
Exploring Instability and Children's Well-Being

*Insights from a Dialogue among Practitioners,
Policymakers and Researchers*

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Contents

Introduction	1
What Is Instability? What Are the Characteristics of Instability That Seem Likely to Affect Children’s Well-Being?	2
Where Does Instability Occur in Children’s Lives?	3
What Might Be Some of the Pathways by Which Instability Affects Children’s Wellbeing?	4
What Child, Parent, Family, and Contextual Factors Seem Likely to Play a Role in Affecting the Impact of Instability —Either by Buffering or Exacerbating the Impact?	5
What Research Is Needed Regarding Instability, and Its Effects on Children Development, to Inform Policy and Practice Solutions?	6
What Are the Implications for Policy and Practice?	8
Conclusion	9
Appendix A. Participant List	11
Appendix B. Meeting Agenda	13
Notes	15
References	16
About the Authors	16

Introduction

Awareness is growing of the essential role of stability in children's healthy development and ability to learn—and of the damage that instability can do. This concern, however, has emerged separately across many different domains, including different policy areas (such as housing, education, child care, and health care), different areas of research (such as family economic security, child development, and school mobility), and different perspectives (such as federal, state, and local policymakers; researchers; and practitioners working directly with families in communities across the country). There has been little focus on the pervasive and interconnected nature of the issue or on possible cross-cutting policy strategies and solutions that could be employed to support stability and better outcomes.

These converging realities provide a unique opportunity to take a comprehensive look at the issues of stability and instability in children's lives and to begin to weave together these disparate threads and concerns to identify strategies to better support children's ability to learn and succeed. Researchers with the Urban Institute's *Kids in Context Initiative* are working to this end through a multiphased project. This report presents insights gleaned from one phase of this effort, specifically a convening of a distinguished group of 35 policymakers, practitioners, researchers, thought leaders, and funders who were brought together with the support of the Foundation for Child Development¹ to begin a dialogue about stability and its role in children's development. This convening was held on November 14, 2013, and was designed to explore the implications of stability and instability for children's development as well as to discuss what we know, what we need to learn, and what we need to do across research, policy, and practice. (See appendix A for a list of meeting participants and appendix B for the meeting agenda.) Additional results of this dialogue, also supported by the Foundation for Child Development, include a compendium of short essays by some of the speakers at the convening that catalogues the most important ideas they took away both from the convening and from this synthesis (Adams 2014), and related blogs by Urban Institute researchers.

The convening built upon an earlier phase of this work, which involved conducting a cross-disciplinary review of the research on instability and its implications for children's development across a range of domains, which was supported by the Low Income Working Families project, with funding from the Annie E. Casey Foundation. This earlier step resulted in the publication of *The Negative Effects of Instability on Child Development: A Research Synthesis* and a related fact sheet (Sandstrom and Huerta 2013a, 2013b). This review of the research offers a definition of instability and explores its effects in five domains: family income, parental employment, family structure, housing, and the out-of-home contexts of school and child care. It also discusses recommendations for policy and practice to alleviate instability's impact.

This document synthesizes the insights and perspectives of the participants on the following questions:

1. What is instability? What are the characteristics of instability that seem likely to affect children's well-being?
2. Where does instability occur in children's lives?
3. What might be some of the pathways by which instability is likely to affect children's well-being?
4. What child, parent, family, and contextual factors seem likely to play a role in affecting the impact of instability—either by buffering or facilitating the impact?
5. What research is needed regarding instability—and its effects on children's development—to inform policy and practice solutions?
6. What are the implications of these issues for policy and practice?

In brief, the participants agreed that instability was a complex but important issue that needs further attention from practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and philanthropies. While there are significant questions that need to be explored further, there also was discussion of concrete steps that policymakers and practitioners could and should take now to provide more supports to help stabilize families and children. These include, for example, ensuring that policies and programs do not contribute to instability, finding ways to identify and better support children and families who experience instability, and working

more effectively across different policies, programs, and systems that serve families. Participants also discussed the importance of developing a common framework and language to support a shared understanding of the issues and challenges that need to be addressed.

The remainder of this report presents many of the insights from the meeting, organized using the six questions already posed. It pulls together key themes and issues from a rich dialogue and as such is not a traditional research synthesis or report. It is not meant to provide a definitive statement or consensus agreement; the convening was exploratory in nature.

What Is Instability? What Are the Characteristics of Instability That Seem Likely to Affect Children’s Well-Being?

One point of discussion among participants was the importance of developing a common understanding or definition of instability in relation to children’s well-being and healthy development. This task was challenging. Though on the most basic level, instability is simply a change in circumstances, there are many different parameters or aspects of instability that participants felt were important in shaping whether a change in circumstances had a negative effect on children’s development. These included the following:

- **The direction (positive or negative) of the change.** Whether the change is positive or negative is an important consideration; some instability is related to positive developments in a child’s life (such as moving to a better neighborhood or better school). While potentially still stressful, positive changes are likely to have a different effect on children’s development than negative changes.
- **The scope or severity of the instability.** The severity of the change is important. For example, a minor change in income or change in a parent’s job would have different effects on a child’s well-being than a major loss of income or loss of job.
- **How frequently the instability is experienced.** Participants described that the frequency or repetition of the experience of instability for children is an important consideration; a single experience of instability seems likely to have a different effect on children than repeated incidences of instability. They also discussed whether the instability is chronic or episodic—determinations that influence the “stickiness” of the instability—and whether it was an ongoing condition for the child. One ironic point made was that chronic instability can become the “new normal” for families, in turn creating the potential for toxic stress.
- **Whether the instability is in a single area of a child’s life or in multiple domains.** Another issue raised during the discussion was whether a change occurred in a single domain in a child’s life (e.g., just a change in school) or in multiple domains. For example, the latter could occur if an initial destabilizing event triggers a series of changes—a job loss could lead to a significant loss in income, leading to food insecurity coinciding with a change in family structure (e.g., divorce), leading to a change in housing, leading to a change in school.
- **Whether the instability is something that the family can control.** There was extensive discussion of different ways in which instability that was more under the control of parents could be less stressful. In particular, participants described two slightly different aspects of this issue:
 - Whether the instability was *predictable* or *unpredictable*: to what degree the change is one that was anticipated or unanticipated is a characteristic that can contribute to children’s (and parents’) sense of safety and security and ability to plan for the change and manage the repercussions. However, predictable adverse changes can still create significant stress for families who have few mechanisms to buffer the repercussions.
 - To what degree the instability is caused by an *intentional* or *involuntary* change is related to (but slightly different than) the issue of predictability; changes can be chosen by the parent or

child rather than out of their control. Intentional change can still be stressful, but may be different in nature and impact than involuntary change.

One of the challenges in working to unpack the implications of these different aspects of instability for children's development is that some or many of them often can coincide or interact, making it difficult to know what aspect of instability is most damaging for child development. Discussants also highlighted the importance of realizing that these issues are not binary—stable or unstable, predictable or unpredictable, and so forth—but instead represent a continuum. In addition, there was a discussion about the particular challenges facing children and parents who have a combination of these more problematic forms of instability. For example, one participant discussed how frequent, random, and adverse instability events have been shown to be psychologically debilitating, creating “learned helplessness.”

Finally, discussants considered whether living with the fear of instability or a sense of insecurity could have a similar effect to instability itself on children's well-being; such fear can similarly destabilize their sense of safety and security. For example, it seems likely that a child who lives in fear of a parent being injured through domestic violence, of losing a parent or family through deportation, of their parent losing another job, or of becoming homeless could have similar developmental challenges to children actually experiencing those challenges. Similarly, these fears can make it difficult for parents to function effectively—one discussant described the challenges of helping immigrant parents who were fearful of being deported think about issues such as saving money and building assets.

Where Does Instability Occur in Children's Lives?

Another common topic of discussion was the different areas where instability can occur in a child's life, which may also shape its impact on children's well-being. These include the following:

- **Instability in core relationships.** This includes the loss of a parent to death, incarceration, abandonment, divorce, or separation; loss of other meaningful relationships that can provide security; and loss of a parent's attention, focus, or ability to buffer change if the parents themselves are under severe stress or have mental health issues. Instability in core relationships can also be related to the loss of other important adults or primary caregivers, such as in a child care program due to turnover.
- **Instability in resources.** This includes job loss or income loss and affects stability of access to food, housing, health care, and other key necessities.
- **Instability in their “place” or setting.** This can occur when children lose their home, change schools or child care programs, or move to a different community. These changes can in turn disrupt a host of important social networks and support systems.
- **Instability in access to “anchor institutions” or public supports.** This can occur when children lose access to anchor institutions (such as schools, child care settings, health care providers or public benefits (such as assistance with food, cash, child care, medical care, or housing). Each of these provides resources and services to buffer the effects of insecurity. Consequently, the loss of any of these supportive institutions or benefits can itself be a destabilizing event that contributes to the cascade of dominos. For example, families can lose work support benefits such as SNAP, Medicaid, or child care because of burdensome eligibility processes even though they are still eligible, in turn further destabilizing their situation.

As noted, instability in these various domains can occur simultaneously or sequentially due to their interrelated nature. Also, as is discussed more in the next section, participants discussed the question of who in the child's life was directly affected by the instability (e.g., child or parent) and the interplay between generations in the impact of instability on children's well-being.

What Might Be Some of the Pathways by Which Instability Affects Children’s Well-Being?

The discussion also explored some of the pathways by which instability can affect children’s well-being. This rich conversation suggested a number of ways that instability could either directly or indirectly affect the well-being of children and their parents.

Some of the ways that instability can *directly* affect children and their parents include:

- **Stress, a sense of insecurity, and worry for both children and parents.** One of the most direct effects of adverse instability on children and their parents is that it can create stress, worry, and a sense of not knowing what will happen and not being able to control their lives. This can directly affect children and affect parents’ ability to support them. Specifically, stress can directly affect parental mental health and the ability of parents to parent; shape children’s sense of security, trust, and efficacy; affect executive functioning and ability to make proactive, future-oriented decisions for both children and adults; and (as mentioned above) create “learned helplessness.” Other participants noted the resulting mental health challenges, such as depression, that can affect parenting and the ability of the parent to support their children.
- **A loss of resources to support development.** Another avenue by which some forms of instability can directly affect child well-being is the associated loss of resources such as food, health care, and housing, which directly support children’s healthy development. Many participants noted their concerns about the important (but often overlooked) role of food insecurity and the effect it has on health and child development.

In addition, there are many *indirect* ways that instability is likely to affect children’s well-being by limiting the ability of other individuals, networks, and programs to buffer the impact of instability on children’s development.

- **Instability can affect the ability of parents to buffer the impact on their children.** The previously mentioned research synthesis on the effects of instability on children’s well-being across different domains suggests that it has an indirect effect on child development—sometimes because it affects parents first, and in other cases because it can be mediated or moderated by parents. For example, as noted, instability can affect parents’ mental health and well-being directly, in turn affecting the quality of their interactions with their children (thus operating indirectly to affect children). It can also affect their ability to help their child manage the change. In other words, instability can affect whether parents are able to buffer the direct effects of instability on children.
- **Instability can affect the ability of children and families to access social supports that could buffer the impact.** Depending on the area and cause of instability, children and families can end up losing access to some of the key stabilizing entities in their lives, thus magnifying the impact of the initial event. For example, depending on the type of instability, children can lose their home or community, access to core adults and relationships in their lives, connections to core friendships and peers if they change schools, and so forth. Each loss can mean that they lose the stability and buffering that those entities can provide.
- **Instability can create challenges for anchor institutions and safety-net programs to function as buffers and to intervene.** Instability in children’s lives can make it much more difficult for stabilizing anchor institutions (such as child care, schools, and health care providers) and safety-net services (such as public assistance with nutrition, cash, or health care) to support or reach families and children, depending on the type of change and the system. It can also limit the effectiveness of interventions to support families and children’s development; instability can cause (for example) absenteeism from school or child care, loss of medical records if children move across communities, and behavioral problems that can create problems for caregivers and teachers.

What Child, Parent, Family, and Contextual Factors Seem Likely to Play a Role in Affecting the Impact of Instability—Either by Buffering or Exacerbating the Impact?

During the dialogue, the participants identified many ways in which the child and parent's characteristics, as well as the characteristics of their family, community, and policy context, could either buffer the family from the effects of instability or exacerbate the problems. Participants specifically discussed the following:

- **Child characteristics.** Participants discussed the importance of understanding more about the variations in child characteristics that can affect their ability to cope with instability and insecurity. In particular, they discussed the differential impacts across children of different ages, genders, racial groups, temperaments, and resiliency, as well as with children with histories of trauma.
- **Parent characteristics.** Participants agreed that a host of parent characteristics—such as their mental health, history of trauma, executive functioning skills, and parenting skills—all play a critical role in shaping their ability to buffer the effects of instability on their children. They also discussed the challenges that scarcity and insecurity can create for the ability of individuals to make good decisions, as it challenges executive functioning even for individuals who are not poor. This highlighted the importance of identifying strategies that help parents get out of the panic mode and make decisions that can help stabilize themselves and their children over the long term.
- **The stability and resources of the family and its social network.** The extent to which the child is part of a family that is itself stable, has a strong social network, and/or financial assets or resources, can affect whether the family is able to be buffered from the impact of instability. Alternatively, families that are less stable, have a weak or unstable social network, or have few assets or resources to draw upon, are likely to be more vulnerable to the effects of instability.
- **The nature of the parent's employment.** While only touched upon briefly in the meeting, participants mentioned the role that the characteristics of the parent's employment can play in affecting the stability of the family. While most commonly considered in terms of patterns of employment/unemployment, one participant highlighted the instability created by the increase in low-wage jobs that have fluctuating and unpredictable schedules and hours.
- **The nature of the community in which the child lives.** The community context in which children and families live can also contribute to (or buffer against) the problems of instability. For example, children who live in communities that are plagued by violence, children in highly mobile populations, or children under threat of deportation will have additional stressors and instability around them that can contribute to the challenges. Conversely, one participant described research on military children (conducted prior to the current increase in military deployments and resulting stress on families) that suggested that the development and mental health of the children was in part related to the family's perspective on the military culture and community, whether they felt supported by nation and community, and their mental health.
- **The stability of anchoring institutions.** There was extensive discussion about the important role that anchoring institutions such as child care, schools, and health care can play in supporting stability in at least some dimensions of children's lives. However, discussants also talked about the ways in which such institutions can contribute to destabilizing children's lives—for example, by expelling children from school for behavioral problems—or can fail to provide the stabilizing supports the child needs.
- **The policy context in which the family lives.** There was also discussion as to how the effect of instability can be changed (both positively and negatively) by the policy context in which children live. For example, the public safety-net programs (such as SNAP, Medicaid, child care assistance, housing assistance, unemployment insurance, and TANF) are designed to buffer the effects of instability for families. However, as is discussed further in the section on policy implications, participants spoke

extensively about the importance of ensuring that these programs actually function to stabilize families and identified ways that policies may inadvertently destabilize families instead. Immigration enforcement and deportation policies were also discussed as contributing to instability for children and families.

One of the most challenging discussions during the day attempted to disentangle the effects of poverty from the effects of instability. While this is not a question that the convening could answer, there was a discussion about the close relationship between instability and poverty—lower-income individuals are more likely to face significant instability in such areas as housing, income, and employment, and lower-income households may be less likely to have resources and assets that they can use to buffer the effect of such major life challenges as job loss, drops in income, and disability. Living with scarcity and insecurity can create significant stress on both parents and children. It is clear, however, that while the effects of poverty and instability on children’s development may be closely interrelated, they are not the same thing; there are children who are poor who may not have experiences of instability, and there are children who are not low-income who do. The discussion suggested that it may be the case that instability interacts with poverty, and that its effects are worse for children in poverty both because of the nature and frequency of the instability, and because the buffers may be weaker.

What Research Is Needed Regarding Instability, and Its Effects on Children Development, to Inform Policy and Practice Solutions?

Over the course of the convening, many knowledge gaps were identified around instability and its effect on child development. These gaps include knowledge about the prevalence and characteristics of instability, whom instability is most likely to negatively affect, and what buffers and policies are effective at ameliorating the negative effects of instability on child development. Research on these topics is needed to help develop policies and practices that address instability’s negative impacts. Some research questions that participants raised as important to solutions include:

- **How prevalent is instability in families with children, and why does it occur?** What number of children live in families where there is instability in general, and specifically of the different types identified earlier (i.e., loss of core relationships, loss of resources, and changes in place or living arrangements)? These different types of instability can be related—for example, divorce usually leads to decreases in income for the household in which the child remains and may cause a change of place or a move. Similarly, job loss can lead to foreclosures and a subsequent move when families don’t have a financial buffer. An understanding of which types of instability tend to occur by themselves compared with those that co-occur with other cascading problems could help inform solutions.
- **Who is most affected by instability and what are its characteristics?** Specifically, what are the characteristics of families (such as income and assets, family composition, employment status, and social networks) most likely to experience each of the above mentioned types of instability? What does instability look like in scope and severity for different types of families? For example, how often is instability chronic as opposed to episodic, how long do periods of instability last, and what are the characteristics of spells of instability? Are these patterns associated with different types of instability? Understanding the interaction between families’ characteristics and the characteristics of the instability will also inform policy and practice solutions.
- **Who is most at risk for negative effects from instability?** Participants suggested that research is needed to identify the characteristics of children, parents, and families with the greatest risk for children’s developmental problems when instability occurs. But it is also important to identify the protective attributes that make both children and parents resilient in the face of instability. In particular, there is a need for information on whether these characteristics vary by the age, sex and temperament of the child, the education and mental health of the parents, and the income and social support available to the family. It would also be useful to better understand what characteristics of

instability are most likely to lead to developmental problems for children and how these interact with child, parent, and family characteristics. It is also important to disentangle the effects of chronic instability, caused by constantly living with few financial resources, from less-frequent, major shocks that create instability for families.

- **What works to prevent the negative effects of instability on child development?**

Participants also discussed the importance of conducting research to understand what works from the policy and practice perspective to support children, parents, and families when instability occurs. Specifically, more information is needed about strengthening the buffering capacity of parents, social networks, anchor institutions, and safety-net programs:

- What programs or strategies enable parents to support their children and act as a buffer during times of instability? Research is needed to identify how to best support parents when the family is dealing with chaos and to get parents on a path to self-sufficiency if that has been lost.
- What can we learn about the buffering role of social networks and support systems? Research is needed both to examine the role that informal networks can play in helping to stabilize families and provide support to children in times of instability and to find ways to support such networks.
- What can we learn about the buffering role of anchor institutions? Research is needed to examine the role that these anchor institutions play in helping to maintain balance for children facing instability in other parts of their lives, the specific programs these institutions might implement, and what types of anchor institutions might be best at providing these services.
- What can we learn about the buffering role of safety-net programs? Participants discussed the importance of examining to what degree safety-net programs—such as TANF, SNAP, Medicaid, unemployment insurance, and housing and child care subsidies—are used when instability results in eligibility for these programs. To what degree program benefits disappear when families experience some forms of instability (sometimes the case with child care subsidies) should also be examined.

- **What can we learn about how anchor institutions and safety-net programs can better support families through instability?** Participants also discussed examining ways that anchor institutions and safety-net programs might be able to identify and track children and families in unstable circumstances using data they collect on clients, and how those institutions and programs could work both on their own and together to stabilize families. For example, research could examine the effect of coordinating different safety-net eligibility determination programs or changing program policies to stabilize access to benefits or anchor institutions (such as was done with both recent federal support to stabilize access to child care subsidies despite changes in work status and policies under the McKinney-Vento Act that allow children to stay in their home school even when homeless).

- **What types of research are needed to answer these questions?** Conference participants mentioned many different research methods and strategies that were needed to investigate these questions. Some were quantitative in nature. For example, analysis of national longitudinal data sets such as the Survey of Income and Program Participation can be used to examine the prevalence and characteristics of instability (such as whether different types of instability co-occur) and identify the characteristics of families it is most likely to affect. Other longitudinal studies, such as the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, and the Fragile Families Study, which contain information on what is going on in the family as well as measures of child development, can also be analyzed. There was agreement, however, that careful attention is needed in research designs to distinguish between associations and causality.

Qualitative research would be a good complement to quantitative analyses to help better explore many of the issues identified during the meeting. For example, such qualitative research could explore how instability in one area triggers a cascade of other forms of instability and what intervention might have helped to mitigate its effects. It might also explore how to best capture some of the subtle

characteristics of instability (such as predictability) that may affect its impact. Case studies based in Head Start programs, schools, housing projects, other settings that serve unstable families, and those with systems designed to support families facing instability (such as the military) could provide a wealth of information on both how instability affects children in these settings and strategies that can help stabilize their families. Focus groups could be conducted in these settings with families to get a rich picture of the risks and problems faced by families with insecure circumstances.

Finally, there is an important role for experimentation through randomized controlled trials or quasi-experimental designs to determine what works to support families and children when instability occurs. This type of experimentation needs to determine both the types of programs, organizations, and institutions best suited to provide supports and what support works best for protecting children.

What Are the Implications for Policy and Practice?

The convening provided important initial insights into ways that policies and social service delivery could minimize the effects of instability on children's development. The discussion included perspectives of practitioners in the areas of health care, home visiting, immigrant services, education, and child care. It also focused directly on some of the lessons learned by people working in systems that have been actively stabilizing children and families. Some of these individuals were involved in systems designed to support families whose lives are characterized by instability, such as support services the military offers to provide stability to children of military personnel and the McKinney-Vento Act, which works to stabilize school services for homeless children. Other individuals were involved in efforts to stabilize access to anchor institutions, such as school efforts to address absenteeism and efforts to reform federal child care assistance program policies to support continuity of care. Practitioners and policymakers from other areas also contributed important insights to the discussion.

There was broad consensus around the table that the anchor institutions (such as schools, child care programs, and health care providers) and safety-net programs (such as SNAP, Medicaid, housing assistance, child care assistance, and TANF) can and should play stabilizing or buffering roles in the lives of children whose lives are unstable. There was also, however, agreement that there were steps that these institutions and programs should take to ensure both that this occurs and that they do not instead cause or exacerbate the instability. Discussants noted that these shifts would in some cases require institutions to undergo a paradigm shift from considering children's needs and eligibility at one static point in time and from the perspective of only their institution, instead adopting a complex perspective considering overlapping service needs, kinds of supports, and the family's trajectories and patterns over time.

Some of the insights that emerged from the day include:

- **Policies and programs serving children and families should do no harm and ensure that their policies do not inadvertently contribute to the cascade of instability in children's lives.** Participants discussed how policies that tie eligibility for services or benefits to something in a parent's life that is inherently unstable (such as employment status or residence) can inadvertently contribute to instability if the child loses eligibility for the service because of a change in the parent's status. So, for example, tying eligibility for child care assistance to the employment status of the parent can increase instability in child care because of the instability of work, which in turn exacerbates the instability faced by children. Similarly, tying eligibility for home visiting to the requirement that a family live in a particular geographical space can mean that a family who moves loses their assistance. Relaxing such requirements for families experiencing instability can stabilize access to important services. Interestingly, there is some evidence that stabilizing the ability of families to get and keep services can have repercussions beyond the boundaries of the individual program. For example, participants described research showing that lengthening the recertification periods for families in the child care subsidy system reduced parents' anxiety about other areas of instability in their lives.

One discussant noted that there are some programs for children, such as Head Start, where only initial eligibility is tied to parent characteristics; once the child is enrolled they do not lose the service if their parent's characteristics change. In addition, steps can be taken to ensure that services are still

available to children experiencing disruption in characteristics that would normally make them eligible. The McKinney-Vento Act, for example, ensures that transportation is provided to homeless children to enable them to continue attending the school they were enrolled in when they became homeless, and it ensures that they can be registered even if lacking in documentation that would otherwise be required.

- **Policies and programs serving children and families should use data for their individual systems to proactively identify and support children whose lives are particularly unstable and target services accordingly.** For example, the growing focus on absenteeism for public schools has led many schools to focus on reaching out to families with high absenteeism rates; there has been discussion of child care subsidy administrators using data to identify and support children who change providers often; and health care providers can use their data to identify children who are coming to them without a medical home and no paperwork or whose lives seem to change between visits.
- **Policies and programs serving children and families should ensure that staff and service providers are trained to recognize and respond to instability.** Many discussants spoke about the importance of ensuring that staff at anchor institutions (schools, child care programs, and medical offices) understand the repercussions of instability for children’s well-being and be trained to identify the problem and solutions. Children experiencing instability can have many different behavior problems. As one discussant noted, the challenge is to recognize behavior problems as manifestations of a child calling out for help and to develop and institute staff training, rather than exacerbate the problem by expelling the child or failing to provide supports.
- **Policies and programs serving children and families should create a shared responsibility and oversight function across systems to share data, and work together to identify and support families and children facing difficulties.** There was widespread agreement across the participants that it is essential to identify ways to share data across systems to ensure both that children’s information was accessible despite mobility and that the service providers could see the complexity of the intersecting needs of the family. Participants described, for example, the challenges of serving a child with no medical history or records. They also discussed schools and child protective service staff working together so that foster care workers are able to see attendance data; schools placing social service workers in the schools to provide low-income children and their families with access to stabilizing services; and other promising strategies supporting cross-system communication and collaboration for children’s well-being. The military approach to children with particular medical or developmental needs was to create a “medical passport” that ensured that the medical professionals wherever the family moved would be able to recognize and continue appropriate treatment.
- **Policies and programs serving children and families should recognize the costs of failing to address the problems of instability.** Many participants noted that while addressing these issues is challenging, it is in the interest of policymakers and practitioners to do so both because instability in clientele can create significant administrative burden and because instability can limit the effectiveness of the services or education (through, for example, a child’s poor attendance or participation). In addition, one discussant noted the challenges created by workplace scheduling policies that lead to unpredictable schedules, and suggested that this would be an area worth further attention by policymakers and employers.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the participants all agreed that instability was a complex but important issue that needs further attention from practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and philanthropies. Though significant questions need to be explored further (as detailed above in the discussion of needed research), participants agreed that there were concrete steps that policymakers and practitioners could and should take now to provide support to stabilize families and children. In addition, the participants discussed the

importance of developing a common framework and language to help support a shared understanding of the issues and challenges that need to be addressed.

Appendix A. Participant List

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Olivia Golden, executive director, Center for Law and Social Policy, Washington, DC

Deanna Gomby, executive director, Heising-Simons Foundation, Los Altos, California

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Eliza Leighton, director of Promise Neighborhood Langley Park Program, Casa de Maryland, Hyattsville, MD

Hannah Matthews, director of child care and early education, Center for Law and Social Policy, Washington, DC

Ann O’Leary, senior fellow, American Progress; Director and Vice President of Children and Families Program, Next Generation

Deborah Phillips, professor of psychology, Georgetown University

Shannon Rudisill, director, Office of Child Care, Administration for Children and Families, US Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, DC

Elisabeth Stafford, Colonel US Army (retired), San Antonio Military Medical Center, San Antonio, TX

Albert Wat, senior policy analyst, Education Division, National Governors Association, Washington, DC

Shelley Waters Boots, senior consultant, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Baltimore, MD

Liliana Janssen-Checa, Healthy Families program director at Prince George's Child Resource Center, Largo, MD

Martha Zaslow, director of the Office for Policy and Communications, Society for Research on Child Development; Senior Scholar at Child Trends, Washington, DC

Urban Institute, Washington, DC

Organizing Committee

Gina Adams, senior fellow, Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population

Lisa Dubai, senior fellow, Health Policy Center

Julia Isaacs, senior fellow, Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population

Heather Sandstrom, research associate I, Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population

Margaret Simms, Institute fellow and director of the Low Income Working Families Project, Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population

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Gregory Acs, center director, Income and Benefits Policy Center

Laudan Aron, senior research associate, Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population

Genevieve Kenney, senior fellow, Health Policy Center

H. Elizabeth Peters, center director, Labor, Human Services, and Population

Erika Poethig, Institute fellow and director of Urban Policy Initiatives

Susan Popkin, senior fellow, Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center

Kathy Smith, senior manager of Foundational Relations

Margery Turner, senior vice president for Program Planning and Management

Appendix B. Meeting Agenda

**The Urban Institute
November 14, 2013**

8:30–9:00 **Continental breakfast and registration**

9:00–10:45 **Welcome and introductions (Margery Turner and Gina Adams)**

Setting the Context: Why does instability matter? What do we know about instability and child development? What do we need to learn?

Moderator: **Julia Isaacs**, Senior Fellow, The Urban Institute

Presentation: **Heather Sandstrom**, Research Associate I, The Urban Institute; “The Negative Effects of Instability on Child Development.”

- **Terry-Ann Craigie**, Assistant Professor of Economics, Connecticut College
- **Lisa Gennetian**, Research Affiliate, Institute for Human Development and Social Change, New York University; Senior Researcher, National Bureau of Economic Research
- **Martha Zaslow**, Director of the Office for Policy and Communications, Society for Research on Child Development; Senior Scholar at Child Trends

10:45–11:00 **Break**

11:00–12:00 **Instability from the perspective of those working with families**

Moderator: **Lisa Dubay**, Senior Fellow, The Urban Institute

- **Liliana Janssen-Checa**, Healthy Families Program Director at Prince George's Child Resource Center
- **Ivor Horn**, General and Community Pediatrics Principal Investigator, Children's National Health System; Associate Professor of Pediatrics, Children's Research Institute at George Washington University School of Medicine and Health Sciences
- **Isaac Castillo**, Director of Data and Evaluation, DC Promise Neighborhood Initiative

12:00–1:00 **Lunch**

1:00–2:15 **Policy lessons learned from systems addressing instability**

Moderator: **Gina Adams**, Senior Fellow, The Urban Institute

- **Maria Foscarinis**, Founder and Executive Director, National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty
- **Elisabeth Stafford**, MD, Colonel US Army (Retired), San Antonio Military Medical Center
- **Shannon Rudisill**, Director, Office of Child Care, Administration for Children and Families, US Department of Health and Human Services
- **Hedy Chang**, Director, Attendance Works

2:15–2:30 **Break**

2:30–4:15 **Thoughts/reactions about what all of this means for research, policy, and practice—what are the next steps?**

Moderator: **Margaret Simms**, Institute Fellow and Director of the Low Income Working Families Project, The Urban Institute

- **Deborah Phillips**, Professor of Psychology, Georgetown University
- **Olivia Golden**, Executive Director, Center for Law and Social Policy
- **Shelley Waters Boots**, Senior Consultant, Annie E. Casey Foundation
- **Donald Hernandez**, Senior Advisor, Foundation for Child Development; Professor of Sociology, Hunter College and The Graduate Center, City University of New York

4:15–4:30 **Wrap Up**

Moderator: **Gina Adams**, Senior Fellow, The Urban Institute

Notes

1. The Foundation for Child Development is a national private foundation. Its mission is to harness the power of research to ensure that all children benefit from early learning experiences that affirm their individual, family, and community assets, fortify them against harmful consequences arising from economic instability and social exclusion, and strengthen their developmental potential.

² Those with an asterisk were unable to attend.

References

Adams, Gina, ed. 2014. *Insights on Instability and Children's Development: Commentaries from Practitioners, Policymakers, and Researchers*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

Sandstrom, H., and Sandra Huerta. 2013a. *The Negative Effects of Instability on Child Development: Fact Sheet*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. <http://www.urban.org/publications/412908.html>.

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About the Authors

Gina Adams is senior fellow in the Urban Institute's Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population. Lisa Dubay is senior fellow in the Urban Institute's Health Policy Center.