



# Timing of Permanency Exits from Out-of-Home Care: The Importance of Systems and Implications for Assessing Accountability for Permanency Outcomes

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## Background

Along with preventing child maltreatment, achieving legal permanency for children placed in out-of-home care due to abuse, neglect, or dependency is one of the primary goals of the public child welfare system. Although it is not always appropriate or feasible, it has long been the case that over half of children entering out-of-home care in the U.S. will return home. For those children unable to return home, child welfare agencies generally seek legal permanency through adoption or guardianship and about one-quarter of children exiting care in recent years have experienced one of those outcomes (US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families, Children's Bureau, 2010). However, observers have long noted significant between- and within-state differences in the likelihood that children entering care will experience legal permanency and how long it takes for them to do so.

Better understanding of the reasons for these differences between geographic jurisdictions in outcomes is important for improving outcomes generally and for improving efforts to hold child welfare agencies accountable for outcomes. For example, on the one hand, if observed differences in outcomes are due entirely to differences in the characteristics of the populations served, in other words, if some jurisdictions more than others serve populations for which permanency is more difficult to achieve, then accountability mechanisms should take that into account. Indeed, some observers have criticized the National Performance Standards under the federal Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) for failing to account for potential between-state differences in populations served (Courtney, Needell, & Wulczyn, 2004; Schuerman & Needell, 2009). On the other hand, if differences in outcomes

between jurisdictions cannot be explained by population characteristics, then it behooves program managers and policymakers to better understand the characteristics of child welfare and related systems that contribute to these differences in order to seek improvements in outcomes.

This report shares some of the findings of an ongoing project of Partners for Our Children (POC) focused on better understanding contributors to permanency outcomes for children under the supervision of the Washington Department of Social and Health Services, Children's Administration (DSHS/CA) in order to identify potential strategies for improving outcomes. The project began in 2007 and came directly from concern on the part of the then current DSHS/CA leadership regarding the consistency around the state of decision-making about family reunification. POC developed a project to work with DSHS/CA to better understand how reunification decisions are made in Washington, learn from efforts outside of Washington to understand family reunification, and identify potential strategies for improving family reunification practice and related court processes ([http://www.partnersforourchildren.org/what/family\\_reunification](http://www.partnersforourchildren.org/what/family_reunification)). Starting broadly with the priority area we established with our public agency partner we engaged a wide range of stakeholders in the reunification process in identifying challenges to improving reunification outcomes and opportunities for positive change in the institutions involved. An advisory committee was formed made up of professionals involved in some part of the reunification process, including: public child welfare agency staff; private service providers; child and family advocates; a juvenile court judge; a state's attorney; an attorney responsible for representing parents; and public agency staff with expertise in mental health services, substance abuse treatment, and services to tribal communities.

The advisory committee identified a range of potential opportunities to improve family reunification outcomes, but there was little evidence to support any given opportunity over another. Beginning with the hypotheses generated by the advisory committee, over the course of two years a small team of researchers, data experts and practitioners worked with administrative data to analyze the reunification process in Washington and engage the field in interpreting what the data meant in the context of Washington's child welfare and legal systems. Recognizing that the emphasis on achieving timely permanency for children in care meant that decision-making often involved consideration of more than one permanency option, we eventually broadened our analyses to include all major forms of legal permanency: Reunification with family, adoption, and legal guardianship.

Our analyses of administrative data on children's paths toward permanency identified significant between-region<sup>1</sup> and between-county variation in the rate at which children experienced permanency, variation that could not be readily explained by differences in the characteristics of the populations served. Digging deeper into the data with agency and court staff at the regional and county level, including sharing and discussing our findings in a wide variety of public and private settings, we identified interactions between the juvenile courts and child welfare agencies as central to much of the geographic variation we observed in outcomes. These engagements with the practice community led POC to involvement in developing and providing technical assistance to demonstration projects intended to streamline and improve court processes and in developing training materials for court communities in collaboration with the Court Improvement Training Academy at the University of Washington School of Law.

In this report we examine how involvement in the dependency court process is associated with the timing of permanency outcomes in Washington. We find that dependency court involvement varies considerably across the state; that is, there is variation by region in how many children placed out-of-home are also involved with the court. Differences between regions in the likelihood and timing of dependency court involvement are partially due to differences in the availability of services to troubled youth (i.e., some regions and counties appear to be more likely than others to offer services for adolescents with behavior issues, who are less likely to be involved with the court) and partially due to local variation in decision-making. Court involvement is important because once children become court-involved DSHS/CA cannot readily reunify children without a court order. Furthermore,

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<sup>1</sup> DSHS/CA organizes its service delivery across six administrative regions, but there are 33 separate juvenile courts in Washington, most of which handle one county but a few of which handle multiple sparsely populated counties.

non-court involved children are more likely to reunify and reunify much more quickly than court-involved children. Thus, variation by region in the mix of children who are court-involved versus non-court involved influence regional performance in achieving permanency for children. We also identify between-region variation that persists even after statistically controlling for court processes and characteristics of the child population.

We conclude that comparing regional performance in achieving permanency outcomes without explicitly taking into account the degree to which each region operates a child welfare system for troubled youth will lead to faulty conclusions. Similarly, failure to take into account the ways that the juvenile courts influence the timing of exits from out-of-home care can also lead to faulty assessments of the performance of child welfare system at the county, region or state level in achieving legal permanency for children. We believe that these findings call for a more holistic approach to holding DSHS/CA regions and offices accountable for achieving permanency outcomes and that the role of all players in the juvenile court process must be considered when assessing institutional accountability for providing children legal permanency. While our analyses provide much food for thought regarding how the characteristics of children and their experiences in care influence the timing of permanency outcomes, we focus our discussion here on the role of institutional systems, specifically the juvenile courts and DSHS/CA regions.<sup>2</sup>

## Data

We use eight years of administrative data on all first entries into out-of-home care for children in Washington State. We follow children entering care in 2001 to 2007 through the end of 2008. Data come from the Case and Management Information System (CAMIS) provided by the DSHS/CA and from the Administrator of the Courts (AOC) for the State of Washington. The data contain exact dates of entries into out-of-home care, moves, exits, and dependency petition filings.

We identified first out-of-home placements in CAMIS and matched these children to the state-specific events file created by the Center for State Foster Care and Adoption Data (CSFCAD) at Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago. In the event file, each child has a separate line of data for each placement event (or move) during their stay in out-of-home care. CSFCAD eliminates and bridges short events, codes a forced exit to "reached age of majority" at age 18, recodes exits of "runaway" or "age of majority" for young children to "unknown", allows only one event per day by deleting all but the last event on a day,

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<sup>2</sup> POC is engaged in ongoing research on factors influencing permanency outcomes and future reports will focus on child and family characteristics associated with such outcomes.

and codes events of return to home lasting over 30 days as an exit to reunification. In addition we eliminated 171 return-to-home events by collapsing them to the previous event or exiting them to reunification if it was the last event. The state-specific event file includes all first placements, even those lasting one day.

We further restrict our sample by eliminating 1,012 events from 172 children in the care of a DSHS/CA Tribal 4E Office because these children are not exposed to the court dependency process in the same way as other children in DSHS/CA care. Our resulting sample is 100,353 events from 37,904 children. In our analysis we lose 1,799 events from 1,107 children because of missing data (1,103 children are missing removal county, about half of which are children from out-of-state, and 4 are missing age at placement). Our analysis is on 98,554 events from 36,797 children.

We linked CAMIS data to data provided by the AOC containing dates of dependency petition and termination filings. The AOC data contained up to five dependency petition filing dates per child. We matched a dependency petition date to the out-of-home placement if a petition was filed up to one year prior or anytime during the placement. Although the administrative data file begins in 1998, we restrict our file to 2001 onwards because prior to 2001 dependency filings and terminations are all coded to dependency filings in King county (Region 4). Because we are matching across two different sources of administrative data, it is possible that we are undercounting dependency filings.

## Measures

Our dependent variables measure days from placement in out-of-home care to a permanency exit. In our data children are classified, in order of prevalence, as: reunified (67.4%), adopted (13.6%), still in out-of-home care (11.5%), in a guardianship (3.9%), reached the age of majority (2.0%), transferred/deceased (1.6%), or unknown (.03%).

Fixed covariates, or covariates that do not change each time a child moves, include the child's sex, age at entry, race, reasons for removal, presence of siblings with an out-of-home placement, year of entry, and region of entry. We use six categories to measure age of entry: infant, 1 to 4, 5 to 8 (the reference category), 9 to 12, 13 to 15, and 16 and over.

We use CSFCAD coding to classify race and ethnicity. We collapse race and ethnicity into one categorization. The child is coded as Hispanic if a child is identified as Hispanic. If the child is non-Hispanic, the child is coded to black if any of six race fields are coded to black. If only one race field is completed and indicates the child is white, Native

American, Asian/Pacific Islander, unknown, or other the child is coded as such. If a second race field is used, the child is coded to other. Thus, "other" represents multiracial children who are not reported as Hispanic or black.

Social workers could select multiple reasons for removal. The reasons available, in order of prevalence, are: neglect, parental drug abuse, child behavior, physical abuse, parental disability, parental alcohol abuse, parent jailed, sexual abuse, abandonment, housing problems, child drug abuse, child alcohol abuse, child disability, and death.

The presence of siblings also in out-of-home care was created by searching CAMIS for children sharing the same household ID (office and inner six digits of their case number). Children could have no matching sibling in out-of-home care, a matching sibling placed into care on the same day, or a matching sibling not placed on the same day. Because we are matching on a shared household ID, our matches may not be siblings, but other children living in the same household.

There were six administrative regions in Washington at the time of the study. The reference category in our analysis is King County (Region 4), which includes Seattle, surrounding areas in the I-5 corridor, and areas to the east.

Time-varying covariates, covariates that can change each time a child moves, include the type of placement event, number of moves, the flow of children into the system in each county by year. Types of placement events, in order of prevalence, include: traditional foster home (the reference category), unlicensed relative, Crisis Residential Center, other, congregate care, respite, runaway, adoptive home, licensed relative, detention center, and independent living.

The number of moves ranges from 1 to 15; it was top-coded at 15 because only 1% of children experience over 15 moves. Flow is the number of children entering care in each county each year (not just first entries) per 1,000 children in each county (according to the 2000 Census).

We have an additional time-varying covariate indicating that a dependency petition was filed with the courts. If the petition was filed during an event we split the event into two lines of data (event pre-dependency and event post-dependency filing).

## Method

In event history models for competing risks, we examine the relationships between the characteristics of children and the child welfare system, and the processes of family reunification, adoption, and guardianship. Cases are treated as censored if the child is still in the system, aged out, transferred/died, or had an unknown outcome.

We run three sets of models. The first is a standard analysis of all children entering care. In the second, we incorporate court data and include a covariate indicating a dependency petition filing. In the third, we stratify the models by whether or not a dependency petition has been filed. For children with a dependency petition we model exits to reunification, adoption, and guardianship. For children entering out-of-home care without a dependency petition within the first three days of removal we model exit to reunification (dependency petition filing is the competing event for these children, experienced by about 31 percent of children who do not have an initial dependency filing). Children in out-of-home care without a dependency filing may be on a Voluntary Placement Agreement or in many cases, are not court-involved because of their placement circumstances (e.g., adolescents in Crisis Residential Centers staying out-of-home no more than a few days). This approach accounts for the fact that some children may begin an episode in out of home care on a Voluntary Placement Agreement but a dependency is filed later. In this case, a child would be in both models. In the first, their exit type would be dependency. In the second, we would model their exit to reunification, adoption, or guardianship (note that in both models the risk for exits starts from out-of-home placement; that is, time spent on a VPA prior to a dependency is counted in both models).

We do not incorporate data on VPAs in the analysis because we only have information on VPAs from 2004 to 2007, and have reasons to suspect that workers did not routinely keep complete records in the Legal Action File (thus we may have an undercount of children on VPAs). If we look at the 2007 cohort of first entries, however, we find that 13% of children were on known VPAs. While children placed on VPAs are likely to be older than children on average, the majority of VPAs are used for children under age 13 (25% are age 13 and over compared to 10% on average and 22% are infants compared to 32% on average). While children placed on VPAs are less likely to be placed for neglect than children on average, the most common reason for a VPA is neglect (47% compared to 71% on average). Children on VPAs are more likely to be placed for physical abuse (21% compared to 16% on average) and child behavior (14% compared to 2% on average), and less likely to be placed for parental drug abuse (22% compared to 35% on average). Of children on VPAs, 60% returned home with a median length of stay of 28 days, with 90% returning home within 99 days. The other 40% of children transitioned to a dependency. The median time to petition filing was 29 days, with 90% filed within 104 days. We do not see any evidence that children transitioning to a dependency after a VPA experience substantially different outcomes than children who were court-involved at the time of removal.

We use competing risks models (Fine and Gray 1999), regressing on the subdistribution of the hazard (cumulative incidence function). The CIF is the probability of failing from a specific event by a certain time. It depends on both the number of people who have experienced a specific event and the number of people who have not experienced any other competing event. The sum of the CIFs provides the overall distribution function (the CIFs sum to 1 - the Kaplan-Meier estimate of survival for failures of any kind). The partial likelihood is calculated similar to Cox proportional hazards models except, 1) the risk set includes those who have not yet experienced an event and those who experienced a competing event. Thus persons who fail from other causes remain in the risk set. However, 2) individuals in the risk set who experienced a competing event are weighted. Those who have yet to experience an event are weighted to 1, whereas those who experienced a competing event are weighted to less than or equal to 1. The further away from time  $t$  the competing event occurred, the smaller the weight. The models produce subhazard ratios (SHR) instead of hazard ratios (HR); they are interpreted similarly (Fine and Gray, 1999; Pintilie, 2006). Because children removed from the same county may experience similarities (e.g., in their placement options, court characteristics, etc.) we cluster error terms on removal county to account for non-independence.

## Findings

Our interest in understanding the reasons for differences in permanency outcomes between differing geographic jurisdictions grew out of our early analyses of the timing of family reunification in Washington, which showed large between-region variation in outcomes. Figure 1 illustrates the timing of family reunification for all children entering out-of-home care in Washington between 2001 and 2007. The vertical axis shows what percentage of children remains in care available to be reunified and the horizontal axis shows how long in days children remaining in care have been in care. Figure 1 shows that the median time to reunification in Washington over this period, in other words, the amount of time it took for half of the children to return home, was 175 days. However, Figure 2 shows that this average figure obscures considerable variation in reunification rates between DSHS/CA regions. While Figure 2 shows that Region 2 has a median reunification rate that is identical to the state average, it also shows that the regional medians range from a low of 83 days in Region 5 to a high of 581 days in Region 3. Our analyses also showed significant differences in reunification rates between counties within a given region, suggesting that institutional factors at the sub-regional level might influence reunification rates.

Figure 1. Timing of Family Reunification Statewide, First Entries 2001 – 2007 (N = 37,904)

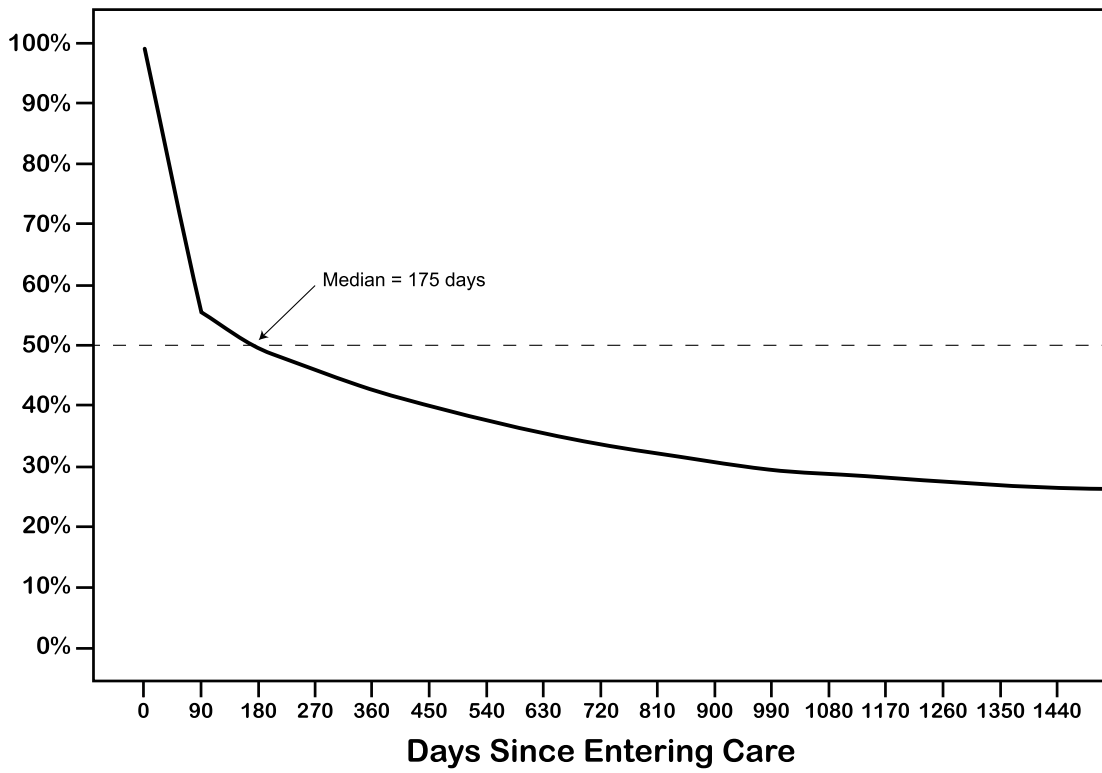
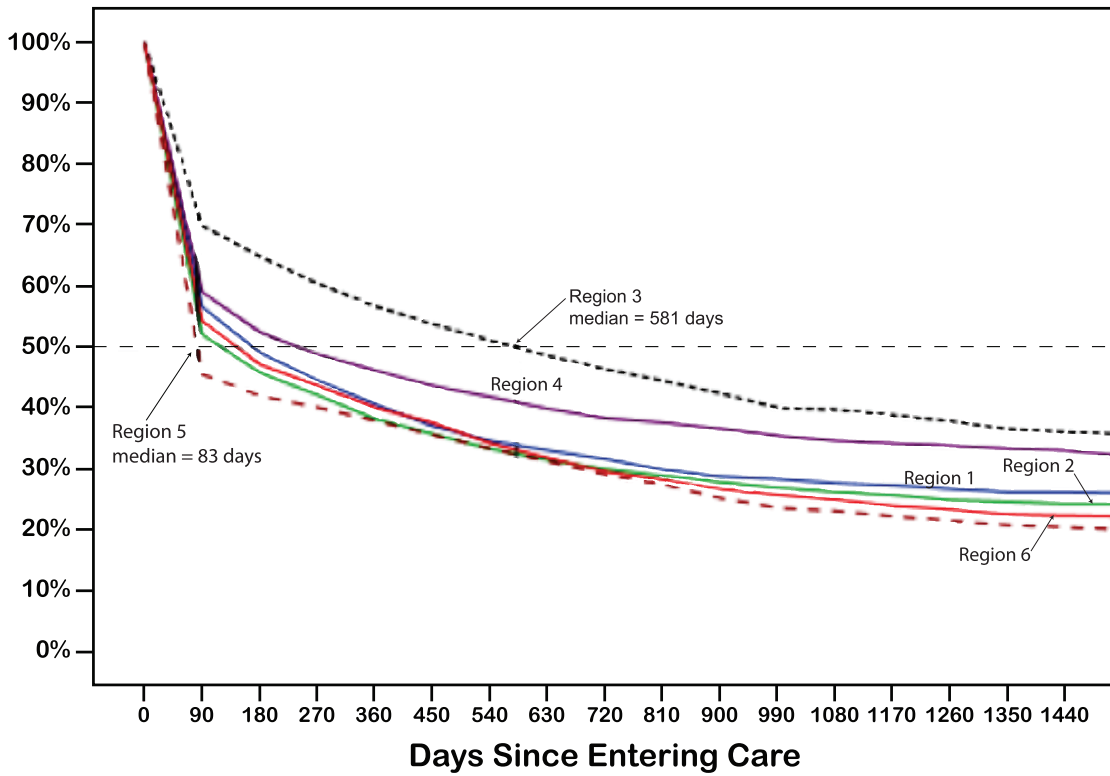


Figure 2. Timing of Family Reunification by DSHSICA Region, First Entries 2001 – 2007 (N = 37,904)



The median estimates the amount of time it takes for 50% of all children to reunify.

Of course, the differences we observed might be caused by differences between geographic jurisdictions in the needs of the populations served. Indeed, when we examined the timing of family reunification and statistically controlled for characteristics of children (e.g., gender; age; race and ethnicity; reason for removal from home), we found that between-region differences were reduced. However, they were not altogether eliminated and our discussions with various parties involved in the reunification process led us to believe that the differences between regions in the services available to troubled adolescents and the functioning of the juvenile courts might explain some of the variation in the timing of outcomes between jurisdictions.

With respect to the courts, we were interested in better understanding whether there were differences between jurisdictions at the county level in the likelihood that children would have a dependency petition filed on their behalf by the Office of the Attorney General early in the child's placement in care. The DSHS/CA can in many cases choose to provide services to children in out-of-home care under a Voluntary Placement Agreement if the child's parent(s) are willing to comply with the terms of the agreement. DSHS/CA is in a position to return a child placed under such an agreement home at any time without seeking the court's permission. In addition, children and adolescents placed primarily because of behavior can be placed for a short period of time in placements established for that purpose, especially Crisis Residential Centers. However, once a dependency petition is filed, DSHS/CA cannot reunify a family without obtaining a court order. Moreover, a dependency order must generally be in place before adoption or guardianship can

be considered as permanency options.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the Assistant Attorneys General are not required to follow the recommendations of DSHS/CA workers; they exercise some discretion regarding whether and when to file a dependency petition and they are assigned on a sub-regional basis, generally handling cases in a particular county court or group of county courts.

Our analysis of the timing of permanency outcomes led us to move from statistical models that take little or no account of court processes, to those that clearly distinguish the pathways of children in the dependency court process from those on whom a dependency petition is never filed. We begin by reproducing figures 1 and 2, restricting the sample to cases that are involved with the courts. Figure 3 shows that the median time to reunification increases from 175 days to 921 days. It is important to note, however, that this median length of time to reunification is based on all children involved with the court. Essentially it provides the answer to the question: how long does it take for 50% of all children to go home? In Washington, however, slightly less than 50% of court-involved children eventually return home, so the median is actually unobserved. Thus, it is also useful to consider: how long does it take for 50% of children who eventually reunify to go home? We estimate this number by looking at how long it takes 25% of court-involved children to reunify (half of the 50% that eventually reunify). We estimate that it takes approximately 267 days for children who eventually reunify to do so. Figure 4 reveals that the ranking we originally observed in Figure 2 changed substantially. When restricting the sample to court-involved children, Region 3 achieves reunification *more quickly* than Region 5.

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<sup>3</sup> While it is possible for a relinquishment adoption or a third-party guardianship to be arranged while a child is cared for under a Voluntary Placement Agreement, in practice this appears to be very rare.

Figure 3. Timing of Family Reunification Statewide for Court-Involved Children, First Entries 2001 – 2007 (N = 21,820)

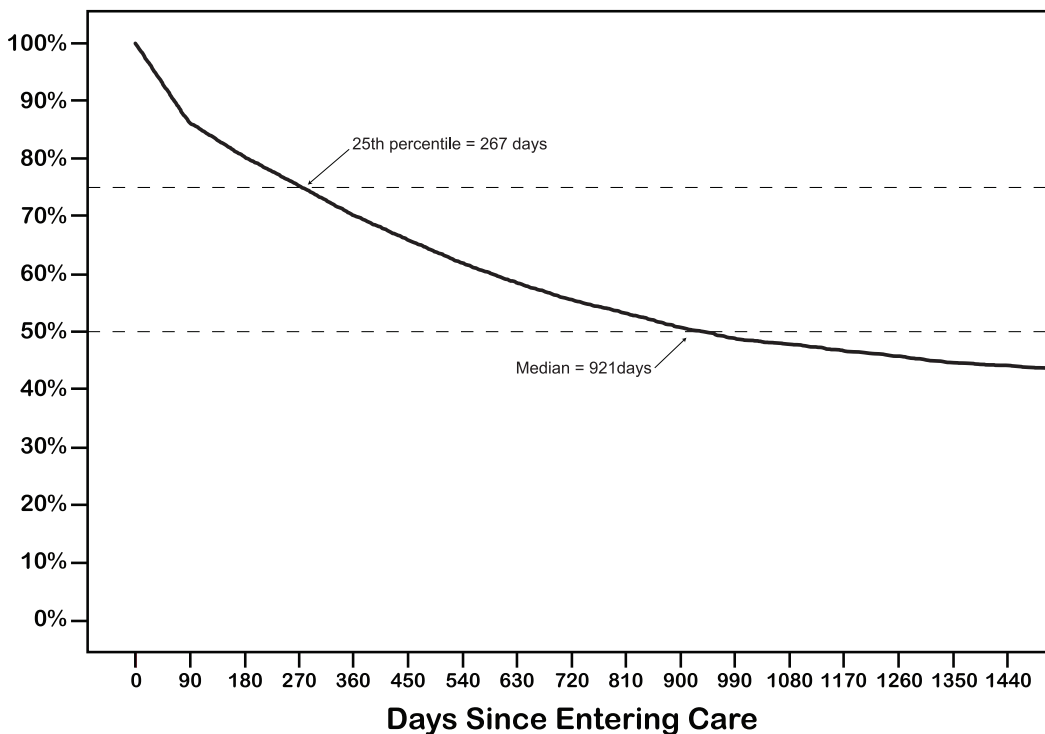
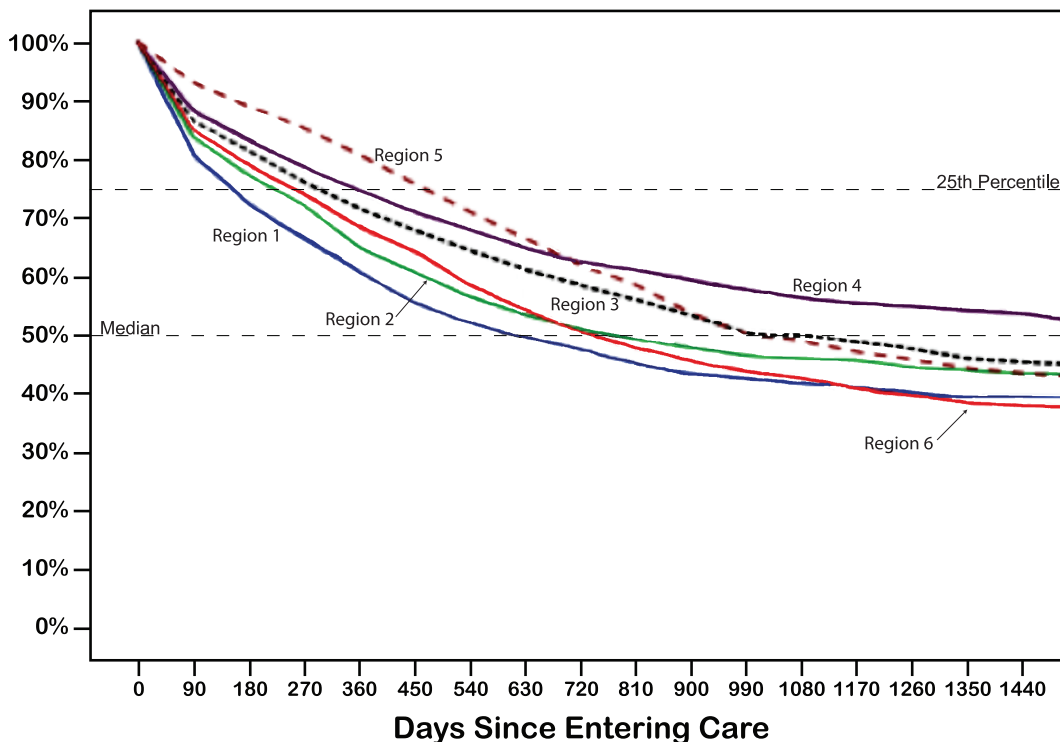


Figure 4. Timing of Family Reunification by DSHS/CA Region, First Entries 2001 – 2007 (N = 21,820)



The median estimates the amount of time it takes for 50% of all court-involved children to reunify. The 25th percentile estimates the amount of time it takes for 25% of all court-involved children to reunify.

Table 1 presents the result of a competing-risks model of the timing of permanency exits that shows how regional differences in the timing of children’s exits from care are sensitive to whether or not filing of dependency petitions is taken into account. The models presented in Table 1 also include statistical controls for child characteristics, placement with siblings, placement type, the flow of children into care in the county of placement, and year of entry to care, though parameter estimates for these are not shown. The subhazard ratios can be interpreted in the following manner. A SHR close to 1 means that a variable has no effect on the timing of the exit in question, whereas a value greater than 1 means that the variable increases that rate of exit and a value less than one means that the variable decreases that rate of exit. For continuous variables the SHR shows the effect of a one unit increase in the variable on the rate of exit. For a categorical variable the SHR shows the effect on the exit rate of the category in question in comparison to the omitted category. For example, Model 1 in Table 1 shows that, all else being equal, the exit rate to reunification is 1.24 times higher (or 24% higher) in Region 2 than in the comparison Region 4.

Model 1 shows that, when controlling for child and system characteristics, but not controlling for whether a child has had a dependency petition filed, Regions 2 and 5 are associated with more rapid transitions to reunification than Region 4, while Regions 2 and 3 are associated with slower transitions to adoption and more rapid transitions to guardianship than Region 4. The other regions are associated with similar transition rates to those experienced by children in Region 4. Model 2 is identical to Model 1

except that it includes a time-varying covariate that captures the timing of the filing of dependency petitions for the children in the sample. Note that nearly three-fifths of children have a petition filed during the study period and that the filing of dependency petitions is associated with a large reduction in the speed of transitions to family reunification, and large increases in the speed of exits to adoption and guardianship. The findings with respect to adoption and guardianship are not surprising given that it is generally necessary to file dependency petition to achieve these permanency goals. However, that dependency filings would be associated with a striking slowing of the rate of reunification is less obvious.

Model 2 suggests that dependency filings influence regional differences in transitions to reunification, but not adoption and guardianship; parameter estimates for regional effects on the timing of permanency outcomes are very similar to those shown in Model 1, except for the case of family reunification. Specifically, Region 2 no longer exhibits a more rapid rate of reunification than Region 4. In addition, the SHR for Region 3 changes from negative (.94) to positive (1.04), which while not resulting in a statistically significant difference with Region 4 nevertheless represents a statistically significant change in the parameter estimate from Region 3. In other words, Region 2 appears to have a faster rate of reunification, and Region 3 a slower rate of reunification, than would be the case if the timing of the filing of permanency petitions were taken into account. Essentially, by restricting the sample to court-involved children, we get a different regional ranking of length of stay.

Table 1. Competing Risk Models of Permanency Exits Showing Influence of Dependency Petitions on Regional Variation in Exit<sup>1</sup>

	All Cases					
	Model 1: No covariate for dependency			Model 2: Covariate for dependency		
	Reunification SHR	Adoption <sup>2</sup> SHR	Guardianship SHR	Reunification SHR	Adoption <sup>2</sup> SHR	Guardianship SHR
Region						
1 Northeast	1.08	1.02	1.17	1.04	1.02	1.17
2 Southeast	1.24 ***	.73 **	2.11 ***	1.08	.76 **	2.32 ***
3 Northwest	.94	.71 *	1.28 *	1.04	.71 *	1.19
4 King (comparison region)	-	-	-	-	-	-
5 Pierce/Kitsap	1.15 ***	1.03	.92	1.16 **	1.02	.90
6 West	1.07	1.06	1.16	1.02	1.06	1.15
Dependency Filed <sup>3</sup>				.29 ***	2.28 *	2.24 **

<sup>1</sup> Parameter estimates for other covariates not shown. See Table 2 for listing of other covariates.

<sup>2</sup> enter risk of adoption 6 months after placement

<sup>3</sup> 58.2% of first entries have an associated dependency filing

\* p < .05 \*\* p < .01 \*\*\* p < .001

Why might the timing of the filing of dependency petitions influence regional differences in permanency rates? In order to shed light on this question we decided to estimate separate models of the transition to permanency for children who were subjects of a dependency petition and for those who were not within their first three days of care. Table 2 shows the results of those models, which help tell an important story. First, a comparison of the outcomes of cases that experience an early dependency filing to those that do not show striking differences. For example, approximately 66 percent (14,156 / 21,452) of the children who did not experience an early petition filing were reunified with their parent(s) and the median time to reunification for this group was four days; about 31 percent of this initial group (6,572 / 21,452) transitioned into dependency status with outcomes similar to

other children involved with the courts. In contrast, only about 47 percent (10,335 / 21,820) of the children who experienced a dependency filing were reunified and their median time to reunification was 921 days. This suggests that where dependency petitions are very likely to be filed might expect to see a relatively slow rate of family reunification compared to places where that is not the case. To a certain extent, of course, these are different kinds of cases. We would expect that court-involved placements would be made when other types of intervention in the lives of families had failed. Cases that require the supervision of the court involve often involve families with more complex problems that require much longer interventions. But that is not the whole story. Put simply, cases are resolved more quickly without the supervision of the court.

Table 2. Competing Risk Model of Permanency Exits, Stratified by Dependency Petition

	DEPENDENCY FILED <sup>1</sup>				NO INITIAL DEPENDENCY <sup>2</sup>	
	% or mean	Reunification SHR	Adoption <sup>3</sup> SHR	Guardianship SHR	% or mean	Reunification <sup>4</sup> SHR
Female	49.6%	.99	1.11 ***	.88	52.9%	1.03
<b>Age: infant</b>	<b>31.5%</b>	<b>.63 ***</b>	<b>3.22 ***</b>	<b>.31 ***</b>	<b>15.9%</b>	<b>.65 ***</b>
1-4	28.5%	.92 ***	1.69 ***	.46 ***	21.1%	.97
5-8 (reference)	-	-	-	-	-	-
9-12	12.6%	1.05	.44 ***	1.65 ***	13.7%	1.09 **
<b>13-15</b>	<b>7.7%</b>	<b>.94</b>	<b>.09 ***</b>	<b>2.02 ***</b>	<b>22.6%</b>	<b>1.13 *</b>
<b>16+</b>	<b>2.2%</b>	<b>.85 *</b>	<b>.09 ***</b>	<b>.77</b>	<b>12.4%</b>	<b>1.06</b>
Race: White	-	-	-	-	-	-
Native American	5.8%	1.04	.45 ***	1.81 ***	4.9%	1.05
Asian/Pacific	1.5%	1.36 **	.62 **	1.08	2.0%	1.20 **
African-American	11.8%	.92 *	.68	1.09	11.6%	1.05
Hispanic	15.3%	1.02	.75 ***	.74 *	15.4%	1.08 *
Other	4.6%	1.05	.68 ***	1.60 **	4.4%	1.06
Unknown	1.0%	1.66 ***	1.04	.76	2.5%	1.36 ***
Removal: Sexual abuse	4.8%	.95	.83	1.19	4.9%	.82 **
Physical abuse	16.0%	1.17 ***	.85 **	.98	16.0%	.87 **
<b>Neglect</b>	<b>70.6%</b>	<b>.81 ***</b>	<b>1.12 **</b>	<b>1.21 *</b>	<b>43.9%</b>	<b>.74 ***</b>
<b>Parent alcohol</b>	<b>8.5%</b>	<b>.95</b>	<b>.99</b>	<b>1.00</b>	<b>4.7%</b>	<b>.93</b>
<b>Parent drug</b>	<b>34.4%</b>	<b>.89 **</b>	<b>1.01</b>	<b>1.02</b>	<b>16.7%</b>	<b>.61 ***</b>
Child alcohol	0.5%	1.31 *	.89	.40	0.5%	.84
Child drug	1.2%	.85	1.05	1.11	0.9%	.88
Child disability	0.4%	.40 *	1.00	2.46 **	0.4%	.35 ***
<b>Child behavior</b>	<b>2.4%</b>	<b>.86</b>	<b>.77</b>	<b>1.00</b>	<b>26.6%</b>	<b>.95</b>
Death	0.4%	.57 **	2.25 *	.75	0.2%	.65
Parent jail	6.6%	1.01	.88	.82	6.9%	1.01
Parent disability	9.6%	.75 ***	1.05	1.54 **	8.9%	.82 ***
Abandonment	3.7%	.58 ***	1.71 ***	1.45	2.5%	.76 **
Housing	3.1%	.84	1.01	1.10	2.3%	.82 **

Table 2. Competing Risk Model of Permanency Exits, Stratified by Dependency Petition (cont.)

	DEPENDENCY FILED <sup>1</sup>				NO INITIAL DEPENDENCY <sup>2</sup>	
	% or mean	Reunification SHR	Adoption <sup>3</sup> SHR	Guardianship SHR	% or mean	Reunification <sup>4</sup> SHR
<b>Sibling: No sib in placement</b>	-	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Not placed same day</b>	<b>19.7%</b>	<b>.82 ***</b>	<b>1.10 *</b>	<b>.84</b>	<b>11.2%</b>	<b>.74 ***</b>
<b>Placed same day</b>	<b>48.7%</b>	<b>1.07 *</b>	<b>.75 ***</b>	<b>.90</b>	<b>36.7%</b>	<b>.92 ***</b>
Placement (TV): Foster home <sup>5</sup>	-	-	-	-	-	-
Adoptive	3.1%	.00 ***	2.89 ***	.08 **	1.0%	.00 ***
Congregate care	6.5%	1.83 ***	.05 **	.04 ***	6.2%	.86
<b>Crisis Residential</b>	<b>5.1%</b>	<b>4.85 ***</b>	<b>.24 **</b>	<b>.36</b>	<b>25.3%</b>	<b>1.99 ***</b>
Detention center	2.2%	4.36 ***	.00 ***	.00 ***	1.5%	3.88 ***
Independent Living	0.2%	.82	.00 ***	.00 ***	0.2%	.62
Licensed Relative	2.7%	.47 ***	.97	3.81 ***	1.1%	.27 ***
<b>Other</b>	<b>12.9%</b>	<b>1.35 ***</b>	<b>.64 *</b>	<b>2.08 **</b>	<b>5.9%</b>	<b>.66 **</b>
Respite	5.6%	2.31 ***	1.40 *	2.99 ***	2.7%	3.39 ***
<b>Unlicensed Relative</b>	<b>51.5%</b>	<b>1.04</b>	<b>.43 ***</b>	<b>2.54 ***</b>	<b>27.9%</b>	<b>.53 ***</b>
Runaway	3.3%	4.43 ***	.00 ***	.12 *	2.1%	4.06 ***
Number of moves (TV)	2.1	.82 ***	.95 ***	.97 *	1	.43 ***
Flow/per 1000 (TV)	5.7	1.02 *	.99	.93 *	5.8	1.02
Year: 2001	-	-	-	-	-	-
2002	13.2%	.95	1.04	.76 **	14.8%	1.01
2003	13.3%	.93	1.02	.60 **	13.4%	1.00
2004	14.0%	.91	.96	.51 ***	14.2%	1.03
2005	15.7%	.84 **	.75 ***	.50 ***	14.6%	1.05
2006	15.2%	.89 *	.56 ***	.30 ***	13.9%	1.13
2007	15.7%	.93	.26 ***	.20 **	13.5%	1.02
Region: 4 King county	-	-	-	-	-	-
1 Northeast	18.9%	1.47 ***	1.01	1.15	17.0%	.73 ***
2 Southeast	10.4%	1.36 ***	.80 *	1.69 ***	13.9%	1.09
3 Northwest	21.1%	1.15	.70 *	1.15	11.1%	.76 ***
5 Pierce/Kitsap	13.3%	.97	1.02	.92	19.7%	1.08
6 West	20.3%	1.29 **	1.05	1.05	23.0%	.89 *
N: events		63,775	39,923	63,775		29,011
N: children		21,820	17,313	21,820		21,452
N: exiting to outcome		10,335	5,067	1,194		14,156
N: competing		6,263	7,227	15,404		6,572
N: censored		5,222	5,019	5,222		724
Pseudo LL (empty)		-98932	-46579	-11537		-1E+05
Pseudo LL (full)		-96970	-43774	-10899		-1E+05
BIC (empty)		197863	93157	23074		270233
BIC (full)		194504	88088	22362		256460

Notes: SHR = sub-hazard ratio. TV = time-varying. \* p < .05 \*\* p < .01 \*\*\* p < .001.

<sup>1</sup>The reference category for the dependency model is male (50.4%), age 5 to 8 (17.5%), white (60.0%), with no sibling in the child welfare system (31.6%), living in a family foster home (74.3% of children ever experience this placement type), entering care in 2001 (12.9%) and in Region 4 (16.0%).

<sup>2</sup> The reference category for the no initial dependency model is male (47.1%), age 5 to 8 (14.3%), white (59.3%), with no sibling in the child welfare system (52.1%), living in a family foster home (58.4% of children ever experience this placement type), entering care in 2001 (15.7%) and in Region 4 (15.4%). 29.4% of these children will go on to have a dependency filed during their placement.

<sup>3</sup>Children enter the risk of adoption 6 months after placement.

<sup>4</sup> No initial dependency indicates that the out-of-home placement did not begin with a dependency petition; it took more than three days to file. A dependency filing is the competing event to reunification.

<sup>5</sup>Descriptive statistics for placement type refer to the percent of children ever experiencing that placement type during their time in care; these estimates are therefore larger than a point-in-time snapshot of where children are living.

Second, regions vary considerably in the likelihood that children entering care will experience a petition filing (Table 3). For example, while about 59 percent of children experience a dependency filing statewide, in Region 3 77 percent of children experience a dependency filing; 59 percent within the first three days. In contrast, in Region 2 only about 49 percent of children experience a dependency filing; 34 percent with the first three days. All else being equal, given the differences in the likelihood and timing of family reunification associated with the filing of dependency petitions, Region 2 might be expected to exhibit a faster rate of reunification than Region 3, which is exactly the result shown in Model 1 of Table 1, but the difference disappears in Model 2 where the timing of dependency filings is taken into account.

Third, Table 2 clearly identifies some significant differences between the children who experience dependency and those who do not (identified by bold text in Table 2). Note that the reference category for the dependency model is male (50.4%), age 5 to 8 (17.5%), white (60.0%),

with no sibling in the child welfare system (31.6%), living in a family foster home (74.3% of children ever experience this placement type), entering care in 2001 (12.9%) and in Region 4 (16.0%). The reference category for the no initial dependency model is male (47.1%), age 5 to 8 (14.3%), white (59.3%), with no sibling in the child welfare system (52.1%), living in a family foster home (58.4% of children ever experience this placement type), entering care in 2001 (15.7%) and in Region 4 (15.4%). 29.4% of these children will go on to have a dependency filed during their placement. Taken together, these differences suggest that adolescents with behavior problems are disproportionately represented among the children not subject to dependency petitions and whose cases therefore do not come into contact with the juvenile dependency courts. Of the children that do not experience an early dependency petition, over one-third (35 percent) are teens while that is true for only one-tenth of those who do experience a dependency filing. Children without an initial filing are about two-fifths as likely as those with

Table 3. First Entries 2001-2007: Case-Mix and Reunification Rates by Dependency Petition Filing, by Region

	Dependency Petition Filed			Total	N
	Within 3 days	After 3 days	Dependency Petition Not Filed		
<b>Region 1</b>					
Case-mix	42%	23%	36%	100%	6,512
Percent of children reunifying	55%	51%	95%	68%	
<b>Region 2</b>					
Case-mix	34%	15%	51%	100%	4,684
Percent of children reunifying	54%	44%	90%	71%	
<b>Region 3</b>					
Case-mix	59%	18%	22%	100%	6,064
Percent of children reunifying	46%	47%	94%	57%	
<b>Region 4</b>					
Case-mix	43%	16%	41%	100%	5,996
Percent of children reunifying	40%	40%	96%	63%	
<b>Region 5</b>					
Case-mix	32%	13%	55%	100%	6,494
Percent of children reunifying	44%	42%	99%	73%	
<b>Region 6</b>					
Case-mix	37%	18%	45%	100%	8,154
Percent of children reunifying	51%	51%	95%	71%	
<b>Statewide</b>					
Case-mix	41%	18%	41%	100%	37,904
Percent of children reunifying	48%	47%	95%	67%	
<b>Days to reunification</b>					
25th percentile	246	319	2	5	
50th percentile (median)	868	956	4	175	

a petition to have been removed because of parental neglect and about half as likely to have been removed because of parental alcohol or drug use, but they are ten times more likely to have been removed at least partly because of their behavior. Not surprisingly, given the nature of their problems and their relatively short stays in care, children without an early dependency petition are much more likely than those with a petition to be placed in a Crisis Residential Center and much less likely to be placed with unlicensed relatives. These differences in populations touched by the dependency process suggest that, in some ways, Washington operates two child welfare systems, one serving primarily children and youth who have suffered from maltreatment by their parents and the other serving primarily older children and adolescents with behavior problems.

Lastly, regional variation in transitions to permanency looks very different when dependency cases are distinguished from those without an initial dependency filing. For cases where a petition is filed, Regions 1, 2, and 6 exhibit faster rates of reunification than the comparison Region 4, whereas Regions 1, 3, and 6 exhibit slower rates of reunification than Region 4 for cases without an early dependency petition. In other words, not only does the mix of dependency and non-dependency cases arguably contribute to regional variation in permanency rates, it also seems likely that regional variation in how the child welfare system manages these distinct types of cases also matters.

## Discussion

Washington exhibits considerable regional variation in the timing of foster children's exits to legal permanency from out-of-home care. Some of this variation appears to be a result of the fact that some areas of the state are more likely than others to place older children and youth whose primary reason for placement is problem behavior into the care of the child welfare system. In fact, the percentage of first entrants to out of home care between 2001 and 2007 who were adolescents ranged from a low of 16 percent in Regions 1 and 3 to a high of 35 percent in Region 5. Our conversations with child welfare program managers lead us to believe that regions vary in the likelihood that they will take these children into care largely as a result of differences in the availability of services to meet the needs of families with troubled youth, particularly Crisis Residential Centers. Regardless of the reasons, the likelihood that a child welfare system will open its doors to youth whose primary need for care is problem behavior strongly influences the likelihood that courts will be involved with cases, and thus, how quickly children achieve permanency. Thus, comparing regional performance in achieving permanency outcomes without explicitly taking into account the degree to which each

region operates a child welfare system for troubled youth will lead to faulty conclusions.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, failure to take into account the ways that the juvenile courts influence the timing of exits from out-of-home care can also lead to faulty assessments of the performance of child welfare systems in achieving legal permanency for children. Our analyses show that, after controlling for important characteristics of children (age; gender; race/ethnicity; reason for removal) and their care experiences (placement with siblings; placement type; placement mobility; pressure on the system in the form of the flow of children through care), the filing of a dependency petition is associated with a significant slowing of children's transitions home. It is probably reasonable to assume that some of the observed variation between geographic jurisdictions in the likelihood that a child will be the subject of a dependency petition is a function of differences in the characteristics of the families and children served that are not captured by our analyses. However, it is very difficult to believe that is the entire story. Our conversations with child welfare program managers and juvenile court personnel around the state make clear that the likelihood that a dependency petition will be filed is a function of a number of things, including the use of VPAs in a given DCF's office or region, the availability of in-home or voluntary services, and the perceived response of the court in a particular area to different types of cases, especially those based on allegations of neglect, by child welfare workers and supervisors and Assistant Attorneys General or attorneys contracted with the Attorney General's Office to represent CA. These and other factors such as the use of short term placements in some regions contribute to the fact that during the period of our study the percentage of children entering care who were ultimately the subject of a dependency petition ranged from a low of 45 percent in Region 5 to a high of 77 percent in Region 3. Strategies for improving permanency outcomes and the performance of public systems in achieving those outcomes should explicitly include the juvenile courts. POC is currently involved in demonstration projects that bring the juvenile courts and DSHS/CA together to expedite the permanency planning process.

Of course, acknowledging that differences in the populations served and in the functioning of the dependency process play a role in the timing of children's permanency outcomes does not mean that DSHS/CA regions and offices should be left off the hook. Our findings clearly show that regional differences remain in the rate at which children experience permanency even after controlling

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<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that sub-regional comparison of the timing of permanency outcomes is also subject to this problem; our analyses of county-level data show that much of the variation between regions in provision of services to troubled youth and their families is driven by particular counties in each region.

for important measures of case mix and for the timing of dependency petitions. Explaining these differences could identify potential strategies for improving practice in ways that lead to more timely permanency for children in DSHS/CA care. Prior research has shown organizational factors to play a significant role in the ability of child welfare agencies to achieve desired outcomes (Glisson, James, & Post, 2000; Glisson, 1994; Yoo & Brooks, 2005; Yoo, Brooks, & Patti, 2007). POC's evaluation of the implementation of the Solution-Based Casework practice model in Washington has gathered invaluable information about how caseworkers and their supervisors work together and how they view their organization (Lyons et al, 2009). POC is engaged in analyses of the relationships between these organizational factors and permanency outcomes for children in DSHS/CA care and we expect the insights gained from those analyses to lead to further opportunities to improve child welfare policy and practice in Washington.

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