

The Impact of Prevention: Maltreatment Re-reporting in Six States' Differential Response Systems

A number of state child protective services agencies have sought to better engage parents in addressing family situations that pose safety risks to children through “differential response” systems. Differential response systems separate incoming referrals into at least two tracks. Families with low to moderate risk and safety threats are encouraged to accept and use prevention services, an approach referred to as alternative response. Higher risk families receive traditional child protective services investigations which seek to determine whether or not a maltreatment incident occurred and identify a perpetrator. A number of studies have evaluated differential response programs and the practice is currently labeled “promising” by the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare.¹

This study sought to determine whether children in counties that more frequently use alternative responses are more or less likely to be re-reported to child protective services and/or confirmed to have been victims of subsequent abuse or neglect. The counties were in Kentucky, Minnesota, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma and Tennessee, all of which used differential response systems during the entire period from 2004 to 2013.

Key Findings and Implications

- 1) Children in counties that more frequently use alternative responses were less likely to be re-reported to child protective services. When they occurred, repeat maltreatment reports were less likely to be substantiated.
- 2) Use of alternative responses varied widely, from 6 percent to 77 percent at the 5th and 95th percentiles, respectively, with an average of 45 percent.
- 3) In three of six states, higher rates of alternative response were associated with lower overall re-reports; in the other three states there was no association between utilization and re-reporting.
- 4) In five of six states, higher rates of alternative response were associated with lower re-reports with substantiation; in the remaining state there was no association between utilization and re-reports with substantiation.

Consistent with prior research, these findings affirm that a greater emphasis on preventive services for children at lower risk results in fewer subsequent safety concerns.

This research was conducted under contract to HHS’s Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) by researchers at the Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect at the University of Colorado, in collaboration with staff in HHS’s Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Office of Data, Analysis, Research and Evaluation.

The full study may be found online at: <https://aspe.hhs.gov/pdf-report/differential-response-and-safety-children-reported-child-protective-services-tale-six-states>

¹ Among other criteria, programs rated as “promising” by the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare must have at least one published study showing program benefits compared with a control group.