

# A better way to reduce child maltreatment

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A first-of-its-kind national study has found that a special program adopted in many states to help some families at risk of child maltreatment has been surprisingly successful.

The study found that [states](#) with what is called "differential response"

(DR) programs had about 19% fewer substantiated reports of [child maltreatment](#), 25% fewer substantiated reports of neglect and a 17% reduction in using [foster care](#) services when compared to states without DR programs.

The success of DR in reducing the number of children sent to foster care is especially important, said Michelle Johnson-Motoyama, lead author of the study and associate professor of social work at The Ohio State University.

"In certain situations, foster care is necessary to protect children from harm. However, it is also costly from human and societal perspectives and some states have been creative in finding ways to keep families together," Johnson-Motoyama said.

"We found differential response programs may be getting families the resources they need to prevent foster care entry."

The study was published recently in the journal *Child Maltreatment*.

Normally, when a state's Child Protective Services (CPS) agency learns about children who may be in danger, it triggers investigations that can lead to court orders and a more legalistic path, Johnson-Motoyama said.

Differential response was developed as an alternative pathway for CPS workers to help families who came to their attention but were at lower risk of child maltreatment.

"These families have an opportunity to receive voluntary services and to receive referrals to community agencies that may be able to provide assistance," she said.

The assistance could be in the form of links to organizations that help

with housing, food, teaching parenting skills and other resources.

When the researchers started this work, they weren't planning to focus on differential response programs. They originally were analyzing the effect of social safety net policies in the United States and their impact on preventing child maltreatment.

But when they took differential response programs into account as they analyzed their data, the impact of the programs stood out, Johnson-Motoyama said.

"What was surprising to us was that these programs emerged as really important protective factors for children in all our analyses. We decided we had to take a closer look," she said.

The researchers analyzed data from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System from 2004 to 2017. They harnessed variations in when states implemented differential response programs to compare substantiated reports of maltreatment and neglect and foster care placements in states with and without DR programs.

Over the study period, 24 states and the District of Columbia used DR at some point in time.

The positive findings regarding the success of differential response programs stood out even after the researchers took into account a wide variety of other factors that could have been related, including whether states that had DR programs also had more generous social safety net programs.

Johnson-Motoyama said the data didn't allow the researchers to determine exactly why differential response programs were so successful. But they do have some ideas about what might be happening.

She noted that most of the families who encounter Child Protective Services are poor and may face problems with housing, food, child care and mental health, among other issues.

In the traditional pathway, families may face court orders to participate in various services if they want to keep their children out of foster care.

"Sometimes these court-ordered services can set families up to fail. They mean well, but they may not be feasible to complete on the timelines of the child welfare system given a [family](#)'s limited resources," she said.

"Some parents can end up losing their child, simply because they couldn't fulfill the court-ordered plan."

In contrast, under differential response programs, CPS employees work with families to develop voluntary plans that help them meet their needs and keep their children.

"Typically, these services are tailored to fit the family's needs. This contrasts with court-ordered services, which may be one size fits all depending on the jurisdiction," Johnson-Motoyama said.

The results show, she said, that differential response is worth investigating further as states consider ways of reducing foster care entry.

**More information:** Michelle Johnson-Motoyama et al, Differential Response and the Reduction of Child Maltreatment and Foster Care Services Utilization in the U.S. From 2004 to 2017, *Child Maltreatment* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/10775595211065761](https://doi.org/10.1177/10775595211065761)

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