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Support Grows For No-Strings-Attached Cash For Families To Prevent Foster Care Removals

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Researcher Will Schneider discusses the optimism for and potential limitations of cash transfers as a way to decrease child maltreatment.





Will Schneider

Enthusiasm for programs that provide guaranteed cash support for low-income families is **spreading** in counties and cities coast to coast. In 2020, California became the first state to offer \$1,000 monthly stipends to former foster youth. And this month, New York **announced** a groundbreaking pilot to extend unconditional cash payouts of \$500 per month to parents facing child maltreatment investigations.

But even as evidence **grows** showing that financial benefits can drive down child neglect reports, child welfare scholars are eager to learn precisely how much money is needed to make a difference, and in what ways cash infusions can change a family's trajectory and a child's well-being.



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Will Schneider, a social work assistant professor at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, is among a **cohort** of researchers producing peer-reviewed **studies** seeking to answer those questions.

He is now in the second year of a five-year **research fellowship** with the William T. Grant Scholars Project. The New York native's work involves revisiting data from old research, such as a **landmark federal housing support study** launched in 1994 called Moving to Opportunity, and pairing them with state child welfare records. He aims to shed new light on, for example, how moving to wealthier neighborhoods affects low-income Illinois families' CPS involvement.

Schneider, 37, says he will be watching the new cash transfer pilot in New York closely, in hopes of launching a similar effort in Illinois with his frequent co-author Megan Feely, a social work professor at the University of Connecticut.

In a recent phone interview from his Champaign, Illinois, home, he described the optimism and potential limitations surrounding the promise of cash transfers as a way to decrease child maltreatment, along with the state of research on the topic.

Many questions remain, Schneider said, noting that guaranteed monthly income has never been targeted to child welfare-involved families.

“It’s really promising, but we don’t know what it would look like if it was targeted at families involved in child welfare, specifically,” he said. “If it was a tool that CPS had, maybe the effects would be much larger.”

The following interview has been lightly edited.

How long have scholars been discussing the potential of guaranteed income programs to prevent child maltreatment reports?

Some of that work has roots in the early 2000s, but there’s been a lot more of it recently.

There’s a group of folks who have been thinking about how poverty and social welfare policy influence maltreatment, or can prevent maltreatment. And that has gone in and out of favor over the years. But it’s been gaining steam. I do think at least part of that is the Family First Prevention Services Act legislation, which seeks to prevent foster care removals when possible, opening opportunities for new types of interventions. And things like the expansion of the Child Tax Credit, where we saw that cash can reduce child poverty dramatically.

And what we want to know is: do those kinds of programs affect maltreatment?

Why do you think this idea of cash transfers is so crucial for the child welfare field?

We are treating neglect as if it has the same set of causes as abuse. And the trends over time [show us](#) that it’s not working. So we can keep giving people treatments that don’t match the problem, or we can try and think of a better way.

When we treat abuse, we’re giving parents new tools to do something different. But when we treat neglect, we’re giving them those same tools, which is not useful. A parenting class doesn’t necessarily help with neglect. And so we’re telling parents, basically, to stop doing something — but we’re not giving them tools to do something different.

I'm not an advocate who says that money will cure everything in child welfare. But I think money is a key missing piece. And we know from the University of California, Irvine, scholar Kelley Fong's research that lots of mandated reporters call CPS because they're trying to get resources for kids. And that's not necessarily how CPS views its job. So there's a mismatch between what people and kids want and need and what the system is designed to do.

For me, part of doing this research is to think about how we can design CPS to provide more of the things that families need, especially given the end of the expanded federal Child Tax Credit. Because it seems like the broader federal policy landscape **isn't going to pursue those kinds of things**. And so someone else has got to do it.

As in, states, cities and counties?

Exactly. And especially for really vulnerable families, those who end up in contact with the child welfare system.

There seems to be so much enthusiasm for this idea in child welfare recently, especially among scholars. Why aren't there more experiments running yet?

In doing this research, we kind of straddled between economics and social work. Not all economists or social work scholars are convinced cash transfers will realize all the effects they promise. Research like **Baby's First Years has shown promise**, but it hasn't had all the positive effects we hoped yet.

And so it's somewhat limited. I think the research on "Do cash transfers 'work'?" depends a lot on what outcomes you are looking at.

Advocates and some scholars emphasize that poverty is not "child neglect," and too often the two are conflated in CPS investigations. They say cash transfers are a better solution than investigations. But others argue rates of maltreatment might decline only modestly with an expansion of welfare benefits amounting to a few hundred dollars per month, as many guaranteed income pilots propose. How much enthusiasm should there be for cash transfer benefits?

It's a great question. I don't think we know the answer. That's why we need to do this research and these pilots. I don't think my colleagues are all arguing that cash is a cure-all. We think there are a certain number of people where some cash over some period of time will help stabilize them and that may help to solve problems and it may also help them to

take advantage of the traditional psychosocial interventions and parenting classes — which they may not be able to take full advantage of because of the stress of instability.

And so how many families is that? I don't think we know.

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— WILL SCHNEIDER

How optimistic are about you that housing and employment programs — non-cash supports — like those you're studying in Chicago, can help families avoid a foster care removal?

The goal of my William T. Grant Scholars project is rather than running new randomized controlled trials — giving cash to new people — to use old randomized controlled trials that weren't about child welfare and see if they had child-welfare effects. I'm hoping it will shed some important light on this question.

One of the old studies I'll be drawing on, Moving to Opportunity, was a major study that looked at the effect of moving low-income families to less low-income neighborhoods. They've done long-term follow-ups, 10 or 15 years later, looking at the effects on the parents, the kids and then the kids' kids.

Moves may give families at least some basic stability. And that may solve the maltreatment concerns itself, but it may also be that then they can take advantage of traditional services because they have reached a level of stability.

And so it's a really rich data source. This will be the first research to link that data with child maltreatment registries. It'll be among the first experimental studies of the effect of neighborhoods on child welfare.

Many families most at risk of facing foster care removal have been in poverty for generations. What might be the right amount and approach to cash transfers to address