

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES

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May 11, 1982

ALL-COUNTY INFORMATION NOTICE I-48-82

TO: ALL COUNTY WELFARE DIRECTORS

SUBJECT: 1981 INTAKE DECISION-MAKING SURVEY FINDINGS

REFERENCE: ACL No. 80-71

The purpose of this All-County Information Notice is to transmit significant findings of the Department of Social Services, Family and Children's Services Program Operations Bureau 1981 "Intake Decision-Making Survey". This letter includes a brief overview of the purpose of the "Intake Decision-Making Survey", a synopsis of the methodology, as well as the significant findings of the survey. It is anticipated that the information gathered from this survey will be helpful to you in improving procedures for intake and case management.

Purpose of the Survey

The decisions made by Child Protective Services workers during their initial contact with clients have tremendous impact upon the client, the agency and subsequent casework activity. These decisions are also of significance to administrators because they affect caseload size in Child Protective Services (CPS) and, indirectly, in Out-of-Home Care for Children (OHC-C).

While it may be assumed that these decisions reflect agency policy, community standards, professional training, social work experience, and perhaps individual predelictions, very little factual information regarding intake decision-making has been collected in the past. In order to gain an increased understanding of this area of social work practice, the Family and Children's Services Program Operations Bureau conducted the "Intake Decision-Making Survey" during the first quarter of 1981 as part of its review of the CPS program in California. The major questions the survey was designed to answer were:

- . Do specific standards which are designed to guide workers in making decisions about opening cases and removing children exist in counties? Do personal characteristics

of social workers play a significant role in the decisions they make when assessing a child abuse referral?

- . Do workers discriminate between situations in which parenting is not ideal, but no observable harm to the child can be found, and situations in which specific harm to the child is observable?
- . Does consistency exist among workers in determining which situations constitute reason for opening a case?
- . Does consistency exist among workers in determining which situations pose sufficient danger to the child to justify removing the child from the home?

Methodology

The survey questionnaire that was developed for this study consisted of 25 short statements (vignettes) describing situations which might be encountered by Child Protective Services workers when conducting initial assessments. (See Attachment 1 for specific vignettes). A statewide random sample of CPS workers were asked to read the vignettes and respond in one of four ways. The response choices were limited to:

1. Not provide further CPS services beyond initial contact. The initial contact may include referral to other agencies.
2. Provide further services without recommending that the child be removed from the home.
3. Recommend that the child be removed from the home prior to the provision of any additional services.
4. Because Probation handles dependency intake in this county, the case would be referred to Probation. (This response was eliminated from the analysis due to the low frequency of responses.)

Questionnaires from 200 respondents representing 40 counties were analyzed. The respondents were mostly white (70.5%), mostly female (66.5%), and averaged ten years of experience as social workers (not all of this experience was performing child welfare services). The majority (62.5%) reported that they worked in urban areas. The respondents were typically in their 20s and 30s, and carried an average of 30 cases each, although caseloads did vary considerably from below 20 to over 60.

The responses were analyzed by computer using the computer program, Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS). Initial analysis consisted of obtaining frequency distributions and descriptive statistics for all variables collected; e.g., race, age, years of experience as a social worker, rural/urban counties.

Significant Findings

The three most significant findings of the survey are:

1. By far the most significant finding was that more consistency was evident among workers employed by the same county about the appropriate action to take than there was among workers from different counties.
2. Overall, personal characteristics such as age, sex, ethnicity, and years of experience appeared to have no significant effect on the consistency of decision-making.
 - a. The number of "immediately remove child" responses was not influenced by age, sex, years of experience, or other worker characteristics, although the responses did differ by county.
 - b. Only two vignettes elicited a majority of "no further services" responses. One relates to poor school performance and the other to sexual practices; e.g., boy knows his father is gay. Five vignettes elicited a majority of "immediately remove child" responses, while the remaining 18 vignettes elicited a majority of "provide further services without removal" responses.

See Attachment 1 for actual percentage of each response.

3. Standards/operational definitions of child abuse and neglect have been established in each county, and some agencies have adopted written intake policies in an attempt to standardize decision-making. Although these policies have a variety of focuses, each is designed to provide operational definitions of child abuse and neglect through the provision of examples of situations which do and do not require a case opening or removal of a child. However, no conclusive evidence of their effectiveness in increasing consistency among workers could be found in the review.

We believe that these findings have two major implications for the administration of the Child Protective Services program in California.

First, although a number of vignettes described situations which had little or no adverse consequences to the child, workers, nevertheless, almost always chose to provide services. In a time of restricted funding and limited resources, it is critically important to develop the means of differentiating between situations in which there is a need for services and situations in which parenting is simply less than ideal. It may be of benefit for administrators to review their own county policies on intake to provide their workers with knowledge of how to more clearly differentiate between situations.

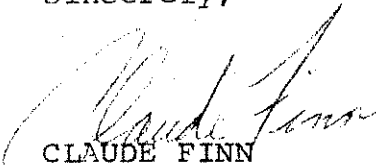
Second, we found that counties have standards of practice that ensure that workers, who are within a given county, assess situations somewhat more consistently than a randomly drawn group, even though most counties have no explicit (written guidelines) intake policy. This is encouraging because it indicates that agencies may affect the decision-making process by providing direction and other mechanisms such as administrative reviews and case staffing to enhance consistency among workers. It should, therefore, be possible for agencies to focus their limited resources on the more serious situations.

Recommendations

Given the unprecedented fiscal constraints faced by county welfare departments and the dismal prospects for increased funding in the near future, it is clear that child welfare services cannot intervene in as wide a variety of family situations as they have in the past. Therefore, the first priority must be to serve cases where a lack of service would pose serious physical consequences to children. In order to provide services to these high priority cases, local agencies will have to free staff resources by limiting intake. This could mean developing more formal policies and procedures through written guidelines, providing training, conducting supervisory reviews, etc., which are designed to give staff clear direction to limit intake to the more serious situations. Such policies and procedures should also provide direction to workers on how to refer cases which cannot be served by their agencies. Finally, to adequately protect children, agencies must ensure that consistency exists among workers in the intake decision-making process.

We appreciate your assistance in the development of data for this survey. If you have any questions regarding the survey, please contact your Family and Children's Services consultant at (916) 445-7653 or ATSS 485-7653.

Sincerely,



CLAUDE FINN
Deputy Director

attachment

cc: CWDA

RELATIVE FREQUENCY OF EACH RESPONSE TO 25 VIGNETTES

<u>Question Number</u>	<u>Question</u>	<u>No Further Services</u>	<u>% Response Provide Voluntary Services</u>	<u>Immediately Remove Child</u>	<u>No. Probation Responses were Not Analyzed Because of Low Frequency in Response</u>
1	Mother fails to provide regular meals for her 7-year-old child. The child's physician is concerned because the child has an iron deficiency.	11	88	0	
2	Parents never make their 9-year-old do her homework. The child is failing in school.	63	36	0	
3	A 12-year-old boy's father is a homosexual and the boy is aware of this.	72	26	1	
4	A 10-year-old boy is allowed to be at his parent's cocaine parties. He asks to use the drug, but is not allowed to do so.	17	59	25	
5	A 10-year-old boy's arms and legs are covered with encrusted sores and he appears to never bathe. The parents appear unconcerned.	1	51	49	
6	A 9-year-old boy has new and healed second degree burns on his buttocks and chest. He stated his father burned him with a cigarette.	1	6	93	
7	An 8-year-old boy's mother often lets him stay home from school. He is failing in school.	21	79	0	

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8	A 7-year-old girl complains of sore gums and has difficulty eating. She has never seen a dentist.	20	80	1	
9	A 12-year-old girl's uncle is an addict who is often in the home. She has asked if she could try his drugs.	26	70	4	
10	A four-year-old is required to clean his plate at every meal. A doctor warns that his health will suffer because of this.	45	55	0	
11	A 10-year-old girl's parents ignore her and seldom talk with or listen to her. She continually fights with other children at school.	22	77	1	
12	A 12-year-old boy is required to sell merchandise his mother has stolen at flea markets. He knows the merchandise is stolen.	11	52	37	
13	A 13-year-old boy is constantly compared unfavorably to his younger siblings by his parents who imply that he is not their child. He continually fights with other children.	21	77	3	
14	A 4-year-old child who suffered second-degree burns after being immersed in a tub of hot water yesterday by the mother who stated she didn't know the water was too hot.	1	19	80	

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15	A 10-year-old boy complains of not being able to see things at a distance. His parents have not obtained an eye examination for him in spite of the school's suggestion that they do so.	20	79	1	
16	A 3-year-old boy usually sleeps on a filthy, urine-soaked mattress. He has untreated infected sores on his body.	0	38	62	
17	An infant is left with her grandmother by her 16-year-old mother several times. The grandmother is unable to reach the mother by telephone. Once the child became ill and the grandmother did not know what physician to take the child to.	12	73	15	
18	A 9-year-old girl's parents keep bottles of whiskey in the house. The child drank some of the whiskey and became intoxicated. The parents didn't believe this to be a problem.	13	76	10	
19	An 8-year-old girl knows her mother is a prostitute.	44	52	5	
20	A 3-year-old child who lives in a house with broken windows has been brought to an emergency room twice by her mother because the child cut her hand on the window. The last episode required three stitches.	2	60	38	

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21	The parents of a newborn who is congenitally addicted to heroin are both regular heroin users.	2	16	82	
22	A 4-year-old girl has red marks on her skin because she was spanked with the hand. The preschool reports the parents' care is adequate.	27	70	2	
23	There is only one double bed in this home and the parents and their 4- and 6-year-old children sleep in it together.	30	68	2	
24	A 3-year-old boy is regularly left outside by his parents who are at home. He was found five blocks from home by the police yesterday.	3	57	40	
25	A 10-year-old girl regularly engages in mutual masturbation with her mother.	3	24	73	