

# Exploring CPS Screening Decisions At The Local Level: Characteristics Associated With Quality Decisions

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## Introduction

- One of the most difficult decisions made by Child Protective Services (CPS) agencies:

Which referrals to CPS are appropriate and should therefore be evaluated, and which should be screened out.

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## Why is this Important?

- Child safety vs. family integrity
  - Are we protecting children?
  - Are we intervening unnecessarily?
- Policy
  - Is policy being implemented consistently when screening decisions are made?
    - Between workers
    - Between jurisdictions
  - What accounts for any inconsistencies?

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## Background Original Study (2001)

- 1996 – revised CPS screening policies and procedures (Circular Letter #SSA 97-3)
- 2001/2002 – collaborative evaluation between SSA, the State Council on Child Abuse and Neglect (SCCAN), and the University of Maryland Center for Families (UMCFF).
- Purpose of collaboration:  
to explore the degree to which screening practices and decisions are currently consistent with these state policies

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## Collaborating Organizations

- Maryland Department of Human Resources, Social Services Administration
- State Council on Child Abuse and Neglect
- University of Maryland Center for Families

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## Review Process

- A collaborative review team was developed with policy analysts from SSA and researchers from UMCF
- Interdisciplinary Review Team representing social work, pediatrics and law

**Individual coding**  
(at least 2 members reviewed cases at same time)

**Team Discussion**  
of cases where coder was uncertain how to code

### Internal Consistency

- Lead team member reviewed
  - 10% of each coder's cases
  - cases in which other team members requested a second review

- Cases with incomplete data were flagged and researchers went to original forms to reconcile missing data

- Information collected on worker characteristics

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## Coding System

- **A coding system was designed to record information about:**
  - nature and extent of referral
  - child demographic information
  - referral source
  - type of suspected maltreatment (if specified)
  - result of history clearance
  - basis for screened out decision
  - whether situation was referred for other services
  - whether there was documentation that supervisor and/or a panel was involved in the screening decision
  - **whether review panel concurred with screening decision**

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## Original Study

- 5,023 referrals received
- 1,811 referrals screened out (36% of cases)
- 82% of decisions to screen out referrals consistent with policy (panel agreement with worker decision)
- Even when more screened out cases in a jurisdiction, level of agreement similar

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## Focus of Current Study

- Panel agreement with worker decision to screen out case
- What case characteristics, worker characteristics and jurisdictional factors predict consistency of the screening decision with state policy?

Consistency with policy operationalized as agreement between worker screening decision and panel screening decision

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## CPS Decision Making

Prior Research

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## Prior Research

- Relevant research focuses on decisions to investigate and substantiate cases
  - Current study will focus specifically on screened out cases and consistency with policy
- Appropriate decision making requires CPS worker to:
  - Elicit critical and accurate information
  - Apply law and policy to information gathered (Wells, 2000, p. 3)

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## Prior Research

- Nationally, of estimated 3.3 million referrals alleging child abuse and neglect in 2005:
  - 62% were screened in for investigation or received alternative response
  - 38% were screened out
- Percentage of referrals screened out varied tremendously from state to state, ranging from just .8% screened out in Arizona to 80% screened out in Vermont

(U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [US DHHS], 2007)

## Prior Research

- This vast difference in screening rates reflects wide range of factors influencing screening decisions:
  - federal and state laws
  - jurisdiction and organizational factors
  - community characteristics
  - worker characteristics
  - case characteristics

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## Jurisdictional and Organizational Factors Associated With Screening Decision

- Jurisdiction<sup>1</sup>
- Organizational factors<sup>2,3</sup>
  - policies
  - procedures
  - customs and norms
  - workers' interpretations of these
- Task environment<sup>4</sup> (decision-making in OHC)

<sup>1</sup>Wells, Fluke & Brown, 1995; <sup>2</sup>Wells, 1997; <sup>3</sup>Wells, Lyons, Doueck, Brown<sup>14</sup> & Thomas, 2004, <sup>4</sup>DePanfilis & Girvin, 2005;

## Community Factors

### Associated With Screening Decision

- Proportion of families with children < 18
  - More children in community, fewer referrals screened in
- Population size
- Percent change in population
- Median household income
- Rate of neglect referrals

Wells, Lyons, Doueck, Brown & Thomas, 2004

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## Worker Characteristics

### Associated With Screening Decision

- Worker beliefs<sup>1</sup>
- Training and experience<sup>2,3</sup>
- More research needed in this area

<sup>1</sup>Wells, Lyons, Doueck, Brown & Thomas, 2004, <sup>2</sup>DePanfilis & Girvin, 2005<sup>4</sup>,  
<sup>3</sup>Benbenishty, Segev, Surkis, & Elias, 2002



## Case Characteristics

### Associated with Screening Decision

- Referral source<sup>1,2</sup>
- Type of maltreatment<sup>1,2,3</sup>
- Age of child<sup>2,3</sup>
- Prior history (neglect)<sup>3</sup>
- Amount of information available<sup>1,2</sup>
- Race of child<sup>1</sup> (more research needed)

<sup>1</sup>Hutchison, 1989; <sup>2</sup>Wells, Fluke & Brown, 1995; <sup>3</sup>Karski, Gilbert & Frame, 1997

## Study Question

What case, worker, and jurisdictional factors predict consistency of screening decision with state policy?

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# Study Methods

- **Secondary data analysis of data collected in original evaluation**
- **Original Study**
  - 5,023 referrals received
  - 1,811 referrals screened out (36% of cases)
  - 82% of decisions to screen out referrals consistent with policy (panel agreement with worker decision)
    - Even when more screened out cases in a jurisdiction, level of agreement similar
- **Current study**
  - 1,615 screened out referrals
    - 135 of the 1,811 cases dropped – no children
    - 61 cases missing data for this analysis
  - 84% of decisions to screen out referrals consistent with policy (panel agreement with worker decision)

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# Case Characteristics

(n=1,615)

- **Type of maltreatment**

Neglect	35 %	(n=567)
Physical Abuse	32 %	(n=522)
Sexual Abuse	9 %	(n=153)
Mental Injury or Other Maltx	2%	(n=35)
Multiple Types of Maltx	5%	(n=83)
No Type of Maltx Identified	16%	(n=255)
- Referrals citing injury

18% (n=292)

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## Case Characteristics

(n=1,615)

- **Number of children in the home**

(Range 1-8, Mean 1.4)

1 child	74%	(n=1,196)
2 children	15%	(n=246)
3 children	7%	(n=108)
4 - 8 children	4%	(n=65)

- **At least one child under 6 in the home**  
35% (n=567)

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## Case Characteristics

(n=1,615)

- **Referral Source**

Professional – 59% (n=948)

Non-Professional – 41% (n=667)

**Professionals:**

private physician, private nurse, hospital or health clinic, private social services, public social service agency, school, day care provider, law enforcement

**Non-professionals:**

parent or parent substitute, victim, siblings, other relative, neighbors, anonymous, other

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# Jurisdiction

## ■ Jurisdictions

- The proportion of referrals screened out ranged from 5.6% in one county to 62.5% in another county in original study

## ■ Community Characteristics\*

- Population size: 191,197 - 873,341; median 489,656
- Median income: \$29,903 - \$74,167; median \$55,256
- Percent households w/children: 2.5 - 18.8%; mean 6.5%, *SD 5.1*

\*Census level data from 2000

Selected from the literature to represent jurisdictional characteristics and to minimize multi-collinearity

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# Worker Characteristics\*

(193 individual workers)

## ■ Years of experience

CPS Screening: (Range: 0-30; Mean=9)  
Social Service: (Range: 0-40; Mean=12)

## ■ Education

- MSW or Master's degree 46% (n=88)
- Unknown or other degree 64% (n=105)

## ■ Work Status

- Full time screener 26% (n=50)
- Rotating screener 67% (n=130)
- Unknown 7% (n=13)

## ■ Match between case-head and worker race/ethnicity

Yes 23% (n=1296)  
No or unable to determine 77% (n=380)

\*NOTE: 37.9% of cases missing worker data so worker characteristics excluded from predictive model.

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# Method

## ■ Nested model

- Tested first with Hierarchical Linear Model (HLM)
- Intraclass correlation (ICC) < 10%
  - ICC = variance in the DV that can be attributed to differences between the jurisdictions
  - ICC = 7% so HLM not warranted (Lee, 2000)

## ■ Logistic regression (SPSS 15.0)

- **Dependent Variable:** Panel agreement with decision to screen out
- **Independent variables:** Case characteristics and community factors (see next slide)
- Worker characteristics dropped due to missing data
  - County specific models (with complete data) were non-significant

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# Method

## ■ Hierarchical entry

- **Step 1:** Type of Maltreatment (physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, mental injury or other maltreatment)
- **Step 2:** Other case characteristics (injury, number of children, child under 6, referral source)
- **Step 3:** Jurisdiction/community characteristics (population – in ten thousands; median income – in ten thousands; % households with children under 18)

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# Results

- Model:
  - $\chi^2 = 91.979$  ( $df=11$ ;  $p<.0005$ )
  - Specificity (99.5%), Sensitivity (3.9%)
    - Indicative of limited predictive ability for non-agreement cases
    - Minimal improvement over the null-model
  - Individual predictors that were significant included:
    - Type of maltreatment
    - Injury
    - Population characteristics

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# Results Case Characteristics

<i>Variable</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>95% CI for Exp(B)</i>
<b>Physical Abuse</b>	<b>-1.517</b>	<b>&lt;.0005</b>	<i>1.00</i>	
<i>No</i>			<i>.219</i>	<b>.141, .342</b>
<b>Sexual Abuse</b>	<b>-1.612</b>	<b>&lt;.0005</b>	<i>1.00</i>	
<i>No</i>			<i>.200</i>	<b>.120, .331</b>
<b>Neglect</b>	<b>-1.086</b>	<b>&lt;.0005</b>	<i>1.00</i>	
<i>No</i>			<i>.337</i>	<b>.220, .518</b>
<b>Mental Injury or Other Type</b>	<b>-1.820</b>	<b>&lt;.0005</b>	<i>1.00</i>	
<i>No</i>			<i>.162</i>	<b>.068, .389</b>
<i>Yes</i>				

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## Results Case Characteristics

<i>Variable</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>95% CI</i>
<b>Injury</b>	<b>.633</b>	<b>.004</b>		
<i>No</i>			<i>1.00</i>	
<b>Yes</b>			<b>1.883</b>	<b>1.226, 2.893</b>
Number of children in home	-.028	.745	.973	.823, 1.149
Child under 6 in home	-.153	.324		
<i>No</i>			<i>1.00</i>	
<b>Yes</b>			<b>.858</b>	<b>.653, 1.163</b>
Referral Source	-.118	.451		
<i>Non-Prof.</i>			<i>1.00</i>	
<b>Professionals</b>			<b>.888</b>	<b>.653, 1.209</b>

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## Results Jurisdiction / Community Characteristics

<i>Variable</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>Sig.</i>	<i>Odds Ratio</i>	<i>95% CI for Exp(B)</i>
<b>Population (ten thousands)</b>	<b>-.008</b>	<b>.024</b>	<b>.992</b>	<b>.985, .999</b>
<b>% Households with children</b>	<b>-.123</b>	<b>.001</b>	<b>.884</b>	<b>.822, .951</b>
<b>Median Income (ten thousands)</b>	<b>.255</b>	<b>.041</b>	<b>1.290</b>	<b>1.011, 1.647</b>

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## Discussion

- Case-level predictors:
  - When referrals **identified a type of maltreatment** - physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect or mental injury - panel reviewers were **less likely** to agree with the decision to screen out the case.
  - When an **injury** was documented the panel was **more likely to agree** with the worker decision to screen out.
  - Age and number of children in the home were not significant predictors of agreement or disagreement with decision to screen out.
  - Referral source was not a significant predictor.

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## Discussion

- Jurisdiction/Community characteristics:
  - Population size & percent of households with children were predictive of **non-agreement** with screening decision
    - More people and higher percent of households with children, team less likely to agree with worker decision to screen out
  - Median income in jurisdiction was also a significant predictor
    - Higher income, team more likely to agree with worker decision to screen out

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# Implications

- Policy
  - Policy is being implemented consistently for the most part
  - Community characteristics influencing decisions
- Practice
  - Second level review verifies consistency of worker decision with policy
  - Predictive analysis may help us go beyond comparing jurisdictions, understand cross-cutting factors when policy not implemented consistently
- Education / training
  - Training around definitions of abuse and neglect as they relate to screening decisions

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# Future Research

- Follow up on screened out cases, whether or not more referrals received
- Evaluate screening decision for all cases, screened in and screened out
- Worker characteristics

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# Study Limitations

- Exploratory analysis
- Statistical conclusions
  - Sensitivity and specificity
  - Missing data
- Limited to screened out data
  - Data not available for screened in data
- Generalizability limited
  - Results specific to this state
  - One month period may not be reflective of other times of year

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**QUESTIONS...**



**CONCERNS...**

**COMMENTS...**

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