



Foster Care in California

Achievements and Challenges

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SUMMARY

California's foster care system, responsible for about 63,000 children and youth who have been removed from their homes because of maltreatment or neglect, has made some remarkable advances in the last decade. Foster care is an exceptionally sensitive component of the state's child welfare system because it can mean the removal of a child from a family. So the goal of the foster care system is to safely reunite children with their own families under improved conditions or to provide stable and beneficial home environments elsewhere. Data show that the state has made great progress in moving children out of foster care. Since 2000, there has been a 45 percent drop in the share of California children in the system, a reduction achieved largely through shortening the time that most children spend in foster care. In 31 of California's 58 counties, the number of children in foster care declined by 10 percent or more between 2000 and 2009—even as the population of children in the state increased from 9.3 million to 10 million. The decline has been most pronounced among black children, who have long been overrepresented in the child welfare system. In 2000, 5.4 percent of California's black children were in foster care, but only 2.7 percent were in 2009. Furthermore, more foster children are remaining in their first out-of-home placement, rather than going in and out of multiple placements, than at the beginning of the decade; and more children who entered foster care later in the decade are eventually placed with relatives.

These reductions, which far outpaced those across the rest of the country, may have resulted at least in part from a more intense focus by local and state policymakers on the problems of foster care, which in turn led to innovations in child welfare policies and practices.

The system still faces significant challenges. Payments to foster families and other out-of-home care providers have not kept up with inflation. Despite the reduction in the proportion of black children in the system, they are still substantially overrepresented. There has been a worrisome increase in the share of children who enter foster care more than once during their childhoods. And, despite the significant reductions, the number of children who age out of the system—often facing uncertain futures with too little adult guidance—has actually risen since the beginning of the decade.

The changes we find and report here are measures of process, not of outcome. Confirmation that California children are in fact better off because they either entered foster care or left it requires investigation into their circumstances. Toward that end, we recommend the gathering of broader data, including measures of the well-being of all children who come into contact with the child welfare system, but especially those who spend time in foster care. Tracking children over time, as well as linking child welfare records with educational, health, parental employment, and criminal records collected by other government agencies, would yield valuable information about children's well-being. It would also pave the way for policy and practice innovations that could extend the noteworthy changes that have occurred in this decade.

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