

Workload Study

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The New York City Administration (ACS) has invested significant resources in reducing child protective services (CPS) caseloads. In November 2019, the average CPS caseload for investigative units is 7.3, with an average of 13.4 for court-ordered supervision units. For comparison, in November 2017, the average CPS caseload for investigative units was 13.2, with an average of 18.1 for court-ordered supervision units. ACS consistently maintains among the lowest child protective caseloads in New York State. While we know from our experience with caseloads over time that lower caseloads enable CPS to do higher quality and more thorough investigations, we have also acknowledged that not all cases require the same amount of time. ACS was also interested in having a better understanding of CPS workloads. Under Local Law 18 of 2018, the New York City Council authorized ACS to complete a CPS workload study. ACS selected the Chapin Hall Center for State Child Welfare Data (the Center) to conduct a research study of child protective caseloads and workloads. Chapin Hall is a nationally recognized independent policy research center dedicated to analysis of interventions that impact child and family well-being.

The study set out to answer a number of questions posed by ACS, including:

- How much time do child protection teams spend on key phases of their investigations of suspected abuse and/or neglect, and in monitoring children and families after investigations are complete?
- What factors should ACS consider in assessing the workload burden carried by Child Protective Specialists and their supervisors and managers?
- What strategies should ACS consider to assign workload in a manner that best supports positive outcomes for children?

As required by the legislation, the study includes:

- An examination of the tasks and key milestones required in a child protective investigation and time spent on each task or milestone;
- Analysis of how case factors impact case complexity, including but not limited to the type of allegation, the number of children, and prior ACS involvement;
- An examination of the relationship between the data described in the preceding bullets and child safety outcomes;
- An assessment of best practices in caseload and workload standards that improve child safety and well-being outcomes; and
- Recommendations for how ACS may structure business processes to assign and balance caseloads and workloads.

The resulting study is the first of its kind in the field of child protection, offering the first comprehensive quantitative and qualitative assessment of child protective investigators' time-use and the relation of time use to outcomes.

The Chapin Hall Center collaborated with ACS to implement a comprehensive research methodology that included interviews with leadership from each program area within the Division of Child Protection (DCP); focus groups with staff representing each borough, program area and staff role (CPS, supervisors and managers) in DCP; an in-depth time use survey of DCP staff, along with estimates of how time use varies based on specific case characteristics and complexities (such as the presence of an infant in the family or a family with extensive history of alleged neglect); and an analysis of 10 years of ACS's administrative data concerning investigations as well as families' history of involvement with ACS services over time.

The Chapin Hall Center defined distinct phases of casework activities, for which researchers gathered estimates of time use for key tasks throughout the investigation. These ranged from direct contact with families and other collateral contacts to all case-related documentation, administrative tasks, travel and non-casework required tasks, such as trainings and staff meetings. The Center differentiated its time use findings by program area, collecting time use estimates from CPS, supervisors and managers. Details of these phases are included in the report:

Key Findings

The study includes key findings related to child protective workload, including which types of case characteristics required the most time and which phases of the investigation required the most time. The study also looked to see whether time use patterns correlated with case outcomes:

- **Most time-intensive cases:** The study found that variations of time use based on case characteristics were most notable for cases involving allegations of severe abuse; cases that included placement into foster care; and cases that were complicated because there was a lack of clarity of case circumstances at the outset and thus significant work to assess child safety and risk. These three types of cases were consistently reported to require significant amounts of time.
- **Most time-intensive phases:** The study found that the most time-intensive phase of child protective casework is often the case closure/transfer phase, which requires a significant amount of both direct and indirect casework such as finalizing the Risk Assessment Profile, documenting and reviewing the case determination, composing summary notes and, when applicable, coordinating transition meetings with prevention or foster care provider agencies. This phase also includes a series of required administrative activities.
- **Supervisors and managers:** The study found that supervisors and managers spend a substantial amount of their time on administrative tasks that are not directly associated with case practice oversight. See section V of the study for more details.
- **Borough office variation:** The study found that time use estimations vary across boroughs and roles, with supervisors reporting the most consistent time use estimates across all borough office locations and program areas.

Time Use Patterns and Case Outcomes

The Chapin Hall Center analyzed whether time use patterns correlated with case outcomes, with a focus on rates of service referrals; repeated incidents of abuse or neglect; and placement into foster care. The analysis sought to identify whether any meaningful variations in case outcomes were associated with differences in time use during the key phases of casework. The Center concluded that, once case characteristics were factored into the time use and outcomes analysis, there was in fact no significant variation in outcomes attributable to time use. See Section VI of the study for more a more detailed discussion of this analysis.

Importantly, the Center's analysis found that differences in child characteristics and investigation details appear to be an important driver of differences in outcomes and time use. For example, younger children – particularly infants – are more likely to experience trajectories including placement, services referrals, and re-reports to the SCR than children who are older.

The researchers also found that for more than half of all children who come into contact with ACS, the first time is also the last time. As the authors write:

“This fact has significant implications for how one thinks about time use, standardization, and workload in child protection. A CPS investigation is a highly routinized process for obvious reasons. Given what is at stake, standardization reduces the likelihood that a case will fall through the cracks. However, standardization comes at a cost. Each case, regardless of what happens next, receives a full investigation, and all that implies. Fundamentally, a substantial amount of time is tied up in first-time investigations carried out on behalf of cases where there will be no further involvement by CPS.”

The Chapin Hall Center's study stated that the requirements of standard casework are complicated and time consuming; each phase of an investigation has numerous required component tasks, which vary depending on case complexities and case phase. Many of these tasks are mandated by state regulations or law, or ACS instituted them in response to external monitor recommendations. The study confirmed that “workload” – and the number of hours needed to meet the responsibilities for each phase of work – varies dramatically depending on the characteristics of the family at the center of the case and the allegations. Not all caseloads are alike, particularly given the possible complexities of a case. The volume of time each case commands means that caseworkers and their supervisors make decisions in the context of many constraints, including time and resource availability.

Best Practice Review

The Chapin Hall Center conducted a review of child protective best practice literature, specifically to identify any best practices that have shown evidence of improvement in outcomes, as supported by rigorous research. In short, their review concluded that there are no widely accepted, evidence-based best practices that have a demonstrable impact on child safety outcomes. This remains an area in which the evidence base is still developing, and this study will itself be an important contribution to the field.

Moreover, since there are significant differences in child protective requirements and practice from one jurisdiction to another – variation which extends to the definition of a child protective caseload itself – the Chapin Hall Center identified no practices that have enough research evidence to warrant scaling in New York City absent intentional and deliberate local analysis and pre-implementation planning. The review thus supports an approach to methodical quality improvement efforts that reflect local evidence and deliberate quantitative and qualitative analysis. See Section VIII for more on this.

Recommendations

The Chapin Hall Center suggests instituting case assignment practices that reflect the differential workload and time burden of cases with certain characteristics. This will inform the extent to which time expenditures can be normalized for similar cases across borough offices and better incorporate key study findings into approaches for case assignment and workload balancing:

- Time use and outcomes are a function of case characteristics;
- Ambiguity and case complexity contribute to workload burden;
- More than half of families in investigations do not have a repeat investigation; and
- Supervisors and managers have a tremendous administrative workload.

Incorporating measures of workload into caseload assignment: For example, the study confirmed that cases concerning families with an infant are more workload-intensive, as families with very young children are more likely to be referred to services, placed into foster care, and to be subsequently re-reported. The analysis supports evenly distributing such cases across teams to ease workload.

Accounting for ambiguity in workload calculations: Cases with more ambiguity surrounding the allegations and observations of the CPS team can create a significant workload burden. Affirmatively ruling out an allegation requires additional information gathering and assessment, both of which require additional time. Further analysis is needed to determine the identifiable characteristics of cases with greater ambiguity, to account for the higher workload burden as part of case assignment and/or allow for additional supervisory guidance and support.

Appropriately reducing or redistributing component tasks: To design the survey that could capture accurate time use estimates about casework tasks for each phase, the Chapin Hall Center ultimately had to design a survey with nearly 2,000 questions. Not all staff were expected to answer all questions – each title and type of unit had a specific subset of questions – but in sum, the sheer volume of questions necessary for this survey confirmed that child protective work involves thousands of specific tasks. Most remarkable is the fact that caseworkers and their supervisors understand the work at this level of detail.

Notably, the Chapin Hall Center recommended redistributing responsibility for certain tasks away from Child Protective Supervisors and Managers. For supervisors and especially managers, additional analysis can inform how administrative tasks can be redistributed or eliminated to ease the substantial current workload devoted to administration. Lastly, the Center

recommends determining whether and how the extent of the investigative response can be adjusted for lower risk, less complex and less ambiguous cases.

The authors conclude:

“ACS is in a strong position to determine the degree to which this can be achieved, in order to focus attention where it is most needed, improve child safety outcomes and reduce the likelihood that children will experience abuse or neglect.”