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SUBJECT: Adoption and the decrease of number of youth and length of stay in foster care

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
A recent decline in the number of youth in foster care along with a decrease in the length of time youth spend in the foster care system offers hope that the foster care system is successfully reuniting families and finding permanent homes for youth through adoption. While the decline of kids in the system and the decrease in the time that they spend there can be positive, research that measures the outcomes of youth who leave the system is limited. As a result, we are not sure which factors are causing the decline, or if the lives of these children are improved upon release from the system. A recent increase in the number of children who reenter the foster care system suggests that more research needs to be done in order to determine if reunification and adoption are in fact improving the well-being of foster children.

One factor that is believed to be impacting foster youth decline is adoption. Implementation of federal legislation known as the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 created more opportunities for foster adoption and resulted in an increase in the number of children who received permanent placements outside of the foster care system. While adoption has positive implications for foster youth, challenges such as inadequate information, preparation and support for adoptive families may pose a threat to the positive long-term impacts that adoption may have on foster youth.

ISSUE STATEMENT
According to the California Department of Social Services, every year, California county child welfare agencies receive more than one-half million reports of suspected child abuse and neglect (CDSS, 2000). As a result of these reports, 76% of children entering the foster care system in California are removed from their homes for neglect related reasons (Needell, et al., 2004). What is more, physical abuse is the second most common reason why children are placed in foster care (CASA, 2008).

Despite the high prevalence of abuse and neglect cases, the primary goal of the California foster care system is to reunite each child with his/her family as soon as the family is safe and stable for the child (Danielson & Lee, 2010). If reunification is not feasible, the next alternative is to place the child with an adoptive family or legal guardian. Overall, nearly 60% of foster children are reunited with their families, and about 20% are adopted or are placed with a legal guardian (Donaldson, 2002).

Over the past decade, child welfare departments nation wide have witnessed a decline in the number of children in foster care, mainly due to a decrease in the duration of time children remain in the system (Danielson & Lee, 2010). The sharpest decline has taken place in California where there has been a 45% decrease in the number of children in the foster care system since 2000 (AFCARS 2008; Danielson & Lee, 2010). While this decline implies that the foster care system is meeting its goals of reuniting families and finding safe, permanent homes for children in cases where reunification is not an option, there is minimal data available that measures the well-being of children who have experienced reunification or determines the status of the children and their families once they leave the system. Furthermore, emancipated youth who exit the foster care system without establishing permanency experience poor outcomes, and account for 12% of the decrease in the number of youth in the system (Needell, et al., 2010).
Recent studies show that although children are experiencing shortened stays in foster care, there has been an increase in the number of children who reenter the system (Danielson & Lee, 2010). 20% of foster youth in California experienced reentry between 2008-2009 compared to 16% between 1999-2000 (Danielson and Lee, 2010). This increase in reentry poses concerns about the success of parental training efforts that are employed before children are reunited with their families and raises the following questions:

1. Are shortened stays in the foster care system an indication of successful reunification or adoption?
2. Are birth parents receiving proper and adequate parenting training before they are reunited with their children?
3. Are adoptive parents receiving appropriate pre-adoption information and sufficient post-adoption resources that aid them in caring for their adopted child?
4. Are alternative options for permanency meeting the needs of children who are not reunited with their families?

ANALYSIS

There are several factors that may contribute to the reductions in both the number of children in foster care and the length of time that children spend in the system. Family reunification, kinship care, foster youth emancipation, resource limitations (namely lack of funding) and adoption are a few of the key factors that may impact this decline. This memo will highlight the impacts of adoption on the reduction of youth in foster care, as well as discuss some of the challenges with adoption.

Impacts of Adoption

When reunification is not a favorable option, adoption offers foster children an alternative way to gain permanency. While the majority of foster children (60%) are reunited with their families, 1 in 5 (20%) youth who leave the foster care system do so through adoption (NACAC, 2009). In 2007, 47% of adopted foster youth were adopted by their foster families (NACAC, 2009). The increase in the number of foster youth who are adopted in turn reduces the number of youth who remain in the foster care system.

Implementation of legislation for foster care adoption reduces children in the system. The implementation of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 increased the foster care adoption rate and helped reduce the number of children in the foster care system. Prior to the late 1990s, adoption of foster children was limited because policies in child welfare emphasized family reunification, no matter how long it took to reunite families (Freundlich, 2002). Adoption was viewed as a “failure” because it meant that families were not reunited. As a result, thousands of children remained in foster care for many years while the child welfare department attempted to help their parents develop the skills they needed to care for their children (Freundlich, 2002). The passage of ASFA lifted some of the barriers that made it difficult for willing adults to adopt children from the foster care system (Lindsey & Schwartz, 2004). This federal legislation imposed a time line that expedited the process of finding a permanent home for foster children by terminating parental rights of children who were in the system for 15 of the past 22 months (ASFA, 1997). Prior to ASFA, there was no time line in place to reach permanency. Implementation of a permanency time line and termination of parental rights increased the number of children eligible for adoption, as well as helped reduce the length of time children spend in the system. As a result, there was a 78% increase in foster adoptions between 1997-2000, with more adoptions taking place in subsequent years (Donaldson, 2002).
Adoption prevents challenges faced by youth who emancipate from the system. Adoption prior to emancipation helps to lower the number of children in the system, as well as prevent some of the challenges that youth might face upon emancipation from the system. The GAO reports that approximately 5,000 youth “age out” of the California foster care system each year (GAO, 2007). Upon emancipation, these youth lose many of the benefits and financial support that they received from the state when they were minors in the system. Within two years of emancipation, former foster youth experience disproportionately high levels of homelessness (Barth, 1990), unemployment (CASA, 2009; Gorge et al., 2002), lower educational attainment (Harbert et al., 2007), physical and mental health-related problems (AAP, 2002; Fernandes 2008) and incarceration (Courtney et al., 2009). The lack of a traditional family and safety net for emancipating foster youth is a primary factor in the challenges that these youth face (CABWHP, 2009). In contrast, foster youth who are adopted find permanency and receive long term support from the adoptive families who elect to care for them, thus are less likely to face the challenges that are experienced by their counterparts who are left without support upon emancipation (Cowan, 2004; Kerman et al., 2002).

Challenges with Adoption

While the move towards increasing adoptions has contributed to a decrease in the number of youth in foster care, a lack of adequate resources and proper support mechanisms may threaten the potentially positive long-term impacts that adoption could have on the lives of foster youth.

Inadequate pre-adoption information and post-adoption resources. Families who choose to adopt foster children often find themselves ill-prepared to handle the emotional challenges that their children have. They also find that there are limited resources and support available to them once they have adopted (Donaldson, 2004). Given their history of abuse and neglect, many foster youth tend to develop special needs that require special services and attention (Donaldson 2002). Foster children have much higher rates of serious emotional and behavioral problems, chronic physical disabilities, birth defects and developmental delays than children not in the system (AAP, 2002). Adoptive parents inherit these challenges, which is why they require adequate information and full disclosure about the health of their child prior to adoption, as well as additional training and support post-adoption in order to be able to provide the love and attention their child needs.

Adoption disruption and dissolution (terminating adoptions). The lack of support and resources available for adoptive families can result in the termination of adoptions in two ways, disruption and dissolution. Disruption is a termination that occurs prior to the legal finalization of the adoption, while the child is already placed in an adoptive home, whereas dissolution occurs after a child has been legally adopted (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2004). In both cases, the child is either placed back in the foster care system, or with another adoptive family. Studies show that the rate of adoption disruptions ranges from 10-25% with higher disruption rates taking place with older youth (Gorge et al., 1997; Festinger, 2002). The rate of dissolutions is difficult to determine because the records of legally adopted children are often closed, names are changed, and personal information is modified (DHHS, 2004). In both cases, termination of adoptions are attributed to various factors including inadequate knowledge of the child’s challenges prior to adoption, adoptive parents feeling unprepared to handle the special needs that their child possesses (Barth & Miller, 2000) and a lack of support and resources post-adoption (Gorge et al., 1997) among others. Overall, the factors contributing to adoption terminations are a threat to the progress that has been made in foster care through the increase in adoptions over the past decade.
REFERENCES


