

**A RAND NOTE**

**Reducing Underresponding: Improving System  
Response to Mandated Reporters**

**Gail L. Zellman**

**RAND**

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## *Reducing Underresponding*

### Improving System Response to Mandated Reporters

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*The fact that the child protective services (CPS) system* in this country is severely overburdened is hardly news. Nor is it news that as a direct consequence of this situation, CPS agencies cannot respond as they might like to many reports. More debatable is the legitimacy of specific criticisms of the system, and the implications of these criticisms, if valid, for the mission and scope of the CPS system.

Critics of the reporting system argue that steady declines in substantiation rates are signposts that the system is overextended. Low substantiation rates mean that many families endure intrusive and traumatic investigations that lead nowhere, and that increasing numbers of reports describe situations that do not constitute maltreatment. These problems, critics claim, are evidence of the need to narrow the reporting mandate and decrease the number of reports (e.g., Besharov, 1985, 1986).

Using available empirical data, Finkelhor (1990) effectively refutes each of these points. He finds that substantiation rates have not declined nationally, and indeed, may be increasing. The emotional consequences of unsubstantiated investigations are unclear. In as many as a quarter of unsubstantiated reports, contact with the family probably does not occur. Further, exploratory data suggest that when such contact occurs, parents are not traumatized; indeed, they generally have positive reactions. Data from the National Incidence Study (Westat, 1988) indicate that reports of the least serious abuse are not increasing, and that most of the serious abuse known to professionals had not been reported to CPS. Finkelhor argues that as with other social control systems (e.g., criminal justice), inefficiencies and intrusions must be viewed as costs associated with advancing the CPS system's major purposes: to underline consensual abhorrence of child abuse, to send a message that potential abuse is under

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scrutiny, and to bring to bear societal resources to prevent and treat it. Based on the evidence, he concludes that we do not have an overreporting problem; there is no need to narrow our definitions of child maltreatment or decrease the number of reports.

However, we do have an underresponding problem. A recent national study of mandated reporters (Zellman, 1990a) suggests that the CPS system lacks the resources, the ideas, and in some cases the will to respond sensitively and effectively to mandated reporters, on whom the system depends to identify and report suspected abuse.

CPS systems contend with chronic overload by establishing formal triage systems or, where acknowledgment of limited capacity is not permitted, *de facto* triage. Mandated reporters may be told at the time of their call that a report will not be accepted; more often, they learn later and incidentally that no response was made to their report. Despite policies in most agencies that feedback will be provided to mandated reporters, oftentimes it is not; Zellman's data indicate that only 25% of mandated reporters regularly receive feedback, and that 25% never get it (Zellman, 1990b).

Less experienced mandated reporters are often angered by perceived inadequacies in CPS response. Those who do not feel confident to treat abuse themselves may be particularly shaken; they perceive few if any options if CPS does not actively intervene to provide treatment or remove the child. More experienced reporters have learned that such nonresponse can be expected in specific instances; given a case likely to be ignored, these mandated reporters may not report it. Although consistent reporting of suspected maltreatment characterized the largest group of Zellman's respondents, "discretionary reporters" who reported some cases and chose not to report others characterized one-third of her sample and accounted for four-fifths of all those who admitted ever having failed to report. These discretionary reporters were as knowledgeable and well-trained in child abuse as the consistent reporters, and were more likely than even the consistent reporters to serve as their agency's child abuse resource person. What most distinguished discretionary reporters was their negative view of the professionalism and capabilities of CPS staff, and their belief that reports often had negative consequences for the children involved.

Three changes to the system could reduce mandated reporter frustration and improve system functioning. A first reform treats information and training. Although more training was associated in Zellman's study with more consistent reporting, discretionary reporters had had as much training as others, and still reported selectively. Useful training must teach what discretionary reporters learn the hard way: that the CPS system cannot do it all. Such training must marry this message to one equally as important: that there are important reasons for reporting nonetheless, among them the need to maintain scrutiny and to collect accurate data. Such training, combined with information about how to get emergent cases noticed, would increase mandated reporter efficacy and bring their expectations closer to reality. Explicit feedback about the cases they reported "unsuccessfully" would contribute important information to the development of realistic expectations about the system.

A second reform involves formalizing the informal. Zellman and Antler (1990)

found that in CPS systems where reports are made locally, reports of minor abuse made by frequent, expert mandated reporters known to CPS staff were often taken but not acted on, with the understanding that the mandated reporter would continue to monitor the case. Such informal reports satisfied the mandated reporter and CPS, and assured that child of continuing oversight. Although the advantages of such informal arrangements are apparent, the problems are clear as well. Informal arrangements do not meet the needs of the system to collect accurate data on abuse, and rely too heavily on personal judgments and relationships. But if this informal process could be formalized, the system might be spared from having to immediately investigate certain kinds of reports. Knowledgeable mandated reporters would not have to choose between complying with the reporting mandate and acting in what they perceive to be the child's best interests.

Reducing the growing difficulties of making reports is a third reform worth pursuing. Busy phone lines, requests to call back, and expectations that reporters will wait by the phone for hours to receive a return call impose onerous burdens on reporters—particularly those in private practice, for whom the costs of reporting are inherently higher, and those who must report frequently. Special treatment for mandated reporters would improve mandated reporters' cost-benefit ratio and thus make reporting more likely. Easier access through dedicated phone lines, FAX capability, or localized reporting, among other possibilities, would make the reporting process less difficult and time-consuming.

Mandated reporters are among a CPS agency's most valuable resources. But too often difficult access, unrealistic expectations, and lack of communication have transformed CPS staff and mandated reporters into adversaries. Reforms to the system could improve these relationships and do much to advance their common goals of safeguarding children and combating maltreatment.

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