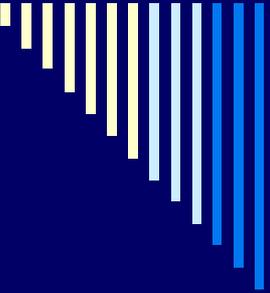# Investigating child maltreatment in out-of-home care: Barriers to good decision-making

Diane DePanfilis

University of Maryland

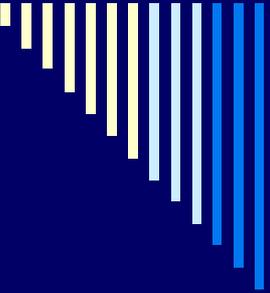**School of Social Work**

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December 4, 2003

Acknowledgements

- Funding for the study was provided by Children's Rights, Inc.
- Primary case reviewers in addition to Diane DePanfilis included:
  - Gisele Ferretto, M.S.W.
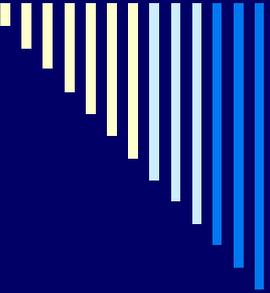 - Heather Girvin, Ph.D.
 - Deborah Linsenmeyer, M.S.W.

Objectives

- To provide a snapshot of the findings of an evaluation of the quality of investigations of child abuse and neglect in out-of-home care

- To identify possible barriers to good decision-making with a goal of offering possible solutions to improve decision-making in the future.

The Study

☐ Purpose: to determine the degree to which investigations of reports of child abuse and neglect in out-of-home care settings were investigated pursuant to professional standards, including state laws, policies, and standards.
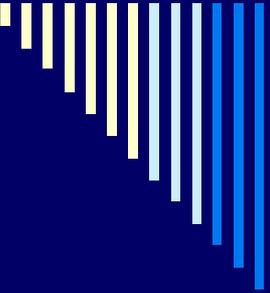
Methods

- Simple 10% random sample of 1295 investigations between 1999-2002
- Archival review by a study team of four reviewers.
- Automated coding system designed to capture case information and assess decision-making
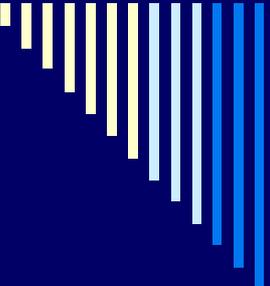- Most records reviewed by two reviewers
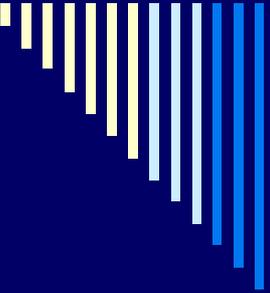
Key Finding

- Professionally Unreasonable Decisions
  - The investigation findings decisions were found to be professionally unreasonable 25% of the time.
  - Decisions related to removal and corrective action were also found to be unreasonable.

For example:

- One case was unsubstantiated even though a foster mother admitted striking a child with a belt resulting in a 4 inch linear belt mark on the child's face. This foster mother had two prior substantiated incidents of abuse or neglect.
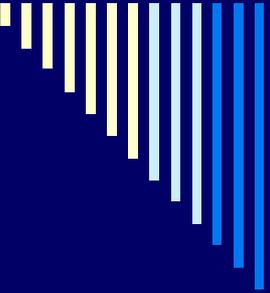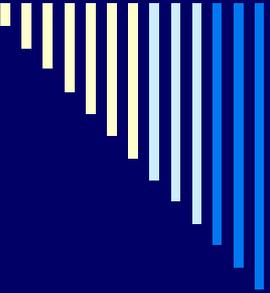
Key Finding

□ Violations of Policy

- No documentation of searches for prior reports of child abuse or neglect in 32% of the files.

- Placing children in homes with prior substantiated reports even though policy suggests these homes should not be licensed.

- Placing children without conducting the normal home study and licensing process

For example:

- "This home is one of many in ____ Region . . . that was opened …without going through the required certification process. We … can not give it a certificate of approval because the ___has never provided us with documentation that this home ever met the requirements to be certified, specifically that criminal and child abuse checks were done, the foster parents completed the required pre-service training, the medical and other required references were received, etc. …We have been requesting the necessary documentation but have not received it. In addition there are two substantiations of abuse/neglect on Ms. _____ and a waiver has not been done."

Key Finding

- Failure to conduct thorough and competent investigations
  - 44% failed to consider important historical information as part of the required investigation process
 - 12% were missing interviews with some or all of the identified witnesses
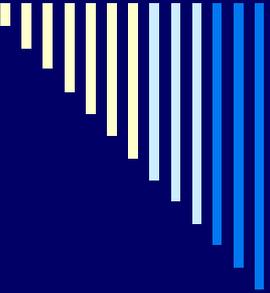
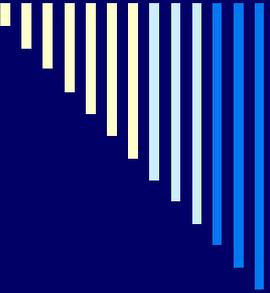# Key Finding

- Untimely investigation
  - 30% failed to make the first contact with the child within the designated response time (i.e., immediate, 24 hrs, 72 hrs, or 10 days).
  - 50% of the investigations were not completed within 60 days.
    - Days between receipt and completion ranged between 5 and 965 days (over 2.5 years).
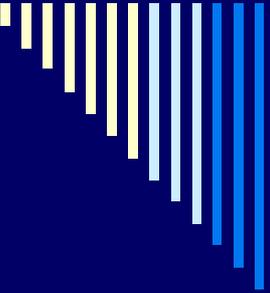
What went wrong?

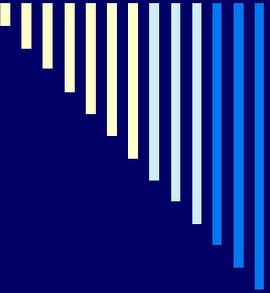# Identifying possible barriers

| Define the faulty decision	Identify possible barriers*	Look for evidence to support assumptions	Offer possible solutions

*use Gambrill (1997) framework
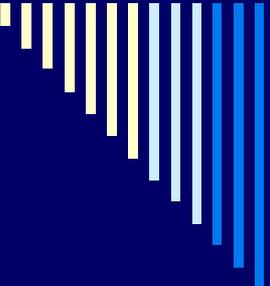
Barriers Framework*

- Sufficient information to analyze
  - Limited knowledge
  - Information processing
  - Task environment
  - Perceptual blocks
  - Expressive blocks

- Insufficient information to analyze
  - Motivational blocks
  - Intellectual blocks
  - Emotional blocks
  - Cultural blocks

* Gambrill (1997), p. 110
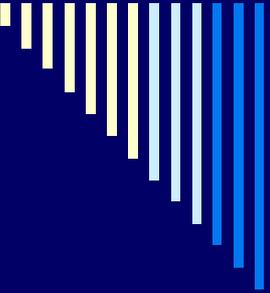
Define the faulty decisions

- ☐ Placement in homes without an adequate home study
- ☐ Placement in homes with prior substantiated incidences of maltreatment
- ☐ Determining finding of report
- ☐ Removal of children (or not) from home
- ☐ Licensing & corrective action

Identifying possible barriers (one example)

Define the faulty decision

- Reviewers disagreed with the finding decision 25% of the time
  - Disagreed in "unfounded" decisions 17% of the time
  - Disagreed in "not substantiated" decisions 58% of the time
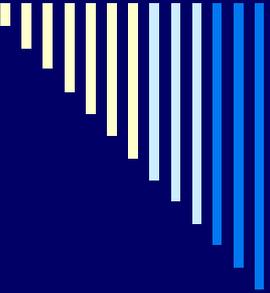 - Never disagreed with "substantiated" decisions

Identifying possible barriers

Not substantiated decisions
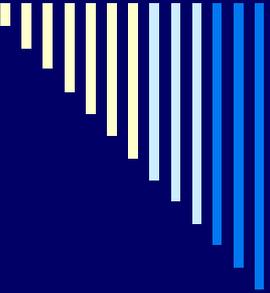
Identify possible barriers*
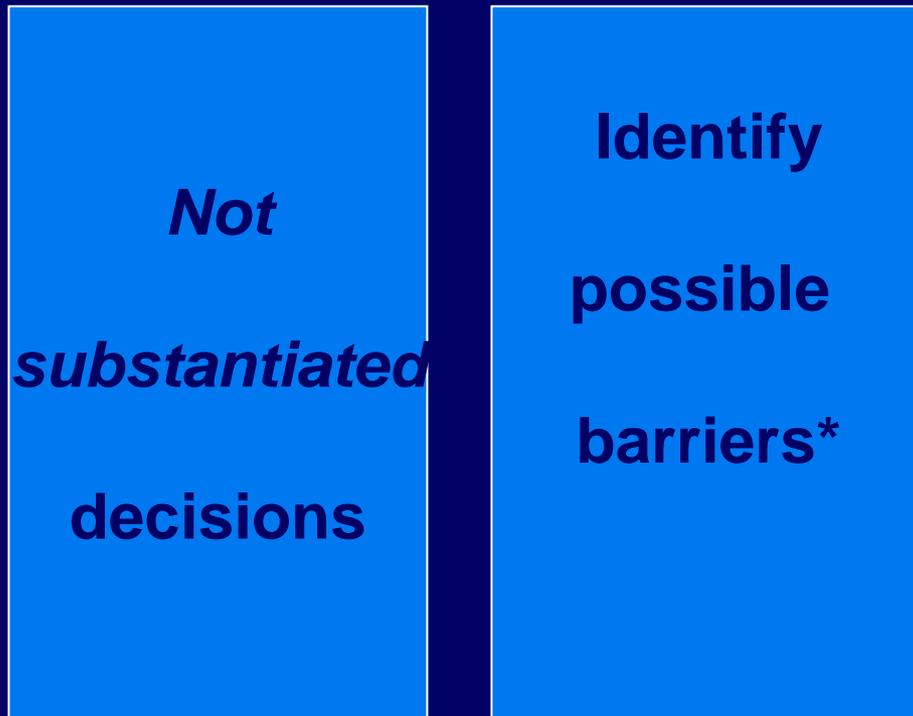
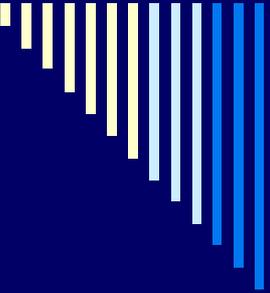*use Gambrill (1997) framework

Possible Barriers

- Limited knowledge
- Information processing
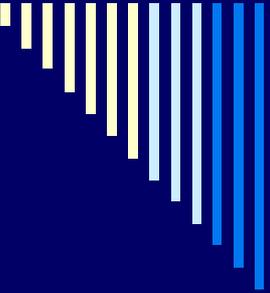- Task environment
- Perceptual blocks
- Expressive blocks

Identifying possible barriers

| *Not substantiated decisions*	•Knowledge •Information processing •Task environment •Perceptual Blocks •Expressive blocks	**Look for evidence to support assumptions**

Limited knowledge

- Educational backgrounds of investigators is unknown
- Policy detailed a good process for how to conduct a thorough and competent investigation but was not applied consistently by these investigators
- Decisions were made with information gaps*

*Sufficient evidence
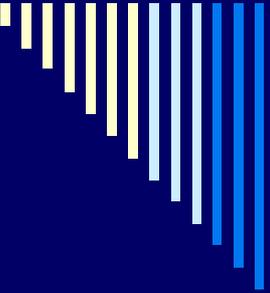
# Information processing barriers

- Selective perception*
  - Document problems but don't realize the importance of the information
  - Ignore important sources of information
- Faulty memory*
  - Investigations stretched out so long that they may have made decisions without remembering the details
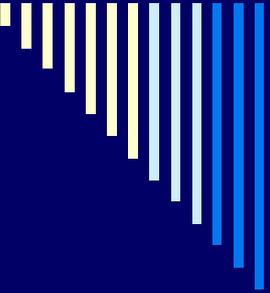 - Events were not noted accurately in the first place

*Sufficient evidence
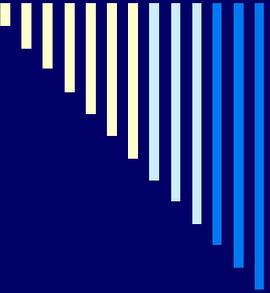
Task environment

- Time pressures*

- Inadequate supervision*

- Distractions*

- Pressure to do more work (remove a child, deal with license or corrective action) if decision was made to substantiate*
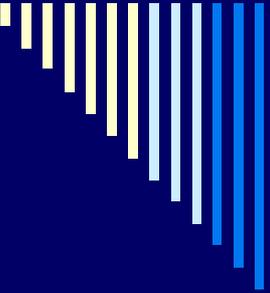
*Sufficient evidence

Perceptual Blocks

- ☐ Defining problems too narrowly*
- ☐ Overlooking alternative views*
- ☐ Stereotyping*

*Sufficient evidence

Expressive blocks
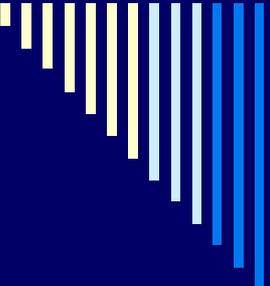
- ☐ Inadequate skill in writing clearly*

*Sufficient evidence

Identifying possible barriers

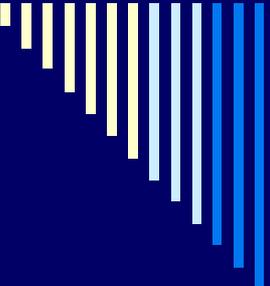|			
Not substantiated decisions	• Knowledge • Information Processing • Task environment • Perceptual blocks • Expressive blocks	• Task Environment • Information processing • Perceptual blocks • Expressive blocks • Knowledge EVIDENCE	**Offer possible solutions**

Task Environment

□ Barriers:

- Time pressures
- Inadequate supervision
- Distractions
- Pressure to do more work

□ Possible solutions:

- More resources to yield adequate caseloads
- Professional development for supervisors
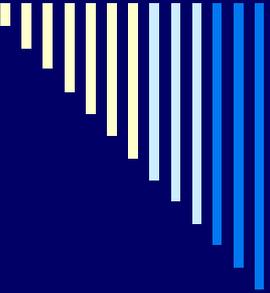- Clear separation of investigation function with rest of the agency
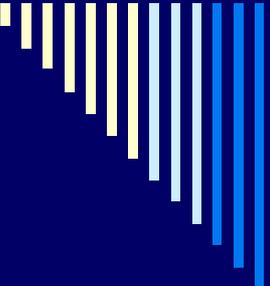
Information processing

□ Barriers:
- Selective perception
- Faulty memory

□ Possible solutions:
- Teach critical thinking and problem solving processes
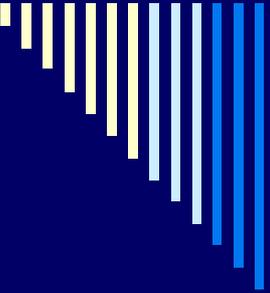- Enhance availability of quality supervision

Perceptual blocks

- Barriers:
  - Defining problems too narrowly
  - Overlooking alternative views
  - Stereotyping

- Possible solutions:
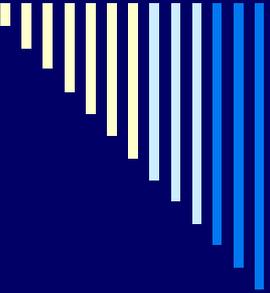 - Emphasize supervisor's role
  - Use teams for complex decision-making

Expressive blocks

☐ Barriers:
- Inadequate skill in writing clearly

☐ Possible solutions:
- Provide models of exceptional investigations
- Hold workers accountable to use the investigation outline for documenting the process
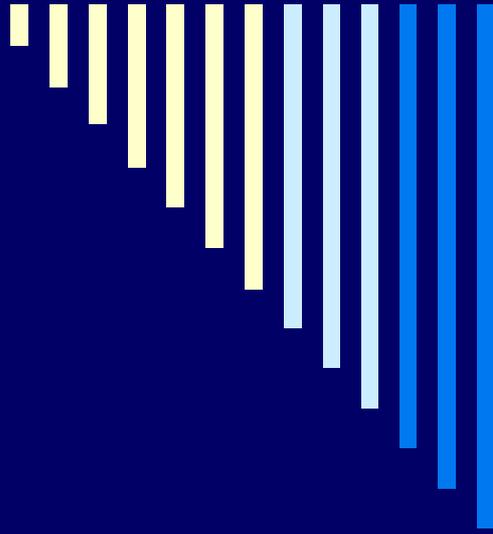- Emphasize supervisor's role

Knowledge

- Barriers:
  - Decisions were made with information gaps

- Possible solutions:
  - Teach methods of interviewing
  - Emphasize the importance of taking adequate time for each interview
  - Emphasize role of supervisor

"The tragedy is not what we don't know. It's how we ignore what we do know."

Uri Bronfenbrenner