

Rise Up Policy Brief

2026



Child Welfare in a Changing Landscape: National Policy and Local Impact

Executive summary

Safety-net retrenchment is a predictable factor related to increased risk for child welfare involvement. When new policies limited accessibility and eligibility to important programs, including those providing food and health care, children and families begin to suffer. The United States offers a current, well-documented case: since 2025, federal cuts to Medicaid and SNAP, tightened eligibility rules, and intensified immigration enforcement have exacerbated worsening economic conditions related to family income and stability, with disproportionate impact on children in poor, rural and immigrant families. Poverty is the strongest predictor of child welfare system involvement, so these changes carry direct consequences for child safety.

Recognizing the impact of federal policy and local level impact, this brief draws two lessons for governments everywhere.

First, adopting a set of core principles - protecting safety net services, integrating economic assistance with child welfare prevention, and building services around equity and data can help buffer families from harmful federal policy impacts.

Secondly, tangible investment and linking core principles with broader strategic goals provides important structure for improving child and family outcomes.

Fairfax County, Virginia demonstrates these principles in practice: despite federal disruption, it has sustained strong outcomes through prevention investment and coordinated local services.

This brief shares US-specific recommended legislative priorities for federal and state policymakers, and transferable principles for governments navigating similar pressures.

The questions we sought to answer

- ✓ What critical current issues are impacting child protection in the United States?
- ✓ How can legislative and policy advocacy help mitigate the negative impact of shifting political agendas?
- ✓ How can the inclusion of local perspectives and the development of national action plans anchor child protection through shifting political agendas?



A public health approach to child protection

This policy brief presents strategies that strengthen two public health pillars:

- Funding, a national action plan, capacity building and scaled solutions
- Strong legislation and policy.

Together, these pillars connect national policy advocacy to the local practice innovations that sustain child safety under pressure.

The problem: federal policy retrenchment and rising child welfare risk

In January 2025, the United States transitioned to a new presidential administration, marking the start of a fundamental restructuring of federal policy and funding affecting children and families. **A series of Executive Orders has aimed to reduce the size of the federal government and unwind longstanding policies intended to reduce inequities experienced by people of color, LGBTQIA+ individuals, immigrants, and other vulnerable groups.** These changes compound longstanding concerns about disproportionality in child abuse and neglect reporting, response, and findings, alongside new eligibility burdens for families receiving food, medical care, and childcare assistance.

In July 2025, Congress passed H.R. 1, a budget reconciliation bill that cut billions of dollars from health care and food nutrition programs, with some cuts implemented immediately and others phased in over several years. Data from just a dozen of the 50 states already show 700,000 fewer children enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), with further cuts still to come (CBPP, 2026). Separately, Congress allowed the pandemic-era Child Tax Credit to expire in 2022, contributing to child poverty more than doubling, from 5% in 2021 to 13% in 2024 (AECF, 2025).

Poverty is one of the leading factors bringing families to the attention of child welfare agencies. As inflation continues to outpace incomes for many families, the federal minimum wage has remained unchanged at \$7.25 per hour since 2009. **Most families living in poverty do not neglect their children; however, poor families are overrepresented among those reported to child protection agencies for neglect.** Research has found that material hardship is the only factor that consistently predicts both child welfare system involvement and neglectful behaviors self-reported by families (Slack & Berger, 2021) – **underscoring the importance of safety-net and prevention programs in stopping families from being unnecessarily reported for needs that are better addressed at the community level.**

Immigration enforcement is compounding this pressure. An estimated 205,000 children have been separated from a parent through detention or deportation by the US Department of Homeland Security, and roughly 22,000 immigrant children are believed to be living without either parent following detention or deportation (Cancian et al., 2026). Congress is also considering a proposed budget that would cut nearly \$1.6 billion from federal Unaccompanied Alien Child and Refugee Resettlement programs, placing more children at risk of unmet needs, and additional strain on the systems already serving these children.





H.R. 1 also introduced new work-reporting requirements for adult Medicaid recipients, effective in most states by the end of 2026. Independent analyses project that a significant share of people who lose coverage under these requirements will be parents and caregivers who remain eligible but are removed for administrative or paperwork reasons – a pattern documented in states that previously piloted similar requirements. Reduced parental access to Medicaid has downstream effects on children even when children’s own eligibility is technically unaffected, including delayed treatment for parental physical and behavioral health conditions that are themselves risk factors for child neglect, and reduced take-up of early childhood developmental screening and intervention services that are often coordinated through the same clinics.

The impact of these federal changes is not evenly distributed across states. **States that have built stronger complementary safety nets – state-funded nutrition supplements, expanded state Child Tax Credits, or state-level Medicaid buy-in options – are better positioned to absorb federal reductions than states without them.** At the same time, many state and local child welfare agencies report that workforce shortages, already a challenge before 2025, leave limited capacity to absorb a sustained increase in referrals driven by economic hardship. Caseworkers in several jurisdictions report **growing numbers of families whose primary difficulty is unmet material need rather than abuse, a pattern that both increases system strain and risks children being drawn unnecessarily into formal child protection involvement rather than being connected to community-based supports.**

Direct federal funding for child abuse and neglect prevention and broader child welfare services has not itself been cut, but state and local governments are already reporting pressure to serve a growing number of children, including those affected by immigration enforcement. In the absence of a systemic national strategy to prioritize the safety of vulnerable children – and to effectively engage local communities and extended family in care planning – there is an increased likelihood that child welfare agencies will be asked to fill this gap for a growing number of children who are abused, neglected, or at heightened risk of harm.

Policy recommendations

Applying a public health approach – combining policy and legislative action with a coordinated national action plan and a multisectoral approach – the following priorities emerge for governments at every level.

Core principles for any government

- Establish sustained multisectoral governance across child welfare, health, education, housing, income support, immigration and community services, with clear responsibilities, financing and accountability for prevention outcomes
- Protect and strengthen income, nutrition, and healthcare supports for low-income families as child abuse and neglect prevention, not solely as welfare policy
- Integrate economic assistance (cash, food, housing, and childcare) directly with child welfare prevention services to eliminate systemic barriers
- Build service systems around equity – multilingual access, culturally responsive practice, and data monitoring – so policy shifts do not fall hardest on already-marginalized families
- Invest in family preservation and kinship care before removal becomes necessary, including equitable financial and other support for kinship caregivers both in and outside the formal child welfare system
- Track outcomes locally to identify and respond to disparities in reporting, response, and placement, including disparities affecting Indigenous, minority, and immigrant communities

Priorities for US federal and state policymakers

- Reverse H.R. 1 cuts to SNAP and Medicaid; expand, rather than restrict, eligibility and coverage
- Restore SNAP funding that has been redirected to immigration enforcement; reauthorize a strengthened Farm Bill
- Reduce family separation: end mass detention and deportation practices that separate children from parents; protect sensitive locations from enforcement action; create a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants and pass the original Development Relief and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act which offers a pathway to citizenship for undocumented immigrants brought to the US as children.
- Protect and increase funding for the Office of Refugee Resettlement and legal representation for unaccompanied children
- Reauthorize and increase funding for the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) and Title IV-E prevention services
- Expand the Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit, and make poverty reduction an explicit purpose of TANF
- Pass the John Lewis Every Child Deserves a Family Act to protect LGBTQIA+ children and families
- Amend the Inter-Ethnic Placement Act to allow consideration of race and ethnicity in permanency planning and in preparing families adopting transracially
- Increase access to federal child welfare funding for Tribes and Tribal communities under CAPTA, Title IV-B, and the Social Services Block Grant
- Ensure full parity in child welfare and anti-poverty programs and measures for US territories

A full legislative agenda is available from the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA, 2026).



Case Study: Fairfax County, Virginia

Fairfax County (population ~1.15 million) is among the wealthiest jurisdictions in the US by median household income, yet faces significant inequality that drives housing instability, food insecurity, and child welfare risk, particularly for single-parent, immigrant, and lower-income families.

Despite this, Fairfax maintains comparatively low foster care entry rates, higher likelihood that children engaged with child protective services remain safely at home, faster achievement of permanency, and lower re-entry into care after reunification. This reflects sustained investment in prevention, state-mandated coordination of children's mental health services, and One Fairfax, a countywide equity policy requiring major decisions to be evaluated through an equity lens.

The county's Department of Family Services integrates public assistance (SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, childcare subsidies) directly with employment, housing, and behavioural health services, minimizing the service gaps created by federal policy shifts. A guaranteed-income pilot for low-income working families, though not

targeted at child welfare-involved families specifically, found reduced financial volatility and stress and stabilized or improved employment among participants, illustrating how local cash-assistance innovation can support family stability.

Fairfax's experience suggests that localities can sustain strong child and family outcomes through federal policy fluctuation by prioritizing prevention, integrating economic and child welfare services, embedding equity in service design, and investing in outcome data – offering a scalable model for other jurisdictions.



Conclusion

The current period is a pivotal one for child welfare and child protection, in the United States and beyond. Reduced safety-net supports and intensified immigration enforcement place vulnerable children at heightened risk – but the response need not be reactive.

Governments at every level can act now, through a multisectoral approach: protecting and integrating economic supports, embedding equity in service design, and investing in prevention before crisis drives families into contact with child protection systems.

Fairfax County is one of many local jurisdictions demonstrating what is achievable even amid federal disruption. The task now is to translate those practices into sustained national commitment.



Resources

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- Virginia Department of Social Services. (2023). Child welfare outcome dashboard.

About the authors of this policy brief

Linda S. Spears, MSW, is President and CEO of the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), and a veteran social worker and policy expert who previously served as Massachusetts Commissioner of the Department of Children and Families.

Alycia Blackwell, MSW, Esq., is Deputy Director of Programs and Services at the Fairfax County Department of Family Services, overseeing four divisions and more than 800 staff.

The **Child Welfare League of America (CWLA)** is a coalition of hundreds of private and public agencies that has supported children and families since 1920. Through its National Blueprint for Excellence in Child Welfare, CWLA envisions all children growing up safely in loving families and supportive communities, with connections to their culture, ethnicity, race, and language. CWLA's National Policy Commission and CWLA Connect network bring together advocates, practitioners, and researchers to respond to major shifts in federal policy and resources.



The [ISPCAN Rise Up Policy Forum](#) is a global initiative to catalyse progress in child protection through a public health and system strengthening approach. It brings together governments, researchers and practitioners in a community of practice and learning, to build on and translate into action the pledges made during the 2024 Ministerial Conference on Ending Violence Against Children.



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