

# FEATURED RESEARCH

## ALAN J. DETTLAFF



*Assistant Professor,  
Jane Addams College of  
Social Work, University of  
Illinois at Chicago.*

Dr. Dettlaff focuses on improving outcomes for children of color in the child welfare system. His research addresses the overrepresentation of African American children in the child welfare system and identifies the unique needs of immigrant Latino children who come to the attention of this system. He is the Principal Investigator of the Jane Addams Child Welfare Traineeship Project, which provides training and financial assistance to students pursuing careers in child welfare.

### IRRPP:

- *funds research*
- *trains scholars to join in on policy discussions*
- *collaborates on social justice projects with community organizations*
- *hosts events*

## PARENTAL CRIMINAL CONVICTIONS IMPACT

### INVOLVEMENT WITH CHILD PUBLIC SERVICES (CPS)

#### Introduction

How do the criminal justice system and the child welfare system overlap? Criminal justice reforms of the 1980s and 1990s increased police presence on the streets, introduced longer prison sentences, and a longer wait time for parole eligibility. These policies have disproportionately impacted people of color, with estimates indicating that nearly two-thirds of the incarcerated population is non-White. As a result of this growing prison population, more children experience the arrest and incarceration of a parent.

Some degree of overlap between the criminal justice system and the child welfare system is expected because the risk factors for arrest and incarceration and child maltreatment are similar. Researchers have therefore asked: does the arrest and incarceration of parents directly cause children's placement in foster care? This report examines CPS case records, placement policies, criminal recidivism and its relationship to child abuse cases, and makes suggestions for policy, practice and future research.

#### Findings

- Parental arrests *do* initiate CPS involvement with children—in 20% of child maltreatment cases.
- Case workers *do* use parents' criminal histories to determine child placement into foster care. In 75% of cases, children had a parent with a criminal record.
- Case workers often determined relatives were not suitable placement alternatives due to their criminal histories. In about 25% of cases, relatives had criminal records.
- In 15% of cases, CPS agencies became involved with children while their parent(s) were in prison.

#### Recommendations

- Policies are needed that address the appropriate use of criminal history information in CPS decision-making.
- CPS administrators should ensure that policies using criminal history in decision-making are grounded in research that examines the link between criminal activity and risk for child maltreatment.
- Existing policies using criminal history should be examined to determine the extent to which children of color are disproportionately impacted.

Phillips, S. D., Dettlaff, A. J., & Baldwin, M. J. (2010). An exploratory study of the range of implications of families' criminal justice system involvement in child welfare cases. *Children and Youth Family Services Review*, 32, 544-550.