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Stabilizing Children's Lives

Insights for Research and Action

Presented by Gina Adams

Based on work by Gina Adams, with Mary Bogle, Julia Isaacs, Heather Sandstrom, Lisa Dubay, Julia Gelatt, and Michael Katz

Overview

- Background
- Our Approach
- Our Findings:
 - Exploring the Basics
 - Insights for Future Research

Background

- Emerging concern about impact of instability on healthy child development and family success, but uneven and often within siloes
- Highly complex and interconnected, yet little attention paid to the pervasive and interconnected nature of the problem
- Builds upon earlier Urban work:
 - Synthesis of research on child care instability (Adams and Rohacek, 2010)
 - Synthesis of research from different domains on instability and child well-being (Sandstrom and Huerta, 2013)
 - 2014 conference proceedings (Adams and Dubay, 2014), and essay volume (Adams editor, 2014)

Background (continued)

- RWJF funded Urban in Fall 2015 to assess what information/research is needed to support changes in policy and practice to stabilize families
- Conducted high-level scan through 60 expert interviews and targeted literature review in the following areas:
 - How instability functions
 - What we need to know within and across key domains to inform action:
 - Parenting/primary caregivers
 - Social and community networks
 - Caring institutions (child care/early education and K-12)
 - Employment
 - Income/assets
 - Key resources (health, housing, food)
 - Safety net programs
 - Community practitioner perspective

Provides important insights at very high level – much more work to be done

Background (continued)

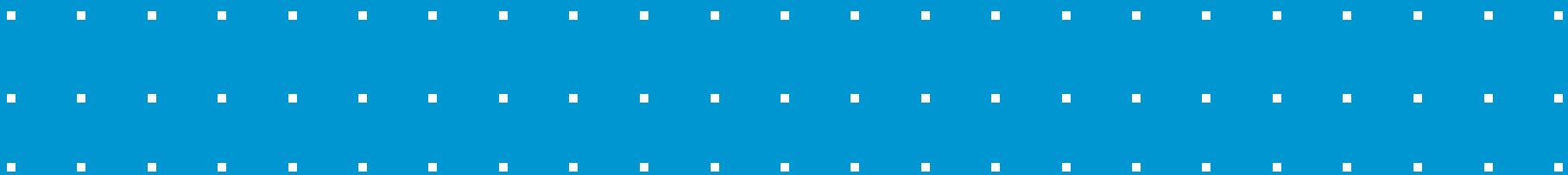
- Products from RWJF funding:
 - Six internal working papers submitted to RWJF summer 2016
 - Summary paper *Stabilizing Children's Lives: Insights for Research and Practice*, (Adams, Bogle, Isaacs, Sandstrom, Dubay, Gelatt, and Katz, Dec. 2016) at <http://www.urban.org/research/publication/stabilizing-childrens-lives>
 - Blog series of 11 related blogs posted 12/5/16 to 12/16/16 at <http://www.urban.org/urban-wire/stabilizing-childrens-lives-insights-research-and-action>
 - Landing page of related Urban research released December 2016 at <http://www.urban.org/policy-centers/cross-center-initiatives/kids-context/projects/children-and-instability>



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Exploring the Basics



What Is Instability? How Common Is It?

- Working definition:

The experience of abrupt and/or involuntary change in individual, family, or community circumstances, which can have adverse implications for child development

- More work needed on terminology
- How does instability differ from related concepts of poverty and mobility?

How Common Is Instability?

- Little information on how much instability children experience *across* domains
 - One study (2000) found 13% poor children 6-13 experienced 2 or more changes across 4 domains in 12 month period
- Data on instability *within* particular domains finds instability relatively common
 - Income: Almost 40% adults living with children lose $\frac{1}{4}$ of their income or more at least once in the space of a year
 - Family composition: $>1/3$ of all children see parents marry, remarry, separate, or start/stop cohabiting by the time they reach 4th grade
 - Employment: 1 in 6 children live with at least one un- or under-employed parent; recent research finds significant instability in schedules for employed parents
 - Food insecurity: 1 in 6 children live in food insecure households, across rural/urban, above/below poverty
 - Residential mobility: 1 in 10 low-income children have lived in their current home for less than 6 months

Why Does Instability Matter?

- Associated with poor short- and long-term child outcomes, toxic stress
- Threatens upward mobility and greater equity
- Undercuts public and private efforts to support the development of children and family well-being
- Widely shared experience and concern

How Does It Affect Children's Outcomes – Key Mechanisms?

Instability affects children's outcomes by affecting:

- Stress for child -- impact on well-being if not buffered
- Critical relationships between child and parent/other nurturing adults
- Stability of place and routine
- Access to basic resources (i.e. food, housing, education, health care)
- Ability of social networks and public systems to support the child/family

Other Factors Likely to Shape How Instability Affects Children's Outcomes

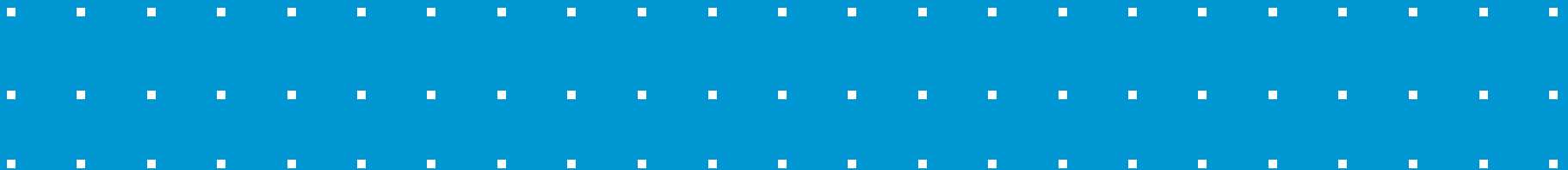
Though relatively little is known (or is known only in some areas), other factors appear likely to be important:

- Characteristics of instability likely to matter
- Child and family characteristics, and history of instability/trauma
- Characteristics of community or place
 - Community resources, stability, and resilience (or lack thereof)
 - “Collective instability” where children experience the fear/stress of instability even if not experiencing it directly – can be associated with a geographic area (i.e. chronic violence) or membership in a group that is under threat or discrimination (e.g. due to race/ethnicity, immigration status, religious affiliation, or sexual orientation)
- Systemic factors or policy context

What Causes It? Where Should We Focus?

- Looked across many domains
- Knowledge base is uneven, but every domain plays a role in stabilizing or destabilizing children and families – no single trigger
- Some children and families are particularly vulnerable, including:
 - Children during periods of intense brain development – first three years of life (especially first year), and ages 15-19
 - Families with mental health challenges
 - Families facing challenges of disability and chronic illness
 - Other groups as well

Insights for Future Research



Key Insights and Selected Ideas

- Recognize the complexity and intersecting nature of the problem
 - Every sector has a role to play, but requires cross-sector awareness
 - Cross-sector work essential
- Fill gaps in our understanding of how it affects children's development
 - Articulate conceptual model for a variety of audiences
 - Re-envision the concept of safety net -- explore whether these domains function together to create a “web of stabilizing supports”
 - Explore what is known about key characteristics of instability in shaping the impact

Key Insights and Selected Ideas (continued)

- Explore what is known about risks and protective factors for different populations
 - Prevalence of multiple instability experiences overall, and for particular populations of concern (i.e. critical developmental periods)
 - Which families/communities have access to the web of stabilizing supports? What are the gaps? How has it changed over time, and for whom?
 - Explore experiences of collective instability
- Improve our ability to measure and interpret instability
 - Improve measures (for surveys, practitioners, etc..)
 - Improve ability to detect whether instability in one area is triggered by (or triggers) instability in another area

Key Insights and Selected Ideas (continued)

- Identify and assess strategies within each domain, and across domains, to prevent, detect, and/or ameliorate instability*
- Bring together expertise across sectors
- Explore value of “stabilizing families” as a message to enlist support and public will to support families

*See report for more details