

The Elephant in the Room: Poverty's Role in Child Maltreatment Risk

California Linkages Conference
Sacramento, CA
September 8, 2008

Kristen Shook Slack, Ph.D., M.S.W.
Associate Professor
U-W Madison, School of Social Work

E-mail: ksslack@wisc.edu

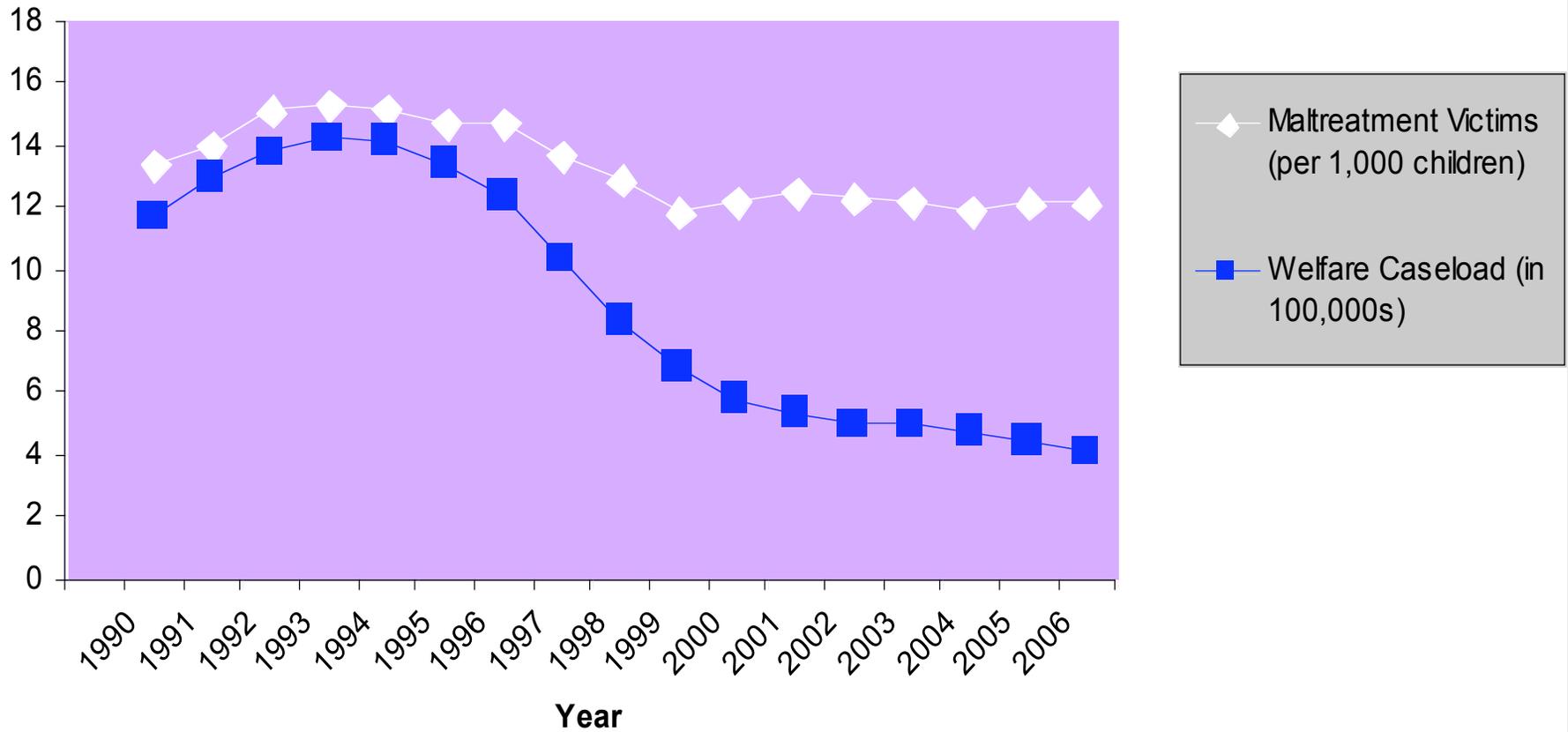
Presentation Overview

- Relationship between poverty and child maltreatment
 - What do we know?
 - What don't we know?
- How is poverty dealt with in child protection systems (CPS)?
 - Historical overview
 - Current innovations
 - Needed directions
- How is parenting support dealt with in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs?
 - Historical overview
 - Current innovations
 - Needed directions
- Questions for Linkages participants
- Closing comments

Relationship between poverty and child maltreatment: WHAT WE KNOW

- Low-income families are over-represented in CPS and out-of-home care populations;
- In National Incidence Studies (NIS-1-2-3), strong inverse correlation with income;
- Child maltreatment report rates are greatest in communities with high poverty rates and high unemployment rates;
- Strong correlation between welfare assistance and child protection caseloads

U.S. Trends in Welfare Caseload Size and Child Maltreatment Victimization: 1990-2006



Sources: Annual "Child Maltreatment" reports by the Children's Bureau (victimization statistics); Administration on Children and Families website (AFDC/TANF statistics)

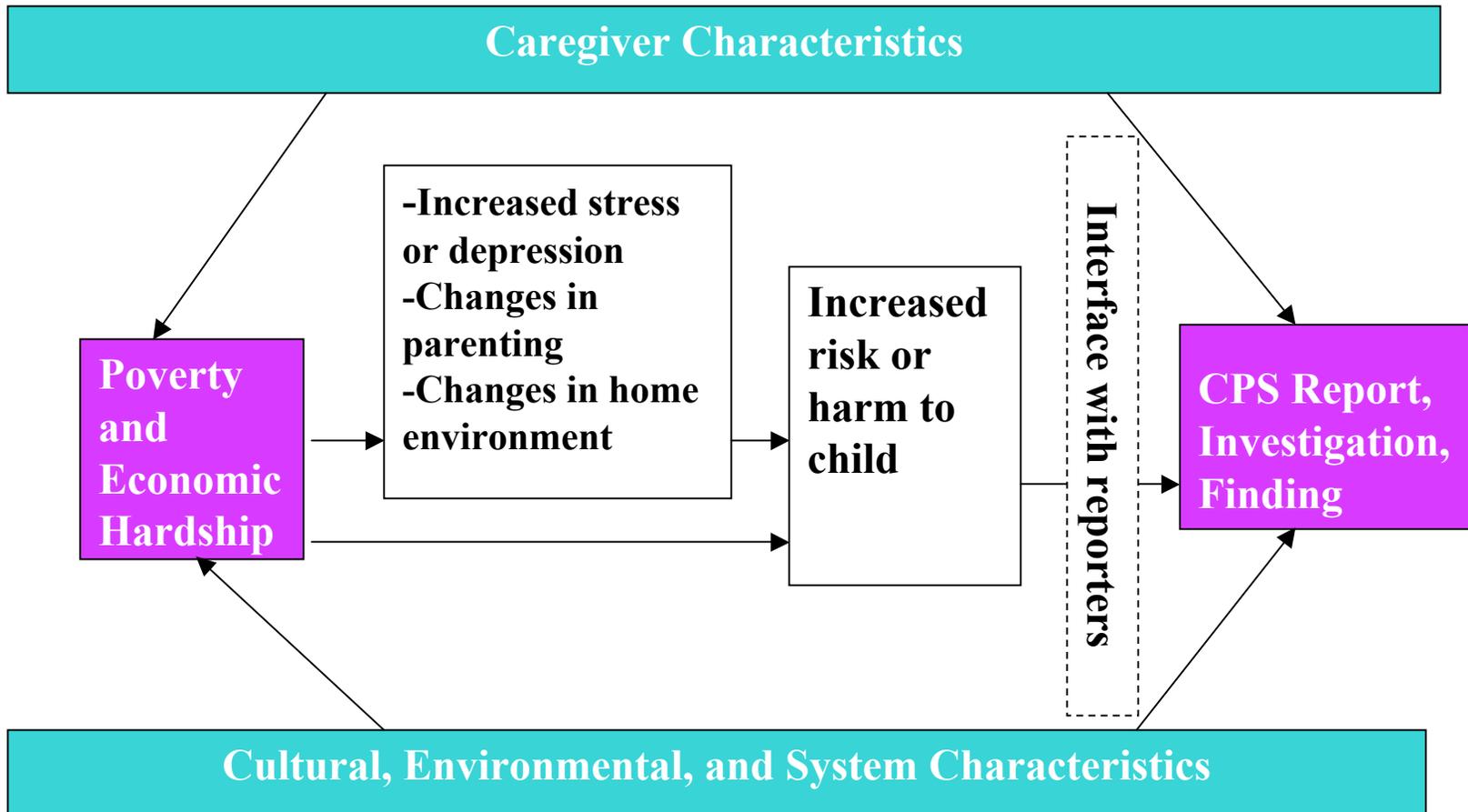
Select findings from studies of TANF populations

- Loss of welfare income while unemployed increases odds of CPS reports;
- Employment reduces odds of CPS reports
- Welfare sanctions increase odds of CPS reports, but not substantiations
- States with “welfare-reform-like” policies have higher rates of substantiated CPS reports
- Child recipients of TANF are more likely to have substantiated CPS reports while receiving welfare than after leaving welfare
- In an experimental evaluation, welfare reform policies are associated with an increase in substantiated neglect reports

Poverty and Maltreatment: WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

- No experimental evaluations linking economic assistance, specifically, to child maltreatment outcomes
 - Delaware's welfare reform experimental evaluation (Fein & Lee, 2000).
 - "Norman Fund" in Illinois (Testa & Shook, 1997)
 - Statewide emergency assistance fund in New Jersey (Pelton, 2008)
- Little understanding of the mechanisms linking poverty and child maltreatment
 - Resources
 - Stress/coping
 - Surveillance bias
 - "Selection"

How Might Poverty Matter?



Dimensions of Poverty

“First Order” or “Downstream”:

- Depth of poverty (e.g., point-in-time income/needs ratio)
- Duration of poverty/low-income
- **Income instability**
- **Life events that produce income strain**
- Source(s) of income
- Timing of poverty
- Assets (lack of)

“Second Order” or “Upstream”:

- Insufficient basic needs (e.g., food, clothing, shelter, utilities, hygiene, health care, transportation)
- Inability to afford any “luxuries”
- Subjective experience of poverty
 - Depression
 - Stress
 - Poor health

*Highlighted items could also be considered second order

What NOT to “know”

- Low-income parents are worse parents than families with higher incomes—NOT KNOWN
- Need to keep in mind that:
 - Most low-income parents do not maltreat their children
 - Research suggests class and race bias in CPS reporting
 - Studies of higher-income families who become poor have shown that parenting/caretaking abilities decline under economic pressure

Poverty and Child Protection Systems

The Historical Role of Poverty in Child Protection Systems

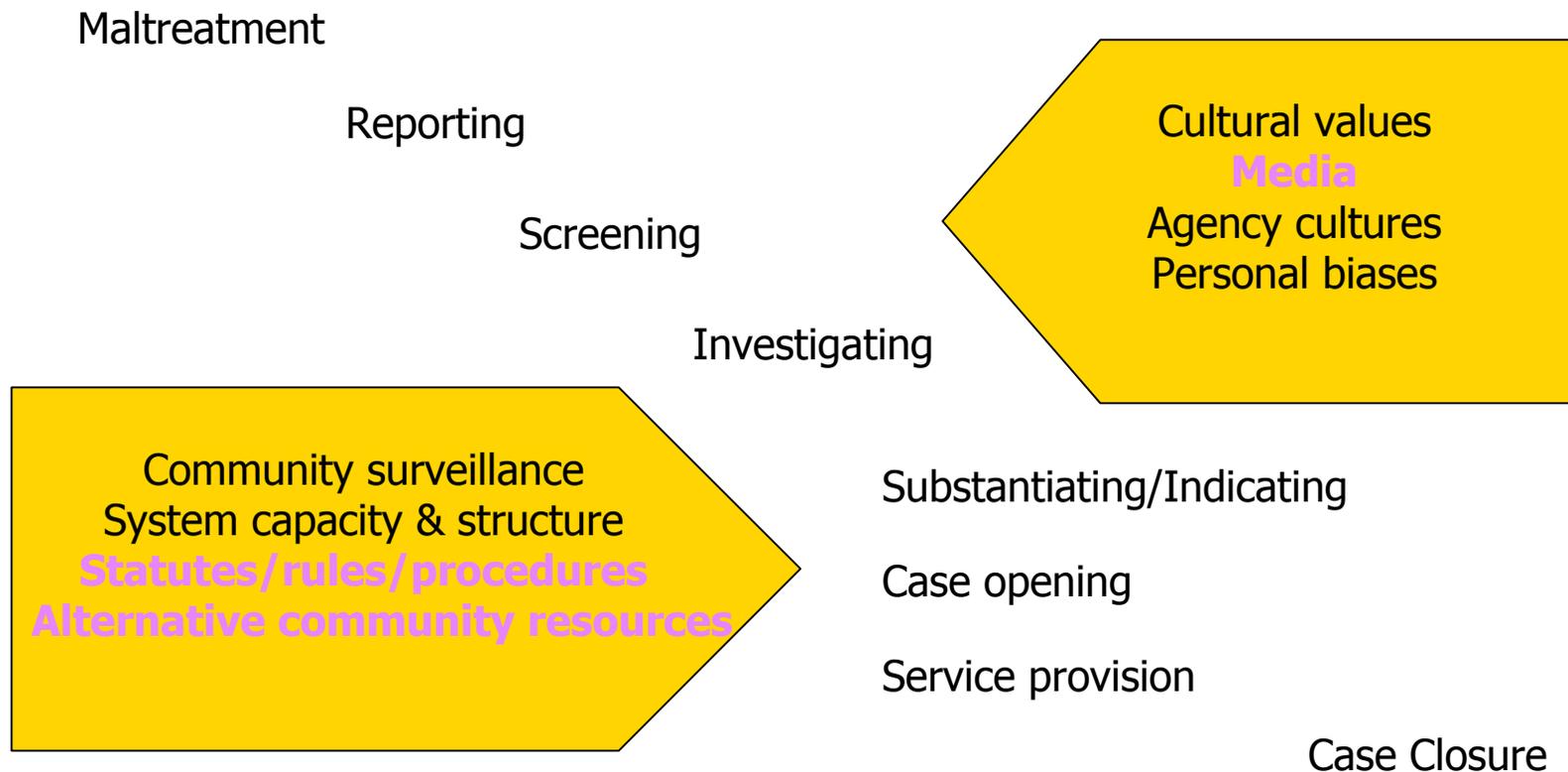
- **Anti-poverty policy strongly tied to child protection policy**
 - Creation of Mothers' Pension Programs and Aid to Dependent Children
 - "Unsuitable homes" provisions and Title IV-E of Social Security Act
 - Historical association between public assistance and child welfare caseloads
- **Child protection practice philosophy**
 - "For reasons of poverty alone" philosophy

Current Policy and Economic Contexts

- No clear economic safety net
- No institutionalized “emergency assistance” options
- Limited access to affordable, reasonable-quality housing
- Very few family-friendly, low-wage jobs; few with adequate benefits; few provide living wage
- No clear practice links between public assistance and child welfare systems*

*Although you are working on that here in CA

Child Protection System



Public Assistance System

Economic
Need

Application for
Assistance

Eligibility
Determination

Receipt of benefits

Maintenance/Review of
benefits

Case Closure

System knowledge
System capacity & structure
Statutes/rules/procedures
Alternative community resources

Cultural values
Media
Agency cultures
Personal biases

Current Innovations: “Cross-Systems” Models

■ Coordination

- MOU's
- Point people
- Data-sharing
- Teaming
- Possibly co-location

■ Integration

- Co-location
- Shared workers
- Simultaneous assessment of parenting and economic needs

Critical Components of Cross-Systems Success

- Be mindful of the “surveillance” hypothesis;
- Consider relaxing TANF requirements for families where child safety and family integrity are at stake;
- Identify points of assessment and referral within each system, and establish formal tools and mechanisms for doing so;
- Formalize emergency assistance programs and procedures
 -and if you can, test this experimentally

Current Innovations: CPS “Alternative Response” Models

Maltreatment or
Maltreatment Risk

Reported to CPS

Screened In for Further Investigation?

Yes

No

Alleged
Maltreatment
Substantiated?

Referred for Voluntary
Services to Reduce Risk

Yes

No

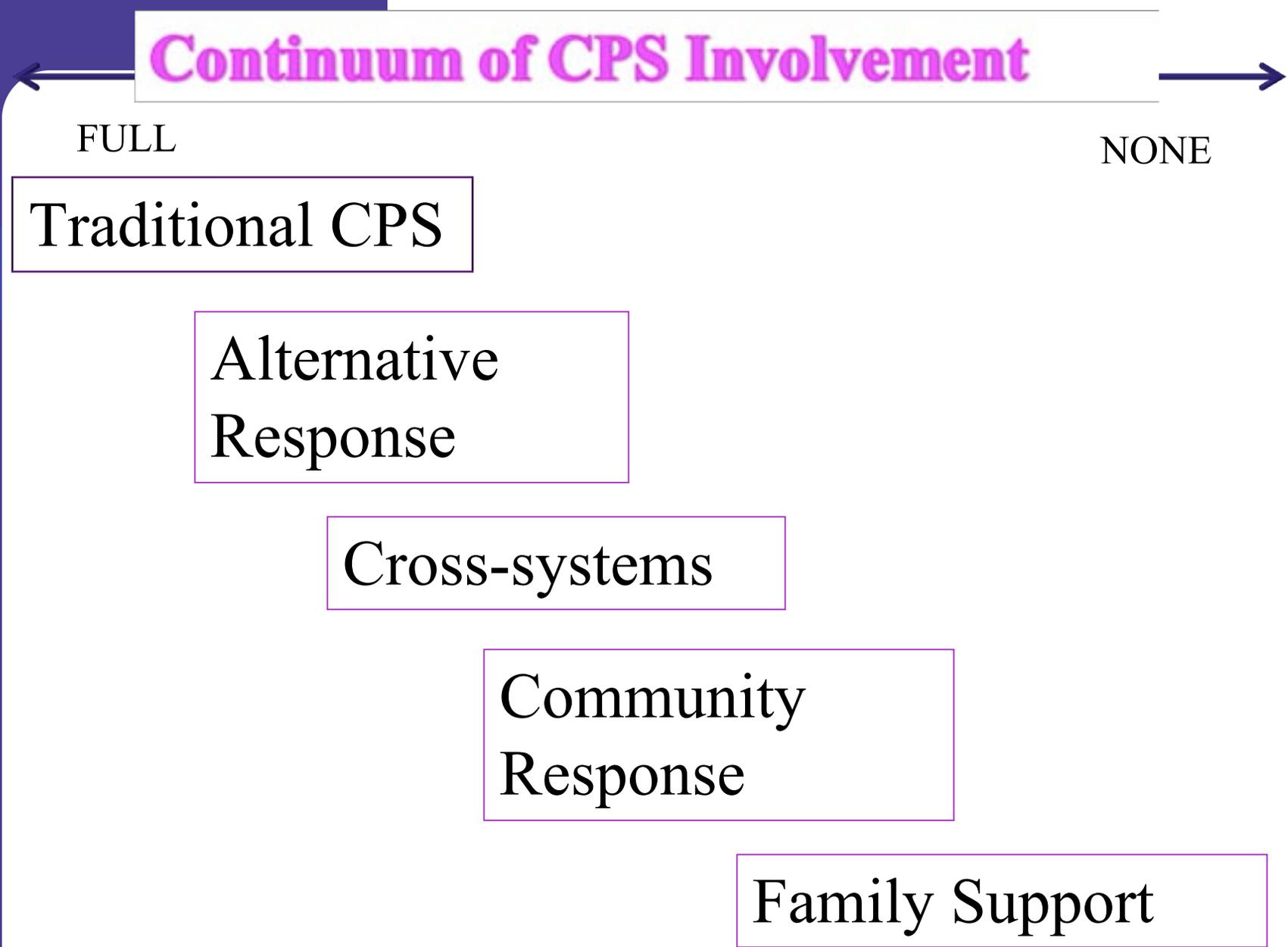
Child protective
services provided

Referred for Voluntary
Services to Reduce Risk

Current Innovations: “Community Response” Models

- Non-CPS agencies receive referrals for low-risk families
 - Serve more low-risk families previously excluded from the child welfare system to prevent escalation of risks associated with abuse/neglect (and re-reports to CPS)
 - Reduce demands on CPS systems that have relied on limited resources to serve lower-risk families
 - Build a more comprehensive, community-based service continuum for serving families at risk for maltreatment
 - Provision of services in a less “threatening”, less intrusive context; may encourage self-referrals

Continuum of CPS Involvement



FULL

NONE

Traditional CPS

Alternative
Response

Cross-systems

Community
Response

Family Support

CPS: What could we change in practice?

- Parenting interventions may not work if economic context is in chaos
- Inventory economic hardships during service assessment phase (in CPS as well as prevention programs)
 - Acknowledge that economic hardships affect parenting
 - Listen for sources of economic stress and probe to understand how such stress affects caregiving capacities
 - When identified, consider how they translate into risks for children in question
 - When identified, probe about the degree of control caregiver has over each hardship
 - Make poverty-informed decisions

TANF: What could we change in practice?

- Work is not the answer at all costs
 - Attend to the unique challenges of parenting within each family
 - Recognize and acknowledge the stresses of parenting in the context of economic hardship
- Building network of family friendly jobs
 - Leave and sick policies, schedules, flex-time
 - Education of employers
- Recognize the limitations of sanctions on human behavior
- Recognize the inevitability of unavoidable economic hardships
- Make parenting-informed decisions

Future Research

- ❖ “Reverse” welfare reform experiments
- ❖ Cost-benefit analyses of programs that involve economic support components; track child well-being and CPS events
- ❖ More attention to mechanisms linking poverty to child maltreatment
 - ❖ With careful attention to how poverty elevates risk of actual harm to child, versus risk of being noticed and reported to CPS



For reasons of poverty alone.....