

Discussion Papers

Children Caring for
Themselves and Child
Neglect:
When Do They Overlap?

Erica H. Zielewski

Karin Malm

Rob Geen

The Urban Institute

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Assessing
the New
Federalism

*An Urban Institute
Program to Assess
Changing Social
Policies*

Assessing the New Federalism is a multiyear Urban Institute project designed to analyze the devolution of responsibility for social programs from the federal government to the states, focusing primarily on health care, income security, employment and training programs, and social services. Researchers monitor program changes and fiscal developments. Olivia Golden is the project director. In collaboration with Child Trends, the project studies changes in family well-being. The project aims to provide timely, nonpartisan information to inform public debate and to help state and local decisionmakers carry out their new responsibilities more effectively.

Key components of the project include a household survey and studies of policies in 13 states, available at the Urban Institute's web site, <http://www.urban.org>. This paper is one in a series of discussion papers analyzing information from these and other sources.

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Deciding when to leave a child home alone to care for him- or herself is a decision that every parent, at one time or another, must make. Determining how long a child can care for him- or herself is equally as challenging for families. According to the 1999 National Survey of America's Families, over 3.3 million school-age children regularly spend time caring for themselves (Vandivere et al. 2003). For some families leaving a child alone is often a necessity because of a lack of child care or other options. For others, leaving children alone is a symptom of parental neglect owing to any number of causes. Further, some evidence suggests that lack of supervision cases are highly correlated with child fatalities (Jones 1987). Understanding the differences between these situations is a challenge for child protective services agencies.

The Urban Institute conducted an exploratory study to examine how local child welfare agencies respond when they receive reports of children who are taking care of themselves ("self-care"), including how they determine whether unsupervised children are victims of child neglect. Through a variety of data collection methods, the study was intended to illuminate the choices that child welfare agencies make every day in handling child neglect referrals. The study included an extensive literature review, interviews and focus groups with child protective services staff in three local Washington, D.C., metropolitan social services agencies, and a review of neglect intake referral forms in one local agency.¹

Important to the discussion of how local child welfare agencies decide when "self-care" becomes child neglect are the legal, policy, and practice guidelines that help to inform caseworkers' decisions. Equally important are the case-specific factors that caseworkers take into consideration. Because of the extraordinary complexity of these issues, the study was not intended to reach definitive conclusions, but rather to help define and focus future research.

Definitions and Prevalence

Self-care

Definitions of self-care by children vary among researchers and practitioners. The National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) defines self-care as a child regularly spending time alone or with a sibling younger than 13 (Vandivere et al. 2003). The definition of self-care, however, extends beyond children left at home to encompass a number of situations in which a child must care for him- or herself, such as walking home from school or being left unattended in a public place (such as a library, park, shopping mall, or car).

Estimates from the National Child Care Survey (NCCS) conducted in 1990 showed that 3.4 million children age 5 to 12 (12 percent) are in self-care (Hofferth et al. 1991). The 1995 U.S. Census Bureau Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) also found that 12 percent of children age 5 to 12 are in self-care (Kerrebrock and Lewit 1999). Using the 1999 National Survey of America's Families (NSAF), a more recent study by Child Trends and the Urban Institute observed that approximately 3.3 million (15 percent of) school-age children (6–12 years) regularly spend time in self-care (Vandivere et al. 2003).

There is also evidence that many families use self-care as their primary child care arrangement, a trend that has increased throughout the 1990s. The 1990 NCCS showed that 6 percent of all families reported that they use self-care at some point during the workweek, but only 2 percent of families identified self-care as their primary childcare arrangement. For families with an employed mother, 2 percent use self-care as their primary care arrangement (Hofferth et al. 1991). More recent data gleaned from the 1999 NSAF observed that 10 percent engage in self-care as their primary care arrangement. (Note: Self-care in this study included

¹ The three local child protective services agencies where focus groups were held were Prince George's County, Maryland; Fairfax County, Virginia; and the District of Columbia. Intake referrals were reviewed in Prince George's

children caring for themselves and care by a sibling younger than age 13.) Interestingly, these proportions were higher for school-age children, as 19 percent of children age 10 to 12 use self-care as their primary arrangement (Vandivere et al. 2003).

Given that many inadequate supervision policies and guidelines are based on age, the age at which parents who use self-care first left their children in self-care is of particular interest. The 1990 NCCS found that self-care users first left their children in self-care for up to 30 minutes per day at an average age of 9 (Hofferth et al. 1991). About one-third of children first cared for themselves before age 9. Notably, Hofferth and colleagues determined that 14 percent of parents first left their children in self-care between age 0 and 6. While not a large percentage, this indicates that many children might be left to care for themselves before reaching school age.

It is important to remember when reading these estimates of the number of children in self-care that these data may be undercounts of the actual numbers of children in self-care. Many of the national surveys cited here rely on parents' reports of self-care. There are a number of reasons a parent may not choose to accurately report the self-care that he/she may use for his/her child. There are still social stigmas attached to leaving children home alone, and tragic media stories of children harmed while left home alone support these notions. Many parents may be ashamed or embarrassed to admit that they leave their children to care for themselves or in the care of siblings under age 13. As a result, it is reasonable to believe that national surveys of self-care may provide conservative estimates.

Child Neglect and Inadequate Supervision

The definitions of child neglect also vary among statutes, child welfare agencies, and practitioners. The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) provides a minimum standard definition which states must uphold in their own policies: "child abuse and

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neglect means, at a minimum, any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker, which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation, or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm.” (42 U.S.C.A. § 5106g (2)).

Using the CAPTA definition as a minimum standard, states create their own definitions of neglect often defining neglect as the “deprivation of adequate food, clothing, shelter, or medical care” (National Clearinghouse 2001). However, there is room for variation in how the policies are implemented and operationalized, and most states (two-fifths) include religious exemptions for medical neglect and financial considerations for physical neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000).

Researchers have also struggled with how to define neglect. According to the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect Information, researchers have universally accepted some behaviors as neglectful. These include inadequate nutrition, clothing, or hygiene; inadequate medical, dental, or mental health care; unsafe environments; inadequate supervision, including use of inadequate caretakers; and abandonment or expulsion from the home (Barnett, Manly, and Cicchetti 1993; Sedlack and Broadhurst 1996 in *Acts of Omission: An Overview of Child Neglect* 2001). One factor often considered in research definitions of neglect is the behavioral aspect of parental neglect. Thus, researchers consider the role of intention or parental will in neglect cases, as well as patterns of parental neglect.

Likewise, researchers and practitioners have also grappled with how to define inadequate supervision. For their National Study on Child Neglect and Abuse Reporting, the American Humane Association (1984) defines “lack of supervision” as “inattention on the part of, or absence of, the caretaker which results in injury to the child or which leaves the child unable to care for him/herself, or have his behavior monitored so that he avoids the possibility of injuring

himself or others" (in Jones 1987). Through a review of child maltreatment typologies, state CPS classification systems, and many state child abuse and neglect statutes, Coohey suggests 10 distinct categorizations of supervisory neglect, five of which are pertinent to definitions of inadequate supervision, including that the parent (1) did not watch a child closely enough; (2) left a child alone; (3) left a child with a suitable caretaker but without the caregiver's consent or adequate planning; (4) refused custody or abandonment of a child; and (5) left a child with an unsuitable caretaker (Coohey 2003).

Regardless of the difficulty in classifying and defining lack of supervision or inadequate supervision, this type of neglect may be one of the most common types of child maltreatment. There is evidence that among child neglect cases, CPS agencies may identify more cases with supervision problems than any other type of neglect. A study of 182 families reported to CPS in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, by Nelson, Saunders, and Landsman (1990) found that 46 percent of the neglected children were inadequately supervised (excluding cases of abandonment, expulsion, and other custody issues) (in Coohey 2003). Similarly, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (1998) found that 49 percent of neglected children were inadequately supervised (including cases of abandonment, expulsion, and other custody issues) (in Coohey 2003). Estimates from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data Systems (NCANDS) suggest that 30 percent of abused and neglected children are inadequately supervised (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2002).

Aside from the child protection issues, why do we care about inadequate supervision? As discussed earlier, often children left alone are given too much autonomy at a young age and have conflicts with parents as teenagers that may result in physical abuse. The literature suggests that there are other reasons it is important to consider and address the issue of inadequate supervision.

Coohey (2003) considers child problems and psychological care associated with adequate supervision. Children who are inadequately supervised are more likely to have drug or alcohol problems, developmental disabilities, mental health problems, problems with the law (delinquency or status offenses), and school or other problems. Mothers who inadequately supervised their children were less likely to have acceptance of and/or affection for their children, have approval of children, have expectations of children, teach or stimulate children, and provide mental health care. Thus, inadequate supervision extends beyond a child protection issue to one of child well-being.

Understanding Neglectful and Self-Care-Using Families

There is considerable research looking at the characteristics of neglectful families as well as families who use self-care for their children. There are significant similarities and differences. In terms of family income, families who use self-care are more likely to have higher incomes and families who leave children unattended are more likely to have a family financial status of “comfortable” (Coohey 1998; Jones 1987; Vandivere et al. 2003). Children with employed parents are more likely to use self-care, while mothers who are neglectful and leave their children unattended are less likely to be employed (Hofferth et al. 1991; Jones 1987; Vandivere et al. 2003). Following the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, the labor force participation for single mothers and never-married mothers increased significantly (Waldfogel et al. 2000 in Paxson and Waldfogel 2000). There is some evidence that families with mothers who move from welfare to work may leave an increasing number of school-age children home alone. Data analyzed before the passage of PRWORA found that working poor families were more likely to leave their children in self-care than poor families that did not work (15 percent compared with 8 percent) (Smith 2000).

Conceivably, if more poor families enter the workforce due to the requirements of TANF, then there may be an accompanying rise in self-care use among these families.

Having younger children in the household increases the use of self-care, and families that are reported for lack of supervision have more, younger children than their adequately supervising counterparts (Cain and Hofferth 1989; Jones 1987; Vandivere et al. 2003). Families that do not adequately supervise children have fewer years of education than their adequately supervising counterparts, even though having a higher education level (college education level or higher) is associated with higher use of self-care (Jones 1987; Vandivere et al. 2003). Finally, having family stress or poor mental health increases the likelihood of self-care use, and mothers who inadequately supervise their children are more likely to have mental health or drug/alcohol problems (Coohey 1998; Vandivere et al. 2003).

Methodology

The research was designed to obtain information from front-line practitioners on cases involving inadequate supervision or children caring for themselves. Screeners, staff tasked with screening calls to the child protective services agency, were asked about the types of individuals who are likely to report these types of occurrences and the screening criteria. Investigators, staff tasked with investigating reports that are screened in, were asked more specific questions about the agency's response to these types of cases including the factors used to make decisions regarding whether to substantiate the neglect and/or open an ongoing child protective services case. Researchers also spoke with administrators and managers in each locality, as well as law enforcement officials in two localities. The primary methods of data collection included focus groups and in-person interviews.

Additionally, research staff reviewed 350 referrals for child neglect in Prince George's County for a two-month period (March–April 2005). For these cases, we reviewed the type of neglect alleged in the referral, the alleged perpetrator or perpetrators of the neglect, the person making the report, other factors identified in the referral such as substance abuse or other physical abuse, and whether the report was screened in for investigation or screened out at the time of referral.

Importance to Local Child Protection Agencies

Owing to the exploratory nature of the study, it was unclear if local child protective services staff would perceive lack of supervision as an important issue. Administrators and caseworkers in each of the three localities reported that lack of supervision was a major concern and represented a significant portion of each agency's neglect referrals. The degree of the problem varied, with respondents providing estimates of inadequate supervision constituting 20–50 percent of all neglect calls.

When asked to estimate the degree to which lack of supervision cases are not brought to light, respondents in each locality expressed that the lack of supervision cases that they receive are the “tip of the iceberg.” They believed that there are many children being left alone who are never brought to the attention of child protective services. These children were often depicted as “latchkey” children, staying alone or outside with other children for periods of time after school or on school holidays. The caseworkers felt that many of these situations were safe and adequate for the children and noted that often, latchkey children have safety plans in place, which, as discussed later, is an important factor in caseworkers’ decisionmaking.

Our review of all neglect referrals in Prince George's County indicated that 35 percent of all neglect referrals involved inadequate supervision. A review of the status (i.e., screened in for

investigation or screened out) found that referrals involving inadequate supervision were more likely to be screened in than other neglect referrals, which included educational, medical, and other types of neglect.

Why Do Families Leave Children Unattended or Inadequately Supervised?

The decision to allow children to care for themselves is a decision all parents make at one time or another. As one caseworker noted, the issue is larger than a child protective services issue. Perhaps because of the universal nature of the decision, caseworkers reported a wide array of reasons parents leave their children alone by choice or by necessity. Notably, many of the described factors are not mutually exclusive; often, it is not one factor, but rather a combination of factors, that causes a parent to leave a child alone.

Economic Need and Child Care

Respondents noted many low-income working-class families use self-care. These often include families that make too much to qualify for child care subsidies or may not have the transportation necessary to access child care. Some of these families turn to unlicensed child care providers when they cannot afford licensed care. Yet, respondents in one local agency noted unlicensed care providers that had been shut down, removing the family's sole provider.

School Hours, School Vacations, and Summer Programs

There was a lack of consensus among respondents as to whether lack of supervision referrals increase during the summer, other vacation days, or early dismissal days, due in part to the fact that there is less reporting by schools on these days. Intake referral data from Prince George's County, however, support these anecdotes. The average number of neglect reports on school vacation days or early dismissal days was less (6.3 reports) than the average number of reports (7.3) on a "normal" school day. However, when only inadequate supervision calls were

analyzed, there was an average of 2.6 reports on vacation or early dismissal days and 2.4 on regular school days.²

Caseworkers noted that, for many children, being a “latchkey” child might work well during the school year when the child or siblings are only home alone for a few hours. However, during the summer or full vacation days, the same arrangement becomes inappropriate if the child is home alone all day. Respondents also noted the need for summer activities for teens. Most children “age out” of summer camps around the age of 12, when adult supervision is still very important. While a 12-year-old may be perfectly capable of caring for him- or herself, long, unstructured summer days may trigger misbehavior and other unwanted activities.

Parents also struggle to make decisions when a child is sick and is not permitted to attend school or day care and the parent must go to work. Caseworkers noted that these parents often make the decision to leave the sick child at home alone or have an older sibling stay home to care for the child. Finally, a few caseworkers pointed out that the school day schedule for elementary-age children often starts later than middle and high schools. Some young children are left alone in the mornings when parents and/or siblings have already left for work or school. These children may be more likely to be tardy or absent from school.

Family Culture

Many of the respondents noted the large role that a family’s culture, upbringing, and degree of assimilation play in making decisions around supervision. In many cultures, older children are responsible for caring for younger ones. In Fairfax County, caseworkers mentioned that some families have been dismayed to realize that something that was done routinely, such as older

² The Ns for these analyses are very small. For vacation or early dismissal days, N = 50. For regular school days, N = 264.

children caring for younger children, in their country of origin is not acceptable in this country if the older child is not of an appropriate age.

Family Isolation

Respondents in all three local agencies noted that family isolation often leads to children being left unattended. Family mobility often leads to family isolation as families that move for a number of reasons often have no relatives or friends nearby to help with caring for children. Caseworkers also observed that some families want to keep to themselves and do not ask neighbors for assistance. Alternatively, many neighbors are quick to report families without offering assistance. Immigrant families, in particular, may be more likely to be isolated due to language barriers.

Symptom of Larger Problem

Respondents recalled that many inadequate supervision cases involve other problems of the caregiver, such as substance abuse, mental illness, and domestic violence. The presence of these issues often causes these cases to be referred for investigation rather than screened out. Caseworkers in all three jurisdictions noted that when inadequate supervision appears to occur because of a parent or caregiver's larger problem, the allegations are usually more severe and the family more difficult to serve.

Who Reports Cases Involving Self-Care and Inadequate Supervision?

According to focus group participants, inadequate supervision is reported by a variety of individuals. Schools, neighbors, and ex-partners and ex-spouses top the list in terms of frequency of reporting occurrences. Results from the review of intake referrals in Prince George's County indicate that of the known reporters of inadequate supervision, 21 percent were school personnel,

29 percent were neighbors, and 13 percent were an estranged or divorced parent.³ The remainder of reporters (39 percent) were other individuals including medical personnel, other community members, or the child him- or herself. Compared to other neglect referrals, there were far less school reporters (21 versus 38 percent) and estranged or divorced parents (13 versus 24 percent). There were far more neighbors reporting inadequate supervision than other neglect (29 versus 2 percent).

Schools

Screeners frequently mentioned schools as a referral source for reports of inadequate supervision. The relationship between child protection agency and schools appeared to vary across the three local agencies and within each community. Differences were reported between public and private schools, with some respondents noting the agency hears from private schools much less frequently than public schools. When the agency did receive a referral from a private school, the caseworkers agreed that the report tends to be serious. Some respondents noted that public schools make some reports to the agency that are not screened in and resulted from the school being frustrated in their attempts to contact parents of an unruly or truant child. While some of these calls are appropriate, caseworkers often felt that the schools had not done a good job at outreach to the family first, before bringing the situation to the attention of child protective services.

Caseworkers also mentioned situations that occur because no adult is home when a child is to be dropped off by a school bus. In one local agency, respondents noted that the policy is for bus drivers to bring the child to the agency when such a situation arises; in some cases, however, respondents noted bus drivers not waiting long enough for the parent or other adult to come to

³ These analyses were conducted for small Ns. The total N for inadequate supervision referrals with known reporters was 63. The total N for other types of neglect was 58.

the bus. Similarly, some respondents receive reports when a parent is not waiting to pick a child up after school or does not appear to be walking the child to school. Respondents in one locality also noted that schools report truancy cases to CPS, although they stressed that unless there is another child protection issue, these referrals are inappropriate.

Neighbors and Friends

Caseworkers noted that neighbors often call in reports of noise made by children left alone. Respondents noted that in dense housing neighborhoods, neighbors might be more likely to report children being left alone because they are more likely to see or hear about such instances. Friends of a child's parents will often report instances in which a child is left in their care but the parent fails to return at the agreed-upon time.

Former Boyfriends and Spouses

Respondents noted calls received by males were most likely to be from ex-boyfriends and ex-spouses. Custody disagreements and other arguments between ex-partners often feed referrals about inadequate supervision. Respondents also mentioned that changes in a household's composition, such as one parent moving out of the house, could lead to inadequate supervision of children.

Calls by ex-boyfriends and ex-spouses are dealt with differently across the three public CPS agencies. In Maryland and Virginia, these types of calls are more likely to be screened out. In fact, some respondents in these two agencies noted that they ask the referring parent to check on the children himself/herself if the parent thinks the child is being left alone inappropriately. If the parent appears unwilling to help, the screeners will note that he/she is equally responsible for the care of the children. However, in the District of Columbia, these calls cannot be screened out. An investigator would need to respond to the call to determine the details of the incident.

What Protocols Guide Caseworker Decisions?

It is also important to consider the legal, policy, and practice guidelines that enter into child welfare caseworkers' decisionmaking. There is a wide body of literature to guide parents in making the decision to leave their children home alone. These guidelines focus on a child's maturity, having safety plans in place, and a number of other considerations.

There is no federal policy regarding self-care. The Federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, as described earlier, provides minimum standards for definitions, however, this law does not specifically mention self-care and the age at which a child can be left to care for him/herself. In general, however, many states allow local communities to define inadequate supervision and appropriate ages for investigating this form of neglect. However, two states, Illinois and Maryland, actually outlaw self-care for specific children. Illinois law prohibits leaving a child under the age of 14 without supervision.⁴ Illinois state law also includes a list of 15 considerations that must be taken into account when dealing with inadequate supervision in trying to determine whether a child has been left for a reasonable amount of time.⁵ Maryland state law also lays out specific guidelines for leaving children home alone and includes language about the age of appropriate caretakers.⁶

⁴ Illinois state law defines a neglected minor, in part, as "any minor under the age of 14 years whose parent or other person responsible for the minor's welfare leaves the minor without supervision for an unreasonable period of time without regard for the mental or physical health, safety or welfare of that minor" (*Juvenile Court Act*, 705 ILCS 405/2-3(1)(d)) (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services 2001).

⁵ These factors include age, number of minors, special needs or disabilities of the minor, duration of time left, home environment, time of day left, weather conditions, location of the parent or guardian, restriction of minor's movement, whether the minor was given a phone number of a person or location to call in the event of an emergency and whether the minor was capable of making an emergency call, available food and provisions, whether the conduct is attributable to economic hardship or illness and the parent made a good faith effort to provide for the health and safety of the minor, the age and physical and mental capabilities of the person who provided supervision for the minor, and whether the minor was left under the supervision of another person.

⁶ Maryland State Family Law § 5-801 provides the following: (a) A person who is charged with the care of a child under the age of 8 years may not allow the child to be locked or confined in a dwelling, building, enclosure, or motor vehicle while the person charged is absent and the dwelling, building, enclosure, or motor vehicle is out of the sight of the person charged unless the person charged provides a reliable person at least 13 years old to remain with

Many localities without specific laws and policies do have guidelines that govern inadequate supervision cases. For example, Fairfax County, Virginia, discussed below, has very specific child supervision guidelines, which represent minimally acceptable standards for the supervision of children. These guidelines offer parents an age and acceptable amount of time that a child may be left alone.

Prince George's County, Maryland

In addition to the Maryland State Family Law, which outlaws leaving a children under the age of 8 unattended, Prince George's County created guidelines to remind parents that even if a child is over age 8, there might be some preclusive factors that make it inappropriate to leave the child unattended, such as a disability, mental handicap, and so on.

Fairfax County, Virginia

Virginia leaves policies regarding the investigation of inadequate supervision and determination of the age up to the local communities. Fairfax County offers specific child supervision guidelines, which represent minimally acceptable standards for the supervision of children. These guidelines include the following: children age 7 and under should not be left alone for any period of time; children age 8 to 10 should no be left alone for more than one and a half hours and only during daylight and early evening hours; children age 11 to 12 may be left alone for up to three hours but not late at night or in circumstances requiring inappropriate responsibility; children age 13 to 15 may be left unsupervised, but not overnight; and teenagers age 16 to 17 may be left unsupervised (in some cases, for up to two consecutive overnight periods). Yet, as is the case in Maryland, these guidelines allow for flexibility, particularly in cases with children who have special needs.

the child to protect the child. (b) A person who violates this section is guilty of a misdemeanor and on conviction is subject to a fine not exceeding \$500 or imprisonment not exceeding 30 days, or both (Warner 2003).

Washington, D.C.

In contrast, the District of Columbia does not have guidelines regarding inadequate supervision at a specific age. The District does have policies for handling children who are left alone or with inadequate supervision and has clear laws defining a “neglected child.” In the District of Columbia, a neglected child is, among other things, a child “who is without proper care or control, subsistence, education or other care or control necessary for his/her physical, mental, or emotional health” (D.C. Official Code § 16-2301(9)). In the District of Columbia, for purposes of child abuse and neglect, a “child” means “an individual who is under 18 years of age” (§ 16-2301(3)). Since the District lacks clear laws or guidelines regarding inadequate supervision and self-care, child welfare staff investigate all children under age 18 that are left alone. However, the lack of guidelines also means that workers have extensive flexibility in handling these cases.

What Are Casework Practices?

Just as the reasons parents leave children alone vary, so do caseworkers’ response to these cases. Despite guidelines and/or laws in place, casework practice in the area of inadequate supervision is largely subjective. Within every clear regulation, such as the minimum age requirement in Maryland, there is some ambiguity, such as a deaf 10-year-old left to care for him/herself. Responses to children left unattended vary not only by caseworkers, but also by law enforcement officers, who are often the first individuals on the scene following a report of a child left alone.

How Do Child Welfare Agencies Respond?

Although there are guidelines and state laws, it is clear that determinations of inadequate supervision (neglect) vary depending on a number of factors and that these guidelines and laws leave room for flexibility despite age limits. Agency response to referrals involving children left alone differed across the three localities.

District of Columbia. Since the District of Columbia does not specify an age at which children can be left unattended legally, any youth under the age of 18 can be investigated for child neglect. As a result, screeners noted that very few calls are screened out. Referrals involving a child left alone require immediate social worker response and, if possible, a law enforcement officer as well, pending the worker can coordinate with law enforcement. If a reporter says that a child is left alone after school but the child is currently in school, the social worker goes to the school to interview the child. Caseworkers in the District noted that the only calls about inadequate supervision that would be screened out are duplicate reports. While they may not substantiate the neglect allegation in many of these cases, particularly given their broad regulations, a social worker must investigate each referral.

Fairfax County, Virginia. In Fairfax County, a two-track system of family assessments and investigations allows screeners to differentiate among reports depending on crucial factors that include the immediate danger to the child and the severity of the alleged abuse or neglect. The purpose of the family assessment is to engage the family in assessing the immediate safety needs of the child, the risk of future harm, and the offering of services that can meet the needs of the child or family. If a family has received three family assessments within a year, the next report is investigated. Respondents in Fairfax noted that most reports of inadequate supervision would initiate a family assessment. Notably, if a law enforcement officer picked up a child who had been left alone (as would happen, if for example, a neighbor called the police when he/she saw a young child alone in the street at night), the complaint would result in an investigation, not an assessment.

Prince George's County, Maryland. Since Maryland has a state law that includes a legal age at which children can be left alone, age 8, there is somewhat less flexibility in handling

these cases. Caseworkers in Prince George's County noted that they tend to intervene only when necessary, noting that they prefer to emphasize family preservation. In cases involving inadequate supervision of children that did not meet the guidelines, caseworkers would help the family create a safety plan. Caseworkers noted that much of their job is to work with families to "see" the issue of supervision of their children in a different light. Workers also noted having an assessment unit that works with families who voluntarily agree to be involved with the agency. However, in severe cases, such as a child left alone in the middle of the night, the agency might remove the child rather than focus immediately on preventative measures.

How Do Law Enforcement Agencies Respond?

Law enforcement responses were similar across the three communities. If a caller reports a young child left alone, police are called to respond immediately. There was some variation in that if the call comes into the Prince George's agency and the location of the child is close by, a caseworker may be the first responder. In all three locations, calls coming to the agency after hours would also get an immediate law enforcement response. Caseworkers in all three agencies noted variability in terms of how law enforcement responds once on the scene. Owing to the unique nature of each call, flexibility is likely important; some of the variability, however, appears related to the experience or skills of the law enforcement officer. Some officers will allow the child to stay with a neighbor or relative until a parent returns home, while others will bring the child into the child welfare agency.

In addition to lack of supervision cases that occur in the home, respondents in all three localities noted that law enforcement officers would routinely handle calls about children left in vehicles. This is another area in which caseworkers felt there was great variability in response. In some cases the law enforcement officer calls child protective services, while in other cases the officer might give the parent a citation but not refer the case to child protective services. Reasons

for the varying law enforcement response to these calls, according to the respondents, can often hinge on parents' attitude and response to the situation.

What Factors Do Workers Consider When Deciding How to Respond?

Once the hotline screeners accept a referral, caseworkers must determine how to respond. A number of factors were mentioned by caseworkers as factors they consider in reports of inadequate supervision. Factors reported can be organized into three major categories—child, parent, and case-specific (see figure 1).

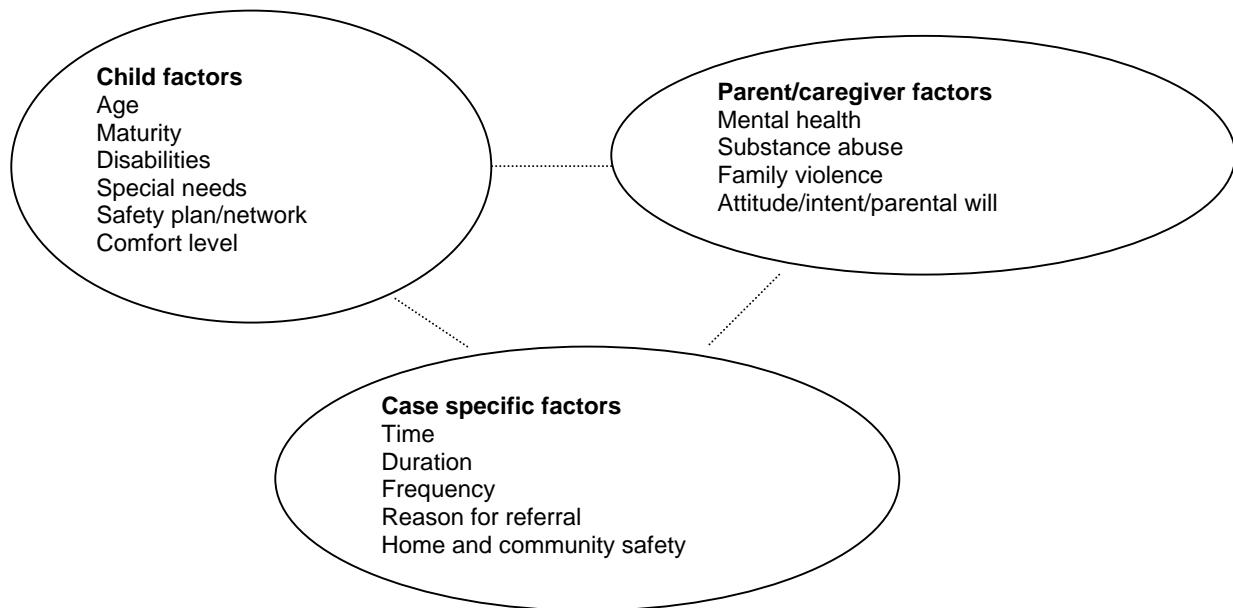
Child-related factors. Child factors are important considerations to caseworkers investigating these types of cases. Clearly, the child's age is an important and useful criteria for examining neglect. Age guidelines in Fairfax and Prince George's counties provide some guidance to screeners. However, respondents in both jurisdictions noted that age is not the only criteria used. More subjective criteria, such a child's maturity and whether the child feels comfortable caring for him/herself or siblings are also considered.

While the guidelines are very clear in some cases, such as no 8-year-old can care for younger siblings; older siblings who otherwise would be appropriate might have special needs or lack the maturity necessary to take care of younger siblings. All workers reported that if the child has health problems or disabilities that warrant adult supervision, the child or young adult should not be left alone, regardless of the guidelines. Scenarios provided by focus group participants highlight examples of such cases:

"A 15-year-old girl confined to a wheelchair was left by her mother in front of the television, which the mother thought was okay."

"An 8-year-old was put in charge of his 4-year-old sibling. The 4-year-old was running around the apartment complex while the 8-year-old stayed home alone. The 8-year-old could not control his sibling."

Figure 1. Caseworker Decisionmaking Factors



Another complication of the age issue arises when a child is old enough to care for him- or herself, but there is a potential for risk of harm from themselves or others. Caseworkers in two jurisdictions gave examples of cases involving teenagers who had been abused while caring for themselves or had participated in risky behavior:

"According to a neighbor reporter, a 15-year-old girl was engaging in sexual activity after school while her mother was at work. The neighbor called CPS after seeing lots of boys coming and going from the house."

One caseworker drew a connection between youth who enter care as a teenager and children left alone to care for themselves at too young of an age. This caseworker felt that many children that have too much autonomy at a young age face difficulties in their teens. Teenagers who skip school or stay out all night may end up in heated arguments with parents or other caregivers, leading to abusive situations.

Another critical factor that caseworkers take into account is whether the family has a safety plan in place for the child. Caseworkers consider whether the child would be able to help

him- or herself if they needed to. They noted that families with such plans in place are less likely to have a case opened. For example, is there a neighbor who knows the child is home alone that the child can contact? Does the child know how to use the phone and have access to emergency numbers (police, fire, etc.)? Workers expressed that even adults have difficulty handling emergencies and questioned how parents could expect children to be able to do this. Ironically, many parents say that their child knows not to let anyone into the house when alone, but the child lets the caseworker into the home with little to no hesitancy.

Even if a family has a safety plan in place, there are circumstances in which these plans fall apart. Cases in which a plan falls through are generally not viewed in the same way as families without such plans. Caseworkers also examine whether this incident was an isolated one or whether the incident is part of a larger pattern of child neglect. The scenario presented below was discussed by caseworkers as an example of a family with a plan.

"A mother staying in the hospital with a sick infant had left the other children alone. The school called the home needing the mother's signature and, finding the children alone, called CPS. An older sibling was watching the children and neighbors were checking on them so the situation was okay according to caseworkers."

Caseworkers also noted the comfort level of the child as a factor that they consider. According to respondents, children who are not comfortable staying home alone, regardless of their age, should not be made to do so. Screeners in the two suburban agencies noted that law enforcement receives some "911 hang up" calls from children left alone. In the view of the caseworkers, often these are children who are lonely or not comfortable staying alone.

Parent or caregiver factors. Caseworkers reported a number of factors related to the parent or child's caregiver that influence their responses to reports of inadequate supervision. Workers consider the mental health of the caregiver, whether the caregiver may have substance abuse issues, and whether there is any family violence in the home. Respondents noted that many parents who leave young babies or toddlers alone have substance abuse or mental health

problems. Results from the review of neglect referrals in Prince George's County indicated that 16 percent of the inadequate supervision referrals involved another type of neglect or abuse-related incident and 30 percent involved substance abuse by the caregiver. If these factors are present, respondents agreed that the case automatically rises to a high level of risk.

The parent's attitude toward the lack of supervision incident is also an important consideration according to caseworkers. Caseworkers assess whether the parent is remorseful and if he or she recognizes and acknowledges the significance of the incident. This helps workers to determine if the incident is an aberration or part of a larger pattern or routine. It also appears that the attitude of the caregiver is important in determining whether the agency can provide voluntary services or whether the worker feels the case demands more directive intervention, such as protective supervision or court involvement. The case scenario below illustrates this:

"A 3-year-old wakes up while his mother is sleeping and wanders out of the house to a neighbor's house. The neighbor did not know where the child lived so called the child welfare agency. The worker was able to return the child quickly to the mother who was very upset and did not know the child had gotten out. The agency worked with the mother to get the door locks changed."

Case-specific factors. There are also case-specific factors that may influence caseworkers' responses to inadequate supervision reports. These include the time of the incident, duration and frequency, reason for the report to child protective services, and home safety issues. Caseworkers in all three jurisdictions noted that fewer calls come in at night largely because many people do not know that child welfare agencies have 24-hour hotlines. Calls received after hours typically have law enforcement officers as the first responders. Respondents note that many families believe that a sleeping child is not at risk. Notably, some caseworkers agreed that young infants and toddlers are likely to be safer while sleeping in their cribs than being left alone elsewhere. However, the workers remarked that they would emphasize the multitude of potential dangers to parents.

"A 4-year-old was left alone with a 2-year-old sibling in an apartment while the mother was at a neighbor's apartment. There were sliding glass doors leading to a balcony that the 4-year-old could open."

Caseworkers always consider the length of time a child is left alone. Fairfax County and Prince George's County provide guidelines regarding the length of time different aged children can spend alone. While a 9-year-old in Fairfax County would be able to spend an hour home alone after school, the same child should not be left for several hours in the evening. The frequency of such situations is also important to caseworkers' decisionmaking. Fairfax County guidelines allow a teenager (16–17-year-olds) to stay alone for up to two consecutive overnight periods, but prohibit the teenager from staying by him or herself for a week.

Screeners and caseworkers also examine the reason the report was made to child protective services. Often, the child(ren) left alone is disruptive and/or delinquent, thus drawing the attention of a neighbor or other community member. Caseworkers mentioned other situations involving ex-boyfriends or spouses who think the mother of the child is leaving the child alone or otherwise neglecting their child and want to cause problems for the mother.

Caseworkers mentioned a number of home safety issues they consider when assessing a report. Home safety can include whether the doors have working locks and if there is a working phone in the home. It also includes such issues as whether the child is allowed to use the stove. Caseworkers noted that while some neighborhoods may not be safe in terms of crime, their focus is more on the immediate home environment. Some workers reported that parents might feel that their home is safe because they live in an apartment complex with other adults in close proximity. However, workers were quick to mention that even in dense housing areas, there can be safety concerns.

What Services Are Available or Can Be Provided by Caseworkers?

Caseworkers reported a number of services available to families, such as child care vouchers, but they primarily discussed providing information to families. In general, many caseworkers felt that educating families is key. Prince George's County developed a brochure that is widely distributed to the community. These brochures are an important component of the county's community education and awareness campaign. Education can make a family more aware of the dangers of leaving children alone. Caseworkers mentioned encouraging families to examine the lists of sexual offenders in their neighborhood.

While services offered appear similar, there were some reported differences in service availability across the three sites. Screeners in the District of Columbia reported having a list of telephone numbers they routinely provide to families. This listing of numbers includes contact information to receive childcare vouchers and other childcare resources. The investigating worker can also provide families with money for child care enrollment fees. While workers in Prince George's County mentioned families that had lost their day care providers due to unlicensed providers, workers in the District of Columbia noted the city has lots of child care and they had never had a family who was unable to receive child care. In Fairfax County, workers observed that lack of reliable transportation and proximity to day care are issues for some families. Fairfax County workers are able to put a family on the list to receive emergency child care, though this avenue is meant to be available only for families to prevent a foster care placement. Workers can move a family up to the top of a waiting list in certain cases as well. In Prince George's County, workers can also offer families flexible funds to pay for child care.

Caseworkers also noted that they discuss informal child care arrangements with families. For example, many inadequate supervision cases arise in very simple situations, such as when a mother needs to run to the grocery store and does not want to bring all her children with her. In

such cases, workers would help identify neighbors or friends who may be able to help the mother with these types of short-term child care needs. This relates to the issue of social isolation raised earlier. It is much harder for a parent to ask a friend or neighbor to care for his or her child for a few minutes when the parent does not know any neighbors and/or is new to the area.

Respondents also referred families to community-based programs for assistance. Many churches in Prince George's County have employment and community outreach ministries. These organizations were noted as having mentoring programs for youth as well as other child-focused activities.

Findings and Implications

While limited in scope, this exploratory study offers three distinct and important findings for further consideration. First, the overlap between children caring for themselves or others and inadequate supervision appears to be a wide one. In nearly every interview or focus group conducted, respondents stressed that leaving children alone is a decision made by virtually all parents at some point in time. In fact, many respondents recounted being left alone as children and suddenly realized that they were neglected according to the standards by which they currently investigate families. The decision to leave a child alone can be a small one when the parent decides to run to the grocery store or can turn into something much larger when the parent elects to let the child come home alone after school each day as a "latchkey" child.

Further illustrating the universal nature of this parental decision are the reasons parents leave children alone. While caseworker respondents frequently cited poverty as a reason a parent unable to afford child care might leave a child alone, they almost equally stressed that it is not always the typical neglectful family that gets reported for inadequate supervision. Often parents make poor judgment calls. As one worker remarked, there are affluent families who make

mistakes and leave their children. Yet, it is clear that regardless of socioeconomic status, leaving their children alone is a decision with which many parents are uncomfortable.

There does appear to be a role for child protective services to play in helping parents make these decisions. Hotline screeners in each site reported receiving many calls from individuals requesting information about the locality's policy for leaving children alone. The fact that many individuals in all localities call for more information implies that there is an awareness of the importance of the issue, as well as a dearth of public knowledge about policies. This suggests that agencies might need to create or expand upon current educational awareness efforts in the community to inform parents. Prince George's County, for example has conducted extensive community outreach by distributing guidelines to public libraries and schools, and respondents reported that this has been helpful in letting families know when children might be old enough to stay at home alone.

Additionally, the level of subjectivity that plays into workers' decisionmaking with cases of inadequate supervision appears quite high. Though most respondents noted that they first approach families with the goal of helping them, how they help them and whether cases are opened or deemed to be more severe vary significantly, even within localities. While this is more understandable in the District of Columbia where the law does not include clear guidelines, one might anticipate that a locality like Fairfax County, where there are clear age and time guidelines, would have less room for subjectivity. However, respondents universally stressed that age is just a number and numerous other factors, many of which are subjective, come into play. For instance, numerous investigators consider the maturity level of children in addition to their age in inadequate supervision. What determines if a child is mature enough to be left alone? Is it

having a safety plan and knowing how to use it? Is it being able to make sound judgments? It is not clear what makes a child “mature” and capable of being left alone.

Similarly, numerous workers noted that families reported for inadequate supervision often have what are considered “dirty houses.” Typically, workers stated that they would not get involved with a family who had a dirty house, unless it was extremely severe and unsafe. This raises the question of what determines how dirty a house must be to be considered unsafe. One final and important example of the role of subjectivity in workers’ and law enforcement officials’ decisionmaking is parental response. The majority of respondents noted that they gauge parents’ remorse and attitudes when they investigate a report of children left alone. If a parent is remorseful and does not “cop an attitude,” it appears that workers and law enforcement are more likely to work with the parent to determine how to mend the situation rather than acting punitively. Interpreting a parents’ level of remorse and/or attitude is extremely subjective and can vary not only by worker, but also by day for a particular worker.

Notably, much of child welfare work is subjective, but it appears that this might be exacerbated in cases of inadequate supervision. What is less clear, however, is if agencies need to address this subjectivity and, if so, the appropriate way to do this. The three localities included in our study presented a range of approaches from detailed guidelines on age and time left alone to broader regulations for children under the age of 18. Regardless of the breadth or narrowness of the policies, however, workers still make judgment calls in these cases. Interestingly, respondents were divided on whether they wanted more structure or standards in assessing these cases. In addition, workers in all localities reported that they did not receive specific training on handling inadequate supervision cases, other than being aware of laws or guidelines and general child welfare and child development training. Despite limitations, this finding that workers are

making subjective decisions with little training on the issue and moderate guidance suggests that agencies might seize the opportunity to enhance guidelines, offer special training, or offer other services to assist workers in investigating inadequate supervision cases.

Lastly, it is evident that even within a small area like the Washington, D.C., metropolitan region, policies and philosophies on child neglect and parental use of self-care vary widely by locality. The three local jurisdictions have varying policies surrounding inadequate supervision. Of the three, only Prince George's County, Maryland, has a state law that prohibits leaving children under the age of 8 alone, while Fairfax County, Virginia, has no law but offers countywide age guidelines. The District of Columbia has a policy outlining inadequate supervision but does not include age specifications. Each locality, however, holds a different philosophy on approaching and handling these types of neglect cases that builds on and extends beyond these laws and guidelines.

In the District of Columbia, the approach toward children left alone is stricter and less vague than in the other localities. Hotline screeners are required to accept every referral concerning a child under the age of 18 left alone or caring for other minor children, regardless of factors like having a safety plan that some of the other localities consider when deciding to accept a report. Respondents in Washington, D.C., acknowledged that inadequate supervision is often indicative of a more serious problem and the only way to determine if there are larger problems is through a thorough investigation. However, there seems to be a struggle among workers and throughout the agency about how to handle these cases. While workers are cognizant of the need to investigate all reports of child neglect, more than one worker questioned the policy of having social workers respond immediately to all reports of children left unattended.

It is not just the initial response that concerned workers in the District, but also the full-scale, in-depth investigations that workers must conduct in these cases. Workers reported they must interview the child and parent; review school, medical, and other reports; and interview other collateral individuals. There was disagreement among respondents about the value in spending a lot of time to investigate inadequate supervision reports for all children under the age of 18.

In contrast, Maryland law specifies response to neglect referrals must be initiated within five days but requires immediate response if there is an element of imminent risk, such as a very young child left alone. Because Maryland law prohibits leaving children under the age of 8 alone, there is less ambiguity for workers in accepting reports. While investigating reports of inadequate supervision, investigators interview the child, the parent/caregiver, and other pertinent collateral individuals. However, respondents stressed that Prince George's County's policy is to intervene through child protective services only if the referral meets the standard for neglect established through regulation. In the event that another issue appears in the home during the screening process, such as substance abuse, some respondents noted that the referral would not be accepted for investigation unless it is clear how these issues affect child safety.

Finally, Fairfax County's two-track intake system places most inadequate supervision reports into the family assessment track. The assessment response enables workers to focus on the family strengths and needs and the provision of services to these families. Respondents in Fairfax County discussed the evolution of their locality's approach to families and noted that workers are collaborating more with families to share in the identification of needs and plan for services.

Thus, within a close area, there are three, distinct approaches to accepting and addressing reports of children left unattended. Since this study only spoke with a limited number of workers in each site, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about appropriateness or effectiveness of these approaches. But the results point to the need for further discussion and evaluation. Are there costs associated with investigating all reports of inadequate supervision in terms of staff time and time that could be spent on other, potentially more serious cases? Or are there greater costs associated with not investigating all reports, including the opportunity to identify and address problems like parental substance abuse before they become serious child protection issues warranting removing the child from the home? Knowing there is research that suggests child fatalities happen more often when children are left alone versus other types of abuse or neglect, is it appropriate to assign most of these reports a lower risk level? Given that so much of workers' decisionmaking extends beyond age to include numerous other factors, does it make sense to have age guidelines or policies at all? Or do caseworkers and families benefit from having such guidelines in place to aid their decisionmaking? Finally, with policies so different among localities and a transient population in the region, is there a need for collaboration among localities to promote awareness of local policies and practices?

Conclusion

Despite the exploratory nature of the study, it is clear that there is likely an intersection between children caring for themselves and child neglect in the form of inadequate supervision. Differing guidelines and policies in the three localities, Washington, D.C., Prince George's County, Maryland, and Fairfax County, Virginia, mean that families investigated for child neglect in one jurisdiction might not be referred for investigation in another locality. They also reveal that agencies' approach and response to families that have been reported for inadequate supervision

differ. Workers in all localities reported similar themes and issues that cause inadequate supervision from poverty, to poor judgment, to social isolation. Similarly, workers in each jurisdiction considered similar factors in determining whether to open a case or remove a child, including child-specific factors, parental factors, and case-specific factors. Regardless of the differences in the intake process, once on the scene, workers noted a service-based approach to working with families and offered services ranging from child care to information about child care providers.

Leaving children to care for themselves is a choice that parents at one time or another face, while children left unattended is a serious problem facing child protective services agencies. The challenge for child welfare agencies is to distinguish between the two to provide protective services when necessary, but also the child care and educational services that families need to make sound and safe choices for their children.

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