

Examining Care and Protection Cases in Fall River

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Care and protection cases are some of the most sensitive and complex in the US legal system because they involve decisions regarding a child's safety, family structure, and their subsequent development. The Massachusetts legal structure is designed to protect children from abuse and neglect while also balancing the rights that their parents have. Parental rights may include the right to maintain custody, the right to make their own decisions about the child's safety, and the right to maintain family integrity unless the state can clearly outline that intervention is necessary for the child's present and future safety (M.G.L. c.119, §1).

These cases require that law and social work cooperate to prioritize the protection of vulnerable children. With that being said though, there also has to be some sort of balance of the rights of parents to raise their own children in the home at their will with what is in the realistic best interest of the child long-term. In Massachusetts, this balance is maintained by a legal structure that aims to empower the Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the intervention of the juvenile Court. The system is far from flawless as there are still many issues that persist and affect these cases and the families involved in them. These issues include timeline delays, racial/background bias, and systemic inequalities that can complicate the purpose of justice in the first place. This paper explicitly explores the legal foundation of C&P proceedings and how external social and economic factors can impact the way that these cases play out.

Legal Framework In Massachusetts

As defined by the Massachusetts Committee for Public Counsel Services, a group providing legal resources to those in need, a Care & Protection petition is “a court proceeding in which a juvenile court judge decides whether a child has been or is at risk of serious abuse or

neglect by a caretaker, usually a parent or guardian” (CPCS, 2025). Examples of abusive behavior in this context can include physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse. CPCS outlines that neglect includes “failing to provide the child with necessary support for his health, welfare, and safety. This can include allowing the child to live in seriously substandard conditions or to live without adequate food, clothing, heat, or medical care, taking drugs in the presence of the child, failing to provide sufficient supervision of the child, failing to keep the child safe from other people who might abuse or exploit the child, and failing to require a child who is under 16 to attend school” (CPCS, 2025). Massachusetts law surrounding Care and Protection petitions shows that there are attempts being made to keep children safe while prioritizing the preservation of the family unit when this doesn't put the child or family at risk of harm.

The care and protection cases are initiated when the Department of Children and Families (DCF) files a petition with the Juvenile Court alleging that a child is at risk of abuse, neglect, or parental incapacity. The court’s authority derives from Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 119, §§ 23–29C, which outline when the state may intervene and the procedures to be followed. Chapter 119 establishes the state’s responsibility to protect children from “harmful effects resulting from the absence, inability, inadequacy, or destructive behavior of parents or guardians” (M.G.L. c.119, §1), which means the state must provide evidence that a child’s safety or health is compromised before starting the removal process. For example, a petition could be filed if a child is found living in an unsafe environment for them, if their parent is suffering from substance abuse, or if a child for some reason has suffered or is suffering from physical, emotional, or sexual abuse.

The Juvenile Court hears these cases under Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 119, section 23-29C. According to the law and the Massachusetts government, “and protections are filed by the Department of Children and Families (DCF),” and it involves allegations against parents who are not providing a livable, safe, and developmentally supportive environment to their children. Chapter 119 of the Massachusetts General Laws: Care and Protection Statute defines and explains grounds and procedures for Care & Protection petitions. This law refers to the state’s authority, responsibilities, and court powers. The law also establishes the legal foundation for child protection and care against abuse and neglect.

Under this law, “the purpose... is to ensure that children are protected against the harmful effects resulting from the absence, inability, inadequacy, or destructive behavior of parents or guardians” (M.G.L. c.119, §1). For instance, under §24, the court may take custody “if the child is suffering from serious abuse or neglect and immediate removal is necessary to protect the child from further harm.” Further harm in this instance would be physical, emotional, or sexual abuse or neglect of the child, as previously mentioned. This is supported directly by statutory language mentioned in Chapter 119, which mentions duties and the role of DCF, Juvenile Court, and steps towards care and protection. For example, a child could arrive at school with injuries that they cannot explain, or law enforcement could respond to a domestic violence incident that involves children in the home. After a child is removed due to an emergency, the court must hold a temporary custody hearing within 72 hours to decide if DCF should retain custody while the case proceeds. The Section §§ 24–26 defines the criteria for emergency removal, evidentiary standards, and permanency planning for children. Later, a trial determines who will have permanent custody from that point on. The purpose of this process is to determine the best interest of the child, and this concept is defined by the court through the viewpoint of child

safety, if the parent is fit to raise their child, and if supportive resources are available and would be of benefit to the family.

Along the way, and in the custody hearing, the court considers all of the relevant factors in terms of what would keep the child safe, such as if they are in immediate danger, if the parent can be present for them, and if the child has other methods of support outside of the parent, like a grandparent, family friend, etc. The court then has adjudicatory and dispositional hearings to determine what the long-term outcomes of the child's relationship with their family will/should be. This can include being reunified with their family, being placed with another guardian, or being adopted into a new family.

Within the justice system, there are challenges in balancing how to run efficiently and have a resolution that protects the child's current growth and opportunity for future growth without unnecessary separation from their family. Across the board, caseload varies from case to case. Given how much variance there is between cases, the rulings and resolutions from these cases become inconsistent as a whole. Some courts make family reunification a priority, while other courts prioritize relocating the child to a safe, permanent home as soon as possible (National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 2024). These challenges reflect how the outcome of a given case is completely subject to the subjectivity and consideration of a given juvenile court.

Family Dynamics And The Legal System's Interventions

Family dynamics are crucial to foster an environment that is stable, nurturing, and supportive as well as a child's psychological well-being. Each member of a family has an idea of how one behaves and what kind of relationship they have with each other. No family style is inherently normal or abnormal and if patterns are deemed functional or dysfunctional, they

depend largely on their fit with the family's developmental and social demands (Walsh, 2003). This finding from Walsh (2003) suggests that no family style should be assessed based on families needs and their challenges. There are wide-ranges of households, with single-parent households, blended families, or nontraditional roles being more pertinent in today's society and these dynamics should not be automatically deemed as problematic only since they differ from traditional family models

Family patterns are considered functional or dysfunctional based on how well the family meets developmental demands. Unfortunately, not all families are free from harm, conflict, or dysfunction. Family dysfunction can manifest in a variety of factors including untreated mental health conditions, substance abuse and misuse, and domestic violence. These stressors do not compromise one single child, they manifest throughout a family leading to all members of the family's mental health and security to be affected.

Dysfunctional family patterns such as domestic violence and substance abuse/use can be passed on generationally. In the cases that we have reviewed, individuals who have grown up in homes that had violence and/or substance abuse are more likely to repeat these behaviors and bring them into their own homes. Children who do experience neglect, fear, and instability in their early years will later on develop difficulties with forming relationships or with conflict. This outcome does not happen because a parent is overtly choosing to repeat harmful habits, but because these behaviors are familiar and seen as their norm. A child who grows up in a home where they have witnessed domestic violence may see this as a way to handle conflict therefore repeating the cycle. Without learning about health forms of communication that child and others affected, may later struggle to manage their emotions in their future interpersonal relationships.

Early family stressors can set emotional trajectories that persist or worsen through adolescence (Williams et al., 2024). Addressing stressors within the family and parental behaviors in the first five years can prevent later mental health issues along with the implementation of parenting programs that teach emotional regulation and stress management can be beneficial. Children who are confronted with unpredictability during early development experience psychological consequences that include impaired stress responses and challenges forming attachments that are secure. These unresolved patterns could develop into repeating the behaviors that they grew up around and without proper interventions these practices can become the norm and continue the cycle of dysfunctional family patterns. Addressing family stressors and parental behaviors early in a child's life can reduce the likelihood of mental health concerns in the future. Interventions and services such as early childhood services and parenting education programs can be a healthy outlet for families to promote emotional regulation and stress management.

In protecting families from harm, criminal law plays a significant role when addressing cases of domestic abuse, violence along with child abuse and neglect. Legal interventions can include arrest, restraining orders, and mandatory reporting. When effectively implemented and tailored to a family's needs, resources and programs can be provided for families who are struggling. They can also serve as a first step for families to gain access to resources and promote family stability and their safety for vulnerable members. Although these legal interventions can be highly successful and can help to break cycles in certain cases, they often disrupt a family's structure.

Reports of inadequate services included being initially defined as ineligible for service, receiving less help than expected, and feeling depersonalized by worker turnover. Palmer (2006)

reported that families often experience being deemed ineligible for services and receiving less services than anticipated. This finding asserts that families who are involved in the criminal justice system are frequently met with feelings of fear and mistrust. Experiences such as the ones mentioned in Palmer (2006) contribute to frustration that families are involved with the C and P system. Lengthy court proceedings and limited victim support services can leave families to more mistrust in the system. Extended legal involvement also causes financial strain along with more stress being brought into the home. Correctional approaches tend to address these issues and do not address the underlying issues of child poverty or psychological issues. Rather than addressing the root causes of dysfunction and implementing preventative measures families can remain stuck in cycles of dysfunction that the system struggles to resolve.

Civil law governs marriage, divorce, and child custody all directly influencing a family dynamic. Having these laws establish boundaries that family members are obligated to follow and shape the way a family functions and interacts with the C and P system if involved. In particular, child custody proceedings are lengthy not only because the compliance of a family member involved with the system is significant, but also because the caseload of a social worker and court could be overbearing. It is during that time, the care and protection system play a key role in monitoring the family environment and knowing when to effectively intervene when children are at risk.

Decisions in child custody usually prioritize finances over a child's mental well being. Social workers during an intervention are looking for multiple signs within a home that can pose a threat to the child's well-being. This can range from a caregivers relationship choices, if there is substance misuse or abuse within the home, or if the parent is not fulfilling their duties in terms of supervision. For each child maltreatment allegation they receive, including whether to

screen in a referral, to substantiate an allegation of maltreatment, and to remove a child from his or her home when necessary (Janczewski, 2015). These decisions are complex and require balancing a child's immediate safety with long-term preservation whenever possible. In an intervention, the main goal is to not separate the family but should a child be separated their well-being is a social worker's first priority. The care and protection system's role is essential in these decisions. Enforcing civil laws and protecting children and supporting families is part of the system's function all while meeting social workers ethical standards.

How DCF Makes Decisions

How the family gets on DCF radar

Child neglect remains one of the most challenging and multifaceted issues within the child welfare system. Numerous factors contribute to whether a family becomes involved with the Department of Children and Families (DCF), or Child Protective Services (CPS). Mandated reporting, community involvement, past family history, and parental substance abuse are some of the most important factors (Atler, 1985).

Mandated reporters play a large role in determining families that get on DCF radar. A mandated reporter is an individual that is obligated by law to report any potential signs of abuse or neglect on a child. They are usually the first adults that are able to recognize these signs of abuse, the role these professionals play is important to protect children. Individuals like neighbors, relatives, family, and friends can also play an important role because of their proximity to the family (Atler, 1985). When these non-mandated reporters decide to report potential abuse, it is stemming from their direct observations and treatment of children by adult caregivers or statements made to them by children. The accuracy and motivation of neglect and abuse reports can vary based on many different things. According to the article, *Decision-Making*

Factors in Cases of Child Neglect, Atler (1985) stated that caseworkers must be able to discern if a report reflects an immediate life threatening situation for the children, or if it is a malicious or false claim (Atler, 1985). The importance of a case can often be decided by a subjective decision of the caseworker (Atler, 1985). Alter (1985) also found that determining neglect is influenced by both observable conditions but also up to the discretion of the case workers. This can cause inconsistencies in caseworkers' judgements (Atler, 1985). Additionally, The *SEEK model of pediatric primary care* demonstrates the role of mandated reporters. The *SEEK Model* outlines precautions put in place to help protect children against neglect and abuse (Safe Environment for Every Kid, 2020). The SEEK model (Safe Environment for Every Kid, 2020) is used to describe the role pediatricians play in promoting child safety. Pediatricians are mandated reporters who are trained to scan if children are showing signs of depression, substance abuse, or domestic violence. When these signs are present, the pediatrician is responsible for connecting the family to services (Luther & Cicchetti, 2020).

A family's involvement with the Department of Children and Families or Child Protective Services in the past can indicate repeated involvement in the future. Previous records of any neglect and abuse in a family can indicate dysfunction and lead to a 'stricter' discretion of caseworkers. Atler (1985) found a positive correlation between poor parent and child relationships and continuing DCF or CPS involvement. This shows an ongoing risk with families who have had one offense with DCF. Atler (1985) also found that the environment children are raised in, including stable economic conditions, resources, and community ties plays an important role in shaping behaviors and attitudes. Involvement with DCF is more common among families who are facing poverty, unstable housing, limited access to resources, and substance abuse (Atler, 1985).

Parental substance use can also cause DCF to become involved with a family. Rates of referral to Child Protective Services are higher when parental substance abuse is present (Prindle et al., 2018). Parental substance abuse is present in 11 to 40 percent of investigations into child maltreatment (Prindle et al., 2018). The rates are higher for children who enter into foster care (Prindle et al., 2018). In most states, a child maltreatment report will be initiated if the mother tests positive for substance abuse during pregnancy (Prindle et al., 2018).

Intergenerational Trauma

Factors like poverty, housing instability, and substance abuse contribute to a cycle of hardship that can persist across generations of families. Intergenerational trauma is the impact of experiences during childhood or young adulthood on behavior in adulthood or when you are a parent (Berger et al., 2016). Intergenerational challenges can limit access to resources that could help stop the cycle of trauma. Stable employment, housing, and access to healthcare can greatly impact families struggling with this issue (Berger et al., 2016).

Berger et al. (2016) found a strong correlation between children involved with Child Protective Services and incarcerated parents, and many incarcerated adults have children with a CPS past. Using Wisconsin data from 2004-2012 the study found that these connections appear from risks like poverty, instability, and substance abuse, creating “dual system” families subject to ongoing service. Adolescents with CPS involvement are at a higher risk of later incarceration, and the early contact with child welfare both reflects family vulnerability and predicts future criminal justice system involvement shaped by long term disadvantages and trauma (Berger et al., 2016).

Intergenerational risks can be explained by systems of control in the nature of socioeconomic and behavioral risks. Berger et al. (2016) identified key factors of poverty, family

instability, and parental substance abuse that contributes to CPS involvement and incarceration rates. Families who are living in poverty often experience high levels of stress because of factors like housing, food insecurity, and limited access to healthcare and work benefits. This can also contribute to neglect allegations, this may also contribute to parents having “too much on their plate” to be able to deal with everything at once, without any help. It is also a generational factor that parents who were exposed to poor parenting or neglect when young are more likely to raise their children the only way they know how. Allegations of abuse in families where parents have had a poor childhood are more likely to be sustained because of the bias that intergenerational trauma comes with (Berger et al., 2016).

Intergenerational factors, such as poverty, can cause lasting impacts on an individual. Lei (2013) found that experiencing factors related to poverty from a young age has lasting consequences on brain development and an increased risk of chronic illness. Psychological stress is associated with growing up in poverty, and disrupts neural pathways which are responsible for emotional regulation and learning. Having this disadvantage as a child can snowball over time leading to poor educational attainment, and low levels of achievement (Lei 2013). Low levels of achievement are shown in the higher percentage of individuals experiencing poverty during childhood that do not graduate from high school (Lei 2013).

DCF Guidelines for Decision-Making

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) has established guidelines that caseworkers must abide by when making decisions about cases. When making decisions caseworkers recognize and evaluate risks or harms to the child at every interaction. When risks are present the caseworker decides whether the child needs to be removed from the home or if a safety plan can be implemented with the child in the home (Child Welfare Information Gateway,

2021). To evaluate the safety of a child and if anything in the home poses a risk, the caseworker assesses individual child vulnerabilities and risk indicators. Risk factors related to the child include characteristics such as their age, a physical or mental disability and attendance at school. There are several other indicators of risk such as parental physical or sexual abuse, verbal threats, incapability to shield the child from physical harm and neglect as a result of substance use. Any violence between caregivers in the home which can cause negative physical or emotional consequences to the child is also a risk factor. Physical conditions of the home that may pose a health risk to the child are also considered to be risk factors (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021).

Each state is permitted to regulate the procedures relating to the administration of child service organizations. In the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, a caseworker is allotted 45 days after the initial contact or date of the opening of the case to complete a full risk assessment (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). The caseworker is required to investigate and assess several factors including those formerly detailed and the five categories listed below.

1. The caregiver has the parenting skills to properly care for their child at each developmental stage, such as guaranteeing their enrollment and attendance at school.
2. The parent facilitates the development of their child's social and emotional well-being, such as teaching the child how to regulate their emotions.
3. The adaptability and strength of the parent to implement changes required to ensure the safety of their children.
4. The parent is able to form healthy social connections, such as those with community members, that can help support both the child and the parent.

5. The parent is able to support the health and wellbeing of the child, such as ensuring the child's medical needs are met (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021).

The caseworker examines additional factors like:

- the age of the child,
- unique medical needs,
- the number of children in the family,
- previous DCF involvement,
- caregivers history of abuse or neglect,
- caregiver drug or alcohol use or abuse,
- current or past mental health issues,
- stability of the family living situation (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021).

When DCF has previously filed a case and a risk assessment has already been completed, the caseworker for the current case must complete another assessment before closing the most recent case (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). The caseworker must reassess the information from the new investigation and note changes in the aforementioned criteria, such as recent parental drug use or a change in living situation (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021).

When DCF makes the decision to close a case, they are ending their involvement with the family because their services are no longer necessary (Commonwealth of Massachusetts - Department of Children and Families, 2017). This can occur because the child is reunited with their caregivers and safe in their home, the child has been legally adopted or placed in the

custody of kin and their safety is guaranteed (Commonwealth of Massachusetts - Department of Children and Families, 2017). The decision to close a case with DCF is made by the caseworker and their supervisor, then discussed with the family (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). The decision to close a case considers the goals outlined in the case, such as establishing the safety of a child. Participation in services provided by the department is also considered. Decreasing the level of risk to the child is an additional consideration (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021).

Bias In Decision-Making Within DCF

Although DCF agencies have guidelines for making decisions, biases can influence the implementation of the guidelines. Rates of substantiated reports of child maltreatment vary depending on factors such as poverty and race/ethnicity of the family (Font & Maguire-Jack, 2015). Font and Maguire-Jack (2015) researched differences in “substantiated cases of child maltreatment” and “out of home placements” of the child depending on the policy of the region, since each state is responsible for defining child maltreatment. Differences in the definition of child maltreatment may impact the number of cases that are substantiated. Policies within an agency that detail the amount of time a caseworker has to investigate and complete their report were also examined (Font & Maguire-Jack, 2015). Font and Maguire-Jack (2015) additionally considered the amount of resources each DCF agency could provide to families, such as mental health counseling. They found that substantiated cases were more likely to come from DCF agencies whose investigation took longer, had more services available to the families, and utilized measures of standardized assessment. Substantiated cases were more common among communities with a higher number of Black residents and caseworkers who had an advanced degree. Cases that were substantiated and also resulted in a removal of the child were more likely

to come from agencies which gave caseworkers 30 days or less to carry out their investigation and who had a decrease in funding. A lower chance of substantiation is associated with the level of collaboration between the DCF agency and other community agencies that provide services. For example, a strong partnership between DCF and a mental health counseling agency could lower the likelihood of a substantiated case (Font & Maguire-Jack, 2015).

Implicit Bias Of The Caseworker

Implicit biases are the beliefs and attitudes within individuals that affect behavior and decision-making without conscious thought (Shah & Bohlen, 2023). All individuals have implicit biases that they are not aware of. These biases are often developed throughout one's life through personal experiences. Implicit biases can be harmful when they go unaddressed because they can lead to different treatment of groups of people based on factors such as their race, sexual orientation or age (Shah & Bohlen, 2023).

Within child welfare agencies, the implicit biases of caseworkers can also influence decisions that contribute to discrepancies. Shetty et al. (2024) aimed to examine the role structural racism plays in the decision making of health care professionals in reporting newborns and their mothers for drug tests. They interviewed midwives, nurses, social workers, CPS agents and physicians from family medicine, medicine-pediatrics, obstetrics and gynecology, and pediatrics. The results indicated that health care workers believe that systemic racism outside of the hospital contributed to their rates of reporting a newborn for drug testing. For example, they admitted to their own implicit biases that stemmed from the War on Drugs and their beliefs of increased drug use in areas that have predominately Black families. They also point out that their agencies are made up of a majority of White health care professionals. Additionally, the state laws addressing testing standards are vague and do not include specific criteria for health care

professionals to follow. Thus, their own personal bias becomes involved in their individual interpretations of the law (Shetty et al., 2024).

Systemic Bias In Social Welfare Services

Socioeconomic factors play a role in other systems within the United States, demonstrating the presence of bias in decision making. Systemic bias is the procedures within a system that cause different groups of people to experience differing outcomes from the same system (The Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center, n.d.). Specific to race, the policies that demonstrate systemic bias benefit White people and place racial minority groups at a disadvantage (The Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center, n.d.).

Decisions within the healthcare system in the US demonstrates further biases, which can then also influence rates of Child Protective Services reporting. Thirty seven states and the District of Columbia have laws that mandate health care professionals to report suspected prenatal substance exposure to child welfare services regardless if there is evidence of child abuse or confirmed prenatal substance exposure (Shetty et al., 2024). Black pregnant women have a higher chance of being tested for drug use than White pregnant women even though both women have similar rates of substance use during pregnancy (Shetty et al., 2024). Black and Hispanic parents and their newborns are also more likely to have testing done than White parents when the reason for testing is not substance use history (Schoneich et al., 2023). Similarly, Black parents are more likely to be asked about drug use by healthcare professionals and have drug tests ordered for their child than their White counterparts (Schoneich et al., 2023). Shetty et al. (2024) revealed that Black children had a higher likelihood to be tested for substance exposure at birth compared to White children. Additionally, several hospitals do not have a formal policy that outlines criteria that must be met for a healthcare professional to order

a newborn drug test (Schoneich et al., 2023). Schoneich et al. (2023) conducted a study on one hospital without this formal policy which produced similar disproportionate rates in the ordering of a newborn drug test. Healthcare professionals ordered more than double the amount of newborn drug tests for Black newborns compared to White newborns (Schoneich et al., 2023). This trend was also present for newborns with mothers who did not have any prior drug tests during prenatal care (Schoneich et al., 2023). When a newborn drug test was administered, White newborns were more likely to test positive for opioids compared to Black newborns (Schoneich et al., 2023).

Systemic bias towards those living in poverty is another factor contributing to the disproportionate rates of reporting cases to CPS. There are inequalities in the rate of Child Protective Services involvement with Black families compared to White families (Thomas et al., 2023). Racialized poverty contributes to the disproportionate rates of CPS involvement among different racial groups. Racialized poverty is defined as the institutional rules and procedures that, in the way they function, cause harm to the economic status of Black families due to their identity as a Black American (Thomas et al., 2023). Mass incarceration and the resulting difficulties finding a job with a criminal conviction is one institutional practice that leads to lower incomes among Black Americans (Thomas et al., 2023). Thomas et al. (2023) conducted research involving nearly 5,000 children born between 1998 and 2000 in 20 different cities in the US. They found that Black children had a higher likelihood of having contact with Child Protective Services before the age of 5 compared to White children (Thomas et al., 2023). Furthermore, a lower income level was associated with a higher likelihood of CPS involvement. Black children in families who had a lower income had a higher likelihood than those with the highest income to become involved with CPS (Thomas et al., 2023). Racial disparities also

persist among Black and White families with similar income levels (Thomas et al., 2023). Moderate and high income among White families acted as a protective factor against CPS involvement, but higher levels of income did not provide the same protection for Black families (Thomas et al., 2023). Single parenting, substandard health, mental health issues, and involvement with the criminal justice system also increased the likelihood a Black family would become involved with Child Protective Services. CPS was more likely to become involved with White families if they were living in poverty. White children with mothers born outside the United States and those living in a public housing complex also had a higher likelihood of CPS involvement (Thomas et al., 2023). Another factor related to these discrepancies is the fact that the definition of child neglect can vary by state (Naveed, 2022). In 2019, the majority of child protection cases did not involve child abuse but rather neglect (Naveed, 2022). The definition of child neglect is often associated with conditions faced by those living in poverty, such as difficulty finding stable housing, parents having to work long days to provide the basics for their family and an overall lack of resources (Naveed, 2022).

The disproportionate rates of CPS involvement is similar among families living in deep poverty. Deep poverty is defined as a family that has an income level that is less than half of the federally defined poverty level (Lei, 2013). In 2012, 20.4 million Americans lived at this level, which is 6.6 percent of all individuals in the United States (Lei, 2013). Many of these individuals also battle with addiction, are homeless, or have disabilities that prevent them from getting or keeping a job. These factors contributed to the 75 percent of adults who suffer from deep poverty and who also have not had a job within the past year (Lei, 2013). Many of the obstacles that prevent these individuals from getting a job are intertwined. It is more difficult for someone to find housing assistance if they have been convicted of a crime. It is also more

difficult for someone to find a job or pursue education if they can't afford or find childcare. There are also barriers if individuals suffer from mental or physical health issues that can hinder their work opportunities but don't qualify them for disability benefits (Lei, 2013). Furthermore, many of the federal policies established to help people with lower incomes have a work requirement attached to them. For example, the earned income tax credit, which is a large antipoverty safety net, bases its criteria on work. Similarly, in order to qualify for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, a caregiver has to be working. These programs are also not designed to help individuals get out of poverty because they do not have sufficient resources and support that people in deep poverty need (Lei, 2013). There are also racial disparities: 15 percent of children who are Black experience deep poverty for half of their childhood compared to approximately three percent of all children in America (Lei, 2013). These disparities are present among those living in poverty, not just deep poverty. Poverty is experienced by 21 percent of Black people living in the US, which is the second highest percentage for all races (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2021). Native Americans account for the highest percentage of Americans living in poverty, consisting of 25 percent (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2021). The correlation between race and poverty is also apparent with income levels: in 2019 Black families earned an average household income of \$46,073, while the White household income averaged \$76,057 (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2021).

One interpretation in respect to the discrepancies between poverty and income levels in the United States is the long-lasting effects of historical racist institutions (Baker, 2022). Southern states in the US have higher rates of poverty and gaps between the rate of poverty among Black people compared to White people. These states in the south also have a history of more systemic racism, which increases the consequences of this racism. Dating back to the Civil

War, states in the Deep South made up the Confederacy then enacted the most severe parts of Jim Crow laws. Baker (2022) examined the impact of these historically racist policies on current levels of poverty between Black and White Americans. The results of the analyses show that, while it's moderate, there is a positive association linking the level of historic racial regimes and rates of poverty. A state's historic racial regime is measured by the extent to which they enacted policies, like the Jim Crow laws, which promoted systemic racism. Thus, states that ranked higher on the scale that measured the extent of their historic racial regime typically had higher rates of poverty (Baker, 2022). Mississippi ranks at the top of both of these criteria (Baker, 2022). States that have less of a history of racial regimes also typically have lower rates of poverty (Baker, 2022).

Issues Related To DCF Intervention

A large issue felt by DCF caseworkers is their contradictory responsibilities. Caseworkers report that they are often given too many cases at the same time (Naveed, 2022). Furthermore, within each case, the same caseworker is typically responsible for developing plans and providing services to reunify the family while also documenting evidence that will support the court case to take away parental rights (Naveed, 2022). These conflicting goals can often lead to a lack of trust between the family and their caseworker.

The lack of trust between families and DCF represents another prominent issue related to DCF intervention. Kokaliari et al. (2019) formed focus groups of African American parents who had been or were currently involved with the child welfare system. The researchers found that a persistent theme among parents was a significant amount of distrust towards DCF (Kokaliari et al., 2019). More specifically, they believed the department's involvement was a punishment for factors beyond their control, such as being a single parent and facing poverty. Furthermore, they

reported that DCF's child advocates did not understand their situation, showed no empathy towards the family, and did not provide them with services in a helpful manner. One parent explained that DCF would instruct parents about ways they needed to improve but did not help them actually make those improvements. Another issue is that the child advocates did not stay with the family for their entire case. One mother had six different child advocates within a year and each had different and contradictory plans to get the family to reunification. Similarly, parents addressed the fact that their children being removed from their care is traumatizing to them. They felt that the child advocates did not understand this and treated them with insensitivity. As a result, parents often became angry with their child advocates, who took the anger to label the parents with anger issues and used it as part of the justification to remove the children from the home. This only increased parents' mistrust towards the system. Parents also reported they want to avoid future interactions with them, even if they do need help (Kokaliari et al., 2019). Another common theme across these parents was DCF's lack of understanding and ineffective help towards their level of poverty (Kokaliari et al., 2019). Parents described that DCF expects many services to be put in place before children can be reunified with parents, such as therapy sessions, attendance at parenting classes, being present for court and childcare services. Parents report DCF does not help parents access resources that can assist in their implementation of these services when they are not financially stable enough to do so on their own (Kokaliari et al., 2019).

Differential rates of reporting child maltreatment or endangerment

The rates of reporting child maltreatment and endangerment are heavily influenced by socioeconomic status and other characteristics of the family.

Race and ethnicity are factors in the differential rates of reporting child maltreatment.

Black children are disproportionately represented in cases investigated by Child Protective Services compared to White children (Kokaliari et al., 2019). Furthermore, Black children are placed into foster care at a rate that is two to three times higher than that of White children placed into foster care (Kokaliari et al., 2019). Putnam-Hornstein et al. (2013) found that Black children between birth and five years old were referred to CPS for suspected maltreatment, found to be victims of maltreatment after investigation, and be placed into foster care at a rate more than double that of White children. The disparity in reporting is also demonstrated within pediatric emergency department visits (Shapiro et al., 2024). Black and Hispanic children who present with fractures in emergency rooms are more likely than White children with the same injuries to be reported to CPS (Shapiro et al., 2024). The same racial disparities are true for infants who go to the emergency department for unexplained traumatic brain injuries (Shapiro et al., 2024). Shapiro et al. (2024) found that similar disparities are also present among children who present for unintentional ingestions. Black and Hispanic families represented almost all of the cases reported to CPS which is disproportionate to their representation in the sample population (Shapiro et al., 2024). Putnam-Hornstein et al. (2022) also found similar results from a study on children born in California between 2012 and 2014. Across all communities there were more Black infants reported to Child Protective Services than White or Hispanic infants (Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2022).

Poverty levels also influence the rates of reporting families to Child Protective Services. Infants in California's most disadvantaged communities are reported to Child Protective Services at a rate seven times that of children reported in California's most advantaged communities (Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2022). This coincides with Naveed's (2022) finding that counties that have higher poverty rates are investigated at a higher rate than those with less poverty.

Additionally, Putnam-Hornstein et al. (2022) found that the rates at which infants were reported to Child Protective Services was higher for every racial group if the child's birth was paid for by public health insurance. Among this group, Black infants were reported to Child Protective Services at a higher rate than White infants (Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2022). Racial disparities are also present among infants who paid for birth with private insurance. Black infants were reported at a rate triple that of White infants (Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2022).

Parental substance use also increases the likelihood they will be investigated by Child Protective Services. The majority of infants formally diagnosed with prenatal substance exposure were referred to CPS (Prindle et al., 2018). Almost half of that group had cases which were substantiated and almost 30 percent of children in substantiated cases were put into the foster care system (Prindle et al., 2018). In these cases with a formal diagnosis, cocaine use by the mother, and resulting cocaine exposure of the child, had the highest rates of referrals to CPS (Prindle et al., 2018). Parental use of amphetamines and opioids had the next highest rates of referral to CPS (Prindle et al., 2018). Substantiated cases were the most common among infants who were exposed to cocaine (Prindle et al., 2018). Infants who were formally diagnosed with substance exposure at birth had five times the reporting rate to CPS compared to those without a diagnosis (Prindle et al., 2018). Those with a prenatal substance exposure diagnosis were also more likely to have a substantiated case of maltreatment (Prindle et al., 2018). This group of infants also had a higher likelihood of foster care involvement compared to those without a diagnosis (Prindle et al., 2018).

Parental mental health issues are also reflected in the rates at which a family is reported to CPS. Hammond et al. (2017) found that infants born to a mother with a diagnosed mental health disorder were almost eight times as likely to be reported to CPS before they reached one

year of age compared to those born to a mother without a formal mental health diagnosis.

Another factor that may contribute is that mothers with a formal mental health diagnosis were more likely to also have documented substance abuse issues compared to mothers without a diagnosis (Hammond et al., 2017). Mothers diagnosed with a psychotic disorder were the most likely to be reported to CPS within their child's first year of life (Hammond et al., 2017). If an infant was born to a mother with a diagnosed mental illness, they had eight times the chance of being reported to CPS for maltreatment than those born to a mother without a diagnosis (Hammond et al., 2017). If an infant was born to a mother with both a mental health diagnosis and substance abuse issues, there is an increased rate of reports to CPS that is 5 to 21 times that of infants born to mothers without either issue (Hammond et al., 2017).

High Profile Cases And Emotional Driven Response By The Media

In extreme cases of neglect, abuse, and systemic failures in monitoring interventions, high profile cases have sparked societal outcry. High profile cases highlight systemic weaknesses that can include insufficient staffing, case overload/management, and low funding. Children are one of our most vulnerable populations and when harmed our society responds emotionally, especially when the failures take place in a system that is designed to act in the best interest of our children. When the C and P system and child welfare agencies fails, the public's trust is compromised and the impact of the child and their family is greatly affected.

The death of eight year old Genesis Mata has been a recent case that has resurfaced scrutiny of the child welfare system after she was murdered by her father and step-mother in Kern County California. Family members say that multiple reports were made to CPS for years regarding the abuse. Court records had also shown that there were prior allegations of violence against both parents with the father admitting that he admitted to being a gang member and the

stepmother being involved in a domestic violence case when she was 17. Records had also revealed that there were prior allegations of violence against both parents.

A recent Kern County grand jury report released in April cited a rise in child abuse cases and highlighted staffing issues within CPS (Morely, 2025). The report noted that low pay and high turnover have led to burnout, while increased caseloads and stagnant budgets are straining the department's ability to respond effectively (Morely, 2025). Court records had also shown that there were prior allegations of violence against both parents with the father admitting that he admitted to being a gang member and the stepmother being involved in a domestic violence case when she was 17. With an active CPS case already in place, the murder of Genesis Mata understandably sparked strong societal outcry because of the failure to properly intervene.

High caseloads and low pay within the system not only impact employees, but also compromise the quality of care that the department promises. Social workers who face high workloads are susceptible to missing crucial warning signs. In cases like Genesis Mata these failures could have been prevented if there was adequate communication between departments along with conduction of proper follow up procedures between the social workers and their supervisors.

The case of Harmony Montgomery, a recent case happening in the state of sparked concern about inter-state child welfare practice. Harmony Montgomery was placed in the Department of Children and Families (DCF) when she was two months old. Her father, Adam Montgomery was awarded custody of her in February 2019. There were multiple signs of abuse as one relative made a report to the Department but nothing came of it. Ultimately, After going into a rage one morning while the family were travelling to a methadone clinic, and beating her to death, Adam hid her body in a duffel bag. He and his wife Kayla were found guilty of

concealing her remains for several months. This case highlights the challenge of identifying, monitoring, and responding to risks effectively while balancing complex legal and psychological elements (Wise et al., 2024)

In the Care and Protection (C and P) system, present no different characteristics that compromise the quality of parenting they provide to their children. These characteristics harm their children to be physical growth and neurodevelopment, causing children to be lower in mental development and growth than other children their age. Witnessing certain behaviors and characteristics of the parent compromises the quality of parenting the child receives. These behaviors that parents involve themselves in often get passed down to children genetically and visually, causing them to inherit the same behaviors and characteristics their parents display.

Negative Parental Characteristics

In the Care and Protection (C and P) system, parents have different abusive characteristics that compromise the quality of parenting provided to their children. These abusive characteristics that parents have cause effects of distress and disturbance at the time it takes place, but may also produce long term effects on the children affected (Mullen et al., 1996). With children appearing with problems such as failing to thrive in their environment, being socially withdrawn, or gaining habits similar to the behaviors witnessed. These behaviors that parents involve themselves in often get passed down to children genetically and visually, causing them to inherit the same behaviors and characteristics their parents display. Domestic abuse is one of these characteristics, being present in parents who physically abuse one another or their children to maintain control of them. This results in their children to be socially withdrawn, and face more maladaptive interactions with others (Crum 2010). These characteristics affect children differently based on the form of abuse they face, although some forms of abuse share similar

outcomes of children behavior. Causing children to be disadvantaged and face the Care and Protection system, with many of them being taken away from their homes due to the improper care parents provide.

Domestic abuse is a characteristic seen in many different C and P cases, often present in abusive relationships with children in the home, or when parents abuse their children. This form of abuse is often present in intimate relationships, defining itself as an attempt by a person in a marriage or intimate relationship to dominate the other partner (Smith, Segal, 2018). However, injuries from domestic abuse can affect children, including parents hitting their children and partner, preventing their children from having a social life, and sexual abuse. This can result in differing degrees of injury. The degrees of injury may fall between minor injuries, such as scratches or bruising on children, while more major injuries would be broken bones, or potentially death. Children who face these characteristics are more withdrawn, lacking interaction with the outside environment around them, and show higher maladaptive interactions with others (Crum 2010).

Maladaptive interactions are interactions that essentially hinder one's ability to cope with trauma they went through, having difficulties forming a healthy relationship. Children who remain in these environments with domestic abuse typically develop behaviors that are reflective of the behavior witnessed, such as becoming abusive themselves in their adult lives. Some of those who are also affected by domestic abuse also become reliant on substances, such as alcohol and drugs as an unhealthy coping mechanism of their lower self esteem (Barnardo's, 2021). These outcomes of children who witness domestic abuse or are domestically abused often lead them to have challenging lives. Either becoming abusive themselves or being affected so heavily their social behaviors change permanently. Neglect often goes hand in hand with domestic abuse,

with parents refusing or being unable to meet the needs of their children's health, leading their children becoming disadvantaged in different ways.

Neglect arises in different ways in children. This form of abuse is pervasive, yet overlooked in comparison to the other forms of abuse children face. Defined by the lack of essential stimuli and caregiving children need to be able to thrive in their environment (Herrero-Roldán, Martín-Rodríguez, 2025). Children who lack these stimuli are often disadvantaged in their lives, being underdeveloped in certain milestones in life. Parents not cleaning their homes, causing children to live in unkempt conditions and failure to thrive cause children to lack certain educational goals by age milestones due to parents not being involved with their education. Neglect can also appear in situations where a parent isn't abusing a child, the parent is simply unable to care for the child properly. This is due to either untreated mental health problems such as untreated depression or anxiety, illness or injury (Smith, Robin, Segal, 2018). Neglect in this case still leaves children missing their milestones in life with their education and developmental learning, such as potty training, etc. These characteristics parents present with have been shown to have associations with internalizing and externalizing behaviors in children along with substance use and educational attainment (Jami, Hammerschlag, Bartels, Middlecorp, 2021). Neglect is often found in combination with situations where other negative characteristics are present. In parents who use substances, they aren't able to be fully present due to the presence of drugs or other controlled substances.

Substance use causes parents to not be there in max capacity for their children, contributing to their difficulties to thrive and potential substance use in their futures. Parents who use substances usually use alcohol, prescription drugs, or other illegal drugs. The aforementioned substances are present in maternal drug use during pregnancy and households that contain

substance abuse problems. Substance use in parents is proven to cause children to be at risk of developing different disorders, such as oppositional defiant disorder, prenatal drug exposure and fetal alcohol syndrome, while also causing physical risk to the health of children. Maternal smoking during pregnancy has been found in connection to oppositional defiant disorder in offspring (Jami, Hammerschlag, Bartels, Middlecorp, 2021). As shown in substance abusive households, children are at risk to develop substance abuse behaviors such as drug abuse and addiction prone personalities. An addiction prone personality are traits that someone has that makes them more susceptible to substance use. These characteristics are genetically transmitted through their parents. Children often exposed to substance use present with drug-exposed conditions, such as unexplained illness, facial features such as their eyes appearing red, or their skin having rashes.

Those who live in households that abuse alcohol may present with bruising and other potential injuries due to physical abuse by parents under the influence. This is due to impaired judgment that alcohol provides when drinking in high amounts. Some other symptoms of alcohol misuse include binge drinking, spending a majority of one's time drinking, and experiencing withdrawal symptoms. With alcohol misuse also causing individuals to have an increased chance of committing violent crimes (Mayo clinic, 2022). A study through Adoption and Foster Care Analysis, found that 38% of children under the age of five are much more likely to live with a parent who abuses substances. With those who interact with the child welfare system reporting substance use as a risk factor for abusive behavior, additionally reporting that about 45% of children below the age of 5 needing to enter out of home care because of parental substance use. (Brewsaugh, Tucker, Loveless, McDaniel, 2023). Substance use remains prevalent in Care and Protection cases, with children being harmed and through exposure to substances.

Child sexual abuse is very prevalent in Care and Protection cases, causing children trauma and long lasting trust issues with adults. Child sexual abuse refers to the unwanted sexual advances a minor faces, as they cannot consent or understand. This serves the person causing it sexual gratification. Child sexual abuse isn't only physical, it can also be online through technology such as phones or computers. Of a percentage of perpetrators of child sexual abuse, 59% are acquaintances, while 34% are family members, only 7% of perpetrators are strangers (RAINN, (n.d)). Children who are sexually and physically abused face many difficulties in their lives, such as noncompliance, tantrums and aggression toward adult figures (Crum, 2010). This leads them to have much higher foster placements due to the disruptions they have with adult caregivers. Child sexual abuse has been shown to harm childrens sense of self, which led to heightened risks of self destructive and suicidal behaviors. Physical abuse had been shown to prove similar results, but not as damaging to the adult self as child sexual abuse does (Mullen et al., 1996). The long lasting effects into adulthood that children affected by child sexual abuse face reflects how impactful this form of abuse is. Causing many children to face shattered views of themselves and develop long lasting trauma and emotional concerns. These characteristics children face are all common in the Care and Protection system, facing multiple at once in their households.

These negative characteristics that parents present with compromise the quality of parenting they give their children. Children who are victims from one of these are likely to experience other forms of abuse, as these often are seen together in care and protection cases (Mullen et al., 1996). From a psychological point of view, children who face these different qualities suffer through their self image view, noncompliance, suicidal ideation, substance abuse and more. It is recommended that courts should ask the social workers who write these

investigative reports to include more details regarding the severity of the presenting characteristic the parent has. This would help the judges and the court understand the severity of the situation a child is in, as more information about the severity of the presenting problem can help courts decide how to further assist children in these situations.. Additionally, it's also recommended that courts should also ask social workers to also write more about parental childhood history in investigative reports, as this would give more insight into why a parent potentially presents with a certain negative characteristic, giving the court more information for a case.

Parental Education

Children are impacted from the world around them in a variety of ways, the most notable is through parental influence and involvement. The impact of parental education is a variable that has been highly debated among developmental psychologists. It is suggested that education plays an influential role in childhood development. Many studies have concluded that while a parent's educational attainment is not invariably a predictor of a child's successful development, it can be a contributing factor. Through intergenerational transmission of human capital reflected through a parent's education, a child can benefit greatly from a parent possessing higher educational attainment. Human capital is commonly recognized as a measurement of the accruelement of skills, education, experience as well as access to resources. Justifiably, a parent who has a higher level of education may have more access to resources and therefore an increased social capital.

The importance of education has been continuously explored and interlinked with Human Capital Theory, studies further suggest that a child's human capital is often closely linked to the level of social capital their parents possess. (Fischer et al, 2013). Further, demonstrating a relationship between social capital, parental education, and child development. The human

capital a parent possesses can in return support a child's development in more profound ways than of a parent with lower educational attainment. Much research supports the theory that parents who finish high school or obtain collegiate degrees will often foster and raise children who do the same, positively impacting their development.

A study was conducted involving a total of 10,910 participants from respondents between the ages of 18 to 69 years of age. The participants examined socioeconomic status, level of education, as well as their parents' level of education. These factors were used to determine the parents as well as the child's social capital in correlation to the parental education level. In conclusion, parents' educational level is statistically significant with their child's educational level, and is strongly correlated with the child's reading, language, and logic skills. The study also concluded, the highest education level of the two parents was the strongest predictor of the child's education, a gendered pattern was present where one parent who aligned in gender assignment was the strongest predictor. (Fischer et al, 2013) The results suggest a connection between social learning and human capital theory, contributing to a child's development.

Parental education in relation to childhood development has been and continues to be a point of contention within developmental psychology research. Much research has agreed that there is a correlation between the two factors in a wide range of data. The most notable, a total of nineteen different samples were taken from seven different countries: the United States, Austria, Germany, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Vietnam, and Brazil. The children within the study were between the ages of 4-22 years old with a total of 15,297 participants. Participants were tested in cognitive ability through mental speed tests, culture fair intelligence tests, cognitive abilities test, progress in international reading literacy, international student assessment, and trends in international mathematics and science study. Parents' economic status was then estimated by

income, further evaluation of assets, and educational level. The results concluded, direct effect of parental education was greater than wealth for child development as well as certain correlation factors such as number of books owned, marital status, educational behavior of parents and behavior of the child toward education. (Rindermann et al, 2018). Indicating that while cognitive development of children is not completely influenced by economic factors, education and parents' interest in education for their children is the most paramount and driving factor towards positive development.

Contact With Family Members

Due to the nature of the Child Protective Care system contact with family members is a topic of controversy. Researchers argue that remaining in contact is critical for the potential reunification process of the family and childhood development. It is rather important if the child is going to be reunified with the biological parent(s) that healthy and meaningful connections are maintained. This however, may not be the case for all children. Contact with biological parents or family members may negatively impact the child if not monitored correctly. Contact with family can increase the likelihood of the child not connecting with the foster family and overall negatively impact healing/progressing in terms of the trauma experienced. It is critical to maintain a healthy balance of contact and appropriate contact with one's biological parents depending on the child's needs.

A study was conducted of sixty eight foster youth examining the fostering skills and supports of the caregivers as well as contact the adolescents had with their parents during a long term foster placement. The foster youths were asked to be interviewed at two points of time, first three months after the start of a new placement and then twelve months of the placement or at the point of disruption if this occurred. The interview consisted of detailed questions regarding

contact, quality and quantity of contact, and the impact this had on the overall placement success. The findings concluded, contact for the majority of adolescents with biological parents negatively impacted their placement and had a significant negative impact on therapeutic outcomes. A common issue was seen where the child may want contact more than their family does creating a conflict of interest between the two. (Moyers et al, 2006). Those who were negatively impacted had also remained in contact with parents unsupervised via cellphone or online apps. This presented a dilemma where children were planning their weeks in accordance with visitation with the biological family. Some events of contact were occurring despite the foster family as well as the department of child services advising limited contact, leading to harm of both the child's well being as well as the families.

These findings support a statement in which avoiding contact should not be avoided rather efforts should be placed on ensuring structured and healthy forms of contact. While contact may be good for some adolescents overall, due to the inability to completely manage the contact in a safe way, it may be harmful for children put in long term foster situations. Emphasis must be placed on managing, monitoring, and ensuring contact is taking place in appropriate settings, frequency, and time frames. While this specific issue may specifically pertain to older children in the system, it is important to address the potentiality of harm inflicted on the child. In terms of contact impacting social skills that are critical for development in many studies, there is no significant correlation that social support during childhood/adolescence, contact with siblings, or extended family had any impact or predictor on development. (Loesch, 2006). With this being stated each case should be assessed on an individual basis of both the child as well as the family members to ensure positive outcomes rather than hindering the child's progress.

Environmental Circumstances

In Care and Protection petitions environmental circumstances include socioeconomic status (SES), exposure to domestic violence, and parental substance abuse. Many factors can influence “normal” developmental stages in specific case ranges in children. Children who internalize emotions such as fear and anger are more susceptible to and at risk for depression, anxiety, and other challenges to their mental health over the course of their lives. Additionally, when the environments in which they live can be described as stressful and unstable, their developmental trajectory can be compromised (Williams et al., 2024). Systemic factors like SES, race, and ethnicity can also be factors that influence access to support services for a child and their families.

While factors like SES, race, and ethnicity can contribute to a child's development, the underlying issue which is more encompassing and systemic in its nature is child poverty. Poverty is not only something that limits resources available for a child and their family, it also exposes them to increased stress in their daily life experiences, unsafe environments, and exposes them to dangerous situations. Additional risks such as being introduced to pollution and toxins may also be related to systemic issues of living circumstances, when a family exists in a lower tier of the social economic system. This can also have a direct and negative impact on a child's physical and mental development. This impact can be reflected in a child’s academic experience because their ability to learn, assimilate and apply new information may be compromised by instructions to the normal developmental process (Gonzalez, 2020). According to this study, poor air quality contributes to compromising cognitive development, school performance, and increases the risk of chronic illnesses.

When a child lives in poverty or in a lower tier of social economic status, their access becomes limited. In a rural area, transportation is limited with necessities such as a pediatrician, supermarket, or a school can be a challenge to reach. Neighborhoods that are affected by poverty do not give children a healthy outlet to thrive, exposing them to criminal activities and drugs. With this in an environment for a child, this can lead into the normalization of unsafe activities and limits positive role models for children. These challenges ultimately lead into consequences that include low attendance in schools, increased likelihood of behavioral issues, and chronic health issues.

Exposure to violence in the home labeled as “domestic violence” compromises the child’s potential for health psychological and physical development. When children are exposed to domestic violence and perennial substance abuse/use this can also be altering to a child’s development. Regular and ongoing use of substances such as illegal drugs and alcohol abuse in the home can also inhibit healthy child development. Children who are neglected because of parental inability to focus and pay attention as a result of an addiction to a substance are significantly compromised in terms of their chances of a healthy development experience. Exposure to violence in the home is damaging because of the relationship between its occurrence and the tendency of the child to internalize their responses to such violence by and to those they love and depend on for stability. Poor relational health, particularly the absence of emotional support by a nurturing adult, increases the risk of childhood toxic stress and difficulties in emotional regulation, early child development, and eventually, lifelong health (Pascoe et al., 2016).

Academic Disciplines Involved In This Area

There are many academic disciplines that hone in on the study of growth and development of children. These disciplines study different aspects of children, such as developmental psychologists and child psychologists, who focus on different developmental milestones for children. Developmental psychologists study children to gain an understanding on how experiences as a child affect the future lifespan. While child psychologists are specialized in the overall treatment of children, conducting assessments, diagnosing and treating children for various mental disorders they may face. These two, on the psychological lens, focus on the development of children, while educators and sociologists focus on development through experiments or hands-on experiences. Sociologists conduct research experiments, using data from experiments and comparing it from data in the past, they are able to make inferences on child development. While educators work hands-on with children, contributing to their development through educating children on different subjects, such as math and language. Educators are pivotal for helping children develop their social and emotional growth.

Developmental psychologists study how people develop and change throughout their lives. This is different in comparison to Child psychology, which revolves their studies on children. Developmental psychologists study children to understand healthy growth, effective methods of care, education, and what causes emotional security (Woodhead, 1999). These psychologists focus on child development to gain an understanding of how children's emotional, physical and cognitive development affect the lifespan throughout life. Developmental psychologists are also interested in prenatal, early childhood, middle childhood and adolescent development (Cherry, 2024b). Developmental psychologists interest themselves with prenatal development to understand how reflexes develop before birth, senses that fetuses have before

birth and look at potential problems before birth such as down syndrome and maternal drug use. With early childhood, developmental psychologists are particularly interested in the remarkable growth and changes children go through. Focusing specifically on physical, cognitive and social emotional growth during this development period. Developmental psychologists also focus on middle childhood to understand how a child develops a sense of self, forms their friendships, and the impact of social influences on children. Parents during this stage of development may rely on developmental psychologists to help their children through social, academic and other issues. Lastly, through adolescent development, developmental psychologists study this portion of life as children experience the most extreme psychological turmoil and transition during this stage of life. By studying this portion of life, they are able to support teens going through psychological turmoil through therapy and help them understand the changes they are going through in this stage of life. Developmental psychologists study children to better understand how the lifespan changes from childhood to adulthood, while child psychologists focus specifically on the diagnosis and treatment of children.

Child psychologists specialize in child development through the treatment of children who suffer through mental health diagnosis. They conduct assessments, diagnose and treat children for various mental disorders. These psychologists have grown to learn and understand the needs for children, such as their social and emotional adjustment, behavioral adaptation and developmental processes (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). Child psychologists specialize in child development due to the differences children have and need with therapy in comparison to adults, due to the differences in their ages, maturity and mental cognitions. Specializing in treatments associated with anxiety, ADHD and behavioral disorders. This is due to these specific disorders being more prevalent in populations of children. Social growth is important to the development

of children as well, as child psychologists study children's earliest connections in their lives. Learning to understand how children's sense of self and social identity is forged. Other aspects that are vital to the study of child psychology are gender roles, genetics, language development and social growth (Cherry, 2024A). Using these to further enhance the study and treatment of children.

Sociologists are also involved in this area of research. They focus on the life of the child, their structural elements and their backgrounds. By researching these, they are able to understand and explain why children have different experiences in their lives (Anonymous, 2022).

Sociologists also use the data collected from research on child development and compare the data found to children in the past. Similar to researchers in psychology, sociologists conduct research utilizing survey methods to interview individuals. By doing these surveys and interviews, sociologists are able to collect their data and apply it to several different areas such as criminal justice, psychology, education and more. Sociologists use the data collected regarding child development and use it to help other fields of work understand more about child development.

Educators play a pivotal role in the development of children. This academic discipline is involved in the teaching of children throughout the beginning stages of their lives, teaching them the main foundations of language and mathematics. Research has been shown that positive interactions between educators and children promote child language development, attention span and resilience (Missouri C. C. A, 2025). When educators show respectable, emphatic, and patient behaviors, children are able to learn emotional and social skills needed for proper development. Educators have also contributed in helping children learn how to manage emotions, empathy and relationships. They develop these skills through putting children in experiences that will help

them understand and express their feelings better. The method that educators use that best helps children develop was found to be play based interactive teaching methods, as hands-on learning helped children be much more social and develop their cognitive skills.

Academic specialties that specialize and study child development contribute to the knowledge that society has today regarding the development of children. By understanding the development and growth of children, these specialties use their knowledge to contribute to either treating, educating, surveying and supporting children. Societies' understanding of children are based on these disciplines' contributions to the study of child development, and without them, the world's understanding of children's development would be much more broad.

Governmental Agencies Responsible For Monitoring Diversity

Diversity is not a one size fits all and it is not a problem that can be overlooked. Due to this, government agencies on federal, state, and local level have diversity units. These units oversee diversity and monitor positive progress to ensure diversity, equity, and inclusion is not something that continues to be an issue. These entities ensure that the workforce is diverse as well as making sure social services offer services that are representative of the entire general public. It is critical that throughout the years this work continues to bridge the gap between reform and effectiveness in human services to the communities in which they serve.

A variety of government agencies that conduct this work is, the Administration for Children and Families, the National Center for Education Statistics, US Department of Education, as well as Government Accountability Office. All of which have made assertive efforts to successfully implement diversity initiatives such as leadership commitment, employee participation, strategic planning, examining diversity indicators and statistical data, as well as linking diversity efforts to many goals and objectives of organizations, companies, and human

services entities. (Wyatt-Nichol et al, 2012). Much studies conclude that diversity is a factor that needs to be examined often and successful implementation lies in diversity training. Successful training that overall emphasizes diversity as part of the tactical plan to improve organizational performance.

Over the years, we have seen an increasing fading of the ‘nuclear’ American family. Families have been becoming more and more diverse in how they operate, function, and overall look. Over 25% of all children were being raised by single parents since 1987. In many families either one or both parents work during the day. In 1988, statistics show that over 70% of children between six to thirteen years old had mothers working outside the home and over half of all mothers of infants were employed. These statistics have shown a change in what many consider to be the ‘nuclear family’. With changes in the family structure, there has been an increase in single parents, step parents, blended, adoptive, foster, grandparents, and same sex parents rearing their children. There has also been a change in family characteristics. The age in which families become families, the age in which women have children have changed, some women are having children in their teens while others are waiting till their 30s. There has also been a significant change in family size. Families have seen to be getting smaller. Along with this there has been significant change in familial characteristics such as economic status, culture, language, religion, and spirituality. (Hanson et al, 1992). All of these factors have contributed to a demand in adapting human services to have increased diversity training to better serve the communities in which they operate.

Without reforming as well as reframing knowledge around diversity, human services will be ineffective to any other family besides those that are considered to the ‘traditional american nuclear family.’ It is rather critical for services such as the Department of Youth and Families to

take into account the demographic information of their respective communities in order to appropriately provide the community with the services needed. Cultural, linguistic, and racial diversity must be taken into account. A study conducted of ninety eight different programs in California were assessed in which 85% conducted a survey of their community and concluded that taking diversity into consideration was important to accurately address the reform needed to provide effective services. (Chang, 1994). In order for apparent change towards positive outcomes, human service programs must take the step of getting to know the community around them in gender, race, culture, worklife, family dynamic, characteristics, and more.

Many companies and organizations have recognized the need for change and have respectively implemented diversity committees. DCYF in Rhode Island has developed a diversity committee to ensure that knowledge of diversity is met and recognized within the system. The committee was chartered in 2015 and works in close collaboration with the state's Division of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion. The committee has developed and devised a plan that will work with local organizations to ensure that a diverse workforce and services are being implemented. The department plans to do more community outreach efforts in order to not only better understand the communities around them but to build both support and trust. The department plans to partner with diverse organizations, educational institutions, as well as a variety of advocacy groups. (DAC, 2025) All of which will allow the department to better promote career opportunities and get to better understand and see the community in which they serve. It is of our recommendation, that while we examine the cases of the Fall River Court we approach potential proposals with this lens of thinking in order to rectify the present concerns at hand in a thoughtful and diversity sensitive way.

Discussion

The Length of Cases in Massachusetts

The Department of Health and Human Services regularly pulls state data through case reviews, and interviews with families and staff. The 2024 of this data shows a lot of notable information regarding the Massachusetts DCF. The report found that lots of abuse and neglect investigations regularly take over 30 days when compared to the federal timeline. It also reported that 8.2% of children experience maltreatment in their environment within the next year, which is above the federal goal of being below 5%. The report details that 71% of investigations for child abuse or neglect were carried out within the first day, which is far below the federal standard of 90%. Reunification is usually a year and around three months on average, which is also longer than the federal standard of one year.

Massachusetts has longer timelines for the welfare system, which can certainly have harmful effects on the involved children and their parents (Ameen et al., 2022). Resulting factors in this context such as instability, emotional distress, and delays in achieving an outcome within the placement of children are a result of investigations and reunifications that go past the federal standards that are set. When children remain in temporary foster care for long periods, they can experience disrupted attachment to their guardian, educational setbacks when compared to their peers, and behavioral challenges that are abnormal when compared to their peers all as a result (Ameen et al., 2022). When considering the parents of these children in this context, delays within the welfare system make complying with the plans even harder, especially when their transportation, housing, mental health, ability, etc. Their resources and time may already be stretched thinner than they can realistically push further to begin with.

Massachusetts has made notable progress in increasing placement for children, but it still faces lots of systemic challenges from investigation backlogs and communication between the

courts and DCF. It's important for these agencies and groups to remain in collaboration to ensure that there is a clear timeline for cases to close. These changes and improved awareness could reduce delays and provide a more intentional and effective outcome for every case. This would also build more trust between families and the court systems, since these systems are meant to protect and serve families instead of splitting them up.

The Impact of the C+P Process

For a child, becoming involved with Child Protective Services can have adverse effects. Font et al. (2023) found that children who had contact with Child Protective Services or were in the foster care system had an increased likelihood of being in special education classes, being homeless, and meeting guidelines for free or reduced cost lunch. Furthermore, having contact with CPS but not being placed in foster care results in a 78% increase in the likelihood of suspension from school compared to no contact with CPS. Children with CPS contact prior to kindergarten also have higher rates of suspension than those children who do not (Font et al., 2023).

The legal aspects of child protection need ongoing oversight to defend constitutional rights. Courts must evaluate complex factors such as parental trauma, cultural bias, systemic inequality, and parental fitness. Child advocates advocate for reforms that include greater access to legal representation for parents and transparent standards for admitting evidence. Massachusetts has made much progress in these areas. However, further alignment with national standards could bring betterment and fairness. As the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) notes, "These reports are essential to a court's continuous quality improvement efforts and its ability to ensure timely, fair, and informed decision-making"

(NCJFCJ, 2024). Reforms such as expanded access to legal representation, clearer evidence criteria, and better communication between agencies could strengthen equity and uniformity.

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