

# **Baby Abandonment**

**The Role of  
Child Welfare Systems**

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# Introduction

An infant found in a hospital bathroom, a newborn baby left on a family's front porch, a baby boy discovered on the grounds of an elementary school.... These are examples of baby abandonment, a complex phenomenon that has attracted increased attention in the United States over the past several years. Although baby abandonment has always existed in some form, public attention was galvanized when 13 babies were abandoned in the Houston metropolitan area over the course of a one-year period ending in late 1999. The national public outcry sparked an unprecedented legislative response: 35 states passed legislation responding to baby abandonment between September 1999 and March 2002.

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), responding to concerns typified by the situation in Texas, created a forum for assessing the incidence of baby abandonment nationwide, gathering information on its causes and issuing recommendations for policy and practice. CWLA hosted a symposium, analyzed state laws, and collected and disseminated information on baby abandonment (see <http://www.cwla.org/programs/baby/>).

This monograph will inform the decisionmaking of community leaders, child welfare agencies, and legislators. It poses a set of questions that every advocate should ask in responding to baby abandonment, describes baby abandonment, examines the existing data, discusses the challenges to moving forward, and makes recommendations for responding to those challenges. Baby abandonment is a complex issue, incorporating medical, psychological, economic, and legal components. It requires comprehensive responses that are proactive and preventive as well as reactive. Furthermore, it is vital not to lose sight of the broader context within which baby abandonment exists. The problem will never truly be solved unless the issues of sexuality education, unintended pregnancy, and resource allocation and availability in social service agencies are also addressed.

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