



## California Juvenile Dependency Data

This Update summarizes recent data and trends on children in the juvenile dependency system. The last version of this update was published in December 2003.

### Referrals

In 2003, there were 493,299 referrals to social services for child abuse or neglect, of which 110,570, or 22%, were substantiated after investigation by child welfare agencies around the state. Since 1999, there has been a population-adjusted increase from 48 referrals per 1,000 children ages 0–17 in 1999 to 52 per 1,000 in 2003, with most of the increase occurring between 1999 and 2000. The rate of substantiation has varied from 22 to 26% during the past five years.

The most common referral allegation in 2003 was general neglect (38%), followed by physical abuse (19%). Together these two allegations account for over half of the reasons for referrals since 1999, with seven others varying from less than 1 percent up to 13%.<sup>1</sup> Though they make up a small portion of the total referrals, the most likely allegations to be substantiated by child welfare each year are severe neglect and caretaker absence/incapacity, respectively 48% and 47% of cases substantiated in 2003.

Children under one year of age have higher rates of abuse/neglect referrals than do older children. This group is more likely to have contact with people (i.e., medical staff) who can notice and report abuse. Among referred cases, those involving children under age one are also most likely to be substantiated (36%), followed by children 1–2 and 3–5 years old (25% and 23%, respectively) and older children aged 6–10, 11–15, and 16–17 (21, 20, and 17%, respectively). Black and Hispanic children have higher rates of allegations of abuse and neglect than do white and Asian/Pacific Islander children in California. After referral, there are no race or ethnic differences in the percentage of referrals that are investigated, nor the percentage that are substantiated by child welfare.

### Court Cases

In 2003, there were 38,069 dependency filings, of which 32,775 were original filings and 5,294 were subsequent filings. This represents an 11% drop in new filings since 1994.<sup>2</sup> In 1994, the courts closed 82 cases per 100 that were filed; in the last several years, they have closed nearly as many cases as were filed.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> These include (with 2003 percentages in parentheses) sexual abuse (9%), severe neglect (2%), exploitation (0.1%), emotional abuse (9%), caretaker absence/incapacity (5%), at risk/sibling abused (11%), and substantial risk of abuse (8%).

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of these statistics, each sibling is counted as having his or her own petition, though, as a practical matter, siblings may be listed on one petition.

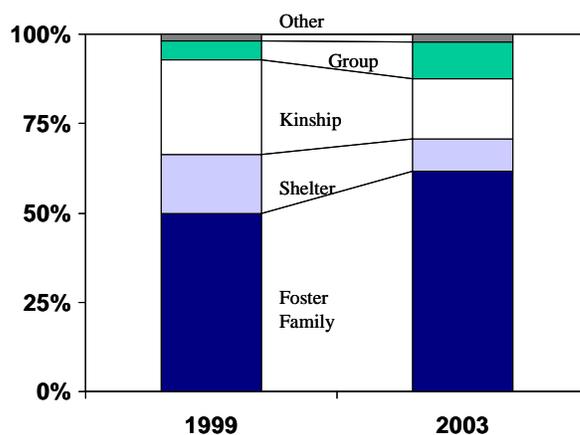
<sup>3</sup> Cases may be closed the year they are open, or they may be closed later.

Consistently, over the last five years, about 29% of allegations substantiated by child welfare have led to an original juvenile dependency court filing.<sup>4</sup>

### Children Entering Foster Care

In 2003, 27,131 children entered foster care for the first time and stayed five days or more. This figure represents slightly less than an 8% decline over the last five years (in absolute numbers) and, in relation to the growth of the child population in California, a decrease of 10% since 1999. Seventy-seven percent of those 2003 first entries to foster care that lasted for five days or more were for child neglect (including severe neglect, general neglect, and the absence or incapacity of a caretaker), 13% for physical abuse, and 5% for sexual abuse. The remaining 5% entered foster care for “other” reasons.

Children entering the foster care system for the first time in 2003 (and staying five or more days) were placed as follows: 62% with foster families, 17% with kin, 10% in group homes, 9% in shelters, and the remainder with guardians or in court-specified homes. Nonrelative foster families (62%) are divided into those that contract with the counties (33%) and those that contract through foster family agencies, or FFAs (29%). There has been little to no change between 1999 and 2003 in the percentage of first placements of five days or more in foster families via county contracts or guardians, or in court-specified homes. However, the percentage of first placements in kinship living arrangements has decreased from 26% to 17% during this time, and the percentage going to foster families via private agencies has increased from 19% to 29%. Also during this time, the number of placements in group homes has doubled, from 5% to 10%, while shelter placements have halved (see chart at right). The decline in kinship placements may be due to the recently established requirement that the relative’s home is to be certified as adequate before placement; the time required for certification may preclude some homes of relatives from serving as the first placement.



### Children in the Dependency System

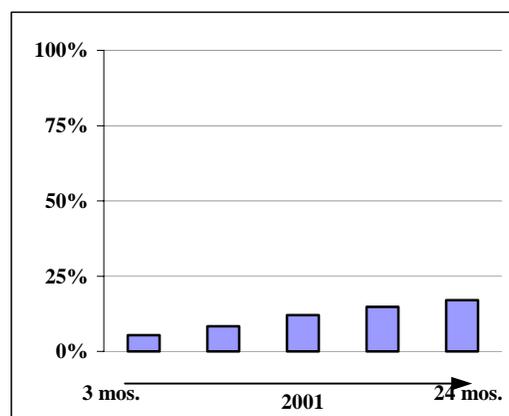
Child welfare agencies characterize cases across time by four discrete stages: (1) “emergency response,” when social workers respond to referrals, assess the family’s situation, and place children in initial placements; (2) “family reunification,” the time period (which can last 6, 12, or 18 months) when efforts are made to help reunify children in placement with their families; (3) “family maintenance,” when families receive services that help them keep children at home or help reintegrate children who have been returned to their family homes; and (4) “permanency planning,” when reunification is not possible or has failed and alternatives, such as adoption or guardianship, are planned.

<sup>4</sup> Lag time between substantiated allegations and court filings introduces slight error in this calculation.

On a typical day<sup>5</sup> in 2003, about 3% of cases were in the emergency response stage, 23% were in family reunification, 21% were in family maintenance, and 53% were in permanency placement. Although the number of children in the foster care system has decreased over the last four years (–13%),<sup>6</sup> the distribution among the foster care stages has been relatively stable, except for a decrease of 23% in the proportion of children in emergency response.

Children remain in the home after substantiated referrals for a number of reasons, including situations where a child can remain safe through the provision of family maintenance services or immediate resolution of a problematic home situation. Therefore, only a minority of substantiated referrals of abuse or neglect led to the removal of children from the home. In 2002, there were 115,745 allegations substantiated by child welfare agencies, and in 2003 there were 110,570. Nevertheless, in 2003, 27,131 children were taken out of the home for at least five days or more.

For children who remained or were returned home after their first substantiated referral<sup>7</sup> of abuse or neglect, the likelihood of a second substantiated report becomes more likely over time (see chart at right). In 2001 (the most recent year for which recurrence rates extending to 24 months are available), 5% of the cases had an additional substantiated allegation in the first three months after the original. By 24 months, 17% of the cases had a recurrence. Children under 15 are more likely to have new, substantiated reports (18% within 24 months), with the percentage rapidly decreasing with age (9% for 16–17 year olds).



As California becomes increasingly diverse, with no ethnic or racial majority, so does the foster care system. In 2003, of the 83,921 children in out-of-home placement, 32% were white, 32% Hispanic, 32% black, 3% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% American Indian or Alaska Native. This diversity also extends to diversity in spoken languages. Though English remains as the primary language spoken by 91% of children in foster care, and Spanish by 8%, more than 27 other primary languages were spoken by the remaining foster children.

### Exiting and Reentering Foster Care

Children who are placed with kin and then sent home are less likely to reenter the foster care system than are children who were placed with non-kin. For instance, of those children entering foster care in 1999, 5% of those placed with kin and 8% of those placed with non-kin reentered out-of-home care within six months (a 40% gap). However, the gap narrows over time as cases are tracked further out; the data show that 12% of youth placed with kin and 16% placed with non-kin reentered out-of-home care within 24 months (a 26% gap).

<sup>5</sup> As measured on January 1, 2003. Measurements are taken quarterly.

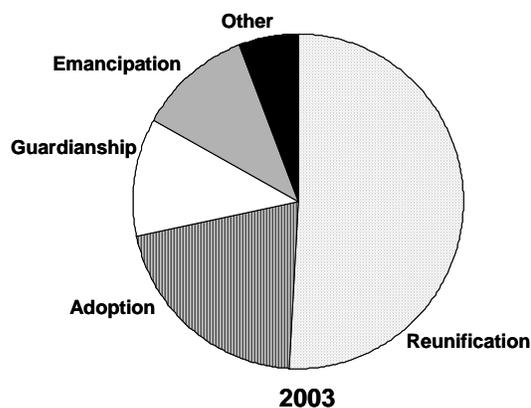
<sup>6</sup> Number is adjusted to reflect California’s population aged 0–17.

<sup>7</sup> The referral categories of “at risk, sibling abused” and “substantial risk” are excluded. Analysis is based on the child’s first substantiated allegation in the base year of 2001.

Throughout most of the 1990s, more children entered the foster care system than exited it. Since 1999, more children have exited than entered.

Correspondingly, before 1998, the courts closed about 8 cases for every 10 they opened (measured by original filings) in a year. However, starting in 1998, they closed nearly as many cases as were opened.

In 2003, 37,278 children exited from foster care. The majority (51%) of these children were reunified with their families, 21% were adopted, 11% went to guardians, and 11% were emancipated (see chart at right).



### Some Resources for Children and Caretakers

- Independent Living Programs help prepare foster youth for emancipation by teaching them essential skills for achieving independence, such as job search skills. On January 1, 2003, there were 20,108 youth ages 16–20 in out-of-home care (including 6,998 under the supervision of probation departments). In academic year 2003, a total of 24,988 youth received Independent Living Program services.
- It is rare for adults to hire private attorneys to represent them in dependency hearings, and rarer still for privately hired attorneys to represent children. Most indigent parents and children are represented by court-appointed counsel. As of fall 2003, there were 1,135 attorneys practicing dependency law in the California trial courts who represented children and/or parents. Over one-half of these attorneys are solo practitioners, and the rest are employees of public agencies (including Public Defender’s and District Attorney’s offices), nonprofit organizations, and private law firms.
- Court Appointed Special Advocates are trained volunteers who advocate for children in the juvenile court. CASA volunteers are available to children in 41 counties as well as through one Native American tribe in California. The number of children who have CASA volunteers varies by county depending on the availability of volunteers in the particular county.
- Juvenile dependency mediation programs assist parties in resolving contested issues in a nonadversarial way. Juvenile dependency mediators are available in 21 counties.
- Foster Kinship Care Education provides training to current and prospective foster care providers. Sixty-seven such programs are available through community colleges to adults in 52 counties.
- The State of California Office of the Ombudsman for Foster Care reviews and resolves complaints from or on behalf of children in the foster care system. This service, available since 2000, now receives almost 9000 contacts each year for information, complaint resolution, and referrals to services. In 2003 there were 8,903 contacts, of which about a thousand (12%) were complaints. Only a small fraction of these actually resulted in a case conference, a facilitated meeting between the foster youth and relevant parties and professionals to try to resolve the complaint.

## About the California Juvenile Statistical Abstract

The *California Juvenile Statistical Abstract*, a project of the AOC's Center for Families, Children & the Courts, is a compilation of reliable, representative statistical data about children and families involved in the courts and with related institutions. It is available on the Internet in PDF format.

This *Research Update* is one of a series that summarize data from the Abstract.

### Data Sources

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