

Coming Soon: Series of Papers on the Adoption and Safe Families Act, 10 Years Later

In November 1997, President Clinton signed into law P.L. 105-89, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). The Act was the most significant piece of legislation dealing with child welfare in almost twenty years. It was passed in response to growing concerns that child welfare systems across the country were not providing for the safety, permanency, and well-being of affected children in an adequate and timely fashion. The ambitious new law aimed to reaffirm the focus on child safety in case decision making and to ensure that children did not languish and grow up in foster care but instead were connected with permanent families.

Twelve years after the law was enacted, the Center for the Study of Social Policy in partnership with the Urban Institute has led an effort to reflect on what has been learned about the intended and unintended consequences of ASFA and the degree to which its goals have been realized. With funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Center has co-sponsored with the Urban Institute a series of papers on the effects of the ASFA law and its implementation written from the distinctive perspectives of researchers, policymakers, advocates, and parents and youth with first-hand experience of the child welfare system.

The papers in this series examine the consequences of ASFA for children and families and for the child welfare systems that intervene in their lives. The series is framed by an overview paper that summarizes the key features of the legislation, the major debates and controversies surrounding its interpretation and implementation, and the available data on its results. This overview is followed by five position papers that capture the personal experiences and reflections of parents and youth who have been involved in the child welfare system. Each of

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these authors tell a unique and compelling story and share a distinct perspective, such as the experience of a parent struggling to reunify with her children while conquering substance abuse and that of a teenager who has spent most of her formative years in foster care. Reviews of the efficacy of the law and its subsequent policies frequently overlook these perspectives of the constituencies most directly affected. These parent and youth accounts poignantly demonstrate the complex impact of a federal law that influences decision making with respect to family composition and definition. Authors of the other position papers include an original drafter of the ASFA legislation, a judge who has extensive experience in implementing and enforcing the law, and the New York City Child Welfare Commissioner charged with carrying out the law's dictates.

The next section of the series includes seven papers by respected researchers and policy analysts. Some look at such crucial questions as the impact of ASFA on special populations: parents with mental health and substance abuse; families involved with the criminal justice system; those caught up in the immigration system; and older youth. Other papers address the priority issues of adoption and preserving family connections. The authors of these seven papers draw heavily upon existing research in framing and supporting their analyses and recommendations.

The papers in the series are not intended to deliver a uniform message or arrive at a "master list" of findings. While many individual papers conclude with recommendations that reflect the author's perspective, the last piece in the series presents a set of recommendations that incorporate common themes emerging from a review of the entire project. This summation, while drawing on the insights of all authors, represents the recommendations of the editors alone.

Legislating social policy that defines when the state has the power and the responsibility to intervene in family life for the sake of child safety is inherently difficult. There will perhaps always be a divide between those who believe the state is overstepping its authority and those who believe the state is not vigilant enough in executing its protective role. We need to know more about the short and long term impacts of our decisions to fully assess whether our child welfare

law and policy achieve the best outcomes for those most in need, while recognizing the often competing interests of individuals and groups affected by the law. We hope this series will promote and illuminate discussion and help to frame the next generation of policy reforms.

The complete series of papers will be available on the Center for the Study of Social Policy's website, at www.cssp.org, on November 1, 2009.