



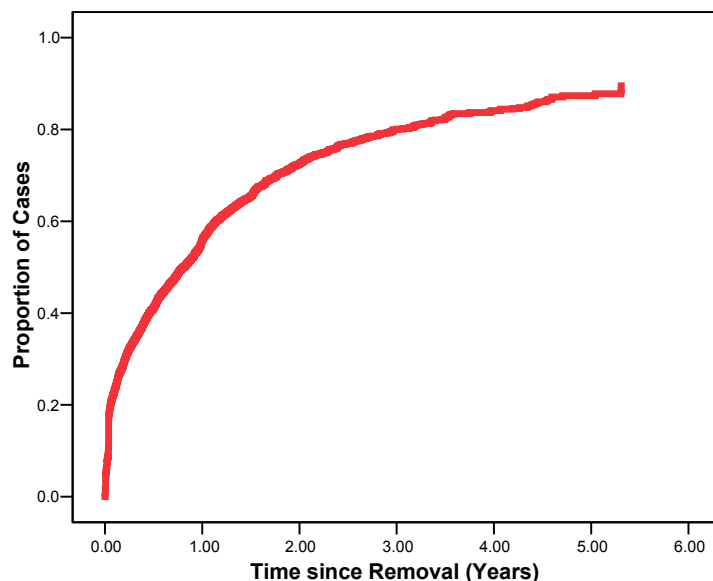
Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth &amp; Families

## ***Foster Care Exits to Reunification: Impact of Child & Case Characteristics***

This Rhode Island Data Analytic Center Brief summarizes findings from a recent study of children in foster care with data obtained from the Rhode Island Children's Information System (RICHIST). RICHIST data was available for 5,725 children who entered foster care between 1998 and 2002. Analyses examined whether family reunification by the child was related to specific child characteristics (e.g., age, race/ethnicity, gender), case characteristics (e.g., the reason the child was removed from the home, history of prior removals from the home), or the types of service settings a child experienced in foster care (e.g., foster care with a relative, foster care with a non-relative, or placement in a group home or shelter).

Of the 5,725 children in the study, 55% were boys, 58% were White, 19% African American, 15% Hispanic, and 4% were of another racial/ethnic background. In addition, 18% were 1 year old or younger, 14% 2-5 years old, 15% 6-10 years old, 34% 11-15 years old, and 17% were 16 years of age or older. A total of 25% were placed in foster care primarily for child neglect, 22% for physical abuse, 3% for sexual abuse, 10% for parental substance abuse, 30% for child behavior problems, and 9% for other reasons. One-third of these initial foster care episodes began in a non-relative foster care home, 22% in relative foster care placements, 22% in group home or residential settings, and 20% in an emergency shelter placement. 15% had at least one prior foster care episode.

As is shown in Figure 1, almost 20% of children are reunified with their family shortly after they are removed, with about 40% reunified after about 6 months. Within 2 years, almost 70% of children are reunified with their families, and the rate of reunification levels off at that point. Only about 10% of children are reunified with their family after 2 years.



### **Child Characteristics**

**Age:** Several studies have found that infants are less likely to be reunified with their family than older children [1, 2, 3]. Study findings from Rhode Island indicate that children between the ages of 11 and 15 (i.e., young adolescents) did, in fact, have higher rates of reunification than infants, though infants did not differ from preschool/school-age children (i.e., 2 to 10 year olds) or older adolescents (i.e., 16 and older).

**Gender:** Consistent with previous research, boys in Rhode Island have slower rates of being reunified with their family than girls [4, 5], a rate that was about 10% lower than that of girls.

**Race/Ethnicity:** Several studies have reported differences in reunification rates based on child race/ethnicity [1, 2, 6-8]. In Rhode Island, children identified as Hispanic were about 15% more likely to be reunified than White children, while African American children and children of other racial/ethnic groups did not differ from White children on this outcome.

### **Case Characteristics**

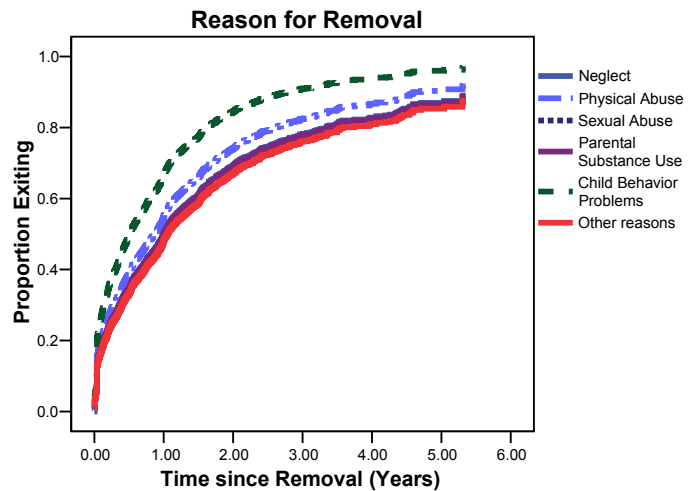
**Previous Removals:** A history of previous foster care episodes decreased a child's chance for reunification. Compared to children with no prior removal, children with one prior removal had significantly slower rates of reunification, and the decrease was stronger among children with two or more previous removals.

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**Reasons for Removal:** Children who were removed for physical abuse were 15% more likely and children removed due to behavior problems were about 60% more likely to be reunified with their family. However, children removed due to sexual abuse were about 45% less likely to be reunified. These findings are consistent with others [1, 6, 7, 9], except for children who were sexually abused; in Rhode Island these children are less likely to be reunified. Reasons for removal were organized by severity with cases involving sexual abuse ranked as the most severe, followed by physical abuse, neglect, parental alcohol/drug problem, child behavior, and "other reasons" (e.g., housing problems, parental ability to cope, abandonment, relinquishment). Each category was compared with removal due to neglect.

**Current Placement Service Setting:** Some studies have found that children in relative foster care tend to remain in foster care longer, and are reunified slower than children in other settings [3, 10]. Our analyses confirmed these previous findings. Results showed that, compared to children placed in a relative foster care home, those in a non-relative foster care home or residential facility or group home were about 15% more likely to exit to reunification. Children in shelter placement were 80% more likely to be reunified.

**Year of Entry to Foster Care:** Results from this study show that Rhode Island has made significant improvements in the rate at which children exit to reunification over the last two years of the study period. Compared with children who entered foster care in 1998, children entering foster care in 2000 and 2001 were 20-25% more likely to exit to reunification. This finding is particularly encouraging in light of federal mandates to increase permanency planning efforts – particularly reunification – following passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) in 1997.



## Summary of Major Findings

- More than 50% of children are reunified within their family within 6 months, yet very few are reunified after 2 years.
- Children ages 11-15 years old are more likely to be reunified than any other age group.
- Girls are reunified at a 10% faster rate of reunification than boys.
- Hispanic children were reunified 15% faster than White children; no differences in reunification rates were found among other racial/ethnic groups.
- Children who were physically abused or who had behavior problems were more likely to be reunified than neglected children, while sexually abused children were less likely to be reunified than neglected children.
- Children in placement in non-relative foster care, a group home, and especially an emergency shelter were more likely to be reunified than those in foster care with a relative.
- In the last two years for which data was available, children were 20-25% more likely to be reunified than in the previous 2 years.

**References:** (1) Courtney, M.E., I. Piliavin, and B.R. Entner-Wright, Transitions from and returns to out-of-home care. Social Service Review, 1997. 71: p. 652-667. (2) Courtney, M.E. and Y.I. Wong, Comparing the timing of exits from substitute care. Children & Youth Services Review, 1996. 18: p. 307-334. (3) Goerge, R.M., The reunification process in substitute care. Social Service Review, 1990. 64: p. 422-457. (4) Vogel, C.A., Using administrative databases to examine factors affecting length of stay in substitute care. Children & Youth Services Review, 1999. 21: p. 677-690. (5) Kemp, S.P. and J.M. Bodonyi, Infants who stay in foster care: Child characteristics and permanency outcomes of legally free children first placed as infants. Child & Family Social Work, 2000. 5: p. 95-106. (6) Glisson, C., J.W. Bailey, and J.A. Post, Predicting the time children spend in state custody. Social Service Review, 2000. 74: p. 253-280. (7) Wells, K. and S. Guo, Reunification and reentry of foster children. Children & Youth Services Review, 1999. 21: p. 273-294. (8) McMurtry, S.L. and G. Lie, Differential exit rates of minority children in foster care. Social Work Research & Abstracts, 1992. 28: p. 42-48 (9) Harris, M.S. and M.E. Courtney, The interaction of race, ethnicity, and family structure with respect to the timing of family reunification. Children & Youth Services Review, 2003. 25: p. 409-429. (10) Courtney, M.E., Factors associated with the reunification of foster children with their families. Social Service Review, 1994. 68: p. 81-108.