legally free for adoption. By the end of that fiscal year, about one-third of those with an adoption goal were placed for adoption, and about one-fifth were legally adopted.

The study found strong evidence that state-administered agencies had higher rates (.54) of adoption placements (as compared to the number of children legally free for adoption) than county-administered agencies (.17; $t = 2.53, p = .01$). Strong evidence also existed that the rate of legal adoption, compared to the number of children legally free for adoption, differed by type

of agency administration, urbanicity, and county poverty: State-administered agencies had a higher rate (.37) than county-administered agencies (.08; $t = 3.13, p = .002$), urban counties had a higher rate (.41) than nonurban counties (.14; $t = -2.51, p = .01$), and nonpoor counties had a higher rate (.36) than poor counties (.10; $t = 2.76, p = .007$). The study found no evidence of any differences in adoption rates with regard to county size.

The Implementation of MEPA-IEP

Most agencies (77%) reported no increase in the proportion of transracial foster care placements or transracial adoption placements following MEPA-IEP. Less than a third (29%) of agencies increased training about the ways that race can be used in making foster care and adoption placements after MEPA. Only 8% created new recruitment resources following MEPA. Likewise, no agencies experienced a change in the number of cases handled by the agency, and only 2% experienced a change in the agency's client base. The great majority (97%) reported no change in the average number of hours spent on a child welfare case, although 17% witnessed an increase in agency regulations and paperwork.

Strong evidence shows that the creation of new recruitment resources was associated with urbanicity, with urban counties (39%) significantly more likely than nonurban counties (0%) to create new recruitment resources ($\chi^2 = 8.58, p = .004$). There is also some evidence that creation of new recruitment resources was also related to county size, with large counties (48%) more likely than other counties (44%) to make such a change ($\chi^2 = 5.47, p = .02$). The study found some evidence that county-administered agencies (94%) were more likely than state-administered agencies (38%) to experience no changes in agency services ($\chi^2 = 5.95, p = .02$). It found no evidence of any differences in the effects of MEPA with regard to county poverty.

Disproportionality of African American Children in Care

Only a small minority (14%) of agencies indicated concern about the overrepresentation or underrepresentation of children of color

in certain services, such as foster care or community-based services. Likewise, only 15% of agencies are involved in training initiatives designed to address overrepresentation or underrepresentation of children of color in services; only 10% were making efforts to racially match child welfare workers and families. Of agencies, 2% reported using performance measures to reduce racial imbalance in placement.

The study found strong evidence that concerns about overrepresentation or underrepresentation of children of color were associated with county size and urbanicity: Large counties (54%) were significantly more likely than other counties (6%; $\chi^2 = 9.12$, $p = .003$) and urban counties (45%) were more likely than nonurban counties (5%; $\chi^2 = 9.32$, $p = .003$) to have such concerns. Some evidence also showed that state-administered agencies (25%) were more likely than county-administered agencies (4%; $\chi^2 = 4.36$, $p = .04$) to have concerns about representation of children of color. The researchers found no differences with regard to county poverty.

Strong evidence also shows that participation in special training initiatives to address over representation or underrepresentation of children of color was associated with county size: Large counties (58%) were significantly more likely than other counties (6%) ($\chi^2 = 7.79$, $p = .007$) to participate in such training. State-administered agencies (52%) were also significantly more likely than county-administered agencies (2%) to participate ($\chi^2 = 7.48$, $p = .008$). Some evidence shows that poor counties (49%) were more likely than nonpoor counties (4%) to participate in these initiatives ($\chi^2 = 5.50$, $p = .02$). The analysis noted no differences with regard to degree of urbanicity.

Discussion

The analyses clearly indicate a greater effect, albeit an uneven one, on child welfare agencies from ASFA than from TANF or MEPA-IEP. ASFA has put a greater emphasis on ensuring safety.

It has also shortened time frames for decisionmaking, resulting in an increased number of families who do not get reunification services and increasing the emphasis on adoption for older children and for children living in kinship foster care. The great majority of agencies have implemented concurrent planning.

These findings suggest that concurrent planning, expressly allowed by ASFA, has found widespread use and may be contributing to the continued increase in rates of adoption, which have grown by more than 50% since the passage of ASFA (Administration for Children and Families, 2001). Whereas some evidence shows that states had already moved in the direction of expediting permanence prior to ASFA (GAO, 1999), the growth in adoptions seems unabated. Yet these findings indicate areas in which the growth in adoption is slow or vulnerable because of lower use of concurrent planning, reunification bypass, and specialized adoption recruitment.

State-administered agencies reported a far higher rate of adoptions than county-administered agencies. They also had more recruitment efforts and were more likely to make determinations that families were not eligible for reunification services after ASFA. This is consistent with other evidence in the survey that county-administered child welfare systems made more modest progress in adjusting to child welfare changes. A little more than one-quarter (28%) of child welfare agencies saw an increase in the number of families that were precluded from receiving reunification services after ASFA. This is not as large as might be feared by those who were concerned that ASFA would greatly diminish the fair chances of parents to resume the care of their children (e.g., Hollingsworth, 2000). Newly available findings from the NSCAW survey of children in foster care for one year indicate that about 10% of the children had no reunification services (DHHS, 2002)—a level that can be considered consistent with this LAS.

TANF appears to have had much less effect on child welfare services since its passage in 1996, although coordination between child welfare and TANF agencies has increased modestly. Of

those agencies that did move toward service integration, state-administered agencies were more likely than county-administered agencies to create interdisciplinary teams that include both TANF and child protective services workers. Likewise, state-administered agencies were more likely than county-administered agencies to routinely make referrals from TANF to child welfare services when clients were sanctioned.

On the other hand, more than half of agency administrators perceived an increase in the number of child welfare cases handled by the agency following TANF implementation. This finding would seem to reinforce the widespread concern expressed regarding the potentially negative effects of PRWORA for the most troubled families. Other studies, however, indicate no significant increases in child welfare caseloads as a result of TANF: "Caseload data show that allegations and substantiated reports of abuse and neglect have been stable or declining since welfare reform was implemented, continuing the trend in caseloads prior to welfare reform" (Geen, Gender, Leos-Urbel, & Markowitz, 2001, p. 2). This discrepancy may be due to LAS's reliance on self-reported perceptions of change, rather than analysis of caseload data. Or perhaps a change in the makeup of the child welfare caseload includes an increase in families sanctioned from welfare, but no net increase in abuse and neglect or foster care entrances, because some other portion of the caseload has declined.

Of the three major federal policies, MEPA-IEP seems to have had the least effect on service delivery. Although an estimated 29% of agencies increased training after MEPA-IEP, more than three-quarters experienced no increase in the proportion of transracial foster care or adoption placements. Only 8% of agencies, generally in large urban areas, created new recruitment resources, despite the diligent efforts requirement under MEPA-IEP. Most agencies did not identify the overrepresentation or underrepresentation of children of color as an agency concern.

When the concern about overrepresentation or underrepresentation of children of color was noted, this was most often in larger and more urban counties. At the same time, however, urban coun-

ties have higher adoption rates than other counties, partially because they are also much more likely to have developed specialized recruitment resources. Furthermore, nonurban counties were more likely than urban counties to have *no* changes in agency services as a result of MEPA-IEP. This may be in part because of their greater racial homogeneity. Again, state-administered agencies seemed to have a head start on county-administered agencies in implementing MEPA-IEP. Participation in special training initiatives to address overrepresentation or underrepresentation of children of color was more likely in state-administered agencies, and they were more likely to have changed their adoption activities following the passage of MEPA-IEP.

In part, the delay in implementing MEPA-IEP may be due to the relative lack of guidance and contradictory information provided to the states (or by states to counties): A GAO report (1998) noted that "state and local officials and caseworkers [demonstrate] lingering confusion about allowable actions under the law" (p. 3). Likewise, MEPA-IEP created new regulations for child welfare agencies without providing additional funding. It is likely that states and counties have little money available for initiating special training or recruitment efforts. Finally, MEPA-IEP challenges deeply ingrained caseworker beliefs about race and ethnicity and the best interests of children. Changing these views is likely to be a long process that is difficult to affect and monitor.

Limitations of the Study

One of the major strengths of this study is that it provides the first information collected from a national probability sample of public child welfare agencies. At the same time, however, the sample is modest in size, and much of the information that was requested was difficult for agencies to provide. For example, although the counties selected are a national probability sample, more than 3,000 U.S. counties have child welfare agencies, and these data are based on a random sample of only 92 agencies. Although the authors reweighted the data to reflect the nation's

composition, the standard errors were large because of the small sample size. These large standard errors were accounted for in the analyses that compare state- and county-administered or urban and nonurban counties. (For simple descriptive statistics, such as percentages, however, these estimates often had confidence intervals that allow a broad range of possibilities as to the actual percentage). This presentation provides only the findings for which the authors are confident that sample size is sufficient and differences are large enough to report. Therefore, when the analysis does indicate significant differences or strong evidence of differences, they have reason to have confidence in those assertions.

Another limitation of the study is its exclusive use of self-report and administrator perceptions. Although administrator perceptions are certainly important and relevant to the issues at hand, they cannot be considered a completely valid measure and would have been strengthened with an independent audit of practices, policies, and expenditures. Unfortunately, corroboration with publicly available administrative information was not possible because many of these data have no easy counterpart, and resources for this component of the larger NSCAW effort were limited. Nor were confirmatory interviews with other respondents possible. In an attempt to ensure more accurate data, the research instrument was divided into two parts, one to be completed after the interview with input from administrative databases and other agency staff. Likewise, the field representatives checked all of the returned SAQs for completeness and followed up with agency directors to get any missing data. Despite such efforts, completion of the SAQ took longer than anticipated—an average of 6 hours, 43 minutes—and many items were not completed. The lack of accurate and complete administrative data is an enduring issue for child welfare agencies (DiLeonardi & Yuan, 2000).

Conclusion

Despite its limitations, this study represents a useful effort to ascertain the national effects of child welfare policy reform. Child

welfare services develop in ways that are somewhat idiosyncratic to local conditions and policies, yet even in this small sample, characteristics of services are strongly related to their context. For example, the differences between child welfare services emphases in state- and county-administered systems should have value to state administrators in understanding the tendencies of service delivery under different administrative arrangements. Findings from this study strongly suggest that state-administered child welfare systems have made more rapid progress in implementing child welfare policy reforms associated with ASFA, MEPA-IEP, and TANF and, arguably, have experienced more success, for example, reporting a much higher rate of adoptions than county-administered systems. Although not a popular idea, some benefits to centralization may exist.

A number of urban and nonurban differences also emerged as significant, especially in the area of minority children's involvement with the child welfare system. Considering the typically greater racial diversity of urban areas, it is not surprising that urban counties were more likely to express concerns about the overrepresentation or underrepresentation of children of color in the system, as well as to implement special recruitment efforts and training initiatives. Interestingly, however, large, urban counties were less likely than nonurban counties to have completed implementation of concurrent planning, and nonurban counties were more likely to have begun increasing their emphasis on adoption, especially of children in kinship foster care (often children of color). In effect, ASFA may be helping to even out some of the differences between child welfare systems in urban and nonurban areas.

ASFA may also be evening out practices between states and counties, as many states had already implemented key features of ASFA, including shorter permanency planning time frames, specific situations that do not require reunification efforts, and termination of parental rights and responsibilities on schedule even if an adoptive home has not been located. The financial incentives related to ASFA may also be having an effect, as states

are able to reduce outlays considerably if they reduce the numbers of children in foster care, and they can also avoid substantial penalties by being in compliance with ASFA performance standards.

One of the most striking findings from this study is the relative lack of effect from MEPA-IEP, especially considering the fact that when compared with ASFA and TANF, it has been in place the longest. Although each of these policies was controversial, MEPA-IEP has almost certainly been given the least attention at the agency level. Furthermore, child welfare agencies have been challenged to implement MEPA-IEP without supplemental funds for recruitment and training regarding this very complex issue. Fiscal policy and court review also have a strong hand in the implementation of ASFA and TANF, whereas the decisions regarding MEPA-IEP have had virtually no fiscal effect, to date, and may be somewhat less visible to the courts. Current court cases proffered by the U.S. Office of Civil Rights against Ohio and other states may eventually effect MEPA-IEP implementation.

Finally, many were concerned at the time PRWORA was passed that welfare reform would spill over into child welfare. This study suggests that indeed, child welfare caseloads have increased following welfare reform, but as a whole, the research evidence is mixed, with other studies finding no such increase. The Geen et al. (2001) study, however, may provide some clues as to more subtle changes taking place in the caseload itself. For example, workers reported the perception that welfare reform had a stronger effect on families already involved in both the welfare and child welfare systems. Another study found that caseworkers perceived their cases as becoming more complicated following welfare reform (Romero, Chavkin, & Wise, 2000). This may be a situation where the numbers tell less than the whole story.

The 1990s saw an unprecedented number of federal reform efforts aimed at child welfare. ASFA has had the most effect on child welfare service delivery. Welfare reform has had less effect on the system, whereas MEPA-IEP has had little effect at all. These data will provide a context for other child welfare researchers to use in comparing their settings to the national picture. ♦

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