



Child Welfare Outcomes 2002: Annual Report published by the U.S. Department of Human Services, Children's Bureau; Children's Administration Performance Report 2005, published by the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, and the April 25, 2006 DSHS Research and Data Analysis report titled "Children Placed in Out of Home Care" collectively provide a detailed profile of foster care trends in Washington State over the past decade and, for some trends, during the past year.

After several years of stability, or even decline, the number of children in out of home care on any one day in Washington State began to increase in FY 04 from slightly less than 9000 to 9755 in May 06. The increase in children in out of home care is being driven by CPS entries into care which grew by 8% during the first 8 months of FY 06 compared to the same months in FY 05. Entries into out of home care from all programs (CPS, CWS, FRS) exceeded exits from care by 450 hundred children per year in FY 04 and FY 05; the entry/exit ratio accounts for the growth in out of home care numbers.

The number of children reunified with birth parents increased in FY 05 for the first time since 1997 (5150 in FY 05 vs. 4887 in FY 04) , probably due in part to the increase in entries into care. However, there were approximately 1000 fewer reunifications in FY 05 than in FY 00 even though there were only 350 fewer entries into care in FY 05 than in FY 00. These numbers strongly suggest that the decline in reunifications since 2000 is due in large part to a reduced reunification rate or increased length of stay in out of home care, not a change in entry into care numbers.

The Children's Administration (CA) has averaged 1150 completed adoptions per year over the past 6 years, and completed 1247 adoptions in FY 05. However, completed guardianships decreased from 651 in FY 00 to 367 in FY 05. Total exits from care due to reunifications, adoptions and guardianships declined from 7832 in FY 00 to 6764 in FY 05, an indication that the decline in reunifications is not being matched by an increase in adoptions and guardianships, the two most common permanent plans when children are not returned to birth parents. To put these numbers in perspective: entry into care numbers (after declining for several years) increased from 7298 in FY 03 to 8131 in FY 05 ; however exits from care have declined by almost 12% compared to 2000 mainly due to a large reduction in reunifications.

Entries into out of home care are increasing in an agency which had about 200 fewer licensed foster homes in June 2005 than in June 2000. This is possible because the CA kinship care rate has steadily increased over the past decade; in June 05, almost 37% of children in out of home care were placed with relatives compared to 26% in 1996. A small fraction of these relatives are licensed foster parents; most receive TANF payments, not foster care reimbursement. Furthermore, the CA kinship care rate has slowly and steadily increased since 2000 and has not yet leveled off; CA investments

in kinship care have paid off in a way that foster care recruitment campaigns have not, a trend which suggests that more of the same is likely.

In federal fiscal year 2002, 12% of children in care on any one day were African American (vs. 4% of the state's child population); 8.4% were Native American (vs. 2% of the state's child population); 11.7% were Hispanic (vs. 12% of the state's child population). The percentage of Native American children in care as reflected in AFCARS (the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System) data probably doesn't include tribal jurisdiction cases; if not, the racial disproportionality ratio for Native American children was larger in 2002 than it appears at first glance. The number of African American children in long term care (more than 2 years) has declined by 15% (725 in FY 01 vs. 618 in FY 05), but the number of Native American children in long term care (364 in FY 05) remained about the same as in FY 01. In addition, Native American children exiting out of home care from 1999-2002 continued to be reunified at lower rates than other racial /ethnic groups. Reunification rates for African American children exiting care increased slightly from 1999 -2002 (56.7% to 60.3%) but African American children continued to be reunified at lower rates than White children and Hispanic children. Adoption rates for African American children exiting care markedly increased from 1999 -2002; in federal FY 02, almost 20% of African American children leaving out of home care were adopted; surprisingly, 12% of Native American children exiting care were adopted in FY 02.

As in other states, age of child makes a large difference in adoption rates. In federal FY 02, only about 10% of children exiting out of home care to adoption were 11 -17; 27% were 6-10; nor is there any indication in 1999 -2002 AFCARS data that the percentage of school age children being adopted is increasing. Various racial / ethnic groups' percentage of total adoptions in federal FY 02 were close to these groups' percentage of children in out of home care with the exception of Native Americans who constituted only 5.5% of adopted children.

The median length of stay (LOS) for children in out of home care on the last day of the federal fiscal year fell from 16.5 months in 1999 to 15.3 months in 2002; the national median LOS in FY 02 for children still in foster care was 18 months. CA has made steady progress over the past decade in reducing the percentage of children in out of home care for longer than 2 years (based on point in time data) from 44% in FY 97 to 34.6% in FY 05. During this same time period, median LOS for children in care for 60 days or longer fell from 644 days in FY 97 to 505 days in FY 05. There is, however, a downside to lower than average LOS, i.e., shorter lengths of stay are usually accompanied by higher rates of re - entry into care. Washington State's re- entry into care rate has been 11 -11.5% (percentage of reunified children re-entering out of home care within 12 months of returning home) since FY 03, well above the federal performance standard of 8.6%. Nevertheless, the state's re-entry into care rate declined from 16.2% in FY 01 to 11.5% in FY 05, a very positive development.

Shorter LOS is associated with higher rates of re - entry into care, but longer LOS is strongly related to multiple placements. In federal FY 02, only 16% of children placed in out of home care in Washington State for 0-1 year had 3 or more placements; almost 42% of children in care 1-2 years were in 3 or more foster homes; 59% of children in care 2-3 years had 3 or more placements; 68% of children in care 3-4 years were placed in 3 or more homes and 83.6% of children in care 4 or more years had been in 3 or more homes. Placement instability as defined by the Braam's settlement agreement becomes the average experience of children in out of home care in this state after stays in care of 2-3 years.

These statistics suggest one of the nation's (and state's) foster care dilemmas: short stays in care prior to reunification with birth parents frequently lead to early re - entry into care which is a serious form of placement instability; long stays in care often lead to multiple foster home/ group home placements which may result in further emotional damage to already troubled children. More than a quarter of children entering care in Washington State have had prior placement episodes; the percentage of children entering care for the second, third or even fourth episode declined from 32% of entries into care in FY 99 to 26.6% in FY 02. There was a reduction in the percentage of children in care for 0-1 year and 1-2 years with 3 or more placements from 1999 -2002; but the percentage of children with longer lengths of stay experiencing 3 or more placements increased during these same years and dramatically increased for children in care for 4 or more years (from 71.7% in FY 99 to 83.6% in FY 02).

Slightly more than two thirds of children exiting care in FY 02 were reunified with birth parents; 15% of children exiting care were adopted and 8.7% of exits in FY 02 were guardianships; 343 youth aged out of foster care in FY 02. In FY 05, reunifications continued to outnumber adoptions by 4-1; but this ratio is based on all children entering care, even the 20% of children placed due to abuse or neglect who return home in 1 -10 days and FRS placements which last only a few days.

Taken together, these statistics describe a foster care system experiencing rapid growth despite a reduction in foster homes and a system increasingly dependent on kinship care. The growth in CPS placements is not the result of increased CPS reports, declining screen out rates or a sudden increase in a specific form of child maltreatment. When I ask CPS staff what's causing the increase in placements, they usually reply with one word, "meth"; but methamphetamine use has been common among parents referred to CPS in Washington State for at least 15 years and doesn't seem adequate to me as a stand alone explanation for an increase of this magnitude.

The increase in CPS entries into care is exceeding the capacity of CA to complete enough permanent plans to maintain the system's equilibrium. The recent increase in CPS placements is resulting in the growth in numbers of children in out of home care because of a long term trend toward reduced reunifications and because the number of adoptions and guardianships completed per year (when added together) has stabilized. It is possible that reunification numbers may increase to match the increase in entries into care, something more likely to occur if CA is making more brief

placements; but recent CAMIS data contained in the "Children Placed in Out of Home Care" report does not indicate an increase in brief (less than 30 days) CPS placements. It is also possible that the shortage of foster homes will stop the growth in entries into care as CA creates units whose job is to manage voluntary service cases. A third possibility is that the number of children in out of home care will continue to increase by a few hundred children per year, a development certain to put extreme stress on an already overburdened system.