Forming Policy Out of Scandal:
Protecting Society’s Most Vulnerable Citizens

WASHINGTON D.C. — We’ve all seen the tragic headlines—children found starving in their adopted home, a little girl missing from her foster home for 15 months without the authorities’ knowledge, a toddler killed by his mother’s boyfriend. These stories are always followed by a public outcry. Fingers are pointed, the system is found wanting, and citizens demand change. However, the policy process takes time and, sadly, public interest wanes as the months go by. Do these child welfare scandals bring about substantive reform? Could a better system be in place so that reactionary policymaking is not necessary?

Little work has been done to systematically analyze how high-profile incidents of child neglect and abuse shape child welfare policymaking in the United States. In Scandalous Politics, Juliet Gainsborough presents quantitative analysis of all fifty states and qualitative case studies of three states (Florida, Colorado, and New Jersey) that reveal how well-publicized child welfare scandals result in adoption of new legislation and new administrative procedures.

Gainsborough’s quantitative analysis suggests that child welfare policymaking is frequently reactive, while the case studies provide more detail about variations and the legislative process. For example, the case studies illustrate how the nature and extent of the policy response varies according to particular characteristics of the political environment in the state and the administrative structure of the child welfare system. Scandalous Politics increases our understanding of the politics of child welfare at both the state and federal level and provides new insights into existing theories of agenda-setting and the policy process. William Gormley, Georgetown University, calls Scandalous Politics “a fascinating account of how politicians, journalists, and interest groups respond to child welfare scandals. Thoughtful, probing, and illuminating.”

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