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Decline in Washington's Family Reunifications: What Influenced This Trend?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When children are removed from home due to child abuse or neglect or because of the child's behavior, DSHS may file a dependency case in the court. Or, in cases where parents agree to the placement, services may be provided to the family to help resolve their problems without going to court. In both instances, when it is possible to do so safely, the goal of DSHS is to reunify the family.

Between 1995 and 2002, the annual number of reunifications dropped by 31 percent. The Washington State Legislature directed the Institute to identify factors that reduce family reunifications in Washington. To do this, we merged administrative records from DSHS with court records of dependencies for the same children.

Findings:

While the total number of reunifications declined, we found that most of the reduction has occurred because the number of out-of-home placements has dropped, not because of any significant change in rate of reunification.

- Between 1995 and 2002, the annual count of family reunifications declined by 2,615. During that same period, the number of children removed from home decreased by 2,236. Thus, the drop in out-of-home placements accounts for 86 percent of the decline in reunifications: $2,236 \text{ placements} \div 2,615 \text{ reunifications}$.
 - ✓ The decline in placements was primarily among a lower-risk population for whom no dependency case was filed. Nearly all children in such placements reunify with families.
 - ✓ No change occurred in the number of placements with an associated dependency case. Slightly over half of children in dependencies reunify with their parents.
- The remaining 14 percent of the decline is explained by changes in the caseload mix, in favor of cases less likely to reunify (e.g., more infants in care, more children placed for neglect or parental substance abuse, more children placed with relatives). However, controlling for case characteristics, the likelihood of reunification did not change over time.