

Caseworker factors that influence removal decisions in child welfare investigations

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Child welfare agencies across the United States investigate millions of allegations of child maltreatment, including abuse and neglect, every year (Children's Bureau, 2016).

Approximately 15% of the youth involved in these investigations are removed from their homes. Removals are tremendously impactful and change the trajectory of the lives of children and their families for better or worse.

Despite the extreme importance of the decision to remove children from their homes, these decisions are not always made systematically. Decisions are known to vary between workers—beyond variance attributable to the presence of child and family risk factors (Dettlaff, Graham, Holzman, Baumann, & Fluke, 2015; Fluke, Baumann, Dalgleish, & Kern, 2014; Gold, Benbenishty, & Osmo, 2001; Rossi, Schuerman, & Budde, 1999). There is limited information on what influences this variance (Graham, Dettlaff, Baumann, & Fluke, 2015). This study explored whether caseworker factors influence removal decisions using real-world data.

Caseworker factors explored included demographics, experience, attitudes toward child safety and family preservation, and childhood history of adverse events. The results from this study suggested caseworkers with more experience, male caseworkers, and caseworkers with more ACEs are less likely to remove children from their homes. Each of these are potential areas that could be targeted by policy or practice interventions to reduce inconsistencies in removal decisions. The findings from this study contribute to the growing body of empirical research on CPS decision making, furthering knowledge that can inform theory and child welfare practice.