A WICKED PROBLEM
Child welfare is a wicked problem. By “wicked,” we mean it is a problem that defies ordinary solutions. It is wicked because as the priorities of the government change, definitions of the source of the problem shift between fixing the blame on inadequate and irresponsible parenting versus tying it to the stresses of the larger social environment. Whatever its source, child welfare problems are interconnected to drug abuse, domestic violence, and unmarried parenthood, at the individual level; concentrated poverty, institutional racism, and ineffective social policies, at the societal level. In setting policy, government continues to struggle with how to measure success and whether it is best to focus narrowly on child safety or a more broadly on social and emotional well-being.

Addressing the wicked problems of child welfare not only promises to prevent harm to children, it can potentially save money. Data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being (NSCAW) illustrate the widespread prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) among children who come to the attention of the child welfare system. Studies show that “… cumulative exposure to ACEs may accelerate an individual's disease experience, putting them at increased risk for premature mortality.” If untreated, childhood trauma not only leads to poor health outcomes for individuals, but also expensive burdens for society.

THE BARRIERS IMPEDING PROGRESS TOWARD RESOLVING THE WICKED PROBLEMS OF CHILD WELFARE CAN BE SURMOUNTED BY:
- Extending the authorization for IV-Waiver programs that promote fiscal responsibility and give states the flexibility to advance cost-effective solutions that are proven to work;
- Supporting the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being which is the only source of national data on child well-being outcomes;
- Prioritizing interconnected responses to child maltreatment by encouraging local collaborations via public-private and university-agency partnerships.

WICKED PROBLEMS INSTITUTES
To help shed light on the wicked problems of child welfare and to help drive a productive conversation towards practice-informed, evidence-based research to address these wicked problems, the University of North Carolina School of Social Work partnered with the Children's Home Society of America to convene a series of institutes that were held in 2012–2014 in Chapel Hill, Chicago, and Washington, DC. These Wicked Problems Institutes brought together child welfare administrators, service providers, researchers, philanthropists, and policymakers. The ideas and insights of this diverse, interdisciplinary group led to the identification of eight (8) grand challenges for child welfare that if addressed, could set a new direction for building innovative, evidence-based, and sustainable solutions to the wicked problems of child welfare.

Adverse Childhood Experiences:
- Physical abuse by a parent
- Emotional abuse by a parent
- Sexual abuse by anyone
- Growing up with alcohol and/or drug abuse in household
- Domestic violence
- Experiencing incarceration of a household member
- Living with family member experiencing mental illness
- Loss of a parent
- Emotional neglect
- Physical neglect

Figure 1. Adverse childhood experiences in NSCAW vs. ACES
**EIGHT GRAND CHALLENGES**

The nature of a wicked problem is such that it cannot readily be resolved by a single discipline or one sector of society. It requires overcoming grand challenges that if removed, could help resolve a wicked problem with substantial probability of success. Over the last two years, the Wicked Problems Institutes have assembled experts, service providers, and government officials to debate the wicked problems of child welfare and identify eight (8) grand challenges that must be overcome to set a new direction for building innovative, evidence-based, and sustainable solutions:

1. Reversing the adverse effects of child maltreatment on brain development
2. Harnessing the natural motivations of parents and kinship caregivers
3. Synthesizing research evidence on the effects of out-of-home care
4. Sustaining family continuity after legal permanence
5. Strengthening the voice of youth in the child welfare system
6. Linking well-being measures to administrative data on child safety and family permanence
7. Attracting private investments and using performance contracts to improve child and family services
8. Preparing the workforce for child welfare’s future wicked problems and grand challenges

**INNOVATIVE, EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTIONS**

Strengthening the evidence-base is essential if we are to address the wicked problems and grand challenges of child welfare. First, although we may intuitively have a feel for how to best address complex issues, we can’t truly understand a wicked problem until we have evidence of a solution that works. The vigorous use of IV-E waivers coupled with rigorous evaluation can advance our understanding and improve child welfare. Second, the interconnected nature of wicked problems necessitates an interconnected response that includes public, private and university partnerships. Lastly, child well-being is the appropriate way to evaluate the effectiveness of child welfare interventions to support safe and permanent homes for children.

Through the Wicked Problems Institutes, we can learn critically important lessons that will help inform child welfare policy, practice and financing decisions at the local, state, and federal levels and move us forward toward achieving the interconnected goals of safety, permanence, and well-being.

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