

Does a state's social policy regime impact involvement with child welfare?

EDWARDS, F. (2016). SAVING CHILDREN, CONTROLLING FAMILIES: PUNISHMENT, REDISTRIBUTION, AND CHILD PROTECTION. *AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW*, 81(3), 575-595, DOI: 10.1177/0003122416638652.

What can we learn from this study?

Child protection agencies operate within the structure of social and criminal justice policy regimes that vary across states. A state's approach can be viewed on a continuum, with extensive and punitive criminal justice approaches on one end, and broad and generous approaches to social welfare on the other. States have broad discretion on how they operationalize child welfare policy – including determining statutory definitions of abuse and neglect and identifying categories of mandatory reporters – both of which directly impact family involvement with the system.

Study details:

- **Population:** State-level trends in children entering foster care and children placed in institutional settings
- **Data source:** Administrative data on child protection (AFCARS), criminal justice (Bureau of Justice Statistics' National Prisoner Statistics), and social welfare intervention categorizations
- **Methodology:** Regression analysis
- **Dates:** 2002 to 2011

Why is this important for our work?

This is the first study to examine the variance in state approaches to child protection within the context of the broader social policy regime. Understanding the policy context in which child protection agencies operate has implications for how children and families access, experience, and receive support.

What are the critical findings?

Variation in the frequency and characteristics of child protection across states is not simply due to differences in the population, but rather the structure of social issue responses. After controlling for relevant demographic, social and political contexts, **states with expansive and generous welfare regimes utilize disruptive child protection interventions less frequently:**

- States with **expansive and generous welfare policies have lower rates of children entering care** (3.5 per 1,000 child population) compared to those at the other end of the continuum (4.5 per 1,000), but entries in these states may increase as enrollment increases (surveillance effect). Expansiveness is defined by TANF, SNAP, and Medicaid enrollment rates among children or people in poverty. Generosity is defined by maximum TANF benefits for a family of three.
- States with **less punitive criminal justice regimes have lower rates of children entering care** (3.4 per 1,000) compared to those that do not (4.9 per 1,000). Criminal justice regimes are defined by incarceration rates, death sentence rates, and number of full-time police officers per capita.
- States with **expansive and generous welfare policies have significantly lower rates of child institutionalization** (39.2 per 1,000 children in caseload compared to 78.1 per 1,000).

This summary synthesizes the findings of a single research study. To learn more, please review several [resources on preventing maltreatment](#).

For additional information, [see the abstract](#) or email KMResources@casey.org.