



Making Better Sense of Accountability in Child Welfare: Recognizing Shared Responsibility for Children's Outcomes

KEY MESSAGE

A new model for assigning accountability in child welfare is needed. Current models, such as those found in the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), place an undue burden on public child welfare agencies to achieve positive permanency outcomes when other factors, such as court involvement or geographic variation in population characteristics, substantially affect key measures of performance.

Background

Finding permanent homes for children placed in out-of-home care due to abuse or neglect is one of the principal goals of the child welfare system. Although family reunification remains the primary permanency goal for most children who come into the child welfare system, reunification is not always appropriate or feasible. Historically, more than half of children entering out-of-home care in the U.S. will return home, yet for children who cannot return home, child welfare agencies generally seek legal permanency through adoption or guardianship. However, observers have long noted state and local variations in the chances children entering care will achieve permanency and the time it takes for this to occur.

Understanding why these variations occur is critical for improving outcomes and efforts to hold child welfare agencies accountable for outcomes. To examine this issue more closely, this study looked at how children's involvement in the dependency court process is related to the timing of achieving reunification, adoption or guardianship in Washington State. This is particularly important since the federal government, through the Child and Family Service Review, holds state child welfare agencies directly accountable for achieving explicit permanency outcomes. Arguably, if court pro-

cesses independently influence the timing of permanency outcomes, then the courts should share accountability for achieving legal permanency for foster children.

The Study

The study followed nearly 37,000 children entering out-of-home care for the first time between 2001 and 2007 through the end of 2008. It measured the days from a child's placement in out-of-home care to a permanent exit from care. Children experienced the following exits from care during this period: reunified with family (67.4%), adopted (13.6%), guardianship (3.9%), reached 18 while in care (2.0%), transferred to another authority/deceased (1.6%), unknown exit (.03%), or still in out-of-home care (11.5%). To isolate the influence of dependency petitions on the timing of exits, the study also considered a number of individual-level characteristics in the analysis: child's sex, age at entry, race, reasons for removal, presence of siblings with an out-of-home placement, year of entry, and region of entry.

The Findings

There is wide variation between CA's administrative regions in the median length of time to reunification. See Table 1.

Table 1

CA Region	Median Time to Reunification (days)
1	170
2	121
3	581
4	242
5	83
6	145
Statewide	175

- Administrative regions vary considerably in the likelihood that children entering care will become involved with the court (i.e., experience a dependency petition filing).
- Children who are court-involved experience strikingly different outcomes compared to those who are not, suggesting that where dependency petitions are very likely to be filed early might expect to see a relatively slow rate of family reunification compared to other places. All else being equal, the rate of reunification is reduced by over two-thirds after a dependency petition is filed whereas the rates of adoption and guardianship are doubled.

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- The population of children entering the child welfare system varies considerably from region to region. For example, some regions and counties appear to be more likely than others to offer services for adolescents with behavior issues, who are less likely to be involved with the court. In fact, the percentage of first entrants to out-of-home care between 2001 and 2007 who were adolescents ranged from a low of 16 percent in Regions 1 and 3 to a high of 35 percent in Region 5. This plays a role in the timing of permanency for children and should be taken into account when looking at performance indicators.

The Implications

Based on the experiences of Washington State's public child welfare agency, Children's Administration (CA), this study finds evidence for considering the role of all players in assessing performance in the permanency planning process, not just the public child welfare agency. A multisystem approach, including the juvenile courts, is more likely to take into account local variations in practice and performance that affect statewide performance.

The study's findings show that failure to take into account the ways that the juvenile courts influence the timing of exits from out-of-home care can lead to faulty assessments of the performance of child welfare systems in achieving legal permanency for children. It also supports collaborative work between courts and the public child welfare agencies to improve outcomes for children.

Acknowledging that differences between regional child welfare populations and in the functioning of the dependency process play a role in the timing of children's permanency outcomes does not mean that public child welfare agencies should not be held accountable for achieving timely permanency for children in care. The study finds that even after controlling for important measures of case mix and the timing of dependency petitions, regional differences remain in the rate at which children experience permanency.

Lastly, given the strong relationship between the filing of dependency petitions and the length of time to family reunification, there is a pressing need to better understand when it is appropriate to use voluntary placement agreements (i.e., placements that do not involve juvenile court supervision), particularly when children are first placed in out-of-home care.

This information is taken from "Timing of Permanency Exits from Out-of-Home Care: The Importance of Systems and Implications for Assessing Accountability for Permanency Outcomes," by Mark E. Courtney, Jennifer L. Hook, Tessa Keating, and Matt Orme, Partners for Our Children, University of Washington. For more information, please contact info@partnersforourchildren.org