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American Humane Association—Differential Response National Overview

This map was developed by American Humane Association, current as of November 28, 2011, and used with permission.

1 This map was developed by American Humane Association, current as of November 28, 2011, and used with permission.
NCANDS Data on Differential Response

Drawing upon recent NCANDS data, the chart below outlines recent national trends in CPS systems. CPS agencies conduct a response for all screened-in referrals, either through a traditional investigation or through an alternative response pathway. An investigation determines whether the report is substantiated (if a child was a victim of maltreatment) and establishes whether or not an intervention is needed. The majority of reports receive such investigations.

An increasing number of reports are assigned to differential response pathways. Families assigned to this response are typically low or moderate risk cases. This response usually includes voluntary, community-based services and the mutual agreement of family needs. Such cases do not usually make a specific determination of the allegation of maltreatment; families participate in services without a finding or substantiation.


Note that not all states that have implemented differential response are able to separate these cases from the traditional investigation pathway in their case management systems. Thus, the number of referrals assigned to alternative or differential response is likely undercounted. In FY10, 14 states reported information on reports assigned to differential/alternative response.
Recent Evaluation of Differential Response in North Carolina Reveals No Compromise to Child Safety

Traditional Child Protective Services (CPS) systems typically treat all screened-in reports of abuse and neglect in the same way—with a forensically focused investigation to determine whether or not the maltreatment incident occurred. By contrast, Differential Response (DR) provides agencies with a new way of responding proportionately to clients based upon the severity of their situation and level of need. DR allows agencies to focus upon the environmental context and the larger issue of family well-being through the use of partnership and strengths-based approaches to meeting family needs. Due to the non-adversarial approach and its focus upon identifying root causes behind parenting difficulties, in previous evaluations, DR has demonstrated improvements in family engagement, child and family outcomes, and some cost savings over time.

In this recent evaluation of North Carolina’s Multiple Response System (MRS), Lawrence, Rosanbalm, and Dodge (2011) conducted a mixed-methods study, incorporating quantitative and qualitative research elements, to assess MRS impacts. The researchers focused their study upon child safety outcomes, as jurisdictions contemplating moving forward with DR commonly express concerns about child safety issues. With their MRS pilot program beginning in 2002, North Carolina purposely selected pilot counties of various sizes and geographic regions across the state in order to match these counties with similar comparison counties for evaluation purposes. Rigorous analyses were applied between the pilot counties and matched comparison counties, revealing that MRS was associated with:

- Decreased rates of substantiated maltreatment cases, with a shift in the trajectory of substantiation rates over time.
  - 6,534 cases of substantiated maltreatment were prevented across 9 MRS counties from mid-2002 until the end of 2005 (according to regression estimates).
- A shift in the trajectory of repeat assessment rates, with a resulting decline in reassessment rates.
  - 1,149 cases of repeat maltreatment assessment were prevented across the 9 MRS counties from the same time period.
- An increase in services provided to families up front, measured through caseworker time.
  - Families receiving frontloaded services were found to have a lower rate of repeat assessment, indicating that completing a more thorough assessment and

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5 For recent rigorous evaluations of DR, see Minnesota: [http://www.iarstl.org/papers/FinalMNFARReport.pdf](http://www.iarstl.org/papers/FinalMNFARReport.pdf), Missouri: [http://www.iarstl.org/papers/MODiffResp2004a.pdf](http://www.iarstl.org/papers/MODiffResp2004a.pdf); and Ohio: [http://www.iarstl.org/papers/OhioAREvaluation.pdf](http://www.iarstl.org/papers/OhioAREvaluation.pdf). See a review of this evaluation below within this issue. Note that Ohio did not observe cost savings. However the cost analysis was conducted early into their implementation process, and with enough time into full implementation, they expect to achieve cost savings.

6 Note that the Multiple Response System is North Carolina’s name for Differential Response.
connecting families with needed services were associated with greater long-term benefits to children and families.

Qualitative analyses of interviews and focus groups with birth parents, social workers, and community providers revealed that Child and Family Team meetings (a component of MRS) was associated with:

- Improved trust and communication with families, who begin to see the team as a support system rather than as accusers.
- Enhanced transparency of the process, leading to better inter-agency collaboration.
- Improved case plan development, leading to greater adherence and better outcomes.

Another component of MRS, Shared Parenting Activities (a strategy of engaging birth parents and foster parents together) was associated with:

- Easing the transition process and associated anxiety involved in placement for children and birth parents.
- Facilitating long-lasting relationships between these sets of parents, leading to long-term parental support and skills modeling.
- Reducing reunification time in some cases.

Overall, the authors observed no compromise to child safety measures as a result of MRS implementation. Additionally, they found that frontloading services predicted improvements to child safety, and this relationship held true across MRS pilot counties as well as comparison counties. This finding suggests that an emphasis on comprehensive assessment and early intervention can have long-term benefits for families. Qualitative findings revealed that families expressed more positive feelings about CPS interactions than negative, which may mean that negative perceptions of CPS in the community are starting to change as a result of MRS in North Carolina.
Casey Practice Digest Interview: A Conversation with Eric Fenner, Former Director of Franklin County Children’s Services, Ohio, on DR Implementation

What do you think is important for people to know about Alternative Response?*

Alternative Response (AR) is not a program, it’s an approach—an alternative approach to traditional investigations. AR allows Social Workers to do social work again; it’s been the driver of the biggest transformation I’ve ever seen in Ohio. When using a traditional approach to investigations, if you look at all of the child abuse and neglect reports that an agency receives and compare the number of those families that are investigated with no findings, you will see that the majority of those families receive few (if any) services. Among screened-in reports, only about 25% of those families receive services. Under AR, many more families can receive services because of the need that is identified from the assessment based approach, absent a finding which traditionally dictated services. What we’re seeing now with AR is a true child welfare system redesign, which begins at the front door.

How have you been able to secure buy-in of stakeholders integral to AR implementation?

When talking to the legislature and others that have a stake in how AR is rolled out, it’s helpful for them to understand that serious cases of abuse are not going to the AR track. They tend to assume that AR is a replacement for the traditional investigative response. In fact, the Alternative or Family Assessment pathway is added onto the existing system, providing the agency with an alternate way of addressing low to moderate risk cases. The investigative pathway stays in place, but the agency is given an additional option for how to address these reports. Legislators and judges understandably have concerns about changes to child protective services systems, primarily around whether or not kids will be kept safe. Many judges that I talked to thought that nearly all cases came to court. They didn’t realize that only 20% of cases are seen by a judge. What happened to all of those other cases, as well as calls that were screened-out? It might be helpful to show them data from these categories, in terms of who is in what track, and how they might think about how to meet the needs of these families. What AR allowed us to do, was to be responsive to the large majority of cases that came to our attention that traditionally would have been unsubstantiated—but still would have benefitted from services. Communicating that AR responds to cases that typically would be unsubstantiated and would not receive services helps to alleviate child safety concerns. If you give a presentation on AR, and haven’t explained this in the first 15 minutes, you’ll lose your audience, and they will start coming up with defensive questions around how to protect child safety. If you communicate this up front, most of the work will be done, which helps them to pay attention to what you’re trying to communicate. This needs to come first: AR will not compromise the safety of children.

*Terms including Differential Response, Alternative Response, Family Assessment Response, and Multiple Response are used interchangeably to refer to alternate pathways that are added onto existing investigative response pathways.
*How have you been able to get buy-in of staff in support of AR implementation?*

In Franklin County, workers were already thinking about how to be most effective in working with families, before we even began talking about AR. When I first became Director, we didn’t start with AR, we began with discussions with staff about how we could best be responsive to the needs of children and families. We needed to redefine who we were. By the time we began thinking about AR, it naturally fit with our new philosophy that was already in place. When seeking staff buy-in, the question became: does AR fit better with who we are now and what we’re trying to achieve, better than what had traditionally been our response? For staff, you have to let them come to it on their own, don’t force them into it. With any change, you must begin with your staff. It has to mean something to them. It has to connect with why they first came to the field.

*Before your agency implemented AR in Ohio, what else would you liked to have known in advance?*

Beforehand, I would have liked to have seen the different ways that jurisdictions have designed and set up their AR systems, looking at different program models, how they drew upon existing structures, and how to build around available resources. I would have liked to have seen alternate models of both specialized and mixed units, whereby workers carry only AR cases, or whether they carry mixed cases of AR and investigation cases. Also, I would like to have seen different ways of rolling out AR statewide, comparing a staged implementation such as 10 counties at a time to an entire statewide implementation carried out at once. Ohio decided on a staged implementation, which made the process more manageable, and allowed later-stage counties to learn from others who had gone before them, relying upon their technical assistance and county-to-county mentoring for a smoother implementation process.

Eric Fenner is currently Managing Director of Strategic Consulting at Casey Family Programs.
Ohio’s Implementation of Alternative Response

Anthony Loman and his colleagues at the Institute of Applied Research (IAR) in St. Louis, MO have issued a major study of CPS practice that underscores the enmeshment of neglect with poverty. Ohio Alternative Response Evaluation: Final Report summarizes findings from an experimental evaluation of Ohio’s implementation of alternative response vs. ‘business as usual’ CPS investigations from July 2008 through December 2009 in 10 pilot counties. IAR followed 4,529 families deemed appropriate by CPS staff for Alternative Response (AR) rather than a CPS investigation; these 4529 families were about half of families with accepted (i.e., screened in) reports. Of these families, 2,285 were randomly assigned to the experimental group and the remaining 2,244 families were assigned to the control group. More than half (56%) of these 4,529 families were referred to CPS for neglect; 30% of the families had 3 or more prior accepted CPS reports and 10% of the families “had a child placed in the past.”

IAR found that “more than two thirds of the families surveyed reported incomes of $15,000 or less" and 34% of the families reported an annual income of $5,000 or less. In other words, the great majority of families in both the experimental and control groups were poor and more than a third were severely poor. The IAR report comments that “about half of families in the study population had a high score on an index developed for this evaluation combining poverty and the likelihood that it would recur or continue.” Many of the families were living in deep poverty that was unlikely to change for the better and “were headed by never married or unmarried females with low educational attainment.”

Families referred for neglect were poorer, on average, than families referred for other types of child maltreatment and had more previous CPS referrals. Single parents with low educational achievement were the poorest families in the sample: “71.7% of ‘never married’ respondents had incomes of less than $10,000 per year,” and more than three quarters of parents with some high school but no high school degree had annual incomes of less than $10,000.

Here, we see a constellation of factors associated with neglect reports: “deep” poverty, single parent households, low educational achievement and several past CPS referrals. Loman, et al., comment that “many of the subcategories of child neglect are manifestations and effects of low-income status. This raises the question of whether addressing the basic poverty-related needs of families reported for child neglect might not only contribute to the welfare of families and children but [also] improve the long term safety of children.”

IAR found small but statistically significant reductions in re-referral and out-of-home placement rates for families in the AR track. The researchers also found larger positive differences in parent satisfaction for families in AR, which they believe was due (in large part) to the increase in poverty related services provided to families in AR. Caseworkers in the AR track had $1000 to spend on services for each family, and a considerable portion of these funds were spent on poverty related services. Caseworkers could also pay for mental health services; and

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In some studies, caseworkers were more likely than parents to prioritize services designed to effect behavioral changes for parents and children, which was a consistent finding in studies that ask caseworkers and parents to separately compile lists of families’ main needs.

Ohio’s AR system has provided a family friendly platform for delivering poverty related services to (mostly) neglecting families without compromising child safety. IAR comments that “Subsequent reporting of families for child abuse and neglect declined under alternative response, particularly among minority families, the most impoverished families in the study. Removals and out of home placements of children declined.”

When direct and indirect costs for AR families and control group families were combined, average costs for AR families were $1325 vs. $1233 for control group families, about a $100 increase in cost per family in AR.
**Additional Resources:**

**Book Review:**

*The Future of Child Protection* by Jane Waldfogel

This book was published in the late 1990s when differential response systems had been field tested in only a few agencies. Waldfogel provides an overview of child protection in the U.S. and the rationale for developing alternatives to CPS investigation for a significant percentage of CPS reports. The Future of Child Protection remains the best scholarly analysis of CPS reports and agency responses and points the way to a more family friendly and effective system.

**DR Resources:**


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**About the Casey Practice Digest:**

The Digest is intended to provide Casey staff with access to the forefront of research, policy and practice developments, bridging the gap between research and practice. Each issue is centered on a topical theme, and will include an interview with an expert source, maps and graphics displaying current trends at a high level, reviews of cutting-edge research with policy and practice applications, as well as resource links for further exploration. Digest editors include Casey staff from Knowledge Management and Data Advocacy Teams.

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