Brief encounters: children in shelter for 7 days or less

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Available Online 23 March 2004

Abstract

This paper examines the circumstances of 1306 children in Hennepin County who were removed under urgent situations and placed, for 7 days or less, in emergency shelter care. This population represents more than one-quarter (26.13%) of the total number of children who experienced out-of-home placement (4998) in Hennepin County (1999). This study allows us to examine, briefly, the circumstances of children who are removed from their families under emergency situations, their demographic profiles and exit information following their shelter care. Two research questions guided this study: is placement in a shelter the least intrusive response for the safety needs of children in emergency situations? And, can we capture and clarify the working relationship between child protection workers and local law enforcement officers? In examining the data on shelter placement, some conclusions are drawn and recommendations are made to improve protocols that guide emergency placements.

Keywords: Child protection workers; Emergency placements; Law enforcement officers

1. Introduction

Out-of-home placement, despite the reality that it may often be essential to protect the health and welfare of a child, is always a stressful event for a child. This is no less true when the out-of-home placement is for a brief period of time. Despite this certainty, a review of the child abuse and neglect literature on short-term or emergency out-of-home placements yields only occasional and indirect references (Shireman, Miller & Brown, 1981; Wright & Seymour, 2000).

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The absence of published literature may be, in part, due to a lack of definitional clarity. There is a lack of consensus on how to count short-term placements when gathering and analyzing data. Statewide standards on identifying the use of shelter care in urgent situations such as family emergencies, respite care, or hospitalization do not exist. Occasionally, the issue arises at the local level on a search for funding to pay for brief placements. In sum, brief, emergency placements have not been systematically studied.

More recently, however, the role of police in child protection is beginning to draw increased attention—particularly when children are found in circumstances that may endanger their health or welfare, and law enforcement officials are empowered to make emergency placements for their safety (Minn. Stat. Chapters 626 and 260, 2000). In the interconnection between law enforcement and child protection, two national issues dominated social policy debates at the time of this study. The first issue involved the merits of turning investigations of maltreatment reports over to the police, leaving child protection system the responsibility only for case management. The argument was that this arrangement solves the apparent contradictory situation for child protection workers who are required to investigate families, and also provide them with supportive intervention that will be rehabilitative in nature. Several states are considering this arrangement (Hutchinson, Dattalo & Rodwell, 1994).

A second national issue was associated with a Supreme Court decision relating to the Fourth Amendment of the Bill of Rights prohibiting unreasonable searches and seizures (Atwater, 2001, Supreme Court). This issue brought arrest procedures and the behavior of police when children are present to the nation’s attention. Moreover, at this time, the substantial disparity in the representation of children of color among child protection cases became the center of reflection and scrutiny (Darity & Myers, 1998). These issues contributed nuances to the process of completing this study.

2. Role and purpose of emergency shelter in the child welfare system

The availability of emergency care is an indispensable component of the crisis-ridden child welfare system. The ‘72-h hold’ provides the legal basis for maintaining a child away from parents under child protection jurisdiction for 3 days or less without a court order (Minn. Stat. Chapter 260, 2000). It is intended to provide a brief interval for an assessment of the parents’ capacity to care for the child and a relative/kin search, or time for a crisis team to find a stable solution for the care of a child removed from a complex, multi-problem, intergenerational family. For the child welfare system, emergency shelter care allows ‘a breather’ and gives time to work out a solution for the best interests of the child. It is a particularly valuable option in the case of parental arrest (Smith et al., 1994).

3. Minnesota’s arrangements for emergency shelter care

Minnesota’s 87 counties vary in the arrangements they make for emergency care. Typically, for younger children, counties have developed emergency foster homes.
These are regularly licensed family foster homes, but are usually paid an extra amount each month to compensate them for being on call. Shelters, specifically designed for adolescents who runaways or in a disruptive placement situation, have been developed around the state (Siltberg, personal communication, July 12, 2001). Minnesota statutes (2000) allow law enforcement officers to take children into immediate custody when a child is found in surroundings or conditions that endanger the child’s health or welfare, or when such an officer reasonably believes the condition may lead to endangerment of the child’s health or welfare.

Hennepin County is the most populous county in the state, with a large, urban population. It has one central location for its emergency shelter intake, St. Joseph’s Home for Children in Minneapolis, which is under contract with the county. The Community-Based First Response system, under the auspices of Hennepin County’s child protection system, is a 24-h crisis intervention service housed in this shelter. Workers in this unit screen admissions into the county shelter system (Minn. Stat. Chapter 260, 2000). They are also qualified to do child protection investigations. To respond to emergency situations occurring after hours, an additional unit of two child protection workers working night shifts is placed in Precinct Four of the Minneapolis Police Department.

4. Methods of entry into St. Joe’s

Children arrive at St. Joseph’s Home via four methods authorized by statute and regulations. The majority of children arrive under the auspices of the 72-h hold (Minn. Stat. Chapter 260, 2000). The 72-h hold is the primary placement authority for this population, occurring when a child is in immediate danger and police believe that emergency protective care is indicated. In Minnesota, only the police are legally allowed to take a child into custody without prior court authorization. Children also enter St. Joe’s through court order, occurring after findings of maltreatment have been made by a court and the child is adjudicated as a ‘Child in Need of Protection or Services,’ through a voluntary placement, occurring when a parent chooses to place a child in St. Joe’s for a short period of time, or through a juvenile warrant, occurring when a warrant exists for a child’s arrest, often for failing to attend a court hearing.

5. The study

This study was developed to examine the circumstances of 1306 children who were removed from their families under emergency situations and held for 7 days or less in emergency shelter care.

5.1. Sources of data

The data used in the study were based largely on administrative information collected at Hennepin County’s central point of intake for Child Protective services, St. Joseph’s Home for Children (hereafter referred to as St. Joe’s) during 1999.
According to data from St. Joe’s, more than 2463 children passed through this system in 1999. Of this group, 1306 (53.02%) were in shelter for 7 days or less. These data were augmented by group interviews with Hennepin County child protection workers and supervisors and with staff members and administrative staff from St. Joe’s. Individual interviews with the Minneapolis chief of police, the supervisor of the Community Based First Response unit, child protection workers based in a police precinct, St. Joe’s intake workers, and Hennepin County Community Based First Response workers also informed this study. The analysis of these data took place in 2000 and 2001.

5.2. Findings

Data from St. Joe’s intake forms were examined to provide information on age, address, race/ethnicity, placement authority, reasons for placement and disposition. Data on the child’s family composition was not available, but it should be noted that a large portion of children were admitted as part of a sibling group (46%). To provide more focused information, profiles of children by age group are included at the end of this section.

5.2.1. Admission by geographic location of report

Although St. Joe’s serves the entire Hennepin County region, the vast majority of children came from Minneapolis. Specifically, a large portion of the children served by St. Joe’s and requiring an emergency response came from the neighborhoods of Minneapolis’ north side, which comprise the Minneapolis Police Department’s Fourth Precinct (Minneapolis Police Department, 1999).

The Fourth Precinct has distinct demographic characteristics. Of all the Minneapolis police precincts, the highest proportion of African–Americans in the county reside in the Fourth Precinct. An increasing number of Somali, Asian and Hispanic families are also residents of this precinct. An extremely high concentration of children has been recorded within the precinct. In some neighborhoods in this area, there are as many as 60 children per square block (Minneapolis Police Department, 1999).

The Fourth Precinct has the highest adult arrest rate among Minneapolis’ five precincts. This is particularly noteworthy because it does not have the highest rate of reported crime (the Third Precinct, which encompasses part of the east and south sides of Minneapolis and includes the Minneapolis campus of the University of Minnesota, holds this record). This inconsistency suggests the possibility that the large number of children brought to the attention of child protective services in this geographical area may likely be a result of increased surveillance rather than increased child maltreatment.

In this connection, it should be noted that the Fourth Precinct has been designated as a CODEFOR (computer optimized deployment focus on results) ‘hotspot’ (Minneapolis Police Department, 2002). This designation makes it possible for police to target resources to neighborhoods that they deem to be at risk for serious crimes. This strategy increases the presence of police and allows for significant
discretion on the part of individual police officers in stopping people and in making arrests. In Minneapolis, the CODEFOR strategy is in operation in predominantly African–American neighborhoods. Linking the increased surveillance of a neighborhood under a CODEFOR strategy to increased child maltreatment reports has not yet been studied.

As Fig. 1 illustrates, broken down by age, 23% (301) of the children were aged 0–3, 16% (211) aged 4–6, 27% (350) were aged 7–11 and 34% (444) were aged 12–17 (as seen in Fig. 1 above). Note that very young children and the oldest group of children produce the highest number of children in shelter care.

African–American children represent the majority, 55% (708), of the total population, as is illustrated in Fig. 2. Caucasian children make up the next largest group at 19% (254), followed by Native American children at 10% (132), and all bi-racial children at 9% (121). Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander and ‘other’ comprised fewer than 6% of the total short-stay population. It is important to note that information about the race/ethnicity of children at St. Joe’s was not systematically collected. Observations of intake workers were occasionally supplemented by police. Many of the children identified as ‘bi-racial’ were older children who self-identified this designation.

As Fig. 3 illustrates, African–American children are over-represented in every age group in the St. Joe’s population, as well as the total. Although the presence of African–American children 18 years of age and younger is recorded as almost 14% (13.9%) of the entire youth population in Hennepin County, African–American children make up 55% of the children entering the shelter for a stay of 7 days or less. This is almost four times their representation in Hennepin County’s population. It should be noted, however, that a large portion of the children in this study were
from Minneapolis and in Minneapolis, African–American children 18 years of age and under make up 31% of the population (US Census Bureau, 2000), somewhat reducing the dramatic nature of the disparity.

The reasons for placement of children in St. Joseph’s home are varied, as is illustrated in Fig. 4. The intake forms provide 26 ‘reasons for placement.’ However, overlap and indistinct definitions ultimately suggested 12 distinct categories, which were constructed for clarification purposes with approval of St. Joe’s intake workers. Those categories were: ‘abuse’, ‘neglect’, ‘parent substance abuse’, ‘parent abandonment’, ‘parent incarceration’, ‘external parent factors’, ‘child factors’, ‘family conflict’, ‘absent parent’, ‘parent absent—health reasons’, ‘asked to leave placement’ and ‘absent child.’ Illustratively, the overlap of ‘parental substance abuse’ with ‘parental incarceration’ was acknowledged, but not precisely differentiated.

‘Abuse’, including physical and sexual abuse, was the number one reason for placement, accounting for 16% of the population. ‘Absent child’ accounted for 15% of children entering St. Joe’s. This category refers primarily to children who were absenting—‘on the run’—from their out-of-home placement and returning to shelter.

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The category of ‘abuse’ encompasses both physical and sexual abuse. Sexual abuse was such a rarely given ‘primary reason for placement’ into shelter that it did not warrant its own category.
care. ‘Parent incarceration’ was the third most common primary reason for placement (12%), and ‘parent abandonment’ and ‘absent parent’ each made up 11% of the reasons for placement. ‘Family conflict’ (7%), ‘parent substance abuse’ (6%), ‘neglect’ (6%), ‘asked to leave’ (5%), ‘absent parent-health reasons’ (4%), ‘child factors’ (3%), and ‘external parent factors’ (2%) round out the primary reasons for placement.

In some instances, ‘parent abandonment’ includes children left in the care of family friends or neighbors for a lengthy period of time, and the parent could not be located. This is distinguished from ‘parent absent,’ which denotes parents who needed to be absent because of family crises such as funerals in another state, or absence due to other emergency, health-related conditions. Furthermore, ‘parent substance abuse’ includes parents about to go into treatment, for whom childcare arrangements had not been finalized. ‘Parent incarceration’ includes parents either under arrest or in jail. ‘External parent factors’ refers to homelessness or incidents arising out of domestic crises. ‘Child factors’ refers to children who were asked to leave placement.

Children of color are far more likely to be placed due to ‘parent incarceration’ than are Caucasian children. Seventeen percent of African–American children, 10% of Native American children, and 10% of all bi-racial children were brought to St. Joe’s as a result of ‘parent incarceration,’ vs. 1% of Caucasian children.

As Fig. 5 illustrates, there was some variation in disposition depending on the age of the children. Children less than 11 years of age were returned to families at much higher rates than adolescents. Children aged 0–6 were returned to families or relatives approximately 85% of the time. Slightly older children aged 7–11 were
reunified with parents or relatives 70% of the time. There was a great drop in family reunification for the adolescent population. Youth aged 12–17 were discharged to the custody of a parent in only 24% of the cases, and to relatives an additional 4%, for a total family reunification rate of 28%.

5.3. Profiles of children admitted to St. Joe’s

5.3.1. Profile of children 0–3 years of age

Of all children admitted to shelter in 1999, 301 were between the ages of 0 and 3 years of age. They comprised nearly one-quarter, or 23%, of the total admissions to shelter for the year. More than 90% of the admitted infants and toddlers had not experienced an admission to shelter within the last 365 days. A little less than half of very young children were admitted as a part of a sibling group.

African–American children aged 3 and younger comprised 53% of all admissions, followed by 18% White, 10% Native American and 10% bi-racial children.

‘Parent incarceration’ was the primary reason for placement among children aged 0–3, accounting for 21% of all admissions in this age group. ‘Parent abandonment’ (15%), ‘physical abuse’ (12%), ‘parent substance abuse’ (11%), ‘need to locate parent’ (10%), and ‘neglect’ (8%) were the five largest remaining categories of reasons for placement.

The majority of infants and toddlers were brought in under a 72-h hold (83%), and the rest were under court order (15%). Only 2% of the emergency placements were voluntary. Finally, 85% of children aged 0–3 were released to their parents or relatives, and 8% were placed in foster care.
5.3.2. Profile of children 4–6 years of age

Children aged 4–6 comprised 16% of the total shelter admissions for the year. As with all age groups, children of color are dramatically over-represented among children aged 4–6 who were admitted into shelter care. More than half (54%) of all children aged 4–6 at St. Joe’s in 1999 were African–American children. Native American children represented another 9% of children aged 4–6. Eight percent of children aged 4–6 were identified as bi-racial. Three percent were identified as Asian and 2% Hispanic. Caucasian children accounted for one-fifth, or 20%, of the population of children 4–6 years of age at St. Joe’s.

More than four-fifths (83%) of children entered St. Joe’s under a 72-h hold. Another 13% entered through the authority of a court order. Only 3% of children 4–6 years of age were placed voluntarily by a parent or caretaker. One percent of all children aged 4–6 entered St. Joe’s as a result of a juvenile warrant.

The vast majority of children 4–6 years of age were reunified with family when they left St. Joe’s. Similar to children aged 0–3, 86% of children aged 4–6 were returned to their parents or relatives. The real impact of that number may actually be slightly higher, as 2% of children were released to ‘friends.’ Five percent of children went to foster care when they left St. Joe’s, and 4% experienced a transfer of custodial care—likely between foster care placements. The final disposition of an additional 3% of children fell into the category of ‘other.’

5.3.3. Profile of children 7–11 years of age

Children aged 7–11 represent 27% of all children admitted to St. Joe’s during 1999. More than 90% of the admitted youth had not experienced an admission to shelter within the last 365 days, and just more than 60% of the children were admitted as a part of a sibling group.

Again, as with all age groups, children of color are over-represented among the children aged 7–11 admitted to shelter care. African–American children represented
63% of children aged 7–11 at St. Joe’s in 1999. Native American children represented another 10%, followed by 6% of children identified as bi-racial, 3% who identified as Hispanic, and 2% Asian. Caucasian children accounted for 16% of the population of children aged 7–11 at St. Joe’s.

‘Physical abuse’ is the primary reason for placement among children aged 7–11, accounting for 18% of all admissions in this age group. ‘Parent incarceration’ (17%), ‘abandonment’ (14%), ‘need to locate parent’ (12%), and ‘neglect’ (10%) were the five largest remaining categories of reasons for placement.

The majority of children aged 7–11 entered St. Joe’s under a 72-h hold (74%), while 19% entered under a court order and 6% entered on a voluntary basis. Of these children, 70% were released to their parents or relatives and 8% were placed in foster care.

5.3.4. Profile of children 12–17 years of age

Thirty-four percent of all children admitted into St. Joe’s in 1999 were aged 12–17%. For 61% of these children, this was their first admission to shelter within the last year. Nineteen percent of the children were admitted as a part of a sibling group.

Once again, of all older children admitted, children of color were over-represented among the children aged 12–17. African–American children represented 52% of the population. Native American children represented 12%, bi-racial children 6%, and both Asian and Hispanic children represented 2% of the children aged 12–17. Caucasian children accounted for 24% of the population of children 12–17 years of age at St. Joe’s.

Sixty-four percent of older adolescents entered St. Joe’s through the authority of a court order, and 27% entered under a 72-h hold. The top five reasons for placement among children aged 12–17 are as follows: 33% were runaways from placement, 6% were runaways from home, 9% were adolescents asked to leave placement, 8% were in shelter placement because of physical abuse. Only 5% of the older children were placed because of parental incarceration.

The disposition information is as follows: for almost one-third (33%) of these children, there was no record of where they had gone after their shelter placement. It is assumed that these children left as runaways. Only 24% of the older adolescents were reunified with family, the lowest rate among all age groups.

6. Limitations of the data

Reports based on administrative data carry a cautionary note. Problems of overlap in categories, uncertain definitions and missing data were acknowledged by shelter staff and related somewhat to the emergency nature of the intake circumstance.

Administrative data used in this study were gathered from the intake form used at the time of a child’s arrival at St. Joe’s and again at the child’s discharge. The intake data were subject to the variables of emergency situations, including timing and priorities of workers responding to crises. A child, the police escort, or the child protection worker may have provided additional responses necessary to
complete the intake form. Complete and accurate information was often not available at the time of intake. Furthermore, the intake forms used by St. Joe’s at the time of this study lacked clarity. (The forms have since been revised.) Details about the circumstances that necessitated child shelter placement were not systematically recorded. At the time of this study, clearly understood definitions for recording administrative data had not been developed, but plans for a protocol to encourage consistency in data collection was underway.

7. Discussion

Generally the removal of children from their families takes place when imminent harm is threatened because of physical or sexual abuse, egregious neglect, abandonment, or the arrest of a parent or caretaker. Children may then be placed in a squad car wherever they are—school, daycare, a friend’s home, etc.—and taken to St. Joe’s. Law enforcement officers are required to call a child protection worker, when children are removed. There are specific instructions to police for taking a child into custody (Minn. Stat. 260C.175, 2002), including authorization for ‘protective pat-down search of a child of any age or gender’. Police then drop off the child or children at St. Joe’s shelter. At this point, they may provide some information to the intake worker at St. Joe’s. Once a child is placed in the shelter, the child may undergo several ‘interrogations’. A staff nurse, an intake worker, a child protection worker, and a mental health professional may all want to question the child or children.

This study of children removed under emergency situations and who experienced shelter care for a brief period disclosed three distinct but interrelated issues: the nature of the relationship between police and child protection; the impact of parental arrests on children; and factors of race and ethnicity in the emergency removal of children from their families.

7.1. Police/child protection relationships

The extent of police powers that can be used in response to child maltreatment reports is generally not fully realized or understood. Police power has been greatly expanded during the past two decades. Only police, sheriff, or other agents of law enforcement are now legally empowered to remove children from their familial households in Minnesota and many other states (Minn. Stat. 260C.175, 2000).

Furthermore, reports of child abuse and neglect may be made to either police or child protection workers. While the law does require ‘cross-reporting,’ that is, each party must exchange information at the reporting stage (Minn. Stat. 626.556. subd.3 (a), 2000), joint responsibilities in the investigation stage are discretionary (Minn. Stat. 626.556. subd.6, 2000). Working arrangements vary, but joint investigations when caseworkers and police/sheriffs go to the household together are exceptional in Hennepin County. When they do occur, the roles are negotiated. Joint investigations generally occur when egregious harm related to sexual and physical abuse is perceived, and where the neglect is of a criminal nature. Police powers allow arrest
during the investigation if there is reason to believe that a crime has been committed. Law enforcement officers and social workers respond within their professional contexts. Typically, law enforcement concentrates on gathering evidence and case-workers assess the family and child circumstances (Shireman et al., 1981; Willis & Wells, 1988).

Local and state level administrative reviews generally give good marks to the partnership between child protection social workers and police (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2000). However, tensions do arise at the level of direct service in terms of cross-reporting, investigation of cases and case planning. Clearly child protection and law enforcement operate under different professional ideologies. Similar issues of differing professional ideologies have been found to be present in working relationships between social workers and/or advocates who work with battered women and police. Law enforcement standards of child removal and placement are embedded in a criminal model centered on the perpetrator and documentation of case-specific evidence. For the law enforcement officer, gathering evidence is the preeminent concern, and a quick removal to the shelter is the convenient action. The social work perspective is absorbed with reasonable efforts directed toward family and child interests. For social workers, the search for options, when emergency removal is required, is guided by concerns for the ‘least disruptive placement.’

Reconciling these points of view requires negotiation and mutual respect. Incidents of tension and misunderstanding inevitably arise. Illustratively, there are differing assessments of ‘imminent harm’ and the conditions under which children are returned to parents. Supervision, administrative reviews and cross-training are important elements in solving issues in these ambiguous partnerships.

It should be noted that 80% of children are reunified with parents. The children do not reappear in the shelter in the year under review. The extent to which the children are reunited with parents/kin under protective supervision, a closely supervised arrangement, was not revealed in the disposition data. What transpires at the time of the child’s return to parents/kin was also not available within the administrative data. Whether the event of the child’s brief stay in emergency shelter is used to conduct risk assessment or to refer to voluntary services is open to question.

In a 72-h hold, time is of the essence. The interview data reveal that the rapid assessment of the family’s capacity to care for the child is the most contentious issue between police and child protection workers. Understandably, the crisis nature of emergency placement does not generally allow reflective decisions. Sorting out the capacity of parents to care for a young child in a large sibling group brought to a shelter under stressful circumstances is a daunting assessment assignment.

The length of time social workers and police have worked together appears to be the key to a mutual understanding of roles and responsibilities. To encourage a knowledgeable and stable working relationship, each law enforcement precinct has an officer with special training in child protection. The assignment of a specialized officer trained in child protection issues does increase the opportunity for cooperative decisions. The Fourth Precinct, the source of the greatest number of emergency
removals, has two social workers on site and on-call throughout the night. This arrangement has encouraged cooperative decisions based on the safety and best interests of the child.

7.2. The impact on children when emergency removal occurs: the case of parental arrests

This study reveals that a primary reason for very young (particularly African–American) children (aged 0–6) to be removed in emergency situations is parent incarceration. The phenomenon of women—more likely than men to be the sole caretakers of young children—arrested with increasing frequency was noted several years earlier than this study. The increase is attributed to drug-related crimes (Shireman et al., 1981; Wright & Seymour, 2000). In most cases, the removal of a child from parents is a traumatic, grief-laden event. This event exacts an even more devastating toll when the child witnesses the arrest of a parent.

Perhaps Justice Sandra Day O’Connor expressed this most vividly in her dissenting opinion in Atwater (2001), when she warned of dire long-term consequences when children witness ‘gratuitous humiliation’ and ‘the pointless indignity’ that sometimes accompanies arrest. Interview data reveal that handcuffing, shackling, and being shoved into the back of a squad car occurred during parental arrest, when circumstances of ‘resistance’ or ‘aggressive behavior’ are noted. Justice O’Connor warns that ‘unbounded discretion’ for the police in the manner of arrests ‘carries with it grave potential for abuse.’ It is these events that incite children to feelings of helpless rage, humiliation and fear. The police response to children is of key importance. Justice O’Connor, in her dissent, noted that children may harbor throughout their lifetimes either respect or dread and hostility toward law enforcement, depending on what they witness when parents are arrested.

It is important to remember that the circumstances of parental arrest may often be entirely unrelated to child maltreatment. The most common circumstances involve warrants of arrest for excessive parking fees, forged checks, shoplifting, faulty cars, substance abuse or narcotics. Arrests for child endangerment, neglect of a child, or malicious punishment of a child are far less common. (Child endangerment may include an arrest involving a DWI with a child in the car.) In domestic violence situations, arrests may occur if the child is used as a shield, or the parent is deemed unable to protect the child from an abusive partner.

According to one observer, from the child’s point of view, placement is a euphemism for arrest. For the child, there are no benign motives for the removal. It is perceived as an involuntary separation with painful and confusing consequences.

Under urgent circumstances, police may or may not attempt to locate parents or guardians to take custody. Typically, children are ‘detained’. The extent to which police respond to children’s anxious questions—‘when will we see our mom and where?’—depends on the officer’s ‘comfort’ in playing the role of the social worker. It is by no means consistent.

The decision to await the arrival of a child protection worker prior to placement is up to the police, and this is an ambiguous arrangement. Yet, it is crucial for
someone to explain to the child the various options that might be considered, including being reunified with parents, placed with relatives, or placed in a shelter while a decision is made regarding their disposition.

At the time of this study, clear protocol did not exist for how police are supposed to treat children, thus the treatment of a child is dependent upon the police officers’ sensitivity to the needs of children. If a child is not present when a parent is arrested, the police may not know about the existence of the child and thus may not be concerned about the child’s needs.

7.3. The factors of race and ethnicity in emergency care

The data from this study reveal a substantial overrepresentation of children of color in shelter care. A discussion of the factors that contribute to this disparity are beyond the scope of this study. However, inasmuch as a high proportion of emergency placements arise from the Fourth Precinct, the neighborhood data for this precinct provides an opportunity to speculate about these factors. Do the neighborhoods suffer from factors of poverty, disorder and mobility, all of which might reduce the capacity of community members to care for children in emergency situations? Does CODEFOR result in increased surveillance with the consequences of increased parental arrests? Is the reporting of maltreatment subject to bias? The subject of racial overrepresentation is troubling and demands study beyond the data presented here.

8. Recommendations

The disproportionate number of children of color in emergency placement has raised concerns about police and child welfare procedures and the consequences of these procedures. Yet, to date, the racial factor in parental arrests, and its immediate impact on children, has not been carefully scrutinized. In the interest of providing guidance to reduce the number of children placed in shelter care, the circumstances of parental incarceration should be the focus of a detailed study. Furthermore, the training component for police officers, when parental arrest involves children, needs to be reviewed—and likely improved.

Best practices for police involvement with children and families at the time of parental arrest include the following: asking parents about their children; allowing the parent time to reassure the child about what is happening; allowing the parent time to take care of a few ‘loose ends,’ such as notifying a workplace or finding a caregiver for the child; allowing the child to bring personal belonging from home, such as a stuffed animal or book; and providing information to the child (at a developmentally appropriate level) about what is happening to the parent and what will happen to the child. To improve the likelihood of best practices occurring, a protocol should be adopted for dealing with children in cases of parental arrest. Police should be given training on how to talk to children in times of trauma. Police should also be informed that the manner in which they treat parents during an arrest is something that a child will remember forever. Treating parents with respect during
an arrest could provide one venue for improving the relationship between police and the public. Police should also adopt simple efforts to increase the comfort of children, such as carrying children’s toys or other comfort items in their squad cars (Sandt, 2000; Wright & Seymour, 2000).

Children’s responses to separation will vary according to their developmental level. Although coping with known bad situations is difficult for children, coping with uncertainty is even more difficult. Where will I live? Who will care for me? When will I see my parent again? When will I return home? And what will happen? These are common questions that require a response suitable for the child’s age and stage of development.

Officially, the relationship between law enforcement and child welfare services is favorable. Administrators from both departments report good working relationships and similar goals (Olson, personal communication, October 14, 2000; Sanders, personal communication, August 8, 2000). However, the evaluation of Child Protection Services in Hennepin County shows that there is room for improvement in the relationship between child protection and police (Minnesota Department of Human Services, 2000). The problems appear to be at the level of direct service, specifically cross-reporting and investigation of cases. Police do not always notify child protection of child welfare concerns. Similarly, police and law enforcement report frustration with the procedures of child protection such as the screening criteria for placement and the rapid return of children to potentially unsafe homes.

More attention should be paid to the effect of the child’s witnessing a parent’s arrest. Sandt (2000) provides sound and useful guidance:

Traumatized children take in what they’re emotionally ready to handle. How you present information to the child about what’s happening is critical. The manner in which you deliver information, word choice, tone of voice, repetition of information, and use of pauses all affect how the child perceives the situation. It’s important to give the child as full an understanding of what’s happening as possible, while being careful not to overload the child... The child needs to know his/her concerns are being taken seriously... Remember, the child hears what you say... Give children something to call their own. Abused and neglect children are facing many losses at the time of removal—their parents, their communities, their belongings. They need something they can call their own, such as a book, toy, or piece of clothing from home. Be creative and see if there’s a way to retrieve a personal object from the child’s home. If necessary, remind the judge of the impact the proceedings are having on the child...

Police protocols should be reviewed periodically, with special attention to working with children. A training unit, focusing on best serving the needs of children present during parental arrest or confrontation should be developed.

To reach the goal of fewer removals to emergency shelter care, the introduction of a ‘community worker’ should be considered. This individual would be someone who has detailed knowledge of the supportive networks in the community. The community worker’s major task would be to focus on the child and identify resources (such as relatives, close friends, faith establishments, school or other community connections) to minimize shelter placements. The fact that there are few repetitive placements within a calendar year indicates that most children can be safely maintained within kin and extended family networks while the emergency conditions are assessed.
The final recommendation of this study is to use the information gathered through this process to advocate for increased attention to the disproportionate number of African–American children in child protective services and in emergency shelter care.

9. Conclusion

Brief emergency care is a necessary part of the child welfare system. It allows transition time in which child welfare workers are able to attempt to prevent more extended placement for children in crisis. Nonetheless, the important role it serves in the child protection system should not go unexamined. It is important to continue to explore the ways in which brief, emergency care and entry into that care, can be minimized.

Acknowledgments

This research was supported by the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare and the Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, University of Minnesota. The authors gratefully acknowledge the time and effort of the staff of St. Joseph’s Home for Children. Under the direction of Charles Lawler, they cooperated fully in sharing knowledge and observations of emergency shelter care. Further, Carolyn McHenry, Hennepin County, contributed to our understanding of the history and development of the partnership between Hennepin County and St. Joe’s. The authors are also very appreciative of the information and insights provided by numerous others in law enforcement, and child protection services. All views are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the participating agencies. All errors are the authors’.

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