

# USING ECONOMIC AND CONCRETE SUPPORTS TO PREVENT CHILD WELFARE INVOLVEMENT POLICY MINI-BRIEF SERIES

## PART 1: Child Welfare Leaders' Perspectives on Cross-System Prevention



Economic and concrete supports are critical to ensuring the well-being and stability of families. These supports include a range of financial and tangible resources that reduce economic hardship and increase opportunity for economic mobility for families in need. Examples include food, clothing, housing, medical services, transportation, child care, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), and cash assistance. Research demonstrates that increasing access to these supports is associated with reduced risk for child maltreatment and child welfare involvement ([Anderson et al., 2023](#); [ECS Policy Tool](#)).

A growing body of evidence has shifted how human services agencies view their role in supporting families facing economic and material hardship. Child welfare prevention has gained particular focus, with increasing calls for a population-based, public health approach to child welfare that moves services upstream in the community (Casey Family Programs, 2019). In addition, cross-sector alignment of services is necessary to ensure that the needs of families are met as soon as possible, as well as reduce redundancy and silos within the human services sector to more quickly meet the needs of families.

As human services leaders continue to shift to prevention, the sector is building knowledge on what has been proven to break the link between poverty and child welfare involvement, and what tangible actions can keep families safely together. This series of economic and concrete supports briefs bring together research insights from program leaders to better understand the opportunity for system change and to chart a different path for those families with children that experience economic hardship and who might otherwise encounter child welfare involvement. The briefs will critically examine policy and practice in child welfare prevention as the momentum builds for creating a better tomorrow for families.



*This mini-brief is the first in a four-part series that will examine the research, practice, and policy landscape related to child welfare agency perspectives on the role of economic and concrete supports (ECS) in prevention. The mini-briefs highlight key results from a national survey of state child welfare agency leaders conducted by American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) and Chapin Hall. The survey results and full report can be found [here](#).*

## Attitudes and Beliefs of Child Welfare Leaders

One section of the [National Survey of Child Welfare Leaders](#) examined attitudes and beliefs of child welfare leaders around economic and concrete supports. These attitudes and beliefs drive agency strategy and help staff understand what is expected of them. When there is clarity around leadership's approaches to concepts like economic and concrete supports, staff can make decisions that align with those values, strategies, and approaches.

***Child welfare agency leaders believe improving access to economic and concrete supports is critical to reducing child welfare involvement.***

Current research compiled by Chapin Hall indicates that family economic insecurity is associated with increased risk for child welfare involvement ([Anderson et al., 2023](#)). The central role of economic insecurity and material hardship as drivers of child welfare system involvement underscores the importance of addressing the concrete needs of families (Dolan et al., 2011; Conrad-Hiebner & Byram, 2020). The strongest predictors of investigations for neglect involve food, housing, and health insecurity (Slack, 2011).



Experiencing economic shocks and/or material hardship (generally defined as difficulty paying for necessities, such as housing, food, utilities, or medical care), particularly for families who are living with low income, is strongly associated with an elevated risk for child welfare involvement (Cai, 2021; Yang, 2015). Additionally, when families experience cumulative hardships, the risk for child welfare involvement is even greater (Yang, 2015; Conrad-Hiebner & Byram, 2020).

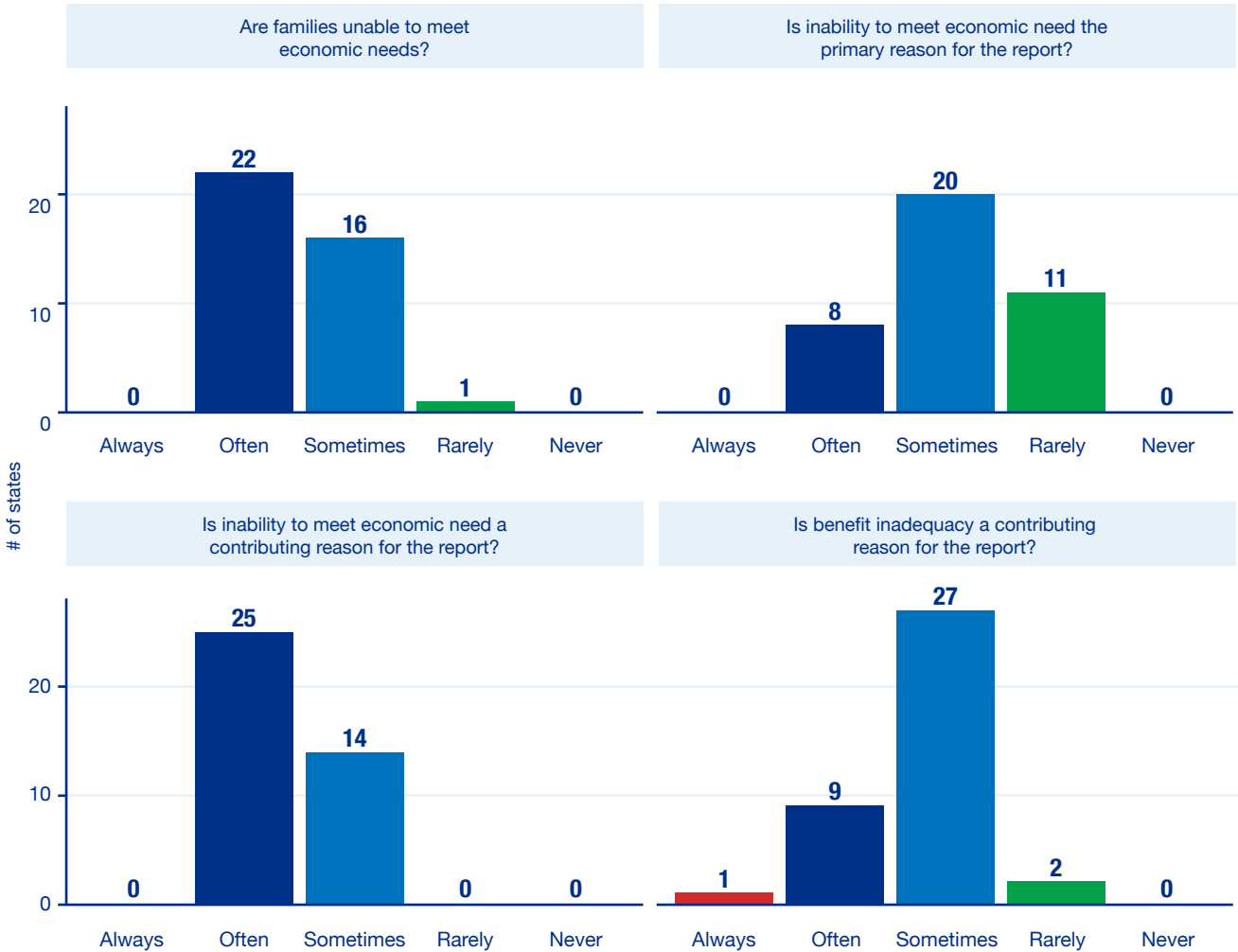
The findings of the National Survey of Child Welfare Leaders align with this research. Figure 1 shows the extent to which child welfare leaders see economic need as related to suspected maltreatment reports. Child Welfare leaders who completed the survey indicated that the inability to meet economic need is “sometimes” or “often” a contributing reason for a suspected maltreatment report.

*Child welfare agencies see themselves as part of a larger system working towards prevention, but not leading prevention efforts.*

The National Survey of Child Welfare Leaders asked about perceptions on the role of child welfare in providing economic and concrete supports and preventing child welfare involvement. Most child welfare leaders indicated that child welfare agencies should provide economic and concrete supports to prevent maltreatment, but they more frequently indicated that prevention was the responsibility of the larger public benefits system.

**Figure 1: Agency leaders' perceptions of the relationships between economic and concrete needs and child welfare reports**

*In suspected maltreatment reports your agency receives, how often...*







**“The data is there that demonstrates that economic factors often contribute to abuse and neglect. This factor is often overlooked by caseworkers and not addressed by service providers. More education and support is needed on this topic to develop an understanding and reduce stigma of providing these services.”**

– Child Welfare Leader, Survey Response

## APHSAs Recommendations

Child protective services will always be necessary to ensure the safety of some children. However, there needs to be a focus on creating clear guardrails in child welfare and alternative pathways through trusted community partners and benefit-serving agencies rather than expanding the child welfare system.

**“A completely new system focused on primary and secondary prevention needs to be created. A system that wraps around families early to prevent them from coming to the door of child welfare. Shift funding and resources that are typically dedicated to the tertiary side, to the primary and secondary prevention system.”**

– Child Welfare Leader, Survey Response



Child welfare cannot and should not be the only agency responsible for prevention. To successfully move upstream, there will need to be targeted funding and resources throughout human services agencies and community partners to ensure families’ needs are met. Upstream shared responsibility is vital to addressing families’ economic needs.

Human services agencies and partners should see this as an opportunity for the broader human services sector to work towards consensus on who should be included in state, local, and community child welfare prevention strategies.

The human services sector and its partners should familiarize themselves with the current research around the connection between economic and concrete supports and child welfare involvement. This will help leaders identify opportunities to work individually and in partnership with other sectors on strategies to reduce child welfare involvement. An understanding of this body of evidence is also crucial to developing policies and practices that will result in positive outcomes, including addressing issues around race equity within the child welfare system.

## Moving Forward

It is clear there is an opportunity to dive deeper into how poverty has been conflated with neglect, and that now is the time for further conversation on policy levers available to reduce this occurrence. Furthermore, understanding the linkages between basic needs and child welfare involvement will help create more effective strategies and policy levers to improve outcomes for families.

Part of increasing access to economic and concrete supports is building out a larger, more comprehensive prevention system that can fill the gaps and address economic hardship as early as possible with families. Currently, jurisdictions are moving upstream and expanding prevention services to better support families. To do this effectively, there must be consensus on the need for this work and the impact of supports on reducing child welfare involvement. Thus, the need to understand the research and the opportunities for agencies to work both individually and collectively around this work is key to advancing prevention.

This mini-brief series will highlight key findings in policy, practice, and research around economic and concrete supports occurring through a range of activities, including the APHSA and Chapin Hall Economic and Concrete Supports Community of Practice. Human services leaders interested in learning more about how to implement economic and concrete supports work at the practice level are invited to join this bimonthly session which brings together child welfare, economic assistance, and other partners to discuss the implementation of economic and concrete supports work. Please contact [Kapria Lee](#) for more information about joining the community.

## Additional Resources

For those interested in learning more about economic and concrete supports, the following resources are available:

- [Chapin Hall's Economic Stability and Family Well-Being](#) site compiles research on how increasing access to economic and concrete supports can positively impact families, reduce risk for child welfare involvement, and promote race equity.
- The [Advancing Family Economic Mobility \(AFEM\)](#) website offers resources for human services practitioners to move upstream of child welfare involvement. It also showcases current work with states and counties to promote economic mobility

*The Economic and Concrete Supports work is part of a larger body of work on AFEM and is produced with support from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and the Doris Duke Foundation. AFEM focuses on creating sustainable pathways to economic mobility and well-being for all people and families.*

