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RESEARCH UPDATE

December 1, 2003

California Juvenile Dependency Data

Referrals

In 2002, there were 542,399 referrals to social services for child abuse or neglect, of which 114,593, or 21%, were substantiated after investigation by child welfare agencies around the state. Since 1998, there has been a population-adjusted 10% increase in referrals, from 51 referrals per 1,000 children ages 0–17 in 1998, to 57 per 1,000 in 2002 – most of this increase began in 2000. The rate of substantiation has varied from 21–23% during the past five years.

Children under one and school-aged children have higher rates of abuse/neglect referrals than do children 1–4 years of age. These two groups are more likely to have contact with people (i.e., hospital staff, at birth, and later, school staff) who can notice and report abuse. Among referred cases, those involving children under one are most likely to be substantiated (35%), followed by children 1–2 and 3–5 year olds (25 and 22%, respectively), and older children aged 6–10, 11–15 and 16–17 (20, 19, and 15%, respectively). Black and Hispanic children have higher rates of allegations of abuse and neglect than do white and Asian/Pacific Islander children in California. Once referred, there are no race/ethnic disparities in the percentage of referrals that are investigated, nor the percentage that are substantiated.

Court Cases

In 2002, there were 38,554 dependency filings, of which 32,746 were original filings, and 5,808 were subsequent filings. This represents a 7% drop in new filings since 1993.¹ In 1993, the courts closed 86 cases per 100 that were filed; in the last several years, they have closed nearly as many cases as were filed.²

In the last five years, about 29% of substantiated allegations led to an original juvenile dependency court filing.³

Children Entering Foster Care

In 2002, 32,196 children entered foster care for the first time, and 26,772 of these children remained in the system for 5 days or more. That latter figure represents a return to 1993 levels (in absolute numbers) and, in relation to the growth of the child population in California, a large decrease over the 10-year period.

¹ Some counties have separate filings for each sibling and other counties consolidate all sibling cases into one filing. Therefore, there is not a one-to-one correlation between filings and number of children for which dependency court jurisdiction is being sought.

² Cases may be closed the year they are open or they may be closed later.

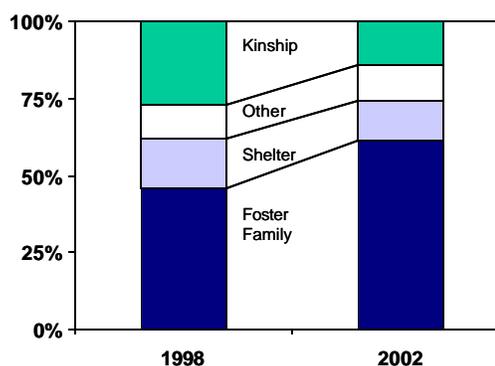
³ Lag time between substantiated allegations and court filings introduces slight error in this calculation.

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Three-quarters of those 2002 first entries to foster care were for child neglect (including severe neglect, general neglect, and the absence or incapacity of a caretaker), 14% for physical abuse, and 6% for sexual abuse. The remaining 5% entered foster care for “other” reasons.

Children entering the foster-care system for the first time in 2002 were placed as follows: 61% with foster families, 14% with kin, 13% in shelters, and the remainder were placed in group homes, with guardians or first placement data were missing. Non-relative foster families (61%) are divided into those that contract with the counties (33%) and those that contract through agencies (27%). There has been little to no change between 1998 and 2002 in the percentage of first placements in foster families via county contracts, group homes, shelters, or guardians. However, the percentage of first placements in kinship living arrangements has decreased from 27% to 14% during this time, and the percentage going to foster families via private agencies has increased from 15% to 27% (see chart at right). This decline may be due to the recent changes in the requirements to certify the relative’s home 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 to 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. On a typical day, about 4% of cases are in the emergency response stage, 21% are in family reunification, 23% are in family maintenance, and 52% are in permanency planning. This distribution has been stable over the last four years.

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 2001, there were 115,131 allegations substantiated by child welfare agencies, and in 2002 there were 114,593. Nevertheless, in 2002, 32,196 children were taken out of the home for at least one day.

As California becomes increasingly diverse, with no ethnic or racial majority, so does the foster care system. In 2002, of the 84,600 children in out-of-home placement, 32% were white, 31% Hispanic, 32% black, 3% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 1% American Indian or Alaska Native. This diversity also extends to diversity in languages spoken. Though English remains as the primary language spoken by 91% of children in foster

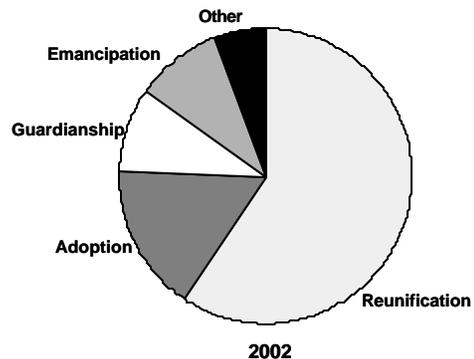
care, and Spanish by 8%, there were over 30 other primary languages spoken by the remaining foster children.

Exiting Foster Care

Children who are placed with kin are less likely to reenter the foster care system than are children placed with non-kin. For instance, of those children entering foster care in 1998, 4% of those who were placed with kin, and 8% of those who were placed with non-kin reentered out-of-home care within six months. However, the gap between kin and non-kin narrows over time. Tracking the cases further out, the data show that 12% of youth placed with kin and 17% placed with non-kin reentered out-of-home care within 24 months.

Throughout most of the 1990s, more children entered the foster care system than exited the system. 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 1999, they closed nearly as many cases as were opened.

In 2002, 41,218 children exited from foster care. The majority (59%) of these children were reunified with their families, 16% were adopted, 9% went to guardians, and 9% 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. In January 2002, there were 23,537 youth ages 15 to 19 in out-of-home care. In academic year 2002, 23,361 youth received Independent Living Program services. There is a wide variation in the content of ILP services available throughout the state.
- 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 the fall of 2003, there were 1,135 such attorneys practicing dependency law in the trial courts, representing 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), non-profit organizations, and private law firms.
- Court-Appointed Special Advocates are trained volunteers who advocate for children in the juvenile court. CASAs are available to children in California in 41 counties. The number of children who have a CASA varies depending on the abundance of volunteers in a particular county.

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- Juvenile dependency mediation programs assist parties in resolving contested issues in a non-adversarial way. Juvenile dependency mediators are available in 25 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.
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About the California Juvenile Statistical Abstract

The *California Juvenile Statistical Abstract*, a project underway by 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 will be available on the Internet in 2004.

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

Data Sources

Administrative Office of the Courts. Administrative records regarding court-appointed dependency counsel obtained from Center for Families, Children & the Courts.

Administrative Office of the Courts. Research Update: Court-Based Juvenile Dependency Mediation in California. (March 2003).

California Department of Social Services, Research and Development Division. Tables SOC405A and ABCD 350. <http://www.dss.cahwnet.gov/research/>.

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