



Stabilizing Children's Lives

Insights for Research and Action

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In recent years, the importance of stable environments and relationships in promoting children's healthy development and well-being has emerged as a critical area of concern. Instability in children's lives appears to undercut many of the foundations necessary for children to achieve their full potential and limits upward mobility for their families. As a result, instability not only negatively affects societal goals to support children's health, well-being, and long-term success, it impedes progress toward a more equitable society. But there remains much we need to learn about instability in the lives of children: why it happens, who it affects and how, and what can be done about it. This brief presents key findings and insights from interviews with leading experts and a quick scan of the field conducted by researchers at the Urban Institute. It describes what we know about some of those questions and what information is still needed to help families, communities, and public institutions stabilize children's lives and promote their healthy development.

Introduction

Instability can threaten some of the most basic things children need to flourish: a sense of security in the world, strong relationships with loving adults, a stable environment, and stable access to resources such as food, housing, education, and health care. Though it appears simple, instability is a complex issue to address. It can occur in many different dimensions of a child's life, affect their healthy development through several pathways, and be triggered or ameliorated by many interconnected aspects of their life.

As a result, how vulnerable children are to instability depends largely on their ability to access a complex web of personal, familial, social, community, private (including employers), and public supports. This web is, in turn, likely shaped by characteristics of child and family, by the community context in which they live, and by larger systemic factors.

Despite the threat posed by instability, there has been—until recently—relatively little sustained focus on what needs to be done to stabilize children’s lives. Awareness of the importance of stability for children’s healthy development has emerged separately and unevenly across different policy areas (e.g., employment, housing, education, child care, nutrition, and health), across different areas of research (e.g., toxic stress, family economic security, child development, and residential patterns), and from different perspectives and sectors (e.g., federal, state, and local policymakers, researchers, and local service providers). Varying levels of information are available on instability within these domains, and little attention has been paid to the pervasive and interconnected nature of the issue, to possible cross-cutting policy strategies and solutions, or to bringing together these disparate perspectives to identify effective strategies.

In fall 2015, the Urban Institute received a research grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to assess what information was needed to support changes in policy and practice to help foster stability and ameliorate the consequences of instability for children’s development. We brought together a team of senior researchers to conduct a quick scan of what information and research is needed to inform action within and across key domains. These domains include parents and primary caregivers, social and community networks, caring institutions (e.g., child care, early education, and schools), employment, income and assets, key resources (e.g., health, housing, and food), and the public safety net. We also assessed what we need to learn about how instability shapes children’s health and well-being and interviewed community practitioners for their perspectives on what research is needed to support action in this area. Each team member conducted interviews with leading experts in these core domains and augmented their interviews with a quick review of some of the key literature. Overall, we interviewed about 60 experts (a list of respondents is included at the end of this brief). This scan builds upon previous work we have conducted around these issues (Adams and Rohacek 2010; Sandstrom and Huerta 2013; Adams and Dubay 2014). The ideas presented here should be seen as suggestions for discussion and not definitive conclusions.

BOX 1

Key Insights for Future Research

- 1) Acknowledge the complexity and intersecting nature of the problem
 - Every sector has a role to play in triggering, preventing, or buffering instability in children's lives
 - Identify and test cross-sector strategies and interconnections
 - 2) Fill knowledge gaps about the mechanisms by which instability affects children's development
 - How various domains of instability, including parents, social and community resources, employers, caring institutions, and public supports, either trigger instability or buffer its impact and work together to form a web of stabilizing supports
 - A conceptual model showing how instability can undermine children's outcomes across multiple pathways and domains, including the full range of possible buffers and sources of resilience
 - Which characteristics of instability are most damaging, why, and how to minimize the damage
 - 3) Explore who is most at risk of instability and why
 - The prevalence of instability, who it affects, and who experiences it across multiple domains
 - Which children face gaps in their web of stabilizing supports and which children have access to buffers to cushion the impact of instability
 - How instability (and access to buffers) varies for communities that have faced systemic inequities and for families that may face extra challenges
 - How instability plays out at different developmental stages in a child's life
 - Differences between families who experience chronic versus episodic instability or who face instability in multiple dimensions versus only one domain
 - Implications of living in a community experiencing collective instability
 - 4) Develop better measures of instability
 - Measure indicators more frequently
 - More nuanced measures of instability in key areas
 - Indicators that capture the key characteristics of instability
 - Measures of how often instability in one area is triggered by events in other areas
 - 5) Identify and assess strategies to address instability both within and across key domains
 - Strategies for preventing instability
 - Strategies for detecting instability
 - Strategies for ameliorating the harmful effects of instability
 - 6) Bring together expertise and knowledge across sectors to focus on stabilizing families
 - 7) Explore the value of stabilizing families as a message to enlist support
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This brief summarizes some of the insights we gained from this scan into how instability functions and what we need to learn to take more effective action to stabilize families. It is divided into two sections:

- **Exploring the Basics of Instability.** We first provide some background information on instability:
 - » What is instability? How does it differ from related concepts?
 - » How common is instability?
 - » Why does instability matter?
 - » How does instability affect children’s outcomes?
 - » What causes instability? Where should we focus?
- **Insights for Future Research.** We then lay out some of the key insights from our scan of what research is needed to inform action to stabilize families (see box 1).

Exploring the Basics of Instability

Our research scan provided important insights into several aspects of instability: What is instability? How common is it? Why does it matter? How does it affect children’s outcomes? What causes instability? Who may be most vulnerable? The information in this section combines the thoughts and opinions of experts we interviewed with insights from the literature and questions that emerged from our analysis.

What Is Instability? How Does It Differ from Related Concepts?

A first step toward building a common awareness around instability is to create a shared understanding of the term and its meaning. For the purposes of this brief, our working definition of **instability** is **the experience of abrupt and/or involuntary change in individual, family, or community circumstances, which can have adverse implications for child development.** This definition builds on the work of Sandstrom and Huerta (2013).

Although we use this working definition in this paper, it is useful to recognize some of its complexities. Our definition highlights instability’s negative effects on children, and the term is often used to refer to negative changes, but instability is not inherently good or bad. It is simply an abrupt change. Some respondents noted that all children experience change at some point and need the resiliency and coping strategies to adapt to change. Whether instability is harmful to children depends on its characteristics and how much its potential negative effects (e.g., stress, loss of key resources, etc.) are buffered. Respondents suggested that perhaps instability, like stress, should be viewed on a continuum from positive to toxic. Some respondents also noted that stability is not always ideal, as remaining stable in a problematic situation is not good for children. It would be useful to explore whether instability is the right term or if a qualifying term, such as “unbuffered instability” or “negative instability” is needed. For the moment, we simply use instability, but we believe this question warrants further discussion as we work to build a common understanding of the issue.

Our research provided insight into two additional areas of confusion. First, we asked respondents whether and how instability differs from poverty. While there was no consensus, our review suggested that chronic poverty and instability overlap significantly but are not identical: instability affects both middle-class and poor families, and some families in poverty may appear stable by certain measures. However, the negative effects and experiences of poverty and instability are mutually reinforcing. Repeated instability is likely to perpetuate poverty, and families living in poverty appear less likely to have the resources needed to buffer the negative effects of instability.

We also explored the difference, if any, between instability and mobility. Again, there was no consensus, but some respondents said that “mobility” often suggests some level of choice and control and an intentional effort to improve one’s situation (e.g., economic mobility). But there are other domains, such as residential mobility or school mobility, where mobility refers to any type of movement, positive or negative.

How Common Is Instability?

Although there is relatively little recent information available on how much instability children experience across multiple domains, one study from 2000 found that 13 percent of poor children ages 6 to 17 experienced two or more changes within 12 months across four domains: residence, schools, parental employment, and health (Moore, Vandivere, and Macomber 2000). More recent research on the incidence of instability *within* particular domains, such as income instability, residential instability, job instability, and so on, suggests that these forms of instability are fairly common (Sandstrom and Huerta 2013):

- **Income instability.** Almost forty percent of adults living with children lose a quarter of their income at least once in the space of a year (Acs and Nichols 2010), with rates even higher for those with incomes in the lowest quintile. In addition, most low-income working families do not have the assets necessary to deal with emergencies (McKernan and Ratcliffe 2008).
- **Family composition instability.** More than one-third of children see their parents marry, remarry, separate, or start or end a cohabiting union by the time they reach fourth grade (Cavanagh and Huston 2008).
- **Employment instability/job precarity.** One in six children live with at least one unemployed or underemployed parent (Isaacs 2013), but recent research finds that even employed parents can experience significant instability. More than 70 percent of workers ages 26 to 32 reported fluctuations in weekly work hours (Lambert, Fugiel, and Henly 2014). A third of working mothers and almost half of working fathers ages 26 to 32 said they had one week or less advance notice of their work schedules (Lambert, Fugiel, and Henly 2014).
- **Food insecurity.** The US Department of Agriculture reports that about one in six households with children were food insecure in 2015 (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2016). These households were unable to acquire enough food to meet the needs of all family members because they lacked

money or other resources. Food insecurity is widespread and affects individuals in urban and rural areas both above and below the poverty level.¹

- **Residential instability.** Residential instability is also relatively common, more so among lower-income children. A 2002 study found that 10 percent of low-income children (and 6.5 percent of all children) had lived in their current home for less than six months (Roy, Maynard, and Weiss 2008).

Why Does Instability Matter?

We identified several reasons why instability in children’s lives should be of concern:

- **Instability is associated with poor short- and long-term child outcomes.** A synthesis of research across a range of domains, such as employment, income/assets, family composition, and housing, finds that “instability—and the family stress that comes with it—can have deep and lasting impacts on children’s physical, emotional, and cognitive development” (Sandstrom and Huerta 2013). In addition, the groundbreaking Adverse Childhood Experiences Study and the growing body of research around toxic stress² have shown the association between traumatic childhood events and later negative outcomes (Felitti et al. 1998). Although these areas of research may not always use the term instability, one respondent suggested that the concept is at the heart of concerns about toxic stress.
- **Instability threatens upward mobility and equity.** Families may struggle to achieve higher incomes, stable employment, and stable housing while experiencing the stress and turbulence of instability. Respondents suggested that instability can limit a family’s upward mobility because of the logistical challenges presented by homelessness, unstable work schedules, financial insecurity, and so on. Instability can also create a negative feedback loop, where stress and scarcity limit a person’s executive functioning capabilities and affect their ability to achieve their goals (Mullainathan and Shafir 2013; Bertrand, Mullainathan, and Shafir 2004).

Research shows that stability may be a prerequisite for upward mobility and greater equity. Respondents stressed, however, that a focus on promoting stability should not inadvertently lead to policies or programs that result in stagnation and limit mobility.

- **Instability undercuts efforts to support the development of children and families.** Research suggests that instability impacts the effectiveness of a range of public investments to support children and families. For example, research on absenteeism in public schools shows how instability within families leads to absenteeism and affects the ability of schools to educate children and meet performance goals (Katz, Johnson, and Adams 2016; Ehrlich et al. 2014). In addition, churn in social safety net programs reduces program effectiveness and increases administrative costs (Mills et al. 2014). Similar challenges have been identified in other areas.
- **Instability is a widely shared public concern:** A nationally representative poll of 7,000 households in 2014 found that 92 percent of respondents said that financial stability was more important

to them than moving up the income ladder. This finding was not just a result of the Great Recession, as these numbers were higher than in 2011 (Pew Charitable Trusts 2015).

How Does Instability Affect Children's Outcomes?

Three issues are important to understand when examining how instability affects children's healthy development and well-being: (1) the mechanisms through which it appears to affect children's development, (2) the characteristics of instability believed to affect its impact, and (3) the contextual factors that may shape its impact.

UNDERSTANDING THE MECHANISMS

Instability threatens some of the most basic things children need to flourish: a sense of security, safety, and efficacy in the world; strong relationships with loving adults; a stable environment; and stable access to food, housing, health care, and education.

Our research suggests that unbuffered instability is associated with negative outcomes by affecting one or more of the following areas of a child's life:

- **Stress.** Although some stress is normal and healthy for children's development, too much stress— and stress not buffered by supportive adults—has consequences for their physical, cognitive, and emotional well-being; brain development; and executive functioning. The findings from the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study and the related body of work around toxic stress provide evidence as to the negative consequences of toxic stress on children's healthy development (Felitti et al. 1998; Shonkoff and Garner 2012).
- **Relationships with parents and other nurturing adults.** Strong relationships with caring adults are essential for children's sense of safety and well-being and for buffering the impact of stress. Instability in these relationships, or in other domains that disrupts these relationships, can threaten children's healthy development (Arditti 2014; Luthar 2006).
- **Stability of place and routine.** Stable routines and home environments foster children's sense of security and give them a foundation to explore and grow (Deater-Deckard et al. 2012). Instability in these key areas can affect a child's sense of safety, add to their stress, and contribute to the disruption of other key supports.
- **Basic resources.** Children need food, housing, education, health care, and other resources to achieve their full potential. Instability can disrupt access to these essential resources and endanger their health and well-being.
- **Supportive systems.** Children and families benefit from a range of support systems, including family and social networks, community organizations, employer supports, caring institutions such as schools and child care programs, and safety net programs, which help them get the resources they need to function and develop properly. Instability can make it difficult for these private and public entities to support and buffer children and families.

When stable, several of these areas can serve a protective role for children. In fact, resilience in children can be partially explained by the extent of their access to buffers or protective factors in some of these domains. Whether a child experiences instability in any of these areas likely depends on how vulnerable the family is in that area. Families vulnerable in many areas would probably experience instability on more dimensions.

UNDERSTANDING THE CHARACTERISTICS OF INSTABILITY

Our scan suggests that several characteristics of instability may affect how much it impacts children's development, though research on these characteristics and their implications is spotty and needs to be investigated further. The first three characteristics were used in our working definition of instability discussed above:

- **Predictability.** Is the change known in advance, giving a family time to prepare?
- **Intentionality/Control.** Is the change controlled by a parent or child? Is it an intentional choice?
- **Desirability/Direction.** Is it a positive or negative change? In some cases, the answer to this question may differ even within a family.

In addition, there are other characteristics of instability that seem likely to play a role in how it affects children and families:

- **Magnitude.** The scope of change is likely related to its impact, but measuring the magnitude of changes could be challenging. Some changes are dramatic and involve a clear breaking point (e.g., getting evicted or losing a job), while others lack a clear threshold (e.g., instability in income or job schedules).
- **Frequency and dynamics.** Is the experience of instability a single or episodic event? Does it occur in cycles, where a family gains a temporary foothold before cycling back into instability when the next crisis hits? Or is it part of a chronic pattern, where daily life is unpredictable and filled with insecurity about the future?
- **Multiplicity.** Is the instability in one area of a family's life or in multiple domains? Is it confined to a single event or is it part of a sequence of bad events?
- **Proximity of instability to core relationships/sense of safety.** Does instability affect the relationship between the parent or primary caretaker and the child (e.g., mental illness, substance abuse, child abuse, or intimate partner violence)? Does it affect the child's residence or place?

Any episode of instability may vary on many of these dimensions at once, and a single episode can be experienced differently on these dimensions by different members in a family. More research is needed to explore what is known and what we need to learn about the role these characteristics play in shaping children's outcomes.

UNDERSTANDING CONTEXTUAL REALITIES THAT MAY SHAPE IMPACT OF INSTABILITY

The impact of instability may vary based on important contextual realities:

- **Child and family characteristics and history.** An episode of instability may affect children differently depending on the characteristics of the child, their family, and their history of instability and trauma. These include the child’s temperament and resiliency, the age and stage of the child, the caregiver’s own resiliency and mental health, the family’s level of personal, social, and community resources, and the capacity of parents to support the child. The family’s history of trauma or instability seems to be particularly important.
- **Characteristics of community or place.** Characteristics of a child’s community that seem likely to help shape experiences of instability and consequent outcomes include elements that may directly destabilize children (e.g., violence, deep poverty) as well as local resources and opportunities that may help buffer the child and family (e.g., social networks, social cohesion, and supportive institutions). In other words, community stability or resilience likely factors into how children and families experience instability.

Children’s outcomes may also be affected by what we call “collective instability,” which can occur when others in the child’s community experience or are at risk of instability, even if the child is not affected personally. In some cases, collective instability is associated with particular places or neighborhoods, such as communities with chronic violence. However, these “collective instability” communities may also be related to shared identities that transcend place—for example, children living in fear of their parents being deported or children who are part of a group that suffers from discrimination because of race/ethnicity, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, and so forth.

- **Systemic and policy context.** The above contexts are, in turn, affected by broader contextual factors, such as whether families are members of communities or groups that have experienced systemic disinvestment and inequities and the policy context shaping the triggers families experience and the buffers they can access. These seem likely to influence how families experience instability and the impact that instability has on a child.

What Causes Instability? Where Should We Focus?

To assess what research is needed to inform action to stabilize families, we focused on the role of several domains—parents and primary caregivers; social networks; caring institutions such as child care, early education, and schools; employment; income/assets; key resource areas such as residential mobility, food insecurity, and health; and the safety net—and how these issues played out in communities and across different groups. Some of our key insights are summarized below.

INSTABILITY CAN BE TRIGGERED OR BUFFERED IN ANY DOMAIN

Any domain can function to destabilize children, help prevent instability, and/or ameliorate the impact of instability. Specifically, our research revealed the following insights for each domain:

- **Parents and primary caregivers.** Parents and primary caregivers play a central role in how instability affects children. Instability can be triggered by a parent’s mental illness or substance abuse or by the loss of the parent through death, divorce or separation, desertion, deportation, incarceration, or loss of custody. These situations can be particularly damaging to children because the loss of their primary developmental relationship often leads to other problems. In other cases, parents may be unable to buffer their children from the stress of instability if they do not have the resources to protect them emotionally, physically, or financially, especially if they are struggling with the stress of instability or if they have experienced serious trauma that has affected their resiliency and protective factors. On the other hand, parents with the capacity and resources to buffer their children during periods of instability can do so by providing a stable, secure, and loving relationship that helps children feel safe and allows them to process their experiences. Parents can also take action to minimize how much instability affects their children through other mechanisms.
- **Family and social networks.** Social networks and supports can also affect stability. Social networks can destabilize families if they are not reliable, demand more from parents than they give in return, or are facing challenges of their own. Families responsible for providing care or resources for other family members because of disability, age, or other factors face additional challenges in this area. Alternatively, family and social networks that function well seem likely to play an important buffering role for children and families by providing financial and emotional resources, supporting families through short-term crises, providing backup care, and so on. But this can be complex, and some forms of support can be a mixed blessing (e.g., offering families temporary housing by letting them “double up” can have both positive and negative effects). These same family social networks may include individuals who can destabilize or stabilize families—or have the potential for both, depending on the circumstances.
- **Caring institutions (child care, early education and schools):** Child care and early education providers and schools are critically important for the stability of children’s lives. But in some cases, they can also be a source of instability for the child or family. This can be caused by voluntary choices made by the parent (e.g., school choice or moving) or involuntary changes in family circumstances (e.g., a forced move or, for child care, a change in work schedule or a loss of child care subsidies, etc.). The policies and practices of the school or program, such as suspension and expulsion policies, restrictive child care subsidy policies, or vacations and summer breaks, may also contribute to instability. When they function well, caring institutions can provide stability in many of the key areas children need for healthy development—not only through education, but also through relationships with caring adults, stability of place and structured routine, and access to essential resources such as food. If caring institutions have the necessary resources, knowledge, and partners, they can also detect early signs of instability for

children and help families access needed supports. Finally, caring institutions can provide essential respite care for parents who may be facing other challenges.

- **Employment.** Employment influences stability by affecting issues such as the stability of family income, children’s daily schedules, and access to stabilizing benefits like family leave and health and disability insurance. Although research has traditionally focused on unemployment and job loss and how it affects families, there is now a growing focus on *job precarity* and *job quality* and their effect on instability (Henly and Lambert 2005; Lambert, Fugiel, and Henly 2014) and family well-being (Udansky et al. 2012). *Job precarity* includes issues such as fluctuating schedules, advance notice about work hours/schedules, unstable numbers of hours (and resulting income volatility), and involuntary part-time status. *Job quality* relates to issues such as nonstandard work hours, inflexible schedules, low autonomy, and lack of workplace benefits. On the other hand, work that offers stable income, employee benefits (e.g., paid leave, health insurance, and disability insurance), and predictable schedules seems likely to support stability for the family and child.
- **Income and Assets.** Unstable income, inadequate assets, and fluctuating cash flow directly contribute to instability and make it harder for families to buffer the impact of instability in other domains of a child’s life. Research suggests that income volatility has increased over the past 25 years (Morris et al. 2015). Many low- and moderate-income families experience sharp fluctuations in both income and expenses from month to month or week to week. The factors that contribute most to volatility appear to be job loss, job precarity, shocks in family structure, shocks in family transfers, and instability in unearned income such as public assistance. However, stable levels of decent income paired with a safety net of assets can help families access the resources they need to buffer the impact of unexpected crises or income shocks on children’s development.
- **Safety net programs.** The public safety net, defined as the range of public benefit programs including Medicaid, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, unemployment insurance, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, the earned income tax credit, and so on, is supposed to provide families a buffer against instability and does just that for many families. But many low-income families are not adequately covered, there are gaps in eligibility and coverage, some policies can inadvertently exacerbate instability, and families on benefits can still experience significant instability. As a result, there are concerns the safety net is not functioning as effectively as it could. In addition to federal programs, there are local safety nets that help stabilize families through food banks, local charities, churches, and so forth, though relatively little is known about their effectiveness in stabilizing families or how they intersect with the public safety net.

- **Additional areas of insecurity.** Three additional areas warrant more in-depth examination:
 - » **Residential mobility** is a complex issue, as families can move for good reasons (e.g. to a better neighborhood with better schools) or be forced to move involuntarily. Residential mobility has been shown to have significant implications for children’s development and can disrupt many of the other mechanisms that would otherwise support children (Roy, Maynard, and Weiss 2008).
 - » **Food insecurity** has emerged as an area of concern in recent years and has implications for children’s nutrition and health and for child and family stress. Food insecurity also appears to be an important early signal of instability for families. Although more studies have focused on the problems caused by poor nutrition in young children, recent research has highlighted the negative implications of food insecurity for teens (Popkin, Scott, and Galvez 2016).
 - » **Health** challenges experienced by any member of the family can have a destabilizing effect if the appropriate buffers (e.g., income and assets, health insurance, paid leave, and disability insurance) are not in place. In these cases, instability is caused by the potential cost of health care and the potential for lost work and income, as well as by the potential impact of the health challenge on daily living and routines and stress. Chronic health conditions can strain families as they seek to balance work and caretaking responsibilities.

ADDITIONAL FACTORS

Two additional sets of factors appear to influence the prevalence and impact of instability on children:

- **Understanding the role of community or place.** Low-income families who live in communities of concentrated disadvantage often experience deep and chronic instability caused by a complex interaction of social and health problems at the community level (Bane 2008). These families also may have more disadvantaged social networks (Kristin, Turney, and Harknet 2009). Communities suffering from chronic violence also contribute to children’s experiences of instability. These challenges may be related to the decades of structural racism and historic inequities in investment and resources in these communities, among other factors. On the other hand, communities also can have strengths and resilience factors that allow them to weather challenges, support residents through challenging times, and foster healthy development in children.
- **Understanding the role of systemic factors and policy.** Children’s experiences with instability are also affected by more systemic factors that determine how vulnerable different families or communities are to triggers of instability or the access they have to resources that support buffers and resilience. These include systemic inequities in public and private investments and resources available to different communities as well as a broad range of policies that affect investments, resources, and services available to different communities and groups.

SOME CHILDREN AND FAMILIES ARE PARTICULARLY VULNERABLE

Finally, our interviews suggested that it may be important to focus on groups especially vulnerable to instability. These include, for example:

- **Children at vulnerable developmental periods.** There are two periods of development during which children appear to be particularly vulnerable to stress and developmental challenges: the first three years of life (especially the first year) and between the ages of 15 and 19. These are times of intense brain development, when life experiences can affect long-term outcomes.
- **Families with mental health challenges.** Parental mental illness threatens a child's most essential primary relationship, can create instability in other domains, and can affect a family's ability or willingness to access supports and resources. The scarcity of affordable community mental health services exacerbates this challenge.
- **Disabilities and chronic health conditions.** Children who suffer from disabilities or whose parents suffer from disabilities or chronic health conditions may have a greater need for stability and fewer buffers to protect them from harm. In addition, the onset of disability in a family may be a particularly destabilizing event with long-term repercussions.

The causes of instability in children's lives are complex, and there is no single trigger. ...It can be triggered by something as small as a broken-down car when there is no money for repairs or...by a major event such as a job loss or health crisis.

Insights for Future Research

Our scan provided several important insights that can support the development of a body of knowledge around effective and targeted strategies to address instability and its consequences for children and families.

Recognize the Complexity and Intersecting Nature of the Problem

The causes of instability in children's lives are complex, and there is no single trigger. Instead, instability can occur in a variety of domains. It can be triggered by something as small as a broken-down car when there is no money for repairs or a snow day causing a parent to miss work, or it can be triggered by a major event such as a health crisis or job loss. Instability can also be an isolated event, an initial trigger that starts a cascade of instability in other domains, or one in a series of events caused by instability in other areas. Conversely, every domain can also be a source of stability. This may be a family member stepping in to help pay for the car repair, a neighbor taking care of the child on the snow day, an

employer providing health or disability insurance that cushions the health crisis, or a safety net program helping to buffer the job loss.

This means that many domains in a child's life are just as capable of preventing or buffering instability as they are of triggering it. Each domain can potentially be part of the problem or part of the solution. These triggers and buffers function and interact in different ways for different people. As a result, how vulnerable children are to instability depends largely on their access to a complex web of stabilizing supports made up of personal, familial, social, private (including employers), and public resources. This web is, in turn, likely shaped by community and policy contexts and by larger systemic factors. When strong, this web can play an important role in ensuring that children are protected; when it has gaps, children are at risk.

This has several implications for both research and efforts to stabilize families:

- **Every sector has a role to play.** Every sector and domain, including parents, families, social networks, community organizations, caring institutions such as child care providers and schools, employers, and the public and private safety net, can play a role in triggering, preventing, and/or buffering instability. As a result, identifying and assessing ways each sector can avoid triggering instability and strengthen their ability to prevent, ameliorate, or interrupt instability could help stabilize families. Because instability in one area can cause instability in another, each sector and domain should be aware of these interdependencies.
- **Stability is based on a web of stabilizing supports, and cross-sector strategies and interconnections are crucial.** Efforts to address and examine instability *across* sectors and domains of a child's life and within the broader context are critical given the complex and interrelated nature of the problem. Although challenging, it is important that research on instability and strategies to address instability build in an understanding of the many intersecting contextual factors that shape how instability affects children's well-being.

How vulnerable children are to instability depends largely on their ability to access a complex web of stabilizing supports made up of personal, familial, social, private (including employers), and public resources. This web is, in turn, likely shaped by community and policy contexts and by larger systemic factors.

Fill Gaps in Our Understanding of How Instability Affects Children’s Development

Existing research provides a fairly strong understanding of how instability affects children’s development. But there are gaps in our knowledge that, if filled, could help develop more effective and targeted strategies to stabilize families. There are several areas where we need to improve:

- Explore whether and how all of these domains function together to form a web of stabilizing supports. Learn more about the *interplay* of various domains—family, social networks, community groups, caring institutions, employers, the public and private safety net, and community and systemic contexts—in triggering instability and/or buffering its impact for families. Information on how these domains intersect in families’ lives is spotty, making it harder to identify effective strategies, their interactions, and possible unintentional consequences.
- Develop a clear conceptual/logic model of this web and of how instability affects children’s development. This model should include
 - » the complexity and interactions between the above domains;
 - » an understanding of the roles these domains play in buffering or triggering instability; and
 - » possible intervention points.

Such a model is important for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, and for building public awareness about the problem.

- Assess what is known and work to fill the gaps in our understanding about which *characteristics* of instability (e.g., predictability, magnitude, etc.) are most damaging and why, and whether there are strategies that can help reduce the stress and damage associated with these characteristics.

Explore What Is Known about Risks and Protective Factors for Different Populations

To effectively target efforts to stabilize families, we must know more about how instability dynamics and patterns as well as access to buffering mechanisms differ across families with different characteristics living in different communities.

- How prevalent is instability in children’s lives across multiple domains, and what are the characteristics of children and families who experience instability?
- How do these patterns relate to the children and families that have strong webs of support and those that face gaps? What buffers or gaps in buffers across domains can explain patterns of instability?
- How do instability dynamics and access to buffers vary for communities that have faced systemic inequities and for families that may face extra challenges, such as families of color, immigrant families, families with disabilities, and so forth?

- » What is the role of systemic and structural inequities in shaping these patterns?
 - » What can we learn about patterns of resilience and risk for these communities and families?
 - » How have these patterns changed over time?
 - » What are the implications for the design of the public safety net, efforts to support communities, and efforts to address systemic inequities?
- What can we learn about how instability plays out at different developmental stages in a child's life, especially periods of significant brain development such as early childhood (before age 3) and midadolescence (ages 15 to 19), as well as other vulnerable periods such as unplanned pregnancies? What buffers need to be strengthened to protect children's well-being at these important junctures?
 - What can we learn about the differences between families who experience chronic versus episodic instability or who face instability in multiple dimensions versus only one domain? What gaps or buffers do they have?
 - What can we learn about the impact on children of living in communities of collective instability (e.g., communities experiencing chronic violence or communities where particular groups are threatened in some way)? What can be done to buffer the impact on children?

Understanding these differences could help strengthen efforts to stabilize and support families, and more effectively target policies and strategies to address instability.

Improve Our Ability to Measure and Interpret Instability

Although we have recently made progress in areas such as food insecurity and job precarity, our measures of instability often are not finely tuned enough to capture the complexity, gradients, or levels of change necessary to inform our efforts. To improve our ability to assess instability and target efforts to stabilize families, we should take the following steps:

- Capture more subannual data in several areas; annual data may mask the rapid fluctuations that can occur in families' lives.
- Develop more nuanced measures of instability in key areas such as child care and residential insecurity. This could build on approaches taken to develop similarly nuanced measures for food insecurity and job precarity.
- Explore what we need to learn about and how we can best measure the previously described characteristics of instability that are hypothesized to shape its impact: predictability, desirability, multiplicity, and so forth.

- Explore ways to capture how much instability in one area may be triggered by events occurring
 - » in a *different domain* of a family's life (e.g., a job loss triggered by a health crisis);
 - » *across generations* (e.g., instability for a child triggered by an event in the parent's life, or vice versa); or
 - » as the result of *larger community or policy changes* (e.g., the closing of a local factory or cuts in social services programs that reduce benefits/resources).

We should assess how each of these issues can be addressed by mining (and potentially linking) existing data, be it administrative, survey, or qualitative data, or if new data is required.

Identify and Assess Strategies to Address Instability

Our scan resulted in many ideas about research that could support and inform strategies to stabilize children's lives by detecting and preventing instability or ameliorating its effects. Here we provide a high-level summary of the approaches suggested by our research. Note that in some areas, there is relatively little existing knowledge, and in-depth research and evaluation is needed. In other areas, the challenge is to synthesize, evaluate, and disseminate what is already known.

- **Prevention.** Several suggestions for identifying and assessing strategies to prevent instability functioned *across* sectors:
 - » Identify common risk points in children's lives to develop and deliver targeted outreach and supports before families experience instability.
 - » Synthesize existing knowledge across domains and develop outreach efforts for parents and other caring adults in children's lives to help them understand the effects of instability on children's well-being and how to avoid instability or minimize its impact.

Other suggestions focused on the importance of identifying and assessing ways to reduce instability triggers *within* specific domains:

- » Explore and assess strategies to better meet the mental health needs of parents.
- » Identify and evaluate efforts to help families develop an income cushion to buffer them from income volatility and expenditure shocks.
- » Evaluate efforts to stabilize employment by, for example, having employers provide more advance notice of work schedules or reducing fluctuations in work hours and assess the impact of work benefits such as paid leave and disability insurance in reducing instability.
- » Explore and assess ways that caring institutions can reduce policies and practices that can destabilize families. These may be at school or provider level or at the system level.
- » Explore and evaluate the role of social networks in preventing or triggering instability.
- » Identify and reform safety net policies and practices that can trigger instability, such as procedural issues that cause churn, and explore ways to reduce the impact of families losing benefits (also known as the cliff effect).
- » Assess and evaluate the gaps and buffers available to families suffering health crises.

- » Explore and assess the role of community resources and characteristics in preventing instability.
- **Detection.** Early detection efforts can identify instability in one domain before it triggers instability in other domains or affects children’s development. We identified several strategies to support early detection:
 - » Work across and within systems and sectors to identify common early warning signals.
 - » Develop and test screening tools and mechanisms that can identify families at risk of or already experiencing instability. These tools could work across different systems and sectors but may also be tailored to work specifically within specific domains.
 - » Tailor and share tools with entities and systems likely to engage with families or children.
 - » Identify and test strategies to meet early needs once identified (see below).

Different systems already have identified some early warning signals. For example, food insecurity is one early warning signal the American Academy of Pediatrics has already suggested be part of pediatric screenings (American Academy of Pediatrics 2015), and some schools use chronic absenteeism as a signal (Katz, Johnson, and Adams 2016). We suggest building on these separate efforts to develop a more comprehensive, cross-cutting approach that could be tailored for different settings.

- **Amelioration.** Some suggestions focused on identifying and assessing *cross-cutting* strategies to strengthen the buffering capability of various domains:
 - » Work across sectors to identify effective or promising strategies to support children and families through transitions within and across domains, develop and test toolkits and other outreach mechanisms tailored to different audiences (parents, other caring adults, caring institutions, etc.), and disseminate these tools to parents and other adults and service providers engaged with children.
 - » Identify and assess ways to help service providers and others who work with families (within and across domains) understand the implications of instability for children’s development and the steps they can take to ameliorate its impact.
 - » Explore and assess ways to help communities detect and act on early signals of instability.
 - » Identify and assess strategies to stabilize and support children living in communities of collective instability.

Other strategies function *within* domains:

- » Identify and assess ways to better support children whose parents struggle with mental illness or substance abuse.
- » Explore and synthesize effective strategies to support children through the loss of a parent (from deportation, incarceration, divorce, death, etc.)
- » Ensure that parenting education curricula help parents understand the effects of instability and how to ameliorate them.

- » Assess and evaluate strategies to strengthen the role of social networks in stabilizing or buffering families.
- » Identify and evaluate ways to help caring institutions protect children from instability.
- » Explore and assess strategies to ameliorate the effects of job precarity on children.
- » Examine ways to restructure the safety net to reflect income fluctuations common among low-income families and to focus on providing stability.
- » Explore mechanisms that can be employed in communities to ameliorate the consequences of instability.

Bring Together Expertise and Knowledge across Sectors to Focus on Stabilizing Families

Because instability cuts across domains, it is essential that efforts to stabilize families bring together experts across sectors to develop a common knowledge base around specific issues or concerns. People concerned with instability operating in different domains do not necessarily share the same language or terminology, but they are all wrestling with what are, at their core, common challenges, they have been learning important lessons, and they have important insights to share. Several of the ideas suggested above would benefit from this kind of cross-sector approach. Interestingly, there are also sometimes siloes *within* domains that limit communication across sectors. Communication can be limited across different safety net programs, across different sectors of the early childhood and child care field, or between different segments of the education community. Sharing and leveraging knowledge within and across sectors to shape policy and practice could be very valuable. In addition, bringing these different perspectives together could help fill the gaps in our knowledge, identify common concerns and pathways, shape priorities for action, and explore unintended consequences.

Explore the Value of Stabilizing Families as a Message to Enlist Support

An unexpected finding of our scan is that stabilizing families may be a goal that could resonate with a broad segment of the American public:

- Experiences of and concerns over instability and insecurity are widespread, as demonstrated by the previously cited poll on American concerns about financial security (Pew Charitable Trusts 2015) and by the prevalence of economic hardship (Jones, Cox, and Navarro-Rivera 2014) and the relatively high proportion of Americans experiencing challenges.³ Studies suggest that these concerns bridge different segments of society across boundaries of income, race and ethnicity, geography, and political affiliation (Jones, Cox, and Navarro-Rivera 2014; Feeding America 2015).⁴ Instability may elicit empathy rather than judgement and could help break down barriers across these different groups.
- Instability directly threatens the ability of service providers, policymakers, and employers to accomplish their own goals and make good use of their resources. This may give different sectors extra incentive to take action.

- Instability threatens our ability to achieve larger social goals of greater equity and upward mobility that affect all Americans.

These points suggest that concerns about instability could engage a broad range of individuals and organizations to act to stabilize children's lives. If true, focusing on stabilizing families may provide opportunities to build shared values around supporting the healthy development of families and children. The issue of instability has the potential to be a powerful lens for social change and social action because, unlike poverty, it is a problem that many people have experienced and can empathize with.

Conclusions

Stabilizing children's lives and buffering the impact of instability is an important goal for anyone interested in supporting healthy child development and well-being as well as upward mobility and equity. While challenging, this area of work is both exciting and promising for several reasons:

- **Despite gaps, there is sufficient information to support action.** Although there are large gaps in our knowledge that require further research, there is enough information available to move forward in some areas by compiling and disseminating existing research through the lens of instability and bringing together experts to share their knowledge and experience.
- **Every sector has a role to play.** It is clear that there are steps every sector can take to help stabilize children's lives and support their healthy development within and across domains and siloes. Conducting research to support strategic actions within each sector and help individuals in those sectors understand how their efforts connect to the others could lead to important steps forward for families.
- **Opportunities to inform efforts to stabilize children's lives require a holistic approach and working across siloes.** Our scan identified several ways that research could inform action within and across domains. However, this issue requires comprehensive, holistic research that is based more on the realities facing parents and children than on the perspectives and needs of particular policy or research domains. This, in turn, requires innovative thinking and funding strategies that cut across siloes and traditional disciplines.
- **Many thoughtful stakeholders are concerned about these issues.** Even a quick review of work in this area identified a broad range of individuals concerned about these issues who are thinking outside the box and working to take a broader perspective on this topic. These stakeholders, and others working on these issues across the country, offer a wealth of expertise to bring together and build on.
- **Instability may be an issue that engages a broader community around supporting children's development.** That instability is such a widely shared concern, and that many Americans have

experienced insecurity, suggests that it may be possible to build public will around stabilizing families and children to support children's healthy development and well-being.

Instability is a complex issue, but a focused effort on research and action to stabilize children and families could provide them with a stronger web of support, give them the opportunity to move ahead, and help build a more equitable society.

Interviews

Urban Institute

Gregory Acs	Samantha Harvell	Kathryn Pettit
Laudan Aron	Genevieve Kenney	Erika Poethig
Matthew Chingos	Heather Koball	Susan Popkin
Lindsey Cramer	Akiva Liberman	Margaret Simms
Stan Dorn	Pamela Loprest	Brett Theodos
Maria Enchautegui	Signe-Mary McKernan	Margery Turner
Megan Gallagher	Mike Pergamit	Elaine Waxman
Sarah Gilliespie	Elizabeth Peters	Mary Winkler
Erica Greenberg	Bryce Peterson	

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Nancy Barrant	Giridhar Mallya	Maisha Simmons
Paul Cheh	Tara Oakman	Katie Wehr
Tracy Costigan	Kristin Schubert	

External

Joyce Arditti, Virginia Tech	Elizabeth Lower-Basch, CLASP
Elisabeth Babcock, EMPATH, Inc.	Mauricio Lim Miller, Family Independence Initiative
Ellen Baxter, Dorothy Day Apartments	Scott Miller, Circles USA
Matthew Biel, Georgetown University	Jonathan Morduch, New York University
Martin Blank, Coalition of Community Schools	Taryn Morrissey, American University
Shelley Waters Boots, Consultant for Annie E. Casey Foundation, Ford Foundation, and Kellogg Foundation	Kent Pekel, Search Institute
Richard Cho, USICH	Deborah Phillips, Georgetown University
David Ciccone, United Way of Central Ohio	Dottie Rosenbaum, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities
Sheena Collier, Promise Neighborhoods (e.g., Dudley Street)	Sophie Sahaf, LIFT
Susan Dreyfus, Alliance for Stronger Families and Communities	H. Luke Schaefer, University of Michigan
Lisa Gennetian, New York University and the National Bureau of Economic Research	Lee Schorr, Center for the Study of Social Policy
Julia Henly, University of Chicago	Amy Ellen Schwartz, New York University
Maureen Perry Jenkins, University of Massachusetts at Amherst	Tassy Warren, Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University

Notes

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