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Technical Appendix

Foster Care in California Achievements and Challenges

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Supported with funding from the Stuart Foundation

Main Data Sources

Child Welfare Services/Case Management System

CWS/CMS is California's statewide system for collecting child welfare data. In collaboration with the Department of Social Services, the California Welfare Performance Indicators Project (CWPIP), housed at the Center for Social Services Research at the University of California, Berkeley, has created a web-based data system to store and report various aggregate data from CWS/CMS. Project staff obtain quarterly CWS/CMS extracts and track the subset of state and federal performance indicators that can be computed using administrative data.¹

Website users can create reports for different subgroups of children or time periods, and the types of reports that can be created are not limited to federal and state performance indicators. The underlying data are updated quarterly and are available dating back to 1998. During the course of quarterly updates, project staff refresh all data to incorporate any corrections made in county data systems to individual children's records. Thus, the statistics in this report may not be exactly reproducible using data posted to the website in the current and future quarters.

Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System

AFCARS is a national dataset. Federal law requires that states receiving federal funds for foster care collect and submit data on all children in foster care, whether or not the children receive federal funding assistance (National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect [NDACAN] 2008). The legislative history and currently proposed changes to AFCARS are reviewed in Federal Register 2008.

A public-use version of these data is available from NDACAN.² The most recent data available cover federal fiscal year 2007 (October 2006–September 2007) and provide information about individual children who were ever in foster care for more than a day during the fiscal year. States have the opportunity to submit corrected data, and NDACAN periodically releases updated versions of the data. At the time of this writing, only the first version of the 2007 AFCARS has been released. It is not known whether updated versions will be released in future years.

Each AFCARS dataset covers one fiscal year and contains one record for every child who was in foster care at any time during the fiscal year. States submit data twice during the year, and NCADAN personnel combine the two reports to produce one public-use dataset. Because AFCARS does not contain a unique identifier for each child, NCADAN staff believe that some duplicate records remain in the public-use datasets but that such duplicates do not exceed 2 percent of records (NCADAN 2008).

Because states can submit updates, a few children who exited foster care after the end of the fiscal year may have an exit date recorded for the subsequent fiscal year. States submit data on children's race/ethnicity, date of removal, age at removal, allegation type, number of prior spells, date of discharge if a child exited during the fiscal year, type of federal or state funding the child received, and some characteristics of children's birth families and foster care placements.

States' definitions of maltreatment vary, so foster care caseloads are not fully comparable across states (Waldfoegel and Paxson 2003, Vericker, Macomber, and Geen 2008). In addition, states do not report children who are not formally taken into state custody, and reporting of probation-supervised foster youth differs

¹ The interface is called the California Child Welfare Dynamic Report System and is available at cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb_childwelfare.

² At ndacan.cornell.edu.

across states (Vericker, Macomber and Geen 2008). Therefore, cross-state comparisons made using these data should be interpreted cautiously.

We use AFCARS to make some limited comparisons between California and the rest of the United States. We also use it to compute length of stay among children in foster care in California.

Differences between CWS/CMS and AFCARS

Although CWS/CMS and AFCARS draw from the same underlying information that counties keep about children who enter foster care in California, there are differences. Apart from quarterly updating that can make CWS/CMS more accurate than AFCARS, which is updated at most once each year, AFCARS also excludes children whose stay in foster care lasted for one day or less and children in nondependent, guardian placements. These differences imply that there should be more children recorded in the CWS/CMS data than in AFCARS and that there should be fewer children with short stays in foster care recorded in AFCARS than in CWS/CMS. In Table A1, we compare the number of children in foster care, entering foster care, and exiting foster care as recorded in both datasets. Although we use only 2000 and 2007 AFCARS data in the report, for comparison purposes we include federal fiscal years 2005 and 2006 in the table, since these are years for which states have had ample opportunity to submit revised data. However, the percentage differences shown in the last column of Table A1 generally tell a similar story across 2005, 2006, and 2007.

We have adjusted the fiscal year 2000 AFCARS data used in this report and summarized in Table A1 to exclude records of children who appear to be duplicated in AFCARS. We determined duplicate records by matching on county, birth date, earliest removal date, latest removal date (if different from the earliest), number of prior removals, discharge date (if any), recorded reason for latest discharge (if any), race/ethnicity, allegation types, and eligibility for federal funding. Dropping these likely duplicates reduced the 2000 caseload by 661 children, the number of children entering by 3,604, and the number of children exiting by 5,571. Later years do not have any instances of apparent duplicates.

As expected, the number of children in foster care is 5 to 7 percent smaller in AFCARS than in CWS/CMS data for the years 2005–2007. However, AFCARS records 4 percent more children at the end of fiscal year 2000. A smaller share of children are reported to have stays of five years or longer in AFCARS than in CWS/CMS, and 6–11 percent fewer children exiting foster care recorded in AFCARS than in CWS/CMS. Differences in number of children entering foster care are generally smaller, ranging between –3 and 4 percent, with the exception of 2000, where the difference is 9 percent.

Overall, these comparisons do not lead us to expect a particular direction of bias in examining trends over time using AFCARS (our primary reason to draw upon AFCARS data) but rather to expect that lengths of stay in foster care calculated at a particular point in time using AFCARS would be somewhat shorter than those calculated using CWS/CMS if we were able to make the latter calculation.

TABLE A1
Comparison of AFCARS and CWS/CMS

	AFCARS	CWS/CMS	Percentage difference
Caseload			
FY 2000	112,146	108,131	4
FY 2005	81,174	85,545	-5
FY 2006	78,373	83,111	-6
FY 2007	74,058	79,996	-7
Time in care (%), FY 2000			
< 1 year	26	28	-5
1 to 3 years	34	32	9
3 to 5 years	18	17	5
5 years and longer	22	24	-10
Time in care (%), FY 2005			
< 1 year	35	35	0
1 to 3 years	32	30	6
3 to 5 years	12	11	5
5 years and longer	21	23	-11
Time in care (%), FY 2006			
< 1 year	36	36	-1
1 to 3 years	33	31	4
3 to 5 years	11	11	-3
5 years and longer	21	22	-3
Time in care (%), FY 2007			
< 1 year	38	37	2
1 to 3 years	34	32	6
3 to 5 years	11	11	-5
5 years and longer	18	20	-10
Entries			
FY 2000	45,685	42,081	9
FY 2005	43,772	42,205	4
FY 2006	41,082	42,286	-3
FY 2007	41,390	42,396	-2
Exits			
FY 2000	50,112	44,541	13
FY 2005	42,589	45,337	-6
FY 2006	40,144	45,020	-11
FY 2007	42,461	45,635	-7

SOURCES: Authors' calculations from Needell et al. 2010, AFCARS n.d.

NOTES: Caseloads are as of September 30 of the federal fiscal year for AFCARS and as of October for CWS/CMS. The table excludes likely duplicate records in 2000 AFCARS. The CWS/CMS data summarized in this table include child-welfare-supervised children, probation-supervised children, and other children. See the methodology notes in Needell et al. 2010 for further details about these possible supervision types.

Methodology

In the body of the report, we adjust for missing and multiple racial/ethnic information about children in California, and we consider the effect of the introduction of Kin-GAP on the foster care caseload. Below, we describe the methodology we used to draw our conclusions.

Estimates for Racial/Ethnic Groups

In several sections of the report, we describe differences across racial/ethnic groups. As Table A2 shows, information about race/ethnicity is incomplete for a minority of children.

TABLE A2
Percentage distribution of children, by racial/ethnic group, including missing and multiple race

Racial/ethnic group	Child population	Children entering foster care	Children entering foster care for the first time	Children in foster care	Children exiting foster care
Multiple race/missing race and ethnicity	3.7	0.4	0.3	0.1	0.3
Hispanic	49.3	48.1	50.2	45.6	48.1
White	30.6	25.8	26.2	24.7	25.4
Black	5.8	20.2	18.7	25.7	21.8
Asian or Pacific Islander	10.2	3.4	3.6	2.7	3.1
Native American	0.5	1.2	1.0	1.3	1.3

SOURCE: Authors' calculations from Needell et al. 2010 and Department of Finance 2007.

NOTES: The first cell in the row labeled "Multiple race/missing race and ethnicity" includes non-Hispanic children with multiple recorded races. Child population and foster care caseload statistics are from July 2009; entry and exit statistics cover the 2008–2009 state fiscal year. Children with multiple entries or exits are counted only once. Child population is drawn from California Department of Finance estimates. The first cell in the row labeled Multiple race/missing race and ethnicity includes non-Hispanic children with multiple recorded races. Other cells in this row indicate children with no recorded race or ethnicity in the CWS/CMS reports. See the accompanying text for further details.

Racial/ethnic information about children in the child welfare system is most often based on parent reports. Respondents indicate the child's primary race and Hispanic ethnicity. They can select one or more secondary races. However, CWPIP classifies children by primary race, or by Hispanic ethnicity. Thus, there is no multiple race category in the aggregate data presented on the project's website. At the same time, some children's records lack racial/ethnic information completely; they are designated as "missing" race/ethnicity on the project website. It is this missing category that we reallocate when we calculate the ranges shown in Table A3.

Total child population originates from annual population projections made by the California Department of Finance, and these are based on the 2000 Census. Census respondents (usually the parent or head of household) are asked to check all races that apply for each child. The Department of Finance estimates include a category for Hispanic of any race (including multiple races), the single race groups listed in Table A2, and multiple races. There is no missing race/ethnicity category in Department of Finance estimates. We reallocate the multiple race category when we calculate the ranges shown in Table A3.

Table A2 shows the incidence of missing and multiple race for 2008–2009 (earlier years are similar). Missing and multiple race affects the estimates for numerically large racial/ethnic groups very little. Estimates for Native American children, particularly the estimates for maltreatment and substantiated maltreatment reports for Native American children, are potentially most affected.

The columns of Table A3 labeled "percentage in foster care" show the widest range of estimates that we can calculate by assigning all of the children recorded with missing and with multiple races in turn to each of the included racial/ethnic groups. For example, to calculate the low-end estimate for the share of white children in foster care, we add all of the children in the Department of Finance "multiple race" category to the estimate of the number of white children in the population to create the denominator and use the CWS/CMS reports of the number

of white children in foster care as the numerator. To create the high-end estimate, we add all of the children in the CWS/CMS missing race category to the number of white children reported to be in foster care and divide by Department of Finance estimates for the number of white children in the population. We do the same for black and for Asian or Pacific Islander children. The range for Hispanics does not include the recalculation of the denominator because the definition of Hispanic ethnicity already includes children with multiple identified races. The point estimates are close to the top of the range in all cases because there are relatively few children who enter foster care with missing information about their race/ethnicity in the CWS/CMS, and relatively more children in the multiple race category in the population.

By making some assumptions, we could narrow these ranges. We do not because the central point of the disproportionate representation of black children in foster care would be clear even if we were to choose the lower-bound estimate for black children and the upper-bound estimates for Hispanic, white, and Asian or Pacific Islander children. The exception here is Native American children. In 2000 as well as 2009, the range of estimates for Native American children supports both an interpretation of under- as well as overrepresentation in foster care compared to Hispanic and white children. Because the estimates for Native American children have so much uncertainty associated with them (i.e., the 2009 share of Native American children in foster care ranges between .18 percent and 1.70 percent), we exclude them from the calculations presented in the body of the report.

TABLE A3
Range of estimates, by race/ethnicity

	2000				2009			
	Percentage in the population		Percentage in foster care		Percentage in the population		Percentage in foster care	
	Low estimate	Upper estimate	Point estimate	Range	Low estimate	Upper estimate	Point estimate	Range
All	–	–	1.1	–	–	–	0.6	–
Race/ethnicity								
Hispanic	43.84	–	0.86	0.86–0.87	49.26	–	0.55	0.55–0.55
White	35.50	38.61	0.82	0.75–0.82	30.65	34.34	0.48	0.43–0.48
Black	7.15	10.26	5.35	3.73–5.37	5.76	9.45	2.67	1.62–2.67
Asian or Pacific Islander	9.85	12.96	0.22	0.17–0.23	10.18	13.87	0.16	0.11–0.16
Native American	0.54	3.65	2.28	0.34–2.47	0.47	4.16	1.62	0.18–1.70

SOURCE: Authors' calculations from Needell et al. 2010, referring to data for July of each year.

NOTE: "Range" is the widest possible range of estimates, as described in the text.

Kin-GAP Simulation

To simulate the caseload under the counterfactual scenario of no Kin-GAP program, we consider two scenarios. As an upper-bound estimate on Kin-GAP effects, we assume that all children who exited from foster care into Kin-GAP would have remained in foster care until the age of emancipation.

Then, for each calendar year from January 2000 through July 2009, we determine the total number of children exiting Kin-GAP, and we add them back into the caseload for that year and for each following year until they reach age 18; then we omit them from the following years, up through 2008. This results in a simulated caseload for each calendar year, which is our upper-bound estimate for the caseload if the Kin-GAP program had not been implemented.

We also estimate a second scenario in which we assume that some children in foster care would have left before emancipating, even if the Kin-GAP program had not existed. To do so, we compute age-specific exit rates for each year among children who were in foster care and who did not exit to Kin-GAP. We then apply these exit rates to each age-year combination of children who exited to Kin-GAP to simulate what the caseload decline would have been had some children who exited to Kin-GAP instead found another permanent placement before reaching age 18. In the text, we report a scenario that assumes that children who exited to Kin-GAP would have had exit rates to other permanent placements that were half those that other children experienced.

We make an upward adjustment to the number of children recorded as exiting to Kin-GAP by adding to those exits all children recorded as exiting to “other guardianship” whose last foster care placement was with a relative. Comparing separate documentation of the number of children exiting foster care and entering Kin-GAP in a given year, it is evident that the CWS/CMS data record too few exits to Kin-GAP (California Department of Social Services n.d., Needell et al. 2010). This adjustment is a plausible approach to adjusting the number of Kin-GAP exits upward.

In addition, the aggregate data available allow retrieval of ages only in whole numbers. This implies that some children who appear to have reached age 18 in a particular year in actuality would have reached that age in the prior or subsequent year. Although this limitation could bias our estimates if there has been a systematic change over time in the month of birth of children who exited to Kin-GAP, we believe that this is unlikely to be the case.

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