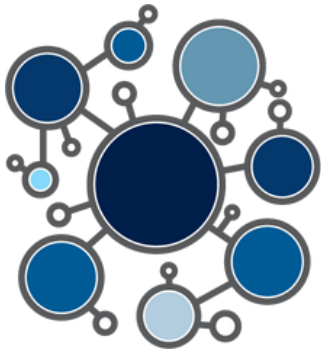


REPORTING ON CHILD WELFARE

A GUIDE FOR MAINE JOURNALISTS



Maine Child Welfare
Action Network

introduction

Reporting on child welfare is important and challenging work. Journalists generally encounter child protective issues when a child has been seriously injured or has died, when information is difficult to obtain, and emotions are running high.

Following these tragedies, there are understandable feelings of fear, disgust, and despair. This guide was developed to support journalists as they report child abuse and neglect and related challenges. It includes:



- Information on how child protective cases work through Maine systems.
- Maine-based statistics and context for those statistics.
- Research on the cyclical nature of child protective media reporting and how it informs public policy action (or inaction).
- Ways to contextualize reporting to better inform policymakers and the public.
- Questions to ask advocates and policymakers as they call for reform and accountability.

OUR INTENT

The intent of this guide is to help journalists and editors report on a difficult topic. It is *not* intended to advocate for a specific outcome in reporting or editing. The authors of this guide understand and respect the role that journalism plays in the public forum and believe that neutral and nuanced reporting helps to:

- Hold systems accountable to create better outcomes for Maine families.
- Encourage public dialogue related to child abuse prevention and systems change.
- Interrogate sensationalized narratives unsupported by evidence-based responses to child safety and system reform.

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How we change systems related to child abuse and neglect is critical to achieving the outcomes we all want: for youth to be safe, healthy, and living in nurturing homes with their families.

Melissa Hackett, Maine Child Welfare Action Network



the power of media

Media coverage of child welfare is the primary and most trusted source of information for Maine communities and many policymakers. This media coverage shapes our understanding of how the child protective system operates and the associated challenges. It is also the way most people learn about the potential solutions to address child abuse and neglect.

How journalists report on child abuse and deaths and the associated systemic issues impacting youth and families also shapes the public's perception of:

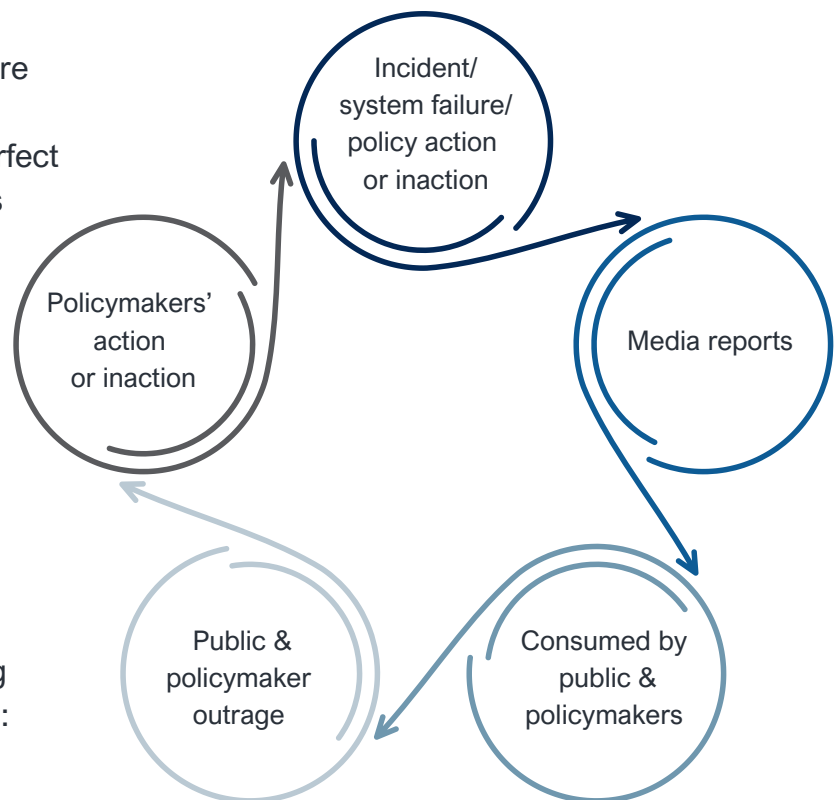
- Families involved with the child protective system.
- The viability of potential program and system reforms.
- Different factors when considering policy options, and what the evidence says about those options.

THE CHILD WELFARE OUTRAGE POLICY CYCLE & THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

The response to reports of child deaths or severe abuse often follows a predictable and well-documented cycle (1). This cycle creates a "perfect storm," where public and policymaker reactions focus on drastic changes as the only solution.

While such responses may align with the public's outrage, they are frequently disconnected from evidence-based or evidence-informed best practices. In an era where public trust in evidence-based solutions is waning, this pattern is especially dangerous and putting children's lives at greater risk.

There is significant potential for media reporting to create panics that harm children and families: both those already involved with the system, *and* those who may not seek help and support they need to prevent child safety issues.



Reporting must include context, critically evaluate policy proposals (especially those lacking evidence), and challenge assumptions about system failures. Without this depth, policymakers may gain public support for reforms without securing the backing of those responsible for implementing them—or ensuring the reforms are effective.

¹ Chenot, David. (April 2011.) The Vicious Cycle: Recurrent Interactions Among the Media, Politicians, the Public, and Child Welfare Services Organizations. *Journal of Public Child Welfare* 5(2):167-184. Accessed June 2024. Retrieved: www.researchgate.net/publication/232860643_The_Vicious_Cycle_Recurrent_Interactions_Among_the_Media_Politicians_the_Public_and_Child_Welfare_Services_Organizations



context is key

A key to preventing child abuse, neglect, and child deaths is understanding which approaches are effective - and which might cause harm. While journalists cannot be expected to be experts on every topic, a basic understanding of evidence-based practices and research (or where to go to find that information) can be valuable. Providing context in reporting on child abuse and neglect helps educate and inform readers. This context can include:

STATISTICS

Provide statistics with the necessary context to understand what the statistics mean. For example, news outlets frequently report the number of child deaths in a given time period without breaking down the type of cases: accidents, parental abuse/neglect, or instances where child protective services was involved.

SYSTEMS' & SERVICES ROLES

Provide information about how systems and services function when they are working as intended helps the public understand their ideal role and purpose. These systems and services include those in addition to the Department of Health & Human Services: law enforcement and the justice system, schools, behavioral health support, and others.

EVIDENCE-BASED REFORMS

Provide information on evidence-based reforms, especially when advocates or policymakers suggest that one or two unproven policy changes will solve most or all issues child abuse and neglect cases or issues. This is crucial when these so-called “solutions” involve removing more children from their families or narrowly focusing on the challenges of a single system (more information on that below).

CONTEXT: STATISTICS

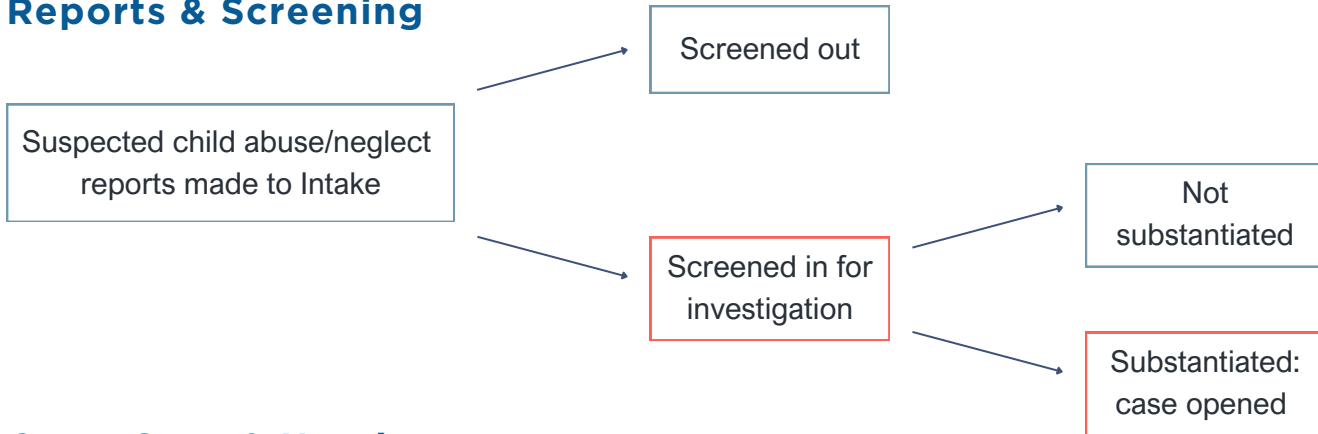
It's essential for reporters to be precise about the statistics they use, as this clarity is key to the public's understanding of child welfare issues. For example, the total number of child fatalities is often reported in coverage of specific child deaths related to parental abuse or neglect. A reporter might state that "31 Maine children died in 2022" without explaining that these deaths occurred for various reasons (such as unsafe sleep or accidents) and were not all cases involving abuse or neglect, nor were they necessarily children in state custody.

Without this context, readers may mistakenly assume that all 31 deaths were due to abuse or neglect by parents, which is misleading. You can find a breakdown of child fatalities in Maine [on the Maine Department of Health and Human Services website](#). Additionally, other child welfare data may be helpful indicators and help provide additional context for readers. This includes [child welfare reports from Maine DHHS](#) and the [KidsCount Data Center](#).

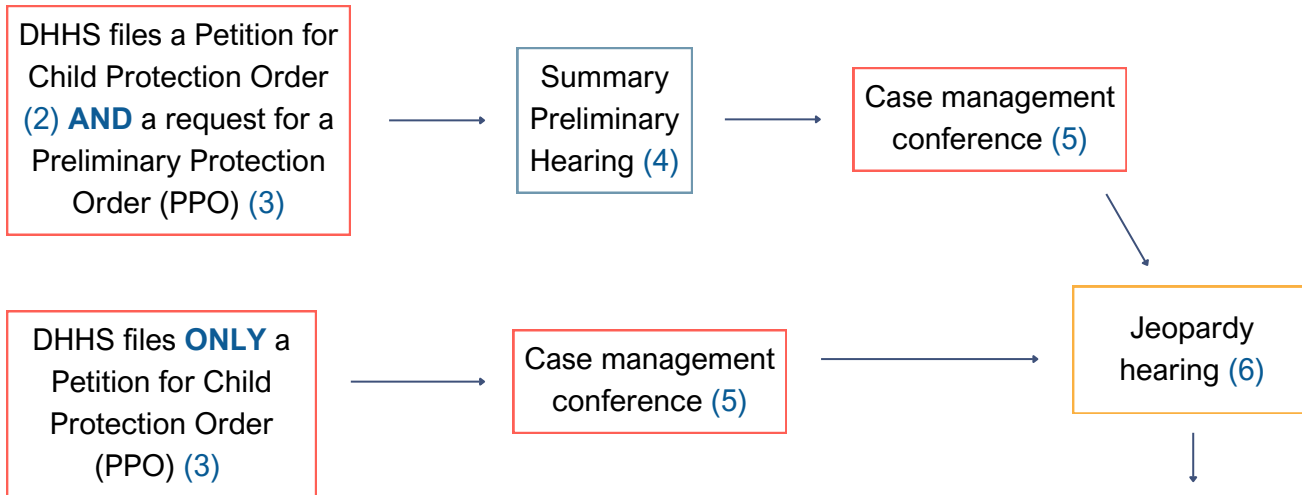
CONTEXT: CHILD PROTECTIVE SYSTEM WORKING AS INTENDED

The child protective system is complex. The public - and many policymakers - generally don't understand what it looks like when it is working the way it should. We've outlined how a case reported to child protective works through the process. Information and the flow charts below have been adapted from the Maine Judicial Branch's *A Guide for Families in Child Protection Cases*. The guide also includes additional details for each step outlined here.

Reports & Screening



Open Case & Hearings

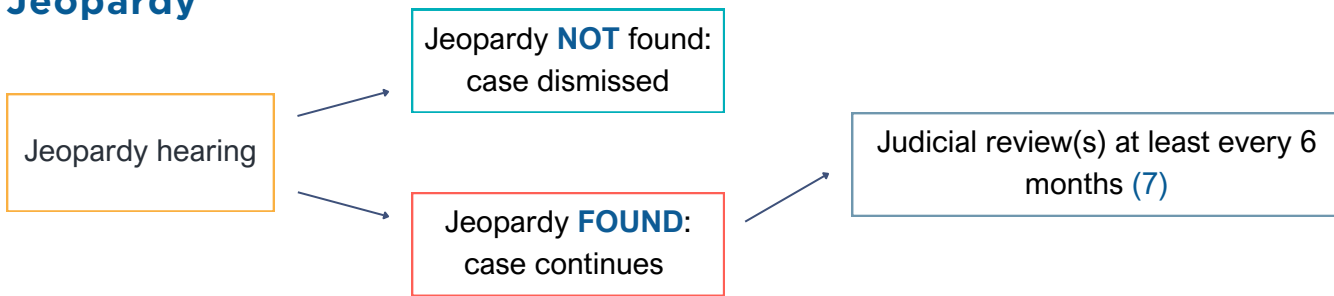


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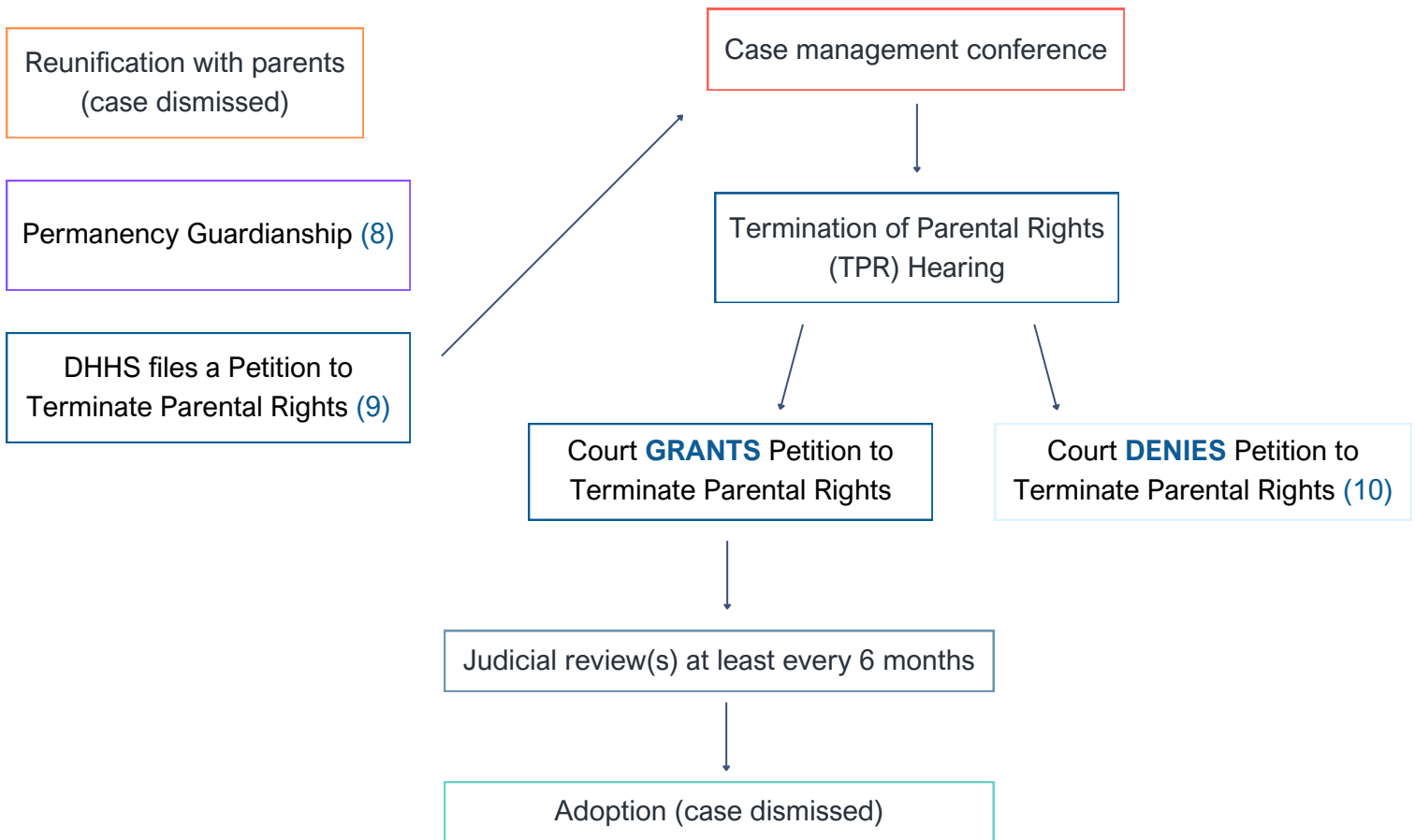
- 2 Petition for Child Protection Order: Document DHHS files outlining why it believes the child is at risk of serious abuse or neglect. A Guardian ad litem (GAL) is appointed when the Court receives DHHS's filing.
- 3 PPO: Document DHHS files when it believes a child is in *immediate risk* of serious harm and asks that the court consider a variety of interventions, including court-ordered services, removal of a perpetrator from the home, or removal of the child from the child's home.
- 4 7-14 days after the start of the case where the court decides whether the PPO stays in place or not.
- 5 Approximately 30 days after start of the case where the status of the case is discussed with a judge and the next steps of the process are outlined. This is the first court date when a PPO is not filed.
- 6 The jeopardy hearing is when the court reviews evidence to decide if a child is in "circumstances of jeopardy." Jeopardy includes, among other things, serious harm, or a threat of serious harm to a child. If jeopardy is found, the court issues an order (orders are issued within 120 days of the original Petition) and the case must be reviewed every six months. If jeopardy is not found, the case is dismissed.

CONTEXT: SYSTEMS WORKING AS INTENDED, CONTINUED

Jeopardy



Possible Case Outcomes of Judicial Review(s)



7 A judicial review is when the court reviews what has happened in the case since the last court date and decides what should happen next. The court may ask about the child's well-being, the GAL's contact with the child and other people involved in the case, what progress has been made toward reunification goals, DHHS's efforts toward providing necessary services for reunification, and other case updates.

8 A type of guardian appointed by the court. There are no mandated reviews following this judicial review outcome.

9 Must be filed if the child has been in care for 15 out of the last 22 months

10 Case may or may not be dismissed.

CONTEXT: CHILD ABUSE & THE SOCIAL SAFETY NET

Failures of one system can lead to failures in another. Child protective services can't work as intended when critical community-based services are not available or difficult to access. This includes when services have long wait lists or require families to travel long distances without reliable transportation. Mental health and substance use disorder services, domestic and sexual violence prevention and response resources, child care, housing and economic supports strengthen protective factors in families. Strong community supports reduce the risk of child abuse and neglect.

Without adequate community support systems, child protective services professionals are often forced to take on two conflicting roles: acting as both investigator and case manager. They must connect families to services and resources that should have been available before the family entered the system, while simultaneously investigating allegations of abuse or neglect. This dual responsibility creates an almost impossible challenge and strains the effectiveness of the system.

PROTECTIVE & RISK FACTORS: AN OVERVIEW

When reporting on child abuse and neglect, reporters may encounter professionals who talk about risk and protective factors. Here's a quick overview of what that means and a few examples.

Child abuse and neglect are not caused by a single issue. Research shows that a combination of factors at the **individual, relationship, community, and societal levels** can increase or decrease the risk of abuse or neglect.

- **Protective factors:** Characteristics that may decrease the likelihood of child abuse and neglect.
- **Risk factors:** Characteristics that may increase the likelihood of child abuse and neglect.

Here are some examples from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control & Prevention:

	Individual	Relationship/Family	Community
Risk Factor	Caregivers have high levels of parenting stress (ex: child with special needs) or economic stress.	Families that are isolated from/not connected to other people (extended family, friends, neighbors).	Communities with high rates of poverty and limited educational and economic opportunities.
Protective Factor	Caregivers who can meet basic needs of food, shelter, education, and health services.	Families with strong social support networks and stable, positive relationships with the people around them.	Communities where families have access to economic and financial help.

You can [find more related information from the CDC here.](#)

CONTEXT: PREVENTION THAT WORKS

As noted above, research demonstrates that supports for families and children are connected to decreases in child abuse, neglect, and serious injury or death. Ultimately, strengthening and stabilizing families includes preventing and mitigating certain stressors families experience, including:

- Ensuring a strong social safety net as noted above.
- Universal home visiting for all prospective parents and new parents. Families could have the option to opt out, but the goal would be that the support is normalized and proactive - and not meant to punish or shame families in poverty.
- Community-based parenting classes provided by child development specialists. Such classes have been shown to help increase parent skills and abilities *and* build social connections that result in parents finding support in each other.
- Normalization of parenting being hard and parents feeling it is okay to ask for help.

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A group of mothers I know met through local parenting classes. Now, years later, they still work together to watch each other's kids when needed. We can't keep pointing to the state and federal government to be the end all be all, but we can fund the initial support to level the playing field. That's how we create communities where parents are less stressed, and families and children are happy, healthy and thriving.

- Maine legislator

Journalists have a unique platform to showcase successful preventative measures that support families. By telling these stories, they can move public discourse on child abuse and neglect beyond the usual cycle of outrage following a tragedy, fostering a deeper understanding of effective, evidence-based policies and programs. These stories can also help shift the perception of child abuse and neglect from being solely the responsibility of the child protective system to a collective societal responsibility.

Journalists often struggle to find families willing to speak on the record. Professionals who work closely with families pay attention to which journalists demonstrate fairness and sensitivity in reporting on family challenges. **When news outlets and journalists consistently cover the full range of struggles families face - as well as the solutions to their challenges - it builds trust. This trust helps motivate those who work with families to connect journalists with families willing to share their stories.**





It is easy to talk about singular concern for children and to act as though the answers to preventing child abuse and neglect as simple as “reforming” one part of a complicated system. But if you really care about kids, you have to care about their families. You need to look at what works - and what works rarely fits into a soundbite.

- Maine legislator

CONTEXT: FOSTER CARE PANICS

A “foster care panic” occurs when high-profile child deaths lead to a sharp rise in the number of children removed from their homes by state child protective agencies. Policymakers often call for such measures following a child death, but there is little evidence to support their efficacy (11). While some removals are certainly necessary, the challenges are far more complex than they seem. These panics overload the child protective system, leading to less effective intervention and support for at-risk families (12). Child protective agencies are then forced to manage a larger caseload with no corresponding increase in resources to manage the response (13).

Calling for an increase in removing children from their homes ignores the physical and psychological trauma separations cause (14), with implications for their long-term health and well-being. It also denies us the opportunity to provide resources and services to families that could actually keep children safe. Evidence also suggests that removing a child and placing them in foster care could have worse short- and long-term outcomes for the child (15). Outcomes include substance use disorder, engagement with the criminal justice system, and mental and physical health challenges.

11 Center for Public Policy Priorities. (2009). *Child abuse and neglect deaths in Texas*. Retrieved from: http://library.cppp.org/files/4/427_Child_Deaths.pdf

12 Child Welfare Monitor. (2024). *Child Maltreatment 2022: Reports increase but response lags*. Retrieved from: <https://childwelfaremonitor.org/2024/02/06/child-maltreatment-2022-reports-increase-but-response-lags/>

13 ProPublica: Philip, A., Hager, E. and Khimm, S. (2022). *How we analyzed child welfare investigations*. Retrieved from: <https://www.propublica.org/article/how-we-analyzed-child-welfare-investigation-data>

14 American Bar Association (2019). *Trauma caused by separation of children from parents: A tool to help lawyers*. Retrieved from: https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publications/litigation_committees/childrights/child-separation-memo/parent-child-separation-trauma-memo.pdf

15 Sugrue, E. (2019). *Evidence base for avoiding family separation in child welfare practice*. Retrieved from: https://www.ncsc.org/__data/assets/pdf_file/0031/18985/alia-research-brief.pdf



common reporting challenges

There are several common challenges journalists face when reporting on anything related to the child protective system. Here are few examples of the challenges, the potential harms they could cause, and questions reporters and editors can ask in response.

Challenge	Potential harm caused	Questions to ask
<p>Calls for increasing the number of children removed from their families.</p>	<p>As noted above, there is no correlation between high rates of family separation and reduction in child deaths. The “foster care panics” that result following a high-profile child death result in more trauma to children and families. These panics also make the system less effective, and therefore children are less safe.</p>	<p>What kind of challenges do children and families face when they’re separated?</p> <p>How can we increase social support for parents before they become involved with child protective services?</p> <p>Research demonstrates more child removals in the wake of a child death results in a significant increase in children who shouldn’t be removed from their families being sent into the foster care system. These separations cause significant trauma. Where is the line?</p> <p>There is no correlation between high rates of family separation and reductions in child injuries or deaths. Why is calling for more children to be removed be a useful approach for Maine to take?</p>

Common Reporting Challenges, cont.

Challenge	Potential harm caused	Questions to ask
<p>References to the child protective system as “broken.”</p>	<p>This language discourages families from reaching out for help for fear of getting stuck in a “broken” system. It tells families who are involved in the system that their children are not safe and the people in the system cannot be trusted to do the right thing.</p> <p>This overly broad language also doesn’t provide context: What does “broken” mean? What part of the system isn’t working? If the public feels as though the system is beyond repair, many mandated reports that could protect a child may go unreported.</p> <p>This type of fatalism also continues the cycle of child protective staffing shortages. Studies show that media coverage plays a role in how child protective staff feel about their work, and can contribute to “stress, burnout, fatigue and fear.”¹⁶ In a challenging hiring environment, these issues are only exacerbated. If we want to ensure a well-functioning system, we need experienced caseworkers who can do the complex work necessary to identify supports or interventions to ensure children are safe.</p>	<p>What parts of the system are working?</p> <p>What specifically needs to change to create a better system? How can we measure those changes?</p> <p>What kind of social supports would be helpful to address some challenges families are facing before child protective involvement?</p> <p>What other systems are involved in these kinds of cases? To what extent are they operating as they should?</p>

16 Chenot, D. (2011). The vicious cycle: Recurrent interactions among the media, politicians, the public, and child welfare services organizations. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*. Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232860643_The_Vicious_Cycle_Recurrent_Interactions_Among_the_Media_Politicians_the_Public_and_Child_Welfare_Services_Organizations

Common Reporting Challenges, cont.

Challenge	Potential harm caused	Questions to ask
<p>Reporting all public information on cases, including specifics about the abuse perpetrated against a child/children.</p>	<p>Journalists may believe that reporting the details of a case helps the public understand the depth of trauma a child experienced (hopefully galvanizing people into action). While that may be true, extra care must be given to the routine practice of balancing the information the public needs to know versus providing information that could cause additional harm.</p> <p>We know journalists focus on matters of public record; you're often providing information that could be found in public documents anyway. However, providing too much detail about a case may have some unintended consequences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Living family members, including siblings and grandparents, may face gruesome details about a loved one's death. • Readers may become desensitized to child abuse and the reporting has the opposite impact. • Readers may be traumatized by reading details, particularly if they or a loved one was a victim of child abuse or neglect. • People impacted by child abuse and neglect will be less likely to trust you or your organization with their stories if they see that type of reporting from you or your colleagues. 	<p>What public benefit is provided by including X detail about this case?</p> <p>Are there ways we can still get the point across using generalizations?</p> <p>What kind of supports could have been provided to this family before they got to this point?</p>

Common Reporting Challenges, cont.

Challenge	Potential harm caused	Questions to ask
Document dumps of public documents related to a given case.	<p>The public - and journalists' - reading such documents without the benefit of context will almost always create additional challenges.</p> <p>Child abuse and neglect cases often include highly technical documents and without appropriate context or reporting, misinterpretation of the facts of the case could become an issue. Additionally, it is important to consider the survivors in a family (particularly other children) and how such an approach impacts them - and may impact them for the rest of their lives.</p>	<p>Which documents are necessary for the public to understand this case?</p> <p>What purpose do these documents serve if they are provided to the public?</p> <p>How did we get these documents? If they are provided to us by a third party, what is their motivation? Is there another way for them to achieve that aim without these documents? Are we the appropriate entity to help them achieve that aim?</p>

policymakers & their records

Through the development of this guide, many journalists noted that a key challenge when reporting on child abuse and neglect is the lack of information - often due to legal requirements - and the vacuum it creates. When the facts are in short supply, policymakers' comments often become more of a focus.

Concern for children and their well-being is a critical component of public policy reform and systems accountability. However, **it is easy for policymakers' rhetoric to veer into political posturing and sensationalism that does little to shift Maine's approach to child abuse and neglect prevention and response. Such rhetoric may also eventually desensitize the public to child injury and death cases, which is counterproductive in our collective work to move the needle on these issues.**

When policymakers agree to comment on such an article, any number of the questions noted above would help lend context to their statements. You may also find it helpful to have some understanding of efforts that help decrease risk factors for child abuse and neglect (also noted above) and ask what kind of family-based, prevention-related efforts the policymakers support.

opportunities in reporting

Media outlets might investigate the effectiveness of all of the systems charged with keeping children safe and families supported. This includes the capacity of a variety of public systems to provide supports and services, including child welfare agency interventions. Some considerations might include:

- Lack of adequate public funding to support essential family supports and services.
- Effective policy and practice in the child welfare agency, including ensuring sufficient, well-trained, and supported caseworkers.
- The need for coordination between state agencies and with community providers who all work with children and families.
- Disparities for families involved with the child welfare system, including people of color, rural, low-income and families with disabilities.
- Youth who exit the foster care system without permanent family support.

A single case often contains multiple, different perspectives. Instead of getting a quote from one or two sources, it is important to identify a variety of individuals who could share their perspectives on child welfare system issues. These include: child protective staff, family advocates, attorneys and others in the court process, educators, and behavioral health and other health care professionals.

conclusion & resources

We hope that this guide is helpful to journalists who take on the challenging work of reporting on child abuse and neglect. It is an emotionally challenging topic full of nuance and complexity.

We understand that journalists are not meant to be advocates for any one policy, approach, or reform. We also know that we can't expect journalists to be experts on every topic they have to cover. To that end, if you have feedback or questions about anything you've read here, [please contact us!](#) If you have additional ideas about what we could include in this guide, we'd love to hear about that, too. Together, we can shift the public conversation beyond rhetoric into real action and systems change that will improve safety and well-being outcomes for Maine youth and families.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Maine Child Welfare Action Network

The Maine Child Welfare Action Network is a group of organizations and individuals working together to improve the safety and well-being of all Maine children, youth, and families. You can [learn more about our work here](#) contact us by [emailing our Network Coordinator Melissa Hackett here](#).

State Policy & Advocacy Reform Center: Child Welfare System Prevention Guide

This guide was created to help guide policymakers in developing community-based resources that will increase child well-being while preventing unnecessary child welfare system involvement. It may be a helpful resource when asking about evidence-based resources. You can [find it here](#).