



"Parental Views of In-Home Services: What Predicts Satisfaction with Child Welfare Workers," by Mimi Chapman, Claire Gibbons, Richard Barth, Julie McCrae, and the NSCAW Research Group, CHILD WELFARE, Sept. /Oct.03, is one of the first articles based on the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well -Being (NSCAW), one of the most sophisticated and important studies of public child welfare ever conducted.

NSCAW is a longitudinal study of a representative sample of families involved with child welfare agencies around the country. The researchers collected initial data on several thousand families in 1998 -99. 1,872 families who had been reported to CPS and who were receiving in- home services were included in the analysis summarized in this article. 91% of the caregivers were female, 57% were Caucasian, 25% were African American and 13% were Hispanic. More than half of the families were poor according to federal poverty guidelines and almost 75% of the families earned less than \$25,000 per year.

Approximately a quarter of the children in the study had been physically abused; 55% had been neglected and 10% were victims of sexual abuse.

The researchers classified almost 40% of the parents as having experienced major depression in the past year based on the parents' responses to standardized interview questions. Child welfare staff indicated a major depression rate for these same parents as 23%, a large difference to say the least. Almost a third of the parents indicated that they had a substance abuse problem; child welfare caseworkers' responses indicated a substance abuse rate of 23%. Child welfare staff indicated that 37% of the families had a history of domestic violence, a slightly higher rate than the DV rate gathered from parents' responses.

28% of the caregivers "reported that they had not spoken with a child welfare worker since the investigation," despite receiving in - home services. These caregivers did not complete a satisfaction survey and so are not included in the analysis. "The mean score for relationship quality was 4.6 (on a 5 point scale) indicating a moderate level of perceived relationship quality." Factors which had a statistically significant effect in reducing parents' satisfaction ratings were (a) two or more child welfare workers (b) longer lengths of time between home visits (c) social workers' failure to offer needed services

"Both caregivers' and children's descriptions of problem behavior in the child appear related to a more positive view of the child welfare worker." "Race did not have a significant overall relationship to client satisfaction with the relationship to the child welfare worker, although African American clients had a significantly more positive relationship (with child welfare caseworkers) than white clients."

"Several key reported variables were not significantly related to caregivers' perceptions of their relationship with the child welfare worker, including type of maltreatment, investigation outcome, major parental depression reported by the caregiver, mental health problems reported by the child welfare worker, substance abuse risk... and low social support reported by the caregiver." "Thus, caregivers with the most serious problems were not more likely to report poor relationship quality with their child welfare worker."

The researchers express concern regarding the lack of contact between caseworkers and parents in a large fraction of cases. "That a large number of respondents report little or no regular contact indicates that basic monitoring may not be taking place for vulnerable children." These authors are also concerned about the number of social workers assigned to families, i.e., "a lower number of workers is associated with higher satisfaction with child welfare services ...". The authors express the view that "the incremental value of services develops with more time and regular contact."

Child welfare workers classified more than 90% of parents as reasonably cooperative." On balance, these findings suggest that relationships between child welfare workers and in-home caregivers are generally perceived as helpful, despite the pervasive problems of large caseloads and the demanding situations of clients." "More important, these findings show that successful relationships are not determined by unchangeable aspects of the case, such as (client) race, type of abuse that prompted the investigation, investigation outcome, and even particular dimensions of risk." "Positive relationships appear to be created by actions that are within the child welfare agency and worker's control," e.g., maintaining frequent contact with parents, continuity of service provision and offering relevant services perceived as useful by caregivers.

The authors are impressed with the contribution of parents' and caseworkers' perceptions of children's behavior problems to parents' satisfaction ratings. They comment that some parents appear to be coming into contact with child welfare agencies because of children's behavior problems for which they are seeking help. "This is a longstanding but often overlooked function of child welfare services." "The finding is consistent with NSCAW data showing that nearly half of children entering out-of-home care have a CBCL (Child Behavior Checklist score) in the borderline or clinical range, and one in five children entering out-of-home care has a primary caregiver whom the child welfare worker does not view as having substance abuse issues, parental mental illness, problems paying for basic necessities or active domestic violence." In other words, these children are entering care primarily because parents cannot manage their behavior.

These are encouraging findings. They suggest that child welfare social workers can combine an investigative role and helping role without undermining their ability to form good working relationships with parents. They also indicate that positive relationships between CPS /CWS social workers in child welfare agencies and parents on the receiving end of involuntary investigations and who ultimately receive voluntary services are the rule, not the exception.