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Fedele F. and Iris M. Fauri 2020 Memorial Lecture: Child Welfare and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Keywords: University of Michigan School of Social Work, Fauri Memorial Conference, COVID-19 pandemic, child welfare, child welfare workforce, child maltreatment prevention

Introduction

Over the past decade, state child welfare systems in the United States have been pressed to do more to support and assist vulnerable families by offering more prevention and early intervention services (Herrenkohl et al., 2020). The U.S. Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) was signed into law in 2018 and has been heralded as a plan to move state child welfare systems from those based predominantly on risk mitigation to ones centered on family supports, early intervention, and diversion from out-of-home placements. While there is considerable work ahead, some efforts underway to address core impediments to healthy and productive families (such as housing instability, food insecurity, and parenting stress) are promising and show a desire, if not intent, to move services “upstream” and away from the punitive, often stigmatizing approach that has existed within child welfare systems for decades. Additionally,

focused activities intended to lessen implicit bias toward families of color that implicate their overrepresentation in child protection investigations and in the use of out-of-home placements are also underway in some jurisdictions, although experts remain alarmed by data showing clear evidence of sustained racial disparities in services and outcomes associated with child welfare involvement (Dettlaff et al., 2020). Better training and the inclusion of input from families in some jurisdictions has also begun to offer hope that change is possible.

Still, the persistence of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought new challenges to assuring the welfare of children and preservation of families. Emerging risks to children and families became evident early in the pandemic due to increased social isolation, rising unemployment, domestic violence, and food insecurity (Herrenkohl et al., 2020). Child protection saw a rapid decrease in reports of child abuse and neglect, raising suspicion that children were placed in harm’s way without being discovered or reported. These concerns were raised because while reports

were declining, families were experiencing sharp increases in risk factors for child maltreatment. For many families, the pandemic included economic instability due to work stoppages, reduced hours, or job closures. Economic instability jeopardized basic health care coverage, housing stability, and home safety. Changes to the social safety net to protect families from economic disruption were slow to arrive and were also minor in scope. Many families were unable to access unemployment benefits, and stimulus funding was insufficient to overcome lost wages. At the same time, increased social distancing and schools relying more on virtual learning led to disrupted social connections and restricted the social outlets for children and their families. Changes in family dynamics because of prolonged time spent together without respite resulted in diminished work-family life balance, challenged personal space boundaries within the home, and increased parenting conflicts. Instability also led to mental health distress, loneliness, exposure to interpersonal violence, and other risks such as drug and alcohol use—factors highly associated with child abuse and neglect.

During the pandemic, we have witnessed changes to child welfare accountability, as well as investigative and child welfare case worker practices. For example, reports of suspected cases of abuse and neglect, especially from mandated reporters such as teachers, have been reduced so there are less available data to reliably ascertain child protection demands and needs (Jonson-Reid et al., 2020). If a determination of risk leads to a decision about preserving the family or a child's removal during the COVID-19 pandemic, options for safely housing the child are uncertain, as the current challenges add to an ever-increasing risk to safety, stability, and the promotion of a child's well-being within a complex and challenging home environment.

The long-running concerns about child and family well-being and the inadequacy of child welfare services available to children and families were clearly revealed, and a history of systemic, policy, and practice shortcomings are now even more pronounced (Herrenkohl et al., 2020; Herrenkohl et al., 2019; Lonne et al., 2019). These criticisms are compounded by the long-standing and troubling deterioration of

the child welfare workforce due to burnout (Lonne et al., 2019). Sadly, there had been little movement before or during the pandemic to address enduring concerns about workforce stress, although the problem will inevitably have to be addressed. Efforts to support vulnerable children remaining in the home now rely on greater worker precautions to safeguard against exposure to COVID-19. When cases are opened, service delivery must weigh permissible options such as, for example, virtual contact as opposed to in-person contact in situations assessed as low risk. Working remotely presents its own challenges because, although it assures safety from exposure to COVID-19, it may mask conditions that more holistically indicate higher risks in face-to-face encounters than what can be ascertained when interacting with families through a computer monitor, iPhone, or other methods that allow a worker to virtually interact with at-risk children and their families.

University of Michigan School of Social Work Held Its Annual Fedele F. and Iris M. Fauri Memorial Conference

In October 2020, the University of Michigan School of Social Work held its annual Fedele F. and Iris M. Fauri Memorial Conference. The Fauri conference is presented each year in recognition of the former University of Michigan Dean and Vice President Fedele F. Fauri and his wife. Dean Fauri's leadership and accomplishments in the field of child welfare spanned nearly 50 years. This year's conference featured an online panel of distinguished speakers who discussed how current circumstances are serving to expose and heighten enduring concerns about gaps in child welfare services brought to light during the COVID-19 pandemic as it impacts the vast majority of families.

This article summarizes the presentations of the panel titled "Child Welfare and the COVID-19 Pandemic." In their remarks, speakers focused on the ways child welfare systems have been impacted by the pandemic and how these systems have responded to increasing and changing demands brought about by shifts in child welfare policies and practices. Additionally,

speakers provided insights on the immediate and long-term impacts of the pandemic on child welfare service models and lessons learned during this crisis that may help to lessen the risk to children and families in the future. The following sections summarize their remarks. A brief conclusion and implications section follows.

Child Abuse Risk Rise in the Pandemic? Empirical Clues

Christina M. Rodriguez, PhD

Early on, a number of warning signs signaled that the COVID-19 pandemic would herald a period of elevated risk for child maltreatment. The incidence of maltreatment rises after natural disasters (Seddighi et al., 2019) and follows times of economic upheaval like the Great Recession (Brooks-Gunn et al., 2013). But the pandemic wove together a number of risks simultaneously for American families that could increase child maltreatment.

A number of longitudinal studies link unemployment to higher rates of child maltreatment (Slack et al., 2011). Unemployment can lead to economic hardship, which can in turn lead to food insecurity and stress on the family (Yang, 2015), as well as higher risk of psychological and physical aggression toward children (Helton et al., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic initiated historic levels of unemployment, with over 40 million Americans filing for unemployment within weeks of the pandemic's announcement (Lambert, 2020). Economic relief from the government allocated \$500 per child, compared to \$1000 per adult, which translated to less financial support for some of the most vulnerable single-parent families raising multiple children.

The pandemic also introduced unprecedented requirements to “stay at home” and socially distance—resulting in an increased likelihood of social isolation. Research has shown that lower social support is associated with increased risk for physical abuse (Rodriguez & Tucker, 2015) and neglect (Freisthler et al., 2014). Thus, this important resource was taken away from families at the very time it was needed

most. During COVID-19, parents are spending more time at home with their children, which may result in more family conflict. During summer school breaks, non-accidental fractures at hospitals tend to rise (Leaman et al., 2017), and reports to child protective services usually decline (Jonson-Reid et al., 2020). During the pandemic, many typical mandated reporters to child protective services do not have the same oversight of children, leading to fewer official reports to child welfare (Jonson-Reid et al., 2020).

Thus, a combination of risks ushered in by the pandemic could translate into elevated maltreatment risk. In our study, mothers enrolled in a longitudinal study participated in a pandemic wave of data collection in which we assessed: (1) whether mothers perceived changes in their pandemic parenting and whether adverse changes corresponded with established measures of child abuse risk; (2) whether employment loss/reduction, food insecurity, or loneliness significantly related to current child abuse risk and mothers' reports of pandemic-related increases in conflict and neglect; and (3) whether physical and psychological child abuse risk during the pandemic increased from mothers' pre-pandemic levels.

Mothers in this study were drawn from those enrolled in the Following First Families study, a prospective longitudinal investigation carried out in the Southeast United States that oversampled for families with one or more sociodemographic risk. The study began the last trimester of mothers' pregnancy and continued until their children were age 4 ($n = 119$ mothers). Early in the pandemic (late April–May), when their children were between 5-6 ½ years old, 106 mothers reported on their pandemic parenting and abuse risk.

Only 3% of mothers reported they were hitting their children more often, but 33.3% reported more yelling, 34.9% reported more conflict, and 11.9% reported speaking with their children more harshly. Further, 7.5% reported leaving their children alone more often, 1.8% reported more difficulty feeding their children, and 1.8% reported showing less love toward their children since the pandemic began. Mothers who reported increased spanking/hitting their children, more yelling, and more neglect during the pandemic

also had the highest child abuse risk scores on established measures.

Over 38% of mothers reported their household experienced pandemic-related employment financial loss (either laid off/furloughed or reduced work hours). Those who experienced employment loss obtained higher child abuse risk scores. Without a resolution of the pandemic and the concomitant economic pressures, parents' abuse risk may be exacerbated. In addition, mothers who reported their children had received meals at school before the pandemic (24.5%) indicated they were experiencing more difficulty feeding their children, higher conflict with their children, and marginally more child abuse risk and spanking. Access to school meals indeed appears to a needed resource for parents to decrease their risk for maltreatment.

Interestingly, mothers who indicated they were experiencing loneliness during the pandemic did not obtain higher child abuse risk scores on established measures during the pandemic. Instead, mothers' greater loneliness was associated with their reports of engaging in more spanking, yelling, conflict, and neglect of their children. These results indicate that parents' perceptions of social isolation are associated with their *perceptions* of harsher and more neglectful parenting during the pandemic.

Compared to scores from data collected from mothers in the previous wave of the longitudinal study, mothers were at higher risk for abusing their children during the pandemic and used more psychological aggression. However, it appeared that mothers did not use more physical aggression, according to their self-reports (for additional details, see Rodriguez et al., 2021).

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed gaps in the social safety net that is ill-equipped to meet the needs of many vulnerable children and families. The child protection system has been founded on sentinels like educational and health professionals as sources of mandated reports of maltreatment—a foundation that crumbled during this crisis. Because the current welfare system is a reactive system that responds to the most serious cases of maltreatment, a more proactive, public health approach is required (Higgins

et al., 2019). Shifting from reactive to proactive, prevention-oriented service models will help child welfare agencies better prepare and respond to families that are directly impacted by crises like the current pandemic.

The Covid-19 Pandemic and Economic Recession: Policy Implications for Child Maltreatment Prevention

Michelle Johnson-Motoyama, PhD, MSW

Questions and concerns abound regarding the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on child maltreatment. Prior to the pandemic, roughly 4.3 million referrals to child maltreatment received an investigation or an alternative response from child protective services (CPS) each year (USDHHS, 2020). However, media coverage and reports from state child abuse and neglect hotlines suggest referrals to CPS fell dramatically during the pandemic's first wave. Observers largely attributed the decrease in referrals to reduced contact of children with mandated reporters, particularly teachers, resulting from stay-at-home orders. Simultaneously, the media began documenting a rise in child abuse hospitalizations, intimate partner violence, and calls to sexual abuse hotlines, suggesting an increase in severe types of maltreatment. Yet systematic and timely data that might shed light on these dynamics is unfortunately limited, making it difficult to determine how best to prevent and intervene in maltreatment cases during these unprecedented times. However, theory and research on the effects of natural disasters and economic recessions on child maltreatment offer useful insights that hold implications for policy.

Natural Disasters, Economic Recessions, and Child Maltreatment

The COVID-19 pandemic presents risks that are both unique and shared between natural disasters and economic recessions. According to Rezqian (2013), natural disasters forge a pathway to interpersonal violence through personal threats to life, loved ones, and property; the interruption and failure of

social systems and services; the collapse of social cohesion and harmony; and massive destruction and population displacement. These phenomena create mental distress, which can be exacerbated when basic provisions are scarce, law enforcement fails to fulfill its duties, governments fail to fulfill promises to help victims, and individuals perceive and experience powerlessness. In Rezqueian's (2013) model, certain groups may be more vulnerable to violence, including children, women, the elderly, those with low social support, and those with prior exposure to trauma. As a society, we have witnessed several features of Rezqueian's model during the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to the personal threat to life of a highly contagious and deadly disease, efforts to contain the disease have spurred job losses and high rates of unemployment, creating recessionary conditions and economic stress for millions of families. A crisis of social unrest related to racial injustice has occurred simultaneously, while natural disasters such as wildfires and hurricanes have ravaged parts of the country, creating mass destruction and displacing thousands.

Decades of research on the family stress model (FSM) provide insight into how COVID-19's economic recession may affect family processes (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010). Economic stress affects a family's ability to care for their child's basic needs; it places strain on romantic relationships, which may contribute to divorce and single parent households; and it leads to caregiver distress, such as depression, and difficulties in parent-child relationships. Moreover, a lack of adequate nutrition and proper care for children can contribute to child behavior problems, placing children at greater risk for maltreatment (Masarik & Conger, 2017).

In the context of these theoretical models, what have we learned from research about natural disasters, economic recessions, and child maltreatment? A small number of published studies have found associations between natural disasters and child maltreatment. For example, child abuse reports were elevated in the months following Hurricane Hugo and the Loma Prieta Earthquake (Curtis et al., 2000), and elevated risks of child traumatic brain injury followed Hurricane Floyd (Keenan et al., 2004). However,

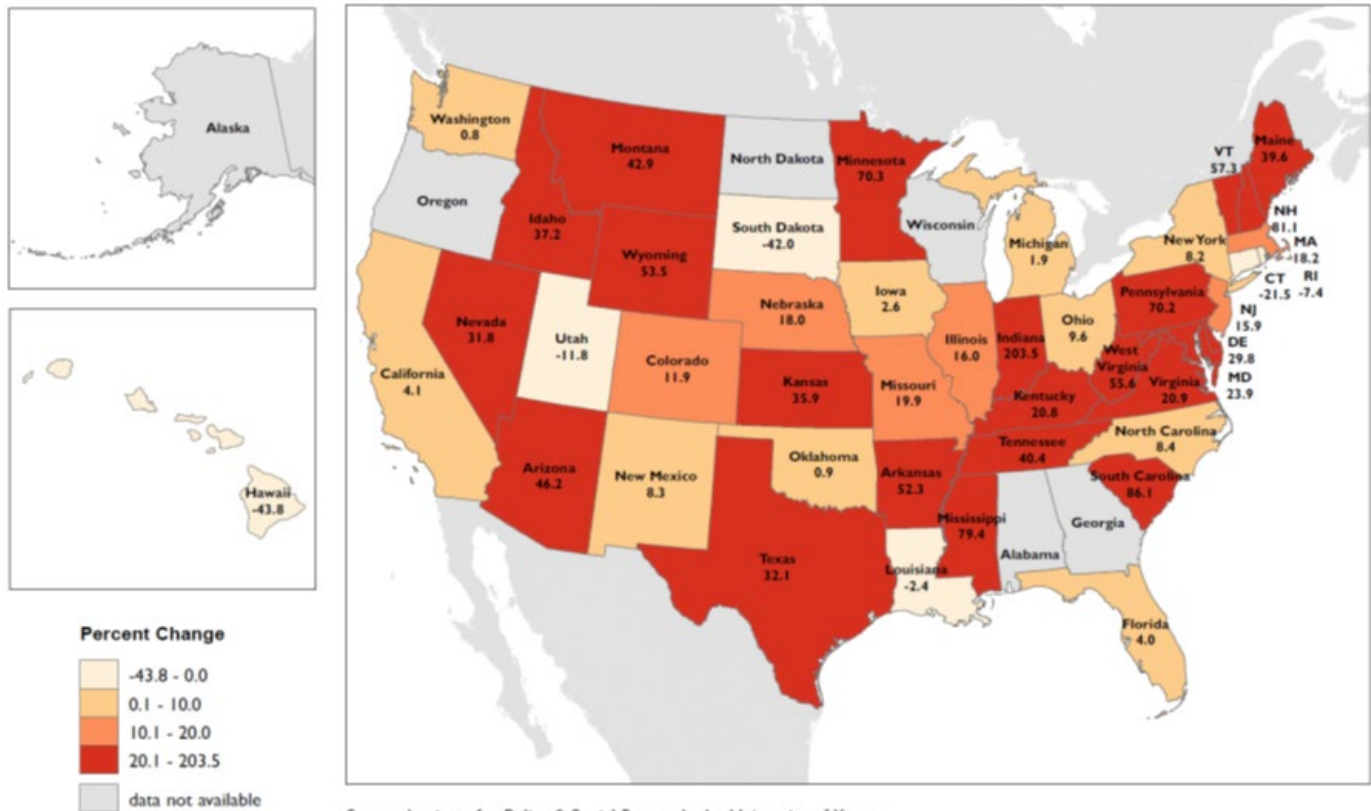
it is important to note that not all studies have found conclusive relationships, suggesting a role for protective factors in prevention (Cerna-Ternoff et al., 2019).

In our own research, we have been examining child maltreatment during the Great Recession, which began at the end of 2006 and continued to ripple through the U.S. economy as late as 2013. We examined child maltreatment trends for the nation from 1990 to 2016 and found that while rates of neglect remained somewhat constant during the recession, physical abuse and sexual abuse declined (Finkelhor, Saito, & Jones, 2018). However, upon closer examination of state level data we found wide variation in child maltreatment rates over time, with some states experiencing dramatic increases in child maltreatment (up to 204%) while others saw little change or even declines (see Figure 1). We hypothesized that state social safety net programs played at least a partial role in these trends through policies that buffered families from economic stress in some states and exacerbated risk in others. Accounting for a broad range of state-level factors associated with maltreatment, we found state-level policy changes made in Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and refundable Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) policies played significant roles in preventing child maltreatment and foster care entries (Johnson-Motoyama & Ginther, 2019). We also found alternative response/differential response (AR/DR) programs, which are often responsive to needs for concrete services, to have preventive effects across states over time (Johnson-Motoyama et al., 2020). These findings build on a body of past research that has found social safety net programs to be associated with child maltreatment prevention (Maguire-Jack, Johnson-Motoyama, & Parmenter, under review). A key takeaway is that even small amounts of money appear to matter.

Implications for Policy

To date, the U.S. Congress has passed a number of coronavirus-related legislative actions to enhance unemployment insurance, increase federal funding for Medicaid, and increase food security spending. For example, the 2020 CARES Act made direct payments to taxpayers and introduced economic support for

Figure 1. Percent Change in Number of Child Maltreatment Investigations by State, 2005–2016



Source: Institute for Policy & Social Research, the University of Kansas; data from National Data Archive on Child Abuse & Neglect, NCANDS Child File.

small businesses, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) passed an eviction moratorium to protect 43 million renters nationwide, which the Biden Administration extended through March 2021. However, recent reports suggest existing measures have not been sufficient to stave off food insecurity or bolster resources for household spending, rent, or mortgages. Additional federal investments are necessary to stabilize income, and concrete supports must be a priority. In the meantime, past research suggests the actions that states and localities take now to support families in need matter for prevention. Policies that increase access to the social safety net and improve the generosity of benefits are likely to have a positive impact. For example, despite legislative efforts, states have not received any additional TANF funds during COVID-19. However, the federal government has encouraged states to waive work requirements and to use funding flexibly to assist families. In turn, some states and localities have creatively developed their own pandemic emergency assistance programs through TANF. As policymakers and practitioners consider available funding arrays in their states and localities, concrete supports for vulnerable families

to address basic needs should be among the top priorities. Notably, the impacts of the pandemic and its economic fallout, while widespread, are disproportionately affecting Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and immigrant children and families. Some of these groups have historically have been more likely to come to the attention of CPS, reflecting longstanding systemic inequities that the current crisis is exacerbating. Equitable access to available services will be critical in mitigating the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on society’s most vulnerable children and families.

Some Potential Impacts of COVID-19 on Child Welfare

Lisa Merkel-Holguin, MSW

By most historical accounts, the current day United States child protection system emanates from the work of Dr. C. Henry Kempe, a tenacious researcher and relentless advocate at the University of Colorado School of Medicine. Dr. Kempe and his colleagues

were the first to recognize and identify child abuse and neglect in their defining paper, “The Battered Child Syndrome” (1962). This paper was regarded as the single most significant event in creating awareness and exposing the reality of child abuse. A decade later, the Kempe Center was born, and for almost the next 50 years, the child maltreatment field consisting of multidisciplinary professionals has been instrumental to establishing policies, laws, research, and training systems to better protect children.

Undoubtedly, the Kempe Center, along with other national, state and local government, nonprofit, and community organizations, has worked tirelessly to protect children and support families, and these groups have numerous positive outcomes to show for their efforts. Yet, there is an awakening across the world that child welfare systems need to be transformed (Casey Family Programs, 2020) or perhaps even abolished (Dettlaff et al., 2020). This reckoning emerges with a growing awareness that child welfare systems disproportionately harm people of color, exclude family systems, marginalize the poor, create an economic underclass, and produce abysmal outcomes for far too many. In addition, there is a culture of oppression that permeates many of the child welfare structures, policies, and protocols, impacting not only the children and families but also the workforce (Yang & Ortega, 2016).

New York Times opinion columnist David Brooks presented to the Weave community of the Aspen Institute in April 2020. He suggested—from studying pandemics historically—that we create a redemptive narrative to improve society. He encouraged everyday citizens to innovate their work and use the pandemic as a motivator for change. At the Kempe Center, we took his challenge seriously and asked, “How can we use our organizational position and privilege to stimulate critical thinking and inspire change in the field of child welfare?” From that question, we set out to build and convene an international community of practice to address issues of justice, social inequality, race equity, family leadership, and oppression in the child welfare and allied systems and began to discuss, debate, and solution build on how systems, communities, and individuals can begin the process of fundamentally changing the structure of these systems.

The COVID-19 pandemic, coupled with the racial awakening in spring 2020, has energized a broad swath of stakeholders to reimagine the child welfare system as one that centers on child and family well-being. Discussed below are a few ideas driving that vision.

Child Maltreatment Reporting

Since COVID-19, child maltreatment referrals have decreased, but of accepted referrals, there is an increase in the proportion of referrals involving domestic violence. A number of media reports indicate that child protection teams are seeing an increase in children with serious injuries. The competing narratives that have emerged during COVID-19 are different, yet likely shape and frame the CPS response and public opinion. For example, media reports suggest, without evidence, that low levels of reporting signify that thousands of children are being abused, and professionals and systems need to find and rescue them. For some parents in communities with the highest level of CPS surveillance, this decrease is a welcome relief from the trauma they experience at the hands of CPS (Hurley, 2020). Another narrative suggests that CPS reporting and investigative practices are intended for the most egregious cases, yet the vast majority of reports are neglect related. Thus, the decrease in reporting under COVID-19 could be acting like a natural filter, with only the most egregious cases being identified for CPS response and service. The larger issue that has emerged—independent of the narrative—is how mandated reporter policies and child abuse hotlines are shaping our response to child maltreatment, resulting in calls for reform (Raz, 2020; Worley & Melton, 2013).

A Surveillance Orientation

The CPS system is surveillance oriented, saturated in risk, and driven by procedures that deliver unequal outcomes and contribute to inequities (Roberts, 2020). In a provocative law review journal, Burrell (2019) compared stop and frisk policing policies to child maltreatment investigations. Burrell found parallels between these approaches, including the tendency to rely on a low burden of proof; the disproportionate effects on people of color in low-income communities; the overall negative impacts on the community; and worker behaviors (e.g., similarities between rogue police officers and rogue caseworkers). The review also

revealed similarities in media portrayals of crime and abuse. While there are divergent views as to whether child welfare is a helping system or a family regulation system intended to perpetuate forcible family separation (Roberts, 2020), there is likely agreement that families' perspectives of child welfare being a punishing system need to be heeded.

Economic Relief

It has been widely documented that the majority of families served by child welfare are poor and have a multiplicity of needs to address including food security, mental health, basic needs, economic relief, substance abuse, and housing stability. A number of approaches are being implemented and showing promise. The first, interdisciplinary parent representation, incorporates an interdisciplinary law office approach in which families are served by a social work staff member, parent advocate, and salaried staff attorney. By serving families holistically and by meeting families' needs, there is some evidence of such promising outcomes as timelier reunification and less time in foster care (Gerber et al., 2019). The second reform strategy that has been implemented in approximately in 30 states is differential response, also known as family assessment response or alternative response. As a widely studied experiment, differential response replaces the child abuse investigation and substantiation decision with a family assessment that focuses on identifying and meeting family needs and connecting families with services (Merkel-Holguin & Bross, 2015).

The Opportunities of Virtual Working

During COVID-19, child welfare agencies, out of necessity and with additional freedom to innovate, have revamped their ways of working with families. For example, family meetings are a standard practice that are now being conducted using virtual platforms, and anecdotal reports from family meeting facilitators are reporting an increased attendance of family members as the needs for transportation, child care, and requesting time off of work are removed. In addition, facilitators of these meetings report that the virtual space equalizes power dynamics and decreases intimidation that families can experience.

Other child welfare practice and system adjustments

include the addition of virtual support groups, increased frequency of video parenting and virtual visits, sharing parenting responsibilities, and virtual court hearings. Even after the pandemic has ended, there may be virtual practices and processes worth sustaining, as they appear to normalize shared parenting, support kin, and more equally distribute power and decision making among those involved.

In conclusion, COVID-19 has demonstrated that from this crisis, systems can innovate and possibly improve the types and range of services they offer. Child welfare agencies are well positioned to challenge institutionally racist practices and policies that prevent advancement toward a child and family well-being system. We can individually and collectively rise to the challenge posed by David Brooks—to leverage the pandemic and create a redemptive narrative for child welfare.

Conclusions and Implications

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The presentations offered during this panel discussion emphasize both the challenges and opportunities presented to child welfare systems during this truly unprecedented time. Speakers touched on critical gaps in child welfare responses and enduring challenges due to the lack of a social safety net for the most vulnerable children and families. All speakers agreed that the system, as currently configured, lacks the proactive response necessary to provide for the needs of families before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, there was agreement that the current crisis presents opportunities to rethink child protection, advance a public health approach, invest in primary prevention, and restructure the safety net and tax system to improve the financial well-being of families.

While differences in perspective exist about why reports of abuse and neglect are down during the pandemic, there was general agreement among

our speakers that the system must assume more responsibility for the care and well-being of families, including those at lower risk for child removal. Preventing the deterioration of family functioning should be a priority, not a secondary goal. Additionally, there was agreement about the need for community systems of care that connect and embolden collaborative, cross-sector models that provide a continuum of services to those families in need, as well as those who are system-involved.

Importantly, Dr. Johnson-Motoyama and her colleagues' work contributes to a small but growing body of research that demonstrates the critical role of programs including TANF basic assistance, SNAP, and refundable EITC programs in preventing child maltreatment and foster care entry. A key takeaway from this scholarship is that even small amounts of income support matter for prevention among families with limited resources. Therefore, concrete supports to address basic needs such as housing, food, and utilities should be among the top priorities at the federal, state, and local levels to prevent child maltreatment and other forms of violence. The COVID-19 pandemic and national reckoning on racial justice also illuminate the historic dynamics of poverty and inequality in this country and present us with the opportunity to examine how we might better address the fundamental needs of children and families. For example, universal basic income and guaranteed income programs, now piloting in parts of Canada and the United States, are designed to alleviate poverty and replace means-tested programs that are stigmatizing and costly to administer. To the extent that income and child maltreatment are related, these and other innovations may hold promise for population-level reductions in child abuse and neglect.

In closing, we reiterate that creative, proactive strategies are indeed needed to better prepare and respond to the needs of families before the next national crisis appears. These strategies should build from what we have learned throughout the pandemic and capitalize on the best available evidence about what works to prevent child maltreatment. It is critical to learn from users of the child welfare system—lending voice to the many children and families who have been served, some inadequately. Additionally,

advances must be inclusive of communities of color who have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as a child welfare system ill-equipped to represent their needs. While we call out the need for change, we also echo our speakers' messages of hope that crisis brings opportunity. We call on the field to consider the various ways in which hardship and suffering from pandemic can be used to motivate much needed structural changes that will benefit families of all racial groups and socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly those with few resources and limited access to desperately needed services. Indeed, there is opportunity in crisis, but only if there is intent to change and the political will do so.

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