



BUILDING COMMUNITY PREVENTION SYSTEMS THAT WORK

AT A GLANCE

37%

Of children in the U.S. will be the subject of a CPS investigation before age 18

55%

Of all Child Protective Services Reports in Wisconsin for 2025 were for neglect.

350,000

Of children with substantiated maltreatment in 2023 were for 'neglect only'.

"Programmatic interventions help people beat the odds, systemic interventions can help change their odds."

- Karen Pittman

Families are Overloaded, Not Broken

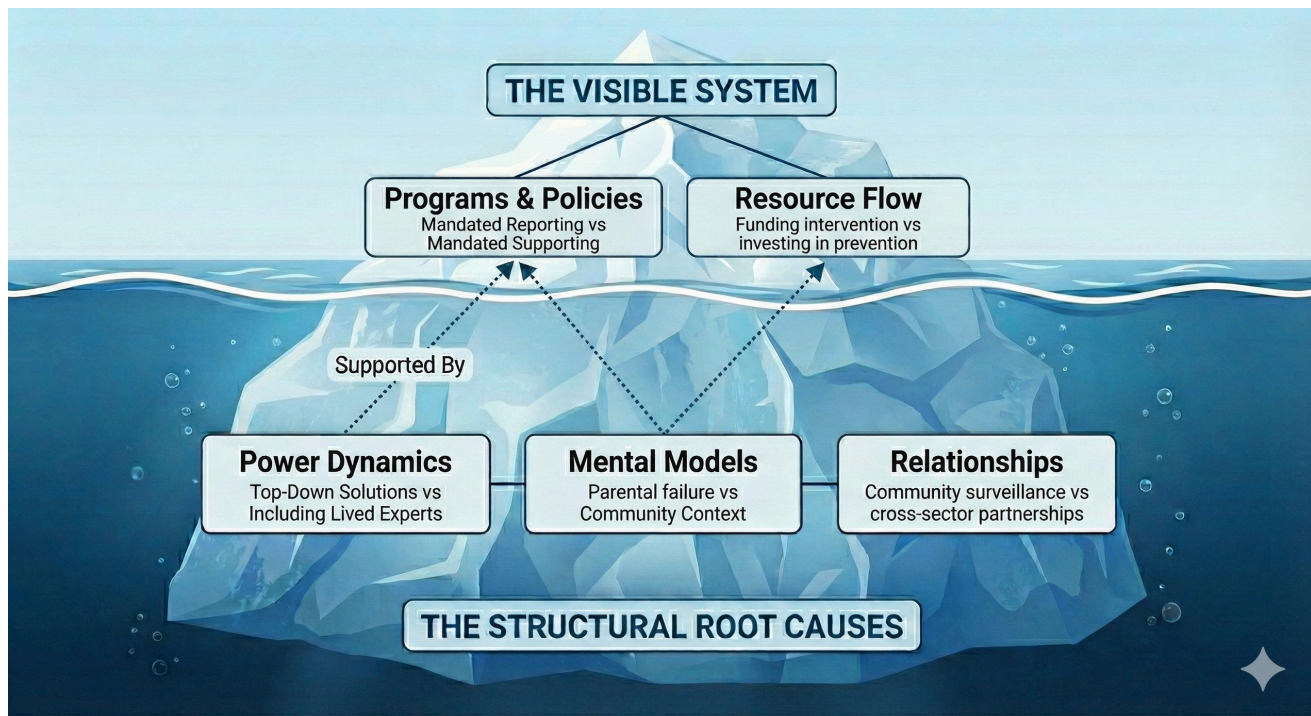
Every family deserves a fair chance to raise their children in safety and stability. Yet 37% of children in the U.S. will face a child protective services investigation before age 18 (Kim, et al, 2017), not because their parents don't care, but because the conditions that overload families go unaddressed. We have built systems that react to crisis rather than prevent it, and families pay the price. For decades, we have tried to solve problems one program at a time. But layered fixes have created fragmented systems that families can't easily navigate.

This brief is intended to support communities that are ready to move from shared vision to action. It reflects and aligns with national prevention efforts while responding to the practical realities local leaders face when building cross-sector prevention systems. This framework does not replace national prevention theories of change; it focuses on how communities translate shared prevention values into durable local systems.

The Burden of Fragmented Systems

Families are trying to meet their children's needs within systems that react to crisis rather than prevent them (Slack & Berger, 2021; Hughes & Rycus, 2024). The child welfare system, which steps in after harm occurs, is not positioned to address the conditions that overload families in the first place. There is no single system focused on easing the burdens that overload families that reach the point of child welfare contact.

Neglect is driven by material deprivation, unstable employment, and social isolation, shaped more by policy choices than by parental indifference. (Font & Maguire-Jack, 2021; Slack & Berger, 2021). Economic shocks, housing instability, food insecurity, and the loss of affordable childcare compound these pressures and leave families without consistent support.



The Reality of Fragmentation

These challenges stretch beyond a single program or system. When parents seek help, they face distinctly separate systems with conflicting eligibility rules and short-term funding. Each program treats one symptom of instability, but few are built to work together. The absence of a coordinated prevention infrastructure leaves families navigating disconnected services, deepening inequity and weakening trust between communities, public systems, and those with lived experience who know most what works (Slack & Berger, 2021; Kania, Kramer, & Senge, 2018; Cabaj & Weaver, 2016).

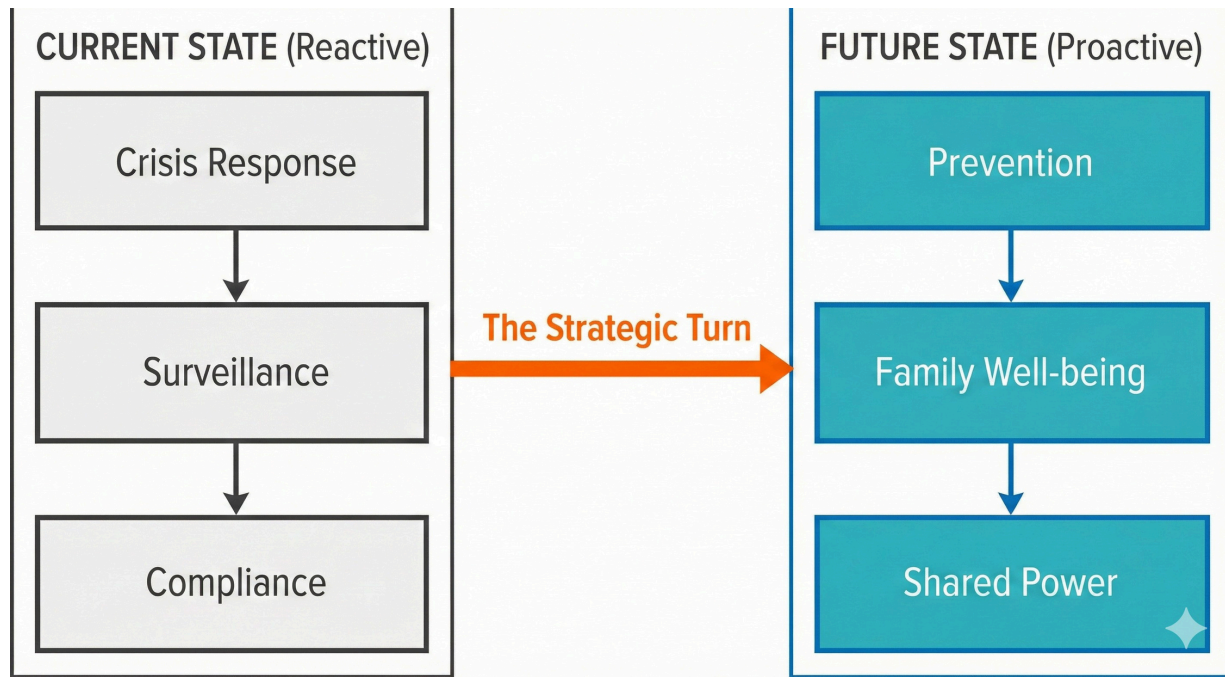
Why Systems Matters

The child welfare system, with a foundation in rescuing, has built a legacy of surveillance and control rather than prevention and support.

What began as a public effort to protect children from harm has evolved into a compliance-driven network of programs that assess family risk more easily than measure family well-being.

There is no single system responsible for supporting families. Instead, housing, education, healthcare, and income support programs each run on their own mandates and funding streams, layered over decades of shifting federal priorities (Hughes & Rycus, 2024).

When families are overloaded by stress, the crises that lead to child welfare involvement rarely happen overnight. They grow out of unmet needs across fragmented systems, including unstable housing, income shocks, and limited access to care (Slack & Berger, 2021; Font & Maguire-Jack, 2021). Each community's version of the system looks different because resources, infrastructure, and relationships vary.



“

If we designed a system to support families today... it would look far different from the one we have inherited

”

Despite these fractures, some communities are proving that another way is possible. Communities with strong social networks, flexible supports, and a responsive workforce, especially those co-led by people with lived experience, see better outcomes (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2024; Gaul-Stout et al., 2025). These examples remind us that structural change is possible when families, practitioners, and policymakers share power and responsibility for prevention.

If we designed a system to support families today, informed by what we now know about stress, brain development, and economic stability, it would look far different from the one we have inherited. That redesign begins with how we work together.

Systems Change Principles for Community Base Prevention

Effective prevention systems are built through sustained shifts in relationships, power, and decision-making, not through isolated programs or one-time reforms. Drawing from national research and on-the-ground learning, this framework reflects several shared principles that guide community-based systems change.

1. Communities are positioned as co-architects of change, not recipients of services:

Durable systems emerge when people most affected by system decisions help define problems, shape solutions, and guide learning over time. Community leadership is not an endpoint; it is a condition for meaningful change.

2. Prevention requires disrupting system habits and narratives, not just adding capacity:

Lasting progress depends on challenging deficit-based assumptions about families and communities, and replacing them with strength-based, relationship-centered approaches that reflect lived realities.

3. Relationships and trust are core infrastructure:

Cross-sector collaboration works when it is grounded in trust, transparency, and shared accountability. Investments in relationships are foundational to coordination, learning, and sustained action.

4. Change unfolds developmentally and must adapt over time:

Systems change is non-linear. Strategies evolve as communities test approaches, reflect on results, and adjust in response to local context and emerging insights.

5. Resources and decision-making move closer to community

Shifting power requires aligning governance, funding, and accountability with community priorities. Progress accelerates when communities have meaningful influence over how resources are used.

6. Learning is embedded in the work, not separate from it

Continuous learning, sense-making, and feedback loops enable communities and institutions to course-correct, deepen impact, and scale what works without freezing strategy too early.

From Programs to Movements

For decades, prevention efforts have been organized primarily as programs: time-limited initiatives designed to address specific needs within defined systems. While programs can help individual families in meaningful ways, they are not designed to change the conditions that overload families at scale.

A prevention-first system requires a different orientation. Rather than asking how individual programs perform, it asks how people, institutions, and communities align around shared responsibility for family well-being over time. This shift moves the focus from delivering services to cultivating the relationships, leadership, and infrastructure that allow prevention to take root and spread.

Movement-oriented change does not follow a linear path. It grows through shared learning, trust-building, and the gradual redistribution of power and decision-making. Progress is measured not only by program outcomes, but by whether communities are better able to adapt, collaborate, and sustain prevention efforts beyond any single initiative or funding cycle.

This shift does not replace programs. It reframes their role. Programs become contributors to a broader system, rather than stand-alone solutions. Over time, the emphasis moves from scaling individual interventions to strengthening the conditions that allow communities to support families earlier, more consistently, and more equitably.

“

Systems change happens when the connections between system actors shift

”

The Path Forward

Building a prevention-first system requires collective effort. No single organization or sector can do it alone. It requires changemakers who share what they learn, bridge local and national efforts, and connect across communities to accelerate progress (Cabaj & Weaver, 2016; Cheuy, Cabaj, & Weaver, 2022).

The work ahead is not about inventing new programs. It's about strengthening relationships among people who serve families while working alongside those with lived experience to align practice, policy, and learning around shared goals. Systems change happens when the connections between system actors shift, when communities, agencies, and families begin to work in concert rather than in isolation (Kania, Kramer, & Senge, 2018).

Progress in this work looks different. It is seen in how communities use evidence and lived experience together to guide decisions, and in how prevention efforts improve stability, trust, and family well-being (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2024; Gaul-Stout et al., 2025).

Prevention is not an aspiration but a practical strategy.

It grows when nurtured by shared learning and consistent relationships. When relationships are strengthened, we focus on shared values and finding alignment rather than consensus, communities and systems follow. A prevention infrastructure rooted in collaboration and shared learning can help communities create conditions for families to get the support they need.

REFERENCES

- Cabaj, M., & Weaver, M. (2016). Collective impact 3.0: An evolving framework for community change. Tamarack Institute. <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/articles/collective-impact-3.0-an-evolving-framework-for-community-change>
- Cheuy, S., Cabaj, M., & Weaver, L. (2022). How field catalysts accelerate collective impact. Stanford Social Innovation Review. <https://doi.org/10.48558/4fwn-j211>
- Child Welfare League of America. (2025, January 8). Child Maltreatment 2023 Report <https://www.cwla.org/child-maltreatment-2023-report/>
- Font, S. A., & Maguire-Jack, K. (2020). The scope, nature, and causes of child abuse and neglect. *Annals of the AAPSS*, 692(1), 26–49. DOI: [10.1177/0002716220969642](https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716220969642)
- Gaul-Stout, J., McCrae, J., Johnson, R., Lowe, A., & Coleman, A. (2025). Community building and mobilization for all families: A pathway to family stability and community well-being. Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago and Lutheran Services in America.
- Hughes, R. C., & Rycus, J. S. (2024). Poverty, neglect, and child protection reform: An invited editorial. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 0(0), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10497315241256325>
- Kania, J., Hanleybrown, F., & Juster, J. S. (2018). The dawn of system leadership. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 16(1), 27–33. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_dawn_of_system_leadership
- Kim, H., Wildeman, C., Jonson-Reid, M., & Drake, B. (2017). Lifetime prevalence of investigating child maltreatment among U.S. children. *American Journal of Public Health*, 107(2), 274–280. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303545>
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2019). A roadmap to reducing child poverty. The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/25246>
- Slack, Kristen & Berger, Lawrence. (2020). Who Is and Is Not Served by Child Protective Services Systems? Implications for a Prevention Infrastructure to Reduce Child Maltreatment. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. [692. 182-202. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716220980691](https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716220980691)