

# What We Don't Know Harms Children

*System change on behalf of society's most vulnerable children relies not on more workers or more training but on more timely and accurate information.*

*By Richard J. Gelles, PhD*

**I**N JANUARY, 2006, 7-YEAR-OLD NIXMARY BROWN DIED—TORTURED, molested, and starved by her stepfather—an all too familiar narrative with all the usual suspects. Nixmary's caseworker at the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) went weeks before seeing the child and failed to update the case file in a timely or appropriate manner. The caseworker's supervisor failed to follow through and obtain a warrant to help find Nixmary after the girl missed school for weeks and after the school reported that Nixmary showed up at school with a gash over her eye. Although ACS caseworkers and supervisors had multiple opportunities to protect Nixmary, they failed.

Nixmary's tragic death is, unfortunately, not unique. In Rhode Island, T.J. Wright was beaten to death by his foster parents in October, 2004. According to a report issued by the Rhode Island Office of the Child Advocate, the Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) had seven opportunities to intervene and protect T.J. Unfortunately, no one in the chain of command knew enough about the case and what was being done or not done to intervene at any of the seven points and act effectively to protect 3-year old T.J.

In Arizona, a caseworker failed to follow the mandatory steps in conducting an investigation of possible child sexual abuse. As a result, key information was not uncovered, the case was ruled "unsubstantiated," and a six-year-old child continued to be sexually abused.

In Philadelphia, a caseworker failed to follow mandatory steps in placing a child in a foster home. The worker placed the child in the home of a convicted child abuser, who sexually assaulted the child for months. That same caseworker failed to follow policy requiring the child be tested for HIV, and the child, HIV positive as a result of the sexual abuse, went untreated for a year.

When a public tragedy occurs, such as the deaths of Nixmary or T.J., the typical response of administrators in child welfare systems is that "the child fell between the cracks" of the system. In response, child welfare agency administrators together with state legislators and public officials, attempt to fill the cracks by "rounding up the usual suspects." Without fail, the response involves hiring more child welfare employees, attempting to reduce case loads, and calling for more training. And without fail, after the usual suspects have been rounded up, the new employees hired, and more intensive training rolled out, another error of omission by the system results in preventable harm to a child.

Why does rounding up the usual suspects fail to improve the quality of child welfare services? Why does it fail to improve the ability of the systems to protect children in harm's way? Because the problems of child welfare systems are less about workers, caseloads, and training, and more about the management and use of information about the children who come to the attention of the system and those who become part of it. The "center of gravity" for system change is not found within the workforce, but with the ability of the workforce to access and manage information about children at risk and to make necessary and timely decisions about children in harm's way.

The same week that the New York City newspapers focused on the tragic death of Nixmary Brown, the same newspapers, in their back pages, examined a report issued by the United States Inspector General. According to the Inspector General's report, State Standards and Practices for Content of Caseworker Visits with Children in Foster Care (USHSS, 2005), most child welfare systems in the United States fail to see maltreated children placed in foster care at least once a month, as prescribed by state law. In only 5 of the 17 states that require

monthly visits are children actually seen with that frequency. More importantly, according to the Inspector General, most states have no information (emphasis added) or data management system to track the actual frequency of visits. In fact, only 19 states and the District of Columbia can report how often visits occur.

As with Nixmary and T.J., it is quite clear that one of the main reasons that opportunities to protect children are missed is that state and local child welfare agencies do not have a means of actually keeping track of:

1. children in out-of-home placements;
2. the work of caseworkers charged with providing case management and services to maltreated children, whether in foster care or in their own homes; and
3. the work of supervisors responsible for assuring that caseworkers are seeing children, managing cases, and providing necessary services.

The “center of gravity” or the most significant “crack” in the child welfare system turns out to be the lack of an interoperable management information system that tracks children and the work of those in the child welfare system on a “real time” basis.

On-line auction site EBay keeps track of 1,000,000 transactions each day. Potential buyers can access volumes of information on each item. Both buyers and sellers keep track of tens, hundreds, or thousands of transactions. They know details about each other’s Ebay-related actions. They can look at statistics on payment and delivery. Potential buyers can bid from mobile phones, Trios, and Blackberry’s.

If EBay software and electronic communications can keep people in touch with millions of tchotskies, then child protective systems should be able, at the very least, to keep track of one million at-risk children. Rather than blaming the usual suspects and the “cracks” in the system, it is time for child welfare systems to evolve from believing that technology is a cell phone and a laptop into implementing software programs that can inform workers where vulnerable children are and what is being done to keep them safe.

We can do this. We can make technology work for the thousands of children like Nixmary Brown and T. J. Wright. And we should. We should make their deaths count for something. We should take their deaths as a call to technological action. Otherwise, their deaths are not only tragic but meaningless.

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