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# Child Maltreatment Research

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## *Federal Support and Policy Issues*

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*The recent history of federal support for child maltreatment research paints a mixed picture of inadequate funding and uncertain administrative guidance against a backdrop of growing public concern about the prevalence of child abuse and neglect. This article describes some of the problems that have been identified in federal research funding, administration, and support of research initiatives and training concerning child abuse and neglect. Remedies for these difficulties are outlined, priorities for new research in this area are identified, and ways in which to rejuvenate the federal government's role in this area, in league with a concerted commitment to policy-relevant research by behavioral scientists, are suggested.*

In recent years, behavioral research has advanced because of a partnership between researchers and public and private agencies. This is especially true when research involves longitudinal study or complex methodologies that require reliable funding, collaboration among research scientists, and technical guidance from program officers. The need for administrative and financial support is underscored also when research concerns significant social problems because a detailed, reliable empirical analysis is critical to devising effective solutions. Indeed, public agencies have historically assumed leadership in supporting research on social issues because of its policymaking relevance. In recent years, however, diminished financial resources and poor coordination within and among federal agencies have raised concerns about federal support of several areas of policy-relevant research.

Current research on child maltreatment exemplifies these concerns. The scope and seriousness of child abuse and neglect warrants concerted research attention. The U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect (1993b) estimated that in 1992 more than 1 million children were maltreated, with many experiencing serious physical injury, psychological trauma, or cognitive or behavioral deficits as a consequence. Research is necessary not only to understand the origins and causes of maltreatment and how to effectively treat its victims but also to evaluate prevention efforts in homes, schools, and communities, improve legal and social services to better assist troubled children and their families, and strengthen the protective factors in the child, family, or neighborhood that can buffer against abuse or neglect. As noted recently by the

Panel on Research on Child Abuse and Neglect of the National Research Council (NRC, 1993), maltreated children merit the investment of research effort to aid them in a manner comparable to society's investment in research to aid victims of child psychopathology, genetic diseases, or other disorders whose victims constitute much smaller cohorts.

During the past 10–15 years, however, public awareness of the problem of child abuse and neglect has escalated, whereas federal support for research and demonstration studies has waned (National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse, 1990). During a period in which the complex challenges of assisting maltreated children have become recognized, research funds have not been as effectively used as they should to address the most important issues concerning abused and neglected children. The purpose of this article is to describe the recent history of federal assistance for child maltreatment research, identify problems in fiscal and administrative support for research initiatives, and survey proposed remedies and recommendations for rejuvenating the federal government's role in this area.

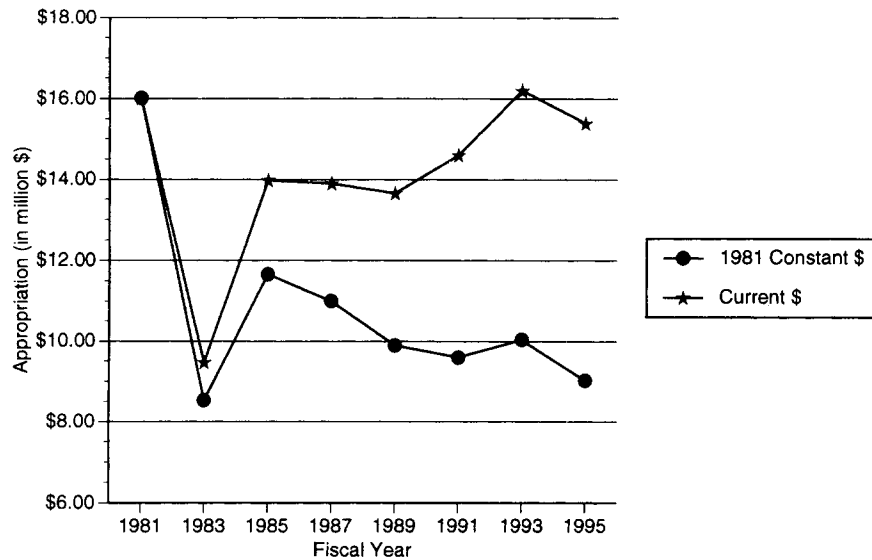
### **Federal Support for Child Maltreatment Research**

According to the NRC study, federal support for child maltreatment research is currently divided among 28 separate agencies or offices in five federal departments (Panel on Research on Child Abuse and Neglect, NRC, 1993). With one exception, however, most of these agencies fund research on abuse or neglect in the context of other program priorities, such as maternal and child health, substance abuse, criminal justice, or mental health. The exception is the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN), established by Congress in 1974 when it passed the landmark Child Abuse Pre-

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**Figure 1**  
 NCANN Research and Demonstration Funding, 1981–1995



vention and Treatment Act.<sup>1</sup> Created with the mission of generating knowledge concerning child maltreatment, NCCAN's budget accounts for more than one third of the total federal funding for research that is primarily relevant to child maltreatment and is the chief source of research funding in this area (Panel on Research on Child Abuse and Neglect, NRC, 1993).

The creation of NCCAN not only established a federal administrative center for child maltreatment research, but it may have also inadvertently fostered lower levels of funding for research on abused children by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and other federal agencies because of the delegation of this responsibility to NCCAN. This is unfortunate because the long tradition of basic etiological and treatment studies of complex problems like child maltreatment by NIMH, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), and other agencies was not easily transferred to a new federal agency with different professional commitments and a limited research support structure. Moreover, the subsequent erosion of research and demonstration funding for NCCAN during the past 10–15 years has probably also resulted in an overall reduction in total federal funding for child maltreatment research.

Figure 1 describes the amounts of research and demonstration funding appropriated for NCCAN from fiscal years 1981 through 1995.<sup>2</sup> During this period there has been a nominal decrease of 3.8% in funding of research and demonstration projects. However, when inflation is considered, the decrease in real dollar amounts increases to almost half (44%). Moreover, even when the past decade is considered alone, there has been a decrease in real dollar amounts of more than 20% in NCCAN support for research and demonstration projects. There

are also estimates that of the funds allocated for research, demonstration activities, and training and technical assistance, only 20% to 50% is used to support research initiatives on child abuse and neglect (Melton & Flood, 1994; Starr, 1990). Thus only a proportion of a small and declining pool of funds is available through NCCAN for research on child maltreatment.

There has been, therefore, a rather dramatic decrease in funding for child maltreatment research during a period when the responsibility for federal support in this area has been increasingly assumed by NCCAN, in which NCCAN's mission has been progressively expanded by Congress to encompass more diverse aspects of child maltreatment study. Moreover, with the emergence during the past 10–15 years of significant public

<sup>1</sup> The Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources approved legislation reauthorizing the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act on June 21, 1995. The bill would eliminate NCCAN and give the Secretary for Health and Human Services (HHS) discretion to establish an Office on Child Abuse and Neglect. The bill requires HHS to support research on child maltreatment (including field-initiated research) and further strengthen the peer review system for research grants, but it gives the Secretary of HHS discretion as to where the research program will be administratively located. The House of Representatives eliminated NCCAN and all of its programs as part of their welfare reform legislation, in which authority for all for NCCAN activities are ceded to the states as part of a child welfare block grant. A conference committee will be required to resolve the differences between the actions taken by the two legislative bodies.

<sup>2</sup> The House of Representatives Appropriations Committee has approved \$15.385 million in funding for child abuse research and demonstration activities for fiscal year 1996; the Senate has not yet taken action. This amount is identical to the funding provided during fiscal year 1995. The House Appropriations Committee has proposed cutting all funding for child welfare research (\$6.395 million) and social services research (\$14.961 million) in fiscal year 1996.

concern about child sexual abuse, the prevalence of child neglect and poverty, the increasing problem of drug-exposed newborns, and growing professional concern about the lack of knowledge pertinent to designing effective prevention and treatment programs (National Committee for the Prevention of Child Abuse, 1990), the decline in federal funding for research during the past decade is particularly remarkable. Although funding for many areas of child and family services and research has declined during the past 10 years, the seriousness of the problem of child maltreatment caused the NRC panel recently to recommend a doubling of research funding on this issue in NCCAN and other federal agencies over the next 3 years (Panel on Research on Child Abuse and Neglect, NRC, 1993).

### **Research Priorities and Administration**

In addition to inadequate funding for research, other problems have undermined efforts to generate new knowledge about child abuse and neglect. These include broad concerns about the need for multidisciplinary integration, the coordination of research among various public and private agencies, and problems in the administration of research funding within NCCAN.

#### **Multidisciplinary Approach**

Child maltreatment is inherently a cross-disciplinary problem entailing perspectives from various subfields within psychology as well as from sociology and social work, criminal justice, public health, and law. Yet the funding that supports new research initiatives, the professional journals and other avenues in which results are disseminated, and the training programs for new scholars tend to be "discipline-centric," with insufficient cross-disciplinary fertilization of perspectives, approach, and goals. Moreover, the failure to adopt a concerted multidisciplinary orientation also limits the application of research knowledge such that new discoveries concerning the origins or consequences of child maltreatment from psychology, for example, often do not come to the attention of social workers, lawyers and judges, legislators, and other practitioners—and psychologists often remain ignorant of insights from allied fields (Thompson, 1993).

The application of a multidisciplinary orientation to child maltreatment research is a matter of professional training as well as research administration and support. Several commentators have emphasized the value of strengthening interdisciplinary graduate and postdoctoral training programs in child abuse and neglect that currently exist in small number and of supporting multiyear research career awards to experienced researchers to foster programmatic studies of child maltreatment in league with other investigators (Panel on Research on Child Abuse and Neglect, NRC, 1993; Melton & Flood, 1994; Thompson, 1993; U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1990).

In addition, the establishment of a comprehensive information and dissemination service to enhance access to published and unpublished research on child maltreat-

ment from different disciplines (such as that which exists in criminal justice) and the sponsorship of periodic forums, in which researchers from different fields concerned with child maltreatment can exchange findings and perspectives, are additional ways that federal agencies can strengthen the multidisciplinary quality of research.

### **Coordination of Research Programs**

Consistent with a multidisciplinary orientation, strengthening the links between NCCAN and other federal research agencies with significant funding commitments to research on child maltreatment—such as NIMH, NICHD, and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP)—can also enhance the integration of various disciplinary perspectives to child abuse and neglect and coordinate the research and technical expertise of agencies with traditional interests in child abuse and neglect. This would also contribute to the perception that the problem of child maltreatment is a cross-cutting concern among federal research agencies.

Moreover, the coordination of research programs across pertinent federal agencies would encourage researchers to integrate empirical initiatives on child maltreatment with current concerns in allied fields (e.g., child mental health in NIMH, or issues of juvenile delinquency in OJJDP) and would perhaps also enhance the avenues for supporting in-depth prospective, longitudinal studies that are essential but lacking in the study of child maltreatment.

### **NCCAN Research Administration**

Beyond these broader concerns, critics have raised many doubts about the administration of research funds at NCCAN, the lead agency for federal support of research on child maltreatment. For many years following its establishment, for example, NCCAN used a system for reviewing research and demonstration protocols that raised researchers' concerns about the role of scientific merit in funding awards. In particular, questions were raised that grant proposals to NCCAN were evaluated by reviewers with little expertise in child maltreatment, that an unnecessarily high proportion of proposals were separated from the normal process of scientific review, and that there were few opportunities for members of the research community to contribute to the formulation of program priorities (e.g., U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Government Operations, 1986).

These criticisms have resulted in a strengthened system of peer review and other valuable remedies. Concerns still remain, however, about the limited amount of feedback provided to investigators after their grant proposals are reviewed, inadequate opportunities for revisions and resubmissions, the absence of well-trained in-house staff who can provide technical advice to researchers, and the lack of a systematic, multiyear plan for guiding the development of this research field (Melton & Flood, 1994; Panel on Research on Child Abuse and Neglect, NRC, 1993; U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1991).

In addition, research funding of demonstration projects to explore promising treatment or prevention approaches from NCCAN has, until recently, allocated relatively few funds to the comprehensive evaluation of these programs. Although this is a common problem for demonstration projects in many agencies, it severely limits psychologists' understanding of what works and why in treating or preventing child maltreatment, and thus undermines the generalization of knowledge gained from these efforts (Panel on Research on Child Abuse and Neglect, NRC, 1993; U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1990, 1991, 1993a, 1993b). One valuable remedy would be to require that NCCAN-sponsored demonstration projects include a rigorous outcome evaluation, preferably by an external evaluator, with a reasonable proportion of the grant or contract research budget (5% to 10%) committed to evaluation.

To some extent, these problems arise because NCCAN does not have a long tradition of research on social problems with complex etiological, preventive, and treatment dimensions. Although there is evidence of significant progress, the NRC panel and other critics have also recommended a reorganization of federal authority for child maltreatment research, with NIMH, NICHD, or another agency with an established research tradition assuming lead responsibility for research in this area (Melton & Flood, 1994; Panel on Research on Child Abuse and Neglect, NRC, 1993).

### **New Research Initiatives**

Thoughtfully conceived and well-designed research and demonstration projects concerning child abuse and neglect remain as vitally important now as they were several decades ago when public concern about child maltreatment began to increase. In league with a rejuvenated federal role in research on child maltreatment, however, behavioral scientists must accept greater responsibility for generating more policy-relevant knowledge about this problem (Thompson, 1993).

Despite limited federal support, researchers have learned much about child abuse and neglect during the past decade. Researchers have acquired considerably greater insight, for example, into the developmental consequences of child maltreatment for socioemotional, behavioral, and cognitive functioning from infancy through adolescence, and their effects on family and peer relationships, and have developed promising treatment and prevention strategies (see Cicchetti & Carlson, 1989; Cicchetti & Toth, 1993; Willis, Holden, & Rosenberg, 1992).

But much more remains unknown. In the conclusion of its 1993 report, the NRC panel identified the following among its priorities for research: the development of methods and instrumentation that would enable more reliable and valid measurement of child maltreatment and its effects; improved epidemiological studies of the incidence and prevalence of child maltreatment, especially of different forms of abuse and neglect; high-quality evaluation studies that would identify promising treatment and prevention services; and research eluci-

dating the importance (as well as risk) factors in the family, neighborhood, or community. Others have noted that studies lack the broader neighborhood and community contexts of child maltreatment, the importance of culture, and the child or family characteristics that predict the efficacy of alternative interventions (Melton, in press; Melton & Barry, in press; Melton & Flood, 1994; Thompson, 1993; U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1993a). To these important priorities, we add three.

### **Decision Making Within the Child Welfare System**

What happens to children when they become identified by child protection caseworkers? Remarkably, researchers have very little systematic information about how local child welfare authorities make judgments concerning the need for an immediate caseworker response, the seriousness of children's abuse, the need for a temporary placement at home or elsewhere, the treatment approaches enlisted to assist children and their families, the length of these services, and the subsequent monitoring of the child's progress. Researchers know little about how decisions concerning the family (e.g., civil or criminal legal action; intervention planning) are made and how outcomes are monitored. It seems likely that such decision making would vary by jurisdiction in relation to resource and funding availability, formal policies, and informal procedures, but at this time researchers have very little knowledge about these basic decision-making processes. Such knowledge could be invaluable not only for improving child protection procedures but also for identifying successful agency programs and policies to emulate elsewhere. Research funds earmarked by NCCAN and other federal agencies for this purpose and administrative coordination with professional groups representing child welfare and law enforcement authorities can spur much-needed studies on this topic.

### **Life Experience of Children in the Child Protection System**

Similarly, researchers know astonishingly little about how children fare once they have become identified by child protection caseworkers. Where are they placed when the caseworker decides to remove them from the home? How many placements occur before a permanent home is found? How do these placements vary with the age of the child? What alternatives exist to foster care, and what are their consequences for children? Although there are a few large-scale studies of the experience of children in foster care, states have moved slowly to compile and analyze federally mandated data concerning the outcomes of children in out-of-home placements, and a thorough analysis will probably require the collaborative support of behavioral scientists (e.g., Schwartz & Ortega, in press). Federal agencies can foster this effort by requiring that states make their child welfare data sets available for primary or secondary analysis by research scientists who have mastered the complex technical requirements of or-

ganizing and analyzing such data sets and by providing funds to researchers to conduct these needed analyses (see Lerman, 1990).

### **Social Isolation, Social Support, and Child Maltreatment**

One of the common beliefs people have about abuse-prone families is that they are socially isolated, coupled with the view that better integrating these families into their neighborhoods might help curb maltreatment (cf. U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1990, 1991, 1993a, 1993b). However, a recent comprehensive review of the research on social support and child maltreatment noted that few reliable conclusions can be made about whether high-risk families are socially isolated and in what ways, compared with other families (Thompson, in press). Some abuse-prone parents feel emotionally supported by social networks that do little to reduce their abuse potential; for some, the benefits of social support are complicated by other problems (e.g., substance abuse, reactance to assistance, or limited social skills or resources) that also require attention; and for others, neighborhoods are sources of stress rather than of support. Moreover, there is little direct information on the features and sources of social support that have the greatest value for preventing child maltreatment or on the interpersonal resources that provide the greatest assistance for abuse-prone families. Thus enthusiasm for social support interventions to curb child maltreatment (e.g., those involving perinatal home visitation) rest on a shaky empirical foundation.

Strengthening this foundation requires multidisciplinary research initiatives because of the importance of coordinating the perspectives of developmental and community psychologists, sociologists, and social workers in efforts to describe and evaluate the social networks and social resources of abuse-prone families within their communities. Research funds earmarked for interdisciplinary initiatives under an RFP format offer one means by which federal agencies can enhance the coordination of interdisciplinary perspectives on the social ecology of child maltreatment.

### **Conclusion**

Advances in understanding of the causes and consequences of child maltreatment, and of the most feasible strategies for preventing and treating this social problem, remain contingent on the commitment of behavioral scientists to create policy-relevant knowledge and on the willingness of federal agencies to provide appropriate administrative and financial support. A new national plan

for programmatic research on child abuse and neglect is possible when scientists and agency directors can coordinate and mutually support their concern for abused or neglected children.

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