

2011

Report of the 2010-2011 Presidential Fellow



BRIDGEWATER

STATE UNIVERSITY

Emily M. Douglas, Ph.D.

Bridgewater State

University

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**Report from the 2010-2011 Presidential Fellow
Bridgewater State University | Bridgewater, Massachusetts
Emily M. Douglas, Ph.D. | School of Social Work**

I spent my Presidential Fellowship as a Visiting Research Fellow at the Family Research Laboratory (FRL) at the University of New Hampshire, where I studied fatal child maltreatment. Annually, more than 2,000 U.S. children die at the hands of their caregivers¹; in Massachusetts, that number is about 12 a year, or one per month.² Child maltreatment fatalities (CMFs), when children die as a result of abuse or neglect, have received increasing levels of attention over the last 30 years. The social service and criminal justice sectors have employed techniques and strategies on multiple fronts both to better identify and to prevent future CMFs. Despite the increases in attention and resources, we know little about the effectiveness of these efforts and especially whether fewer children die. We also know little about the child welfare professionals or practice decisions that social workers make with families where children ultimately die. During my 2010-2011 Presidential Fellowship, I focused on better understanding the rate of CMFs over the past 30 years, the state-level social context in which CMFs occur, and examined the intersection of the child welfare profession and maltreatment fatalities.

Site of Research Study

Drs. Murray Straus and David Finkelhor, two of the founding fathers of the study of family violence, co-direct FRL. Established in the 1970s, FRL has been and continues to be home to some of the most groundbreaking research on family violence and child victimization. Hundreds of future and active scholars have trained at this center over the past four decades, and have gone on to make important contributions to the field. This environment provided me with easy access to leaders in the field, consultation on advanced statistical methods, and learning opportunities in the weekly research seminars where works in progress (including my own) are reviewed by all members of FRL and other research associates.

Research Activities and Findings

I examined the changing rates of CMFs from 1979-2007. In truth, I examined child homicide among children ages 0-9; but, because most homicides among this age group are perpetrated by parents and other caregivers, it is an acceptable proxy for studying maltreatment-related fatalities. The purpose of this study was to examine whether changes in diagnostic criteria may be related to the increase in the homicide rate among young children, something I term the “reclassification hypothesis.” I found support for this hypothesis: as child homicide rates climbed during the 29-year period, the rate of children dying from unintentional injuries decreased, as did the rate of children dying from undetermined causes. This suggests that increased attention to homicide among children, including education and better training for medical examiners led to more accurate diagnoses concerning the death of children.

¹ U.S. Department of Health & Human Services (2009). Child maltreatment 2007: Reports from the States to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data Systems - National statistics on child abuse and neglect. Washington, D.C.,

² Every Child Matters. (2009). "We can do better: Child abuse and neglect deaths in America." from http://www.everychildmatters.org/images/stories/pdf/wcdb_report.pdf.

Another finding that was that the rate of child homicide differed drastically between states. Some states stayed consistently above national rates, others stayed below; still others fell during the 29-year period while the nation's rate climbed, and finally, in some states the rate of child homicide climbed, but faster than the national average. In a second set of analyses I examined whether the social context of each state matters with regard to the rate of maltreatment fatalities. I found that some state-level factors matter, including the divorce rate, unemployment, and child fatality review team legislation.

I also conducted the first multi-state study of child welfare workers' perceptions of and experiences with maltreatment fatalities. Over 450 child welfare workers participated in this online study and through it I learned important information concerning the case, service, child, and family characteristics of fatality victims; child welfare workers' knowledge of risk factors for fatality; and worker characteristics, training, and experiences when a child died on one's caseload. I specifically learned that:

1. Child welfare workers have a wide range of knowledge with regard to risk factors for maltreatment fatalities. Further, workers have significant gaps in some areas, which could be addressed through targeted training.
2. Children who died had regular contact with the child welfare system. Workers had seen victims one week prior to their death and were closely monitoring families. The most frequently mentioned family characteristics included: parental unemployment, parental mental health, experiencing a major life event, and parents' inappropriate age expectations of the child. Also of concern were: parental alcohol and substance use, and parental perceptions of the child being "difficult."
3. Workers who experience the death of a child had, on average, worked 6 years in child welfare (4 years for frontline workers; 13 years for supervisors). Workers were college-educated or held advanced degrees, had appropriate training for being a child welfare worker, and were in their 40s. Workers reported that the death was a stressful event, affecting their professional and personal lives. Only half were offered therapeutic support by their agencies and only a minority used those services. Workers did report that co-workers were a source of support for them. Finally, over a quarter of workers believed that the deaths of the children on their caseload were "unavoidable."
4. Child welfare workers who experienced a CMF on their caseload were *not* more likely to experience high rates of post-traumatic stress symptoms, as compared to workers who had never experienced a CMF. That said, among just those workers who experienced a CMF, those who felt a higher level of culpability for the death reported more distress.
5. Workers who had previously experienced the death of a child client were more able to identify challenges in working with families and to provide additional services for their clients, as well as support their client in decisions they make about their family

It is my hope that the work that I completed during my Presidential Fellowship will help us to better understand the social context in which children die from maltreatment and how this has changed over the past several decades. Further, I hope that through my work, and the work of others, that the field will be better able to identify child and family risk-factors through increased efforts at training and to support workers who experience a fatality.

Publications, Presentations, and Trainings

I have presented the results of this new research at the *8th Annual Mississippi Child Welfare Training Conference* in February 2011 in Jackson, MS and the *One Child, Many Hands Conference* in Philadelphia, PA in June 2011. I am slated to present at the annual conference of the *Society for Social Work Research* in January 2012 in Washington, DC; and, I also submitted abstracts for additional presentations to *Chadwick Center's San Diego Conference on Child and Family Maltreatment* and the *18th National Conference on Child Abuse and Neglect*. Finally, my work from this project is in various stages of review with four journals so far: *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, *Journal of Social Work Administration*, *Child Abuse Review*, and *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*.

I am working in conjunction with a colleague, Toni Chance, at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas to develop a training curriculum concerning CMFs that we will offer as a face-to-face training or a webinar to child welfare professionals throughout the nation. We hope to have a training curriculum ready to be offered in early 2012.

Child Welfare Practice in Massachusetts

I also used my fellowship as an opportunity to learn more about child welfare practices in Massachusetts by becoming a Volunteer Foster Care Case Reviewer for the Department of Children and Families (DCF). Once being accepted and trained as a volunteer reviewer, I attended a two-day training in Worcester, MA that is required by the Commonwealth. Once trained, I volunteered twice a month to provide input and guidance concerning task completion and progress toward goals on cases where children were in foster care in Massachusetts.

Contribution to the BSU Community

Finally, I also taught my elective course on CMFs in Summer 2011 to BSU MSW students. This year I updated the course from a 1.5 to a 3.0 credit course, revised the syllabus, and utilized many of the contacts that I developed over the past year. For example, I invited a Massachusetts DCF supervisor speak to my class about assessing for risk among vulnerable families. Through my study of child welfare workers, I came to know a child welfare administrator in New York State who lost a child client almost 20 years ago; she spoke to my class through the use of Skype. I also arranged for students to hear from the director of policy and research for *Every Child Matters*, a Washington-based children's advocacy center that has identified CMFs as one of their central concerns. My year-long immersion in the literature about CMFs and the child welfare profession also allowed me to provide my students with the most up-to-date literature on this topic. In another effort to share this knowledge with the BSU community, I have submitted a request to the BSU Honors Program to teach an Honors Colloquium on CMFs in Spring 2012 and I will provide a CART Colloquium in November 2011 about the research that I have conducted on CMFs.

Gratitude

I thank the President's Office for establishing the Presidential Fellows Program to provide faculty the opportunity to grow and develop further expertise in their areas of specialization. I am also grateful to my colleagues in the School of Social Work who took on projects in my absence that I would have otherwise normally performed.