Can big data help keep children safe?

**USC researchers are exploring the potential of predictive risk modeling in child welfare and well-being.**

A call comes in to the child welfare hotline. The caller reports that a child is being maltreated.

The operator has to make a decision. Are the allegations serious enough to open an investigation? Is the child in immediate danger? What services does this family need?

“Child welfare workers are often dealing with a very partial, imperfect picture of conditions that may place a child at risk of harm,” said Emily Putnam-Hornstein, an assistant professor at the USC School of Social Work. “Yet critical decisions must be made about which referrals are screened in or out and whether a case is opened for services.”

What if in that moment, the hotline operator had access to a model that could scan the vast landscape of data available about that particular family, weighing risk factors such as previous involvement with child protective services and a history of substance abuse while taking into account strengths such as educational achievement and access to supportive resources?

Would that information help the operator decide how to proceed?

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Putting people behind bars has hidden costs for society

An open hand gives in abundance, even as it receives.

It’s a saying that has been passed down in Robynn Cox’s family for generations. It’s also a maxim that has guided her research on the societal and economic consequences of mass incarceration, particularly in the black community.

“When people are marked with a criminal record or the stigma of incarceration, there is a lot of judgment passed and people give up on those individuals,” she said. “I’m really passionate about helping people, and everybody deserves a second chance.”

As the newest member of the faculty at the USC School of Social Work, Cox plans to focus her research on understanding historical disparities related to the prison system, exploring how to help incarcerated individuals develop useful skills and prepare to reenter society and calculating the external costs of criminal justice policies and incarceration.

A fourth-generation native of Los Angeles, she grew up in the Crenshaw District and Culver City, where her childhood experiences instilled a strong interest in issues of social justice.

“Knowing the history of incarceration and slavery and policing, including my own personal experiences having family members affected by that, drew me to the topic and wanting to understand it more,” she said. “When you incarcerate a particular group, pulling so many men out of a particular community where people are already disadvantaged, there will be some sort of social consequence.”

As an assistant professor of economics at Spelman College, Cox conducted research on the effects of mass incarceration on black women, including employment outcomes, wage levels, and mental health. She has also worked closely with the USC Leonard D. Schaeffer Center for Health Policy and Economics as a scholar affiliated with its Minority Aging Health Economics Research Center.

While studying economics at Duke University as an undergraduate and later at Georgia State University, where she earned a master’s degree and doctorate in economics, she became increasingly aware of the societal and criminal justice policies.

Federal grants that support the hiring of more police officers to wage the war on drugs, for instance, can lead to racial disparities in arrest rates. Families that experience incarceration are more likely to struggle with food insecurity, regardless of their employment status.

Even well-intentioned efforts, such as removing the item on job applications asking about prior felony conviction, may have unintended consequences. Research has shown employers that don’t use background checks hire fewer black men.

“This can be tied to perceptions in society of criminality,” Cox said. “Because they know black men are more likely to have a criminal record, it might actually lower employment. It’s not that we shouldn’t have something like ban-the-box legislation, but you might also have to educate these employers about that tendency to statistically discriminate.”

The effect of incarceration policies on certain racial and ethnic groups is clear. For example, in 2013, approximately 37 percent of black people were behind bars, despite this group constituting only 13 percent of the U.S. population, according to a U.S. Department of Justice report.

Although white women comprised a much larger share of incarcerated women, the imprisonment rate was twice as high among black women compared to white women.

How did these policies end up landing so heavily on this segment of the population?

“This is something we are currently grappling with as a nation, particularly policing in the African American community,” Cox said.

She hypothesized that the nation’s legacy of discrimination and racism, coupled with socioeconomic factors, has generated a dual criminal justice system with a skewed balance between civil liberties and enforcement powers.

To illustrate the point, Cox described how people became more willing to give up certain civil liberties in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks to ensure their safety, such as acquis- ing increased security at airports.

Race can become a wedge in that trade-off between safety and freedom, she said. Members of the majority may be willing to have some sacrifice, but not the incarcerated population because they know those laws won’t be applied in full force in their community.

“Because they are not bearing the full burden, they are able to operate with their civil liberties intact and maintain these strict-on-crime policies,” she said.

Using code words can also influence how people feel about criminality. When asked about combating crime in general, people tend to prefer social programs.

When asked about fighting “urban” crime, they lean toward incarceration and stringent law enforcement.

Dehumanization of certain groups also justifies the lack of investment in social programming, Cox said. Why invest in a population that is viewed as unfi xible? “These individuals are no longer seen as worthy of having the full rights of a citizen,” she said. “This is in no way, shape, or form to say we should let murderers go free. These are all symptoms of a broader issue that we need to shed light on.”

As an assistant professor at the USC School of Social Work, she plans to continue exploring this broader effect on society, including an ongoing research project with the Schaeffer Center investigating connections among health, aging, and imprisonment.

One particular finding suggests that people who are incarcerated are more likely to have been knocked unconscious due to head trauma. Cox is considering how such an injury might affect everyday functioning among older individuals, including the ability to maintain employment and engage in inter-personal relationships.

Ultimately, as she continues to delve into these complex topics surrounding mass incarceration, Cox said she will keep her family’s advice in the back of her mind. “My family has always told me to help others and I’ve always wanted my research to inform policy with the hope that it will make a difference,” she said. “Being at the USC School of Social Work will definitely help me achieve that goal.”
Does gang life have long-term effects on Hispanic women?

In her master's thesis, Homegirls and Chicks: High-Risk Mexican American Gang Associated Females, Cepeda noted that these young women seemed to accept their circumstances as a normal part of life in their communities.

“Many of these girls are unaware of their susceptibility to these high-risk behaviors, often times accepting them as part of their social reality,” she wrote. “In many instances, these girls are simply seeking acceptance, love, respect and prestige.”

Now nearly a decade and a half later, preliminary interviews with a subset of these women have indicated they are still facing challenges. Of 32 women who participated in the original study and were recently contacted, Cepeda said 64 percent reported recent intimate partner violence, 63 percent had been incarcerated, and approximately 50 percent reported being unemployed.

Cepeda and her fellow researchers, including Valdez and Hortensia Amaro, Dean’s Professor of Social Work and Preventive Medicine and associate vice provost for community research initiatives, are interested in how experiences during adolescence may have contributed to negative life trajectories among these women.

They will explore rates of obesity, prediabetes, sexually transmitted infections, cardiovascular and metabolic dysregulation, and other health problems. The research team also plans to examine mental health factors such as depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and stress.

“Hopefully we will also be able to identify factors that led some of these women to lead more conventional lives,” Valdez said. “That’s the payoff of this research.”

Intimate partner violence is a major focus of the study, given its prevalence in the study population. Noting that women of color tend to go underreported in studies of domestic and partner violence, Cepeda said she suspects that cultural factors may affect whether Hispanic women seek services or report victimization.

Latino culture tends to be male dominated and influenced by values of machismo, she said, and these girls were embedded in families and communities in which violence was relatively common. “It’s something that is not seen as unusual,” Cepeda said, describing how some participants in the original study responded when asked to talk about the last time they fought with their partner.

“They would say, oh yeah, he got mad because he thought I was dising him and he hit me,” she said. “He kind of slapped me or punched me, but that was it — it was nothing serious. It was obvious these young women didn’t view punching or slapping or strong holding as violence. They defined violence only if they had to go to the hospital or something more serious.”

This type of trauma not only can lead to physical injuries but also has been linked to negative biological outcomes and other risk factors.

Although it has been more than a decade since the research team has interacted with participants from the original study, Cepeda said that they will be able to reconnect with many of the women, who are now in their early 30s. During a previous follow-up study with men, they located and interviewed 122 of 160 original participants.

Cepeda said some men in the original study had died, others were in federal prisons and could not interact with the researchers, and a few declined to participate. She expects that it may be more difficult to convince women who have led more conventional lives to participate in the new study.

“Those who have moved on may not want to be associated with the lifestyle they had as adolescents,” she said. “They may just feel that it is behind them, that they aren’t involved with gangs anymore.”

However, she also expects to find many original participants in the same neighborhoods as they were 15 years ago. In a recent study, two researchers

Alice Cepeda

As teenage girls, they were enmeshed in the dangerous world of gangs in some of San Antonio’s rougher neighborhoods.

Now approximately 15 years later, what effect has that experience had on the lives of young Hispanic women? Researchers at the USC School of Social Work will explore that question in a new $3 million study funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Led by Alice Cepeda, an associate professor and principal investigator of the project, the research team will examine how intimate partner violence, drug use, and other forms of trauma have affected the physical and mental health of 300 women who were affiliated with male gang members during their adolescence. “We know that trauma like partner violence has been associated with depression and anxiety, but we don’t know the extent of the consequences for women who experience chronic, long-term exposure to this victimization,” Cepeda said.

She first became aware of this unique group of gang-affiliated girls as an undergraduate research assistant studying the risks of gang involvement among adolescent Hispanic boys as part of a project led by Avelardo Valdez, then a faculty member at the University of Texas at San Antonio and now a professor with the USC School of Social Work.

At that time, most research on gangs had focused on men or adolescent boys, Valdez said. The few studies on women involved in the gang lifestyle also centered on full-fledged gang members rather than affiliates. “These gangs were embedded in the community, in family-based networks,” he said. “They drew girls in those communities into their networks — girlfriends, sisters, neighbors, and schoolmates. These girls were being exposed to the same kinds of risk behaviors.”

In particular, many of these girls experienced intimate partner violence, engaged in criminal or delinquent behavior, had histories of childhood trauma, and used various illicit substances. At an average age of 16, approximately 30 percent of study participants were teen mothers.

Amaro, who has specialized in research on the effects of relationship power and interpersonal violence, said a previous study revealed that trauma is a common thread running through the lives of women who use substances and engage in risky sexual behaviors.

“Close to 100 percent of the women we saw had not only a history of interpersonal violence but also really complex trauma and multiple traumatic experiences throughout their lives,” she said. “The issue of violence was really a driving force behind their mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder.”

“I was born and raised in those same communities. I could have easily been one of these young girls. I want to know why my trajectory took me to where I am now, compared to these young women.”

Alice Cepeda

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Book makes policy advocates out of social workers

Whether they are aware of it or not, most social workers are advocates.

They might help a client apply for certain benefits, or access needed services. Perhaps they assist someone with navigating the complicated process of applying for health care coverage. However, more and more social workers are moving beyond that work with individuals to engage at a broader level, advocating for changes in their organizations or society as a whole.

A new book by Bruce Jansson seeks to break that trend, offering tips and strategies for social workers to embrace advocacy as a tenet of the profession.

“It’s a tool to empower social workers to move beyond traditional counseling roles to become active in trying to change policies,” said Jansson, who holds the Margaret W. Driscoll/Louise M. Cleverger Professorship in Social Policy and Administration at the USC School of Social Work.

In Social Welfare Policy and Advocacy: Advancing Social Justice through 8 Policy Sectors, available now from Sage Publications, Jansson extends his previous work on policy advocacy by exploring issues specific to topics such as gerontology, education, criminal justice, and mental health.

Using case studies and video vignettes, he describes how serious issues such as violations of ethical rights or the quality of services can affect clients, families, and communities. In addition to analyzing the effects of specific policies, the book illustrates how social workers can engage in what Jansson terms micro, mezzo, and macro policy advocacy to address those problems.

“People have done policy work for hundreds of years, but what he has done is matched the ethical principles of social work with analysis of the core components of different policy work,” said Sam Mistrano, a clinical associate professor who oversees the foundation policy curriculum at the USC School of Social Work.

Jansson has made it theoretically sound to work on policy from the social work perspective.”

Although Jansson coined the term policy practice approximately three decades ago, he said social workers often view themselves as direct practitioners whose only task is to help individual clients.

In addition, policy is generally seen as a dry and uninteresting topic, focused largely on analysis of certain programs or understanding legislation related to social welfare. “It can feel very abstract and disconnected,” said Gretchen Heidemann Whitt, who completed her PhD at the USC School of Social Work and is currently a visiting assistant professor at Whittier College.

“What does this have to do with the client or the decision-making level of the agency affects our work with clients,” she said. “I hope this is a call to arms for these direct practitioners to become more aware of the step up to the plate to become leaders.”

To illustrate how a social worker might move among the various levels of advocacy, Jansson described a case study from the book involving a pregnant teenager.

Although pregnant teens in public school have the legal right to decide whether or not to stay in their current school or go to a continuation school, in this particular instance the girl was not aware of that right.

A social work intern at the school recognized the issue and informed the girl that she did not have to transfer to a continuation school, which might have negative consequences on her life or her likelihood of graduating. Moving to the mezzo level, the social worker considered why the school didn’t inform the girl of her rights.

“Probably because counselors don’t know the legal rights of pregnant teenagers,” Jansson said. “So she helped develop a training program for the staff.”

At the macro level, the social work intern delved into whether state laws are clear enough regarding the rights of pregnant teenagers and broader issues such as education.

Jansson describes these specific manifestations of core social problems as red flags and alerts the book with various examples in each of the eight sectors he examines as part of his strategy to engage readers in the world of policy.

For instance, many older adults don’t receive adequate information to make an informed decision about end-of-life options such as palliative and hospice care, he said. They might not know about their legal rights regarding living wills and advance directives.

“We still have roughly 16 million Americans who don’t have health insurance in the United States, even with the Affordable Care Act,” Jansson said. “This applies to these other sectors — people can identify certain factors that help lift these communities out of poverty. “I hope what we do here will make some contribution to reducing the health disparities that exist in this population and have gone unreported.”

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unearthed data from the 1960s that featured interviews with individuals in San Antonio, they were able to locate many of the original participants or their descendants living in the same neighborhoods.

A key finding of that study was the lack of upward mobility among Mexican Americans, Cepeda said, largely due to various social and economic factors.

“People don’t really leave these communities,” she said. “I was born and raised in those same communities. I could have easily been one of these young girls. I want to know why my trajectory took.”

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Jansson added. “That is deep in our DNA as a social work profession and we work with analysis of the core components of different policy work.”

“The code of ethics mandates us to be aware of what is going on in the world and how policies affect our clients and the populations we serve.”

Gretchen Heidemann Whitt
Jeremy Goldbach, who is leading the one-year Bond, who earned his master of social work degree to evaluate how The Trevor Project solicited proposals for a comprehensive approach to addressing homelessness begins with Housing First. A new book tracing the development of innovative approaches to addressing homelessness is now available.

Housing First: Ending Homelessness, Transforming Systems, and Changing Lives is coauthored by Assistant Professor Benjamin Henwood from the USC School of Social Work in collaboration with Deborah Padgett, the lead author and professor at the NYU Silver School of Social Work, and Sam Tsemberis, who founded Pathways to Housing and developed the Housing First model.

“This book demonstrates that effective policy change can and needs to occur to address many of our current day complex social problems,” Henwood said. “Los Angeles recently declared a state of emergency on homelessness. This is an apt description in many areas of our country that reminds us of the devastating effects of incivility and a lack of need for the type of transformative policy change that embodies the story of Housing First.”

Described as a unique combination of evidence-based practice, the individual right to housing, and consumer choice, Housing First challenges the traditional strategies of mandating treatment, sobriety, and other requirements before receiving independent housing.

The book tracks the history of homelessness in the United States, exploring how shelters and transitional housing programs became the norm during the 1980s. The linear approach to tackling issues of homelessness is then countered by the Housing First model, which provides immediate access to housing and supportive services.

Developed in New York City in 1992, the model has since expanded throughout the nation, helping local social workers develop protocols for postdisaster interventions with children. It has been credited with ending homelessness in the United States, Canada, Western Europe, and Australia. It has been credited with ending homelessness among veterans in several U.S. cities and eliminating chronic homelessness throughout Utah. In 2007, the federal government recognized Housing First as an evidence-based practice, and Canada has adopted the approach as its official policy.

In addition to describing how the model operates, the book highlights research on Housing First, including findings from a study led by Padgett and Henwood in New York that involved in-depth interviews with homeless individuals who received Housing First services. The book also features first-person accounts from formerly homeless individuals regarding how their lives changed after they obtained housing and support services.

“Housing First is an evidence-based and homelessness services providers initially greeted Housing First with skepticism, Henwood said emerging evidence of the model’s effectiveness versus traditional approaches of care has tempered that resistance. Research has shown that Housing First produces greater stability in housing, decreases use of drugs and alcohol, and is more cost effective than traditional approaches to homelessness.”

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It’s an exciting new approach in the field of child safety and service delivery known as predictive risk modeling or risk analytics. In Los Angeles County, which handles approximately 200,000 allegations of child maltreatment each year, leaders are working to vet the concept.

“In the child welfare system, decisions are being made throughout the life of a case,” Putnam-Hornstein said. “Should we accept this referral that came into the hotline and investigate? Are we going to open a case for services? Are we going to reunify a child who has been in foster care?”

Putnam-Hornstein said that data in the absence of context will outweigh human decision making. “All of this information is personal,” said Jacquelyn McCroskey, the John Angeleliong Professor of Social Work at USC. “It’s the courageous discussion we need to have.”

“Will it trigger a final decision about removing a child? Will it trigger a decision about a child’s foster care? “She said. “There is a real concern that data in the absence of context will outweigh human decision making.”

That was a major point of discussion during the recent gathering at USC, with county officials and researchers emphasizing that any predictive model or risk scoring system will not replace a social worker’s assessment of a particular case.

“Instead, the model is envisioned as a tool that can help child welfare workers assess information from across county departments and affiliated agencies to gain a better understanding of the strengths and risks of each family,” Putnam-Hornstein said. “It’s an incremental process,” Soydan said. “I worry sometimes that any model or risk scoring system will not replace a social worker’s assessment of a particular case.”

Children’s social workers are responsible for completing checklists based on statistical models, introducing the possibility of human error and unintended bias. A predictive risk model might eliminate some of those subjective biases, but could it introduce other disparities?

“Telling the answer to that question depends in part on how the model is constructed,” Putnam-Hornstein said. “Should race and ethnicity be considered as a potential risk factor? How about living in a certain low-income neighborhood? Even if the model proves to be relatively accurate in terms of determining the likelihood of negative outcomes, will the results be handled fairly?”

“I don’t think we will ever see a tool that can capture all the nuances of the child welfare system.”

However, individual caseworkers have been actively implemented in Los Angeles County and other jurisdictions to develop effective and efficient tools that can address those societal ills. As China struggles with issues related to wealth disparity, ethnic diversity, urbanization, and internal migration, scholars are finding promise in evidence-based approaches that make use of big data.

During the recent convening at the 2015 USC Global Conference in Shanghai, experts from the USC School of Social Work and the Chinese Cochrane Center discussed how large amounts of data can be synthesized to develop effective and efficient tools that can address those societal ills.

For instance, a study from 2009 indicated that more than 50 million articles had been published in more than 26,000 academic journals, with an additional 1.7 million articles introduced each year.

In “each area, the amount of information can be overwhelming,” said Haluk Soydan, associate dean for faculty affairs and senior fellow for global research impact at the USC School of Social Work. “That’s why systematic research reviews and meta-analyses were invented and have become more sophisticated over the past few decades.”

These analytic tools help researchers come up with evidence-based practices that have been tested and approved. “We need to go slowly,” Soydan said. “There is a real concern that data in the absence of context will overwhelm human decision making.”

Can China use big data to address social problems?

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that could be used to predict risk in current child welfare cases.

“The reality is that our resources are not unlimited,” said Jennie Feria, interim executive assistant with the county’s Department of Child and Family Services. “This can help us focus in on which families are going to receive priority for some of these services.”

Feria, who previously served as a supervising child social worker and later oversaw the highest-volume child welfare office in the county, with an average of 1,000 referrals a month, said results of initial tests have indicated that predictive risk modeling is a promising approach worth pursuing.

“By not looking at this possibility, we would be doing our families an injustice,” she said.

Officials also stressed the findings of a 2014 report by the county’s Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection, a group charged with reviewing recent failures in the child protection system, highlighting organizational barriers to child safety, and drafting recommendations to reform the system.

In that report, the commission cited a preventive risk analytics program developed in Florida’s Hillsborough County that identified key risk factors associated with poor child welfare outcomes. According to the report, that information helped officials allocate resources more effectively to address those factors, resulting in a major reduction in child fatalities.

The commission called for the implementation of a similar process in Los Angeles County, with an emphasis on ensuring that key services such as health and mental health care, substance abuse treatment, housing support, and preventive programs are being directed to families at highest risk of fatalities.

“The county has a mandate to develop this work,” Putnam-Hornstein said. “The key discussion is how risk modeling is implemented and used.”

One strategy to ensure that the tool is not misused is to restrict access to risk scores, perhaps only allowing the hotline operator and a supervisor to view the results of the model, she said. That would prevent caseworkers in the field from being overly concerned due to a high score or ignoring red flags during a family visit because of a low score.

“If a hotline model allows the county to identify the top 10 percent riskiest referrals, perhaps the protocol is simply that those referrals cannot be screened out without an investigation and they are assigned to a more experienced worker,” she said. “What if there was a special unit with lower caseloads and workers who had received extra training in investigations and family engagement? The score would not mean there is anything wrong with those families, simply that it is likely a more complex case that requires more time and expertise.”

Along with McCroskey and other researchers at USC, Putnam-Hornstein views her role as a neutral technical resource, a sentiment echoed by community leaders such as Ralls, who said the university can serve as an academic and social justice arbiter to ensure that the community’s voice is heard throughout the process.

“I see USC as a neutral, extremely high-caliber, brilliant, and socially just institution with the best intentions to create something that can support more responsive services for kids and families,” Ralls said.

Acknowledging that county officials have been increasingly open as they pursue predictive analytics, Ralls encouraged leaders to engage in ongoing meetings with the community to ensure transparency and emphasized the need for slow, thoughtful implementation.

Ultimately, Putnam-Hornstein remains optimistic that predictive risk modeling will prove to be a valuable tool in child welfare, but warned against viewing it as infallible.

“I think there is a lot of potential, but I don’t think we should oversell it,” she said. “Hopefully risk modeling will allow us to improve on practice as we know it today. But no tool will be perfect.”