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Exploring How Advocacy Influences Policy Decisions

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EXPLORING HOW ADVOCACY INFLUENCES POLICY DECISIONS REGARDING CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT: PERSPECTIVES OF POLITICAL LEADERS IN COLORADO

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by
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ABSTRACT

This exploratory case study examined the perspectives of state-level elected officials regarding what influences policy decisions related to child abuse and neglect issues. By interviewing six former state-level elected officials, the study explored what policy makers believe about their ability to impact child abuse policies, how they define, and ways they have experienced evidence-based policy, and what they know about risk factors and protective factors with regard to child abuse-related policy. The study design was inspired by the Harvard Family Research Project’s (2005) Bellwether Methodology, which bases advocacy strategy on the knowledge base and input from influential policy makers. The findings from this study are intended to provide insights about how advocates, researchers, and other stakeholders can most effectively influence child abuse-related policy decisions.

Key words: Advocacy, child abuse and neglect policy, child advocacy strategy, evidence-based policy
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“We are drowning in information, while starving for wisdom. The world henceforth will be run by synthesizers, people who are able to put together the right information at the right time, think critically about it, and make important choices wisely.”

— E.O. Wilson, biologist
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Background

The research around child abuse and neglect offers evidence-based findings regarding effective prevention and intervention, yet currently such findings are rarely utilized to influence public policy decisions that impact child abuse protection and intervention. In short, a gap remains between what research shows and policy makers’ use of the findings to create systemic changes and improvements. The child advocacy community can help bridge the divide between what we know and what we do in public policy by educating and informing policy makers.

To make child abuse intervention and prevention policy a political priority, the case must first be made regarding the immediate and far-reaching implications of child abuse and neglect on individuals as well as on society in general. The negative implications of child abuse and neglect are extensive, and impact the health, well-being, and potential of individual children while also impacting family systems, communities, and the greater society.

There are more than three million reports of child abuse and neglect annually in the United States, involving more than six million children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). The adverse effects of child abuse and neglect are well
documented; specifically, negative outcomes for the victims of the abuse, including direct negative correlation to poor or problematic physical health, mental health, social difficulties, cognitive dysfunction, high-risk behaviors, behavioral problems, including criminal and violent behaviors, and early mortality (Felitti et al., 1998).

In addition, there are great negative outcomes for society in general. For example, in the United States, the estimated cost associated with identifying and treating child abuse and neglect and their associated outcomes amounts to more than $104 billion dollars annually (in 2007 dollars) (Prevent Child Abuse America, 2007). Federal, state, and local governments are charged with the protection and custody of many children who are abused and neglected, thus the costs associated with child abuse and neglect are largely publically funded. For these reasons, child abuse and neglect and investments in prevention, intervention, and mitigation are a growing public policy concern that deserves more attention and prioritization from elected officials who have the authority and ability to significantly influence systemic improvements in child protection.

**Government’s Role in Addressing Child Abuse and Neglect**

Protecting children from maltreatment is a primary responsibility of child welfare programs administered at the state and federal levels, thus requiring funding and governance from the public policy arena. The federal government provides funding to states to identify, treat, and prevent child abuse and neglect, and state and local governments supplement those funding streams at varying levels as they determine necessary.
States have varying but similar parameters around government involvement in cases of child abuse and neglect, wherein publically funded entities engage in identification, treatment, protection, and prevention of child abuse and neglect.

Publically funded child protection entities include, but are not limited to, departments of human services (also referred to as Child Protective Services or Child Welfare), foster care, residential treatment, psychiatric hospitals, adoption services, mental health providers, community-based treatment and therapy providers, shelters, homeless shelters, day treatment providers, and other similar entities.

By law, states may intervene in child protection cases at various levels, ranging from investigation to community-based therapies to temporary removal and placement of a child to permanent termination of parental rights and subsequent permanent child placement. Because federal, state, and local governments are legally accountable for protection from and intervention in child abuse and neglect cases, issues of child abuse and neglect are addressed in public policy and law. Federal, state, and local policy makers must address the short- and long-term societal and individual impacts of abuse, the financial costs associated with addressing child abuse and neglect, and the prioritization of policies and investments promoting prevention and intervention to work toward mitigating and eliminating abuse and neglect.

**Child Abuse and Neglect as a Public Policy Issue**

A broad body of research details the damages, costs, and outcomes of child abuse and neglect, at both the individual and the societal level. For example, a strong
correlation has been found between adverse childhood experiences (specifically, child abuse and neglect) and risk factors for several leading causes of early and preventable death in adults (Felitti et al., 1998). Children who have experienced child abuse and/or neglect are much more likely to have social, emotional, and cognitive impairment; adopt high-risk behaviors; experience disease, disability, or social problems; and experience early death (Prevent Child Abuse America, 1997). The growing body of research around the impacts of child abuse and neglect on brain development supports the notion that abuse and neglect actually change the architecture of the developing brain, creating maladaptation and neurological dysfunctions that strongly impair healthy development and function (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007). In many cases, these outcomes extend beyond childhood into adolescence and adulthood, potentially compromising the lifetime productivity of the maltreatment victims, in addition to the other costs associated with the damages resulting from the abuse and neglect (Prevent Child Abuse America, 2007).

According to Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory, child development is heavily influenced by the systems and contexts that interplay to comprise the child’s environment, from family to child care to community to political state. Environmental factors that are heavily correlated with child abuse and neglect include, but are not limited to, poverty, domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness, financial stress, and isolation (Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, 2011).
While many variables contribute to the presence of these risk factors and their direct or indirect correlation with child abuse and neglect, each factor is also deeply influenced by the public policy climate, political decisions, and government investments. Thus, increases in child abuse and neglect are correlated with decreases in economic stability, including the current recession in the United States (Berger et al., 2011). For example, medical research has concluded that abusive head trauma to children (which is the leading cause of child abuse deaths) increased significantly in the 19 months of the recent economic recession more than in the 47 months prior to the recession (Berger et al., 2011). Such findings were heavily correlated to parent unemployment, lack of health insurance, and funding cuts in child protective services. At least 45 states cut core funding for safety-net services to vulnerable populations throughout the recent recession despite a steady increase in need and further projected cuts through 2011 and beyond (Berger et al., 2011).

**Colorado Context**

In Colorado, there were more than 80,000 reports of child abuse and neglect in 2011, up from 71,340 reports of abuse in 2009. In 2009, 36 Colorado children died as the direct result of child abuse and/or neglect. As Colorado policy makers consider policies and public investments toward child protection efforts, they must do so in the context of Colorado’s unique fiscal situation: Colorado is the only state with a constitutional provision, called the Taxpayer Bill of Rights Amendment (TABOR), that prohibits tax increases unless approved by a majority of voting citizens and ratchets the state budget
down every year, limiting the state’s capacity for budget growth. Thus, the legislative and executive branches of government in Colorado do not have the authority to raise taxes, including funds to meet the needs of state spending. This directly impacts Colorado’s capacity to adequately fund child protection and child abuse treatment and prevention, placing vulnerable children at higher risk of harm from child abuse and neglect and saddle the state with higher long-term costs.

Policy makers must also consider that Colorado faces risk beyond fiscal austerity. Poverty is well documented to be the single greatest risk factor to child well-being, and is strongly correlated to child abuse and neglect (Wright, Chau, & Aratani, 2011). In 2009, Colorado had the single fastest growth rate of children in poverty in the nation (Colorado Children’s Campaign, 2009), despite ranking 10th highest in the nation for per capita income (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Colorado’s increasing child poverty rates are almost directly correlated to the state’s increasing incidences of child abuse and neglect (Colorado Children’s Campaign, 2009).

In 2005, the University of Denver’s Economic Futures Panel reported that Colorado is a high-income, highly educated state with a relatively low tax rate, compounding the negative impacts and constraints of the constitutional provisions dictating state fiscal policy (Colorado Economic Futures Panel, 2005).

Rebuilding public trust and improving the processes used for public decision making and governance are fundamental to the long-term economic success of the state. These processes form the framework for decisions that will shape the economic future of Colorado. . . . The economic future of Colorado, and the quality of life our children enjoy tomorrow may hinge on our collective resolve today (p.7).
Making Child Protection a Political Priority in Colorado

Addressing and prioritizing issues of child abuse and neglect can be complicated from the perspective of policy makers, because of the daunting and complex nature of all the aforementioned variables involved. However, for that very reason, it is critical to align policy makers to determine collectively that mitigating risk and addressing issues of child abuse and neglect are priority political issues in Colorado.

Policy makers, child protection stakeholders, and advocates are able to influence political agendas and build political will to make change. If they are unaware of immediate and long-term costs of child abuse, the issue may not reach their attention and gain prominence on their agendas. Research in the field of child abuse intervention, prevention, and advocacy consistently calls for systemic improvements via political and policy leadership and improvements (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007; Shankoff, 2010; Shankoff & Phillips, 2000), but the issues have yet to reach prominence and prioritization in political realm at the national and state levels.

Example of Effective Advocacy Strategy

One example of successful leveraging of advocacy efforts to influence policy makers and policy change began in 2003, when the Packard Foundation invested in a large multi-year project in California to try to build political will through advocacy to heighten awareness of and attention to the issue of Universal Preschool (Harvard Family Research Project, 2005).
The effort commenced when California’s budget shortfalls began to pose significant threat, and when the issue of Universal Preschool was not evident on anyone’s political radar, and thus unlikely to be addressed in the political and policy-making realms. By implementing a technique created by the Harvard Family Research Project (2007) called the Bellwether Methodology, the Packard Foundation sought to assess the political landscape to determine the feasibility of elevating the prominence of children’s issues, and in particular, Universal Preschool.

The Bellwether Method is an evaluation technique wherein seasoned political leaders (bellwethers) participate in individual qualitative interviews. The Bellwether participants represent the political continuum, and about half of the sample has some knowledge about and experience with the topic whereas the other half have little to none. The interviews first seek to gain general perspectives about the political context and top issues, then move to questions around children’s policy, and eventually to the key issue, which, in the case of California, was Universal Preschool.

The data collected from the interviews reveal information about key issues, the values and perspectives of what the leaders see as feasible, and what they do not know. From there, the advocacy and research communities are better able to ascertain what information and education is needed and with whom. The Packard Foundation’s effort did just that: it used the interviews to build its strategy. Once implemented, the foundation conducted a second cycle of bellwether interviews two years later. Its findings indicated that Universal Preschool was not only on the leaders’ radars but had
reached a level of prominence and prioritization among decision makers despite California’s fiscal downturn (Harvard Family Research Project, 2005).

The Bellwether Method may be a suitable approach to assist in influencing and informing other sociopolitical challenges, including the case of Colorado’s child abuse and neglect policy.

**Typical Policy-Making Process**

While some public policies are heavily influenced by evidence and research-based findings, much of the policy and legislation considered by policy makers currently results from a reactive, and not a proactive, approach, usually intended to “solve a problem.” Each year, state legislators are able to sponsor a certain number—usually five, at least in Colorado—of bills and begin considering potential legislation in the months prior to the legislative session. Citizens and interest groups can offer ideas for potential legislation, as can other departments of governmental entities. The research process behind bills varies greatly, and a bill can be generated to address issues that have not been well researched or explored.

The current process often produces unintended consequences or policy and legislation that is less effective than it might have been if evidence-based research had been considered in its formulation. While the process still produces some successful public policy, it leaves much to be desired in terms of the creation of carefully planned, research-based, proactive legislation. Working toward a more effective approach to
legislation and policy is another reason the information from this study will be useful and informative to policy makers, stakeholders, and advocates.

**Statement of Problem**

Children who experience child abuse and/or neglect are at increased risk for health problems and early mortality, high-risk behaviors, including criminal actions and substance abuse, emotional and cognitive impairment, and other social problems. In times of economic downturn, incidence of child abuse and neglect increases due to caregiver stresses related to unemployment, domestic violence, substance abuse, mental illness, and poverty.

While mitigating child abuse and neglect is a daunting and complex public policy issue, it is one with proven, evidence-based solutions. To influence policies around child abuse and neglect, including ensuring adequate public funding of such services while also incorporating other collaborative solutions, policy makers need to prioritize, understand, and value child protection issue. Policy makers have the power and ability to determine political agendas and set political priorities. Until they understand the vast societal ramifications of child abuse and neglect, they will not understand the need to prioritize the issue. In Colorado, this issue is especially critical, given unique state fiscal policy constraints and the growth rate of children living in poverty, both of which are occurring parallel to annual increases in rates of child abuse and neglect. In Colorado as well as nationally, policy makers need to understand how and why to prioritize and address child
abuse and neglect and the importance of using evidence-based policies to influence improved outcomes for children and families.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore what Colorado policy makers believe and understand about their ability to impact child abuse and neglect policy, and how they see the role of evidence-based research as a tool to inform the strategies around advocacy, child protection practice, and ongoing research in working toward elevating and addressing the issues at the public policy level. In addition, the study sought to identify what policy makers understand about the environmental risks of child abuse for both individuals and the greater society. The study also explored how policy makers are influenced in policy decisions about child abuse and neglect and child protection. Finally, the study attempted to provide insights to inform policy and advocacy strategies around influencing evidence-based policy in the field of child abuse and neglect in Colorado and beyond.

**Significance of Study**

The results of this study will provide information for policy makers, advocates, researchers, funders, and other child protection stakeholders regarding ways to shape meaningful, targeted, and effective strategies of advocacy in the child abuse and neglect policy arena. Results will inform how to increase political attention to, and prioritization of, child abuse and neglect issues, including the preservation and potential for increasing of public funding for prevention, intervention, and mitigation.
While the study focused on the State of Colorado due to unique fiscal circumstances and increasing levels of risk, many of the findings will be applicable in other states and in national-level advocacy and policy improvement efforts. Findings will also be transferrable to other disciplines and issue areas. To date, no study has examined what Colorado policy makers know and believe about child abuse and neglect policy or what is needed to elevate the issues to a higher level of priority. Therefore, the findings of the current study have the potential to inform efforts to influence and shape evidence-based policies regarding child abuse and neglect in Colorado and beyond.

**Research Questions**

The study explored the following research questions:

1. What do policy makers know about risk factors and influences on safe child development, and what do they believe about the potential for policy to mitigate risk and increase protective factors?
2. What influences decision making for policy makers when considering child abuse and child protection policy?
3. What do policy makers believe about the role of evidence-based policy as it relates to policy decision making regarding child abuse and neglect issues?
4. What do policy makers believe about their ability to impact child protection and child abuse through public policy?
Definition of Key Terms

This section defines key terms used throughout this document.

Advocacy. The strategies devised, actions taken, and solutions proposed to inform and influence local, state, and federal decision making specifically regarding public policy or legislation (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007).

Evidence-based policy. As used here, public policy or legislation based upon the best available clinical science and practices that have been demonstrated to be safe and effective (Chafin & Friedrich, 2004).

Child abuse and neglect. Child abuse and neglect are defined by both federal and state laws. At the state level, child abuse and neglect may be defined in both civil and criminal statutes. At the federal level, the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) defines child abuse as “[a]ny recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker, which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation or failure to act which presents an imminent risk or harm” (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2011, p.2).

States recognize different types of abuse in their definitions, including, but not limited to, physical abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). All states have mandatory reporting laws that define the people or categories of people that are required by law to report to authorities when they have a reasonable suspicion that child abuse or neglect has occurred or is occurring. Mandatory reporters include, but are not limited to, medical personnel,
educators, child care providers, social workers, law enforcement, and others (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). When child abuse or neglect is reported, law enforcement or child protection services are required to assess the report to determine whether and how to respond.

Child protection. The publically funded social services agency (in most states) that receives and investigates reports, and provides intervention and treatment services to children and families in which child maltreatment has occurred. Frequently, this agency is located within larger public social service agencies, such as departments of social services (Office on Child Abuse and Neglect, Children’s Bureau, 2004).

Policy makers. People who occupy positions in the governmental arena that entitle them to authoritatively assign priorities and commit resources. This includes elected officials, legislators, and high-level administrative appointees (Center for Policy Studies at George Washington University, 1994).
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides an overview of the theoretical underpinnings and research around what influences decision making for policy makers, as well as the role of advocacy and public policy decision making related to child abuse and neglect. The overview includes research regarding decision making for policy makers, literature that details the societal implications of child abuse and neglect from the public policy lens, and expresses the need for greater education of policy makers so that public decisions and public investments impacting child abuse and neglect are informed by research and data.

It is a matter of respect and utmost importance to note that while the literature listed in this chapter focuses strongly on the financial and societal costs of child abuse and neglect, the moral and emotional cost to children who have been victims of abuse and neglect is the actual point of this discussion, and should remain at the forefront of all decision making and research in this field. This chapter also includes factors for consideration regarding Colorado’s unique fiscal policy context.

Theoretical Framework

While a primary focus of this study was to examine how policy makers are influenced in their decisions about child abuse and neglect policy issues and their understanding about evidence-based policy, the study also explored the importance of building the case through which child abuse and neglect issues may be prioritized with
policy makers. This is based upon the notion that child abuse and neglect not only impact individuals but also have longer-term systemic and societal implications, risks, and costs, all of which can be addressed, prevented, and mitigated through public policy and other interventions. The following literature explores the theoretical underpinnings and research to support these notions.

**Understanding the Context of Public Policy Decision Making**

Jonathan Lomas (2000) theorized a framework for understanding the context of public policy decision making as consisting of three interrelating domains: (a) the institutional structure for decision making (and its implicit and explicit rules of conduct); (a) the values of those involved (ideologies, beliefs, and interests); and (c) the information being considered (producers, purveyors, and knowledge). Figure 1 illustrates Lomas’ framework for policy decision making.
Policy-Oriented Learning Theory

Public policy decision making has been explored through various learning theories (Bennett & Howlett, 1992). Policy-oriented learning theory emerged from the work of Paul Sabatier in the 1990s and remains a pillar of public policy research. Policy-oriented learning theory incorporates the ongoing process of search and adaptation motivated by the desire to realize core policy beliefs, such that what is learned is how to better achieve one’s ends, or how to better implement public policies (Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith, 1999). According to Sabatier, policy-oriented learning theory generally involves:
1) Improving one’s understanding of the state of variables defined as important to one’s belief system (or, secondarily, by competing belief systems).

2) Refining one’s understanding of logical and causal relationships internal to a belief system.

3) Identifying and responding to challenges to one’s belief system. (Bennett & Howlett, 1992, p. 284)

Sabatier argued that the “‘advocacy coalition’” is the agent of learning. Advocacy coalitions usually arise out of dissatisfaction with existing institutional arrangements and can consist of policy makers, journalists, researchers, policy analysts, and/or others who play a role in the generation, dissemination, and evaluation of policy ideas. According to Sabatier, the glue that holds advocacy coalitions together is a “Deep Core” belief held by their members (Bennett & Howlett, 1992). Sabatier introduced the notion of “policy brokers” as individuals within the advocacy coalition whose dominant concerns are with keeping the level of political conflict within acceptable limits and reaching some “reasonable” solution to the problem (Bennett & Howlett, 1992).

**Theory of Social Construction of Target Populations**

Another theory useful in examining how policy makers approach decision making involves social construction of target populations (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). This theory refers to the cultural characterizations or popular images of the persons or groups whose behavior and well-being are affected by public policy. As such, the theory of social construction of target populations contends that the social construction of target populations has a powerful influence on public officials and shapes both the policy
agenda and the actual design of public policy. This helps explain why some groups are more advantaged than others in the public policy realm and how policy designs reinforce or alter such advantages. The constructions and associated political positioning proposed under this theory are:

1. Advantaged construction (the elderly, business, veterans, scientists) as having a positive construction and strong political power;

2. Dependent construction (children, mothers, disabled) as having a positive construction but weak political power;

3. Contender construction (the rich, big unions, minorities, cultural elites, moral majority) as having a negative construction but strong political power; and

4. Deviant construction (criminals, drug addicts, communists, flag burners, gangs) as having a negative construction and weak political power. (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, p. 336)

Schneider and Ingram (1993) reported that for dependent groups, such as children or mothers, officials want to appear to be aligned with their interests, but the dependent groups’ lack of political power makes it difficult to direct resources toward them. Some policy makers may see dependents as powerless, helpless, and needy, and may believe that their problems are their own but that they are unable to solve them by themselves and need the support of policy makers (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). This is useful and relevant consideration when examining the decisions and role of policy makers with regard to policies about child abuse and neglect.
Ecological Systems Theory

Urie Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) ecological systems theory is central to making the case about the larger societal implications of child abuse and neglect and defining the role of policy makers. Ecological systems theory proposes that children develop in a nested series of systems within their environment that interplay, creating associated influences on child development. The theory explores the impact of environmental factors and characteristics as they relate to and influence the developing child, from the child’s immediate realm (such as family and home) to those in the child’s neighborhood (such as school and extended family), to those in the broader context (such as society, religion, and public policy). Bronfenbrenner outlines implications for policy development and the critical nature of integrating the ecological systems theory into social policy development. This theory is particularly germane in educating policy and decision makers about the implications of risk and protective factors in the context of child development, and particularly in the prevention and identification of child abuse and neglect.

The Gap between Researchers and Policy Makers

While the academic and scientific communities have explored the issues involved with identifying, treating, and preventing child abuse and neglect, their findings are not always easily translated to the political and policy-making communities for a variety of reasons and obstacles. For example, researchers and policy makers have different goals, means of gathering information, languages, and motives (Choi et al., 2005). Researchers
and policy makers operate on a different hierarchy of evidence and often have differing viewpoints of what constitutes evidence (Choi et al., 2005).

While researchers have time to explore the content area, policy makers face multiple issues presented from various viewpoints and have little time to consider issues with great depth. This is particularly true for term-limited policy makers, as they have a limited period of time in which to become familiar with a wide range of topics. For that reason, policy makers tend to rely on information, historical perspective, and institutional knowledge they receive from “trusted messengers” or “knowledge brokers,” who can be lobbyists, community leaders, or other stakeholders with whom they have established trust and rapport. Policy makers can also be influenced by media, which might play into their positions, tactics, or decision-making process. Finally, they are influenced by values, morals, and the interest of groups and constituents (Choi et al., 2005).

The combination of these factors must be considered by the research community as we seek to influence public policy and policy makers in various areas, including prioritizing child well-being and identifying, treating, and preventing child abuse and neglect. The concept of information dissemination via “knowledge brokers” is especially useful in states with term limits, as legislators are not in office long enough to build a depth of knowledge and understanding of all policy areas and thus rely on trusted knowledge brokers to translate issues for them and aid in decision making.
Influencing Decisions of Policy Makers

Research from the Center for Policy Studies at George Washington University in Washington, DC, explored how policy makers are influenced by the use of qualitative research as an effective means of presenting data and issues (Center for Policy Studies at George Washington University, 1994). The researcher, Rist, proposed that policy decision making is part of a complex process that relies heavily on contextual information, group processing, trade-offs, and information linkages, as well as trusted messengers (Center for Policy Studies at George Washington University, 1994). Further, he proposed that qualitative data provide an effective means of translating information and issues because of their open-ended nature and characteristics of producing scenarios and perspectives that might influence policy makers more strongly than quantitative data alone.

The Gap between “What We Know and What We Do”

Shankoff’s (2010) more recent work leans heavily toward the value of engaging and influencing policy makers as a means of improving factors that influence child development and mitigate sources of adversity and risk in the critical early years. As such, he emphasized the need to bridge the gap between “what we know and what we do” from the policy-making perspective, specifically regarding risk mitigation for children. Shankoff provided implications for policy and practice based in neuroscience and brain development, with consideration of environmental and societal factors and family situations research, while emphasizing the importance of policy investments in services
for vulnerable children and families. In addition, he stated the importance of policy makers understanding protective supports such as parent education, access to basic services for children, and mitigation of “toxic stresses” defined as “frequent, and/or prolonged activation of the body’s stress-response systems in the absence of stable adult support” (Shankoff, 2010, p. 360). Examples of toxic stress include extreme poverty, chronic abuse or neglect, and family violence.

Advancing the field and improving outcomes for children at risk of or experiencing child abuse and neglect depends heavily upon the engagement and leadership of policy makers. “All available information points to the same conclusion—intervention in the early years can make an important difference, and the magnitude of policy and program impacts must be increased” (Shankoff, 2010, p.365).

Currently, Shankoff’s (2010) work is the predominant voice in the effort to bridge “what we know (from research) and what we do (in public policy),” as well as in voicing the imperative to educate and influence policy makers regarding evidence-based policy in the best interest of children and families. Shankoff’s work is heavily influenced by Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) ecological systems theory, further expanding the notion that child development is strongly impacted and molded by the child’s environment, which directly links public policy decisions with the ability to improve outcomes for children including in the realm of child abuse and neglect.

Shankoff has become a primary thought leader in this particular field of research as a co-editor of *From Neurons to Neighborhoods* (2000). Further, he serves as chair of
the Center for the Developing Child at Harvard University, producing a research series entitled *A Science-Based Framework for Early Childhood Policy*, which focuses on bridging findings from academic research in the environmental and societal impact on the developing child and its associated implications for public policy. The Center’s research draws a direct correlation between brain development and environmental factors and calls for public policy interventions and investments that promote access to protective supports for children and families living at higher risk of child abuse and neglect due to societal or environmental factors such as poverty, substance abuse, or family violence (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007a).

**The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study**

Additional evidence for use in educating and influencing policy makers about identifying, treating, and preventing child abuse and neglect is grounded in findings around the societal and moral costs of child abuse and neglect. The Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) Study was landmark research in the field of child abuse outcomes. Involving more than 13,000 adults, it found a strong relationship between exposure to abuse or household dysfunction during childhood and multiple risk factors for several illnesses and leading causes of death in adulthood (Felitti et al., 1998). Key findings in the study explained the correlation between child abuse and neglect and maladaptive coping mechanisms in adulthood, including smoking, alcoholism, drug use, and the likelihood of continued involvement with domestic and family violence.
The study pointed to the need for increased focus on preventing adverse childhood experiences through interventions such as early home visitation programs that provide parenting education, health, and risk monitoring, and relationship building for vulnerable families. This finding is consistent with the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect’s recommendation that universal early home visitation programs as a primary means of preventing child abuse and neglect (Felitti et al., 1998). Other recommendations for increasing protective factors and prevention interventions included increased communication among the various disciplines that have immediate access to at-risk families—such as home visitation nurses, medical and public health personnel, and others—to increase awareness of risk factors such as family and domestic violence and the presence of substance abuse.

The study also discussed the financial costs of long-term outcomes of abuse and neglect in terms of health, preventable illness, and premature death, and supported the notion that the public health arena has the research to prove that prevention should be a primary focus and that outcomes of child abuse and neglect can be improved with research-based interventions. These findings have influenced subsequent studies and lend important insight about the potential for return public investments in prevention and intervention.

**Economic Impact of Child Abuse**

The ACE Study informed the work of Prevent Child Abuse America’s 2007 economic impact study, which considered the costs of identifying and treating child
abuse while also quantifying the other direct and indirect costs associated with child abuse and neglect, including hospitalization and medical treatment, mental health treatment, child welfare system services, law enforcement, special education services, juvenile delinquency and adult criminal justice system costs, and lost productivity to society (Prevent Child Abuse America, 2007). (These government and private services exist at the federal, state, and local levels and provide treatment, protection, and intervention services for children and families experiencing child abuse and neglect and the associated risk factors.)

The study estimated that there are close to one million confirmed victims of child maltreatment annually, equating to a response cost estimated at $103.8 billion. The study also recognized the unquantifiable cost or “intangible losses” to the victims, including the impact of pain, suffering, and increased challenges at accessing productivity and healthy outcomes in life. The study called on policy makers to consider the preventable costs of child abuse and neglect when allocating resources and engaging in policy decision making and prioritization (Prevent Child Abuse America, 2007).

As pointed out, this body of research is built upon the foundations of child development occurring within the context of ecological systems theory, which makes the case that child abuse and neglect have a significant financial and moral cost to society, but are preventable and treatable. Conveying these concepts to political leaders and decision makers is a critical step in influencing decisions around public investments and policy decisions that could ultimately change outcomes and reduce risk from
Bronfenbrenner’s exosystem level, which is where governmental and political influences potentially shape the environment and opportunities for developing children (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In short, this research provides evidence for use in advocating that policy makers can and should prioritize working in the child abuse and neglect policy arena because they can significantly influence outcomes. This research also aids in formulating advocacy strategies for what and how policy decisions may be influenced.

**Policy Landscape for Child Advocacy in Colorado**

Considering Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, it is important to understand local landscape for practice, policy, and advocacy. Given that the current study focused on Colorado’s unique political and social context and its parallel political landscape, one must understand the factors unique to Colorado so that, as necessary, advocacy outcomes from Colorado can be generalized and separated from those of other state landscapes to inform future advocacy efforts in Colorado and beyond.

In 1992, Colorado voters passed a constitutional amendment known as the Taxpayer Bill of Rights (TABOR), which was intended to restrain growth in government. To date, TABOR is the most restrictive tax and spending limitation in the United States (Bell Policy Center, 2012). TABOR has several provisions, but its primary characteristic is limiting government revenue, and applies to all state, city, county, school district, and special district levels of government in Colorado.

This limit is achieved through refunds to taxpayers in years that produce tax revenue in excess of the established limits. However, the TABOR limits do not consider
the implications of economic recessions, wherein the revenues do not exceed the limits and thus ratchet the limits down to the level of the revenue. The “ratchet effect” creates decreased revenue and spending limits during recessions, which has necessitated hundreds of millions of dollars in budget cuts in Colorado just to keep governments in compliance with the TABOR limits.

TABOR also mandates that policy makers do not have the authority, without a vote of the people, to increase taxes, which is a very complex and hard concept to explain and sell to voters in times of recession. The result is a unique financial scenario that is inherently complicated for policy makers to address when making state budget considerations (Bell Policy Center, 2012). The impacts of budget cuts over the past decade have trickled down to public schools, government programs, and community services that serve as the safety net for Colorado’s most vulnerable citizens, including children at risk of or experiencing abuse and neglect.

Given the consequences of Colorado’s unique budget situation in conjunction with the recent national recession, the Colorado state budget has become increasingly lean. As a result, the philanthropic and foundation communities have been forced to stretch their resources to attempt to fill gaps, leaving an inevitably diminishing capacity in important programs and services.

Additional insight for advocate and policy maker consideration regarding Colorado’s unique fiscal scenario was released in 2005, through the Colorado Economic Futures Panel, a nonpartisan study at the University of Denver, which leveraged business,
policy, and community leaders to explore the complexities of Colorado’s fiscal situation. Its year of research resulted in the 2005 Final Report of the Colorado Economic Futures Panel, which included specific findings and recommendations to improve Colorado’s fiscal stability and potential.

The study found that Colorado is a high-income state with highly educated citizens and that it offers an abundance of opportunities for economic growth in tourism and business. Nevertheless, the fiscal constraints of the state budget inhibit Colorado from having the flexibility necessary to complete required fiscal policy changes and adaptations. Changing these constraints depends upon the input of voters, who would have to vote to “undo” a number of fiscal policy provisions through constitutional amendments, an unlikely scenario. Recommendations from the report (Colorado Economic Futures Panel, 2005) call for more rigorous standards to amend the Constitution, as well as revising or simplifying the current Constitution, if possible; efforts to strengthen representative government so that it has the decision-making ability to amend fiscal policies in statutes (laws) and not in the Constitution; efforts to rebuild and strengthen public trust to achieve these changes; and other changes such as creating a better balance between residential and non-residential (business) property tax.

The report provides a comprehensive overview of Colorado’s issues and challenges, with recommendations for improving the state’s economic future. To date, some of the recommendations have been addressed in the public arena, but none of the significant recommendations have received sufficient public support to be adopted.
Additional Risk Factors in Colorado’s Child Policy Landscape

The Colorado context creates a unique set of issues for children and child policy for a variety of reasons. In 2009, Colorado achieved the highest percentage growth rate of children living in poverty in the United States (Colorado Children’s Campaign, 2009). This trend was tracked using several tools from the U.S. Census Bureau data in conjunction with school data on free and reduced-price lunch eligibility. Poverty is well documented as being the single greatest risk factor to child well-being (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2011; Wright et al., 2011). Thus, the risks associated with poverty impact a family’s most basic needs, including ability to access affordable housing, health care, education, food, clothing, transportation, and other fundamental needs. Poverty is also closely correlated with child abuse in Colorado (Colorado Children’s Campaign, 2009). For these reasons, poverty trends need to be an important area of focus in the policy-making arena as we consider how to mitigate risk and child abuse. These are critical considerations for policy makers, who need to understand the relationships among Colorado fiscal policy, growth rates of poverty, and their implications for abuse prevention and child well-being.

Evaluating Advocacy: How Do We Know What Is Working?

Measuring the outcomes of policy advocacy efforts in the child policy arena is a relatively new field of study. The Harvard Graduate School of Education took on the issue of advocacy evaluation by compiling recent research and findings and publishing the compilation in Evaluation Exchange (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007). For
the purpose of its research, Harvard defined *advocacy* as representing “the strategies devised, actions taken, and solutions proposed to inform or influence local, state, or federal decision making” (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007, p. 1). Types of advocacy evaluated included activities such as one-on-one meetings, testimony at hearings, community meetings or forums, coalition building, public education campaigns, street marches, media outreach, and electronic advocacy (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007). In recent years, evaluating the effectiveness of advocacy efforts has become a valuable measure for foundations and other funders to calculate their return on investment.

Among the research included in Harvard’s *Evaluation Exchange* were interviews with four large foundations to learn about their perspectives on evaluating effective advocacy. The California Endowment, Atlantic Philanthropies, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the W. K. Kellogg Foundation are known as philanthropic pioneers for their investments in advocacy (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007) and have developed indicators for effective advocacy outcomes. Each foundation is interested in measuring if and how its grantees impact public policy change and how to track “meaningful indicators” of progress beyond traditional simple measures such as number of people attending a forum or the quantity of materials distributed. More meaningful indicators may include tangible policy change or an increasing number of legislators attending meetings on a given topic, which would potentially signify increased attention to the issue.
Atlantic Philanthropies noted an interest in investing in advocacy efforts that have a realistic timeframe, which usually means a multi-year investment to build capacity and potential for effectiveness. It reports that too many foundations offer single-year grants and expect unrealistic outcomes in a short time period. The Annie E. Casey Foundation evaluates advocacy efforts based on impact, influence, and leverage, while recognizing that advocacy effectiveness is complex and complicated to measure and thus should be individualized for each grantee. Finally, Atlantic Philanthropies, California Endowment, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation all prioritize technical assistance to grantees to help them individualize meaningful evaluation (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007).

New Mexico Voices for Children is a non-profit advocacy organization working to influence policy makers and policy change on behalf of children, with a primary focus on low-income and economic justice issues. Its advocacy in child welfare and abuse and neglect treatment and prevention is focused on immediate services in tandem with longer-term policy improvements. As cited in the Harvard Family Research Project (2007), Executive Director Kay Monoco stated:

The difference is that service providers meet immediate needs, like food and housing crises, while policy advocates look at long-term solutions that will, hopefully, lessen the prevalence of such crises. We’re really two halves of the same whole, both of us doing our part to promote change and both parts equally crucial (p. 16).

This organization measures successful advocacy based on its internal theory of change, which begins with problem identification, validated by research and community input, bolstered by community stories and input from influential leaders to inform and influence
policy outcomes, and finally is validated by whether those policy changes had a positive impact on the original problem (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007).

Another advocacy evaluation method covered in the 2007 *Evaluation Exchange* describes the Bellwether Methodology developed at Harvard in conjunction with the Packard Foundation to measure the effectiveness of advocacy efforts in a 10-year project in California intended to elevate the political will to support and expand Universal Pre-K. The Bellwether Methodology consists of structured interviews with “bellwethers” — seasoned political and thought leaders in the state—to gauge their assessment of top political issues, level of knowledge about Universal Pre-K, and input about whether or how best to educate and influence to advance the issue. The input of these bellwethers, in turn, was used to educate and inform the strategy of the advocacy community in influencing policy change. Half of the bellwethers knew little to nothing about Universal Pre-K, whereas the other half had some or much knowledge of the topic. Harvard and Packard conducted the bellwether study twice in California, with the results of the first study revealing little knowledge of the issue and little or no political will to advance key messages from key informants toward key policy makers. This circumstance actually changed the political will surrounding the issue. A second bellwether study a year later revealed that Universal Pre-K was among the top three political issues as listed by the bellwethers interviewed, and the policies were indeed changed to expand Universal Pre-K.
The Packard Foundation was pleased with the outcome of its investment and felt that the Bellwether Methodology was instrumental in shaping an effective strategy. Since that study, Harvard has duplicated the bellwether approach in other studies, and according to one of the method’s founders, it is beginning to be used in other projects in the United States and abroad (J. Coffman, personal communication, January 11, 2012; Harvard Family Research Project, 2005, 2007).

**Gaps in Research**

Currently, very little research is available measuring how advocacy influences policy and decision makers with regard to child abuse and neglect policy. While there is a substantial body of research about the origins, characteristics, treatments, and implications of child abuse and neglect, little known is about how to engage policy makers in this topic to shift and engage political will such that the issues are elevated as priorities.

The gap in knowledge on this topic area is what Shankoff (2010) described as the “the difference between what we know and what we do.” What is known about child abuse and neglect and quantifying those outcomes and costs needs to be more effectively connected to the level of political will, which establishes a shift in political agendas and produces improved policy and societal outcomes.

**Summary**

The body of research on child abuse and neglect lays out multi-systemic problems with roots in immediate and intergenerational environmental factors and influences.
Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory supports the notion that child development occurs and is shaped by concentric circles or layers of environmental influence, from family to neighborhood to society, government, and culture (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). Risk factors within those environmental levels can impact child development but can also be addressed, shaped, and improved through informed and intentional public policy investments and decision making.

To influence policy makers and policy change, research must be disseminated in a manner that is usable and accessible by policy makers, which is most effectively done via knowledge brokers or trusted messengers, relying on valid and compelling research-based solutions to problems. Advocacy efforts to improve outcomes in the child abuse and neglect arena have yet to reach the level of heightened political prioritization but remain a fragmented and misunderstood societal issue. However, advocacy efforts could be informed and improved by the aforementioned research such that policy outcomes are improved and advanced to generate improved outcomes in the lives of children who have experienced or are at risk of experiencing abuse and neglect. In Colorado, advocacy strategy would need to consider the unique cultural, political, and financial characteristics of the state to advance policy change in the child abuse and neglect arena.
CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

This chapter presents the research design for the study and describes methods used to collect, manage, and analyze the data. It also addresses study limitations, precautions related to potential researcher bias, and protection of human subjects.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to explore what Colorado policy makers believe and understand about their ability to impact child abuse and neglect policy. The study also explored how elected officials see the role of evidence-based research as a tool to inform strategies around advocacy, child protection practice, and working toward elevating and addressing the issues at the public policy level. Another purpose of the study was to identify what policy makers understand about the environmental risks of child abuse for both individuals and the greater society. In addition, questions were posed to assess how policy makers are influenced in their policy decisions about child abuse and neglect and child protection. The insights obtained are intended ultimately to be used to inform advocacy strategies on how to influence evidence-based policy in the field of child abuse and neglect in Colorado and beyond.
The primary research questions for this study were as follow:

1. What do policy makers know about risk factors for and influences on safe child development, and what do they believe about the potential for policy to mitigate risk and increase protective factors?

2. What influences decision making for policy makers when considering child abuse and child protection policy?

3. What do policy makers believe about the role of evidence-based policy as it relates to policy decision making regarding child abuse and neglect issues?

4. What do policy makers believe about their ability to impact child protection and child abuse through public policy?

**Research Design**

The study was conducted as an exploratory case study incorporating elements of the Bellwether Methodology as an approach to a qualitative analysis. Exploratory case study design is used to investigate little-understood phenomena, identify or discover important categories of meaning, and generate hypotheses for further research (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 1999). As such, exploratory case studies often build descriptions of complex circumstances that are unexplored in the literature (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

Social science research utilizes an array of techniques—from quantitative to qualitative—each serving very different functions and purposes. While quantitative data provide useful information, quantifiable variables, and statistics, naturalistic or qualitative
research allows researchers to gather “hidden” or “hard to reach” information through observation and by talking with and carefully listening to people deemed to possess relevant information (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Qualitative interviews shed insight on experiences and perspectives the researcher might not otherwise access or have the opportunity to consider through surveys or other quantifiable data collection mechanisms.

Qualitative research is especially effective at describing and analyzing social and political processes, including how and why things change (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). For these reasons, a qualitative and exploratory design was chosen for the current study—to explore the perspectives of elected officials on the specific and complex topic of child abuse policy in the context of Colorado’s policy and economic climate. For the specific research purposes of the study, a quantitative approach would offer less capacity to access the unique experiences, perspectives, and ideas of the participants, which can yield unforeseen and unpredictable insights that may be useful in future political and advocacy strategy in the children’s policy arena. Rather than beginning with a theory, qualitative research generates or inductively develops a theory or pattern of meaning (Creswell, 2013).

This qualitative exploratory case study incorporated elements of the Bellwether Methodology because it is designed to explore the unique and valuable perspectives of influential leaders in an efficient manner, as obtaining access to such leaders or “elites” can be a key challenge for a researcher (Kvale, 2007). While the Bellwether Methodology has not been widely utilized and published and is not yet recognized as a
credible academic approach, it embodies strategic elements that support the goals of this study, specifically with regard to gaining insight from and about policy makers through interviews.

The methods described in the literature review regarding Harvard’s Bellwether Methodology describe a means for gaining input about political landscape and specific issues from policy makers and thought leaders for use in informing advocacy strategies influencing decision makers and shaping policy directions. Given the cases made for the role of policy makers in improving policies that impact child abuse and neglect issues and the specific challenges and characteristics in Colorado, elements of the Bellwether Methodology were incorporated into the research design. This approach was chosen to assist in gaining insight about the existing basis of information about child abuse in the policy landscape directly from leaders themselves, and to formulate suggestions for improvements that can be used to inform the strategies of advocates and researchers in the future.

The Bellwether Methodology is a qualitative design developed by Harvard Family Research Project (2005). It is an advocacy evaluation approach used to gauge whether an issue is on a political agenda (federal, state, or local) and, if so, how it is positioned, assess political will for a desired outcome, forecast the likelihood of future policies and proposals, and assess the extent to which advocacy messages have already or could “break through” to policy makers (Coffman, 2008). The data are collected through
individual interviews with “bellwethers;” that is, policy makers and other thought leaders who are in positions that require them to track a broad range of policy issues.

There are five main steps common to all studies using the Bellwether Methodology Protocol (Coffman, 2008) use the following five main steps (see Appendix E):

1) Select the types or categories of bellwethers for interviews. (Categories may vary depending on topic, and may include policy makers, media, funders, researchers, business leaders, trade associations or advocates. Categories are selected to represent the individuals whose opinions are influential on public policy.)

2) Select the bellwether sample. (At least half of the sample should include individuals who are not connected or familiar with the topic at hand, and the other half should have some level of familiarity or even expertise in the topic area. The purpose of this selection is to increase likelihood that information gained will be attributed to advocacy efforts and not just personal experiences or other outside variables. Selection criteria should also consider bipartisanship, gender, ethnicity, and, to the extent possible, other demographic and geographic representation.)

3) Set up interviews. (It is critical that bellwethers be unaware of the specific topic before the interview begins, so that their responses are authentic and unprompted. Interviews can be arranged by providing information about what topics will generally be covered, but specifics and details should not be provided in advance.)

4) Conduct interviews. (True Bellwether interviews are short (20-30 minutes) and maintain consistent order in questions. Interview questions begin with broad topics and narrow down to the topic at hand, to see if the policy area is listed in their comments on overall broad policy landscape, and later more specific questions reveal more about their level of education on the topic.)

5) Analyze data to inform strategy. (Both summative and formative data will be collected. The summative data can the level to which the participants are informed about the issues and thus may indicate how effective advocacy messaging and outreach has been, and formative data can help inform advocates about what information or messaging is needed to increase penetration of message. The method is
repeatable over time if the advocacy strategy takes multiple several years.). (Coffman, 2008)

For both the feasibility and validity of this study, not all of the elements of the Bellwether Methodology were utilized (see Table 1). For example, the sample size was smaller than recommended because it was exploratory in nature, but interviews were longer than the typical Bellwether interview to increase validity and depth of information. Data from the study could be expanded upon in future research incorporating a larger sample or full-scale Bellwether Methodology study or a larger qualitative case study incorporating elements of the Bellwether Methodology.
Table 1

*Key Differences Between the Bellwether Methodology and This Exploratory Pilot Study*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of the Bellwether Methodology (Coffman &amp; Reed, 2009)</th>
<th>Characteristics of This Exploratory Pilot Study</th>
<th>Rationale for Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conduct structured interviews with “bellwethers,” or influential people in the public sector whose positions require that they track a broad range of policy issues.</td>
<td>Participants for this study were drawn from a narrower pool of bellwethers consisting solely of former elected Colorado state-level officials.</td>
<td>This narrower group was selected due to feasibility and capacity of the researcher, and also because this population is most closely related to state policy decision making. The pool consisted of former elected officials to avoid any conflicts of interest with current elected officials, given the researcher’s professional role as a state official funded by state General Fund dollars, which are managed by state policy makers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least part of the bellwether sample is “unconnected” to the policy issue of interest. At least half the sample should include bellwethers who do not have a special or specific connection to the issue being explored.</td>
<td>Participants for this study were invited based upon how recently they had served in state office, how highly ranked they were, and their availability and willingness to participate. Participants were also chosen to represent political affiliation and gender as evenly as possible.</td>
<td>The Bellwether approach has not established a clear methodology for determining a participant’s knowledge of or proximity to the topic, thus leaving much room for selection or interpretation bias on behalf of the researcher. The invitation criteria for this study were intended to reduce bias as much as possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bellwethers are unaware beforehand that the interview will discuss the policy issue of interest. They are informed of the general topic area but are unaware of specific questions and topics.</td>
<td>This study was conducted very similarly to the Bellwether approach in this regard. Participants were made aware of the general topic but were not provided details or questions in advance.</td>
<td>By not having details about the interview topics and questions prior to the interview, participants are more likely to provide authentic and unprompted responses. Their responses yield insights regarding their level or interest and/or experience with the topic(s), which is useful in informing advocacy strategy.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Interview questions determine what the bellwethers know and think about the policy of interest. Questions begin more broadly to gauge input about their beliefs and the policy landscape in general, becoming more narrowly focused toward the topic throughout the interview.

This study was conducted very similarly to the Bellwether approach in this regard.

This approach helps the researcher learn about participants’ general orientation and perspectives while also learning about the depth of knowledge and level of experience with the topic of interest.

| Bellwether studies typically include 40 or more participants for a single interview (usually 30 to 60 minutes). | This exploratory pilot study included two interviews with six former policy makers. | Multiple (ideally three) interviews make for a more credible qualitative study because participants’ behaviors become more meaningful and understandable when the researcher has the opportunity to build rapport and compare and “plumb” the experience in context (Seidman, 2006). However, accessing interviews with “elites” is challenging due to the demands of their schedule and position (Kvale, 2007), so this study was based on two interviews with each participant. |

Historically, qualitative research is more difficult to fund and publish than quantitative research (Royse, 2008); however, elements of the Bellwether Methodology offer an innovative advantage as a qualitative research method that demonstrates effectiveness of advocacy efforts. Demonstrating effectiveness in advocacy is of great interest to the foundation and philanthropic communities, as they seek to invest in effective methods of influencing and producing policy and systemic changes. For this reason, incorporating elements of the Bellwether Methodology into the overall exploratory case study design was well suited to meet the research goals of this study.
Sample

Participants for the study were former state-level Colorado elected officials with a broad range of policy knowledge and expertise. Potential participants were selected based upon how recently they had served in state office, how highly ranked they were, their availability and willingness to participate, and also to represent political affiliation and gender as evenly as possible.

Invitations to participate were sent to eight former elected officials who had served in state-level positions, leaving office within the past three or fewer years (Appendix C: Participant Invitation Letter). Two of the eight former elected officials invited were unable to participate due to scheduling demands. The study sample was purposive in nature, as the participants shared certain characteristics that made their input relevant and germane to the research topic (Royse, 2008).

To control for bias and conflict of interest given the researcher’s current position as a state official (funded by state General Fund dollars, which are controlled by the state legislature), only leaders who were no longer serving in public office, and thus were no longer responsible for legislative votes or decisions regarding state General Fund dollars, were invited (see Table 2).

Table 2
Bellwethers Interviewed for This Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Name</th>
<th>Last Name</th>
<th>Last State-Level Elected Office Held</th>
<th>Year Exit Public Office</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Terrance</td>
<td>Carroll</td>
<td>Democrat, Former House Speaker</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BJ</td>
<td>Nikkel</td>
<td>Republican, Former State Representative</td>
<td>2012</td>
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Data Collection

Data collection in case study research is typically extensive and draws on multiple sources of information, including observations, interviews, documents, and other types of information the researcher determines to be relevant (Creswell, 2013). For this study, data collection involved three primary components: (a) review of research and historical information about child abuse and neglect policy advocacy and evidence-based research into the societal implications of child abuse policy; (b) research on the background of each interview participant; and (c) the qualitative interviews phase influenced by elements of the Bellwether Methodology protocols (Coffman, 2008).

The data collection phase began after a broad review of the relevant literature and historical documentation, as outlined in Chapter Two. This phase informed the planning and execution of the interview phase, incorporating evidence-based research and historical background into interview questions. The second phase involved research into the backgrounds of each participant, including biographical information, professional experience, and political history, including service on committees or leadership positions that involved with or relevant to child policy issues and decisions.

The third phase of data collection involved interviews conducted using some of the protocols established by the Harvard Family Research Project for its bellwether
research (Coffman, 2008) (see Appendix E). The Harvard protocols include a sample summary invitation letter stating the general purpose of the study and general versions of sample questions (so as not to reveal specific policy areas).

Requesting participation in the interviews involved an initial email introducing myself and clarifying separation between this research and my current role as Colorado’s Child Protection Ombudsman to avoid confusion and bias. The interview request provided general information about the expectations of the interviews, including format (two face-to-face recorded interviews, each lasting approximately 45 to 60 minutes). Face-to-face interviews were requested in lieu of phone interviews to build trust and rapport while also allowing the observation of both verbal and nonverbal data, including gestures, facial expressions, and other types of communication that enrich the meaning of the spoken words (Knox & Burkard, 2009).

Confidentiality was explained in the initial request for interviews, and was repeated in the informed consent form and verbal introduction of interviews (see Appendix B). Briefly, these materials explained that for the purposes of this study, participants’ names would be listed in the final write-up of the study, but comments and quotes would not be attributed to individual participants.

Seidman (2006) recommended the use of the “Three Interview Series” to explore (a) focused life history, (b) the details of experience, and finally (c) reflection on meaning. Knox and Burkard (2009) recognized the value and credibility of at least two interviews as a way to not only lend understanding to context but also help participants
feel a sense of safety with the interviewer while allowing the opportunity for further examination of additional content and context from the initial interview.

In the current study, two interviews were conducted instead of three due to logistics; that is, the participants sought are generally difficult to access due to their position and/or scheduling demands, a key challenge in accessing “elites” for interview research (Kvale, 2007). Seidman (2006) also acknowledged the challenges of carrying out interview plans with elites or executives, given their busy schedules and outside demands.

Before the beginning of the study, participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent form explaining the purpose and process of the study and ways to report concerns or issues about the interview process or procedures. The form also explained that the interviews would be recorded and would be used solely for the purposes of this study and would be destroyed thereafter.

**Interviews**

The first interview consisted of introductory questions designed to get a better understanding about participants’ political background, general policy landscape issues (specific to Colorado), and more specific questions about participants’ experience with child abuse and neglect policy issues and decisions.

The second interview was designed to allow participants an opportunity to reflect on their experiences as policy makers and explore what they believed about how public policy might improve outcomes for children experiencing child abuse and neglect. Per
Harvard’s protocols for the Bellwether Methodology (Coffman, 2008), the researcher determines on a case-by-case basis whether it is necessary to ask all of the questions if it becomes clear that the subject knows little or nothing about the specific subject matter or the participant knows the subject so well that he or she covers multiple questions in the same answer, allowing the researcher some flexibility in fielding the remainder of the questions while trying to adhere to the fidelity of the question order and content.

Participants were offered the opportunity to review transcripts and summaries from the interview for member-checking as a means of developing trust and ensuring validity.

**Procedures and Data Management**

Because qualitative research involves multiple sources of information and data, the procedures and data management techniques included several components, as outlined in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Procedures and Methods of Data Management*

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<td>Test-piloting interview questions</td>
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<td>Interview transcripts</td>
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<td>Field notes</td>
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<td>Reflexive journaling</td>
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<td>Peer review</td>
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**Test-Piloting Interview Questions**

While interviews were being scheduled, I simultaneously test-piloted the interview questions with former State Senator Maryanne “Moe” Keller as a volunteer subject prior to the beginning of actual interviews. The purpose of testing was to refine
framing of questions, assess researcher bias, and adjust timing and logistics for interviews (Creswell, 2013).

The test interview was extremely valuable in refining questions for clarity and content. I had worked with Ms. Keller on policy issues when she was a state senator and I was a lobbyist until she was term-limited out of the Senate in 2010. I do not know Ms. Keller well but have worked with her far more than any of the other study participants, which was beneficial in terms of the level of comfort and trust we shared. Thus, this context enabled me to interview her and observe which questions needed editing or refining. It also provided me the opportunity to have an honest and open discussion with her about her thoughts and input about the questions. Her input and the test-pilot yielded significant revisions of 3 of the 15 interview questions.

**Interview Transcripts**

Each interview was audio-recorded with the permission of participants. Immediately following the completion of every interview, I emailed the recordings to a professional transcription company with whom I contracted for this project. The company primarily transcribes confidential and HIPAA-compliant medical dictations, so the staff is well versed in confidentiality compliance, which was stipulated in our contract, to protect the content of the interview participants, which was also stipulated in my proposal to the University of Denver Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The transcriptions were typed verbatim, and included every pause, laugh, sidebar conversation or comment, and speech patterns, including “um,” “ah,” and all spoken
words in the interviews. The completed transcriptions were emailed back to me in a format that I was able to correct and edit as needed. The transcription company agreed to destroy all audio and paper files from the interviews as a contractual obligation at the close of the contract, which occurred May 24, 2013. I immediately downloaded and printed every transcription as soon as I received it, and began reading and coding each transcription immediately.

Field Notes

I took written field notes during and after every interview. The field notes included observations about the environment and the participant and as much detail and as many direct quotes as I was able to write during the interviews. I added coding during the interviews to track voice inflection, pauses, animation, anger, laughter, passion, reflection, and other behaviors of the participant. After the interviews, I added further details and observations to the field notes to help me remember specific details, including my feelings and observations about what I brought to the interview or my interview style and technique. The field notes were analyzed and coded alongside the transcripts to maximize level of detail about each interview.

Audit Trail documenting

An audit trail was used to track decisions made and status of the process, and to document the course of the development of the completed analysis throughout the project (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). The audit trail served as a checklist of
progress that helped guide my efforts and planning; parts were also used for reporting progress to dissertation committee members.

**Reflexive Journaling**

The two primary components of reflexivity include (a) the researcher talking about his or her experiences with the phenomenon being explored, and (b) a discussion about how past experiences and perspectives shape the researcher’s interpretation of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2013).

Self-reflexivity acknowledges the researcher’s role(s) in the construction of the research problem, the research setting, and research findings, and highlights the importance of researcher becoming consciously aware of these factors and thinking through the implications of these factors for his or her research (Pillow, 2003). I used reflexive journaling throughout the research process to document my thoughts and observations both about the participants’ input and my interpretations. I captured these thoughts and ideas in writing and through audio voice recordings on my iPhone, and later documented them in writing.

**Peer Review**

The evolving versions of this dissertation have been shared with members of my committee for input and edits throughout the process. I also sought input from a colleague who is a recent Ph.D. graduate from Yale University, where she completed a qualitative dissertation exploring the work of child protection ombudsmen. This colleague’s input has been useful both from a methodological standpoint and as an
expression of the knowledge of a content-expert in the field of child abuse related policy and analysis.

**Data Analysis**

Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously throughout every phase of the study. The interviews were audio-recorded for transcription by a professional transcriptionist, and I also took detailed field notes. I hand-coded the data to analyze for themes, key words, and categories of meaning. Coding is a heuristic (from the Greek, meaning “to discover”) used to arrange and analyze data into themes, categories, and/or ideas (Saldana, 2009).

Data were coded using a combination of methods, including in vivo coding, whereby the code is directly quoted from the participant’s words to accurately represent his or her input (Saldana, 2009). Other coding methods used included coding for similarity, difference, frequency, categories, and relation to research questions (Saldana, 2009).

Discourse and conversational analyses were also relevant means of analysis for overall consideration of meaning (Creswell, 2013). One of the strengths of qualitative data involves their open-ended nature, sometimes resulting in unexpected themes and notable diversions emerging during the interviews and data analysis phases. This type of input was especially valuable for the purposes of this exploratory study by gleaning insights that might not have been predictable or expected.
Creswell’s (2013) data analysis spiral represents the data analysis steps taken for the study. As illustrated in Figure 2, the spiral begins with data management, wherein data are organized and coded several times for each transcription and field note. The role of the researcher during this phase includes ongoing involvement with the data to supplement information, coding, converting data to appropriate themes and trends, writing and reflecting notes and observations, interpreting data, and creating representations of the data summary, while constantly managing the growing and evolving body of data. This approach allows the investigator to conduct constant comparative analysis, providing an iterative process of constant and ongoing reviewing and coding the data (Royse, 2008).

Based on Creswell’s (2013) data analysis spiral, the data were managed to most appropriately support the exploratory case study approach, as follows:

1. Data organization: Create and organize files for data;

2. Reading, memoing: Read through text, make margin notes, form initial codes;

3. Describing the data into codes and themes: Describe the case and its context;

4. Classifying the data into codes and themes: Use categorical abbreviation to establish themes or patterns;

5. Interpreting the data: Use direct interpretation; develop naturalistic generalizations of what was “learned;”

6. Representing, visualizing the data: Present in-depth picture of the cases using narrative, tables, and figures. (Creswell, 2013, p. 183)
**Potential Limitations of Study**

The small sample size of this study (six participants) $N$ could be a potential limitation because the amount and variety of input is limited to that of six individuals, whereas more participants would offer a larger pool of data from which to learn. However, this was an exploratory case study so the sample size was intentionally small to potentially inform future research in a topic area about which currently little or no research has been published.

Other potential limitations include failure to adequately address validity and reliability. Qualitative research accepts the principles of validity and reliability, but rarely uses these terms because of their association with quantitative measurement.
Rather, qualitative research utilizes the concepts of trustworthiness or credibility as analogous to establishing validity and reliability (Royse, 2008).

For the present study, trustworthiness was addressed in the unbiased, non-partisan presentation of data, which involved member-checking. Credibility was established through triangulation; that is, the utilization of multiple sources of data, methods, and cross-checking for consistency and accuracy (Royse, 2008). Creswell (2013) recommended using at least two forms of triangulation in a given study (Creswell, 2013).

The following actions were taken to increase the validity of this study:

1. Interview #1;
2. Interview #2 (to provide contrast from Interview #1 and to build trust);
3. Peer review: Dissertation committee members reviewed and offered input throughout the evolution of the study; and a “critical friend” reviewed drafts of the study;
4. Use of direct quotations of participants to decrease opportunities for misinterpretation;
5. Piloting the interview questions with a volunteer (completed February 12, 2013, with former Colorado legislator of 16 years Marianne “Moe” Keller, now policy director for mental health advocacy organization);
6. Member-checking, wherein participants have the opportunity to review their individual case study summary and cross-case analysis for accuracy.
Several key elements enhance the overall quality and trustworthiness of a case study, including (a) the case study research question is clearly written; (b) the case study design is appropriate for the research question; (c) purposeful sampling strategies appropriate for case study have been applied; (d) the data are collected and managed systematically; and (e) the data are analyzed thoroughly and correctly (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Each of these elements was considered and incorporated into the design of this study to increase trustworthiness and credibility.

**Bias**

Bias is an outside contaminant that produces a distortion of what is occurring in the data, causing the research to potentially distort or misrepresent reality (Royse, 2008). Researcher bias was a considerable risk in this study and, therefore, was carefully considered and explained in all phases of the study. According to Peshkin (1988), “researchers, notwithstanding their use of quantitative or qualitative methods, their research problem, or their reputation for personal integrity, should systematically identify their subjectivity throughout the course of their research” (p. 17).

Interviewing is a research methodology and a social relationship that must be nurtured, sustained, and then ended gracefully (Seidman, 2006). An important element of establishing a subjective and trust-based rapport with participants is to create an “I-thou” relationship for the interviews, wherein the interviewer keeps enough distance to allow participants to fashion their responses as independently as possible. I made creating this
dynamic for the interviews a priority, and believe the content of the interview input is strong, substantive, and subjective as a result.

In an effort to systematically identify and acknowledge my bias and subjectivity, I had to remain aware of my evolving position as a researcher who had an identity as a professional in the child advocacy and political arena in the past, and who during this study, served in the role of a state official as Child Protection Ombudsman. This identity is inseparable from this research both for the participants and for me as researcher.

My professional history shapes my bias given my history of working in policy and advocacy; perspectives and experience from working in the U.S. Congress, a state legislature, and the Indiana Democratic Party; and as a government relations consultant and policy researcher of children’s issues for the past seventeen years. My work experience in the partisan political arena must be carefully considered and addressed as a potential area of bias. My current role as Colorado’s Child Protection Ombudsman requires me to serve as an independent, unbiased intermediary between the public and child protection systems in Colorado, which is a perspective that could influence my perspectives and bias. Most of the participants of this study worked on the bill that created the Ombudsman Office, and all of the participants voted to support the bill because it passed unanimously. The bill and the Ombudsman Office have been and remain present in the media and thus hold a specific identity in the minds of the participants, even though most had never worked with me in the political or policy arenas prior to this study.
My educational history includes a B.S. in early childhood education, an M.A. in child and family studies, and my academic preparation for a Ph.D. in child and family leadership. These courses of study arm me with a perspective about child development, risk and resilience, and the value of evidence-based research that inevitably influences my view of public policy decisions and investments.

Finally, my personal history includes being a female, Caucasian, progressive/liberal Christian, middle-class American, who grew up in rural Indiana as the youngest child in a large extended and tight-knit working-class family with married parents. I am married and have two typically developing biological daughters, and currently live in an affluent mountain community and work for an urban-based national non-profit. My history includes elements of both privilege and disadvantage, including lack of access to diversity and cultural difference during my childhood and college years. While I am not a victim of child abuse or neglect, many of my family and extended family members were victims of child abuse, which undoubtedly influenced my interest in and commitment to the topic both academically and professionally. All of these traits and experiences have contributed to my worldview and must be considered as I analyzed and interpreted data from this study, so as to recognize and minimize bias wherever possible.

Probably the most significant potential bias for this study occurred unexpectedly. At the time I received Institutional Review Board approval and began scheduling interviews, my role as Child Protection Ombudsman became prevalent in the media.
This timing was unexpected and occurred as the result of my office releasing an investigation report about the state’s handling of a high-profile child fatality review about which my office found significant flaws and errors. While I scheduled and conducted all of the interviews, this story continued to be covered by *The Denver Post*, including three headline stories and me being featured in at least four local news television interviews. All of the study participants made mention of this coverage during the interviews in some form.

While the media coverage was favorable of me and my office, its very presence inevitably influenced this study process as well as the participants’ perceptions of me as a professional and a researcher. I believe that the media coverage might have helped me secure interviews with people who I might not otherwise have been able to access. I could not have predicted that the media coverage would coincide with the interviews, and must acknowledge that the timing likely influenced participation in the study and likely also increased my trustworthiness and credibility with the participants.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

This study protocol was approved by the University of Denver Institutional Review Board. Specifically, according to the Institutional Review Board, the study qualified for expedited approval due to the minimal level of risk involved with the interviews with former elected officials. Participants in the study were informed of the study protocol and purpose and were asked to sign an informed consent form prior to the start of the interview, which included permission to audio-record interviews. The
informed consent forms also included an explanation of how confidentiality will be maintained and how data will remain secure and protected. Participants were offered the opportunity to review interview transcripts and received a link to the final study for their review. Interviews took place at the time and location requested by participants to minimize inconvenience for them. No incentives were offered for participating in the study, as they could potentially be seen as a sign of conflict of interest or coercion.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This chapter is presented in two sections: (a) Individual Cases and (b) Cross-Case Analysis. The individual cases describe the data that emerged from each interview as they relate to the following topic areas in order of presentation: participant background (both personal and professional); experience as an elected official, experiences with child abuse-related policy decisions; influences on child abuse-related policy decisions; understanding of risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect; definition of and experience with evidence-based policy; and advice for effectively influencing child abuse-related policy decisions. Data in each of these areas directly relate to and lend insight about each of the research questions. The cross-case analysis compares and contrasts the data across the cases and analyzes the data as they relate to the theoretical underpinnings as previously described. The cross-case analysis provides the basis for the description of findings and recommendations.

Section I: Individual Cases

Dean

Dean’s interview took place in the conference room of his office building in downtown Denver. We sat together at the end of the long table facing each other with a street-level view of downtown on a busy workday. Dean was relaxed and warmly
welcomed me. Once introductions were made and the recording started, he settled easily into a rich and detailed conversation.

**Background.** Dean’s professional background followed a less conventional route to state-level elected office. He grew up in a working-class family in the western United States. After attending college and law school, he and his spouse worked for three years as church missionaries in Zambia, where Dean directed a food distribution and nutrition program for impoverished families and children—a leadership role that he enjoyed. As a member of the Catholic Church, he has publically acknowledged that his faith and values have influenced decisions and positions he has made during in his career. In the interview, he mentioned being Catholic and expressed disappointment in the Church’s approach to the protection of children; however, he believed that overall, child protection is stronger in the United States than it was when he began his career. This information also lends insight into his political perspectives about child abuse-related policy decisions, and why he prioritized so many initiatives and policies around child protection.

**Serving as district attorney.** Upon his return to the United States, Dean did not initially seek to enter politics; rather, he was appointed by the governor to serve as district attorney of Denver after his predecessor left office.

I probably never would have been in public office, because it wasn’t something that I really desired . . . but like a lot of things, once I understood more about the science and art of holding political office, I was able to stay for 12 years. I very much liked the policy role.
He described his years in that role as being almost as impactful, if not as impactful, for children’s policy issues as his four years in the state-level elected position he later sought.

I really liked the part about the DA’s office that had to do with handling the individual cases and developing a case strategy, but I also very much liked the policy role that you have as a sort of major city prosecutor. I spent a lot of time in the legislature working on criminal justice issues. You could start with an idea that became defined in bill form and take that idea to the legislature and see it become law. You could really make a difference.

Dean answered many of my questions first through the lens of his role as district attorney and, second, his role as an elected official, not by my prompting but by his own introspection of the topic. By intentionally answering the questions from his perspective as DA and separately from his experience as a state-level elected official, Dean demonstrated that he believed he was able to make a positive impact on child abuse-related policy issues from both positions and that serving as an elected official was not necessarily more important or impactful in terms of his efforts for child protection issues.

While serving as district attorney, Dean forged many projects and interventions to address the needs of vulnerable children and families he represented in court cases. He described leading or participating in several efforts that improved systems, services, and protections for children, without needing legislation to do it. For example, he
successfully worked to expand the types of protections that can be in place for children, child witnesses, and child victims, without needing legislative action to make the changes and improvements. He also mentioned working on a variety of child-involved cases on Indian reservations, where he saw unmet needs in the representation of children. To address those needs, he successfully created child protection teams on the reservation to attempt to resolve child protection issues, again without needing legislative action to accomplish the change. While he discussed legislative action as a primary intervention to help children, he also described specific actions and projects that he felt made a difference.

Dean credited the leaders before him for increasing the level of priority for child abuse-related issues in the DA’s office, thereby creating an environment more open to change and innovation as it relates to improving policies and systems for children.

I think in Denver we started thinking about these things a little bit differently because we had these really gifted leaders. The district attorney I worked for was a good guy, the DA after him was a good guy, and I followed . . . but I inherited a culture that was really thinking about how we do a better job protecting children inside the system.

As DA, Dean also led the creation of one of the nation’s first drug courts and created the first Victims Services Network. In addition, he played a key role in the creation of Child Advocacy Centers, which are programs where professional medical and social work clinicians conduct research-based interviews of children who have
experienced or may have experienced sexual abuse. These interviews are used in court so that children do not have to experience the trauma of telling their story multiple times. In addition to these efforts, he met with principals and teachers to convey the importance of mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect and educate them about how those cases can be handled in the best interest of the child.

Dean spoke about working with Kempe Center for the Protection and Prevention of Child Abuse to “try to ensure the right kinds of support were in place for kids who found themselves in the criminal justice system.” His description of these experiences painted a very clear picture of a legal professional who not only understood, but highly prioritized, the engagement of policy decisions to address child abuse-related policy decisions and situations.

**Serving as a state-level elected official.** After serving as DA, Dean considered an upcoming race for governor and was encouraged by friends and colleagues to consider running. The race seemed politically viable, as there was no incumbent and no presumptive nominee, so he opted to run for the office. He did not think he would have run had the opportunity not come up at that particular time. ”Mostly I was motivated by the policy side of it, the impact that you could have on a broad array of issue areas.”

After serving one four-year term, Dean opted not to run for re-election citing the best interest of his family. He is well recognized by the media and child protection community for prioritizing child protection issues while in office and received much newspaper and television news coverage about his work on child protection issues. One
of the most notable accomplishments was the creation of the Child Welfare Action Committee, which he initiated following several child abuse fatalities. This committee of child welfare experts was created through his Executive Order, and was tasked with studying child protection and compiling recommendations for improvement over the course of a year. The work of this commission was followed closely by stakeholders in the child protection community as well as by local newspapers, and most of its recommendations were implemented and are still discussed today in Colorado’s child policy arena. Examples of recommendations implemented include the increased accountability through the creation of the Child Protection Ombudsman, increased access to judicial records for child protection workers, creation of a centralized child abuse reporting hotline, completion of an organizational study of child welfare statewide, and numerous improvements to trainings for child protection workers. Dean expressed regret for not focusing on child abuse-related policies earlier in his term, because he believed the Child Welfare Action Committee accomplished many important improvements, and he would have like to have more time to complete even more improvements.

**Experience as an elected official.** Of the participants interviewed for this study, Dean demonstrated the most extensive experience, leading the initiation and passage of several policies impacting child abuse-related issues both as DA and as a state-level elected official.

**Experience with child abuse-related policy decisions.** Dean explained that the prohibitions and limitations of the TABOR Amendment, Gallagher Amendment, and
Amendment 23 constrain the decision making of elected officials in Colorado. Due to the national recession, Colorado’s state budget was reduced during his tenure in office, which created new challenges and constraints to the provision of child protection services and the creation of child abuse-related and child protection policies during that time. Dean identified these budget constraints and issues both as significant obstacles in his overall experience as an elected official and also as directly limiting the legislature’s and governor’s office from investing more and differently toward improving child abuse-related issue areas.

**Influences on child abuse-related policy decisions.** Regarding what or who influences him the most, Dean said that he relied heavily on input from subject-matter experts. By his own admission, Dean knew that as an elected official, he could not possibly have expertise in all of the areas he would be considering. Thus, he sought the advice of subject-matter experts in a highly “deliberative process.” He believed that this process produced better public policy because a variety of experts from the field were able to contribute their perspectives and experience.

You have so many things competing for your attention … On any given day, you might sit down with 10 people who have 1 thing they say is their priority and trying to decide how to divide up a finite amount of time and energy to really make a difference … It’s important to allow subject-matter experts to inform you, and the worst of all things is to react just in a strictly emotional way and pour more money into a bad thing.
He also felt that media (particularly local television news and print media) influence elected officials’ decisions. He acknowledged both the positive and negative impacts of media coverage, and valued the ability of media to elevate some issues.

I think this [child abuse issues] is a place where media actually [have] done a pretty good job of aggregating the evidence and putting it out in front of the public and probably elevating it to the point where policy makers have to pay attention to it differently.

Dean thought that while the media have elevated child abuse issues to the policy level in Colorado in recent years, they are guilty of over-sensationalizing graphic cases without continuing adequately covering solutions and remedies that policy makers and others put forth as the result of the media bringing the issues to light. He recalled creating the Child Welfare Action Committee to address child protection/child abuse-related policies and how it initially received media coverage in conjunction with graphic child fatality media coverage. However, once the work of the commission began and policies were being considered, the media were much less interested in covering the issues and progress.

It is just a place that becomes too tedious for them [the media], and it actually causes people to lose faith because the problem is defined, but the solutions are not set forth in a very graphic way. I am a critic of the media in this sense.
Understanding of risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect. Dean’s response regarding risk factors and implications for healthy and safe child development was extensive and comprehensive, illustrating his depth of understanding of the issues. He described healthy child development as beginning even before prenatal care, involving whatever situation a child is born into. He went on to describe risks as including the health of the mother, including nutrition and risky behaviors leading to outcomes like fetal alcohol syndrome. He mentioned the economic and marital status of the mother, access to nurse home visitation or similar programs, environmental factors, presence of domestic violence, untreated mental illness in the caregivers, and nutrition. Dean went on to describe indicators of risk, including the child’s vocabulary, access to quality child care and quality schools and teachers, and adequate resources for schools and teachers, including access to counseling.

You just kind of build this pyramid … an inverted pyramid where the public policy issues broaden. And it’s best to think of, from my perspective, an at-risk child’s situation from their personal and in-home circumstance, their community circumstance, and their school circumstance.

Dean’s description of variables that pose risk to healthy and safe child development provided a complex and well-informed level of detail and insight. It was unclear from the interviews whether Dean gained this level of perspective from his role.
as an elected official or if he was informed by other factors. In any event, his depth of knowledge about risk, protective supports, and child development clearly informed his attention to child abuse-related issues and child well-being, perhaps even back to his time in Zambia working with families to improve nutrition.

**Definition of and experience with evidence-based policy.** Dean’s impression of evidence-based policy included an understanding of academic research based on data and other research. He explained that when something bad happens to a child, as in cases of child abuse, policy makers are confronted with how to address the situation. He thought that using research and evidence-based policy was valuable but was careful to explain that elected officials can unintentionally make the situation worse by seeking the wrong remedy even though it may be evidence based. He believed that a combination of evidence-based policy and input from content experts yields the best outcomes in terms of improving public policies.

Evidence-based policy is trying to understand the research that is out there, the studies that have been done, and trying to defer to them to the extent that is appropriate. It’s a combination of sort of understanding the research but also allowing people’s experiences in the field inform you as the policy maker, and those things will be of the greatest benefit in changing.

In Dean’s experience, some elected officials value and utilize evidence-based policy, while others do not. He used the example of the U.S. Congress
considering climate change issues. While some elected officials in Congress utilize the credible science and data available regarding climate change, others dismiss the research.

*Advice for effectively influencing child abuse-related policy decisions.* Dean’s advice for more effectively influencing and shaping child abuse-related policy decisions included involving grassroots organizations that are well led and informed by evidence-based research. He followed that notion by stressing the importance of educating the public in order to shape the political will to make policy change. He referenced the advocacy efforts of Barbara O’Brien, who served as lieutenant governor in his administration and before that was president and founder of Colorado Children’s Campaign, a non-partisan advocacy organization working to advance children’s issues.

You have to have effective grass-roots organizations involved that have good leadership, that are themselves well-educated and relying upon evidence-based research. At the same time, it’s important to educate the public … Barbara O’Brien was probably as effective an advocate for children as anyone in the state, because she understood the power of grass-roots organization.

Finally, Dean shared concern about the challenges of improving child abuse-related policy, based on his experience of the “turf issues” involved with the various stakeholders within the child protection arena. The context of his comment involves Colorado’s state-supervised but county-administered child protection system. Twelve
states in the United States (including Colorado) have this sort of county-controlled child protection system. The turf issues he referred to involve the power structure between Colorado’s 64 counties interpreting state-supervised laws, policies, and funding streams differently. He felt that the turf issues and power struggles were not only prohibitive to the advancement of more public policies to address serious problems but the “single biggest impediment” to improving child abuse related policies and child protection systems in Colorado.

Really solving this has to do with trying to get people in political life to decide that it’s not about the turf, and that it’s not about power and control; it’s about children and trying to design a system that is the single best system for protecting children. A perfect system doesn’t exist, but an improved system is absolutely possible.

James

James’ interviews took place in the small coffee shop in the lobby of the high-rise office building where he works in downtown Denver. James was engaged, providing thoughtful and humorous responses and comments throughout the interviews.

Background. James grew up in poverty in the eastern United States and was raised by a single mother who was the primary and critical positive influence in his life. He spoke of her repeatedly and attributed his success and ability to achieve to her guidance and nurturing. He believed that poverty is one of the risk factors to child well-being but not necessarily prohibitive to success, as evidenced by his personal life journey.
His mother worked as what he called a “domestic engineer” for an affluent family in the major urban area where he grew up. She transferred many of the expectations and opportunities for James that she observed in the home in which she worked. While other children in his neighborhood were not engaged in activities, she made sure he participated in Boy Scouts and summer camp, and received any educational assistance he needed to succeed at school. While some children in his neighborhood “never made it out” and struggled with various challenges, he credited his mother for his success.

She was my role model. She would always say to me that if you expect things to get better, you have to get involved and improve things yourself, so that’s how I got involved in civic life … Some people would say I was always in the middle of things.

James’ political journey began in his school years through involvement with student government and political campaigns, and he became chief of staff of the student government in his senior year of college. He continued to be engaged in civic matters after college, until the opportunity to run for public office arose and his friends and members of the local political community encouraged him to run. Prior to his successful bid for state-level public office, James completed law school and also earned a degree in theology. Today, he is both a licensed attorney and an ordained clergy.

**Experience as an elected official.** James served as a state-level elected official for eight years. He quickly rose in leadership and was appointed to serve as house speaker, which is the highest level of leadership in the House of Representatives.
Experience with child abuse-related policy decisions. He explained that he encountered several child abuse-related policy issues while chairing the House Judiciary Committee, which is the committee that considers all court-related and legal policy matters, including issues that involve court involvement regarding child abuse and neglect and child protection. James recalled sponsoring a bill that created a Criminal and Juvenile Justice Commission. He saw the bill as an opportunity to make a difference for youth in the criminal justice system.

Influences on child abuse-related policy decisions. James’ recollection of his experience sponsoring the bill prompted him to reflect upon things that influenced his decision making regarding child abuse-related policy issues. He struggled to keep from getting overly personal with the issues, because of his own experience with child abuse. James has publically disclosed during speeches and during our interview that he was sexually abused as a child, which makes child abuse “both a political and very personal issue” for him. He considers himself a survivor because of all of the other protective supports in place thanks to his mother’s vision and tenacity. James continues to volunteer for groups and causes that help children who are victims of abuse or who are at risk of abuse. He mentioned that he has served on the board of directors or has volunteered for child-serving agencies, including Children’s Hospital, Metro State College, Boy Scouts, the Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect, Savio House (residential treatment home for children in the child protection
system), and Hope Farms Project (services for children experiencing post-traumatic brain injuries).

I’ve engaged in working with kids who are survivors by helping them understand it does not have to define your life. You see, for me it’s two worlds that merged [referring to his experience of abuse and his role in politics].

James’ life experiences have deeply influenced his decisions on child abuse-related issues as an elected official and his opposition to policy proposals and initiatives that he perceived as using child abuse victims for political gain. In his words, “Kids who are abused and neglected deserve better than gamesmanship.”

I always thought I had the ability to make a difference in things. There’s just the question of how much time do I have in a particular day, or how much bandwidth or capacity do I have on multiple challenges and multiple subjects? I tried by best when it came to child abuse and issues like that, but a lot of times, oddly enough, we’re fighting a defensive battle against people who were trying to use the issues for political gain.

His decisions about child abuse-related issues have been influenced by his own personal standards, which he describes as “how my mother raised me—that was always my benchmark.” Other influencers included evidence-based research and groups known for relying on evidence-based research, such as the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Bell Policy Center, Donnell-Kay Foundation, and the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research.
Less influential have been lobbyists and fact sheets; in fact, he claimed to “never read” the fact sheets that are commonly circulated to educate or influence legislators about specific bills. He considered policies from the perspective of the children who would be impacted and what such a policy could have meant to him as a child. He also placed faith in subject-matter experts who weighed in on bills and policies.

You are considering between 500-700 bills every year. There is no way humanly possible that you could read in depth every bill that comes your way. Thus, you have to rely on people who have put a great deal of time into understanding the issues.

James was not particularly influenced by the TV news and print media while in office, as he perceived that they were usually biased or prone to over-sensationalize issues to sell newspapers and TV coverage. However, he acknowledged that a few journalists were credible and “could tell it straight.”

**Understanding of risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect.** James demonstrated a high level of understanding of risk factors and their implications for healthy and safe child development. He described in great detail the benefits of access to protective supports, starting with prenatal care and extending through access to health care, safe schools and neighborhoods, and other protective supports as tools for child abuse prevention.

I think it starts with prenatal care and early child care. I know that’s several steps back, but it does impact what happens going forward. I think
access to quality schools in safe neighborhoods, access to quality after-
school programs, and even quality textbooks a school receives. And it’s
not just about having a kid in preschool, but it’s about quality … and it’s
also about parent involvement in schools.

**Definition of and experience with evidence-based policy.** James was animated
and engaged when he discussed how he defines evidence-based policy.

It’s based on research and it quantitative, and it’s peer-reviewed. It’s not
just based on anecdote. It is best practices that are gleaned from years of
experience combined with research to show that policy has actually
worked, not just [based on] someone’s good feelings about it.

James explained that in his experience, elected officials knew little about
and infrequently used evidence-based policy. He recalled only one piece of
legislation that actually referred to evidence-based policy, which was the bill he
mentioned earlier regarding the Criminal and Juvenile Justice Commission.

**Advice for effectively influencing child abuse-related policy decisions.** James
had several suggestions for effectively influencing child abuse-related policy, including,
but not limited to, the use of academic research to influence and shape policies. He
suggested that the advocacy community need not assume elected officials have the time
or interest in reading long academic reports, and suggested that personal stories are a
powerful way to influence policy decisions.
You have to make [research] more accessible. You can’t simply drop a very academic report on a legislator’s desk and expect someone to read it. You have to tell a story.

He believed that child abuse-related policy should be led by a strong legislative champion who has a lot of respect and credibility among peers. He described the importance of having both a “grass top” strategy and a “grassroots” strategy. The former consists of decision makers who are well educated on the issues and can lead the building of a coalition while the latter involves outreach and education through broader coalitions with the religious and education communities.

**John**

John’s interviews took place in his office near the top of a high-rise building in downtown Denver. John warmly welcomed me and easily engaged in thoughtful and measured responses.

**Background.** John began his career serving in the military. After his honorable discharge, he spent over 25 years owning and operating small businesses in a resort area in the western United States. He was active in the business community, serving on several boards and with a chamber of commerce. Upon learning that his local representative was not running for re-election, John decided to run and ended up winning the election. He had never really considered running for public office but decided to seize the opportunity. He felt his business experience would be relevant to the public policy arena since state-level public policy often impacts business, tax, and regulatory decisions.
John served in state-level elected office for 10 years before assuming a non-elected state-level appointment.

**Experience as an elected official.** During his time in office, John served on several committees that focused on business, the state budget, and natural resources.

**Experience with child abuse-related policy decisions.** By his own admission, John was not involved in leading many child-focused policy initiatives, and children’s issues were not his area of expertise. Even so, he recalled carrying one bill that enabled the continuation of the Office of the Child’s Representative (OCR), the state office that provides publically funded legal representation for children who are mostly victims of abuse and or neglect. He felt the office had demonstrated its effectiveness and deserved the support of policy makers to continue.

I thought the office [OCR] was doing a good job … the office had proven [its] worth and operational validity with effective, efficient operational activities, so we were able to pass the bill without any sunset review, so it continues as a permanent function independently.

John was not regularly involved in children’s policy issues, nor did he have expertise in child-related policy topics. However, he pointed out that all legislators have to vote on all bills, including child abuse-related policies. Moreover, the state budget includes several line items that directly impact children and child abuse-related services and protection. Funding for education, Medicaid, and children’s health coverage, for example, are budget items that are critical to children experiencing or living at risk of
child abuse and neglect. He felt that funding these types of services was critical from both business and humanitarian standpoints as investments in the state infrastructure and workforce.

If we can’t turn out a well-educated, skilled work force, we’re not going to find the kind of companies relocating to or opening in Colorado that will make a healthy economy and give us the lifestyle that we hope to appreciate in Colorado. The application of state funds is critical when it comes to looking after children and looking after vulnerable elements of our society.

**Influences on child abuse-related policy decisions.** John suggested that the legislature’s focus is influenced by whatever the public and media are focused on. He explained that when there is media coverage of a tragic child abuse event, the public’s attention is raised, and policy makers typically follow at least to some degree.

When considering child abuse-related policies and bills, John reflected that he was most influenced by “the people who work professionally in the field … who have the expertise to understand what is good policy and what is not.” When considering budget implications for children (including child abuse-related decisions), he also recalled being influenced by subject-matter experts, such as doctor’s advocates, the medical society, and Children’s Hospital.

**Understanding of risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect.** John described risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect as largely having to do with
the home environment, specifically referencing domestic violence as a risk factor within
the home. He also thought that risks were sometimes related to economic strata. He
thought that patterns of violence in the home were more predictive of risk than economic
status. John recognized that risk factors could be mitigated or reduced by the
involvement of people who care, or from community resources such as GALs, Big
Brothers Big Sisters, mentors, or Boys & Girls Clubs.

**Definition of and experience with evidence-based policy.** John viewed
evidence-based policy as the legislature reacting as the result of incidents taking
place. He cited examples such as oil spills and mass shootings as events that
inspire elected officials to take some sort of action to address the issue and try to
prevent further damage.

Typically the legislature tends to be reactive as opposed to being proactive
… [such as] the recent gun legislation that came about from the mass
shootings at Sandy Hook and Aurora. That was very reactive, but the
reaction is based on evidence. I think evidence-based policy comes about
from incidents taking place.

John believed that elected officials value evidence-based policy and that it usually
forms the basis of their actions.

**Advice for effectively influencing child abuse-related policy decisions.** John was
disappointed by the current partisan divide and believed it was a barrier to the
advancement of children’s issues. He felt that the passage of Amendment 41 ("gifts ban")
between lobbyists and public officials) was a damaging milestone in Colorado’s political history. John was in office when this amendment passed, and he thought that it negatively impacted the relationship building between lobbyists and elected officials as well as between elected officials themselves. Prior to the passage of the amendment, he recalled attending events and social gatherings at restaurants and bars, where Republicans and Democrats would visit with each other and with lobbyists about various issues. He said that he was often able to accomplish important communication during such after-hours gatherings that was not as likely to happen during the typical workday. Such gatherings drastically diminished, as they could no longer be funded by lobbyists, corporations, causes, or other outside interests.

When [R]epublicans and [D]emocrats could have that kind of after work socialization and collegiality and a conversation outside the granite walls of the Capitol, they could come to understanding and agreement, and act on it the next day when the issue came up.

The point of John sharing this change in our dialogue was to explain how damaging he believed the current partisan divide was in advancing many issues, including those impacting children. He recalled socializing and relationship building at such events with elected officials better known for carrying children’s issues, with whom he likely would not otherwise socialize. He suggested that child abuse-related issues and other general issues could be more effectively influenced and informed if elected officials
had more opportunity to build relationships by discussing issues outside the Capitol and in social settings.

John believed in the importance of educating all elected decision makers and not just the ones seen as leaders of children’s policy issues. He found it helpful, as a new elected official, to attend seminars and trainings by various groups to learn more about their policy needs and concerns. He remembered attending an orientation on health care issues that was held early in his policy-making career, which helped him gain a better understanding of an issue area outside of his experience and expertise. He suggested that child abuse-related policy issues be presented to elected officials in a similar manner to educate and influence those with varying degrees of knowledge about the issues. He also stressed the importance of building relationships with legislators throughout the year and not just during the legislative session when things are so busy. He thought that child abuse-related policy issues could become impactful topics during election cycles to generate interest and input among candidates. His suggestion was not to politicize children’s issues for political gain but rather to educate candidates about the presence of the issues. “Kids groups tend not to have deep pockets, but it doesn’t preclude them [kids groups] from interviewing candidates and throwing support because the kid community still has a constituent base.”

Mary

Mary’s interviews took place in restaurants in Denver. She was warm and welcoming, and spoke softly and thoughtfully throughout the interviews. She was
interrupted a couple of times by people who knew her and spoke to her briefly during the interviews, but she was skilled in re-directing her attention to our conversation and maintaining concentration on our topics. I observed this to be a skill that probably served her well in the busy environment of the legislature.

**Background.** Mary grew up in poverty in the midwestern United States. She was raised in subsidized housing by her single mother, who worked and saved until the family became more economically stable. She recalled being on public assistance and owning only two dresses, and wearing them on alternating days to school. She walked everywhere because her family could not afford a car. She believed those circumstances shaped her values and perspectives because she knows what it is like to struggle.

I can really empathize with children who are in need, but I don’t feel like I was in need … my mother never made me feel that way. She actually worked pretty hard and eventually bought her own house and got us out of the housing project. So I never really felt deprived, but yet I knew what our circumstances were.

Mary believed that these experiences influenced her decision making and perspectives as an elected official years later. Prior to running for state-level elected office, she served on the welfare reform board and other civic boards and councils. Recently, she recognized her lifelong engagement in social justice and civic issues when she found one of her high school yearbooks and read that one of her classmates wrote, “[Mary], Keep fighting for the causes you believe in.”
Mary earned a master’s degree in public administration and has a long history of civic engagement in city- and state-level politics. She had been a small-business owner for most of her career, and has served in elected office while simultaneously maintaining her business through the past several years.

**Experience as an elected official.** During Mary’s seven years in state-level elected office, she was heavily involved in many issues that impact children, specifically child abuse-related issues.

**Experience with child abuse-related policy decisions.** While Mary specialized in several areas of public policy, she identified with being a leader in children’s issues. She did not believe that she had expertise in child abuse issues but was involved with leading many bills that effected vulnerable children. She acknowledged the importance of the state budget and strength of the state infrastructure for children’s services and opportunities. Mary pointed out that child abuse-related issues are present within the state budget, infrastructure, individual bills, and policies, and also occur in local, city-level decisions and policies. She participated in each of those levels of government and believed in the importance of each level in shaping children’s policies.

Mary identified foster care as a high priority children’s issue in Colorado. She was concerned about “their access to services, because what we do with those kids, and how we support them today will impact what they do in society later in life.” She was especially concerned about the youth who have emancipated from foster care.
When they’re out of the foster care system, where do they go? Who supports them? They don’t have anybody to fall back on … We need to support them through their stay in the foster care system.

In addition to concern about children in foster care, Mary also expressed concern about children’s nutrition, physical activity, and access to physical and mental health services for children. She felt that all of these issue areas deserve attention and improvement from elected officials.

Regarding child protection issues, Mary believed in the existence of a “fine line” between decisions to remove children from abusive or neglectful caregivers versus family preservation, wherein efforts are made to provide services to the child and family to help the child stay safely within his or her home. This issue was often brought to her attention throughout the years, and she described one bill in particular in which the removal of the child versus family preservation became a central issue. Mary sponsored a bill regarding conditions upon which child protection professionals could determine whether to remove a child from his or her home in child protection cases on Indian reservations. Mary recalled that the bill became controversial, and child advocates actively opposed it. She worked with child advocates and child protection professionals to negotiate, and was able to reach consensus while also maintaining the integrity of the bill. This scenario made Mary realize the potential of the advocacy community to influence legislative decision making.
Influences on child abuse-related policy decisions. When Mary was making decisions about child abuse-related policies, she relied on people who were working in the field, including parents and families, child care and child protection professionals, and some lobbyists. She recalled a specific instance when advocates influenced a bill that would provide school breakfasts for low-income children. “When I did the school breakfast bill, I realized all the hunger advocates came out … there was a whole arena here I was not aware of.”

Mary spoke briefly about her perspective of the media as an elected official. “I was not the type of legislator who sought the media. I always thought it was more effective, actually, to work the issues and not try to work them through the media.” She believed that the media could sometimes shed light on issues but also bring out the opposition on issues where they might not have otherwise become engaged, which makes the issues more difficult to manage. She acknowledged the media for “bringing light to child abuse tragedies” and thus raising the level of awareness of both the public and elected officials.

The sad thing about it is [that] it usually takes some event—usually the death of a child—to elevate the issue. I wish the awareness efforts could elevate the issues for some other reasons, but the sad reality is that is usually takes some sort of sad event to elevate the issues.

Understanding of risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect. Mary’s perspective of risk factors to children included poverty and lack of access to a safe
physical environment. She described the environmental dangers and risks often associated with low-income housing, such as lead-based paint, the presence of rodents or bugs, and the safety level of the surrounding neighborhood in terms of air quality and crime rates. Mary was quick to suggest policy changes that could improve or mitigate such risks for children, including changes to city-, state-, and federal-level policies. She specified that city-level policy changes could be particularly impactful in improving the living environments of children living in low-income areas. Mary cited her experience as a city-level elected official as producing positive changes for children and families living with environmental risk. She also discussed to what she termed “interlocking policies,” referring to city-level policies that complement or strengthen state-level policies and vice versa. For example, liquor and marijuana laws are state-level laws that are implemented at the local government level through planning, zoning, and other city or county government functions. Mary believed each level of government played an important role in making policy decisions that impact and reduce environmental risk factors.

When speaking about protective factors and mitigating risk, Mary’s perspective of risk broadened, implying a more complex perspective of risk than initially described. She listed several examples of community resources that offered protection and risk mitigation for children, including school-based health centers, after-school programs, and access to other community resources at low or no cost to low-income families. She again referred to the state budget, which is necessary to fund many community-based supports like the ones she identified. Mary reiterated her point about the state budget being a
critical way to address risk to children, because it includes many funding streams that support programs that help keep children safe and help reduce the risks associated with child abuse. She believed it is very important for state-level elected officials to understand the state budget and the ways it is directly associated with promoting child well-being.

**Definition of and experience with evidence-based policy.** Mary defined evidence-based policy as an important consideration for elected officials because “you see that it has some sort of an impact, or there are some statistics that are gathered around it … I think it makes it easier to support something if you can justify it through independent data that suggests it is good policy.” She believed that elected officials generally value evidence-based policy, and that it usually informs policy decisions.

**Advice for how to most effectively influence child abuse-related policy decisions.** Mary emphasized the importance of building relationships with elected officials throughout the year and not just during the legislative session. She valued educational opportunities and gatherings hosted by experts from the field, and attended events addressing children’s issues. Mary believed that term limits are an important consideration for advocates or others interested in educating elected officials and influencing policy. “Because of term limits, you need to always think about the next group [of legislators] coming up and what backgrounds they have … and where are they at with some of these issues.” Mary communicated the importance of advocates being aware that newly elected officials inevitable have varying degrees of understanding of all
policy issues, including those impacting child abuse, again supporting her earlier point about the importance of continual education of legislators. “I think we still have a lot of work to do in the area of child abuse policy, and we need to keep supporting those that are in the legislature to keep working on the issues.”

**Peggy**

Peggy’s interviews took place at a restaurant near her home. She began the interview explaining that children’s issues were among her top priorities, which became evident throughout the interview as she listened intently to the questions and provided thoughtful responses.

**Background.** Peggy’s description of her background began with a summary of her professional journey thus far. She wrote a weekly column for a daily paper in northern Colorado, and later worked as a development director for a statewide association. Peggy went on to work in various political positions, including district director for a member of U.S. Congress, and on political campaigns and causes. She also served on numerous boards and commissions, both as an appointee and a volunteer. In addition to these positions, Peggy noted that she is a classical musician. Peggy first entered the political arena when her children were young and she became concerned about state education policies. She entered politics “for [her] kids and for the future of other Colorado kids.”

**Experience as an elected official.** After directing the district office for the member of U.S. Congress for a few years, Peggy learned of an unexpected vacancy of the
seat of state representative in her home district. She won the seat and assumed office about two weeks after the legislative session began. She was appointed to the Health and Human Services Committee, which is the primary committee that considers child protection and child abuse-related issues.

*Experience with child abuse-related policy issues.* Once in state-level elected office, Peggy became interested in youth detention issues and ran a controversial bill to address reported abuses of youth in state-run detention centers. She continued leading many policy initiatives regarding youth in state custody, which involved several child abuse-related issues. She thought that it was important to have accountability in how youth are being treated when they are in the custody of the county or state.

When speaking about transparency and accountability, Peggy referred to her personal conviction that government business and decisions should occur in venues and manners that are open to the public. She believed that public input is important to government decision making and that members of the public should have the ability to both influence and monitor government actions. For these reasons, Peggy assumed a leadership role in passing a bill to establish a Child Protection Ombudsman to increase transparency and accountability of the child protection system.

Transparency is certainly at the core of why I am interested in all of this, and that’s having accountability and having the light shine on [the government role in child protection and custody] so that people in the state know what’s going on. I think that accountability has been missing.
Peggy’s strong feelings about the role of government and the need for government accountability strongly shaped her positions in all issue areas including child abuse-related decisions. “It’s part of the reason I became involved with the state legislature, trying to influence things from the perspective that government is not the answer. Government can be helpful, but it also creates problems for people too. It’s a personal philosophy, I guess.”

**Influences on child abuse-related policy decisions.** Peggy valued working with “trusted experts from the field,” including the Kempe Center, as “Kempe was always motivated by the best interest of children.” She always tried to be aware of the motives of the individuals and groups working to influence children’s policy decisions because she believed that some were working in the best interest of children, while others were politically motivated.

Peggy deeply valued public input as she considered child abuse-related policy decisions. She recalled participating in a public forum in her district, which was held for the purpose of gaining public input about child protection issues.

We had a huge turnout from people who were very upset with the county [child protection] system and felt that there was not a lot of accountability or that things were falling through the cracks … It was pretty overwhelming, honestly … But I think it’s an important part of the process—to listen to the public—especially people who have gone through the sorts of things that can help shape policy.
Peggy found the media receptive and helpful in conveying her messages and positions about children’s issues and controversial issues such as child abuse occurring with children and youth in state custody. “Using the media is a valuable tool, if you know how to do it the right way. You have to be able to control the message.” Peggy’s experience writing for the local newspaper earlier in her career contributed to her positive opinion about the media, and helped inform her insights into ways to most effectively work with the media to shape messages.

**Understanding risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect.** Peggy believed that living in a household with “a lot of negative lifestyles” was a primary risk factor to children. She described negative lifestyles to include drug abuse, domestic violence, and child abuse. She was quick to follow that description by expressing concern about the child protection system’s ability to effectively work with parents, believing that the system is often overly intrusive in people’s lives. She thought it was important for the child protection system to remain cognizant about the rights of the parents.

They [child protection professionals] need, whether through training or otherwise, to work with the parents rather than just take the child away. There’s a lot of work that needs to happen so the system can work well with parents to try to help provide education about how to be a better parent.
Peggy believed that there is a role for agencies to step in and offer services and supports to children and families to help mitigate or decrease risks. She listed counseling as one valuable service to help children gain self-esteem so that they grow up to become independent adults, and not identify themselves with their negative past. She also recognized the value in agencies or services that help shape healthy development for children.

**Definition of and experience with evidence-based policy.** Peggy explained evidence-based policy as “using facts that exist to evaluate and formulate policies.” While she did not recall hearing evidence-based policy discussed much during her time in elected office, she did believe that elected officials value evidence-based policy as something that influences decision making.

**Advice for how to most effectively influence child abuse-related policy decisions.** Peggy’s advice for influencing child-abuse related policy decisions included building and strengthening relationships with legislators. She suggested inviting legislators to small groups or meetings to focus on a particular issue, and strongly favored spending time with legislators while they are not involved with the legislative session.

I always found it difficult to schedule back-to-back-to-back meetings with lobbyists or groups. It’s just so consuming during the legislative session. I would say doing anything in the summertime or fall to try to influence legislators is the best time to do it. It’s not during the legislative session.
Steve

Steve’s interviews took place in his office. He answered questions with energy and engagement, speaking quickly and energetically, interjecting questions periodically. His engagement in the interview matched his feedback, which indicated genuine interest in improving child abuse-related policies and practices.

**Background.** Steve grew up in the western United States in what he described as a “politically active family.” Although they were not elected officials or activists, they were active around the dinner table discussing issues and followed the news and current issues, so he always had an awareness of what was happening in the nation and in the world. He was student body president in college and actively engaged in college athletics and civic issues. After college, he served as an aide to a member of the U.S. Congress, and rose quickly in that role, participating in the formulation of policy initiatives and negotiations. A few years later, Steve returned to Colorado and made a successful bid for state-level elected office.

**Experience as an elected official.** Steve served one term in the House of Representatives and then was elected to serve one term in the Colorado Senate. While in the Senate, he served as minority leader. He served a total of seven years in elected office. “I love public policy. There is a certain element of excitement to it. It can be fulfilling work, and that’s what drew me into it in the first place.”
Experience with child abuse-related policy decisions. Steve did not have depth of experience or expertise in children’s issues but was interested and recalled trying to weigh in when possible.

I tried to be engaged and involved. I was knowledgeable [about child abuse-related policies] but I didn’t command a particular expertise. I started first as a parent, so you bring a fundamental belief that one of the jobs of government is to protect those incapable of protecting themselves … they’re [children] powerless.

He recalled voting on several bills that impacted child abuse-related issues but remembered only being heavily involved with the Child Protection Ombudsman bill. Once he understood the history and purpose of the bill, he became involved in negotiations and attempts to re-structure it. He was frustrated because the bill was written such that the Ombudsman Office would be managed by the Colorado Department of Human Services. Steve found this problematic because the Ombudsman would be managed by the very department that it was tasked to monitor and investigate. He felt this structure compromised the Ombudsman’s ability to function independently of the Department of Human Services. “I spent some time on that [Ombudsman] bill . . . but it was one where the inertia of the legislative process is to water down the bill. I think that while that bill was helpful, it wasn’t as dramatic as it should have been.”

Influences on child abuse-related policy decisions. Steve explained that his decision making regarding child abuse-related issues was influenced by a specific county
commissioner who had expertise and history in child abuse and child protection issues. He also valued interest and advocacy groups such as the Colorado Children’s Campaign, which is a non-profit child advocacy organization that is actively engaged in children’s policy issues. While Steve did recall trusting the commissioner and the Colorado Children’s Campaign on some children’s issues, he was also quick to add that he saw an opportunity for the child advocacy community to improve their strategies regarding influencing legislators.

There is a vacuum in the legislative process for true experts, especially with term limits … And that’s where there is room for credible, truly nonpartisan groups to legitimately claim the mantle and be willing to cross either [political] party. There’s a huge space because people are hungry for trusted, legitimate, credible, nonpartisan information.

As an elected official, Steve was overwhelmed with messages and positions from commissioners, counties, the state, and advocates themselves. He believed that term limits further complicated the equation because elected officials have so many issues to consider in a limited amount of time. Steve felt that child abuse-related policies get “bogged down” because of the complex nature of child abuse-related issues, and because of multiple levels of government being involved in child protection. He specifically emphasized the complications involved with Colorado’s state-supervised but county-administered child protection system.
There are so many power centers in this issue. There’s the relationship between the state and counties … all of these things were created as checks and balances and to limit the ability of government to change courses quickly. Then you sprinkle in interest groups with different positions, and it gets very hard to make change.

Steve’s description of the “multiple power centers” illustrates his experience of trying to make policy decisions while considering a variety of influences. He found it very difficult to make sense of influences that were delivering inconsistent or contradictory messages about how to improve child protection. His opinion about conflicting and mixed interests extended into other issues beyond child protection. He believed that special interest groups have a lot of influence over decision making in general, as well as in child abuse-related policy decisions. “The legislature has become special interest run amok. There is no overarching worldview … no interconnecting agenda that ties them all together.”

**Understanding of risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect.** Steve explained that children who are at risk of abuse or who have experienced abuse are symptomatic of other bigger problems in the home such as alcoholism, drug abuse, poverty, and domestic violence. He also suggested that children living at risk of harm may lack positive adult role models in their life.
Steve spoke passionately about the power of positive supports that can mitigate or decrease risk for children. He felt strongly that public schools are critically important to children living in homes where dysfunction prevails.

For kids without role models at home, the only hope is that they have a teacher who, in the space of five or so hours a day, can break through and make an impact. Schools are all they’ve got. Schools can help identify children who have major problems at home, and can get them the additional support and tools they need on an instructional level, behavioral level and social level.

**Definition of and experience with evidence-based policy.** Steve described evidence-based policy as “policy that addresses a problem and ideally has solutions that are quantifiable or proven to be successful in other settings.” While he valued evidence-based policy, he felt that studies and academic research alone are not enough to effectively influence legislation.

Evidence is important, and it can be compelling. But it has to be packaged in a way that is politically appealing … The politics have to align with the evidence in order for you to move the ball … The media creates the sort of momentum that helps frame the politics. The media is your friend on this topic.
He felt that elected officials generally value evidence-based policy, but the degree to which they utilize it depends heavily upon the political context and how well they understand the evidence.

**Advice for how to most effectively influence child abuse-related policy.** Steve felt that the most effective way to influence and shape child abuse-related policies and “enact truly sweeping changes” would be through the well-organized and well-funded leadership of “agitators or truth-tellers” to push the issue to a higher level of priority. He compared child advocacy to the gun lobby or the environmental lobby. While those lobbying groups have different areas of political focus, there is no question about where they stand and what they want from policy makers. Steve believed that the child abuse advocacy groups lack a precise vision, which is what policy makers need in order to carry forth sweeping change. He emphasized the importance of organizing the leadership and marketing of children’s advocacy efforts, which should be followed by the building of a broad-based coalition to help create and maintain the momentum of the urgency to push for policy change.

Steve suggested modeling the coalition after existing effective coalitions such as Club 20 and Action 22, which are policy advocacy groups with various interests throughout Colorado. He also suggested enlisting various chambers of commerce to diversify the support base both in content areas and geographic diversity. In addition, bipartisan participation of elected officials would increase the potential for bipartisan support. Steve thought that partisan politics can sometimes be an obstacle, but believes
an effort on behalf of children would be made stronger with buy-in from both major political parties.

I’d try to find three or four smart legislators, regardless of whether or not they have a history with children’s issues. Get them to agree on the problem and the solution … Not to be crass about this, but nobody would be taking a risk on this … This is a slam-dunk in politics, like mom and apple pie. This is about kids dying.

While this type of coalition-building effort would require adequate funding to reach its potential, Steve believed that corporations or foundations would be interested in being associated with an effort to advance such important children’s issues. His point was that a sophisticated, strategic coalition campaign would be required to elevate child abuse-related policy issues to a significantly higher level of priority.

Other elements needed to advance such a coalition effort would include strategic utilization the media to bring attention to the topic in an effort to build public awareness and political will. He also thought it would be important to have the involvement, if not the leadership, of the governor, if possible. Ideally, the governor could mention his interest in improving child abuse issues in the State of the State Address, which outlines the governor’s priorities for the year. According to Steve, such an effort could also be successfully led by a well-known “luminary,” such as former Colorado First Lady Frances Owens, former Senator Hank Brown, or former Governor Dick Lamm, who could serve as the spokesperson leading the issue.
Steve then picked up a newspaper from his desk and turned to a full-page ad funded by a coalition of oil and gas companies working to promote a specific piece of legislation, and explained that it was a good example of what could be possible for children’s groups if they had the resources to purchase cause marketing. Steve’s input demonstrated his belief in the power of coalitions in advancing difficult political issues and making meaningful change. His suggestions also reflected his belief in the ability of elected officials to make meaningful change in child abuse-related policy issues.

**Section II: Cross-Case Analysis**

This section presents a cross-case analysis of the data gathered from the six cases presented in Section I of this chapter. The findings discussed here represent the themes that emerged during the coding and data analysis process. The participants’ perspectives about what influences the beliefs of policy makers regarding child abuse and neglect-related policy issues varied, but reflected some prevalent themes and differences regarding background (such as their personal history, values, beliefs, what led them to seek elected office) and experience as an elected official (such as their experiences of and influences on child abuse-related policy decisions, understanding of risk and protective factors associated with child abuse and neglect, personal definition of and experience with evidence-based policy, and advice for how to most effectively influence child abuse-related policy decisions). Each of the themes presented in this section is explained in the context of the theories presented in Chapter Two.
Backgrounds of Cases

The interviews began by exploring the background of each participant and what led them to elected office. This discussion was a segue into more specific questions about their experience as elected officials, and also provided basic background information from which to compare and contrast personal and professional histories and reasons for entering politics. The questions also offered an opportunity for participants to share about values and beliefs by discussing their backgrounds. Table 4 summarized participants’ backgrounds.

Table 4
Summary of Case Backgrounds

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<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Years in State-Level Elected Public Office</th>
<th>Professional History</th>
<th>Direct Service or Personal Experience in Children’s Issues</th>
<th>Impetus for Entering Politics</th>
<th>Personal History (Experiences, Values, or Beliefs Relevant to Career in Politics)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Former NGO director; attorney; appointed district attorney</td>
<td>Directed international food distribution and nutrition program/ direct service with families; extensive direct service with victims (adults and children) in legal representation</td>
<td>Never planned to run for public office but decided to when the opportunity opened; was “motivated by the policy side of it”</td>
<td>Grew up in working-class family; Catholic; value for and experience with humanitarian service; believed he could make a difference in public office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Attorney (corporate); ordained clergy</td>
<td>Personal experience growing up in poverty; victim of child sexual abuse, benefited from strong protective supports; now volunteers for abuse prevention and child-serving</td>
<td>Appointed to open seat; longtime involvement in politics, student government, and political campaigns</td>
<td>Grew up in poverty within single-parent household; Christian; personally experienced child abuse; value for and experience with volunteering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Occupation</td>
<td>Children’s Service</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>Personal Details</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Former military; business/entrepreneur</td>
<td>No direct children’s service cited; while in office, he served on the Education Committee; history of several community business boards</td>
<td>Never planned to run for public office but decided to when opportunity opened, and was motivated by business practices he found unfair and wanted to change in policy</td>
<td>Did not disclose history prior to adulthood; did not disclose religious or faith perspective; believed he could make a difference in elected office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>MPA; small-business owner; served in city-level politics</td>
<td>No direct children’s service cited; long history of public service on community boards; many dealing with welfare and public service organizations; personal experience growing up in poverty</td>
<td>Involvement in student government and lifelong involvement in social issues</td>
<td>Grew up in poverty in single-parent household; did not disclose religious or faith perspective; valued social causes and believed she could make a difference for disadvantaged people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peggy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Senior staff to member of U.S. Congress; political campaign history; journalist; musician</td>
<td>No direct children’s service cited; long history of public service on several community boards and commissions, including education and child welfare-related areas of focus</td>
<td>Became involved in politics to address some issues her children were experiencing in education, leading to involvement in several political campaigns and issues; running for office was not original goal</td>
<td>Did not disclose history prior to adulthood; did not disclose religious or faith affiliation; believed she could make a difference for children and valued government transparency and accountability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Senior staff to member of U.S. Congress; political consultant</td>
<td>No direct children’s service cited; long history in federal and state-level politics</td>
<td>Lifelong political engagement; student government; several political campaigns</td>
<td>Grew up in household that valued civic awareness and engagement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

James and Mary discussed their personal histories with the greatest degree of personal details, including information about their childhoods. Both described growing up in poverty with single mothers. Both were very proud of their mothers, and described
them as supportive and positive influences in their lives. James discussed being a victim of sexual abuse as a child, which he saw as shaping his views and actions as an elected official. He also mentioned that he was Christian and an ordained clergy, but did not specifically link his faith to his decision making. Dean provided the next highest degree of detail but did not discuss his childhood. His description of his personal history began with his young adult years after college and law school, when he ran a food distribution center as a missionary in Africa. He also mentioned that he was Catholic, but like James, did not directly correlate his faith practice to his decision making. Steve mentioned his growing-up years but not in great detail, other than to describe growing up in a civically and politically aware family that discussed politics at the dinner table. Neither Peggy nor John mentioned anything about their growing-up years, beginning by discussing their professional backgrounds and journeys to elected office, without disclosing any additional information about personal beliefs or values beyond their vision of government and wanting to make a difference.

James, Mary, and Steve described being civically and politically active during their growing-up years, and felt that running for office was a natural evolution in their professional journey. Dean, John, and Peggy never planned to run for elected office prior to doing so, and made quick decisions to run when vacancies occurred in political positions for which they were eligible. James, Mary, and Steve continued to have some level of involvement in politics and public policy after leaving office, which is consistent with their lifelong civic engagement, whereas Dean, John, and Peggy were no longer
involved in politics. None of the cases described previous involvement with child abuse-related professional work prior to entering office. Each of the six cases had left state-level elected office within the past three years, thus sharing a common timeframe and political context during their time in elected office. Information regarding the background of each participant provided insights into some of their perspectives and positions throughout the analysis of the data, such as Mary’s interest in improving policies for low-income families or James’s defensiveness about using child abuse issues for political gain.

**Experiences as Elected Officials**

**Experience with child abuse-related policy decisions.** Dean and Mary both discussed children’s issues as ranking among their top priorities when in office. Dean and Mary were the only participants who had held other political appointments or offices (Dean was a DA, and Mary served on City Council) in addition to their service as a state-level elected official, and both reflected that they made important policy impacts and changes in each of their political positions.

Dean explained his experience of impacting children’s policies as an elected official and as a DA, both through legislation as well as through non-legislated policy changes and decisions. Mary discussed her perspective about how different levels of policy decisions are sometimes equally important as they relate to children’s issues, and that local- or city-level decisions are as impactful as state- and federal-level policy decisions. Both Dean and Mary recalled leading several child abuse-related policy
decisions and bills. James recalled being involved in several child abuse-related policy decisions and bills but did not identify child abuse-related decisions as one of his top priorities. James was aware of how his own history of child abuse shaped his thinking as an elected official, as he described feeling defensive when he suspected that child abuse-related bills were being used for political gain and not for the best interest of children. Peggy entered the political arena to try to make a difference for children’s issues, and thus led several bills and initiatives impacting child abuse-related issues.

John and Steve had the least experience leading child abuse-related issues, and acknowledged that children’s issues were not their area of expertise. Even so, both John and Steve spoke passionately and convincingly about the importance of child abuse-related issues and felt strongly that improvements were needed in the child protection policy arena. John recalled leading one bill related to the Office of the Child’s Representative (which directly impacts child abuse-related issues), and also spoke about how the entire state budget deeply impacts child abuse-related policies in many ways. All of the participants referenced supporting the bill that created a Child Protection Ombudsman in 2010.

All of the participants expressed serious concern for child abuse-related issues, though they had varying degrees of involvement with the issues. Their perspectives were consistent with the theory of social construction of target populations, which proposes that children and other dependent populations are seen by elected officials as having a positive construction but weak political power (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). All of the
participants spoke positively about the need to help children and child abuse-related issues, and all acknowledged that children are not very politically powerful, and thus are not represented as well as other causes in politics.

**Influences on child abuse-related policy decisions.** All six participants shared similar perspectives on the factors that influenced their consideration of child abuse and child protection policy. They all valued hearing input from “professionals from the field” of the topic they were considering. However, with regard to policies impacting child abuse, they valued the input of the families involved as much as input from the professionals from the field. They all spoke about how legislators are inundated with information and persuasion from so many sources and how difficult it is to try to make good decisions about such a broad range of issues.

All participants generally felt favorable about lobbyists’ helpfulness in educating them on complex or new issues, although they trusted some lobbyists more than others. All participants listed the Kempe Center for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse (Kempe Center) lobbyists or staff as trusted resources. Dean, John, James, and Steve listed the Colorado Children’s Campaign (children’s policy advocacy organization) as a trusted resource. James and Peggy recalled listening to some lobbyists whom they trusted and found credible but also distrusted lobbyists or interests who seemed to be using children’s issues for political gain.

Mary, John, and Steve pointed to term limits as a primary factor regarding influences on legislators. Due to Colorado’s term limits and citizen legislature, elected
officials have a relatively short period of time to learn about a wide variety of issues, including child abuse and neglect policies. For that reason, they tend to rely on information, historical perspectives, and institutional knowledge from “trusted messengers” or “knowledge brokers,” who may be lobbyists, community leaders, or other stakeholders with whom policy makers have established trust and rapport. This finding is consistent with Sabatier’s policy-oriented learning theory, wherein “policy brokers” are trusted figures who are part of larger coalitions working toward a common policy goal (Bennett & Howlett, 1992).

All participants spoke about the media as having some level of influence—not necessarily in the decisions they made but more in the elevation of issues that helped influence policy makers’ priorities. All participants agreed that the media had the ability to raise an issue in the public eye, regardless of whether it was accurately portrayed, which elevated issues and influenced elected officials’ prioritization of or attention to issues. All of the participants referenced the Denver Post coverage of child abuse fatalities. The Denver Post has featured a multi-part series that began in November 2012 and continued through the completion of this study in June 2013 entitled “Failed to Death,” referring to the failings of Colorado’s child protection system. All of the participants suggested that media coverage of more catastrophic or horrible child abuse stories would be necessary to make child abuse policy a higher priority in Colorado.

The influence of this media coverage is an example of Lomas’ framework for understanding the context of public policy decision making, wherein outside information
from media, advocates, and research is used to appeal to the ideologies, beliefs, and interests of elected officials to persuade them to address a social problem through public policy changes (Lomas, 2000).

Table 5 presents the data from each case as they relate to Lomas’ (2000) framework for understanding the context of public policy decisions.

Table 5
Data Related to Lomas’ Schematic View of the Contextual Influences on the Decision-Making Process

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Values (Ideologies, Beliefs, Interests That Affect Decision Making)</th>
<th>Influences on Child Abuse-Related Policy Decisions</th>
<th>Advice for How to Most Effectively Influence Child Abuse-Related Policy Decision</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>Valued ability to improve policies through legislative and non-legislative avenues as DA and as state-level elected official; valued input from subject-matter experts who are informed by research and evidence based policy; prioritized a need to move beyond the “turf issues” (referring to state supervised and county administered child protection system)</td>
<td>Highly valued the deliberative process bringing subject-matter experts together to consider issues and make recommendations; media can be influential but not always a positive influence</td>
<td>Involving well-led grassroots organizations and coalitions that are informed about evidence-based policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>Valued input from victims, families, and professionals working in the field; valued research and evidence-based policy; believed child abuse policy decisions needed to be protected from political &quot;gamesmanship&quot;</td>
<td>His personal standards and values; research-based evidence; credible research-oriented groups; media only sometimes a positive influence</td>
<td>Grassroots and &quot;grass tops&quot; coalition strategy informed by research and data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Valued input from families and professionals from the field; valued evidence of operationally effective programs and services; valued the perspective that all elected officials vote on state budget, which impacts all areas, including children’s issues</td>
<td>People or stakeholders who work professionally in the field; media are influential because they impact what the public is interested in following</td>
<td>Opportunities to improve relationships between elected officials in order to more effectively improve child abuse-related issues; educate legislators outside of session; educate all legislators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Valued input from</td>
<td>People who are in the field, parents, and child care givers; some lobbyists; media raise awareness of issues but usually most effective only after tragedy</td>
<td>Need to build relationships with elected officials outside the legislative session; important to consider term limits when educating elected officials</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>all levels of policy decision making, including federal, state, and local/city as the levels of policy decisions are dependent upon and impact one another; valued issues around child poverty; valued the state budget-making process because it impacts many levels of policy and programming</td>
<td>Counties involved in child protection; some special interest groups; media can be helpful if the elected official shapes and manages the media message</td>
<td>Building and strengthening relationships with elected officials outside legislative session to educate them about child abuse issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peggy</td>
<td>transparency and accountability of government (child protection) to improve child abuse-related issues; valued input from families and communities; valued protection and safety of children in the custody of county or state</td>
<td>Experts, including some county commissioners; some special interest/advocacy groups; media very helpful on child abuse-related issues</td>
<td>Need for a strategic and comprehensive plan to improve child abuse policy that is informed by research and led by a strong coalition; importance of considering term limits when educating elected officials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>input from families, some well-informed commissioners and professionals from the field; valued improving child abuse-related policies as something that all elected officials and influencers should support and not politicize</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Understanding of risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect.**

Responses regarding definitions and understanding of environmental risks and their implications on child development and safety varied from very detailed to somewhat vague descriptions across the six participants. Dean and James provided similar and very detailed descriptions of risk and development, and included references to the mother’s health prior to pregnancy and the prenatal care and health of the child; they also
described risks of poverty, neighborhood violence, family violence, substance abuse, access to health care, access to quality child care and schools, vocabularies spoken at home, nutrition, and access to other protective community supports. James identified specific kinds of community supports such as Boy Scouts, summer camp, and tutors. Both Dean and James made multiple references to interventions or protections that directly resulted from or were associated with public policy decisions and programs.

Mary listed several of the same risk factors as Dean and James, adding childhood hunger and environmental risks associated with low-income neighborhoods. John, Peggy, and Steve provided brief descriptions of some risk factors but mainly focused their answers on behaviors of parents as primary risk factors. Access to education as a way to mitigate risk was referenced by all six participants, indicating their shared understanding and opinion that school is a potential protective factor for children living among risk factors.

James and Mary mentioned their personal experience of growing up in poverty, stating that while poverty is a barrier and a risk factor, it is one that can be overcome with access to protective supports like what they themselves experienced. Both credited their single mothers for working hard, raising them to access opportunities and break the cycle of poverty and emphasizing the importance of education.

All of the participants focused their initial response to this question by listing the importance of the home life and the role of the parent(s). Dean, James, Mary, and Steve mentioned substance abuse as a risk factor to children, which indicates a shared awareness of substance abuse as a risk factor in child abuse and to child development.
As presented in Chapter Two, Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) ecological systems theory outlines the nested set of systems in which children develop. Ecological systems theory provides an excellent framework from which to consider risk factors and protective factors as they relate to child development, including the impacts of policy decisions on reducing risks and increasing protections. The theory presents each system from the child’s immediate realm (including self, family, and home) to the child’s neighborhood (including school and extended family) to the broader environmental context (including religion, government, and public policy), proposing that the systems interplay to create the context in which children develop.

Dean, James, and Mary described risks and protections as occurring at every level of the theory, while John, Steve, and Peggy identified risks and protections as occurring more in the child’s immediate and neighborhood realms. The difference in their descriptions illustrates their perspectives about where risks and protections occur and to what degree policy decisions can impact them.

Table 6 presents participants’ input regarding their understanding of risk and protective factors in relation to the systemic levels of development presented in ecological systems theory.
Table 6
*Understanding of Risk and Protective Factors in Relation to Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Descriptions of Risk and Protective Factors Associated With Child Abuse and Neglect</th>
<th>How Case’s Description Relates to Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) Ecological Systems Theory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>Risks: untreated mental illness or domestic violence in the home, behaviors of mother (substance use), poverty, presence of community violence. Protections: access to prenatal and post-natal health care, vocabulary spoken in the home, access to quality schools and teachers, and policy maker’s responses to the aforementioned issues</td>
<td>Described all levels of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, from child’s immediate realm, to child’s neighborhood, to broader societal context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>Risks: domestic violence or abuse, dangerous neighborhoods. Protections: access to prenatal care, access to health care, safe schools and neighborhoods, access to quality child care and after-school care, parent involvement in school, access to protections such as tutors, mentors, Boys’ and Girls’ Club, Boy Scouts</td>
<td>Described all levels of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, from child’s immediate realm, to child’s neighborhood, to broader societal context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Risks: mostly within the home environment, presence of domestic violence, sometimes risk can be correlated to poverty. Protections: involvement of people who care, community resources such as GALs (Guardians ad Litem), Big Brothers Big Sisters, mentors, Boys and Girls Club</td>
<td>Described first two levels of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, from child’s immediate realm to child’s neighborhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Risks: poverty, dangerous neighborhood, environmental risks, lack of resources or supports when emancipating from foster care. Protections: school-based health centers, after-school programs, community resources for low-income families, and policy responses to the aforementioned issues at the local, state and federal levels</td>
<td>Described all levels of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, from child’s immediate realm, to child’s neighborhood, to broader societal context</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peggy</td>
<td>Risks: negative lifestyles in the home, domestic violence, sometimes the child protection system becoming inappropriately involved with families. Protections: counseling, community agencies offering services to children and families and promoting health child development</td>
<td>Described first two levels of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, from child’s immediate realm to child’s neighborhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>Risks: exposure to caregivers experiencing alcoholism, drug abuse, poverty, and/or domestic violence. Protections: public schools and teachers</td>
<td>Described first two levels of Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, from child’s immediate realm to child’s neighborhood</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Definition of and experience with evidence-based policy. The participants shared varying beliefs about the role of evidence-based policy in decision making regarding child abuse and neglect issues. Dean, James, Mary, and Steve referenced research and data when defining evidence-based policy. The same four participants agreed that data and research help inform decisions and can help make a compelling case, but the overarching theme was that evidence-based policy is not a primary determinant in decision making for most elected officials, in their experience. Peggy and John described evidence-based policy as the result of an experience or quantifiable problem that influences policy decisions.

This input regarding the evidence-based policy is supported in the literature cited in Chapter Two, wherein it is noted that researchers and policy makers have different goals, means of gathering information, languages, timelines, and motives (Choi et al., 2005). While evidence-based research and policy are available to elected officials, they are most effective and most likely to be utilized when presented in a format that is credible and reasonably easy to understand and apply. James, Mary, and Steve mentioned the value of coupling evidence-based policy with emotional appeal, narratives, or stories to help busy elected officials better understand the context and applicability of what is being considered.

This feedback provides useful information for research and advocacy stakeholders with regard to delivery of research information to policy makers. Throughout the course of several questions during the interviews, all of the participants reiterated how busy
Legislators are, especially during the legislative session. Thus, they all expressed the feeling of being inundated with information and the need for thoughtfully “packaged” messages from trusted messengers working in or impacted by the field. James and Steve spoke at length about the need to “package” academic reports and research in a more concise manner, as legislators do not have time to read lengthy reports. Mary, John, Peggy, and Steve valued the importance of developing relationships with legislators outside the legislative session, when legislators have more time.

What participants believe about the ability of elected officials to impact child abuse through public policy. Policy-oriented learning theory incorporates the process of ongoing search and adaption motivated by the desire to realize core policy beliefs, such that what is learned is how to better achieve one’s ends, or how better to implement public policies (Bennett & Howlett, 1992). Sabatier’s theory addresses both the belief system of the policy maker as an individual and the belief system that is held at the core of the advocacy coalition seeking to achieve a given policy goal. In turn, Lomas’ (2000) framework for understanding the context of public policy decision making consists of three interrelating domains: (a) the institutional structure for decision making (and its implicit and explicit rules of conduct); (b) the values of those involved (ideologies, beliefs, and interests); and (c) the information being considered (producers, purveyors, and knowledge).

These theories support that notion that the beliefs of elected officials are central to policy decision making but are also a variable among other influential factors, including
research, the context of decision making, and input from other stakeholders. Elected officials may enter a decision-making process with a preconceived notion of the issue or anticipated outcome but become convinced or persuaded differently through outside influences and information as they move through the process. This notion is illustrated by Lomas’ (2000) framework for understanding the context of public policy decision making, wherein social problems or issues are addressed by policy makers who are influenced by both their own values and beliefs weighed against outside influences and information.

Beliefs about the ability of elected officials to change or positively impact child abuse and neglect. All of the participants’ responses shared a common thread of the belief that, indeed, policy makers have the ability to positively impact child abuse policy. Dean, James, and Steve identified “turf issues” between government entities as a barrier that can prevent policy makers from making an impact in child abuse-related policy arena.

An important point raised by John, Mary, and Steve was that no matter the level of experience or interest elected officials have regarding child abuse policy issues, they must ultimately vote on the bills and policies with implications for children, including the state budget, even if they did not play a leadership role in creating the bill or policy. James, John, Steve, and Mary suggested that more education is needed in this policy area for all elected state officials and not just those traditionally associated with the issues.
The participants shared a common caveat that while elected officials do have the ability to make a positive impact in the child abuse policy arena, they do not always do so for a variety of reasons. James explained that he felt their role was somewhat limited:

In all honesty, I probably think our role is rather limited. . . . The role is limited other than broad policy prescriptions and reductions in the form of legislation . . . and also the underutilized role of being the bully pulpit to bring attention to the matter. I think that’s one role they can play.

Interesting, each of the participants answered quickly and confidently that they believed they personally had the ability to positively impact change in this arena, even though most conveyed some level of doubt about the overall ability of legislators to make a difference in this policy area. This feedback portrayed a distinction between what they believed about policy makers in general and what they believed about themselves as individuals. These perspectives share the element of belief in the ability of elected officials to make positive change. While these responses are not directly related to any particular policy or issue, they reveal a great deal about what the participants believe about politics and the ability of policy makers.

**Beliefs about political priorities in Colorado.** The participants identified many common political priorities when discussing Colorado’s current political landscape. The question, inspired by the Bellwether Methodology, was made up of two parts: (a) to ask participants to first identify what they believe to be the top three policy issues in Colorado; and (b) to ask them to describe what they believe to be the top three policy
issues related to children in Colorado. The purpose of these questions was to explore what the participants believed to be the priority issues in the state as an indicator of their perspective of government and public policy in general, followed up by exploring what they believe to be the top children’s issues.

By comparing their answers to these two questions, the researcher was able to get an idea of where children’s policy issues rank among the state’s overall political issues according to each participant. These questions also provide a baseline if the researcher has the opportunity to return to the participants to do post-intervention interviews, as were done in the bellwether study in California, cited in Chapter Two. Table 7 presents participants’ top issues.

Table 7
Participants’ Ranking of Policy Issues in Colorado

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Top 3 Policy Issues in Colorado</th>
<th>Top 3 Children’s Policy Issues in Colorado</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Mary        | 1. State budget  
2. Health care  
3. State infrastructure (including public education) | 1. Hunger  
2. Foster care/contraction from foster care  
3. Physical activity |
| Steve       | 1. Economic recovery  
2. Education (K-12 and higher education)  
3. Energy | 1. Education  
2. Child protection  
3. Health care |
| James       | 1. Jobs  
2. Guns  
3. Health care | 1. Child protection  
2. Kinship care (placing children with relatives upon removal due to abuse/neglect)  
3. Need better monitoring of foster care |
| Peggy       | 1. Economy/jobs  
2. Education (K-12 and higher education)  
3. Health care | 1. Deaths of children in state custody  
2. Education  
3. Zero-tolerance policies of children in judicial system |
| Dean        | 1. Education (K-12)  
2. Higher education  
3. Energy development & water availability | 1. Education  
2. Health care (including mental and dental health)  
3. Child protection/child abuse & neglect |
| John        | 1. Education  
2. Higher education  
3. Medicaid | 1. Education  
2. Medicaid  
3. Child abuse |
The responses to these questions were interestingly similar despite the various political party affiliations of the participants. Most of the participants ranked the economy, jobs, education, and health care as the current top priorities in the state. Aside from education, the top children’s issues were generally not ranked as top state priorities. Child protection and child abuse issues were consistently ranked highly as top priorities among children’s policy issues, but no participant ranked child protection or child abuse as a top state issue in general. The information gained through this Bellwether Methodology tactic will be useful in informing future advocacy and legislator education.

**Advice for how to most effectively influence child abuse-related policy.** All of the participants raised comments about the value of hearing from the professionals and groups or coalitions impacted by the issue or policy. This feedback is directly applicable to strategy, and supports Sabatier’s policy-oriented learning theory, wherein policy is influenced by the beliefs of the policy makers and stakeholders, but the advocacy coalition is the agent of learning (Bennett & Howlett, 1992). Other feedback was more related to context and things the research and advocacy communities should consider as they formulate strategies to impact policy. For example, Mary and Steve suggested that term limits be a priority consideration in the advocacy strategy. John raised the importance of election season politics, explaining how campaign contributions are another necessary consideration in the creation of effective advocacy strategy.

Dean cautioned the advocacy community to be very aware of “turf issues” creating barriers for effectively influencing policy, referring to Colorado’s child
protection system as a state-supervised and county-administered system, meaning county commissioners and county directors of human services have extensive decision-making power at the local level.

All of the participants, in one way or another, stated something about how child abuse policy issues are too important to fall victim to partisan politics. However, Dean, James, John, Peggy, and Steve provided specific examples of their experience of a child abuse policy issue becoming compromised or failing due to partisan issues.

The input from the interviews reflected thoughtful and articulate messages about what the participants believed and had experienced regarding the ability of elected officials to improve child abuse-related issues. The data also revealed the realities of competing interests and messages that hinder systemic improvements on behalf of abused and neglected children. Thus, these cases demonstrated the power of outside influences and organized coalitions in public policy decision-making process and the challenges involved with incorporating evidence-based policy in a meaningful and effective manner.

In sum, the findings illustrate strongly shared values regarding child protection and the need to improve child abuse-related policies amidst the complexities and competing interests of the larger political context.
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND CONCLUSIONS

This exploratory case study examined the perspectives of elected officials regarding what influences policy decisions related to child abuse and neglect issues. The study sought to identify policy makers’ beliefs about their ability to impact child abuse policies; how they define and ways in which they have experienced evidence-based policy; and what they know about risk factors and protective factors with regard to child abuse-related policy. The findings from this study are intended to provide insights about how to most effectively influence child abuse-related policy decisions.

This study included a solid theoretical basis for exploring a relatively unexplored topic area regarding political decision making in the realm of child abuse and neglect public policy. As such, it achieved access to high-level, former policy makers who have served as state-level elected officials in the past three or fewer years, and, therefore, are credible to speak about their perspectives as former elected officials. To date, I have not been able to identify any similar studies that have explored what influences policy makers and what policy makers believe as it relates to improving child abuse and child protection policy in Colorado or anywhere else nationally or abroad.
The remainder of this chapter consists of the following: study summary, conceptual framework, summary of findings, recommendations, implications, limitations, and conclusions.

**Study Summary**

I selected this topic after working as a lobbyist in the Colorado legislature for most of the past decade, advocating for agencies that contract with the government to care for and treat children, most of whom are in the custody of the state because they have experienced severe child abuse and/or neglect. Simultaneously, I incorporated my interest in political advocacy and child abuse and neglect policy into my work as a graduate student, focusing on how evidence-based academic research impacts and informs public policy decisions in the field of child abuse and neglect.

While several credible research and advocacy organizations such as Casey Family Programs and Child Welfare League of America are promoting evidence-based practices and policy improvements at the national policy and in some states, I personally experienced most state-level policy decisions and changes to occur reactively—in response to a problem or problematic trend in the child protection system. In contrast, I observed that other child-related fields, such as early childhood and child health, were using research to formulate more proactive, evidence-based policy agendas and were advancing their agendas through more comprehensive coalition efforts.

My interest in advancing effective advocacy efforts in the child abuse and neglect policy arena led me to review the work of the Harvard Family Research Project working
in conjunction with the Packard Foundation to advance Universal Preschool as a policy issue in California (Harvard Family Research Project, 2005). The Harvard Family Research Project conducted a research project using the Bellwether Methodology, in which interviews are conducted with elected officials and other figures who influence public policy to gauge what issues are among their highest priorities, what they understand about children’s issues, and specifically about the advantages of investing in Universal Preschool, and finally explored whom they trust in the advocacy community and what most effectively influences their policy decision-making processes. The findings from those interviews were then used to inform the child advocacy community in building a coalition strategy to elevate the prioritization and eventual passage of Universal Preschool by the California legislature. This effort was successful, by elevating the issue Universal Preschool to a top priority among policy makers (Harvard Family Research Project, 2005).

I designed this exploratory case study to incorporate influences of the Bellwether Methodology to explore what Colorado policy makers know and believe about child abuse-related policy, how and by whom they are influenced, and what they understand about evidence-based policy and risk and protective factors.

Data were gathered through two interviews with each of the six participants. The participants were former elected officials who had served in a state-level office within the past three years. I did not interview current elected officials because at the time of this study, I served in a state-level contract position that was funded by state General Fund
dollars. Interviewing current elected officials might have created a conflict of interest as they are responsible for managing all state funds.

I wanted to interview officials who had served in state-level office as recently as possible, so I submitted requests to eight former elected officials who represented political, geographic, and gender as evenly as possible. Six of the eight agreed to participate in the study. Table 8 lists the participants’ names, the office held, the geographic region represented, and the year they exited state-level office.

Table 8
Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Name</th>
<th>Last State-Level Elected Office Held</th>
<th>Geographic Area Represented</th>
<th>YearExited Public Office</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Terrance Carroll</td>
<td>Democrat, Former House Speaker</td>
<td>Denver metro (capital city/central CO)</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BJ Nikkel</td>
<td>Republican, Former State Representative</td>
<td>Ft. Collins/ Loveland (northcentral CO)</td>
<td>2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh Penry</td>
<td>Republican, Former Senate Minority Leader</td>
<td>Grand Junction (western CO)</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill Ritter</td>
<td>Democrat, Former Colorado Governor</td>
<td>Statewide</td>
<td>2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paula Sandoval</td>
<td>Democrat, Former State Senator</td>
<td>Denver metro (capital city/central CO)</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al White</td>
<td>Republican, Former State Senator</td>
<td>Winter Park (ski resort/northcentral CO)</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interviews took place in April and May 2013 at locations of the participants’ choosing. Protection of human subjects and interview protocols were presented to each participant, and each signed Informed Consent forms. Part of the study protocol included
the provision that pseudonyms would be used to protect confidentiality in the presentation of the case descriptions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. I coded the transcripts for themes and issues.

While Seidman (2006) supported the use of the Three Interview Series to explore (a) focused life history, (b) the details of experience, and (c) reflection on meaning, for the reasons listed below, this study necessitated that this information be gathered in two interviews, thereby consolidating the history and details of experience together into the first interview. Knox and Burkard (2009) recognized the value and credibility of at least two interviews as a way to lend understanding to context and also to help participants feel a sense of safety with the interviewer while allowing the opportunity for further examination of additional content and context from the initial interview.

The reason for conducting two interviews instead of three in this case was that the participants were generally difficult to access due to the demands of their position and/or scheduling, which Kvale recognized as a key challenge in accessing “elites” for interview research (Kvale, 2007). Seidman (2006) also acknowledged the challenges of carrying out interview plans with elites or executives, given their busy schedules and outside demands. While all participants generously granted interviews, I found it very challenging to schedule two interviews with the participants due to their schedules.

The interview questions were designed to begin with general issues and questions and segue into more specific and targeted information, as in the Bellwether Methodology
Harvard Family Research Project, 2005). Each of the questions was designed to inform one or more of the overall research questions:

1. What do policy makers know about risk factors and influences on safe child development, and what do they believe about the potential for policy to mitigate risk and increase protective factors?
2. What influences decision making for policy makers when considering child abuse and child protection policy?
3. What do policy makers believe about the role of evidence-based policy as it relates to policy decision-making regarding child abuse and neglect issues?
4. What do policy makers believe about their ability to impact child protection and child abuse through public policy?

**Conceptual Framework**

The study was built upon the frameworks of three theories regarding policy making, and one theory that serves as a reference for the context of public policy as it relates to child development, as briefly summarized in the following.

Lomas (2000) proposed a framework for understanding the contextual influences on the public policy decision-making process consisting of three interrelating domains: (a) the institutional structure for decision making (and its implicit and explicit rules of conduct); (b) the values of those involved (ideologies, beliefs, and interests); and (c) the information being considered (producers, purveyors, and knowledge). Under this framework, elected officials consider social problems and issues based upon their values.
(ideologies, beliefs, and interests) weighed against information they receive from research, the media, and influential stakeholders.

Sabatier (Bennett & Howlett, 1992) suggested that policy-oriented learning theory proposes an ongoing process of search and adaptation motivated by the desire to realize core policy beliefs of both the elected decision makers and the stakeholders involved. Policy-oriented learning theory also proposes that the advocacy coalition is the agent of learning, and those coalitions usually arise out of a deep dissatisfaction with existing institutions. The advocacy coalitions are held together by the deep core beliefs of its members. Finally, Sabatier introduced the notion of “knowledge brokers” and trusted messengers who influence policy makers (Bennett & Howlett, 1992).

Through the theory of social construction of target populations, Schneider and Ingram proposed four constructions associated with political positioning. The dependent construction represents populations who are perceived as being vulnerable and deserving of help and assistance, such as children, mothers, and disabled persons. Child abuse-related issues would be considered a dependent construction, wherein elected officials view abused children as deserving of help and assistance, but as having little political power (Schneider & Ingram, 1993).

Finally, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) proposed that, through ecological systems theory, child development occurs within a nested set of systems that are summarized to include the child’s immediate realm (including family and home), neighborhood (including school and extended family), and the broader community or societal context.
(including culture, religion, and public policy). These systems interplay to create the context through which the child develops, including risk and protective factors and public policy decisions impacting level.

While the academic and scientific communities have explored the issues involved with identifying, treating, and preventing child abuse and neglect, those findings are not always easily translated to the political and policy-making communities for a variety of reasons and obstacles. Researchers and policy makers have differing goals, means of gathering information, languages, and motives (Choi et al., 2005). While researchers have time to explore the content area, policy makers face multiple issues presented from various viewpoints and have little time to consider issues with great depth. This is particularly true for term-limited policy makers, as they have a limited period of time in which to become familiar with a wide range of topics. For that reason, policy makers tend to rely on information, historical perspective, and institutional knowledge they receive from “trusted messengers” or “knowledge brokers,” who can be lobbyists, community leaders, or other stakeholders with whom policy makers have established trust and rapport. Policy makers can also be influenced by media, which is might play into their position, tactics, or decision-making process. Finally, policy makers are influenced by values, morals, and the interest of groups and constituents (Choi et al., 2005).
Summary of Findings

The findings from this study support Lomas’ (2000) Schematic Framework of the Contextual Influences on the Decision-Making Process in that the beliefs and values of the participants coupled with persuasive information from stakeholders, including the media and researchers, reportedly impacted their decision-making processes (see Figure 1).

Specifically, child abuse-related policy issues presented elected officials with a problem to solve or address. Their personal values and experiences provided the basis for their decision-making process, which was then positively or negatively influenced, or merely informed by information from researchers, media, advocates, and other stakeholders. The institutional structure of decision making occurs with the influence of the aforementioned factors in the presence of the structured processes of government (including executive branch, legislative branch, and bureaucracy) to produce the policies that attempt to address the original problem or issue (Lomas, 2000).

The following summarizes the data, which mirror Lomas’ (2000) framework and provide a new context through which to consider the influences and processes involved with child abuse-related policy decisions.

Participants’ backgrounds were explored to lend insight into their beliefs, values, and reasons for entering politics. While two of the six had not planned to enter politics and did so because of unexpected opportunities, all of them agreed that elected officials have an opportunity to “make things better,” “shine light,” and “make changes” in policy...
areas that matter, including child abuse and neglect. Three of the participants described themselves as “finding themselves in leadership roles” throughout their teen and early adult lives, including student council, political campaigns, and social causes. All of the participants felt strongly about the need to improve child abuse-related issues though they had varying levels of experience with and expertise in the topic.

Participants’ perspectives about what influences beliefs of policy makers regarding child abuse and neglect-related policy issues varied but included some prevalent themes and differences regarding background and experiences as elected officials. The primary themes that emerged included experiences of and influences on child abuse-related policy decisions; understanding of risk and protective factors associated with child abuse and neglect; personal definition of and experience with evidence-based policy; and advice for how to most effectively influence child abuse-related policy decisions.

Participants expressed frustration with the sheer volume of issues that legislators must consider during their annual 120-day legislative session. The variety of interests and issues leaves them feeling inundated and overwhelmed, and they typically look to trusted sources from each respective field for guidance and information to influence their decision making. This is especially true given the presence of term limits in Colorado.

The consistent and rapid influx of information makes it difficult for issues to register at a priority level because of the constant competition for attention, given the limited capacity of legislators. Child abuse and neglect issues usually reach their peak
level of priority following a tragic event such as a child abuse fatality that is covered in the media. All of the participants in the study thought that media and crises are usually the impetus for serious attention at the state policy level, and most reflected that they wished this were not the case, as child protection should be among our highest priorities ongoing.

Study participants expressed varying degrees of understanding about the risk factors associated with child abuse and neglect. Three thought about risk as being most influential to the child according to the parenting composition and characteristics of the home life or home environment. The remaining three participants discussed a more complex and interrelated set of circumstances working in tandem to create the presence of risk. While poverty and caregiver substance abuse are highly correlated with risk of child abuse and neglect (Shankoff & Phillips, 2000), three of the participants did not articulate those as primary factors contributing to child abuse risk.

Based upon the input received from the participants in this study, evidence-based policy is not as commonly understood as the research and advocacy communities might believe. The participants had varying definitions for evidence-based policy. Two of the six described evidence-based policy as including events that provide evidence that policy makers consider in decision making. The other four participants referenced words like “data,” “research,” and “statistically supported” to describe evidence-based policy. Finally, two of the six provided in-depth and complex definitions of evidence-based policy, which included words like “peer-reviewed” and “rigorously evaluated” research.
Despite their differences in describing the definition, they all agreed that, based on their experience, evidence-based policy is not frequently referenced or utilized in the current state-level policy-making arena.

The participants were uncertain about the degree to which they believed policy makers have the ability to positively impact child abuse and neglect issues, yet all felt strongly that they as individuals had the ability to positively impact child abuse and neglect through public policy. Participants acknowledged that policy makers bring varying levels of expertise to every topic area covered in the legislature and that some know little about or have little interest in child abuse and neglect. That said, the participants encouraged the research and advocacy communities to develop relationships at some level with as many policy makers as possible since they all have to vote on the issues once a bill is created and reaches decision-making stages. Three of the participants specifically stated that advocates should look beyond working solely with the policy makers traditionally associated with their issue area of interest, as other policy makers may be willing to learn more about or interested in playing a larger role advocating for child abuse and neglect policy issues.

**Recommendations**

In alignment with Sabatier’s (Bennett & Howlett, 1992) policy-oriented learning theory, I propose the following recommendations in an effort to improve our understanding of the state of variables defined as important to one’s belief system, refine logical and causal relationships internal to a belief system, and identify challenges to
one’s belief system. Sabatier also supported the concept of the “advocacy coalition” as a power agent in impacting policy decisions. Several of the following recommendations reflect input from the participants regarding the value of influencing policy decisions by working within a coalition.

1. **Consider the workload and busy schedules of elected officials, especially during the legislative session, and prepare materials and messaging accordingly.** As noted in most of the comments in these interviews, elected officials do not have time to read long and complex academic reports but do need to be informed about research and evidence-based policy. Educational materials for elected officials should be strategically prepared to include accurate and compelling information, in the most concise format possible. The “trusted messengers” or “knowledge brokers” working with the elected officials should be well informed about the research and data, and should be prepared to speak about complex research to in a concise manner. Relationships with elected officials should be cultivated and nurtured throughout the calendar year and not just during the legislative session. Elected officials have more time and fewer urgent competing interests outside the legislative session and, therefore, are far more likely to engage in learning about issues and building relationships during the “off session” time. Election cycles present another opportunity to inject child abuse-related issues into the election-season dialogue. Raising voter and candidate awareness of the issues can elevate the level of priority of the issues.
2. **Educate decision makers about risk factors and their correlation to child abuse, and how investments in and support of protective factors can reduce and mitigate child abuse.** Elected officials want to make a difference in the lives of children who have experienced or are at risk of child abuse but often feel the issues are too complex and difficult to effectively address. The evidence supporting the mitigation of risk factors through access to protective factors is compelling and demonstrates positive outcomes and return on investments. Educating elected officials about this research can help inform their decision making and has the potential to influence positive evidence-based policy outcomes. While all of the cases reported some level of understanding of risk factors as they relate to child abuse and neglect, they had varying degrees of understanding about investments in protective factors and proactive policy planning to mitigate risk of child abuse and neglect.

3. **Educate stakeholders in the child abuse policy arena about the definition and value of using evidence-based policy to inform the decision making of elected officials.** Elected officials have varying perspectives about the definition and value of evidence-based policy. Education and advocacy efforts should provide definitions about the meaning and utility of evidence-based policy. Such efforts should not be targeted solely at elected officials but should also target the media, advocates, “trusted messengers,” and others involved in influencing policy decisions.
4. **Education and outreach strategies should target all elected officials who consider child abuse-related issues.** Education and advocacy efforts should target all elected officials, not just those who are identified with children’s issues. All state-level elected officials vote on all bills, and all take part in approving state budgets and thus influence policy decisions that impact child abuse. Also, decisions about children’s issues and child abuse occur at several levels of government and leadership. Education and outreach efforts should also include city-, county-, state-, and federal-level officials, as well as court and legal officials. All of the participants mentioned that child abuse-related policy decisions are not limited to state-level elected officials and that education and advocacy efforts should include a strategic and comprehensive outreach to various levels of policy-making, depending on the issues.

5. **Researchers and advocates should work more closely together to advance policies to impact child abuse and neglect-related issues.** Researchers work toward different goals, on different timelines, and using a different language than seen in the political decision-making arena. While elected officials do not have time to consider complex academic reports and studies, they are interested in knowing about what has been proven to make a difference and how their decisions can be most effective. To the extent possible, researchers and advocates should collaborate to present messages and positions to elected officials to most effectively influence policy decisions. This was supported by input from
the study participants, who expressed value for research but do not have time to consider long and complex academic studies during the legislative session, and rely on other advocates, experts from the field, or trusted messengers to relay the highlights and main points of research as it relates to the topic.

6. **Build strategic coalitions to advance the cause or message.** Interview input supported Sabatier’s (Bennett & Howlett, 1992) belief that elected officials are strongly influenced by the positions of credible and strategic coalitions. Coalitions that include content-area experts, professionals from the field of child abuse and neglect treatment and prevention, families or victims of child abuse, and other trusted stakeholders have credibility and influence with elected officials. Coalitions should base messages and efforts upon evidence-based policy that is presented in accurate, concise, and convincing ways.

**Implications**

While this study was exploratory in scope, it has several implications for child protection research and advocacy in Colorado and beyond. The participants suggested several means of improving effective advocacy in these issue areas, including developing knowledge brokers or trusted messengers to lend education and expertise about the issues. They were easily overwhelmed with research, data, and evidence-based policy, and encouraged incorporating research findings into digestible and concise summaries that they have time and capacity to absorb and understand as relevant to their decision making. They also encouraged advocates to cultivate relationships with elected officials.
outside the legislative session, when they have more time, energy, and attention to
devote. They suggested that advocates “package” messaging using both research and
emotion conveyed through stories and narratives. They also suggested that the media are
uniquely poised to serve as a powerful lever for advocates on child abuse and neglect
issues, as the media tend to cover the issues in a manner that engages the emotions and
interest of the public, thus increasing the political positioning of the topic.

Policy makers and researchers function with different goals, contexts, motivations, and timelines. The research and advocacy communities should work more
closely together to advance causes and policy improvements. Advocates are better able
to make a credible and convincing case for policy makers when using evidence-based
research, and researchers are better poised to successfully influence policy improvements
through the efforts and messaging of trusted knowledge brokers from the advocacy
community to usher the research to and through the policy-making process.

The implications of this study serve to inform a broad group of stakeholders.
Elected officials, researchers, policy advisors, media, and advocates and interest groups
in all fields, not just child protection, stand to benefit from this input regarding how to
effectively influence public policy decisions. The information shared by the participants
translates across disciplines and is applicable to many policy fields.

**Limitations**

Because this study was an exploratory case study, the sample size was
intentionally small (six participants). The small N size could be a potential limitation
because the amount and variety of input is limited to that of six individuals. However, by its very nature, the study design was intended to inform future research in a topic area about which there is currently little or no published research.

My position as a state-level official serving as Colorado’s first Child Protection Ombudsman was a potential limitation, as my role as well as past and current professional experiences influence how I see the child protection system in Colorado. The Ombudsman Office was created by a bill in 2010 that was supported by all the participants in this study, thus giving them some potential bias or potential preconceived notion of my motives or perspectives, which may have influenced, positively or negatively, their input.

Another limitation of the study occurred because the Ombudsman Office, under my leadership, released a large and controversial investigation of the Colorado State Department of Human Services and its handling of a child abuse fatality report. This story produced several Denver Post headlines and interviews with me on at least four Denver news stations. This media coverage occurred at the same time the interviews were being conducted. The Denver Post coverage was mentioned by all of the participants, and may have prompted them to share more or different information than they might have absent the media coverage.

Conclusions

Child abuse and neglect is a field in which research has identified associated risks and causes, and offers research-based solutions to reduce, prevent, and mitigate child
abuse and neglect. Public policy makers often view child abuse and neglect as too complex to effectively address, and instead seek to improve child protection through small measures and projects that seem achievable. To influence large-scale child protection reform, policy makers must reach an understanding that reform is an achievable goal and that the issues need to be elevated to a higher level of political priority. Research and advocacy communities need to work together to build a compelling and achievable case for improvement.

This study provides suggestions for achieving this goal and lays the groundwork for future studies into effective advocacy in the child abuse and neglect policy arenas. Elevating these issues at the policy level has the potential to change the trajectory of children’s lives for the better. For this reason, the topic merits further exploration. Elected officials, advocates, and researchers agree that children deserve to be protected, and it is in the best interest of our children and our society as a whole to make child protection and child well-being a political priority.
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APPENDIX A:
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND QUESTIONS
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Thank you for taking time to talk with me. As we have discussed, I am a doctoral student at the University of Denver Morgridge College of Education and this interview is part of my data collection for my doctoral dissertation. I am exploring what policy makers believe about their ability to impact policy decisions regarding child abuse and neglect. I am collecting input from a bipartisan group of former elected officials from Colorado. I am not interviewing current elected officials to avoid any conflict of interest with my current professional role as Colorado’s Child Protection Ombudsman.

This is a two-part interview.

The first interview will include some questions to get a better understanding about your political background, Colorado’s policy landscape in general, and then more specific questions related to children’s issues and policies related to child abuse and neglect.

The second interview will allow you the opportunity to reflect on your experiences as a policy maker and what you believe about how public policy might improve outcomes for vulnerable children and how to most effectively inform policy makers about children abuse issues and decisions.

There are no right or wrong answers. Feel free to decline to answer any questions if you wish, and you may also provide any additional information you think I should know about your experience or perspective.

The content of this interview is confidential and your name will not be linked to any quotes or positions. With your permission, your name will only be listed in the dissertation as a participant. Finally, this interview will be audio recorded for my use only for the purposes of this study, and will be disposed of after the study is completed. I will also be taking notes to capture your comments.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Thank you!

Becky Miller Updike
beckyupdike@hotmail.com or 720-560-3810
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
Interview #1

1. The first question starts broadly, and later questions will be more specific. Can you begin by talking about what led you to public office and what about your background might be relevant to your entering politics?
   Prompts:
   - How did your background or life experiences shape what you believe about the role of policy makers?
   - How did your background shape your view of social policy (like the policies that impact child abuse and neglect)?

2. Describe your understanding of or experience with children’s policy issues, including child abuse and neglect policy.
   Prompts:
   - Describe your experience with any specific children’s policy issue(s).
   - Describe your thoughts about what child abuse and child protection policy might include.

3. With regard to policy issues in general and not just children’s issues, what do you think are the three top issues on Colorado’s policy agenda now?
   Prompts:
   - Are the current policy priorities the same as when you were in office or different, and please explain.

4. What do you think are the top three issues on Colorado’s policy agenda regarding children?
   Prompts:
   - Are the current policy priorities the same as when you were in office or different, and please explain.

5. Have you participated in political decisions that likely had a positive impact on child abuse and neglect issues?
   Prompts:
   - What do you think made that initiative (or those initiatives) successful?

6. Narrowing our focus a bit, I want to shift to political decisions that address children living at risk of abuse or neglect. What kind of risk factors do you think can negatively impact healthy child development?
Prompt:
- How do you think policy decisions can make kids safer at the family level, neighborhood level, and greater community or state level?
- Do you have ideas about how children can be successful even when living among risk factors?

7. Can you recall a time when you were in office and you were considering a policy decision about child abuse or neglect, and can you describe what influenced your thinking and decision making about the issue?

Prompt:
- Who do you consider the “trusted messengers” or credible experts on these issues?
- How might other legislators influence your decisions around these issues?
- Can you discuss the role of media and/or special interest groups in influencing decision making?

8. What, of all we have discussed today, would you like me to remember or think about the most?
Interview #2

Let’s begin with two closely-related questions. The first part is about policy makers in general, and the second part is specific to you.

1. What do you believe about the ability of elected officials to change or positively impact child abuse and neglect?
   Prompts:
   - Do you think policy makers can influence better outcomes in child abuse, protection and prevention?
   - What do you think other policy makers believe about their ability to help in the child abuse, protection, and prevention policy arena?

2. What did you believe about your ability as an elected official, to change or positively impact child abuse and neglect?
   Prompts:
   - Can you think of a time when you either witnessed or took part in considering or passing a policy that caused you to think differently about your ability to impact change? Please explain.

3. How would you define evidence-based policy?
   Prompts:
   - What does “evidence-based policy” it mean to you?

4. In your experience, do elected officials value evidence-based policy as something that influences policy decisions?
   Prompt:
   - In your experience, what do you think policy makers know and believe about evidence based research?
   - How can researchers and advocates do a better job of educating policy makers about evidence-based research and how that research could positively impact policy decisions?

5. What would it take to elevate child protection issues to a higher level of priority in Colorado?
   Prompts:
   - What are the most effective uses of advocacy dollars that you have seen regarding children’s issues or any other policy issues?
6. What advice would you give about how to impact or influence policy decisions?
   Prompts:
   - Can you think of a tactic that influenced your thinking as a policy maker (on any issue, not just children’s issues)?
   - Can you remember tactics that were less effective or even negatively impactful?

7. Is there anything else you would like me to think about as I compile this study?
APPENDIX B:
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Title of Research Project: EXPLORING HOW ADVOCACY INFLUENCES POLICY DECISIONS REGARDING CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT: PERSPECTIVES OF POLITICAL LEADERS IN COLORADO

As we have discussed, I am a doctoral student at the University of Denver Morgridge College of Education and this interview is part of my data collection for my doctoral dissertation. I am exploring what policy makers believe about their ability to impact policy decisions regarding child abuse and neglect. I am collecting input from a bi-partisan group of former elected officials from Colorado. I am not interviewing current elected officials to avoid any conflict of interest with my current professional role as Colorado’s Child Protection Ombudsman. To Contact the Researcher: If you have questions or concerns about this research, please contact: Becky Miller Updike, (720) 560-3810 or beckyupdike@hotmail.com. You may also contact the faculty member supervising this work: Dr. Gloria Miller, University of Denver Morgridge College of Education, University of Denver, Denver, CO, 80208 or (303) 871-3340 or Gloria.miller@du.edu.

What you will do in this research: If you decide to volunteer, you will be asked to participate in two interviews. The 1st interview will include some questions to get a better understanding about your political issues and policies related to child abuse and neglect. The 2nd interview will allow you the opportunity to reflect on your experiences as a policy maker and what you believe about how public policy might improve outcomes for vulnerable children and how to most effectively inform policy makers about children abuse issues and decisions. If a 3rd interview is needed and agreed upon, it will be scheduled to conclude any additional data collection or input.

Time required: Each interview will take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. Interviews will be scheduled to accommodate your schedule and desired location.

Risks: There is no anticipated physical risk involved with participation in this study. The anticipated risk of potential harm to social, psychological, and political well-being is minimal in this study, and primarily exists with regard to the potential for the unanticipated breach of anonymity and/or data security which could have negative ramifications impacting in public opinion or perception of the participant. The researcher will make every effort to reduce or mitigate risk to social well-being by the aforementioned security and confidentiality measures. You may decline to answer any question for any reason, and you may cease participation in the study at any time.

Benefits: This is a chance for you to share about your experiences as an elected official considering public policies regarding children’s issues among other issues, and your perspectives about effective advocacy and legislator engagement by the advocacy and research communities. Your input will benefit this field of research as little research has been done to examine these specific topics as they relate to policy making around issues of child abuse and neglect.
Confidentiality: Your responses will be identified by code number only and will be kept separate from information that could identify you. This is done to protect the confidentiality of your responses. Only the researcher and the transcriptionist will have access to your individual data and any reports generated as a result of this study will use only group averages and paraphrased wording. The transcriptionist involved in this study will sign a confidentiality agreement and will maintain all documents and recordings in accordance with the protocols described above.

However, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena. Although no questions in this interview address it, we are required by law to tell you that if information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide, or child abuse and neglect, it is required by law that this be reported to the proper authorities.

If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during the interview, please contact Paul Olk, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at 303-871-4531, or you may email du-irb@du.edu, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs or call 303-871-4050 or write to either at the University of Denver, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-2121.

You may keep this form for your records. Please sign the next page if you understand and agree to the above. If you do not understand any part of the above statement, please ask the researcher any questions you have.

I have read and understood the foregoing descriptions of the study called (name). I have asked for and received a satisfactory explanation of any language that I did not fully understand. I agree to participate in this study, and I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form.

Signature _________________________ Date _________________

___ I agree to be audiotaped.
___ I do not agree to be audiotaped.
___ I agree that my name may be listed among the participants in this study, but that my name not be associated with any quotes or content within the report.
___ I do not agree that my name may be listed among the participants in this study, nor should my name be associated with any quotes or content within the report.

Signature _________________________ Date _________________

____________ I would like a summary of the results of this study to be mailed to me at the following postal or e-mail address:
APPENDIX C: PARTICIPANT INVITATION LETTER

(sent via e-mail)

Dear ________________,

In addition to my current role as Colorado’s Child Protection Ombudsman, I am also a doctoral student at the University of Denver Morgridge College of Education, finishing my Ph.D. dissertation in Child & Family Leadership.

My dissertation will explore what policy makers believe about their ability to impact policy decisions regarding child abuse and neglect. I am collecting input from a bi-partisan group of 4-6 formerly elected officials from Colorado. (I am not interviewing current elected officials to avoid any conflict of interest with my current professional role as Colorado’s Child Protection Ombudsman.) The study is not analyzing political party affiliation, rather, will look more into how and what influences policy decisions in this field to inform the research & child advocacy communities about how to promote better outcomes for children and families.

I’m writing to respectfully request the opportunity to interview you for my dissertation.

Specifically, I am doing a two short interviews with each participant, with each interview is estimated to take about 45 minutes and can be adjusted per your availability. The 1st interview will include some questions to get a better understanding about your political background, Colorado’s policy landscape in general, and questions related to children’s issues and policies related to child abuse and neglect.

The 2nd interview will allow you the opportunity to reflect on your experiences as a policy maker and what you believe about how public policy might improve outcomes for vulnerable children and how to most effectively inform policy makers about children abuse issues and decisions.

There are no right or wrong answers. Participants may decline to answer any questions, and you may also provide any additional information you think I should know about your experience or perspective.

The content of this interview is confidential and your name will not be linked to any quotes or positions. With your permission, your name will only be listed in the dissertation as a participant. Finally, this interview will be audio recorded for my use only for the purposes of this study, and will be disposed of after the study is completed. I will also be taking notes to capture your comments.
This dissertation will be the first of its kind in the field of child abuse and neglect policy. Your experience and expertise would lend greatly to the study and may also serve to inform the child advocacy & research fields nationally.

If you are willing to participate in the interviews, I will accommodate most any time and location that suits your preference.

I am available to begin scheduling interviews immediately, through early May.

I greatly appreciate your consideration.

With respect and kind regards,

Becky Miller Updike, Ph.D. Candidate

University of Denver Morgridge College of Education

Personal Cell: (720) 560-3810

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Becky Miller Updike, Ombudsman
Office of Colorado’s Child Protection Ombudsman
A program of National Association of Counsel for Children (NACC)
Direct Line ~ 303.864.5321
Main Office Line ~ 303.864.5111
Toll Free ~ 1.855.5.SAFEKIDS
www.protectcoloradochildren.org

CONFIDENTIALITY NOTICE:
This message may contain confidential and/or legally privileged information and is intended only for the individual(s) named. Any name or signature block is not a legally binding electronic signature. If you are not an intended recipient you are not authorized to disseminate, distribute or copy this e-mail. Please notify the sender immediately if you have received this e-mail by mistake and delete this e-mail from your system.
APPENDIX D:
MAP OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND THEIR CORRELATION TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Research Questions:
1. What do policy makers know about risk factors and influences on safe child development, and what do they believe about the potential for policy to mitigate risk and increase protective factors?
2. What influences decision making for policy makers when considering child abuse and child protection policy?
3. What do policy makers believe about the role of evidence-based policy as it relates to policy decision making regarding child abuse and neglect issues?
4. What do policy makers believe about their ability to impact child protection and child abuse through public policy?
5. What are the implications of this study for child protection and advocacy for Colorado and beyond?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Questions (Coded below as I1 or I2 for Interview 1 or 2; and Q# refers to question number in corresponding interview.)</th>
<th>Informing research question #</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I1Q1. Can you begin by talking about what led you to public office and what about your background might be relevant to your entering politics?</td>
<td>2,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1Q2. Describe your understanding of or experience with children’s policy issues, including child abuse and neglect policy.</td>
<td>1,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1Q3. With regard to policy issues in general and not just children’s issues, what do you think are the three top issues on Colorado’s policy agenda now?</td>
<td>2,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1Q4. What do you think are the top three issues on Colorado’s policy agenda regarding children?</td>
<td>1,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1Q5. Have you participated in political decisions that likely had a positive impact on child abuse and neglect issues?</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1Q6. Narrowing our focus a bit, I want to shift to political decisions that address children living at risk of abuse or neglect. What kind of risk factors do you think can negatively impact healthy child development?</td>
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<tr>
<td>I1Q7. Can you recall a time when you were in office and you were considering a policy decision about child abuse or neglect, and can you describe what influenced your thinking and decision making about the issue?</td>
<td>2,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I1Q8. What, of all we have discussed today, would you like me to remember or think about the most?</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I2Q1. What do you believe about the ability of elected officials to change or positively impact child abuse and neglect?</td>
<td>1,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I2Q2. What did you believe about your ability as an elected official, to change or positively impact child abuse and neglect?</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I2Q3. How would you define evidence-based policy?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I2Q4. In your experience, do elected officials value evidence-based policy as something that influences policy decisions?</td>
<td>2,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I2Q5. What would it take to elevate child protection issues to a higher level of priority in Colorado?</td>
<td>2,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I2Q6. What advice would you give about how to impact or influence policy decisions?</td>
<td>2,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I2Q7. Is there anything else you would like me to think about as I compile this study?</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E:
2008 BELLWETHER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL: STATE LEVEL


2008 BELLWETHER INTERVIEW PROTOCOL: STATE LEVEL
[REVISED April 2, 2008]

Thank you for taking the time to talk to me. Let me start by giving you a brief overview of why I wanted to talk to you today. We at the Harvard Family Research Project are documenting policy initiatives in California, particularly those related to children’s learning and education from ages birth to 18.

Today I’m going to ask you some questions about California’s policy landscape in general, and then some more specific questions about policies related to California’s children. We are interested in your opinions and reactions to our questions; of course there are no right or wrong answers.

Finally, the interview is confidential, and we will not link your name to specific quotes in our report.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1) Our first question starts out broadly. Thinking about policy issues in general—not just issues related to children—what three issues or priorities do you think are at the top of the policy agenda in California right now?

2) Our next question narrows in a bit and focuses on issues affecting children—from birth to 18 years—in California. What three issues do you think are at the top of the policy agenda specifically for California’s children?

3) Now we’d like to talk more specifically about education issues and education reform. California faces a sizable achievement gap, meaning there are significant differences in academic performance for students from different racial, ethnic, or income
groups. What policies or programs do you think represent the best solutions for addressing the state’s achievement gap?

4) [IF SAID PRESCHOOL FOR THE LAST QUESTION, DO NOT ASK] What do you think about increasing access to high-quality preschool as a possible solution for addressing the achievement gap?

5) I would like to ask some additional questions about preschool in California. How familiar are you with preschool issues in California? Would you say you are very familiar, somewhat familiar, or not at all familiar?

6) As a policy issue in California, would you say preschool’s importance has increased, decreased, or remained the same compared to three years ago?

IF INCREASED or DECREASED: Why do you think it has increased (or decreased)?

7) Do you think that California should increase access to high-quality preschool?

[IF YES] Do you think California should increase access to high-quality preschool, starting with the kids in the state who need it most? By “kids who need it most” we are talking about low-income kids, kids entering low-performing schools, or English-language learners.

[If pressed on what low-income means, say kids in families earning less than 75% of the State Median Income.]

8) How likely is it that California will increase its preschool investments for kids who need it most during the next three years? Would you say it is very likely, somewhat likely, not very likely, or not at all likely?

IF VERY OR SOMEWHAT LIKELY—What kinds of investments or policies is the state most likely to make?

IF NOT VERY OR NOT AT ALL LIKELY—Beyond budgetary issues, what are the barriers to these investments?
9) I have just two more questions. Do you think California should adopt a universal preschool policy? By the term “universal preschool” we are talking about providing state-subsidized free or low cost preschool for all 4-year olds in California.

10) How likely is it that California will, in the next 5 years, adopt a universal preschool policy, and then begin phasing it in, starting with the kids who need it most? Would you say it is very likely, somewhat likely, not very likely, or not at all likely?

7) What issues, if any, about preschool do you think the state needs to be most concerned about right now?

8) Compared to other states across the country, in terms of preschool access and quality, do you think California is above average, about average, or below average?

9) Do you think that California should increase access to high-quality preschool?

[IF YES] Do you think California should increase access to high-quality preschool, starting with the kids in the state who need it most? By “kids who need it most” we are talking about low-income kids, kids entering low-performing schools, or English language learners.

[If pressed on what low-income means, say kids in families earning less than 75% of the State Median Income.]

10) How likely is it that California will increase its preschool investments for kids who need it most during the next three years? Would you say it is very likely, somewhat likely, not very likely, or not at all likely?

IF VERY OR SOMEWHAT LIKELY—What kinds of investments or policies is the state most likely to make?

IF NOT VERY OR NOT AT ALL LIKELY—Beyond budgetary issues, what are the barriers to these investments?

11) Even if increasing the amount of money California spends on preschool is not likely in the current budget context; can you think of any other ways that the state can improve its preschool system in the next three years?
12) Currently, what individuals, constituencies, or groups do you see as the main supporters of increasing preschool investments in the state?

What individuals or groups do you think need to be on board in order for the state’s investments in preschool to increase? (e.g., governor, legislature, education leaders, business leaders, Latino leaders, etc.)?

13) I have just two more questions. Do you think California should adopt a universal preschool policy? By the term “universal preschool” we are talking about providing state-subsidized free or low cost preschool for all 4-year olds in California.

14) How likely is it that California will, in the next 5 years, adopt a universal preschool policy, and then begin phasing it in, starting with the kids who need it most? Would you say it is very likely, somewhat likely, not very likely, or not at all likely?

Possible Questions and Answers

Q: Who nominated me?
A: We asked a group of education and human service experts in California to nominate individuals to consider in our interview sample. We selected you as somebody we had a particular interest in interviewing given your background and experience with California policy issues.

Q: Can I see the results of your research?
A: We will send you a summary of our results once we complete our data collection.

Q: To whom are you disseminating your results?
A: All of our key informants and education and human services agencies and organizations in California.

Q: Who is funding your work?
A: A variety of funders support the activities of the Harvard Family Research Project. The Packard Foundation is funding the specific research of which this interview is a part [only provide if they ask explicitly].

Q: What does the Harvard Family Research Project do?
A: We are a nonprofit research project associated with the Harvard Graduate School of Education. For the past 20 years we have been doing research and evaluation to help
organizations and policymakers understand how to develop effective programs and policies that serve children, youth, families, and communities.

Q: Who is the lead researcher on this project?  
A: The research is being led by Heather Weiss, founder and director of the Harvard Family Research Project.

Q: What timeframe are you interested in, in terms of California policy issues?  
A: We are looking at current policy issues, especially those that are likely to affect policy in the near future.
APPENDIX F:
SAMPLE OF AUDIT TRAIL REGARDING INTERVIEWS

Reported Status to Committee May 16, 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Name</th>
<th>Last Name</th>
<th>Interview 1</th>
<th>Transcription 2 complete &amp; coding in progress</th>
<th>Interview 2</th>
<th>Transcription 2 complete &amp; coding in progress</th>
<th>Other status notes</th>
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<tr>
<td>BJ</td>
<td>Nikoal</td>
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<td>Done</td>
<td>Done</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>Penny</td>
<td>Done</td>
<td>5/16 1:30</td>
<td>To do</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gov. Bill</td>
<td>Ritter</td>
<td>Done</td>
<td>Done</td>
<td>Done</td>
<td>Done</td>
<td>Due to scheduling complications, Gov. Ritter was only able to grant one interview, but he answered both sets of interview questions in the 1.5 hour interview. Weaknesses on just the single interview will be expanded in write up. His content, however, was incredibly rich for just a single interview.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paula</td>
<td>Sandoval</td>
<td>Done</td>
<td>5/16 5:30</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Done</td>
<td>Done</td>
<td>In process</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>