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## Chronic neglect of family violence: more than a decade of reports to guide US policy

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### Abstract

For more than a decade, several boards and committees have reviewed the state of policy, research, and services on child maltreatment and other forms of family violence in the US. Although these efforts have resulted in a redefinition of the tasks involved in protecting people within their homes, this new conceptualization has yet to have a substantial effect on policy, research, and services. Some positive steps have been taken, but most are still modest in scope. They may be dwarfed by the growing challenges in family and community life. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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### Introduction

I first had the opportunity to work closely with Dick Krugman from 1989 to 1993 when we spent the best 20 years of our professional lives (irony intended) among the leaders in the now-defunct US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect. I suspect that my own experience on the Board was similar to that of other members. It was at once the most frustrating and the most exhilarating experience that I have had and probably ever will have as a professional.

The exhilaration came from the belief that we “got” it: that we had a new and more productive view of the ingredients required for fulfillment of children’s right to personal security (cf. Melton, 1991). This intellectual excitement was amplified by the promise, albeit fleeting, of meaningful changes in children’s safety. At various points, key policymakers in both parties indicated occasionally that they were persuaded by our arguments, and that they were willing to build the coalition necessary to implement a complex legislative strategy to respond to a complicated problem. (For the Board’s blueprint for comprehensive federal

action to ensure the safety of children, see US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1991.)

The frustration came in part from the resulting protracted discussions and numerous iterations of draft reports before agreements were reached about the language—agreements that, at least in the short term, generally did not result in concrete action for implementation. The frustration was magnified by the realization that a matter of such fundamental importance was often being sidetracked by petty political concerns. Perhaps most outrageously, the Board's first report (US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1990)—a declaration of a national emergency in the child protection system—received enormous press attention, but only because of the individual efforts of the Board's small staff and some of the Board's members. The (first) Bush administration delayed issuance of a press release about the report until almost the last minute before the scheduled press conference, purportedly because of concern about the letterhead to be used.

Just as child protection is not—or should not—be a partisan issue, the failure that occurred in implementation of the Board's reports was unfortunately bipartisan. The first Bush administration actively resisted most of the Board's recommendations—withstanding a strongly worded, wide-ranging charge to the Board by Secretary of Health and Human Services Louis Sullivan. Although Congress was controlled by Democrats at the time, none of the relevant committee chairs exercised the leadership needed to implement a comprehensive child protection strategy—a task that by its nature implicates scores of congressional committees and subcommittees (see US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, 1991).

The 15-member Board was diverse in background. I doubt if any of us knew more than three other members before beginning our service, and some previously knew no one else on the Board. Some of the Board members were undoubtedly political appointees; others were not. Importantly, however, the Board members acted as a team without regard to their political affiliations. (The partial exceptions were the two federal employees, who actively participated in the Board's work and joined in its reports but who were constrained to some degree by their positions [e.g., deputy assistant secretary of Health and Human Services].) Indeed, members could only guess about the politics of most of our colleagues.

We quickly coalesced around one common perception: the field of child protection in the US was—arguably, still is—badly in need of leadership. Accordingly, we vowed, admittedly with some grandiosity, to use the Board's broad and ambiguous mission to set a vision for the field. That role was enabled ironically by the Board's vague principal mission in law: to evaluate the nation's progress in meeting the purposes of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 (as amended)—a neat trick given that CAPTA (the principal federal legislation focused specifically on child protection) had no express purposes!

In assuming the role of visionary, some of us used a sister body, the President's Committee on Mental Retardation (PCMR), as our model. In the 1960s, PCMR had redefined the field of mental retardation services. Thus, PCMR was responsible in substantial part for the movement of that field from a concept of mental retardation as an immutable medical condition necessitating institutional care to a view that mental retardation is typically primarily a social and educational problem best addressed in community habilitation programs.

Coincidentally, the Board's executive director had worked on the staff of PCMR. Dis-

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