



UNDERSTANDING DATA AND THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Welcome to the first edition of *Insights*. *Insights* is a new and ongoing publication that examines the links between data, policy and outcomes for our state's most vulnerable children and families. This premier issue examines California's child welfare outcomes since January 2004, when the state's new outcomes and accountability system went into effect.

Insights will highlight key state and federal data that can be monitored over time. Subsequent issues will examine specific data elements and provide information about how practice and policy can impact improvements in child welfare outcomes. The next issue of *Insights* will examine permanency for children and youth in the child welfare system.

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HOW ARE WE DOING?

Early results are promising. Data indicate that fewer children are entering the system and for those who do, many are returning to live with their families sooner.

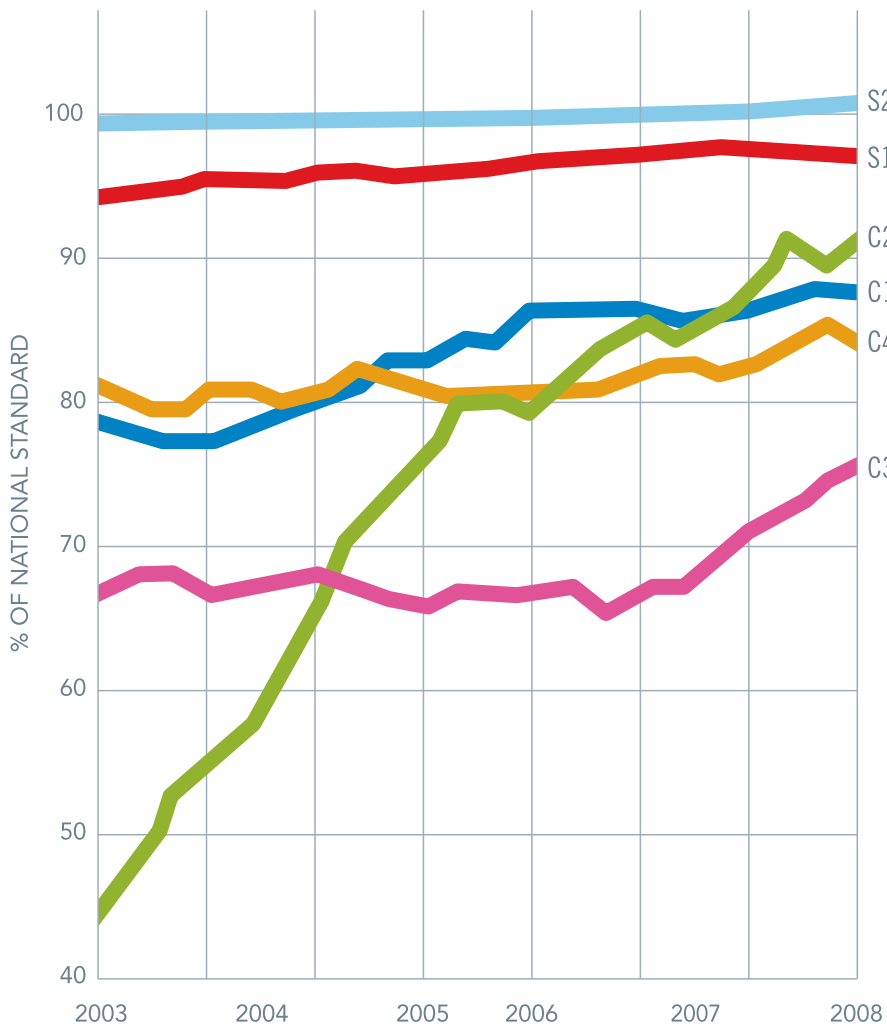
Work remains to be done. Despite this progress, data has also identified critical areas that need attention and require improvement. Challenges include increasing the placement stability of children and youth, reducing reentry into the system for children who have been reunified with their families, and increasing permanency for children in long-term care.

The stakes are high. Children who have experienced abuse and neglect are among the most vulnerable of California's residents. These children have suffered trauma and loss and deserve the best support and services that can be provided. Data can identify those services and practices that are the most helpful. Improving outcomes is a matter of particular urgency for these children and their families.

Insights into Data

California's Performance on National Child Welfare Standards

The federal government requires states to track performance focused on safety, permanency, and well-being. It sets standards for safety and permanency. There are six national standards—two safety standards with indicators that stand alone, and four composite standards that compress 15 separate measures of permanency and stability.



Safety Indicator 1 (S1)

No Recurrence of Child Maltreatment

California has always performed relatively well on this issue and has improved from 95.3% to 98.0% of the national standard in the past five years.

Safety Indicator 2 (S2)

No Maltreatment in Foster Care

California's performance is currently 99.9% of the national standard. The state has met or exceeded the national standard for this measure in most years since AB 636 was implemented.

Composite Score 1 (C1)

Reunification

California has improved from 78.8% of the standard to 88.6% of the standard, a 12.4% improvement in the past five years.

Composite Score 2 (C2)

Adoption

California has improved from 45.0% of the standard to 92.0% of the standard—an improvement of over 100% in the past five years.

Composite Score 3 (C3)

Long-term Care

California has improved from 67.6% of the standard to 76.0% of the standard—a 12.4% improvement in the past five years.

Composite Score 4 (C4)

Placement Stability

California has improved from 81.7% of the standard to 85.0% of the standard in the past five years—a 4.0% improvement.

This Insights chart shows that California is improving on all six national standards for child welfare performance: two child safety measures and four permanency indicators. However, not all counties are improving in all areas, nor are all measures within a given composite score improving.

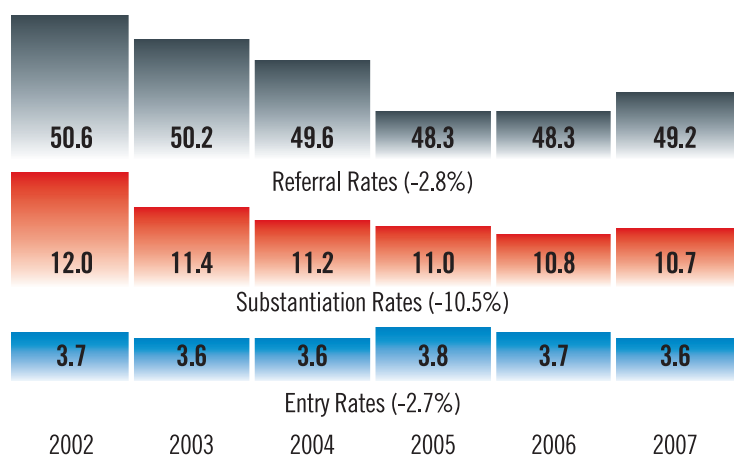
All of the numbers reported in this document reflect data from California's Child Welfare Services/Case Management System. The data are publicly available at: http://cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb_childwelfare

California's Participation Rates

California takes accountability seriously when it comes to families and children. California's Child Welfare Outcomes and Accountability system (AB 636) tracks additional data and examines trends related to child safety, permanency and well-being. California's system is based on a continuous improvement model – the goal is for each county to continually improve its outcomes.

The California system provides quarterly data on a range of issues, including "Participation Rates" that count children who come in contact with the child welfare system as a rate per 1,000 children in the population.

Performance on all other measures should be viewed by first understanding participation rates. They tell us how many children we are serving and act as a guide to the best use of available resources.



- **Participation Rate 1 (PR 1) Referral Rate**

The rate of reports of abuse or neglect has decreased by 2.8% in the last five years.

- **Participation Rate 2 (PR 2) Substantiation Rate**

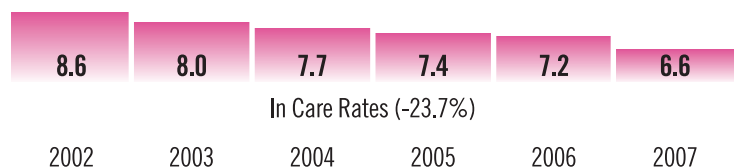
The rate of substantiated reports has decreased by 10.5% in the last five years.

- **Participation Rate 3 (PR 3) Entry Rate**

The foster care entry rate has decreased by 2.7% over the past five years.

California child welfare agencies receive more than half a million reports of child abuse and neglect each year. Only a portion of these reports are substantiated and a smaller number of those cases enter the foster care system.

This chart shows the relationship among: the rate at which reports are referred, the rate at which these reports are substantiated, and the rate at which children enter foster care. It illustrates the large difference between the rate of reports and the rate at which children enter care. The chart reflects rates per 1,000 children.



- **Participation Rate 4 (PR 4) In Care Rate**

The foster care in-care rate has seen a 23.7% decrease over five years.

This chart shows the rate of children in foster care on any given day in the specific year cited. Since 2002 there has been a substantial decline in children in foster care. The chart reflects rates per 1,000 children.

Using Data to Improve Child Welfare Outcomes

Child welfare data provide an important resource for state policy makers, child welfare professionals and other stakeholders. Data can increase Californians' understanding of the impact of child welfare programs and other state funded services. Data can also help show what is working—and where improvements are needed. Using data to inform child welfare practice and policy helps ensure that services provided to children and families are contributing to desired outcomes.

There are several key points to keep in mind when analyzing data and using it to achieve better outcomes for children and families:

- **Data about child welfare outcomes are inter-related, and indicators cannot be viewed in isolation.** It is important to look at how one data measure affects another. For example, expanding services to keep children safe at home may lead to a decrease in entries into foster care. Those children who must still enter the system may come from families with more challenging issues, which in turn may make reunification more difficult. Thus, a decline in reunification performance may be driven by an improvement in the availability of preventive services.
- **Look at trend data that follows progress over time, and not just data that represent a single day or point in time.** Following trends from a specific baseline date can give a good sense of whether county performance is improving or declining. It can also lead to very interesting discussions if data show an unexpected dip or rise. Keep in mind that if the baseline is already relatively high, there will not necessarily be a great deal of improvement, while if the baseline performance is relatively low, even a lot of improvement may still leave a long way to go.
- **Be mindful when comparing counties.** Particularly in California, there are enormous variations in demographics across our state. Outcomes must be evaluated in the context of the socioeconomic differences of the families in each county, as well as the services and resources available in each community.
- **Pay attention to the racial background of children who enter the system.** Many states, including California, are grappling with an overrepresentation of African-American and Native American children in the system. Children from both groups are more likely to be removed from their homes and to stay in placement longer than their counterparts in white, Hispanic, or Asian families.
- **Age is another factor to watch.** Outcomes differ depending on age, as do risks and service needs. Children are more likely to enter out-of-home care during infancy than at any other age and young children are more likely to be adopted than older children. Youth who age out of foster care at 18 or 19 are often unprepared to live independently as adults and are more likely than their peers to drop out of school, face unemployment, experience homelessness, and struggle with mental health issues.

Future issues of Insights will explore these topics and will focus on specific measures. The next issue will examine permanency for children and youth in the child welfare system.



California Child Welfare
Co-Investment Partnership

The California Child Welfare Co-Investment Partnership is a collaborative group of state agencies, foundations and other nonprofit organizations. Our goal is to ensure a coordinated approach to the investments needed to improve the lives of children and families who are in, or are at risk of, entering the state's child welfare system. We provide information to policymakers and the public and have a range of materials on our Web site.