# The Translating Child Welfare Research podcast. The graphic features a swirl with University of Illinois colors.

# The Role of Economic Mobility and Financial Assistance in Preventing Child Abuse: An Interview with Dr. William Schneider

## Dr. Heather Fox

Welcome to the Translating Child Welfare Research Podcast. Supporting policies that promote economic mobility and provide financial assistance to families may be key to preventing child neglect. In this podcast, we invite Dr. William Schneider to talk about his research on the role of economic mobility and financial assistance in preventing neglect.

I'm Dr. Heather Fox and I'm your host for this episode of Translating Child Welfare Research podcast. The goal of this podcast is to provide child welfare professionals with timely and quality research information to help them support their well-being and the well-being of the families they serve each month; we invite a researcher to highlight. One finding or an implication of their research, visit our website to explore our podcast, read biographies for our guests, and access information about the research. We feature welcome Dr. Schneider. We are excited to meet with you today. Let's start with a brief introduction.

## Dr. William Schneider

Thanks so much. I'm thrilled to be here to talk with you today. My name is Will Schneider. I'm an associate professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and I'm Faculty Director of the Children and Family Research Center.

## Dr. Heather Fox

Would you provide a brief overview of the research you are going to talk about today?

## Dr. William Schneider

Sure, my research is focused on the role of poverty, inequality, and social welfare policies in the prevention of child maltreatment and child neglect in particular. I'd go about this using survey data, administrative data, and some new experimental data to ask the question, “How can we best prevent child neglect and involvement in the child welfare system?”

## Dr. Heather Fox

It's really common when we discuss the prevention of child abuse and neglect to talk about them as a bundle. Your research highlights what we should consider prevention of neglect, independent of prevention of child abuse. Can you talk about why preventing child neglect is different than preventing child abuse and why it's important to address the prevention of child neglect?

## Dr. William Schneider

I'm so glad you asked this question. I think the story starts a long time ago. In actuality, we've known for a very long time that neglect and abuse, while related, probably have different origins. In 1974, when the Child Abuse and Prevention Treatment Act was passed, one of the first large-scale pieces of federal legislation about child maltreatment. In testimony before the Senate, senators and witnesses made clear that they thought neglect was more closely tied to poverty but that, for practical purposes, they couldn’t address the poverty piece in the legislation, so they were grouped together. In fact, as you can tell from the name, it's the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, it doesn't mention neglect in the name. In fact, in many ways, neglect in the legislation was an afterthought. And so, because of that kind of political expedience choice back in 1974, all the funds and research that have flowed from CAPTA over time have treated abuse and neglect as if they had the same origins and can be treated in the same way. But we've known for a long time that that likely isn't so that they're likely to be different in some important ways.

Early research focused on individual-level studies on surveys, asking folks about their income, their social welfare policy use, and abuse and neglect. And indeed, that research found that poverty was closely tied to neglect. I think the jump we've made. More recently in the last. Five or six years is a new crop of quasi-experimental research that has looked at this question. So, what does this mean? That means research where we're not doing randomized control trials, assigning people into one condition and other people into another condition, but rather looking at, essentially, natural experiments that are occurring. If the earned income tax credit or the minimum wage is greater in one state than in another, do we see differences in neglect rates? And that research has been powerful, and it shows quite clearly that in states where the social welfare safety net is more robust and more generous, there's less neglect. I think there's another way to think about this, which is that intuitively in some ways the connection between poverty and neglect makes sense. And it doesn't mean that there aren't co-occurring factors that also might predict abuse, mental health problems, substance use, or intimate partner violence. These are all things that are related to both neglect and abuse. But the piece that we've been missing in policy and in practice is this story about how does poverty play a role in those factors? And is that role different for neglect and for abuse? And so it may be that families who are referred to welfare systems because of neglect still need these other services. But the thing they haven't been getting is anti-poverty services, and it may be that we need to address those poverty problems. Before we can give traditional services that may or may not be useful or something like neglect, depending on the type.

## Dr. Heather Fox

Your research highlights the relationship between economic mobility and child neglect prevention. Can you discuss why promoting policies that address economic inequities and mobility are critical to reducing maltreatment?

## Dr. William Schneider

Yeah, I think this is a really important question. As you might be aware, inequality in the United States has grown over time. By some measures, we're as unequal today as we were during the Gilded Age. So, what does this mean in practice? Why should we care about inequality? One argument about caring about inequality is about fairness, right? In the United States, we generally believe that everyone should have an equal shot of making it and getting ahead. But inequality suppresses that chance. The other part of the inequality story, and why we should care about it, is that the research, particularly from sociology and some from economics, shows that one-way inequality sustains itself is that rich families are able to invest in their kids in ways that poor families can’t. So, what does that mean? It means summer camp and tutors and high-quality childcare. These are choices that all parents want to make. Rich parents are able to do it, and it gives their children a leg up. That's a kind of fundamental question about fairness and about what do we owe children?

When it comes to child neglect, it's a linked story. You can think of child neglect, and there are some cases of child neglect that are intentional, willful neglect. And that's the kind of separate story and one that is much more rare we think. The broader story about neglect is one about the inability to provide what my colleague, Megan Feely and I call safe and consistent care. So, the opposite of abuse is more involved better parenting. But in general, the opposite of neglect is, “don't do that”. And that's really not a sufficient thing to tell parents, especially if it's caused by something like poverty. Don't leave your kid at home alone unsupervised. Well, sure, “How do I afford to not do that? How do I afford quality childcare?” And inequality deepens that divide between what parents are able to afford and to provide for their kids. Thinking about inequality in terms of neglect, it's really a question of how do parents provide safe and consistent care? And how does yawning inequality make that more difficult for low-income families?

## Dr. Heather Fox

I really appreciate that example because I think it's important that we understand what you're saying is that poverty limits people's choices. There isn't an innate character flaw that says that people who are living with poverty are more likely to abuse or neglect. For children, it's that people living in poverty have less opportunities, resources and choices, and those choices sometimes result in a child in a situation that may look like neglect.

## Dr. William Schneider

I think that's exactly right. You know, we often in the research world think about how poverty influences something like neglect or even abuse. So, you might think about indirect effects. So, the idea is that poverty creates stress in the household and creates mental health issues. That it alters our parenting and our parenting choices. And that's one pathway. A pathway that's been fairly heavily researched and analyzed over time. This question at the individual or family level how does poverty influence our parenting? The second pathway here is that poverty has a direct effect. You can't afford quality childcare. Your car breaks down, and you can't make it to work. We think there are likely these dual paths. That, yes, it's true; poverty can affect your decision-making, but it can also just make it so that you can't provide safe and consistent care for your kids. If that's the case, then a parenting class or a class about early childhood development will not fix that neglect problem because it's not about a character flaw or parenting choices that you don't know any better about. It's about the ability to make those parenting decisions and enact them.

## Dr. Heather Fox

I’d go a step further and say that some of those services if they're not necessary for somebody who's already stressed and already low-resourced and already struggling, could be a detriment for them if they're another drain on their time or their resources. I think that's one of the things that is most exciting things about your new study. You're launching a new, really exciting study here in Illinois exploring cash assistance as a potential tool for keeping children and youth safe at home with their families. Can you provide some information about what led you to propose this new research? And what we know about the impact of cash assistance from previous research.

## Dr. William Schneider

I'm thrilled about this new study and excited to talk with you about it. I'm going to embed it in kind of a story about my personal journey as a researcher. You know, I started off doing research that was really using survey data, preexisting survey data, administrative data, thinking about these kind of broad problems, about the role of family structure and the role of economic events in the risk for child maltreatment. And as I progressed over the years, I really wanted to turn towards more applied research. What kind of work can I do that will impact families today, not just down the road when our kind of general research has seeped down into policy? What can we do that's going to show policymakers and clinicians that this is a new strategy that might be effective?

We turn to this more applied research, trying to find avenues that would provide real and hopefully immediate benefits to families. We've done this research. We've known for a long time that poverty is linked to child maltreatment, particularly to child neglect. That research has gotten more and more causal, meaning we know that there is an effect, but there haven't been any randomized control trials of the role of poverty and neglect. There are a few now happening in the United States. Most notably, in New York State and in Washington DC and are really exciting projects, but they're quite small. We don't know yet what kind of effects we will be able to discover.

The leader of Brightpoint which used to be call the Children’s Home and Aid of Illinois read some of our work and reached out and said, “I like this. I think you're right and I want to try it.” Which was I got to say a super exciting thing to happen. So, we worked with Brightpoint for about three years to raise the funds we needed to get this idea off the ground. And DCFS has been an amazing partner in this work. The experiment is working with intact Family Services that Brightpoint run. These are services where families have a report or an allegation of child maltreatment and they may be substantiated or they may not, but they're referred to receive services from Breakpoint while the child remains in the home. In Illinois, about 18% of those families will return to the child welfare system within 12 months. And so to us, this is a real problem, right? These families are clearly not getting some sort of service that they need. And, maybe that service is anti-property services? Maybe as we talked about earlier. Parenting classes aren't cutting it. That's not addressing the real problem.

We'll randomize over about two years about 800 families half will receive services as usual, and half will receive a few $100 per month for 12 months. And that amount is going to vary by family size and local cost of living. That's a departure from other basic income studies, because we're social workers we want to stress fairness and equity, and we want to make sure that families are receiving the amount that's kind of binds in their local area. We'll see. Does receiving a monthly unrestricted cash gift reduce the likelihood that they are returned to the child welfare system that children are removed? We have high hopes. We think it's going to be… we're excited about.

## Dr. Heather Fox

I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about the decision to make it an unrestricted cash gift. A lot of programs that come through are federal funding sources and the like, have very strict requirements about how any support is used. I wanted to ask you to expand on why that decision was made and why you think it's important in fighting poverty in this way.

## Dr. William Schneider

Our theory is essentially this: All parents need a combination of balance of time and money in order to provide safe and consistent care. Time you can use to provide childcare to do the everyday tasks that your child needs, and you need money to provide things, food safe, housing, a high-quality early childhood education. And as long as those things are in balance, you can probably provide for your child in an effective way. If you work too much, but that work pays you well, you can offset the time loss with money. You can pay for a babysitter. You can buy hot food on the way home for dinner instead of making it. And if you have too much time. But not enough money. You. Maybe you can make it work right. You can stay home with your child while a partner works. But when those things are imbalanced, then the risk for neglect, in particular, gets much higher. Because they can't offset one another. So, our research shows that for low-income mothers, both working too much and not working enough are both a risk for children. Because time and money become imbalanced. And so, why does this matter for this question? Well, we think that many of the social welfare programs today, which tie receded benefits to work in this sense, haven't thought deeply enough about what that means for low-income mothers and for neglect in particular. So, we wanted to be sure that something like work wasn't prerequisite for receiving these needed funds.

The second part of your question is about why let people decide how to spend the money. This is an important question and really to get to the foundation of the American social welfare policy landscape. Why do we tell people you can only buy certain foods with your book stamps? I think, in essence, we want to trust parents. We do trust parents, and we trust people's autonomy. This is, you know, one of the core pillars of social welfare practice and theory. And there's a lot of research from other universal basic income studies in the United States, of which there are now many. That parents spend this money on their kids. So, Baby's First Year, for example, is one of the first and largest basic income studies for low-income parents with newborns. And they find overwhelmingly that parents spend money on items for their children. And this shouldn't be a surprise, right? I don't think we should be surprised by these kinds of findings. People who end up in the child welfare system, more often than not, have good intentions. They want to raise their children the best thing they can. And we shouldn't presume that there is a character flaw that will influence the way they spend money. We should presume that parents want the best for their kids and that means giving them autonomy to spend money the way they see fit. The way they think will best benefit their families.

## Dr. Heather Fox

And I'm assuming, in some cases, that will include spending money on things that are not directly on the child, like getting your car fixed, buying a new vacuum, or paying the utility bill. Something that is going to certainly support the child and the family as a whole but isn’t what we'd initially think when you'd say spending the money on the children.

## Dr. William Schneider

And that's exactly right. And it gets to this kind of larger question about what do we mean when we say poverty is related to neglect? I think too often in child welfare, we think of poverty and neglect in terms of the ways we might see it when we do a home visit. We might see exposed wires. We might see a child who doesn't have a winter coat, and that certainly is poverty. But poverty and how it relates to neglect is so much broader than that. So, this ability to get to work right, to have a car, to have childcare. We often, I think in child welfare, don’t classify that as a poverty-related problem that is linked to neglect. Intimate partner violence in the home is often considered as linked to neglect. We almost never, I think in policy or practice, think about that as related to poverty. But much of the research on intimate partner violence tells us that it is linked to poverty. I think in thinking about this question, we need to really broaden our frame in child welfare about what poverty is and how it might be linked to what.

## Dr. Heather Fox

Thinking about that broad frame, what are your thoughts on what is needed to design an effective cash assistance program? How would a state engage with at-risk families? How would they know who to provide assistance to? How much assistance to provide? How long to provide it? Do you have any thoughts on what an ideal system might look like or even how we would get there?

## Dr. William Schneider

I have some. But I think in large part we don't know yet and these are questions that need to be tested in the field. I think for me the first step is really this, this basic one of changing the minds of workers in the field of caseworkers, of supervisors. Finding a way to communicate to them exactly what we mean when we say poverty and why it must be addressed. For too long, because we haven't had the concrete resources to provide to families, we have taught caseworkers, supervisors, and practitioners in general to not look at poverty. To pretend like it isn't there. Because it's hard to tell someone, “You should know that poverty plays a role here, but no, we can't give you anything to help people when it is poverty.” And so, we kind of put on our blinders and told people to put on their blinders and not pay attention to this problem. So, in some ways, the first step is the process of education. A process of teaching clinicians what the history of poverty and child maltreatment is and how it's linked to things like systematic and racism and structural racism. And what that might mean for them in their everyday interactions with clients. So, I think that the first step is a kind of broad-based change in perspective for workers in this field.

The second step I think is really variable and it really depends on when and where states would want to intervene with something like cash assistance. You can certainly imagine a broad-based policy that's prevention oriented that's focused on families before they come in contact with the child welfare system. The Doris Duke Foundation is working on projects like this. And I think that has real promise. If you're interested in a child welfare system-based tool, one that says, OK, we've got parenting classes and substance use classes and psychosocial interventions, and now we need another tool called anti-poverty. Then you're thinking about prevention policy that's further down the line.

What we don't know is, how long and how much and whether it can be prescriptive. Whether we can say, OK, when you come to the system for this problem, you get this many months of money for this long. And we don't know that yet. We don't know whether it can be prescriptive like that. And I think fundamentally we don't know how to define poverty for a program like that. Are we talking like other programs that it's 100% or 200% of the federal poverty line, or are we doing a kind of more holistic assessment of what families need and what the barriers they face are?

## Dr. Heather Fox

I think I'd be remiss if I didn't ask. You to talk about the costs associated with this. I think there might be a knee-jerk reaction for some people to say, well, we don't have money to do this kind of thing. And I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about the offset here in how you know there are costs involved with our current practices and how this might change the landscape.

## Dr. William Schneider

Yeah, I think at this point it's hard to know, but I think there are clear signs that this could be quite cost-effective. So, research by my colleague here at the University of Illinois, Hyunil Kim, shows that about 37% of children will be involved in the child welfare system by the time they turn 18. The lifetime costs of child welfare system involvement is about $428 billion. So the child welfare system is very expensive both for society and for state and federal government. In particular, when we get down the line to child removal, things like foster care are, generally speaking, quite expensive. I think averaging around $1000 a month per child. If our research and others find that a small, relatively small amount of monthly cash transfer for a relatively small amount of time is able to stabilize families so that they don't get to foster care. Don't come back to the system. Then I think we'll find something. That's quite cost-effective. But we don't know that yet, right? This is why we have to do this kind of research to get to the point where we can make a solid case to policymakers that not only is this the right thing to do, but it's a cost-effective tool as well.

## Dr. Heather Fox

WelI absolutely believe we need to have you back when you complete the study, because we'll need the answers to some of these questions, or at least the first steps towards them. And we're going to want to hear about your results. In the meantime, is there some place that people can go to learn about your research or more about this important topic?

## Dr. William Schneider

Yeah. Thanks so much for having me. You can certainly find us at Brightpoint, our partner agency, at the School of Social Work here at the University of Illinois. And at our study homepage, [empwrstudy.com](https://www.empwrstudy.com/).

## Dr. Heather Fox

Awesome. I just want to give you an opportunity. I know you're not doing this work alone. If you want to call out some of your partners and some of the other people that are contributing to this work, this is a great way to do that.

## Dr. William Schneider

Oh, that's wonderful. Thank you. Yeah, we've had great partners at the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. Mike Shaver and Paula Corrigan-Halpern at Brightpoint and of course, my co-investigators Megan Feely and Ann Marie Garran at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work, and Emily Bosk at Rutgers University School of Social Work.

## Dr. Heather Fox

That's the main thing and your funders.

## Dr. William Schneider

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## Dr. Heather Fox

That is amazing. So, to recap, we've been talking with Dr. William Schneider about the power of economic mobility and financial assistance and strategies for preventing child neglect. Our gratitude goes out to the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign School of Social work for its support of this podcast series to our listeners. Do you have feedback on the podcast, a topic you'd like to learn more about or research you'd like to share with our audience? Contact us at DCFS.ORCW@illinois.gov and thank you for listening to the Translating Child Welfare Research Podcast. The University of Illinois Urbana Champaign School of Social Work is providing the content of this podcast series with funding and support by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. The views, thoughts and opinions expressed in this podcast are the speakers owned and do not represent the views, thoughts and opinions of the University of Illinois or the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services. The material and information presented here is for general information purposes only and does not imply endorsement of or opposition to any specific organization, product or service.