

Journal Highlights

By Patti Beekman, BA, Stacey Saunders, MSW, Pam Quigley, MSW, and Laura Hughes, BA

This issue's Journal Highlights summarizes the highest scoring articles for the 2010 Pro Humanitate Literary Awards in child welfare. Together they represent a snapshot of some of the exceptional work produced by child welfare researchers, academicians, and practitioners during the past year. The five highest scoring articles selected to receive the award are (1) Littell, (2) Bourke and Hernandez, (3) Jonson-Reid, Drake, and Kohl, (4) Drake, Moo Lee, and Jonson-Reid, and (5) Neustein and Lesher.

The Quality of Published Reviews of Evidence-Based Practice

In this article, Dr. Julia Littell sought to assess the quality and rigor of compiled reviews of research studies, focusing on synthesis, analysis, and dissemination of primary research findings and conclusions, as summarized and reported in research reviews.

Using data from two studies in which she reviewed and analyzed both primary research conducted on multisystemic therapy (MST) and summary reviews of this research, she concluded that research reviews often used to determine which practices qualify as “evidence-based” may themselves be subject to bias.

In her first study, Littell identified and evaluated 37 research reviews. She noted that only a small portion (9) of the reviews was quantitative in nature, and most were in narrative form. She also found differences based on the reviewer's relationship to the research and suggested that independent reviewers were more likely to use explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria and systematic search methods, were less likely to include unpublished studies, and included fewer research reports and studies than did reviewers who were affiliated with MST.

Littell also found that standards of evidence and the way these standards were appraised also varied across reviews. Differences between randomized controlled trials and nonrandomized trials were not always considered by reviewers when reporting effects. Only four reviews assessed attrition in the original study, and only seven used some type of rating system to evaluate study quality. Synthesis of study results varied as well. In most cases, reviewers used tables of findings to synthesize data; however, reviewers frequently excluded null or negative results.

In the second study, Littell examined the 1987 Bunk, Henggeler, and Whelan trial of the effects of MST in cases of child maltreatment, and then she evaluated the 13 research reviews that reported the findings of this study. Of these reviews, only three included both positive and negative results or positive, negative, and neutral results. Littell identified several incongruities between the results of the original studies and the way authors had reported the results in their reviews.

Littell concludes with implications of these findings for social science, such as a need to provide advanced training for the next generation of scholars in systematically conducting reviews of research. Recommendations also included strengthening the peer review process to counter various types of selection bias; applying the CONSORT statement to provide clear guidelines for the reporting of meta-analyses and other types of research reviews; and endorsing use of prospective registers of trials to avoid publication bias and outcome selection bias. Littell also concludes that social science needs more scientifically sound syntheses of empirical studies to provide a valid evidence base for direct practice.

Littell, J. (2008). Evidence-based or biased? The quality of published reviews of evidence-based practice. *Children and Youth Services Review, 30*(11), 1299–1317.

Hands-on Child Victimization by Child Pornography Offenders

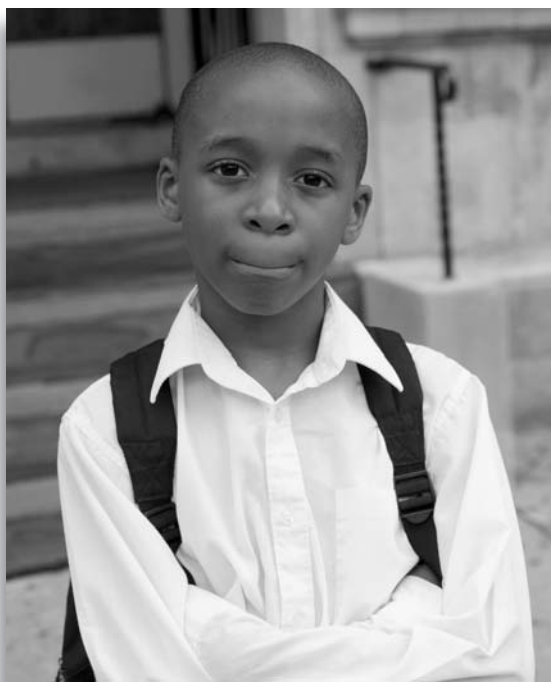
This article, by Dr. Michael Bourke and Dr. Andres Hernandez, reports findings of a study conducted by the authors that compared two groups of child pornography offenders participating in a voluntary treatment program at a medium-security federal prison. One group included men whose known sexual offense history at the time of sentencing involved Internet pornography but did not include “hands-on” child sexual abuse. The other group consisted of men who had participated in both Internet pornography and hands-on sexual offending against at least one child victim. The study sought to determine if the first group of offenders, thought to be only collectors of child pornography, in fact posed little risk of hands-on sexual offenses, or if they actually were hands-on offenders whose criminal sexual behavior involving children had gone undetected.

The study findings demonstrated that the Internet-only offenders were significantly more likely than not to have committed “hands-on” sexual abuse of a child. Further, offenders in both groups who abused children were likely to have offended against multiple victims, and the incidence of “crossover” victimizing across gender and age categories was high.

Previous research had confirmed the co-morbidity of sexual criminality among child pornographers. One of the authors (AEH) had initially raised this issue in November 2000 in a poster session, the “Butner Study,” at the 19th annual conference of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA). This study had also compared offenders in treatment and identified a substantial number who first claimed they merely collected child abuse images, only to later admit acts of previously undetected child sexual abuse. The current study utilized a larger sample, employed more rigorous research methodology, and explored the issue of “crossover” abuse in more depth.

The authors believe the offenders in the current study did disclose their offenses while in treatment, even after years of deception, because they felt it was safe to tell the truth without fear of prosecution. The authors also contend that few, if any, of the offenders would have admitted the true extent of their sexual offense histories if they had not been participating in an intensive treatment program. This underscores the importance of prison-based sex offender treatment programs to enhance the accuracy of risk appraisals and to improve the management of offenders in the community.

The fact that many study offenders reported previously undetected hands-on sexual crimes raises the question of whether the Internet has created a new type of sex offender, or if it provides additional outlets for sexually deviant individuals. The authors suggest that many Internet child pornography offenders are undetected child molesters, and that their use of child pornography is indicative of their paraphilic orientation. The study findings suggest that online criminal investigations targeting child pornographers can have the added benefit of identifying and apprehending concomitant child molesters. If hands-on contact offenders were not involved in criminal sexual activity online, their more serious crimes might not otherwise come to the attention of law enforcement.



In conclusion, the authors state that while this study is exploratory, it highlights the complex and reciprocal interaction between viewing child pornography online and contact sexual crimes. They also caution that although their preliminary findings indicate that the majority of so-called online child pornographers are, in fact, undetected child abusers, it is presumptuous to conclude that the Internet is a causal factor in contact sexual criminality. More research is needed to define this relationship.

Bourke, M. L., & Hernandez, A. E. (2009). The ‘Butner Study’ redux: A report of the incidence of hands-on child victimization by child pornography offenders. *Journal of Family Violence*, 24(3), 183–191.

Overrepresentation of the Poor Due to Bias or Need?

Although research confirms that maltreatment occurs across social classes, poor children are more likely to have contact with the child welfare system than are non-poor children. However, the child protection field has been unclear whether poor children are actually more likely to suffer maltreatment, or if bias related to the social and economic class of clients exists at one or more levels of the child protection system. The authors—Drs. Melissa Jonson-Reid, Brett Drake, and Patricia Kohl—define *bias* as reliance on social and economic class membership to determine the likelihood of child protective service involvement rather than an objective identification of risk or a need for services.

To assess for the presence of class bias, the authors compared child welfare system involvement (defined as maltreatment reports, investigations, out-of-home placements, and/or recurrences) with involvement rates from other service systems, such as income maintenance, hospitals, juvenile court, public health, or mental health. The study findings suggested that the presence of increased risk among poor children, rather than high levels of systemic class bias, drives the overrepresentation of poor children in the child welfare system.

The authors consider this to be the first study to explain how class bias might manifest in child welfare involvement, and to further test these relationships using criteria that are not sensitive to class bias. The study draws data from a larger longitudinal study based in a Midwestern metropolitan area and follows children from 1993 through mid-year 2006.

The authors compared child welfare outcomes (e.g., initial reports, placement, recurrence) and nonsystem negative outcomes (e.g., injuries, mental problems, substance abuse) for three groups that included (1) poor children reported to child welfare, (2) non-poor children reported to child welfare, and (3) poor children who were not reported to child welfare. The data uniformly presented against the existence of large degrees of class bias. Poor children reported to child welfare appeared to be at substantially more risk of nonsystem negative outcomes when compared with either non-poor children who were reported or poor children who were not reported. These findings were also consistent with theory and research suggesting that poor children are appropriately overrepresented in the child welfare system because of the stress of poverty and its associated ecologic conditions, which typically place families at greater risk of abusive and neglecting behaviors.

The authors do caution that regardless of study findings, the field must still address biased decision making if and when it occurs. They also contend that while others recommend that we focus attention on addressing poverty directly, the child welfare system cannot afford to abandon its current work with at-risk children and families while searching for a long-term resolution to poverty. Further, professionals must not confuse the need to prevent poverty with the prevention of negative behaviors, including child abuse and neglect and other outcomes that are exacerbated by poverty.

Jonson-Reid, M., Drake, B., & Kohl, P. (2009). Is the overrepresentation of the poor in child welfare due to bias or need? *Children and Youth Services Review*, 31(3), 422–427.

Race and Child Maltreatment Reporting: Are Blacks Overrepresented?

Child welfare professionals have widely presumed that discrimination and bias are largely responsible for racial disproportionality in child maltreatment reporting. In this study, Drs. Brett Drake, Sang Moo Lee, and Melissa Jonson-Reid tried to determine whether racial disproportionality exists in child maltreatment reporting and to identify differences in child maltreatment reporting rates for white and black families.

The authors used U.S. Census data and child protection reports from Missouri's child abuse and neglect database from January 1, 1999, through December 31, 2001. To minimize potential investigator bias, they studied both substantiated and unsubstantiated referrals. The final data set included approximately 90,000 white children and 33,500 black children.

The study determined that blacks in Missouri were disproportionately reported to the child welfare system when

compared with whites, at a ratio of about 2:1. However, when poverty was held constant, racial disproportionality in reporting rates was not evident. In addition, the findings indicated that poverty was associated with higher child maltreatment reporting regardless of race.

The authors identified six possible theories that could account for racial disproportionality: poverty, aggregation bias, visibility bias, straightforward racism, being “out of place,” and differential sensitivity to poverty. They reported that black families were heavily aggregated in poorer communities and would access resources and services to alleviate the effects of poverty, thereby becoming more visible to potential reporters and drawing higher rates of reports (aggregation bias). However, counter to their hypothesis, the researchers also noted that mandated reporters were less likely to report individuals living in poverty, regardless of race. As an example of differential sensitivity, the study indicated that whites in high-poverty areas had slightly higher reporting rates than blacks in high-poverty areas; and in very low-poverty areas, blacks had higher reporting rates than whites. Data supported the suspected outcome that report rates would be higher for either race when in the minority (“out of place”) as compared with times when they were in the majority, but this is held more for whites and for blacks only in less poor areas.

The study results confirmed the relationship of poverty and child maltreatment but did not show evidence of general racial bias in child maltreatment reporting. The authors concluded that their findings were consistent with earlier data. They also discussed how the heavier representation of blacks in poorer neighborhoods may increase their likelihood of being reported for child maltreatment. They cautioned against looking at racial disproportionality in reporting rates at “face value” when making policy changes to the process of reporting child maltreatment. Finally, the authors acknowledged that this study did not consider racial differences among reports accepted for investigation versus reports that were not, and they recommended that future research examine this issue.

Drake, B., Moo Lee, S., & Jonson-Reid, M. (2009). Race and child maltreatment reporting: Are blacks overrepresented? *Children and Youth Services Review*, 31(3), 309–316.

Rabbinic Sexual Abuse in the Orthodox Jewish Community

This article by Dr. Amy Neustein and attorney Michael Leshner explores how a rabbinic court intervened in a Brooklyn case involving charges of child sexual abuse perpetrated by a rabbi within an orthodox Jewish community. The authors provide insight into how religious and cultural concerns that guide rabbinic court activities could interfere with the effectiveness of the secular criminal justice system.

In 1997, a 9-year-old boy with a serious hearing deficiency required special tutoring in order to be mainstreamed into the *yeshiva*, or religious school. After a year and a half of intensive tutoring, the boy's performance became stagnant. In late 1998, the parents fired the rabbi tutor. Months later, the boy began to disclose abusive acts by the rabbi during tutoring sessions (pulling on his genitals and hitting his ear with the hearing aid). He also said the rabbi threatened him if he told anyone about the abuse.

In January 2000, secular authorities arrested the rabbi and charged him with child abuse. A rabbinic court, composed of five influential rabbis from orthodox communities in New York City, assembled to conduct an investigation of the charges against the accused perpetrator. An assembly speaker, also an orthodox Jew, became involved to ensure the district attorney would listen to the court rabbis.

The rabbinic court, or *beth din*, has great influence in orthodox communities, just as this traditional institution held unchallenged authority in centuries past. Orthodox community members are under a cultural imperative to forego secular courts and take all disputes first to the *beth din* for resolution. In this case, the victim's family did go to law enforcement first; but the rabbinic court also approached the district attorney, not to cooperate with prosecution but to stop the investigation of a credibly accused child sexual abuser. Traditional beliefs justify intervention by the *beth din* to prevent potential threats due to involvement in secular courts; or to address the fears that a rabbi convicted of sexual abuse would be attacked in prison, or that the rabbi's family would be shamed, or that relatives would be unable to find suitable marriage partners; and a fear, historically grounded, that scandal of this nature could reinforce anti-Semitism. In the case study, the rabbinic court used political influence to convince the district attorney to drop charges against the alleged perpetrator. Thus, the rabbi avoided criminal investigation and was not held accountable.



During the authors' preparation of the article, a prominent rabbi reported that no problem of child sexual abuse by rabbis existed, and that the orthodox Jewish community would never face scandal as did the Catholic church because the rabbinate does not include homosexuals. Still, the authors propose educational and legal reforms to prevent further vulnerability of Jewish children to rabbinic sexual abuse. For example, education could alert the community to lifelong consequences of abuse and also empower victims to reveal violations. Law enforcement could neutralize the influence of rabbinic courts in criminal cases, just as they do if gangs or members of organized crime attempt to intimidate witnesses or interfere

with court processes. The authors qualify that *beth din* methods are not criminal; however, within their communities, *beth din* actions can be intimidating and can undermine justice.

Neustein, A., & Leshner, M. (2008). A single-case study of rabbinic sexual abuse in the orthodox Jewish community. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse*, 17(3-4), 270-287.

The Quest for Evidence-Based Practice

This article reprints an address delivered by Dr. Bruce Thyer at an international conference sponsored by the Center for Social Services Studies at the University of Beilefeld, Germany. In this address, Thyer briefly catalogs the history of science in the social work movement and offers recommendations to enhance the link between science and social work. He contends that the foundation of the social work profession can no longer be

caring for persons in need but rather evidence about results, effects, and outcomes. He references Auguste Compe's belief that human affairs are, in fact, amenable to successful investigation using tools of inquiry found in the physical sciences, mathematics, and biology, and he asserts that social work should be subject to these same types of inquiry. Thyer also outlines the history of positivism in the evolution of the social work profession and its influence on the establishment in 1994 of the Society for

Social Work and Research. He suggests that these advances represent both the quest toward evidence-based practice and an opportunity to ground the social work field on a scientific foundation.

Thyer recommends that social work embrace the philosophical assumptions and scientific methods associated with the larger evidence-based practice movement. He contends that social work practitioners need to stop criticizing these methods and principles as inherently incompatible with social work values and objectives. He acknowledges that social work lags behind other professional disciplines because of endless professional wrangling over inherently unresolvable philosophical issues, and recommends replacing this debate with a commitment to high-quality social work research and to prioritizing funding for this purpose.

Thyer recommends that the profession reduce its focus on a theory-driven research agenda and instead should evaluate processes and outcomes. He suggests that the profession become much more proactive in collaborating with organizations such as the Cochrane and Campbell Collaborations because much needed data from systematic reviews in social work and social welfare are notably lacking. He recommends adoption of ethical standards that support a client's right to effective treatment, as well as adoption of an evidence-based approach to social work education. He also contends that the profession should stop seeking knowledge that is specific to the social work discipline, since social problems and their interventions are not discipline-specific. Attempts to carve out unique social work-specific knowledge should be replaced by interdisciplinary approaches to problem solving. He concludes by suggesting that through the combination of evidence-based practice with caring attitudes and liberal views, the social work field will become "truly professional."

Thyer, B. A. (2008). The quest for evidence-based practice? We are all positivists! *Research on Social Work Practice, 18*(4), 339–345.

Clergy Sexual Abuse in the Context of the Catholic Religious Tradition

In this article, Rev. Joseph J. Guido uses a case example of a man named Danny, whose priest sexually abused him on three separate occasions when he was an adolescent. By describing these experiences, the author illustrates how sexual abuse of children and adolescents by Roman Catholic priests is not only a physical violation but potentially also a spiritual one. He contends that the associated infringement on a fundamental sacred trust can leave survivors feeling alone, unable to believe, and in Danny's words, "spiritual orphans." The author argues that the intersection of the status of priests in the church combined with a "sacramental" culture makes this crisis unique to Catholicism.

Guido discusses the importance of understanding both Catholic culture and the role of priests to fully understand the idiosyncrasy of this violation. The author suggests that in a sacramental culture, spiritual rituals have deep symbolic meaning to parishioners. To illustrate the importance of sacraments in the Catholic religion, Guido cites the work of Hoge, whose research showed that 80% of Catholics across three generations identified sacraments as the most important component of their self-identification as Catholic. Through the sacrament of Holy Orders, priests become vessels through which parishioners can experience their faith and receive their sacraments, and priests' alignment with Christ creates role confusion for child victims and often leaves victims questioning the role of God in abusive acts.

The author suggests that in order to heal, survivors often need to confront the underlying religious meaning to them personally of the abuse, by examining both their own religious beliefs and the personal implications of having been abused by such a sacred figure. To help clients in this situation, therapists need to address not only the alleviation of symptoms caused by the trauma but a client's spiritual needs as well. In some cases, therapists should refer survivors to knowledgeable and compassionate church representatives for spiritual help. In other situations, clients may choose not to return to the Catholic faith and may change denominations, or they may choose not to believe at all.

Guido, J. J. (2008). A unique betrayal: Clergy sexual abuse in the context of the Catholic religious tradition. *Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, 17*(3–4), 255–269.

Maltreated Children's Emotional Availability With Kin and Non-kin Foster Mothers

Federal policy mandates the placement of children with kin (i.e., relative) foster parents whenever possible to ensure continuity of family relationships and to reduce placement trauma experienced by children placed outside the family unit. However, there has been limited research conducted to compare the efficacy of kin versus non-kin foster placements. The present study sought to identify placement options for maltreated children that would provide them with the greatest likelihood of developing strong relationships with their caregivers.

Dr. Michael J. Lawler based this research on sociobiological theory, which implies the existence of a biologically-based investment in kin foster mother–maltreated child dyads, which would be stronger than bonds between non-kin foster mothers and the children in their care. The current study examined how biological relatedness of kin foster care contributed to the quality of maltreated child–foster parent relationships, as defined by dyadic emotional availability between young maltreated children (2–8 years old) with behavioral problems and their kin or non-kin foster mothers.

The study assessed 106 randomly selected maltreated children, ages 2–8, and their foster mothers. The research controlled for the children’s age, foster mother’s age, foster mother’s level of education, and placement duration. To measure the emotional availability of the foster parents and the child, the author used the *Emotional Availability Scales*, including categories of *maternal sensitive structuring*, *maternal non-hostility*, *maternal non-intrusiveness*, and *child emotional availability*. Researchers also scored an age-appropriate play response using Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT).

Study findings did not support the hypothesis of a sociobiologically-based relationship advantage for kinship foster placements. Lawler suggests that non-kin foster parents may demonstrate altruistic motivation and behaviors when deciding to become caregivers to maltreated children. Lawler cautions, however, that demographic and characteristic differences exist between the two caregiving groups.

This study has added to limited existing data on sociobiology and substitute caregivers. However, due to the lack of verifiable difference in emotional availability between the kin foster parent and maltreated child relationship and the non-kin foster parent and maltreated child relationship, Lawler recommends that practitioners complete thorough assessment when conducting any out-of-home placement. He also suggests that future research include longitudinal study of a broader sample of maltreated children and their kin or non-kin caregivers, which would also take into consideration the variations in professional support provided to non-kin, agency approved families, and kinship families.

Lawler, M. J. (2008). Maltreated children’s emotional availability with kin and non-kin foster mothers: A sociobiological perspective. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30(10), 1131–1143.

Missing Children: Representing Young People Away From Placement

A 2002 article in the Detroit *Free Press*, “State Loses Track of 302 Abused and Neglected Kids,” precipitated this chapter in *Childhood, Youth, and Social Work in Transformation* (Nybell, Shook, & Finn, 2009). These youth became Michigan’s “missing children” and the publicity generated years of advocacy on behalf of child welfare in Michigan.

In this chapter, Dr. Lynn M. Nybell suggests that by categorizing youth who leave placement as “missing children,” the media inappropriately labeled the youth by simplifying and generalizing their stories. The author met with youth and recognized common

themes. They reported feeling a “pull” from their families, a “push” from their living facility, and a need to feel “normal.” Some felt they could not make their concerns heard at the placement facility. Others cited abuse, bullying, and threats by other residents or staff. Rules and regulations put in place by the facilities made it difficult for young people to attend after-school programs or activities that could help normalize their experiences.

Michigan was not alone in its previously benign response to youth who were AWOL (away without legal permission) from placement. In 1996, 20% of 17-year-olds in foster care in California had exited the foster care system by running away. “Just leaving” became one of the principal ways for youth to terminate their placements. Soon after the *Free Press* article, Michigan posted names of photographs of “missing children” on its government Web site. As a result, the state found some children living with relatives to avoid placement. In response to the court order for the secure detention of these “missing children,” the Youth Law Center warned of action against the court system and the Family Independence Agency, the agency initially cited by the *Free Press* for “losing” these children.

The initial *Free Press* article generated a transformation of Michigan’s foster care system. The paper’s publication of 27 ensuing news articles through the end of 2002 ensured that the newly-created Wayne County Task Force would continue to address concerns and would advocate for children in foster care in Michigan. The task force developed intervention strategies that included therapeutic foster care and alternative residential settings. After initiating these strategies in 2006, the courts placed only 10 AWOL children in detention centers, compared with 140 in 2003.

Nybell offers two critical points in this chapter. First, she urges further advocacy efforts on behalf of youth in foster care, specifically when they enter secure detention centers as punishment for leaving placement. She also challenges the foster care system to identify and reconsider what factors and situations impel children to leave placement, and she lobbies for the “missing children” theme to continue to underscore the need for advocacy. In conclusion, Nybell challenges the foster care system to balance a degree of freedom for children placed in substitute care with needed direction to navigate through the foster care system and into life after placement.

Nybell, L. M. (2009). Missing children: Representing young people away from placement. In L. M. Nybell, J. J. Shook, & J. L. Finn (Eds.), *Childhood, youth, and social work in transformation: Implications for policy and practice*. New York: Columbia University Press.