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Final Grantee Report: Julie S. McCrae

Award Number 90CA1718/01: Fellowships for University-Based Doctoral Candidates and Faculty for Investigator-Initiated Research in Child Abuse and Neglect

I. Executive Summary

This research aimed to apply innovative methodology to address a range of questions concerning child welfare services and children's mental health. The research used data from a nationally-representative sample of children involved with child welfare services. Four individual studies addressed the following topics: (1) the link between maltreatment type and post-investigative child welfare services, (2) subclassification of sexually abused children and the relationship between children's latent family profile, psychopathology symptoms, and mental health services, (3) prevalence of child mental health problems at child welfare intake and over three years, and (4) changes in emotional-behavioral problems among 3 to 14-year-old children in association with mental health services. Analytic methods included multinomial logistic regression, factor mixture modeling, repeated measures regression using generalized estimating equations, and propensity score matching aimed to invoke quasi-experimental study design using survey data.

The research produced a number of substantial findings and highlights the benefits of using novel analytic approaches to work with survey data. The fourth paper in this series, for example, centered on the relationship between mental health services receipt and changes in children's emotional-behavioral symptoms over three years. Propensity score matching was used to create more equivalent "treatment" and "comparison" groups with the aim of examining service relationships under non-experimental conditions. Adjusting the analyses for selection

bias resulted in a change in the direction of study findings. With selection bias unaccounted for (no matching), children appeared to fare better having not received mental health services. With selection bias accounted for (post-matching), children who received mental health services improved significantly more in emotional-behavioral symptoms over 3 years than children who did not receive mental health services. The study supports the link between mental health services and progress toward alleviating children's emotional-behavioral symptoms, and demonstrates the importance of attending to differences in treatment and comparison groups when evaluating service-related outcomes.

A second paper in this research used factor mixture modeling to create latent subgroups of children and families investigated for sexual abuse. The goal was to approach the link between sexual abuse and psychopathology symptoms from a holistic perspective; that is, by considering sexual abuse to be one of a set of factors that contributes to the likelihood of poor psychological outcomes. The predominance of research on this topic has adhered to a "main effect" model between sexual abuse and psychopathology, wherein the goal is to identify the factor that contributes most to children's outcomes, an approach that is unlikely to reflect the complexity of children's lives. In this study, children were grouped into latent family profiles using details about the sexual abuse and the presence of other substantial family problems upon referral to child welfare services. Results showed that, most fundamentally, sexually abused children are not a homogenous group, but rather may present to child welfare services with experiences that are more similar than not to other maltreated children, including high rates of prior maltreatment, exposure to domestic violence, and having caregivers with mental illness or substance abuse problems. Multiple subgroups of children with similar experiences were revealed, and contrary to previous research, children with the most psychological symptoms were not always those with

the most severe experiences of sexual abuse. Among 3 to 7-year-old children, for example, the most behavioral symptoms were observed among a group of children exposed to domestic violence and caregiver mental illness. Results showed that many children may need mental health services to address a combination of family problems and rather low severity, low duration sexual abuse. Children's referral to mental health services in this study, however, tended to be guided more so by the substantiation status of the sexual abuse than by children's exhibited needs. This study provided new information about targeting mental health services among a group of children expected to be the most at risk for poor psychological outcomes.

In summary, the four studies that comprise this research were successful in applying innovative methodology to address a range of questions about the service needs of children involved with child welfare services. Publications that were produced with this research include four peer-review journal articles and one book chapter, two of which are in press, one of which is under review, and two that are in preparation and soon to be submitted. Results have also been presented at numerous national conferences, including the Society for Social Work and Research, and the International Research Conference on the Victimization of Children and Youth.