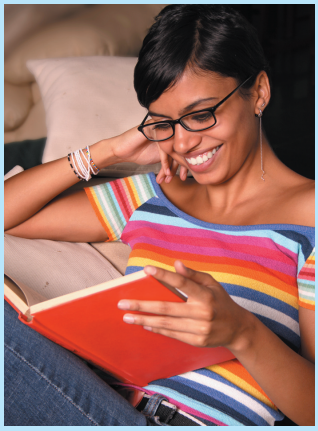
A Joint Study by the Nebraska State Foster Care Review Board and the Nebraska Department of Health & Human Services

Finding Permanent Homes

February 2009

Working Together for Children in Foster Care

The **Nebraska State Foster Care Review Board** (FCRB) and the **Department of Health and Human Services** (DHHS) continue to work to better understand children in foster care and the barriers they face to finding permanent homes. In fall 2008, caseworkers and supervisors in the DHHS Division of Children and Family Services teamed up with FCRB staff to study 230 children and youth who have been in foster care for two years or longer. Staff focused on parental compliance and placement issues.

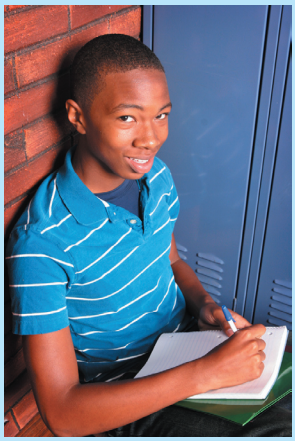


Working together on this special study, DHHS and the FCRB learned many lessons and also identified some areas of concern. Here's a brief overview of the results of that study.

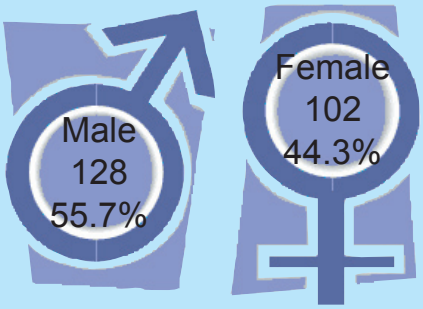
Who Was Included?

Originally, we wanted to examine cases from April 2008 involving 550 children and youth. By the time the data collection began, plans for many of those children had already changed, with 320 children's plans changed to adoption, guardianship, or other plans. We would like to acknowledge DHHS caseworkers and supervisors for this work.

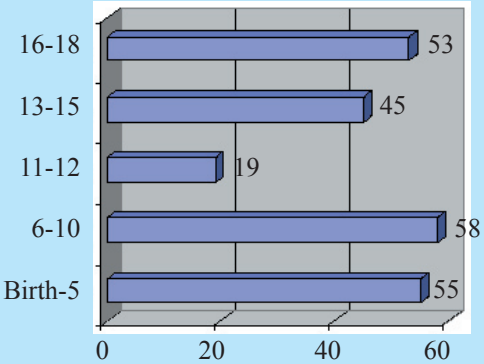
We looked at the cases of 230 children who have been in foster care two years or longer and whose plan was reunification. Here's a more detailed look at who was included.



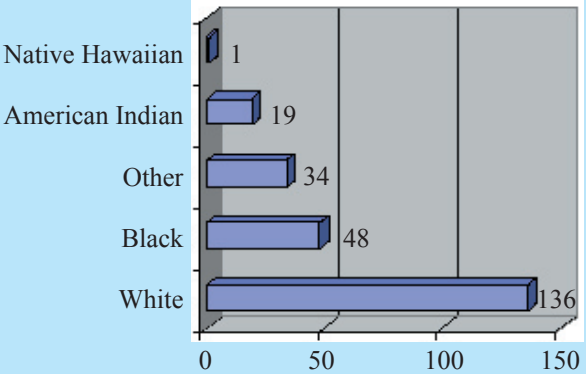
Gender of Youth in Study



Age of Youth in Study



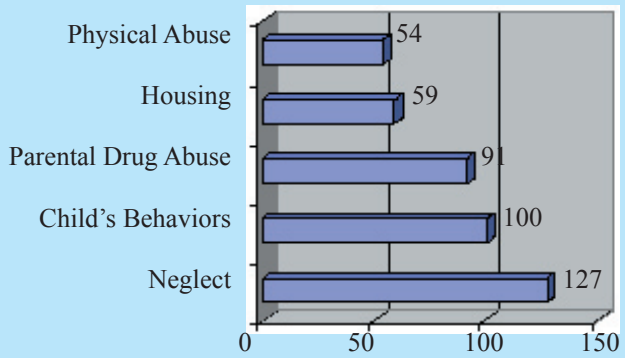
Race of Youth in Study



* multiple races may have been given

Positive Results, Concerns, and Lessons Learned

Top 5 Reasons Youth are in Foster Care*



* multiple reasons may have been given

Positive Results for the Youth

The special study validates that some indicators are moving in the right direction. For example:

- Services were provided within 60 days of removal for 192 children (83.5%).
- Current services were appropriate for 183 children (79.6%).
- Children's court hearings are occurring every 6 months for 82.2% of the children.
- Paternity was established for 173 children (75.2%).
- Permanency plans changed for 111 of the 230 youth because of the study.
- Over half (50.9%) of the children had three or fewer caseworkers over the lifetime of the case.

Areas of Concern

- The number one barrier to reunification is the parent not being able or willing to parent (121 children, or 52.6% of cases).
- Mothers did not comply at all or only partially complied with visitation for 69 children (35.0%).
- Safety concerns were identified for 22 of the 117 children (18.8%) despite the fact that visitation was supervised or monitored by a contractor.
- There were aggravated circumstances at the time of removal for 26 youth (11.3%),

Areas of Concern, continued

however the plan remained reunification. In only 3 of the 26 children's case was expedited permanency sought (a court ruling that efforts to reunify were not necessary).

- Court 12-month permanency hearings did not occur for 16 children (7.0%).
- For 41.3% of the children, we were unable to determine if the required court hearing occurred in order to determine if a termination of parental rights petition should be filed.
- 20.6% of children did not have contact with their siblings. For 18.5% of children it was unclear if sibling contacts were occurring.

Lessons Learned

DHHS and the FCRB learned many lessons from this special study.

- Parental willingness needs to be assessed early, and parental compliance monitored throughout the case.
- There needs to be a particular focus on strengthening stability and safety of placements.
- Foster parents should be better prepared and supported for the unique challenges of caring for children with a disability.
- A consistent focus is needed on identifying cases of extreme abuse or neglect and requesting a hearing where a court may be able to find that efforts to reunify are not necessary.
- It is paramount to have a consistent, relentless focus on the best interest of the child if timely, appropriate permanency is to be achieved, and if children and youth are to be safe while in foster care and have their individual needs met.

Next Steps, On-going Efforts

From this special study, DHHS and the FCRB identified important next steps, on-going efforts and partnerships that must continue to ensure that the best interests of foster children are being met. Joint monthly staffings are being held on the cases of the 230 children in the study. Many of these children's plans have now changed, and 29 of the children have left foster care as of Feb. 1, 2009.

In addition to finding permanent resolutions for more children and families, we have made a concerted effort in the past year to develop stronger relationships with others involved in child welfare, particularly the courts.

- DHHS, the courts, and the FCRB are focusing on identifying cases where courts can rule that DHHS can bypass efforts to reunify children with their parents in cases of severe abuse or neglect.
- The FCRB is identifying cases where guardians ad litem are not meeting the Supreme Court's guidelines for representation of children and youth. The FCRB is flagging this information for the judges responsible for those appointments.
- DHHS, the courts, and the FCRB are working on making the court's mandatory 12-month permanency hearings more meaningful.
- All organizations involved in child welfare need to keep the focus on strengthening stability and safety of placements.

Partners in Foster Care and Finding Permanent Homes

About the Department of Health & Human Services

Helping people live better lives is more than a mission statement. It's what employees do every day at the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

DHHS is made up of six Divisions: Behavioral Health, Children and Family Services, Developmental Disabilities, Medicaid and Long-Term Care, Public Health and Veterans' Homes. On any given day, approximately 6,500 children and their families receive child welfare services, including comprehensive safety assessments, safety planning and services, foster care and adoption services.

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About the Nebraska State Foster Care Review Board

The Nebraska State Foster Care Review Board's (FCRB) mission is to ensure the best interests of children in out-of-home care is being met through external citizen review with a particular focus on best interests, monitoring facilities that house children and youth, maintaining up-to-date data on a statewide tracking system, and disseminating data and recommendations through an annual report. The FCRB tracks over 9,000 children per year, and conducts over 4,000 reviews annually. In 2007 FCRB staff appeared in court 947 times, with the FCRB's recommendations adopted in over 70% of the cases.

State Foster Care Review Board
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Special thanks to DHHS and FCRB staff for their dedication and willingness to work together on this study. Continued collaboration is key to help assure that Nebraska's children in foster care reach timely, appropriate permanent homes, and that they are safe while in out-of- home care.

ADA/AA/EOE