From Evidence-Based Policies to Positive Outcomes: How to Fund What Really Works in Child Welfare

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How to Fund What Really Works in Child Welfare

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Matthew was 11, John was two, and Lisa was a newborn when they were removed from their mother’s care because of her drug addiction and placed in the foster care system. Instead of helping, the foster care system further traumatized the children. The children’s first foster home was de-licensed after another child was severely physically abused in the home. The siblings were then separated, and John was beaten with a belt in his next foster placement. The newborn was placed in a home with a convicted rapist. Matthew began having behavior problems and engaging in gang activity. Although their mother loved her children, she needed help herself, and the addiction and parenting support programs available to her were ineffective.

Perhaps the most distressing part of this story is how common these circumstances are for child-welfare-involved children. As many as 80 percent of parents whose children are in foster care suffer from a substance abuse disorder. And while removing children from their original homes can be essential in many circumstances, it also increases their risk of engaging in delinquent behaviors, substance use, and ultimately ending up in prison. The long-term societal costs of removing children from their original homes, rather than seeking to treat parental addiction issues and preserve families where possible, are enormous—and sometimes continue for generations.

Regardless of whether children are removed from their homes, child maltreatment is a public health problem with substantial costs to society. A study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that the total cost of child maltreatment is $124 billion each year. Despite these enormous costs, few evidence-based interventions address the needs of either maltreated children or their parents. The situation may be exacerbated because federal child welfare expenditures have decreased, even though the number of child maltreatment reports has increased across the country. As a result, child welfare services are increasingly reliant on

1 Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of Lisa, John, and Matthew.


Social impact bonds, part of a broader suite of outcomes-based contracting approaches, constitute a relatively new variation of performance-based contracts that focus on funding effective programs in child welfare. Social impact bonds are public-private partnerships that shift risk from the government to investors: An intermediary raises private capital, chooses service providers to provide an evidence-based intervention, and selects an independent assessor to determine performance outcomes and the evaluation approach. Government is required to pay only if the intervention works as intended.

Because of the size and complexity of the child welfare system, ensuring that social impact bonds can be effective in that context requires starting with a well-designed study, with the following components: a clearly defined population and problem, an intervention, a comparison, and the desired outcome.

It is best practice for evaluations of social impact bonds to include a comparison or counterfactual, which is a way to see what would happen if the intervention were not given. One way to provide counterfactuals is to use randomized controlled trials. In randomized controlled trials, participants are randomly assigned by an impartial method, such as a flip of a coin, to determine whether they receive the intervention the social impact bond provides. Although randomized controlled trials are considered the gold standard for scientific research, they are sometimes not used because some argue that it is unethical to withhold a treatment that could work. The irony is that failing to use randomized controlled trials may do more to withhold effective interventions, because that can allow treatments that may not work to be scaled up, wasting limited resources.


Although the literature regarding the strengths of child welfare social impact bonds is sparse, there are indications that social impact bonds may have the potential to strengthen the child welfare system. Axford and Morpeth suggest that the outcomes-based focus of social impact bonds may be a better fit for employing programs with a proven track record (i.e., evidence-based practice) than providing traditional public child welfare services without such contracts.22 Liebman asserts that social impact bonds could provide a means of helping foster youth and youth involved in juvenile justice to successfully transition to adulthood.23 Hawkins et al. contend that social impact bonds could effectively support the widespread use of preventive interventions.24 With this in mind, evidence-based prevention and intervention programs could be initiated to address a wide range of issues pertaining to child welfare over the course of development. One example of a prevention program is SafeCare,25 which is an in-home program for at-risk or maltreating parents that could be implemented in more communities throughout the world.26 Examples of programs that address trauma include the Attachment and Behavioral Catch-Up for children from birth to 24 months, Parent-Child Interaction Therapy for youth from two to 12 years old, and the Safe Harbor program for youth six to 21 years old.27 Despite their potential, social impact bonds also have some weaknesses. Service providers may be deterred by the risk that the intervention could fail, or they (or their investors) may require large fees to assume the risk. Scaling up social impact bonds can be difficult because what works for one population may not work for another.28 Social impact bonds may also cost more than programs that government delivers directly.29 Another

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26 See additional examples for a range of preventative programs at https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/preventing/programs.

27 See additional examples at http://bmo.sagepub.com/content/32/5/736.short.


may be outraged if children are harmed by a program that was perceived as having a profit motive.

**CONCLUSION**

Although there are challenges, social impact bonds can play an important role in advancing child welfare. Science and ethics must play a central role in any such venture, and political will must be built among participating stakeholders to ensure optimal designs at every phase. Because the stakes are so high, social impact bonds should be considered as an option for child welfare only when the most rigorous evaluation approaches are used. In addition, child welfare social impact bonds require robust data systems to capture integrated data from each service provider children encounter, so that we can investigate fully what factors influence desired outcomes, both positively and negatively. Finally, it is imperative that all parties involved in social impact bonds are honest when interventions fail, because children like Lisa, John, and Matthew deserve interventions that work.

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31 Lawrence L. Martin, “Performance-Based Contracting for Services: A Survey of NIGP Members,” (Orlando, FL: GSA Training Conference and Expo 2010), available at [http://208.112.78.139/gsaSchedule2010/training/ppt/PerformanceBasedContractingForNIGP.ppt](http://208.112.78.139/gsaSSchedule2010/training/ppt/PerformanceBasedContractingForNIGP.ppt).