California Child Welfare
Co-Investment Partnership

insights

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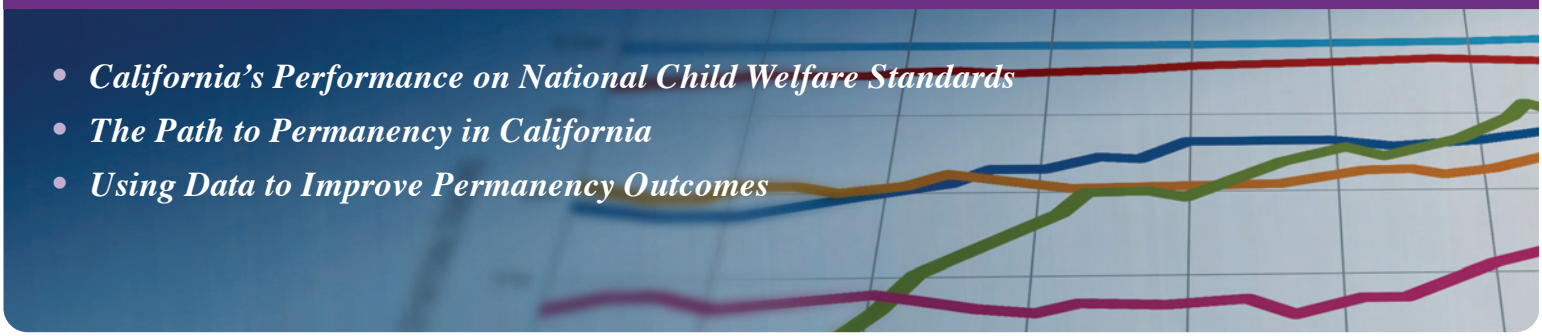
UNDERSTANDING PERMANENCY AND THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

This issue of Insights focuses on permanency for children who are in the child welfare system. Along with safety and well-being, permanency is one of the three critical outcomes that guide all efforts to provide for children who have been abused or neglected.

Permanency refers to the need of all children and youth for love, a sense of belonging, and the continuity of family to support and sustain them throughout their lives.

When relationships with family members, caregivers and others are nurtured and sustained, children and youth in foster care have the opportunity to forge "emotional" or "relational" permanency with caring adults. These are important building blocks for achieving the legal permanency outcomes explored in this issue of Insights.

IN THIS ISSUE



HOW ARE WE DOING?

California has made significant progress toward achieving permanency goals. We are improving in our ability to quickly and safely return children to their families and in our placement of children with adoptive families when a child is unable to return home. Data indicate that the percentage of family reunifications occurring within 12 months of placement is increasing and the time to adoption is decreasing.

Important areas need further improvement. If a child is still in care four to five years after placement, it less likely that he or she will find a permanent home. Data supports the need for additional focus on children who have been in foster care for more than two years.

Time is critical. Foster youth who do *not* have permanent connections to supportive adults are generally on their own when they "age out" of the system at 18 or 19. Research indicates that these youth are at high risk of dropping out of school, unemployment, homelessness, incarceration, mental health problems and more.

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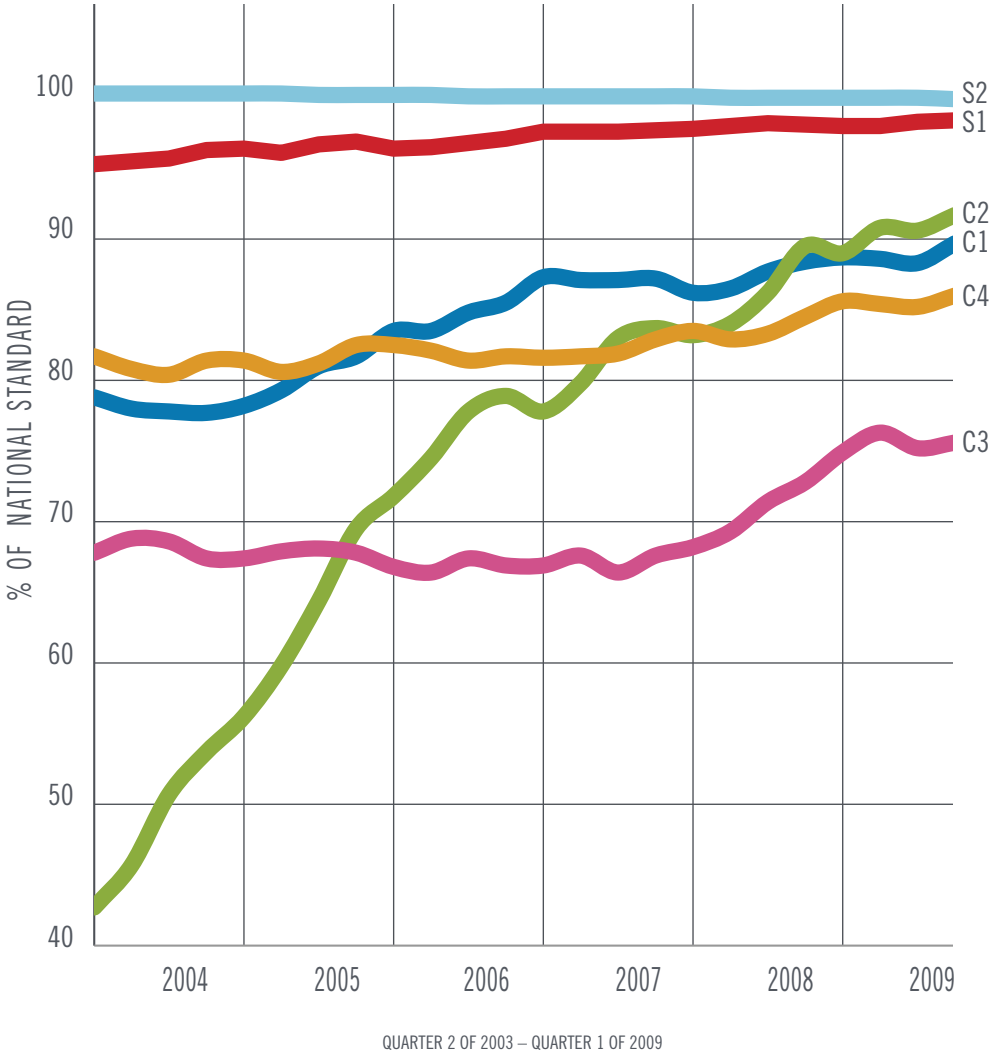
Insights into Data

California's Performance on National Child Welfare Standards

The federal government has mandated permanency goals for all states. States that do not make sufficient progress toward these timelines can be financially penalized. The six federal measures below show how California is doing on these national standards. All four of the composite measures have permanency implications: reunification, adoption, number of children in long-term care and placement stability.



QUARTER 2 OF 2003 – QUARTER 1 OF 2009

* AB 636 (2003) is California's Outcomes and Accountability System. The California system provides quarterly data on a range of issues in addition to the national child welfare standards and enables the state to examine trends related to child safety, permanency and well-being.

Safety Indicator 1 (S1)
— No Recurrence of Child Maltreatment
California has always performed relatively well on this issue and has improved from 95.4% to 98.4% of the national standard in the past six years.

Safety Indicator 2 (S2)
— No Maltreatment in Foster Care
California's performance is currently at 99.9% of the national standard. The state has met or exceeded the 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 89.7% of the standard, a 13.8% improvement in the past six years.

Composite Score 2 (C2)
— Adoption
California has improved from 42.7% to 91.7% of the standard — an improvement of over 100% in the past six years.

Composite Score 3 (C3)
— Long-term Care
California has improved from 67.8% of the standard to 75.6% of the standard — an 11.5% improvement over six years.

Composite Score 4 (C4)
— Placement Stability
California has improved from 81.7% to 86.0% of the standard in the past six years — a 5.2% improvement.

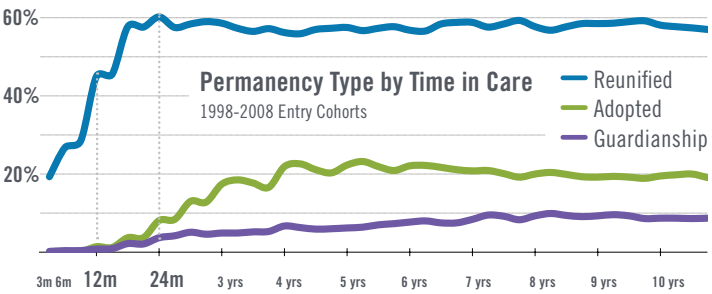
This Insights chart shows that California is improving on all six national standards for child welfare performance: two child safety measures and four permanency indicators. However, not all counties are improving in all areas, nor are all measures within a given composite score improving.

All of the numbers reported in this document reflect data from California's Child Welfare Services/Case Management System (CWS/CMS). Baseline data on some measures may change slightly over time due to data entry and clean-up efforts by counties. The data are publicly available at: http://cssr.berkeley.edu/ucb_childwelfare

The Path to Permanency in California

California's Child Welfare Outcomes and Accountability System augments the federal measures. The data provides a more comprehensive picture of the experiences of children in foster care and increases our ability to understand the various decisions and dynamics that impact finding and securing permanent families for these children and youth.

Most children entering foster care return home to their families.

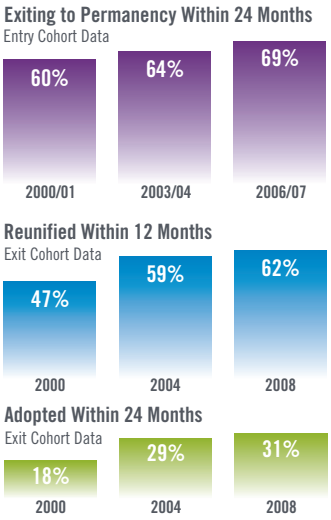


This graph shows that the path to permanency is strongly related to the length of time a child has spent in foster care:

- Most children find permanency through reunification with their parents and do so within two years of removal from their homes.
- During the first two years of placement, adoptions and guardianship make up a small share of exits from foster care. However, these paths to permanency become increasingly important the longer a child or youth is in foster care.

California continues to improve but more is needed for children in foster care.

California's system allows permanency trends to be examined using three types of data:

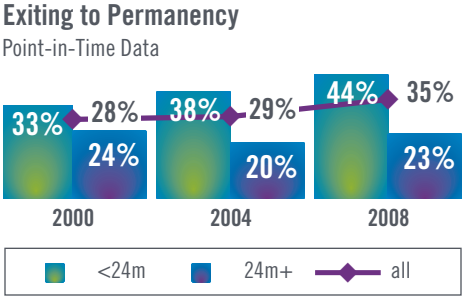


Entry cohort data tracks children in foster care over time based on their common entry into foster care during a specified period of time. It shows that:

- 69% of children who entered care in 2006/07 found permanent homes with families within 24 months of entry versus only 60% of children who entered care in 2000/01.

Exit cohort data defines a group of children based on where they go when they leave foster care (e.g., reunification, adoption or guardianship) during a specified period of time. It shows that:

- 62% of children were reunified with their families within 12 months of entry in 2008, a far larger proportion than in 2000 when only 47% reunified within 12 months.
- 31% of all adoptions were completed within 24 months of entry compared to only 18% in 2000. Between 2000 and 2008, the median number of months that adopted children spent in care before exiting to permanency dropped from 38 months to 30 months.



Point-in-time data offers a "snapshot" view of all children who are in out-of-home care, away from their families, on a given day. Permanency outcomes for these children can then be tracked over time. This data shows that:

- 35% of all children in care on the first day of 2008 left the child welfare system to permanent homes with a family, up from 28% of children in care on the first day of 2000.
- 44% of children in care for **less than 24 months** on the first day of 2008 left the child welfare system to a permanent home and family within the year, compared with only 33% in 2000. The proportion of children in care for **24 months or more** on the first day of 2008 that exited to permanency within the year remained about the same as in 2000.

Insights into Policy

POLICY

Using Data to Improve Permanency

By connecting child welfare practice to outcomes for children and using data to follow progress, California has made significant improvements in moving children and youth out of foster care and into families where they can grow and thrive. But more work is needed to ensure all children are able to live in loving, stable and secure families. Insights into policy include:

Federally mandated timelines improve permanency outcomes, but also present challenges for some families. Federal guidelines require states to complete efforts for family reunification or adoption within certain timeframes. Some of the improvements in California's permanency outcomes can be attributed to this mandate. However the challenges of some families may be too great to resolve within these limited federal timeframes as they may require comprehensive services over longer periods of time to resolve the issues that led to the removal of their children. For instance, research indicates that addiction issues put children at risk of maltreatment and removal, and many families who have addiction issues also struggle with mental health and domestic violence problems. Policies that prioritize drug treatment, mental health and domestic violence programs for child welfare parents could improve successful reunification within federal timelines.

Children and youth who have been in care for two or more years require increased efforts to ensure they have permanent homes or lifelong commitments from caring adults. The data shows that most children return home to their families or find alternate forms of permanency within two years and that children entering care today are finding permanency more quickly than those who entered foster care five to ten years ago. However, the data also reveal that California's efforts to secure permanent homes for children and youth who have been in care for more than two years have not been as successful. Multiple variables impact this outcome:

- **Age** — Many of the children who have been in care for two or more years are older; therefore, different strategies may be required to find them permanent families. Before older youth can leave care, additional efforts may be needed to locate permanent families or to secure and support loving adults who are committed to establishing critical relational permanency.
- **Sibling Groups** — Finding families for sibling groups can present numerous challenges. Data, however, shows that relatives are often willing to take in these special groups of children. Enhanced family finding and relative support services could increase the likelihood that siblings are able to be placed together in a permanent home.
- **Special Needs** — Children with special needs, either emotional or physical, present additional challenges when seeking to secure a loving home. Post-permanency services can help support these children and their adoptive families.

Caseloads and funding strategies can impact permanency outcomes. When social workers, dependency court judges, and child and family attorneys carry high caseloads, they are not always able to engage in the type of intensive activities that could improve permanency outcomes. Reducing high caseloads, especially for individuals assigned to children and youth who have been in care for more than two years could improve permanency outcomes. Funding strategies can also impact permanency outcomes. Strategies such as California's Adoption Initiative and Older Adoption Pilot have been successful in securing permanent homes and reducing the time children and youth spend in foster care. In both cases, additional resources with funding flexibility were provided to counties for increasing adoptions. Counties improved permanency outcomes employing a variety of strategies.

There is more to learn. The issue of permanency is complex with multiple variables impacting outcomes. In this issue we have provided some insight into legal and relational permanency options and outcomes. In future issues we will explore the impact that race and premature reunification has on permanency outcomes.

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.

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