



DECISION-MAKING IN CHILD PROTECTION

Font, S.A., & K. Maguire-Jack, K. (2015). "Decision-making in child protective services: Influences at multiple levels of the social ecology. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 47, 70–82.

WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

This study focused on the second cohort of the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being to explore how certain factors (agency and geographic context, caseworker attributes, and families' unique circumstances) might be associated with two key case decisions — substantiation of maltreatment, and removal and placement in out-of-home care.

WHAT ARE THE CRITICAL FINDINGS?

- ✦ Rates of confirmed child maltreatment and placement in out-of-home care vary across the country. Though substantiation is intended to reflect a confirmation of maltreatment, as demonstrated by a preponderance of the evidence, substantiation rates differ significantly across and within states. Rates can be impacted by geographical variations, such as differences in poverty levels, racial background, and population size. Rates can also be influenced by policy and practice differences, and constraints in relation to time, resources and decision-making authority within an agency.
- ✦ A growing body of research has sought to better understand how child protective service caseworkers make decisions. The results of this study reflect the following variations:

FINDINGS	
Rate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 25% were substantiated ✓ 24% of those substantiated resulted in removal to out-of-home placement
Substantiation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ More likely from agencies with longer timelines for completing investigations ✓ More likely from agencies without a system of care, operating under a consent decree and used to more standardized assessment tools ✓ More likely in counties with more black residents ✓ More likely to have been investigated by caseworkers with advanced degree and more years of experience
Substantiation Resulting in Removal & Out-of-Home Placement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ More likely from agencies allowing 30 or fewer days to complete investigations and 3 or more days between removal and initial hearing ✓ More likely from agencies that had lost funding and used structured decision-making model ✓ More likely in families with caregiver mental health and substance abuse risk factors ✓ More likely in families with black children or younger children

- ✦ Substantiation is strongly influenced by agency factors, in particular constraints on service accessibility: **substantiation is less likely when agencies can provide services to families in need (unsubstantiated cases) and when collaboration with other social institutions or systems is high.**

WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR WORK?

When agencies provide services to all families and effectively collaborate with other systems, substantiation rates decrease. States and local agencies should take steps to separate service availability and delivery from the substantiation decision, so that families do not need to have their cases substantiated in order to access the most needed or useful services.