

# CHILDREN LEFT BEHIND:

A STUDY OF THE ARKANSAS CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM



Report by Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families

Author: Jennifer Ferguson, J.D.

Data Consultant: Sandra E. Miller

March 2007



## Executive Summary

The performance of the Arkansas Child Welfare System declined significantly beginning in 2004, as measured by a broad range of indicators related to protecting children from abuse and neglect and providing services to help children and families. The decline corresponded with a severe shortage of family service workers at the Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS).

Given these significant problems, AACF conducted a year long study analyzing 2005 data to determine whether children who fall within certain demographic groups may be even more at risk of receiving inadequate protection and care. Ten decision points were identified throughout the child welfare system to determine whether disparities existed in how children were treated in the child welfare system based on age, gender, race, ethnicity, and geographic location. Each decision point was chosen based on its overall importance to the safety and care of the child and whether quantifiable data was available for analysis. The study was limited to a review of only those decision points that could be analyzed using computer software.

The following decision points were chosen by a project advisory committee of child welfare experts:

1. If the report of maltreatment called into the hotline was accepted for investigation, whether it was assigned to the Crimes Against Children Division (CACD) at the Arkansas State Police or DCFS for investigation
2. Whether the investigation was initiated in a timely manner
3. Whether the investigation was completed in a timely manner
4. Whether the investigation was completed in a timely manner by case type
5. Whether a case was opened
6. Whether a report of maltreatment was found to be true or unsubstantiated

7. The number and level of risk assessment received
8. The goal chosen when a case plan was developed including: (a) maintaining children in their home with a safety plan, (b) reunifying the child with the family, (c) terminating parental rights to free a child for adoption or guardianship, (d) granting custody to a relative, or (e) granting another permanent planned living arrangement such as independence
9. The number of visits between the child and relatives when the goal was reunification
10. Whether the termination of parental rights was granted

A mid-level analysis was conducted to determine if possible disparities might exist. While tests for statistical significance were not conducted, a small percentage difference could be considered significant because of the large number of records involved with many of the decision points.

The findings in this report include only the decision points where possible disparities were identified. With many of the decision points, no disparities were found when conducting the descriptive analysis. A majority of the differences found were based on geographic location, especially among the ten DCFS management areas.

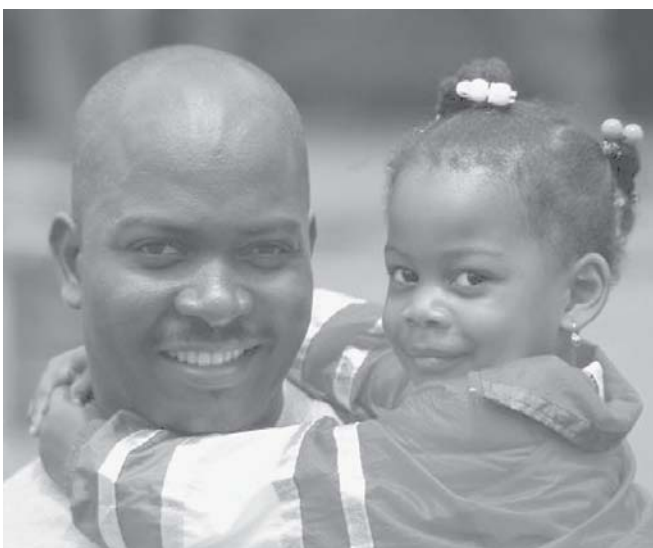
The study found the following possible disparities:

- ◆ Differences among DCFS management areas on: whether the investigation was initiated in a timely manner, whether the investigation was completed in a timely manner, whether a true report of maltreatment was found, whether the case was opened or not opened, and the goal identified in the case plan.
- ◆ Differences among cities, towns, and rural areas on: whether the investigation was initiated in a timely manner, whether the investigation was completed timely, the goal of the case plan, and the number of monthly visits with relatives. USDA's nine point rural continuum, which is based on commuting patterns, was used to categorize counties dominated by cities, counties dominated by small towns, and counties largely rural in character.<sup>1</sup>

- ◆ Differences between younger and older children on: whether a case was found to be true, the goal of the case plan, and the number of monthly visits with relatives.
- ◆ Differences in race for African American children on the number of monthly visits with relatives.

While this study did not analyze all points where critical decisions concerning children are made, it is encouraging that only a few disparities were found. Several of the disparities found based on age may be justified and not necessarily harmful to children and their families. More decision points should be analyzed in the future to determine whether disparities exist in services, foster care, and adoptions. A recent DCFS report found African American children were overrepresented in the number of children waiting for adoption.<sup>2</sup>

Although more decision points need to be analyzed for possible disparities, a possible reason more disparities were not found is because the child welfare system is performing poorly on many important indicators that affect all children in the system. DCFS is currently experiencing a leadership transition. Their director retired in October 2006, and a new director was hired in March 2007. Hopefully, improving the system for all children will be a priority under the new leadership. With appropriate support from the child welfare system and our local communities, more children can grow up to live healthy and productive lives.



## Introduction

The performance of the Arkansas Child Welfare System declined significantly beginning in 2004, as measured by a broad range of indicators related to protecting children from abuse and neglect and providing services to help children and families. The decline corresponded with a severe shortage of family service workers at the Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS). In 2005, the vacancy rate among all family service worker positions reached a high of 23%, up from 10% in 2002.

Some of the more troubling indicators identified in the July 2006 report by Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families (AACF) on the child welfare system (data from January 2005 to March 2006) included<sup>3</sup>:

- ◆ Only 68% of child victims were seen by an investigator within the required 72 hours of the initial call. In 2000, this figure was 89%.
- ◆ Only 47% of maltreatment assessments were concluded within the required 30 days after an allegation of maltreatment, down from 80% in 2000.
- ◆ Only 29% of cases had an initial staffing held within the required 30 days to develop a case plan with the family to identify a goal, needs, and services.
- ◆ Only 44% of foster children received monthly visits from caseworkers as required.

Given these significant problems, the question arose as to whether children who fall within certain demographic groups may be even more at risk of receiving inadequate care. AACF was awarded a one year grant from the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation in December 2005 to conduct a study of whether disparities existed in how children were treated in the child welfare system based on age, gender, race, ethnicity, and geographic location. The following report details: (1) how the study was conducted, (2) the findings, (3) the challenges encountered during the study, and (4) recommendations for future studies.

## How the Study was Conducted

An advisory committee of child welfare experts from around the state was established to guide the project. This committee was composed of service providers, DCFS officials, court personnel, child welfare attorneys, social work professors, and other child welfare experts. The committee helped select the decision points, reviewed the findings, formulated the focus group questions, and provided feedback throughout the project.

The first phase of the project was to determine which disparities would be studied and to select the points in the child welfare system where key decisions were made about the safety and care of a child. To determine if certain groups of children were more likely to be marginalized in the system, five characteristics were identified to examine as disparities: age, race, gender, ethnicity, and geographic location. Ethnicity was chosen because the Advisory Committee wanted to examine Hispanic children since they are a growing population in Arkansas. These children are captured under ethnicity in DCFS's database and not under race. Geographic location was broken out in two ways: (1) by comparing counties dominated by cities, counties dominated by small towns, and counties largely rural in character; and (2) by comparing DCFS management areas, which are divided into ten areas across the state.

After the characteristics were chosen, decision points were identified throughout the child welfare system. At each decision point, DCFS makes a critical decision that affects the child. The child enters the system when a reported allegation of abuse or neglect is made to the Arkansas State Police hotline. The child leaves the system when her case has been closed, which is usually when DCFS determines that the family is able to take care of the child, or the parental rights have been terminated and the child has been adopted. A total of ten decision points were identified. Since many key decisions are made when a child first enters the system, a majority of the decision points are based on the

first part of the system. The following decision points were chosen:

1. If the report of maltreatment called into the hotline was accepted for investigation, whether it was assigned to the Crimes Against Children Division (CACD) at the Arkansas State Police or DCFS for investigation
2. Whether the investigation was initiated in a timely manner
3. Whether the investigation was completed in a timely manner
4. Whether the investigation was completed in a timely manner by case type
5. Whether a case was opened
6. Whether a report of maltreatment was found to be true or unsubstantiated
7. The number and level of risk assessment received
8. The goal chosen when a case plan was developed including: (a) maintaining children in their home with a safety plan, (b) reunifying the child with the family, (c) terminating parental rights to free a child for adoption or guardianship, (d) granting custody to a relative, or (e) granting another permanent planned living arrangement such as independence
9. The number of visits between the child and relatives when the goal was reunification
10. Whether the termination of parental rights was granted

The second phase of the project involved working with DCFS to pull data from their CHRIS (Children Reporting Information System) database based on each decision point. Only 2005 data was examined.

With respect to the CHRIS data, the study was limited to a review of only those decision points that could be analyzed using computer software. Manual review of the data was not feasible because most of the data pulled for each decision point contained over 20,000 records. For example, if the data was part of a long narrative entered in the database, it could not be analyzed. If the data was entered into

a specific field that only contained information about that decision, it could be analyzed.

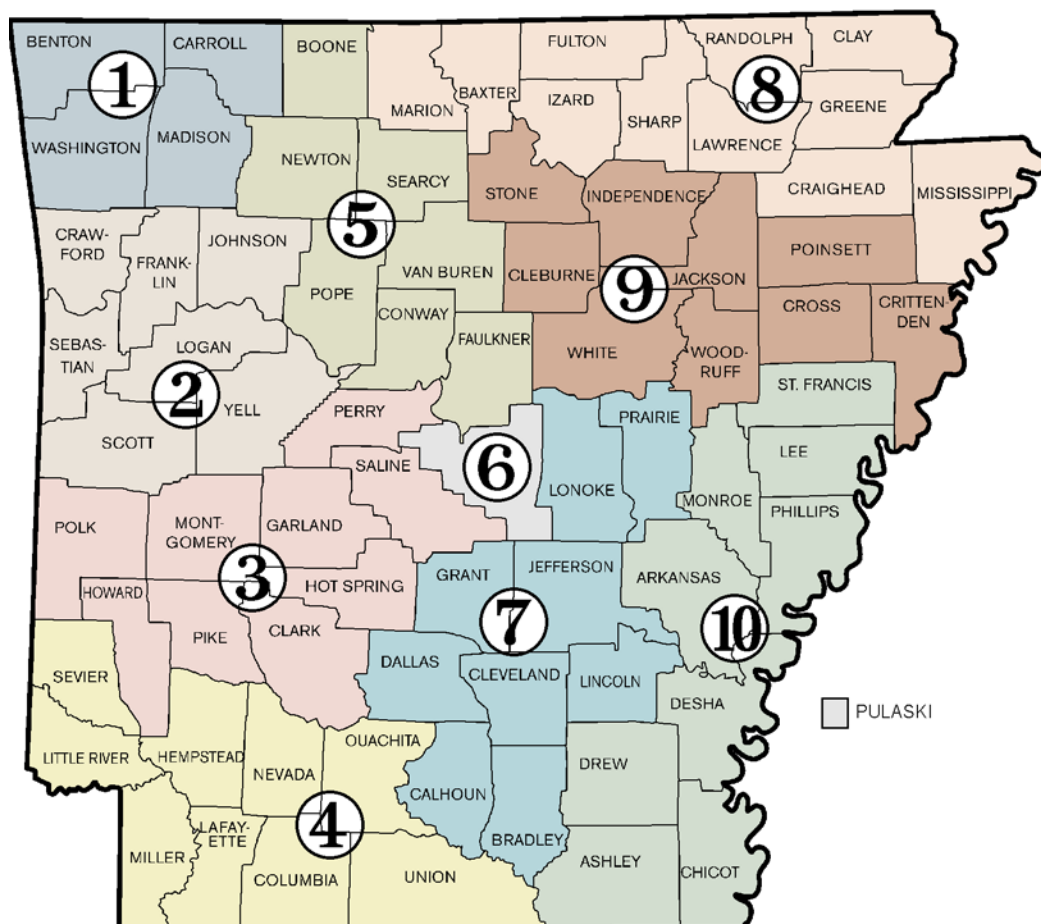
A descriptive analysis was conducted to determine if possible disparities might exist. This type of analysis is a mid-level analysis to determine if the data should be examined further to test for statistical significance. Even though tests for statistical significance were not conducted, a small percentage difference could be considered significant because of the large number of records involved with many of the decision points.

The third phase of the project involved using the results from the analysis to design and conduct focus groups and personal interviews. AACF convened eight focus groups in Chicot, Craighead, Pulaski, and Washington counties. In each county, AACF conducted a focus group with six to eight family service workers, and a separate focus group with six to eight foster parents. AACF also conducted per-

sonal interviews in each county with other individuals involved with the child welfare system, such as attorneys ad litem, service providers, CASA volunteers, and investigators. We have compiled and examined the results from the data analysis, focus groups and personal interviews in this report.

## Findings

Each of the ten decision points was analyzed by the age, race, gender, ethnicity, and geographic location of children who were in the child welfare system during 2005. The findings include only the decision points where possible disparities were identified. With many of the decision points, no disparities were found when conducting the descriptive analysis. A majority of the differences found were based on geographic location, especially among the ten DCFS management areas, which are shown in the map below.



Numbers refer to DCFS Management Areas



## Disparities by DCFS Management Areas

Differences in management areas were found among the following decision points: whether the investigation was initiated in a timely manner, whether the investigation was completed in a timely manner, whether a true report of maltreatment was found, whether the case was opened or not opened, and the goal identified in the case plan.

### Investigation Initiation in a Timely Manner

After an allegation of maltreatment is reported to the state, the child must be seen quickly to ensure safety. DCFS' policy states that a child should be seen within 72 hours if

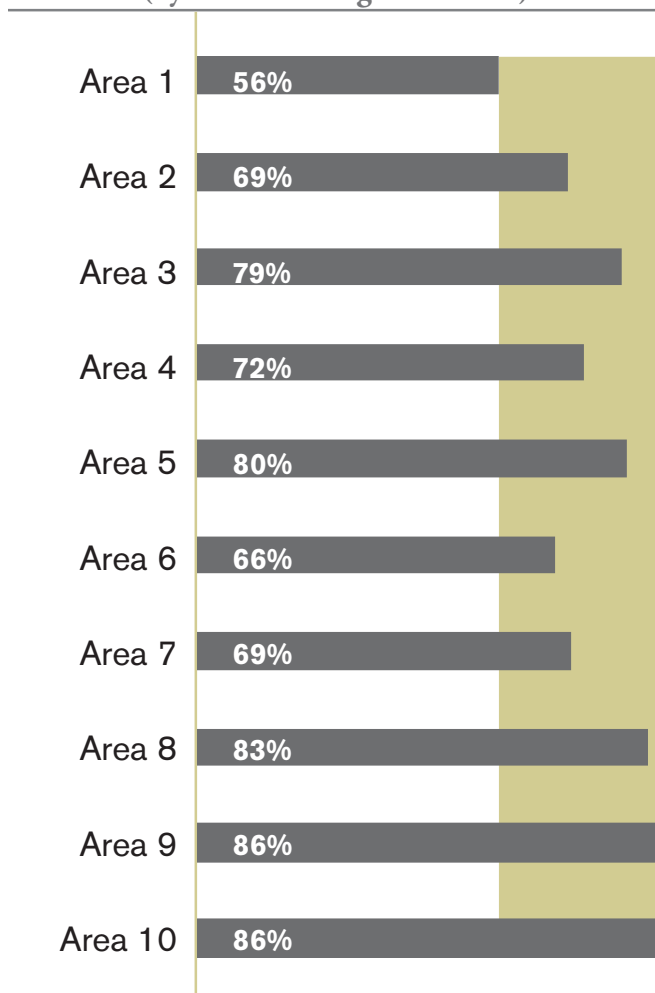
it is not a report of severe maltreatment. In analyzing 18,344 records, there appeared to be a substantial range in whether an investigation was initiated in a timely manner among the various DCFS management areas. It ranged from 56% of the children being seen timely in Area 1 to 86% in Areas 9 and 10. See Chart 1.

### Investigation Completion in a Timely Manner

The investigation should be completed within 30 days after an allegation of maltreatment has been reported, according to DCFS policy. During this time the child victim and her family may remain in limbo while waiting for the investigation to

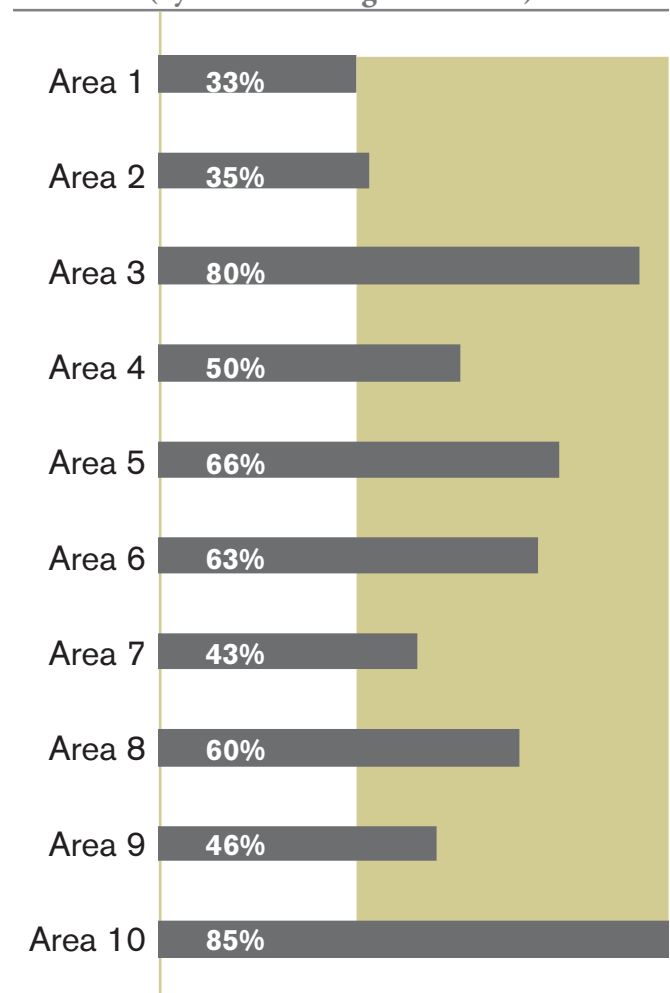
**Chart 1. Percent of Children who had Investigations Initiated in a Timely Manner in 2005**

(by DCFS Management Area)



**Chart 2. Percent of Children who had Investigations Completed in a Timely Manner in 2005**

(by DCFS Management Area)



be completed. In analyzing 19,065 records, the data suggested there was a significant difference among DCFS management areas in whether an investigation was completed in a timely manner. It ranged from 33% completed in a timely manner in Area 1 to 85% in Area 10. See Chart 2.

### Report was Found to be True or Unsubstantiated

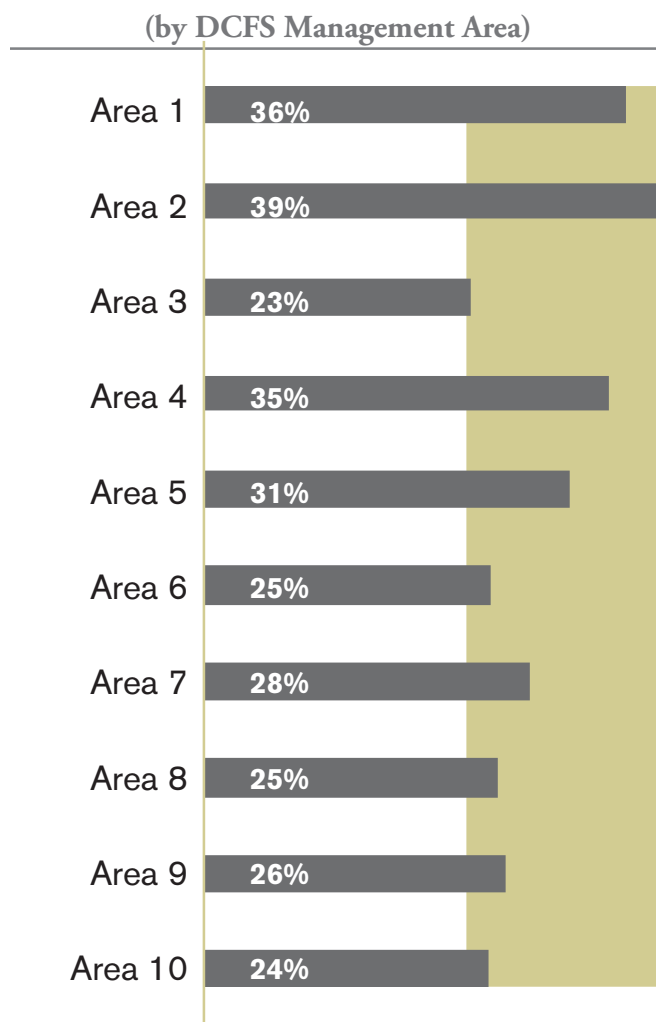
When the investigation is completed, it is determined that the allegation of abuse or neglect is true or unsubstantiated. Approximately 33% of reported allegations are found to be true. There was a range in the percentage of maltreatment reports found to be true among management areas.

In analyzing 19,769 records, this percentage of reports found to be true varied from 23% in Area 3 to 39% in Area 2. See Chart 3.

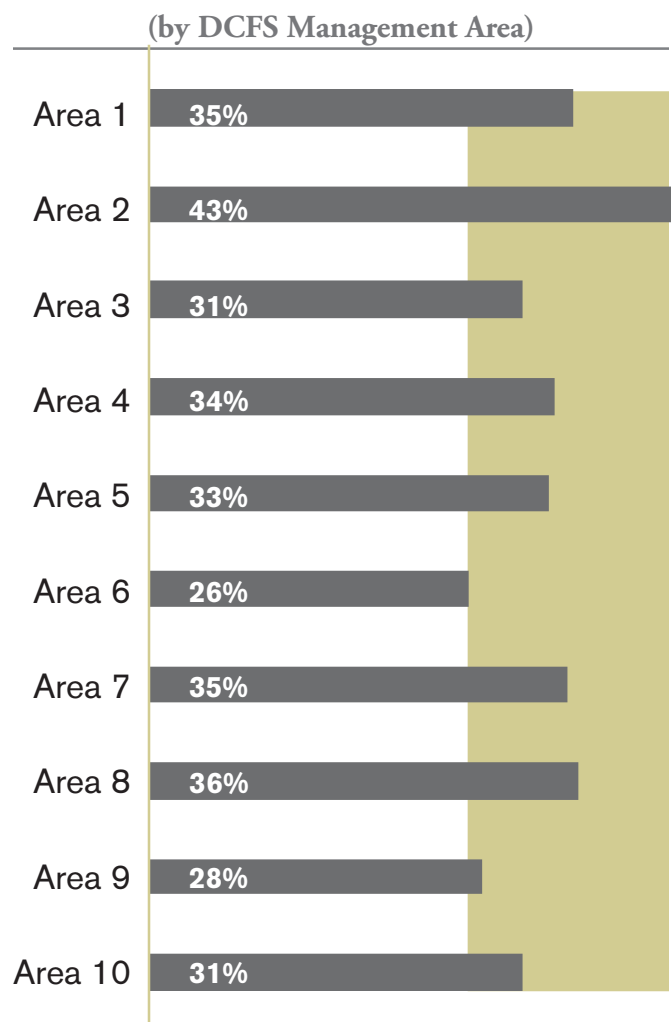
### Case was Opened or not Opened

If the allegation is found to be true, DCFS opens a case to provide services to a child and the family. The data indicated differences among management areas in whether a case was opened or not opened. It varied from 26% in Area 6 to 43% in Area 2 for cases opened. 6,422 records were analyzed. These records included only cases opened in 2005. See Chart 4.

**Chart 3. Percent of Children whose Cases were Found to be True in 2005**



**Chart 4. Percent of Children whose Cases were Opened in 2005**





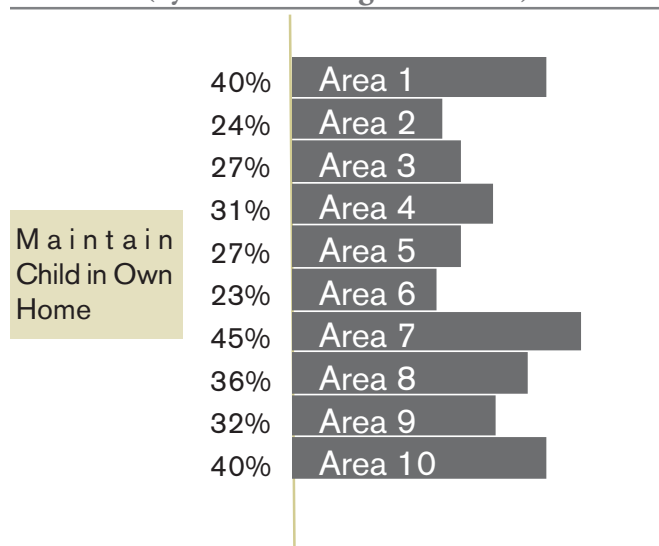
## The Goal of the Case Plan

A case plan should be developed with all parties so that a goal and family needs can be identified. Appropriate services are also identified so that they can be provided to the child and the family. The goal chosen when a case plan is developed may include: (1) maintaining the child in her home with a safety plan, (2) reunifying the child with the family, (3) terminating the parental rights to free a child for adoption or guardianship, (4) granting custody to a relative, or (5) granting another permanent planned living arrangement such as independence. The number of records analyzed was 2,677, and was small compared to many of the other decision points because only cases that were opened in 2005 were chosen.

The two categories of goals with the largest number of records showed the following ranges among management areas: (1) children maintained in their own home ranged from 23% in Area 6 to 45% in Area 7; and (2) children returned to their parents ranged from 44% in Area 10 to 67% in Area 2. See Charts 5 and 6.

**Chart 5. Percent of Children whose Case Plan Goal was to Maintain Child in Own Home in 2005**

(by DCFS Management Area)



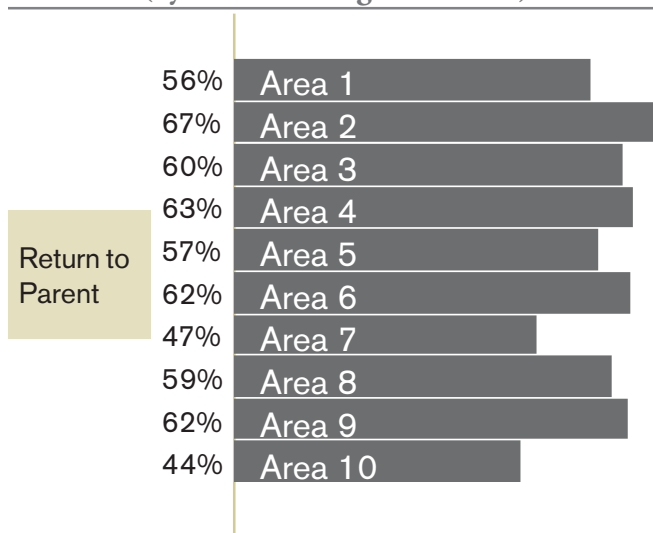
## Staffing Shortages

In examining all the decision points above based on management areas, it is important to note that DCFS experienced a significant staffing shortage of family service workers in 2005. The state-wide staffing vacancy rate in 2005 was 22% as compared to 10% in 2002. Several management areas in particular suffered staffing shortages far worse than others, especially Area 1. Five of the ten DCFS management areas in 2005 had an average vacancy rate of 23% or more - Areas 1, 2, 6, 7, and 9. Area 1 had a vacancy rate of 39%. See Chart 7.

This high vacancy rate in 2005 is one factor that affected decision points that dealt with performance. When an area is short staffed, it is difficult to initiate and complete investigations on time. Area 1 (northwest Arkansas), which had a 39% vacancy rate in 2005, had the worst performance both in initiation and completion of investigations. Information provided by the focus group participants suggested that as the number of abuse and neglect allegations increased along with the rising population in northwest Arkansas,

**Chart 6. Percent of Children whose Case Plan Goal was to Return to Parent in 2005**

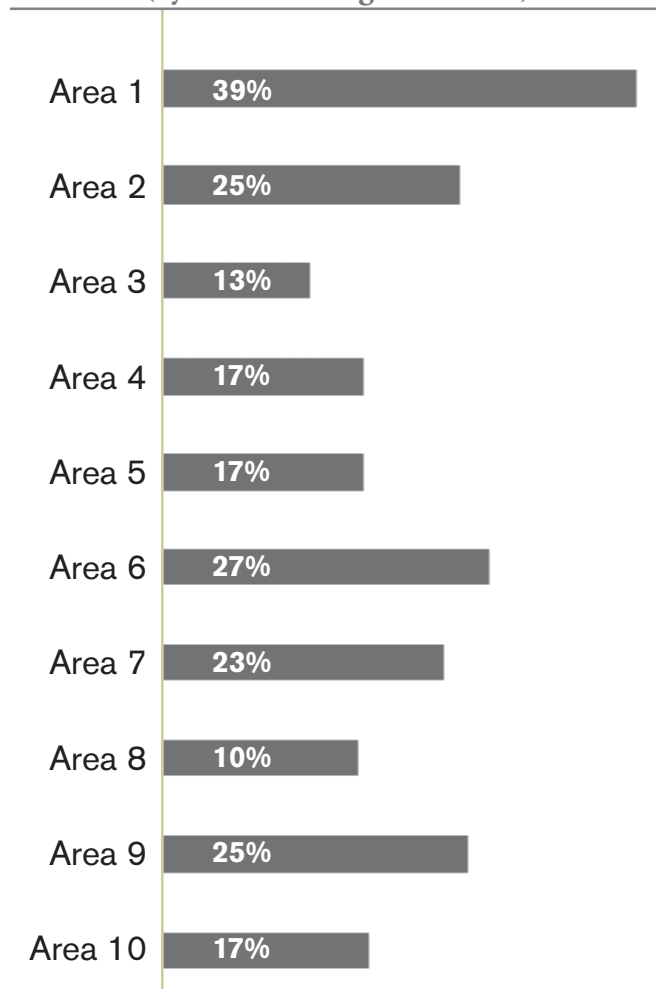
(by DCFS Management Area)



“When staffing levels are up and we have qualified, experienced staff, it tends to go a lot smoother.”

DCFS did not have a sufficient number of staff to handle the increase. To make matters worse, as the number of cases increased, and workers were overwhelmed, many quit. This meant the other caseworkers had to take on more cases.

**Chart 7. 2005 Vacancy Rate  
for Family Service Workers**  
(by DCFS Management Area)



Even as more were hired, they had to go through training and did not have enough experience when they took on cases.

Other questions that do not deal with timeframes, but deal with making decisions such as whether an allegation is found to be true or not, are also impacted by staffing shortages because staff are spread too thin in order to do a thorough investigation. As a focus group participant stated, “When staffing levels are up and we have qualified, experienced staff, it tends to go a lot smoother.” As another participant said, “When we have such high caseloads, we have to choose who we are going to focus our attention on. It’s not fair to the other families, but that is what we have to do.”

Not all the differences among management areas can be explained because of staffing shortages. Other factors may contribute such as the level of poverty in a particular area, the way cases are handled based on local practices, and, especially, the leadership in the local areas. Management issues were raised in focus groups as a factor, but an examination of this issue was beyond the scope of the study.

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# Disparities by Cities, Towns, and Rural Areas

The second item that revealed possible disparities was among cities, towns, and rural areas. USDA’s nine point rural continuum was used to categorize counties dominated by cities, counties dominated by small towns, and counties largely rural in character.<sup>4</sup> USDA’s rural and urban continuum codes divide all counties in the United States into one of nine categories that distinguish metropolitan counties by the population of their area, and nonmetropolitan counties by the degree of urbanization and their proximity to a metro area or areas. Several possible disparities were found among the following decision points: whether the investigation was initiated in a timely manner, whether the investigation was completed timely, the goal chosen in the case plan, and the number of monthly visits with relatives.

## Investigation Initiation in a Timely Manner

Based on the 23,276 records analyzed, the data suggested that counties with cities (80%) were less likely to initiate investigations in a timely manner than small towns (88%) and rural areas (89%). See Chart 8.

## Investigation Completion in a Timely Manner

Counties with cities (55%) were less likely to complete investigations within the required 30 days than small towns

(63%) and rural areas (66%). Approximately 28,908 records were examined for this data point. See Chart 9.

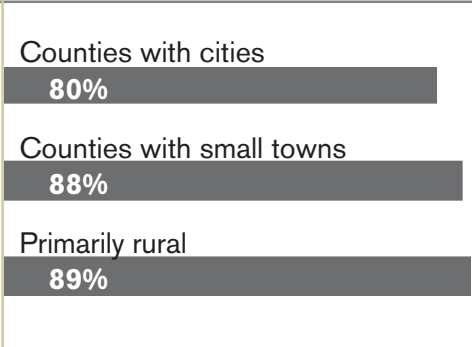
Focus groups suggested for initiation and completion of investigations that even though counties with cities have more workers than smaller towns and rural areas, it is still not proportionate to the actual number of children they serve. Focus group participants also stated people are easier to track down in smaller areas because there is more of a community feeling, and others in the community know the family and are willing to provide assistance.

## The Goal of the Case Plan

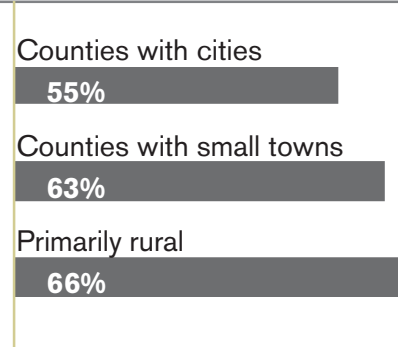
The number of records was small for this decision point with 2,677 records analyzed because only cases that were opened in 2005 were included. The data appeared to show that counties with small towns (37%) were more likely to have the case plan goal be to maintain children in their own homes than counties with cities (31%) and rural areas (33%). See Chart 10.

Focus group participants suggested that workers in smaller towns might feel more comfortable leaving the child in their own home than larger towns or rural areas. As one participant stated, “In smaller towns you know your neighbors and it is more of a community setting. Lots of people in smaller towns have a stronger support network. They’re involved in church and they are more willing to accept the

**Chart 8. Percent of Children whose Investigations were Initiated in a Timely Manner in 2005**  
(72 hours or less)



**Chart 9. Percent of Children whose Investigations were completed in a Timely Manner in 2005**  
(31 days or less)



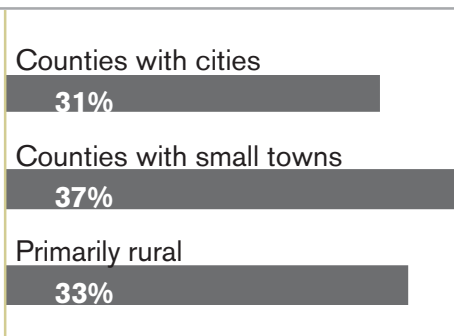
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### The Number of Monthly Visits Between the Child and Relatives

According to DCFS policy, children whose case plan goal is to be reunified with their parents should have monthly visits with their parents. Children who are not placed with their siblings should have bi-weekly visits with their siblings. A child's regular contact with her family is crucial if reunification is to be achieved. For purposes of this question, relatives visits include monthly visits with parents and

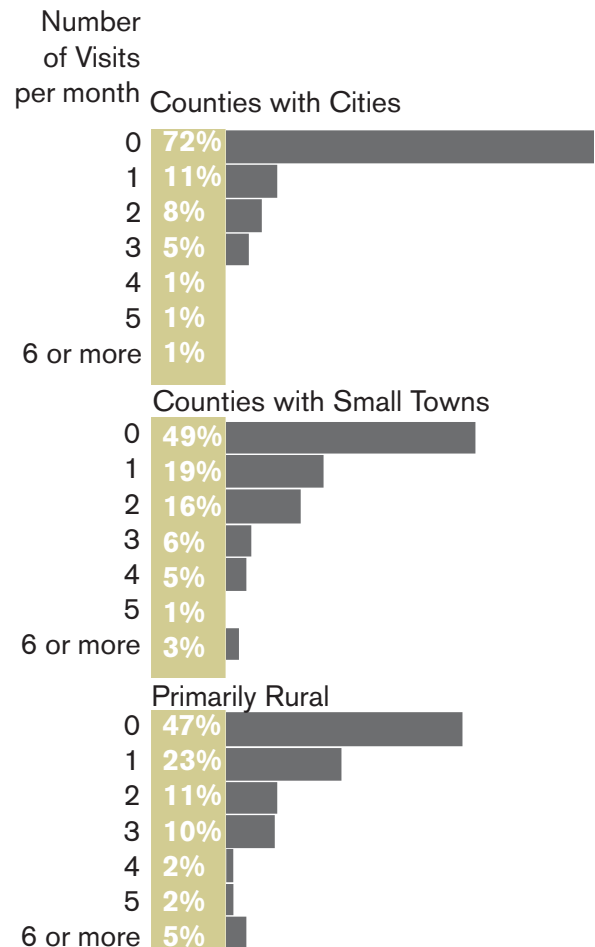
**Chart 10. Percent of Children whose Case Plan Goal was Maintaining Child in Own Home in 2005**



siblings. 1,491 records were analyzed, which included children with a case open in 2005 whose case plan goal was to be reunified with their parents. Cities (72%) were more likely to have no visits per month between the child and her relatives than small towns (49%) and rural areas (47%). See Chart 11.

A focus group participant from an urban area stated that their caseloads are usually higher than smaller towns so they have to prioritize cases. They deal with the toughest situations first such as child safety, which leaves very little time for arranging visits between the child and relatives.

**Chart 11. Percent of Children who had Visits with Relatives 0 to 6 times per Month in 2005**



## Disparities by Age

Several possible disparities were found by age including: cases found to be true, the goal of the case plan, and the number of monthly visits with relatives. A child's age was broken out into six age categories: 0 to 1, 2 to 5, 6 to 11, 12 to 15, 16 to 18, and over 18.

### Report was Found to be True or Unsubstantiated

For the youngest children (ages 0 to 1) the data appeared to show a small difference that a report was more likely to be found true than for children in the other age ranges. Thirty-eight percent of reports were found to be true for children ages 0 to 1 compared to approximately 33% for children ages 2 to 11 and 35% for children ages 12 to 18. A total of 31,500 records were in this analysis, and with this many records a 5% difference is likely to be significant. See Chart 12.

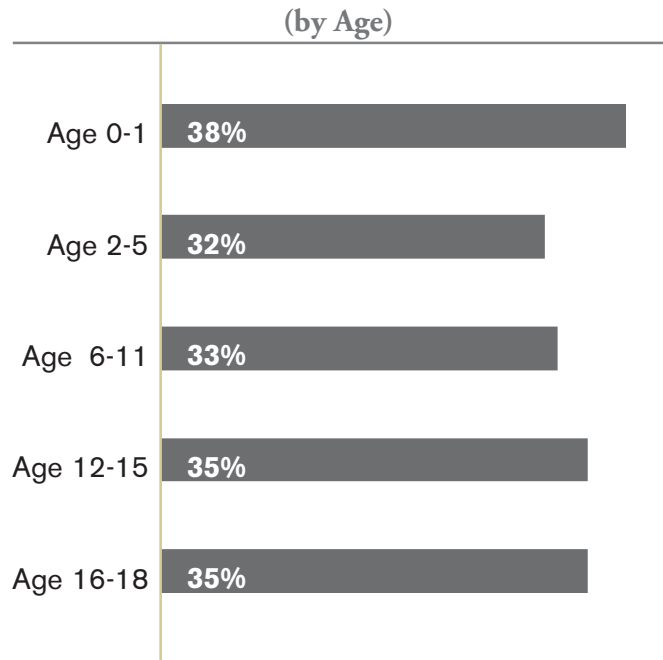
This disparity appeared to be justified according to focus group participants. They stated that younger children are usually not capable of providing information because they lack verbal skills, so workers tend to be more cautious and more likely to find the report true.

### The Goal of the Case Plan

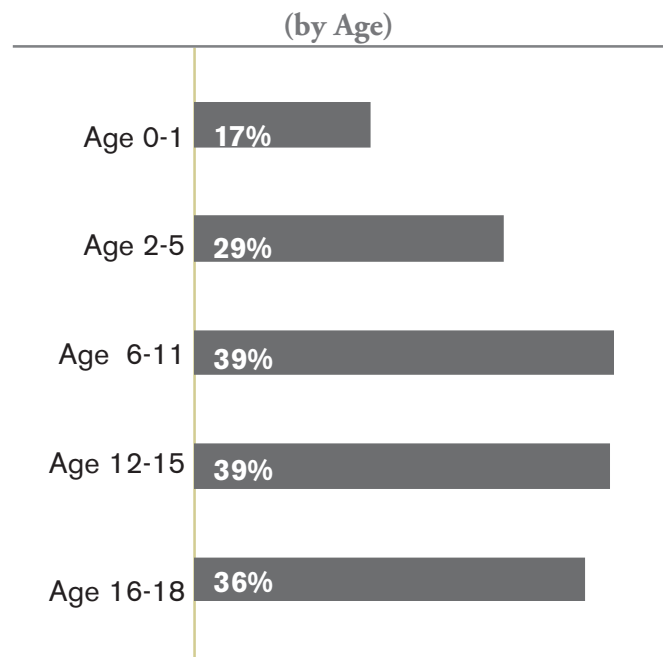
Younger children were less likely to be maintained in their own home than older children. Seventeen percent of children ages 0 to 1 and 29% of children ages 2 to 5 were maintained in their own home. This is compared to children 6 and older which ranged from 39% for ages 6 to 15 and 36% for children 16 through 18. A total of 2,723 records were reviewed in this analysis. See Chart 13.

This disparity would also be justified according to information provided by the focus group participants. They suggested that younger children were less capable of taking care of themselves, and therefore workers felt these children were more at risk if maintained in their home.

**Chart 12. Percent of Children whose Cases were found to be True in 2005**



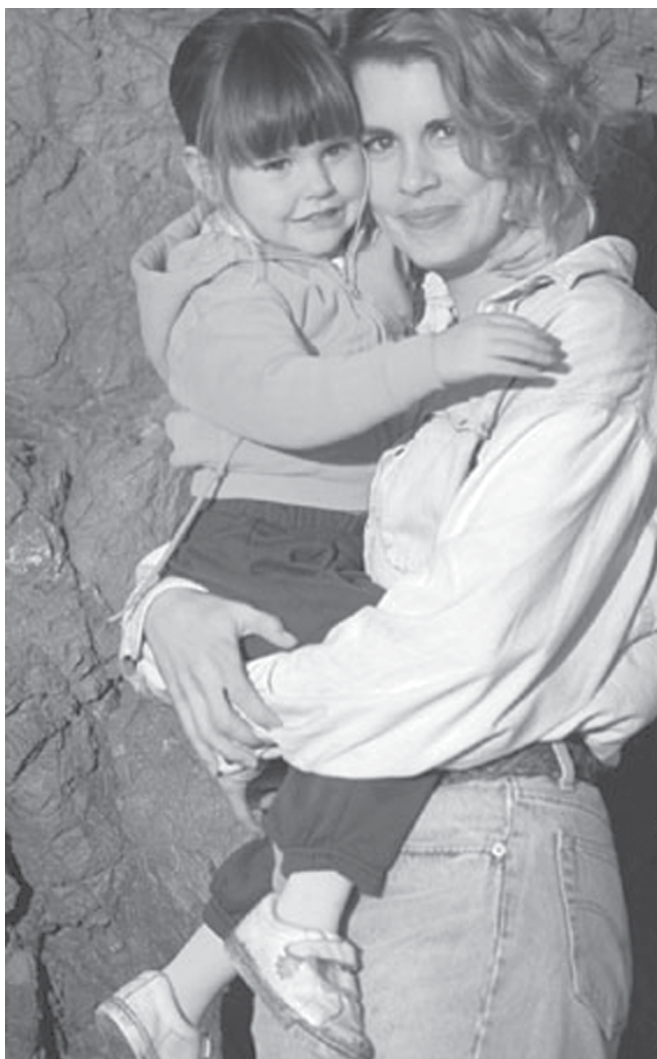
**Chart 13. Percent of Children whose Case Plan Goal was Maintaining Child in Own Home in 2005**



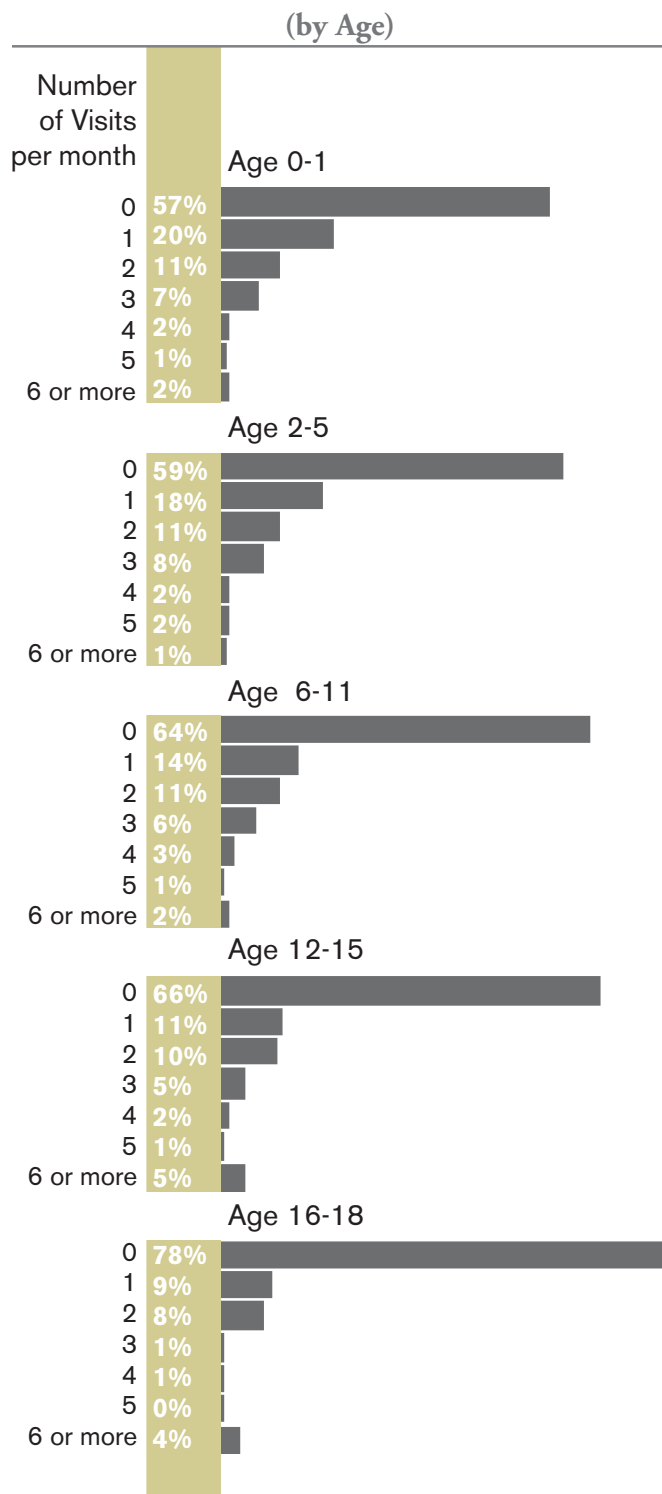
## The Number of Monthly Visits Between the Child and Relatives

When the goal of the case plan was to reunify the child with the parents, older children were more likely not to have monthly visits with their relatives than younger children. 78% of children 16 to 18 years of age did not have monthly visits compared to 57% of children 0 to 1 year of age. 1,524 records were analyzed.

A suggested explanation, especially for the older children, was that the closer the child was to independence the less likely the focus was to reunite the child. Focus group participants said that older children are not always wanted back by their parents because they can be difficult to handle. Older children also tend to have their own lives, and do not wish to visit.



**Chart 14. Percent of Children who had Visits with Relatives 0 to 6 times per Month in 2005**





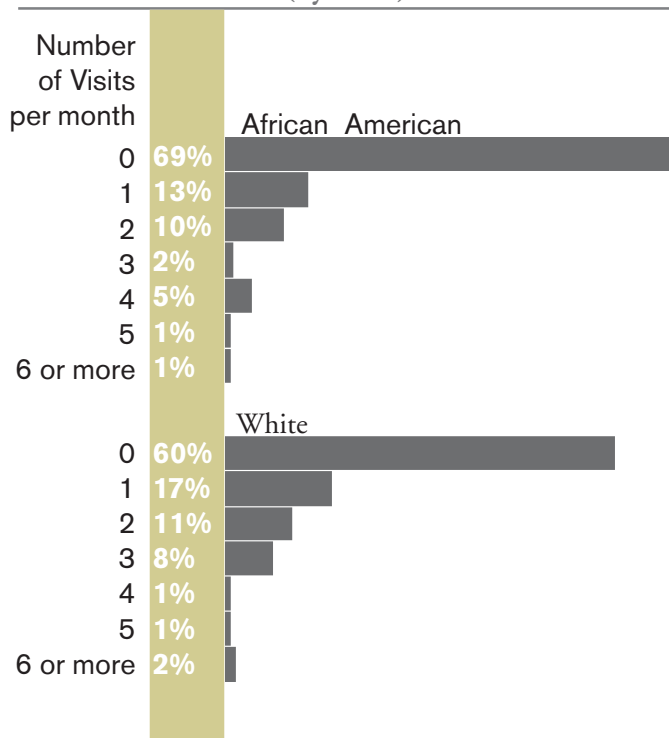
## Disparities by Race:

African American children were analyzed to determine if possible disparities existed between races. Other minority races did not make up a significant enough number to be analyzed. Hispanic children were not captured under race in the CHRIS database, but by ethnicity. The only decision point found that may have a possible disparity was the number of visits between the child and relatives.

### The Number of Visits Between the Child and Relatives

When the goal of the case plan was to reunify the child with their parents, African American children (69%) were more likely to have no monthly visits with their relatives than white children (60%). In this decision point there were a total of 1,524 children, which included 393 African American and 1,018 white children. Other races were included within the 1,524, but they did not represent a significant enough number to be analyzed. See Chart 15.

**Chart 15. Percent of Children who had Visits with Relatives 0 to 6 times per Month in 2005**  
(by Race)



## Hispanic Children

Because of the small number (approximately 1,500) of Hispanic children in the child welfare system in 2005, further study would have to be done to determine whether the small differences found are significant. However, since the number of Hispanic families is growing in Arkansas, it is important to mention the differences so that the data can be monitored in the future:

- ◆ 47% of investigations involving Hispanic children were completed within 30 days as compared to 55% of non-Hispanic children. Fourteen percent of Hispanic children's investigations were not completed in over 150 days as compared to 9% for non-Hispanic children. Some of this difference could be because many of these Hispanic children were located in northwest Arkansas, and the timely completion of investigations for all children in that area of the state was poor compared to other areas of the state.
- ◆ 39% of Hispanic children's cases were found to be true compared to 32% for non-Hispanic children.

Focus group participants said language was an obvious barrier. Even though DCFS had interpreters on contract, it added an extra layer to the process to contact them and arrange a time for them to meet the worker at the victim's house to interview those involved. Several of the offices had a worker on staff that could speak Spanish, but these workers had a regular caseload not specifically devoted to Hispanic families. Focus group participants also said that the Hispanic families moved frequently so it was difficult to do investigations and to locate the parties involved in the investigation.



## Challenges of Analyzing the Data:

For future research, it is important to document the challenges and the limitations that were encountered while conducting this study.

- ◆ The Advisory Committee wanted to measure whether disparities existed based on family income, but in many cases family income was not entered in the CHRIS database at DCFS. Therefore, family income could not be examined for this study.
- ◆ The Advisory Committee had hoped to have a decision point based on calls that were screened out (i.e. not accepted) when an allegation was first reported to the State Police hotline. However, DCFS would not allow AACF access to this data because of a state law that says these records may not be disclosed and may only be used within DCFS for purposes of administration of the program.
- ◆ The Advisory Committee wished to analyze data that dealt with key decision points within the court system such as which children were adjudicated abused or neglected. However, it was discovered that most of this information was not filled out in the CHRIS database at DCFS. This information could be found within the Administrative Office of the Court's database. AACF could not cross analyze this data within the confines of this study because the same children's records from each system were too difficult to link.
- ◆ The Advisory Committee also wanted to select several parts of the system to analyze that dealt with quality of services. However, DCFS did not have quantifiable data dealing with quality of services that AACF could examine.

## Recommendations for Future Studies

The high vacancy rate for family service workers seems to correlate with decision points that deal with initiation and completion of investigations in a timely manner. While the vacancy rate for family service workers has decreased, it still has not been reduced to 2002 levels. Further, DCFS continues to have a difficult time retaining staff. The average length of stay for family service workers was 3.5 years according to a report generated by the DCFS Office of Finance and Administrative Support in September 2006.

“We spend our time putting out fires. All of a sudden you have something that is about to blow up, so you have to stop and take care of that, instead of making a visit to a family.”

Staff experience is very important in protecting a child and helping a family in crisis. Not only are the family service workers interacting with children and families, they are also working with mental health professionals, medical providers, foster parents, law enforcement, attorneys, judges, and others community stakeholders. They must be able to make decisions quickly, make judgment calls from subjective information, and balance many cases. As one family service worker stated, “We spend our time putting out fires. All of a sudden you have something that is about to blow up, so you have to stop and take care of that, instead of making a visit to a family.”

One of the main issues identified in all the focus groups was that family service workers quit because they are overworked and underpaid, and they can find better paying jobs that are much less stressful. Currently, a family service

worker trainee is hired at \$25,897, which is a Grade 18, Level 1 position under the state of Arkansas pay scale. This pay scale applies to all state agencies. This is an incredibly low salary for the nature of their job. They work more than 40 hours a week, have call shifts during the week that involve late nights and weekends, and must make judgment calls constantly that concern the safety of children. The worker's safety is often at risk when they travel alone to

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rural areas where few people are around and animals are not fenced. They go into dangerous situations in homes where drugs, alcohol, and domestic violence are involved. For future studies, it will be important to monitor staffing and retention levels and supports to ensure worker safety for each management area.

Lack of services was another issue raised in focus groups, especially for smaller towns and rural areas. As pointed out by one family service worker: “The child welfare system is not just the case workers at DCFS. I believe if we had access to services that were not so complicated for the fami-

lies to get into in a timely manner that we could prevent a lot of kids from being in that fragile situation and entering foster care. We don't have funding to help people pay their bills like their rent.” For future studies, it will be important to look at which services are available, what services are needed, and what is the quality of the services provided in each area.

Another part of the child welfare system that should be examined for disparities is adoptions. A recent DCFS report found that African American children represent less than 16% of Arkansas' population as of the 2000 census, but they make up 24 percent of children waiting for adoption in SFY 2006.<sup>5</sup> Our study focused on more decision points that are made when the child enters the DCFS system, rather than if the child enters the court system. Further studies should examine whether disparities exist in services, foster care, and adoptions.

## Conclusion

While this study did not analyze all points where critical decisions concerning children are made, it was encouraging that only a few disparities were found. More decision points should be analyzed in the future to determine whether disparities exist in services, foster care, and adoptions. Most importantly, it should be noted that the performance of the overall child welfare system is poor on many indicators, thus impacting all children in the system. DCFS is currently experiencing a leadership transition as they hire a new director. Hopefully, improving the system for all children will be a priority under the new leadership.

With appropriate support from the child welfare system and our local communities, children can grow up to live healthy and productive lives. More than half of maltreatment allegations found to be true involve cases of neglect and can be remedied with the right services. Arkansas' abused and neglected children should be a top priority for our state. These children deserve to have the opportunity to thrive in a loving, safe, and permanent home so that they can reach their full potential.



## Acknowledgment

This research was funded by the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation. We thank them for their support and acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Rurality/RuralUrbCon>

<sup>2</sup> Arkansas Adoption Coalitions Project: A Survey of Coalition Membership. Hornby Zeller Associates, October 2006, p. 2.

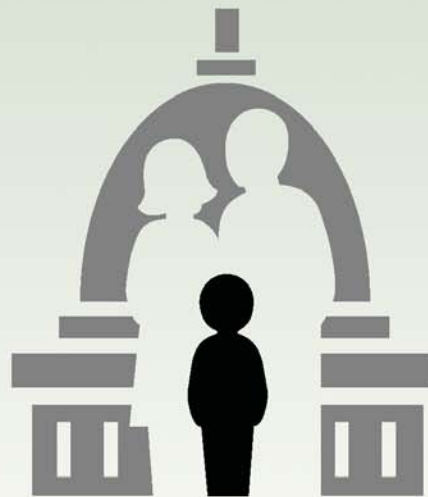
<sup>3</sup> A Long Road Ahead: An Update on the Arkansas Child Welfare System. Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families, July 2006.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/Rurality/RuralUrbCon>

<sup>5</sup> Arkansas Adoption Coalitions Project: A Survey of Coalition Membership. Hornby Zeller Associates, October 2006, p. 2.



For More Information:  
Rich Huddleston, Executive Director  
[rhuddleston@aradvocates.org](mailto:rhuddleston@aradvocates.org)  
[www.aradvocates.org](http://www.aradvocates.org)



**ARKANSAS  
ADVOCATES  
FOR CHILDREN & FAMILIES**

Arkansas Advocates for Children & Families  
Union Station, Suite 306  
1400 W. Markham  
Little Rock, AR 72201  
(501) 371-9678