

# ARE POLICIES HELPING TO REDUCE CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT?

**Over the past 30 years, many countries have implemented policies and programs designed to reduce child abuse and neglect. The question is, are they working?**

To find out, researchers studied six countries and states: Sweden, the United States, England, New Zealand, Western Australia and the Canadian province of Manitoba (chosen for the availability of quality data). They looked at rates of hospital admissions for maltreatment-related injuries, violent deaths, and child protection agency contacts, including investigations, substantiations and out-of-home care.

Overall, they found no clear decrease or increase in child maltreatment. This could mean that interventions are not working – or it could

mean that increased awareness and action have resulted in more cases being reported, balancing out the numbers.

By choosing countries with different levels of inequality and social supports and different child maltreatment policies, researchers also hoped to assess the effects of different types of policies.

“The biggest contrast was between Sweden and the U.S.,” says Dr. Marni Brownell from the Manitoba Centre for Health Policy, one of the study’s authors. “We associated this difference not so much with specific policies around child maltreatment, but with broader policies.” For example, Sweden has much lower rates of child poverty and parental risk factors, such as addictions and intimate partner violence. At the policy level, Sweden offers much more support for parents, such as the length of paid

leave, and spends more on early childhood programs.

Across all countries, the study found tenfold differences in rates of children being placed in out-of-home care, with Manitoba having the highest rates of all. Dr. Brownell says this is disturbing, especially considering that there are no controlled trials comparing the effectiveness of out-of-home care with intensive home support.

She concludes by stressing the importance of preventive initiatives. “Surveys show there are lots of kids who experience maltreatment who never come to the attention of authorities. A universal public-health approach would be more likely to reach them, and potentially reduce the numbers of kids needing protection services.”

**BY EVE KRAKOW**

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## BULLETIN

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