

Arsht Research on Ethics and Community Grant

Recommendations for Removal: Does Bias Exist Amongst Child Protection Professionals?

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Abstract

Child protection professionals' decisions to recommend that a family member be removed from a home are likely affected by multiple constructs. These constructs can include legal guidelines, evidence of abuse or neglect, severity of maltreatment, chronicity of maltreatment and risk factors, which must be considered simultaneously in determining when removal is perceived to be the least harmful alternative (Arad-Davidzon & Benbenishty, 2008; Atkinson & Butler, 1996; Britner & Mossler, 2002; Tjaden & Thoennes, 1992). Despite considering such valid constructs in decision making, child protection professionals have still shown low reliability in decision making about removal (Gambrill, 2005). Personal difference in interpretations of child abuse statutes, the weighted importance of risk and evidence factors, and biases that child protection professionals inherently bring to the decision making process about removal may compromise their ability to make fair, objective decisions about removal (Daniel, 2000; Gold, Benbenishty, & Osmo, 2001; Rossi, Schuermam & Budde, 1999). In particular, the presence of systematic bias in decision making about removal may result in significant adverse outcomes to families (e.g. unnecessary removal of a family member, future harm to a child). However, the extent that biases in removal decisions actually result in adverse outcomes to families has yet to be examined. Therefore, the goals of the proposed study are to examine the extent to which child protection professionals' recommendations for removal of a family member versus services for a family are biased and whether there are any long term adverse outcomes of those biases. That is, it is expected that groups of families who are the products of biased assessments are more likely to be reported for future child maltreatment, due in large part to the fact that they did not receive appropriate recommendations for services or removal during the initial evaluation. Because maltreated children are the most vulnerable members of our society, it is imperative to understand whether decisions affecting their lives are made in an ethical and appropriate manner.