FAQ
PREDICTIVE RISK MODEL

Q Where can predictive risk modeling be used in child welfare?

A Predictive risk models can support decision-making at several points in the child welfare process, including hotline screening, investigations, supervisory review, in-home services, and foster care oversight. Most jurisdictions begin by using the tool at intake, where early decisions can have significant implications for child safety and resource allocation.

Q Does predictive risk modeling replace professional judgment?

A No. Predictive risk modeling is a decision-support tool, not a decision-maker. It helps frontline staff and supervisors see patterns and risk factors that may otherwise be difficult to identify, but all decisions remain the responsibility of trained professionals.

Q What is the model designed to predict?

A The answer depends on the problem a state is trying to solve. Models are typically built using outcomes that occur often enough to be measured reliably, and are considered markers of future child harm or system involvement such as future maltreatment, repeat reports, or foster care entry. States should begin by testing a range of outcomes to assess how the model performs. An important part of that evaluation is validating the model against other indicators of child safety the model was not trained to predict, such as serious injuries or fatalities.

Q How long does it take to have an operational model?

A This is not necessarily a multi-year technology modernization project. States with accessible data and clear objectives can often move from concept to pilot within a year, allowing leaders to test results, build confidence, and refine implementation before expanding statewide.

Q How does predictive risk modeling fit with existing assessment tools?

A Predictive risk modeling complements existing tools rather than replacing them. While tools such as hotline and safety assessments rely on new information gathered from a reporting party or during an investigation, predictive models can help surface historical patterns and risk factors from existing data. Used together, these tools provide a more complete picture for decision-makers.

Q Does implementing predictive risk modeling require a major technology overhaul?

A No. Many successful implementations have been built using information already contained in existing child welfare systems. In several jurisdictions, predictive models were introduced as targeted enhancements rather than large-scale technology replacements. The model can be developed and deployed in any environment.

Q What data are needed to build a predictive risk model?

A Most models are built using data that agencies already collect through their child welfare case management systems. Historical information about prior reports, investigations, services, and placements for thousands or hundreds of thousands of cases often provides enough information to begin developing a useful model. Some states choose to incorporate additional data sources, while others intentionally limit models to child welfare data only.

Q Who will own the model and maintain it?

A The child welfare agency should remain responsible for the use, governance, and oversight of the model. While external partners may assist with development and technical maintenance, public agencies should retain ownership of policies, implementation decisions, and accountability for outcomes.

Q How is family privacy protected?

A Predictive risk models should operate within the same privacy and confidentiality requirements that already govern child welfare records. Most models rely on information agencies already possess and are subject to existing safeguards regarding access, use, storage, and disclosure of sensitive information.

Q How can states guard against bias and disparities?

A Transparency and ongoing oversight are best practices. No decision-making system is free from the possibility of bias, including human decision-making. States can reduce risk by excluding variables such as race and geography, conducting independent evaluations, testing model performance across demographic groups, monitoring outcomes, and maintaining human review of all decisions.

Q How will we know the tool is successful?

A Success should be measured by outcomes, not the model itself. States should evaluate whether predictive risk modeling improves child safety, reduces repeat maltreatment, strengthens consistency in decision-making, helps agencies prioritize high-risk situations, and supports better allocation of limited resources. Early implementations have reported reductions in re-referrals, injuries, fatalities, and disparities while improving consistency and supervisory oversight.

Q Why not simply hire more caseworkers instead?

A Workforce investments are important, but even the best-trained professionals can only act on the information available to them. Predictive risk modeling helps agencies organize and interpret information they already possess, ensuring limited staff time is focused where the risk to children may be greatest. Technology is not a substitute for people; it is a tool to help people make better decisions.