

# Commentary: Implications for Research in Family and Child Service Policy

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*Listening to the workshop papers and reading the subsequent chapters has provided me an opportunity to think about what psychologists, sociologists, and economists have learned and to consider how that might apply to some of the programs in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF).*

*For me this has been a very heavy adventure. It has demonstrated that, collectively, we know a lot more than we apply in practice or in policy. It also has demonstrated that when we do apply good sense or what seems to be good sense in developing policy and in practice, it is often based on partial knowledge, conjecture, or intuition.*

*Implicit for me has been the message that research not only contributes to the accumulation of knowledge for its own sake, but may also make a difference in how we relate to and care for people, and ultimately in the quality of their lives and our own.*

The ACF is a sister agency to the National Institute of Mental Health and others in the Department of Health and Human Services. We administer programs to help ensure economic independence for needy families, as well as programs that seek to protect those who are vulnerable (e.g. children who may be abused or neglected, children who may have to be removed from their own homes or separated from their families) or those who are poor, disabled or otherwise in need of help from the public sector.

In our rhetoric we talk about: empowering families to help themselves and to achieve economic independence; strengthening families and communities so that they will have a healthy, supportive, and positive impact on the quality of adult lives and on the development of children; partnering with individuals, front-line service providers, communities and states, Native American tribes, and others to achieve coordination, integration and ready access to services for those who need them.

We are ambitious in our goals, but our aspirations don't always play out. Our efforts at times lack the knowledge required for successful conceptualization or application. We administer a broad array of programs, which may soon be fewer and probably with less money. Some of our programs are entitlements such as Aid for Families and Dependent Children-- which has been of concern in some of the papers-- emergency services, and maintenance payments for children who are in foster care.

Some of our programs are grants-in-aid to the states. We administer community services block grants, social services block grants, and formula grants for child welfare services and for child abuse and neglect prevention and treatment services. We also fund grants directly to some nonprofit agencies; for example our Head Start Program is a directly funded grant to non-profit organizations.

Many of our programs carry discretionary monies with them. By and large, discretionary monies have been used to fund demonstration projects and program evaluation rather than research. Our program evaluations have used both experimental and non-experimental approaches.

For example, we are currently studying the implementation of Family Preservation and Family Support Services over a five-year period beginning in 1994 when the program was authorized. Changes that occur at the state, community, and front-line service levels will be studied systematically using non-experimental methods. We have used experimental approaches to study the JOBS program, and we typically require experimental methods and control groups in evaluating state demonstration programs when we grant waivers to existing laws or regulations. Such waivers are permitted under Section 1115 of the Social Security Act. Our agency considers and permits waivers under the AFDC program; the Health Care Financing Administration handles waivers of the Medicaid program. Waivers are funded as demonstration projects for serious study and evidence of cost neutrality over a five-year period.

How we use our discretionary monies is a reflection of the nature of our programs and our place in the Department as an essentially non-research organization. The expectation is that our sister agencies such as the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, NIMH, the National Institute on Drug Abuse, and others will produce the necessary information under research conditions.

Our unwritten and too often neglected charge is that we will work together with the research arms of the Department both to bring that research knowledge to bear on our programs and to help determine the research questions to be pursued within those organizations.

No doubt more needs to be done to improve the use of knowledge gained through research and to inform researchers of the most pressing research questions salient to improving policies and practice. This is not a new thought, and the task is not easy. We each see the world through our own lenses and with our own blinders. And as it turns out, researchers have lots of answers and policy makers have lots of questions. But so far our experience in matching the two has been spotty. Several of you have alluded to the rather extensive literature on stress and depression. If you look at the populations we serve, in virtually all of our programs, large percentages of people are depressed, but we have yet to marry your knowledge with our need to help those families as well as we might.

Apart from many lost opportunities to help those whom we serve, both researchers and policy makers may lose the opportunity to further our work through the impending budget unless we are more effective in demonstrating the value of our work. Apart from political and ideological pressures with which we may not know how to deal, or which we believe to be outside of our control, we are not prepared to tell our story well in justifying the continuation or modification of particular avenues of research or programming.

I have been trying to think through how we might build on each other's knowledge and experience. The workshop experience was too intense, with too much to absorb in too little time. Part of that time I was playing catch-up with the researchers' use of language; some of the nuances went right by me.

At other times I felt frustration that such rigor had been applied to confirm points through research that seemed self-evident to me, while answers were lacking on what might be done to remedy the problem. For example, we know that the percent of children born out-of-wedlock increased dramatically between 1975 and 1992, that many of these children were born of teen parents, that many are being raised in single-parent families, and that many live in poverty. We can measure the stresses that this produces for both parent and child. We know that the quality of life for these individuals is often compromised. But, it is not enough to say that we need prevention programs or that we should intervene.

We know that financial aid helps some, but that's not enough. The JOBS program, which we administer, helps some with education, skills training, job search and placement, and childcare. But to the extent that the program succeeds in matching individuals to jobs, the resulting jobs are typically low paying, without benefits or potential for growth, and not satisfying to those who are employed. Somehow people don't last in those jobs. We need to frame the questions better so that together we can arrive at more informed solutions.

I would like to highlight two areas in which the ACF has begun to set targets with which I think you can help us. One of our targets is to promote parental responsibility for the emotional and financial support of children. We want to improve paternity establishment and to increase child support collections, assuming such responsibility is a first step towards more responsible parenthood.

At first glance, this may sound fairly simple. You ask the young woman to identify who fathered her child; get a court order for child support; wait for payment. When payment is received, you reduce her AFDC benefit. If he doesn't pay, you put the fellow's picture on the Internet. This is not meant to be facetious. In the state of Massachusetts, the ten most deadbeat dads are on the Internet. Their pictures and their bios are there. At any rate, if the dad is turned in to the collection agency, you get him.

But will this reduce out-of-wedlock births? Will it provide greater financial support and reduce the stresses on the single parent and her child? Will it help reduce the national debt? Probably not. Researchers and policy makers know that it's a lot more complicated than that.

Some young men have fathered multiple children with multiple women. Some women have children who were fathered by different men. The relationships and dynamics among these varied individuals are complicated. We have no idea what the effect is of insisting on payment when there is no money. For example, what might this mean for siblings? So far, our approach has been simple: just get out there and try to get the money. Our aspirations for responsible parenthood are more complex.

A second set of targets for us concerns the safety and well being of children. We want to reduce the number of deaths due to child maltreatment. We want to reduce the number of children who must be removed from their home for their safety. We want to strengthen families so they can better care for themselves and their children.

The Family Preservation and Family Support Program mentioned earlier is built on the notion that intensive services, tailored to individual families and provided over a 6-8 week period at a point of crisis, -- for example when the child is at imminent risk of removal from the home-- will prevent the child's removal and fix the family. Such a program could be better informed with research knowledge.

It is in these two areas that I would suggest that researchers and ACF policy makers come together to talk through the issues and to explore how we can join what you know from your research and experience with what we are trying to do.

