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Current Projects

The digital world now allows us to cost-effectively curate data and information on a scale that was once unimaginable. The private sector and many scientific disciplines have moved quickly to embrace technological innovations that allow the surfacing and mining of structured and unstructured data—both improving business performance and supporting more responsive and tailored experiences for clients. By contrast, social service and other public agencies are just beginning to realize the utility of the information they collect. I believe the potential application of these data to advancing the science behind the delivery of social services and the development of responsive social policies is tremendous – and that is the focus of my scholarship.

Los Angeles County Risk Stratification Project
Most child welfare reforms have focused on improving the conditions and outcomes of children who are removed and placed in foster care. This attention is understandable, but has come at the expense of other aspects of child protection, especially the front-end of the system. The tools agencies use to screen reports of abuse and neglect are rudimentary, unvalidated, and have left our system poorly equipped to effectively screen and triage millions of children reported for alleged maltreatment each year. The stakes cannot be overstated. Correctly assessing the immediate concerns of an allegation of abuse or neglect is critical. Yet, as important, and far more challenging, is the system's ability to assess a child's risk of future harm.

In partnership with the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, my longtime collaborator, Rhema Vaithianathan, and an interdisciplinary team of university-based researchers, I am leading a project to explore the use of a predictive risk model to support supervisors and other staff during investigations. Piloted in three offices as of August 2021, the goal is to use the model to: (1) better align and deploy supervision and management resources to ensure children are safe and families receive the services needed during a maltreatment investigation; (2) increase the use of information and data by supervisors to reduce practice errors during investigations, and (3) use of data to identify reporting patterns and screening practices that may result in unnecessary investigations disproportionately burdening Black families. Findings are forthcoming. The project was discussed in this LA Times opinion piece.