

Florida Sheriffs Take on Child Abuse Investigations

NIJ Research in Progress Seminar, "The Police as Child Protective Service Investigators: An Evaluation of the Transfer of Responsibility for Child Maltreatment Investigations in Four Counties in Florida," Richard J. Gelles, Susan Kinnevy, and Burton J. Cohen, grant number 00-IJ-CX-0002, available on videotape from NCJRS (NCJ 189634).

A study in which four Florida counties shifted responsibility for investigating child abuse and neglect cases from child welfare agencies to sheriffs' offices found no adverse consequences and detected improved police attitudes.

At the close of the 1990's, Federal courts supervised almost half of the Nation's child welfare systems because of deficiencies in foster care, adoption, and child welfare responsibilities. To improve the handling of child maltreatment investigations in Florida, the State legislature required three counties—Manatee, Pasco, and Pinellas—to transfer all

investigations of child maltreatment cases from the Department of Children and Families (DCF) to the sheriff's office. A fourth county—Broward—voluntarily shifted its child investigative functions to the sheriff's office.

Some thought that this transfer of duties would be beneficial because: (1) police officers might be better trained and equipped than DCF staff to investigate child abuse and neglect hotline reports and (2) the shift might allow DCF personnel to focus on improving family support services. Critics were concerned because officers have, at times, been viewed as insensitive to the needs of child abuse victims and perpetrators.

Researchers tested the hypothesis that the shift would lead to fewer service referrals, more foster care placements, and more arrests for child abuse and neglect offenses. The resulting trend would be toward criminalization of child abuse cases.

In a Research in Progress seminar held at NIJ, Richard J. Gelles, Susan Kinnevy, and Burton J. Cohen from the University of Pennsylvania presented encouraging preliminary findings from their study of the four Florida counties and three comparison counties.

Two Approaches to Child Abuse Cases

Traditional approach. In traditional child abuse programs, DCF workers take action based on incoming calls to a hotline. They visit the child, conduct a risk assessment, and provide support services to the family based on the assessment. If the case needs criminal investigation, DCF may ask a police officer either to meet with the DCF worker at the child’s location or to conduct a separate investigation (see figure 1).

Experimental approach. In the four experimental counties, a civilian child protective investigator employed by the sheriff and a deputy make the initial visit. Together they assess the risk and, if necessary, refer the case to DCF for services. If a criminal investigation is required, they contact a detective from the sheriff’s Crimes Against Children office (see figure 2).

No Dire Consequences Found

The researchers found that the possible negative consequences—such as increases in emergency placements and the growth of foster care rolls—were not evident.

Although it may be too soon to conclude that children reported as maltreated were any safer over time in the experimental counties, the findings indicate that child abusers were no more likely to be arrested in the experimental counties than they were in the comparison counties. Researchers believe that this is due to the lack of significant criminal penalties for child abuse in all of the counties studied.

Figure 1: Investigating Process in Traditional (Comparison) Counties

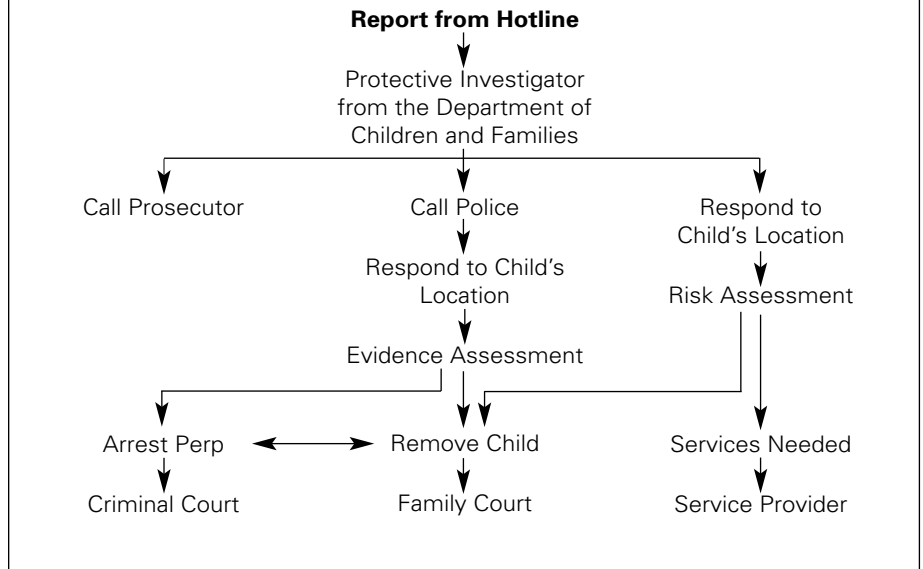
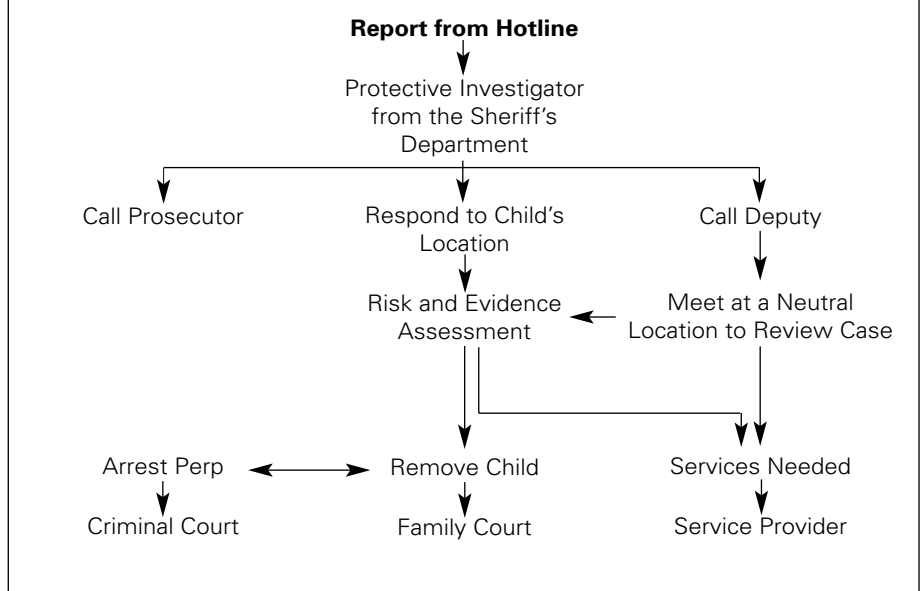


Figure 2: Investigative Process in Experimental Counties



Police Attitudes Improved

The study found that police officers’ attitudes toward child welfare cases appeared markedly more sensitive after the restructuring. One officer stated, “I’m more aware of the ‘gray’ areas...I can see the connection with poverty better.” Another said, “I

feel better about what happens to kids when there isn't any crime...I know the services they get..." Significantly, when the officers were asked, "What is the purpose of maltreatment investigations?" they uniformly answered, "To find out what the family needs."

Further consideration of regional differences may help clarify the findings. The researchers will review the data from 2001 and expand the study to cover related issues, including criminal penal-

ties for child abusers and evaluations of legal representation provided in such cases.

For more information

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