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Trends in State-Funded Out-of-Home Placements of Youth in Washington State

The Washington Legislature in 1994 directed the Washington State Institute for Public Policy to study juvenile violence and other at-risk behaviors of youth.¹ The Institute was instructed to analyze trends in these behaviors and evaluate the cost-effectiveness of Washington's efforts to achieve measurable reductions in violence and at-risk behaviors. This research brief is part of the Institute's plan to provide the legislature and other interested persons with up-to-date findings on these topics.

Background The 1994 Washington Legislature established Community Public Health and Safety Networks and gave them responsibility "to make measurable reductions in the rate of at-risk children and youth."² The Networks were told to assess local conditions, develop comprehensive plans, and be committed to:

- 1) reducing "the rate of state-funded out-of-home placements," and
- 2) making "reductions in at least three of the following rates of youth: violent criminal acts, substance abuse, pregnancy and male parentage, suicide attempts, dropping out of school, child abuse or neglect, and domestic violence."³

In two reports to the Legislature, the Washington State Institute for Public Policy has published information describing long-term trends in seven of the eight at-risk behaviors or outcomes of youth listed above.⁴ This research brief provides analysis of the factor not covered in those reports: the rate of **state-funded out-of-home placements** of youth. This information, along with the other reports, helps establish statewide baseline data for evaluating whether the goals of the 1994 Violence Reduction Act are being achieved.

Trends in State-Funded Out-of-Home Placements

The State of Washington operates two main programs providing out-of-home placement services to youth: the family foster care program and the group care program. As described by the Department of Social and Health Services, the family foster care program "provides services to children who need short-term or temporary protection because they are dependent, abused, neglected, and/or cannot live with their parents because of conditions which threaten their normal development." The group care program "provides services to children with emotional and/or behavioral difficulties which exceed the service or supervision capacity of regular foster care families."⁵

¹ RCW 70.190.050.

² RCW 70.190.130 (h).

³ RCW 70.190.130 (h).

⁴ Washington State Institute for Public Policy, *Trends in At-Risk Behaviors of Youth in Washington*, January 1996, and *Reported Child Abuse or Neglect Trends in Washington*, July 1996.

⁵ See, for example, Department of Social and Health Services Home Page, www.wa.gov/dshs/.

To gain a long-term perspective on state-funded out-of-home placements, the Institute collected information from DSHS—the state agency that administers the programs. Figure 1 shows the trends in the rate of state placement from 1970 to 1995.

FINDING: *The rate of use of Washington’s foster and group care programs has either declined or held steady in recent years. For both programs, the rate of use was higher in the 1970s than it is today.*

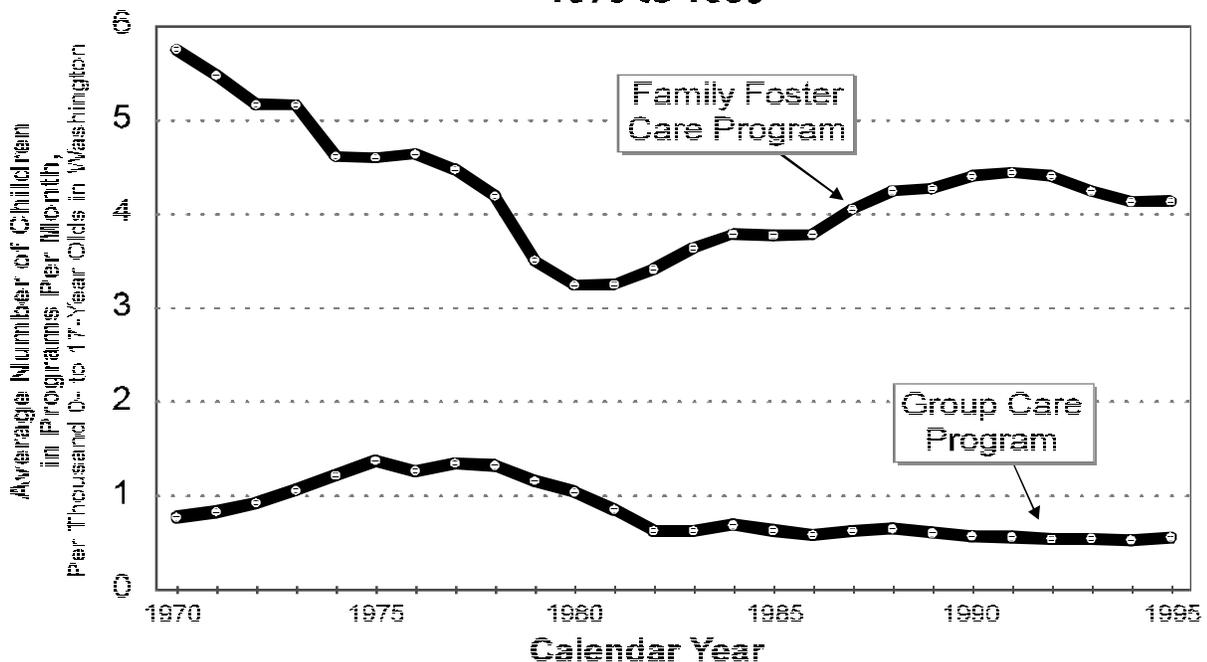
Family Foster Care In 1995, the average number of children per month on the family foster care caseload was 6,062. The Office of Financial Management estimates that there were 1,463,358 people in Washington 17 years old or younger in 1995. Thus, the out-of-home placement **rate** for the family foster care program during an average month in 1995 was 4.1 children out of every thousand youth in Washington.

Figure 1 shows that in 1970 the out-of-home placement rate for the foster care program was 5.8 youths per thousand 0- to 17-year olds—the highest rate over the last twenty-five years. The rate fell sharply during the 1970s, reaching a low of 3.2 in 1980. The foster care rate then rose to 4.4 by 1991. Since 1991, the rate has fallen slightly.

Group Home Care Figure 1 also shows the long-term trend in group home use in the state. In 1995, the average monthly caseload was 822 youths. When divided by the youth population in Washington, the current **rate** of group home use is 0.6 children out of every thousand. The current rate has been quite steady since 1982, and it is lower than it was during the 1970s.

For further information, contact Steve Aos or Roxanne Lieb at (360) 866-6000, ext. 6380.

Figure 1
**The Rate of State-Funded Out-of-Home Placements in Washington
1970 to 1995**



Data Sources: Washington State Department of Social and Health Services, Washington State Office of Financial Management. All calculations made by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy.