

**THE STATE OF JUVENILE DEPENDENCY COURT RESEARCH:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY**

**NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JUVENILE AND FAMILY COURT JUDGES  
PERMANENCY PLANNING FOR CHILDREN DEPARTMENT**

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# THE STATE OF JUVENILE DEPENDENCY COURT RESEARCH: IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND POLICY

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In 2007, the California Administrative Office of the Court's Center for Families, Children and the Courts contracted with the Permanency Planning for Children Department of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges to conduct a research review to determine the current state of research involving juvenile dependency<sup>1</sup> courts. The review examined all relevant research from the last ten years which involved juvenile dependency court processes or outcome measures. This paper presents a brief overview of the findings of that research, including identification of several promising research projects. Additionally, the paper addresses the gaps in the current state of juvenile dependency court research and makes recommendations to advance the field with more research and better research methodology.

Juvenile dependency courts play a key role in overseeing the cases of children removed from their home as a result of abuse and neglect. Although many academic journals and publications are devoted to topics in child welfare, research focused on the role of the court in ensuring the safety, permanency and well-being of children in foster care is relatively rare. In particular, little is known about the causal relationship of juvenile court improvements and reforms to the ultimate outcomes for children in the dependency system.

A review of published quantitative research related to juvenile dependency courts identified 76 studies published between 1997 and 2007. Of these, one-quarter were from academic journals and three-quarters were from non-peer reviewed publications, usually sponsored by associations or governmental agencies. The authors found much work of value to the dependency courts and other stakeholders. Both the findings and the methodologies of these studies are highlighted in the accompanying report. However, some serious deficiencies in dependency court research were also identified. Major gaps in current research include:

- **Content Areas**  
There are a limited number of studies related to the core work of dependency courts, including a lack of research on judges, judicial workload, and representation (particularly regarding children's attorneys). Further, no studies were found on minority over-representation in the dependency court process.
- **Outcome Measures**  
Few research studies addressed specific outcomes of the court and child welfare system, including due process, safety, permanency and well-being outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup>Dependency is used herein to refer to civil child abuse and neglect or child protection cases and courts hearing those cases.

- **Methodology Employed**  
The majority of studies reviewed were descriptive studies. Few studies employing experimental designs were found, and most were lacking in statistical rigor, resulting in an inability to generalize findings.
- **Lack of Opportunity for Meaningful Research**  
Most research has not been efficiently disseminated, theory was rarely tested, and there were few links or collaborations between academic and applied researchers.

After reviewing the available publications, the authors proposed several recommendations for moving the field of research in dependency courts forward:

1. **Generate buy-in from stakeholders.** Collaborating with judges and encouraging them to become informed consumers of research will result in more demand for high quality research, as well as research designs that accurately reflect the needs and role of the dependency court.
2. **Combine efforts of academic and applied researchers.** More collaboration between academic researchers (who have expertise in theory and statistical rigor) and applied researchers (who have expertise in systems' knowledge and applied methods) is needed.
3. **Address the gaps in the field.** Research should address the role of the judge, judicial workload, and representation in affecting outcomes of due process, safety, permanency and well-being.
4. **Ensure adequate dissemination.** All research should be disseminated in a manner that allows for the broadest possible audience to benefit. More journals and conferences are needed to ensure better dissemination.
5. **Funding needs to become a priority.** Funding sources for research exist through federal, state and philanthropic organizations. Funding should be explored so that methodologically sound and practically useful research for juvenile dependency courts can be prioritized.

**Results of the review clearly indicate that dependency courts cannot draw from the large base of quantitative research and evaluation on their processes and outcomes that are available to the child welfare system and other stakeholders. Dependency courts need more and better research, especially research which can address the gaps identified, and which ties research findings to policy and practice reforms.**

## INTRODUCTION

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Efforts to improve the juvenile dependency court have been steadily underway since the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (PL 96-272), one of the first major steps in formalizing the juvenile dependency court process. This was followed by a number of key events in the 1990s which sought to further enhance the system. The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1993, for example, which included the Court Improvement Program (PL 103-66, 107 Stat. 312), was enacted with the goal of systematically reforming the juvenile dependency court.

Two years later in 1995, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) published the *RESOURCE GUIDELINES: Improving Court Practice in Child Abuse and Neglect Cases*, which provided the foundation for court improvements by not only establishing hearing best practices, but also making recommendations for enhancement of the juvenile dependency court system as a whole. This groundbreaking work was quickly followed by the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (PL 105-89), which called for expanded judicial oversight in order to ensure the safety of the child and timely case processing, and established permanency, safety and well-being of children as the primary outcomes to achieve in child welfare cases.

The passing of these laws and the development and recognition of best practice guidelines increased the responsibility and accountability of judicial officers, requiring them to ensure both safety and the best interest of the child and procedural fairness for parents, all the while moving the case along in a more timely fashion. These reform efforts served as a catalyst for change, identifying important ways that the court could significantly impact the outcome of a child abuse and neglect case. Engaging parents early on in the case, for example, could encourage later compliance and responsibility. Ensuring the educational and medical needs of the child are met could promote well-being during a difficult time for children and families. Further, by addressing visitation with parents and siblings, the court could take an active role in ensuring that family relationships and attachments were not severed. The new statutes and best practices allowed judges the opportunity to improve not only the life of a child, but also the life of an entire family. These changes have also required a closer examination of the court process in order to ensure that best practices are actually being implemented, statutory requirements are being met, and all parties are guaranteed their rights. One way to accomplish this is through evaluation and research.

Unlike the child welfare system, which has long benefited from and been informed by research and program evaluations designed to determine effective interventions and preventions, research used to inform the juvenile dependency court system is a fairly recent phenomenon. Research on the child welfare system has focused specifically on child protection interventions and prevention strategies. But the reforms identified above gave the courts major responsibilities in ensuring the timeliness of case events, and the safety and permanency of children. Research on the child welfare system needs to incorporate designs that would permit conclusions to be drawn about the impact of specific court improvement efforts, and contribute to national knowledge about practice, policy and program outcomes.

Research has the potential to improve the dependency court system in a variety of ways. Researchers can work with the courts to identify key strengths and weaknesses of court processes in order to improve system performance, a program of needs assessment that has long been conducted by other fields. Further, researchers, working with court officials, can help to identify and create performance measures, such as those outlined in the national dependency court performance measures.<sup>2</sup> These measures can be used to determine the impact of programs (e.g., mediation, pre-conference hearings, and family treatment courts) and best practices (e.g., judicial continuity, early appointment of counsel, and thorough and substantive hearings) on children's safety and permanency, as well as on the court's efficiency and ability to ensure the fairness of its procedures. Without these performance measures in place, it is difficult, if not impossible, to accurately determine how each factor in the juvenile dependency court process can influence outcomes. Finally, research can provide a theoretical foundation for system change. Researchers can not only identify good practice, but, through program evaluation, can also identify the causes of positive (or negative) outcomes by testing theories of system change.

Despite the clear benefits of conducting and utilizing research, most courts are not engaged in useful research projects. The problem is two-fold. Courts and court staff lack, or are unaware, of available funding to support needed research. The second concern is that courts may not know where to find researchers who are capable of conducting high quality research involving the juvenile dependency court system. This problem may be exacerbated by resistance to evaluation and research in the court context (e.g., concerns about access and confidentiality) as well as concerns about negative findings. Yet, stakeholders are gradually acknowledging the value of research and beginning to express a need for more research to improve their courts and their practices. Because of this move toward more and better research, it is essential to first understand what research has been conducted and how it has impacted the court system.

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<sup>2</sup> ABA Center on Children and the Law, National Center State Courts, and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (2004). *Building a Better Court: Measuring and Improving Court Performance and Judicial Workload in Child Abuse and Neglect Cases*. [www.courtsandchildren.org](http://www.courtsandchildren.org).

## EXAMINING CURRENT RESEARCH

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In June 2007, the Permanency Planning for Children Department (PPCD) of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) was contracted by the California Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) Center for Families, Children and the Courts to conduct a review and evaluation of research on the impact of juvenile dependency court improvements on the safety, permanency and well-being of the children under the court's jurisdiction. This project included a national evaluation of all relevant dependency court related project evaluations (within the last ten years) which reported *measurable* impacts of court improvement in terms of court process, fairness, and/or the safety, permanency or well-being of children in the juvenile dependency court system, as well as selected works of descriptive research which add to the quantitative picture of the courts' impact. The national dependency court performance measures previously mentioned were combined with measures from the Child and Family Services Reviews and the California Blue Ribbon Commission on Children in Foster Care to examine outcome measures in five key areas: safety, permanency, due process, timeliness, and well-being.

The NCJFCJ conducted an extensive review of the relevant research, examining academic databases (e.g., Academic Search Premier, PsychINFO), national organization materials and websites (e.g., National Center for State Courts, American Bar Association) and foundations (e.g., David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Casey Family Programs) in order to identify relevant research on the juvenile dependency court system. Studies were included in the review if they produced measurable outcomes related to the five key outcome factors listed above. Those which had sound methodology were also highlighted. Sound methodology was defined as studies which conducted research either with random assignment to treatment and control groups (experimental design) or with comparison between two groups (quasi-experimental designs). Innovative statistical methodology, and well-conducted studies that were primarily descriptive or quantitative were also noted.

Studies were then categorized into specific domains to aid comparison. These domains included general court improvement, with the sub domains of problem-solving courts, Model Courts, and judicial workload studies; representation, which included parents' representation, children's representation, and Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) evaluations; and alternative dispute resolution evaluations which included mediation and family group conferencing. Several promising studies were identified and are highlighted in the full project report. However, the number of studies, particularly studies with strong methodologies, is insufficient in relation to the needs of the court for the information research and evaluation can provide.

## RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH REVIEW

### Overview of Results

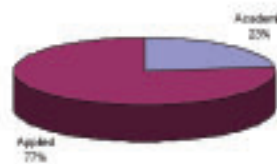
Seventy-six studies were identified for inclusion in the review. These studies included both academic and applied research across a variety of domains. The following snapshots summarize the information that was found.

### Type of Publication

Two major types of publications were identified in the studies. These were academic publications (i.e., articles published in peer reviewed journals) and applied publications (i.e., reports, technical assistance bulletins, or briefs published by organizations which conduct field research).

**Academic.** One-quarter (17) of the studies identified were found in academic journals. Although the articles were found in several different peer reviewed journals, the primary journals with the most frequently reviewed articles included:

- *Juvenile and Family Court Journal* (4)
- *Child Maltreatment* (3)
- *Research in Social Work Practice* (2)



**Applied.** The other three-quarters (59) of studies identified were conducted by national organizations and published through project reports, which were primarily available online (although the NCJFCJ often publishes their research in the form of *Technical Assistance Bulletins* and *Technical Assistance Briefs*). While many organizations conducting research *specific* to the juvenile dependency court system were found, the following organizations were represented in the research review sample most frequently:

- *National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges* (20 studies, 4 in collaboration with other organizations)
  - o Research topic areas included: Mediation, Family Group Conferencing, Representation, General Court Improvement, Model Court Assessments, and Judicial Workload



- *Center for Policy Research* (8 studies)
  - Research topics included: Mediation, Problem-Solving Courts, CASA/ GAL Programs, and Family Group Conferencing
- *Northwest Professional Consortium, Inc. (NPC) Research* (3 studies)
  - Research topics included: Problem Solving Courts, and General Court Improvement

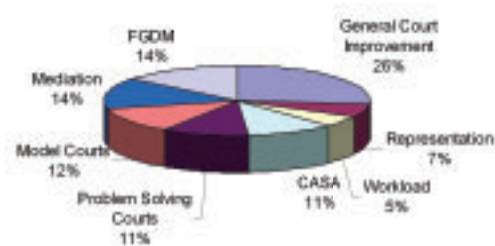
### **Summary of Findings**

The following tables and lists provide a brief summary of the content of research studies which were identified, categorized first by domain, then methodology, and finally by outcome measures assessed.

### **Domain**

#### General Court Improvement (41 studies)

- General Court Improvement (20)
- NCJFCJ Model Court Assessment (9)
- Problem-Solving Courts (8)
- Judicial Workload (4)



#### Representation (13 studies)

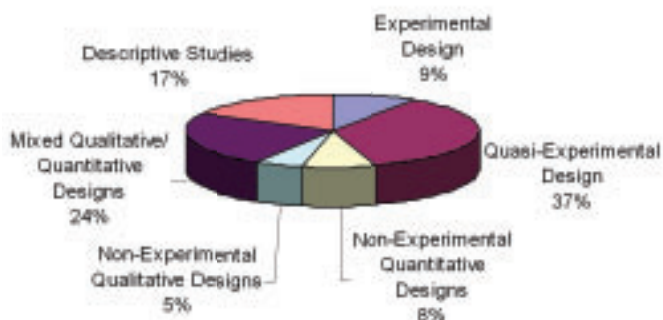
- CASA (8)
- Parents' Representation (5)

#### Alternative Dispute Resolution (22 studies)

- Mediation (11)
- Family Group Decision-Making (11)

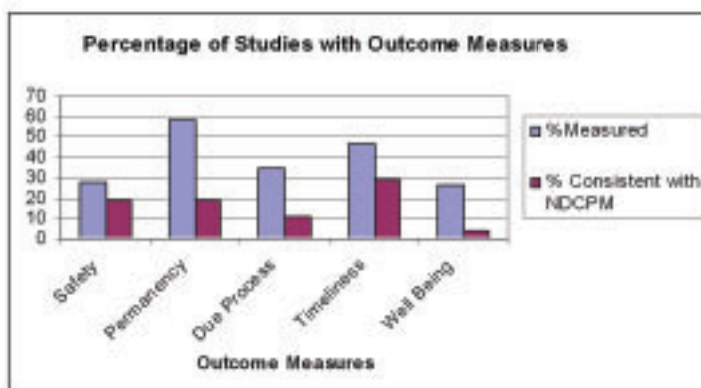
### Methodology

The methodology of studies was quite diverse. Few utilized a true experimental design, but several employed a quasi-experimental design, comparing experimental groups to comparison groups or conducting pre-post test measurement. Further, several studies were primarily descriptive in nature or included data but not research.



### Outcome Measures

Studies were evaluated based on their outcome measures and the percentage of measures which were consistent with the combined measures from the national dependency court performance measures (NDCPM), Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) measures, and California Juvenile Dependency Court California Blue Ribbon Commission on children in foster care measures.



### **Specific Results**

Overall, there were very few research studies which examined programs or best practices specifically tied to the juvenile dependency court system. Yet, of the few that were found, some of the research is quite promising. Over the last ten years, several quasi-experimental studies have employed comparisons between groups, and utilized advanced statistical analysis to draw conclusions. The authors noted an increasing number of advanced experimental and quasi-experimental designs in recent years, due in part to the recent efforts of the federal Court Improvement Program and the consortium of dependency researchers including the NCJFCJ, the National Center for State Courts (NCSC), the American Bar Association (ABA), the Center for Policy Research, and others. A few of these promising studies are briefly described below with findings of interest noted. All of the studies are described in depth in the full research paper.

### **Experimental Design**

- In 2001, following the implementation of the Family Court Pilot Program in Colorado, the Center for Policy Research conducted an analysis, randomly assigning cases to the Family Court or traditional court processing in order to examine the impact of the Family Court on case processing and outcomes. The Family Court ordered more services for the families than the control court [Information on locating all the studies in this paper is included in *Sources* at the end of the document].
- In 2002, the Center for Policy Research conducted an analysis of the Hamilton County Juvenile Court Permanent Custody Mediation program which randomly assigned cases to either mediation or no mediation and measured outcomes related to child permanency.
- Also in 2002, Festinger and Pratt conducted a study of judicial continuity between termination of parental rights and adoption hearings. They randomly assigned cases to typical process or expedited (continuity) condition and examined the impact on timeliness. Children whose cases had continuity reached adoption significantly faster than the comparison group, indicating judicial continuity can expedite case processing.
- In 2005, the NCJFCJ completed an experimental evaluation of the Washington, D.C. mediation program by randomly assigning juvenile dependency cases to either mediation or traditional case processing. They examined differences in safety, timeliness, and well-being. Case processing time frames were significantly shorter for mediated cases than non-mediated cases in terms of reaching adjudication, disposition and permanency. The mediated cases were also less likely to have returned to court within the 12-month follow-up time, indicating mediation can enhance case processing and safety.

- In 2005, the Institute of Applied Research in St. Louis, Missouri conducted an evaluation of the state of Mississippi's Title IV-E Child Welfare Waiver Demonstration Project. They randomly assigned children to the experimental (waiver) or control group and compared measures of safety and permanency between the groups. The waiver group had significantly fewer reports of repeated maltreatment than the control group.
- In 2007, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges contracted with the University of Nebraska, Lincoln as part of the Toolkit project in order to evaluate pre-hearing conferences implemented as part of ongoing reform. Cases were randomly assigned to pre-hearing conference or no pre-hearing conference and later analyzed for differences in case processing. This study found significant reductions in continuances, shortened time frames to adjudication, and more involvement of, and services for, fathers in the sample of pre-hearing conference cases.

### ***Quasi-Experimental Designs***

- In 1999, the National Center for Juvenile Justice conducted a follow-up assessment of the Pima County (Tucson, Arizona) Model Court Project which included a quasi-experimental comparison of model court cases to non-model court cases from a different jurisdiction in terms of timeliness of case processing. Model court cases reached hearing stages faster than non-model court cases and had fewer continuances.
- In 2001, the NCJFCJ completed an evaluation of the Washington State Parents' Representation Pilot program, conducting a pre-post test analysis of timeliness and permanency outcomes. Cases in the pilot program, which provided parents' attorneys with extensive training in dependency court best practice, had a significant increase in likelihood to reunify, particularly for those who had a history with the court. Additionally, following implementation of the pilot program, children spent less time in out-of-home placements.
- In 2000, Litzfelner examined the effectiveness of CASAs in achieving positive outcomes for children. The analysis compared permanency outcomes for 119 children with a CASA to 81 children who were not appointed a CASA. Children with a CASA had more services ordered and had fewer placement moves than children without a CASA.
- In 2002, the National Center for Juvenile Justice conducted an evaluation of the impact of Model Court reforms in Pima County, Arizona, comparing cases in 1996 to 1999 on measures of permanency, due process, and timeliness. Following implementation of the Model Court, court orders were significantly more detailed and attorneys were appointed more quickly for all parties.

- In 2002, the NCJFCJ evaluated the impact of an expanded second shelter hearing, which the Portland Model Court implemented in order to enhance front-loading of cases. Pre and post-implementation outcomes related to due process and timeliness of case processing were compared. Following implementation, there were fewer continuances, and greater compliance with time frames to adjudication.
- In 2007, NPC Research conducted a national evaluation of Family Treatment Drug Courts (FTDC) by comparing court, child welfare, and treatment outcomes of families treated by the FTDC compared to those receiving traditional services. Parents in the FTDC were more likely to complete treatment than the comparison group. Further, children whose parents were in the FTDC spent significantly less time in out-of-home care and more time in their parent's care.

### **Gaps in the Research**

A review of the juvenile dependency court research indicates that, despite the promising studies noted above, there are some extensive gaps in the current literature base. The content of research studies was quite diverse. There were studies in multiple domains, the most common being mediation studies, family group decision-making studies, and general court performance studies. However, the large number of general court performance studies needs to be interpreted with caution. Although there are several studies, each focuses on specific programs or specific outcomes making comparisons across groups difficult. Other areas have yet to be fully studied and require much more attention.

Judicial studies including an examination of court hearings are rare. The few studies of judges involved judicial workload assessments and these only examined time devoted to court hearings, failing to include the quality of hearings in their data collection and analyses. Further, studies on judicial decision-making (in general) and the role of judicial continuity and judicial training as they impact case processing and outcomes have rarely or never been addressed in the research.

Representation in dependency cases is also an area in need of research attention. Few studies examine parents' representation and its impact on the case and none of the studies identified for this review examined children's legal representation, although several examined the impact of CASA.

A final content area which has been lacking in research is in minority over-representation in the system. This topic, long of interest in juvenile delinquency, has recently begun to be studied in juvenile dependency. However, few studies to date have adequately examined the role of minority over-representation as it pertains to juvenile dependency court processes or outcomes specifically.

In addition to specific research areas, certain outcome measures are rarely examined. Permanency was measured the most frequently (59%), followed by timeliness (46%), due process (35%), safety (28%), and well-being (26%). Unfortunately, most measures were study specific and not consistent with either the federal outcome measures designed for the CFSR or the national dependency court performance measures, which, as a result, makes generalizability across studies problematic.

Methods employed by most studies were also relatively weak. Traditionally, most research in this arena has been primarily descriptive in nature. However, more recent research has begun to explore experimental and quasi-experimental designs to determine the effectiveness of programs, practices and policies. Nevertheless, experimental designs, with random assignment to groups, were quite rare, occurring in only 9% of the studies reviewed. This might be a result, of course, of ethical and practical concerns about assigning certain children, parents, or cases to programs or procedures which would benefit them and not allowing others the same opportunity because of adherence to a research protocol. Quasi-experimental designs have been used much more frequently as they do not require the same level of rigor as experimental designs but still allow for comparisons between groups. Even fewer studies have employed advanced statistical analysis, such as logistic regression, meta-analysis, or survival analysis.

The final deficiency of current research is the lack of opportunity to learn from research that has been done and apply findings in a meaningful way. Because the majority of research in this field is conducted by applied researchers who produce reports directly for the court or other funders, many of the research reports are not widely disseminated and accessible – perhaps available only online, if at all, and often in a summary report form only. Further, the majority of research fails to integrate theory into its analyses and link that theory to specific practice recommendations – a gap which may be filled by linking academic and applied researchers. Ultimately, for research

## **GAPS IN THE RESEARCH**

### **Content Areas**

- Few studies about judges or judicial workload
- Few studies of representation, particularly children’s attorneys/GAL
- Few studies of minority over-representation

### **Outcome Measures**

- Few measures of due process
- Few measures of safety
- Very few studies of well-being (perhaps due to lack of defined outcome variables)

### **Methodology Employed**

- Few experimental designs
- Most are lacking in statistical rigor

### **Lack of Opportunity for Meaningful Research**

- Not efficiently disseminated
- Theory is rarely tested
- Few links between academic and applied researchers

to assist in moving the field forward it must be tied to theory, be systematically tested so that the underlying mechanisms of change can be identified, and widely disseminated so that it contributes to a growing knowledge base.

## **MOVING THE FIELD FORWARD**

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### ***Essential Steps***

In order to bridge identified research gaps, there are several steps that researchers can take to move the field forward. The initial step of identifying current research and research gaps is complete. The next steps are more difficult.

First and foremost, it is important to generate buy-in from all stakeholders on the value of research in the juvenile dependency court system. Without an understanding or acceptance of the significance of good research and its impact on program design, process and outcomes, conducting new research will not be helpful. Support and involvement, particularly from judges, can increase the accessibility of program data to researchers and increase the desire for more research to inform practice. The judge is the cornerstone of juvenile dependency case processing and is essential to informing outcomes. Judges who are open to research bring enormous benefits to the field. They not only can work specifically with researchers but also can share their expertise in a meaningful way to help inform research designs. One potential channel through which this could be accomplished is via the federal Court Improvement Program (CIP). The CIP allots funding to all states to enhance the juvenile dependency system. Using the CIP to increase court professionals' awareness of the need for research, encourage statistically sound research, and fund good research is an excellent way to get the courts onboard and demonstrate the national need for quality research. CIP efforts must result in not only anecdotal information about program efficacy, but in concrete collaborations between the courts and researchers with steps in place to move forward on a research agenda.

Second, it is essential to combine the efforts of applied and academic researchers. Drawing links between the two fields is necessary to improve dissemination of research findings and to help tie together theory and practice. Academic researchers are trained in psychological, sociological, and other relevant theories and various statistical methodologies which may inform research on the impacts of the juvenile dependency court system. Academic researchers also regularly submit articles to a rigorous peer review process. Finally, they are part of an extensive network of journal writing and conferences related to the social sciences that effectively disseminates their findings. At the same time, academic researchers often have little contact with the applied setting (i.e., juvenile dependency court) and thus fail to draw links between theory and practice, or at least fail to effectively articulate these links.



Applied researchers, on the other hand, often have extensive experience working directly in the field. This experience enhances their ability to fundamentally understand processes, outcomes, and system dynamics that outsiders do not. They are able to present findings of their research in an easily understood format—regularly translating their findings to implications for practice improvements. Yet, their work is rarely subjected to rigorous peer review, which means that there is often no external system in place to critically review methodology and ensure that it is truly sound. Further, they often fail to ground their work in theory, which makes their findings less helpful for advancing a knowledge base of effective programs, practices and policies. That is, their results may be meaningful to the specific program being studied but cannot be disseminated and easily replicated on a national level.

Academic researchers should be paired with organizations and court officials to learn from each other. Judges can articulate what they know, what they want to know, and the specifics of the court process. Academic researchers can suggest theories to test, methods to apply, and analytic approaches to adopt. Applied researchers can aid in this process by contributing their wealth of knowledge about translating research designs to real world settings, and integrating findings into a format that court officials can easily understand and apply. Such a process would help ensure better methodologies are utilized, that a theory of system change is integrated into research, and that practice is informed at a much broader, national level.

## STEPS TO MOVE THE FIELD FORWARD

1. **Generate buy-in from stakeholders.** Judges who believe research is important can share their expertise with researchers and make their courtrooms available to create more meaningful research. Judges also need to be included in the identification of research questions and the choice of research methods.
2. **Combine efforts of academic and applied researchers.** Academia can bring theory and statistical rigor, while applied researchers can help translate research into something meaningful to the field.
3. **Address the gaps in the field.** Now that gaps have been identified, research can be designed to target these gaps.
4. **Ensure adequate dissemination.** All research should be disseminated in a manner that allows for the broadest possible audience to benefit from it. More journals and conferences are needed to ensure better dissemination.
5. **Funding needs to become a priority.** Funding sources for research exist through federal, state and philanthropic organizations. Funding should be explored so that methodologically sound and practically useful research for juvenile dependency courts can be prioritized.

The third step is to begin addressing the research gaps previously identified. There are several key content areas which have little if any research, but have major impacts on the court process. Although no studies were identified which addressed children's legal representation, children's legal representation is obviously a critical component of the juvenile dependency court process with the potential for major impacts on process and outcomes, and should be studied. The quality and impact of representation for *all* parties should be further examined, as should the impact of best practices, such as substantive hearings and increased services at the beginning of the case. Studies need to focus more on the judge, examining judicial continuity, judicial workload, judicial training, and judicial decision-making. Furthermore, the very important and completely understudied issue of the disproportionate representation of minority children and families in the dependency court system must be examined. The juvenile justice system has already discovered that racial inequalities exist in the treatment of children in the delinquency system, implementing steps to remedy these disparities. The juvenile dependency court system should also do more to address racial inequality.

The fourth step is to ensure that all relevant research in the area is disseminated. The majority of studies identified were not broadly disseminated and therefore not readily accessible. A study's report may be available for download on the internet, but this is contingent on individuals understanding where and how to search for those reports. While research on several key dependency court topics are understudied, as previously mentioned, it may very well be the case that this research does in fact exist but is not currently accessible. This is often the case with applied research where final products are typically in the form of reports to the funder and the courts only, and little effort may be made to disperse the work elsewhere. All researchers should strive to facilitate national reform efforts to improve the juvenile dependency court system, and improve outcomes for children and families, by seeking widespread and varied publication venues for their research findings. The Child Welfare Information Gateway ([www.childwelfare.gov](http://www.childwelfare.gov)) has already taken steps to coordinate and disseminate research and other information and may be an ideal venue for the continuation of achieving a national goal of informing dependency stakeholders of current research.

The fact that there are few good academic journals specifically devoted to juvenile dependency court research is also problematic. Currently, some of the major journals specifically providing a forum for juvenile dependency court research are *Child Maltreatment*,<sup>3</sup> *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*,<sup>4</sup> and *Child Abuse and Neglect*.<sup>5</sup> Although these journals do include research articles on

<sup>3</sup> *Child Maltreatment* is a journal of the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children, published quarterly through Sage publications. More information on the journal is available online at <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsProdDesc.nav?prodId=Journal200758>.

<sup>4</sup> *Juvenile and Family Court Journal* is the official publication of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. More information can be found on the National Council's website at [www.ncjfcj.org](http://www.ncjfcj.org).

<sup>5</sup> *Child Abuse and Neglect* is the official publication of the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and is published monthly through Elsevier publications. More information is available online at: <http://www.elsevier.com/>

the courts, they also include a variety of other articles. Other researchers have also published articles from the field in miscellaneous journals, such as *Social Work Research*. While applicable to the social work field, these studies may not be located by those who are looking for court-focused research. Clearly, more publication venues for juvenile dependency court issues are needed so that researchers will know where to locate research related to the dependency court as well as have an outlet for their own research.

Funding for research on juvenile dependency court issues also needs to become a local and national priority. National and government organizations are often good sources of funding for research in dependency court systems.<sup>6</sup> At the state level, the Court Improvement Programs offer funding which can be used for program implementation and evaluation. Further, many foundations<sup>7</sup> provide research support both locally and nationally.

Finally, national and state-level consortia which bring together court stakeholders, researchers, policy makers, and funders are needed to advance a juvenile dependency court research agenda. Such collaborations will bring much needed attention to the gaps in the field and generate a call to action for new research to inform juvenile dependency court process and outcomes. The contribution of multiple perspectives is necessary to fully understand what research needs to be done, how to do it, and how it can impact the courts, both locally and nationally. Working together to improve research can improve the lives of hundreds of thousands of families and children across the country.

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[wps/finding/journaldescription.cws\\_home/586/description?navopenmenu=-2](https://www.wps/finding/journaldescription.cws_home/586/description?navopenmenu=-2).

<sup>6</sup> For example, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP, [www.ojjdp.ncjrs.gov](http://www.ojjdp.ncjrs.gov)) provides funding to juvenile justice related programs. Also, the Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Families and Children (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov>) offers potential grant funding for a variety of research related to child abuse and neglect. Even organizations whose goals are not specific to juvenile dependency or the courts, such as the National Science Foundation ([www.nsf.gov](http://www.nsf.gov)), offer funding for good quality research with testable theories.

<sup>7</sup> Many foundations offer funding support to local researchers. Others, such as the many Casey foundations ([www.casey.org](http://www.casey.org), [www.aefc.org](http://www.aefc.org)), offer funding nationally to researchers who focus specifically on the many issues involved in the juvenile dependency system.

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