

Overview and Preliminary Evaluation of the Relative Caregiver Assistance Program

Texas Department of Family and Protective Services

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Overview and Preliminary Evaluation of the Relative Caregiver Assistance Program EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Kinship care has become an important option for children in foster care in Texas, with the percent of Texas children in kinship care almost doubling over the past seven years. In 2000, 14% of children in state custody were in an unpaid relative placement, representing 3,494 children. By 2006, the number of children had increased to 8,138 (26%).

Several DFPS actions have contributed to the substantial increase seen in kinship care, particularly during the 2005 to 2006 time period. The Family Focus Initiative of Child Protective Services (Senate Bill 6, 79th Texas Legislature) provided for an increased emphasis on Family Group Decision Making conferences, expanded the Relative Caregiver (Kinship) Assistance Program statewide to provide support and services to families who care for relative children in their homes, and implemented a financial support process to allow transitional financial assistance for kinship caregivers. During the first six months of the program (March through August 2006), 2,205 children in 1,166 families received over \$1.45 million in relative caregiver support.

The preliminary evaluation examined four facets of the statewide kinship program: 1) general descriptive program data, 2) selected outcomes for children in relative placements versus children in non-relative substitute care, 3) exits from care, and 4) non-paid days in care as a function of the implementation of the Relative Caregiver Assistance Program.

The analyses of the kinship program point to positive outcomes for the children placed with relatives. Once placed with kin, their experience seems to differ in the sense that they are less likely to leave the placement for their own reasons (e.g., running away) or those of their caretaker (e.g., the caretaker requests they be placed elsewhere). They also appear to be safer in a kin placement than in a placement where they have no pre-existing relationship. Finally, they are more likely to have a positive exit from care (reunification, custody to relative, or adoption).

Data comparing those receiving financial assistance to those without, generally suggest a slight difference in exits, with children in kin placements without financial assistance slightly more likely to have exited from care and to have been reunified. Data also indicate a 1% rise in relative placements over and above the current trend following the introduction of the Relative Caregiver Assistance Program. However, the newness of this program warrants caution with regard to attributing success or failure of the program to financial assistance. As more time passes and financial assistance becomes available to more relatives, the outcomes will be more indicative of the program's status.

INTRODUCTION

Within the Texas child welfare system, kinship care has become an important option for children in foster care. “Kinship care” is the term used to describe those situations in which children, who are no longer able to live with their own parents, are cared for by grandparents or other relatives.¹ Unlike foster parents in Texas, Texas kinship caregivers have historically provided care to these children without verification, licensure, or financial assistance, though a home study has been conducted to insure child safety. However, in late 2004, the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) began implementing some forms of financial assistance to kin caregivers as a result of a legislative rider enacted by the 78th Legislature allowing financial support for kin caregivers in four South Texas counties.

This report presents an initial descriptive summary of kinship placements² in Texas since the inception of the statewide Relative Caregivers Assistance Program and an early evaluation of the effect of financial assistance for kin caregivers. Additional time and experience will be needed before a thorough evaluation that examines a full range of outcomes, with precision, may be completed.

BACKGROUND

National Trends in Kinship Care

In 1996 the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (P.L. 104-193) required states to give preference to adult relatives over non-relative caregivers, provided the relative caregiver met the state’s child protection standards. The Adoption and Safe Family Act (P.L. 105-89) in 1997 also recognized the special place of kin in the child welfare system by making some special exceptions to general regulations for children in kin placements. Supporting these legislative changes were research results showing that kinship placements are better able than foster care placements to: 1) reinforce a child’s sense of identity and self-esteem, 2) help children make connections with extended families, 3) continue lifelong family traditions and memories, 4) provide more stable placements, and 5) enable children to live with people they know and trust.

Though research suggests that children benefit from kin placements, it also points to the numerous challenges for the caregivers who tend to be older, single, poorer and live in more disadvantaged neighborhoods than foster parents. As a consequence there are fewer resources available for children placed with relatives. Additionally, kinship caregivers tend to receive fewer services for both themselves and the children in their care.^{3 4} Furthermore,

¹ Shlonsky A, Dawson W, Choi Y, Piccus W, Cardona P, and Needell B. (2004). Kinship support services in California: An evaluation of California’s Kinship Support Services Program.

² The information contained in this report represents only those children in Kinship Care for whom CPS has legal custody.

³ Geen, R. & Berrick, J.D. (2002). Kinship care: An evolving service delivery option. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 24(1/2), 1-14

the lack of monetary resources and support services can lead to disruptions, sending the children back into paid foster care.^{5 6} Finally, relative caregivers traditionally have been left to raise these children largely on their own while foster parents receive special training and services related to raising children in their care. Thus, kinship programs have developed nationally that are designed to help relatives shoulder the responsibility of caring for these children by providing similar services to those provided to foster parents. The services may include financial resources, as well as case management and support services. The aim is to reduce the likelihood of children returning to traditional foster care through the provision of these support services.

Kinship Programs in Texas

The first pilot of a kinship care program in Texas began in Bexar County in 1997 through the support of a three-year federal grant. Known as the Comprehensive Relative Enhancement Support and Training Project (CREST), the program was continued after the third year through the support of Casey Family Programs. Paid caregiver assistance expanded to four additional South Texas counties in 2003 through a Rider enacted by the 78th Texas Legislature and was known as the Supporting and Educating Relatives as Placements (SERAPE) program. Each of these programs is described in more detail in Appendix A.

The Family Focus Initiative of Child Protective Services (CPS) was created in 2005 as part of the DFPS renewal effort resulting from Senate Bill 6 passed by the 79th Texas Legislature and has had a substantial impact on kinship programs in Texas. Through this initiative, CPS has been able to increase the emphasis on Family Group Decision Making conferences, allowing immediate family members and other relatives greater participation in decisions regarding children in CPS care. The Family Focus Initiative also allowed for the expansion of the Relative Caregiver Program statewide to provide support and services to families who care for relative children in their homes and the implementation of a financial support process (Relative Caregiver Assistance Program) to allow transitional payments for kinship caregivers. The financial assistance payments are made available statewide through the combined efforts of Kinship Development Workers and regular conservatorship caseworkers.

The services, which were made available in March 2006, include the funding of one-time integration payments (\$1,000), annual per child reimbursement payments (\$500), and day care services. During the first six months of the program (March through August 2006) 2,205 children in 1,166 families received over \$1.45 million in relative caregiver assistance.

The results of these targeted CPS efforts are most clearly illustrated in Figure 1. The percent of Texas children in kinship care has doubled over the past eight years, with the

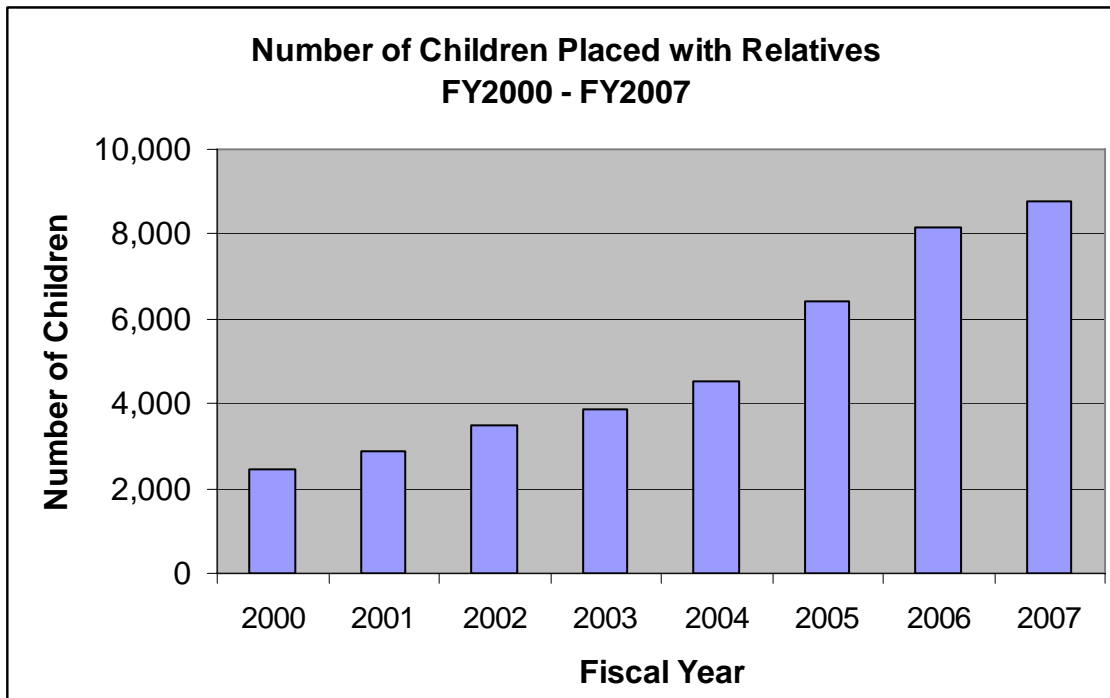
⁴ Ehrle, J. & Geen, R. (2002). Kin and non-kin foster care--Findings from a national survey. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 24(1/2), 15-35.

⁵ Terling-Watt, T. (2001). Permanency in Kinship Care: An exploration of disruption rates and factors associated with placement disruption. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 23(2), 111-126.

⁶ Testa, M.F., & Slack, K. S. (2002). The gift of kinship foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 24(1/2), 79-108.

sharpest increase following 2004. In 2000, 14% of children in state custody were in an unpaid relative placement, representing 2,443 children. In 2007, 29% (8,775) of the children were living with relatives or other kin caregivers,⁷ some of whom were receiving financial compensation for the placement.

Figure 1: Number of Texas children placed with relatives. Fiscal Years 2000 – 2007.



PRELIMINARY EVALUATION

The preliminary evaluation examined four facets of the statewide kinship program: 1) general descriptive program data, 2) selected outcomes for children in relative placements versus children in non-relative substitute care, 3) exits from care, and 4) non-paid days in care as a function of the implementation of the Relative Caregiver Assistance Program. Each of the four evaluation measures is described in the following sections.

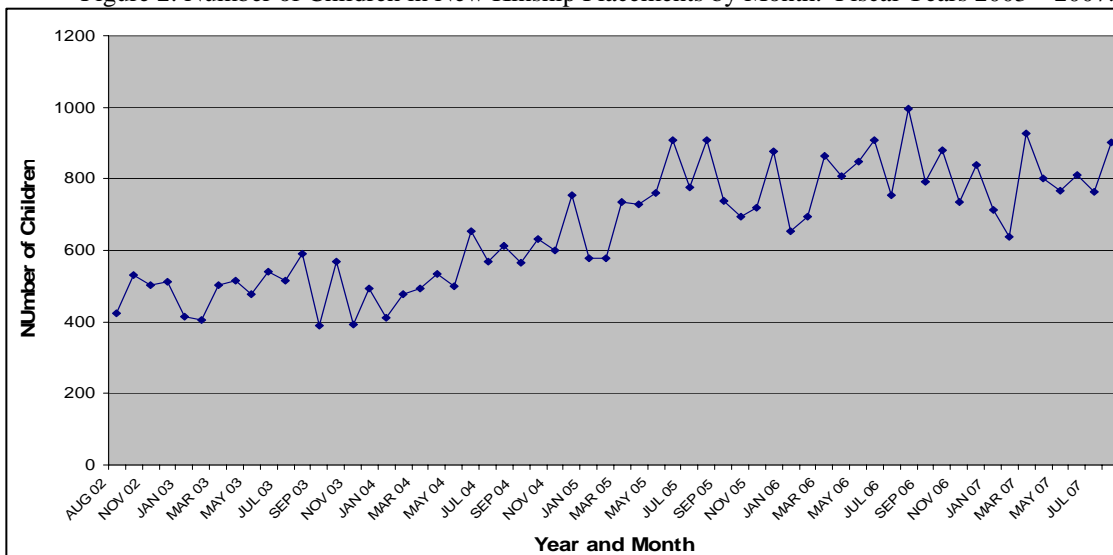
Program Information

As shown in Figure 2, the number of children in new kinship placements has increased steadily and substantially from August 2002 (the end of Fiscal Year 2002) through

⁷ According to DFPS definitions, “kin caregiver” is an inclusive term that includes relatives and close family friends and others who have a long-standing relationship with the child. These non-biologically related caregivers are sometimes referred to as fictive kin or designated caregivers.

September 2007 (the start of Fiscal Year 2008).⁸ The average monthly total of children in new kin placements in Fiscal Year 2003 was 494. During Fiscal Year 2007, that number increased

Figure 2: Number of Children in New Kinship Placements by Month. Fiscal Years 2003 – 2007.



to 787 children per month, an increase of 61%. In Fiscal Year 2007, DFPS had legal responsibility for 8,775 children who were in relative care. The number of new kinship families has also increased from an average of 331 families in Fiscal Year 2003 to an average of 524 families in Fiscal Year 2007.

When comparing children in kin placements with the general substitute care population, the most striking differences are those regarding the age, gender, and special need characteristics of the children (see Appendix B). There is a greater percentage of children age nine or younger in kin placements than in the general substitute care population, but a smaller percentage of children age 10 or older. The difference is particularly striking for youth age 14 to 17, with far fewer youth in this age range placed with relatives. There are also slightly more females placed with kin. Finally, fewer children with special need characteristics (physical, medical, emotional, learning, drug/alcohol) are placed with relatives, compared to those in the general population. With the exception of race/ethnicity, these findings are somewhat similar to those found for children who are adopted in CPS. Generally, it is more difficult to find adoptive homes for older boys, especially African American boys and those with special needs.⁹

Positive Outcomes for Relative and Non-Relative Placements

⁸ Data sources: DFPS Data Books and Data Warehouse and Management reports from FY2003 through FY2007. This includes paid and unpaid kinship care.

⁹ Fluke J, Branton L, and Hedderson, J. (August 2003). Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services Outcomes and Cost Study of Adoption Practice Changes in Region 6.

Findings from several sets of information indicate that kin placements have positive outcomes.¹⁰ First, kin placements tend to be more permanent. When the reason for removal from a placement was due to the child's behavior, 92.4% of the moves were from non-kin placements and 7.6% were from relatives. In addition, when the reason for removal was at the caretaker's request, 82.2% were from non-kin placements and 17.8% were from relatives. Finally, when the child ran away, 92.4% were from non-kin placements and 7.6% were from relatives. Thus, kinship placements may foster a better sense of commitment, both on the part of the child and the relative. Alternatively, it is possible that this could be due to the characteristics of the child, since children placed with relatives tend to be younger and have fewer special needs than children placed in foster care.

Second, it appears that less subsequent harm may befall children when they are with relatives, compared to when they are not. When the reason that a child was removed from a placement was due to risk of abuse or neglect, 70.6% occurred in non-kin placements and 29.4% occurred in kin placements.

Third, positive permanent outcomes are more likely to occur following placement with a relative while the child is in care. Data comparing the permanency outcomes prior to the program to those during the time the program had been in operation revealed that kinship placements were more likely than non-kinship placements to end with a return home (kinship returned home 19.3% compared to 15.6% non-kinship), or with custody going to the relative. Eighty percent of the relative placements resulted in actual closure of custody going to a relative, while cases not experiencing a relative placement resulted in a discharge of custody to a relative in only 20% of the cases. In other words, kin placement while in care increases the likelihood that the child will permanently reside with a family member. Including adoption as one of the outcomes in the analysis, a child who had at least one kin placement while in care had a positive outcome (return home, custody to a relative or adoption) 95% of the time compared to not having a kin placement which resulted in a positive outcome only 65% of the time.

Finally, the potential impact of financial assistance for relatives was examined for the initial stages of the program by comparing a group of children who entered relative placements with financial assistance with a group that did not receive assistance within a similar timeframe.¹¹ With 71% of the children still in care, it is too early to draw definitive

¹⁰ Three data sets were used in this section. In the first data set, placement changes and permanency for kin placements versus non-kin placements were compared using data collected prior to the implementation of the statewide program (March through December 2005) with that collected after the start of the program (March 2006 to December 2006). Second, long-term outcomes for children who exited care between FY 2001 through FY 2007 and who had at least one kin placement were compared to those children who did not have a kin placement. Finally, in order to assess the early effects of the Relative Care Payment Program, exits from care were examined using an entry cohort of 13,532 children who entered care from February 2006 through October 2006, and who were followed through April 2007 for exit status.

¹¹ Those children who received a kin payment during this period, but did not meet the above criteria were excluded from further analysis. Of the 4,758 children in kin placements that received financial assistance between February 2006 and April 2007, 44% were excluded. They were excluded because they had entered care before the program started and hence had either been in the kin placement a long time before financial assistance was received or had been put in a paid kin placement after they had already been in care a

conclusions regarding the true impact of financial assistance on relative placements. However, the children whose kin did not receive financial assistance look to be a slightly different group than the children who went to kin placements with financial assistance. The children in kin placements without financial assistance were slightly more likely to have exited from care (32% versus 26%). They are also more likely to have been reunified (12.1% versus 6.2%).

Early Effects of the Payment Program Using Client Histories and Non-Paid Foster Care Days

To obtain an early look at the potential impact of the Relative Caregiver Assistance Program on the costs of care, forecasters from HHSC created a database made up of children entering care beginning at the start of Fiscal Year 2002 and ending in February 2007. Non-paid foster care days over time for all children in care were analyzed. Results of the analysis indicated that since the Relative Caregiver Assistance Program began in March of 2006, there has been a 1% rise in non-paid foster care days. This rise is over and above the steady rise that DFPS has been witnessing in relative care over the last several years (recall Figure 1). Some caution is warranted here because the program is new and more data will need to be collected to be certain that this trend will continue.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The analyses of the kinship program point to positive outcomes for the children placed with relatives. Once placed with kin, their experience seems to differ from children placed in foster care in the sense that they are less likely to leave the placement for their own reasons (e.g., running away) or those of their caretaker (e.g., the caretaker requests they be placed elsewhere). They also appear to be safer in a kin placement than in a placement where they have no pre-existing relationship. Furthermore, they are more likely to experience a positive exit from care returning home, living with a relative, or by being adopted. There are two potential explanations for these findings. The first is that relative placements bestow positive benefits when compared to foster care. This is consistent with the literature. The second is that the children in relative care are better off than the children in foster care: the population of children who are going into a relative placement are different from those children going into the foster care population in that there is a greater percentage of younger children in kin placements, and fewer children with special characteristics (physical, medical, emotional, learning, drug/alcohol). Subsequent evaluation efforts will need to take these differences into account.

Though it may be too soon to be definitive, data comparing those receiving financial assistance to those without, generally suggest a slight difference in exits, with children in kin placements without financial assistance slightly more likely to have exited from care and to have been reunified.

significant amount of time. A fewer number of children were excluded because they entered care late in the study period and there was not sufficient time for follow-up.

Data also indicate a 1% rise in relative placements over and above the current trend following the introduction of the Relative Caregiver Assistance Program. However, the newness of this program warrants caution with regard to attributing success or failure of the program to the financial assistance. As more time passes and financial assistance becomes available to more relatives, the outcomes will be more indicative of the program's status.

APPENDIX A

Descriptions of Early Kinship Care Programs and the Family Group Decision Program in Texas

CREST

The Comprehensive Relative Enhancement Support and Training Project (CREST) was started in Bexar County (San Antonio) with a three-year federal adoption opportunity grant. The features of the program included formal group trainings, individualized case management, and limited financial assistance made possible through the grant. The formal group trainings consisted of two 10-week curriculums, one for the relative caregivers and one for the children in the home. The kin curriculum included such topics as stress management, self-esteem, drug addiction, sexual abuse, community resources, discipline and CPS processes. Free childcare was also available during the training sessions.

Specialized Kinship Development Workers were a standard of CREST. These staff served as the caseworker for the kinship family, while other caseworkers attended to the child's needs. It was the goal of the Kinship Development Workers to provide services to the relative caregiver enabling them to successfully meet the child's needs. Aspects of the case management services provided by the Kinship Development Workers included helping access community resources and services such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Medicaid; participating in DFPS planning meetings; attending court hearings and school meetings; and providing monthly visits in the kinship home. Kinship Development Workers were also on-call to respond to concerns and crises that might occur within the placement after office hours. Through provision of such one-on-one counseling services, crisis intervention activities, and connecting with resources, Kinship Development Workers were able to build a rapport with families that resulted in more positive kinship experiences.

SERAPE

Two major expansions of the CREST program were launched in the fall of 2003. The first included duplicating CREST program services in 25 additional counties in Texas. Although additional Kinship Development Workers were hired, this expansion lacked the financial services initially available through the federal grant that had funded CREST.

The second expansion of CREST occurred with the implementation of the Supporting and Educating Relatives as Placements (SERAPE) program made possible by House Bill 1 (General Appropriations Act, Article II) in the 78th Legislative Session. SERAPE retained all the features of CREST, such as the kin training program and the individualized case management. The added feature of SERAPE was the provision of a one-time integration financial assistance payment of \$1,000 to qualified caregivers upon placement, as well as up to \$500 in annual flexible funds. The integration payment provided some assistance for the purchase of beds, bedding, furniture, clothing, and other "start-up" items that might be needed to support the placement. Among the eligibility requirements were the requirements that there be a relationship to the child through blood, marriage or adoption, legal residency

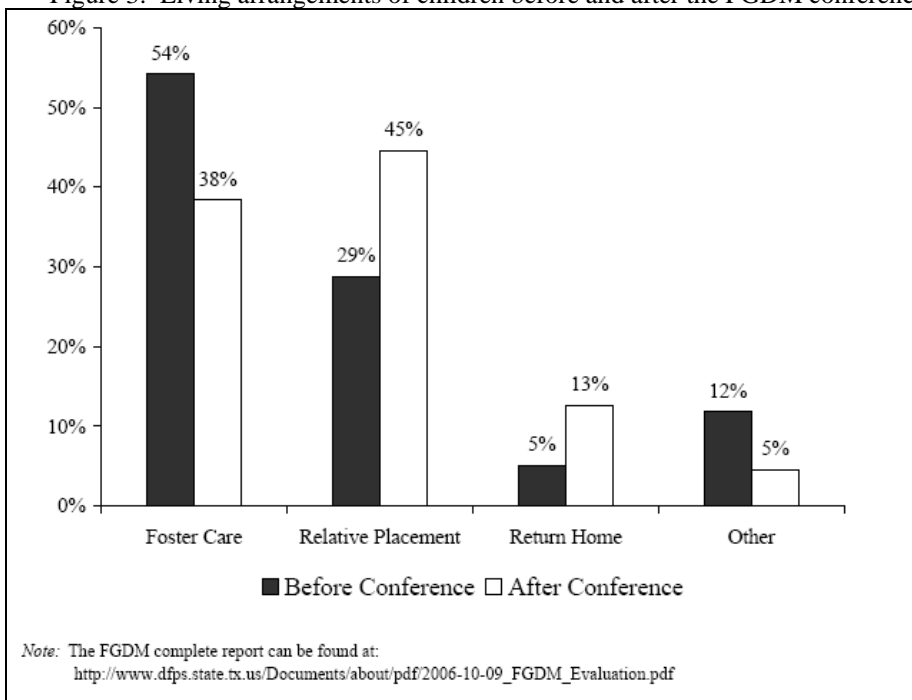
in the United States, and an annual family income at or below 300% of the federal poverty guidelines. The SERAPE program, like the initial CREST program, was confined to a relatively small section of the state and served families in Cameron, Hidalgo, Nueces, Webb, and Willacy Counties.

Family Group Decision Making

Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) is an umbrella term used to describe a variety of approaches to working with and engaging families in problem solving. DFPS first incorporated FGDM within the CPS program to allow families to participate as a partner in securing the protection and safety of their children beginning in December 2004. FGDM services are currently provided in all regions across the state. The impact of FGDM on relative placements has been apparent.

Figure 2 illustrates the placement patterns of 1,908 children followed for the agency's evaluation of FGDM. The families of these children experienced a family group conference within the first 30 to 45 days of being in foster care in the 37 counties where FGDM was offered at the time. The leftmost bars on Figure 2 represent the percentage of the 1,908 children in each type of placement prior to the conference. The rightmost bars indicate the percentage of the children in each type of placement after the conference, indicating that after the conference, more children had moved from a foster care placement to a relative placement or had returned home.

Figure 3: Living arrangements of children before and after the FGDM conferences. Fiscal Year 2006.



APPENDIX B

Demographics of Children in Kinship Care for Two Time Periods and Children in the General CPS Substitute Care Population: March 2006 to March 2007

Table 1: Demographics of Children in Kinship Care for Two Time Periods and Children in the General CPS Substitute Care Population: March 2006 to March 2007

	Percent of Children in Kinship Placements: March 2005 to February 2006	Percent of Children in Kinship Placements: March 2006 to March 2007	Percent of Children in General CPS Substitute Care Child Population: March 2006 to March 2007*
Race/Ethnicity			
African American	30.6	29.9	28.7
Hispanic	35.4	36.8	37.5
Anglo	32.2	30.9	31.6
Other**	1.8	2.4	2.2
Age			
0 to 2 years	34.3	32.9	24.9
3 to 5 years	24.5	24.2	18.1
6 to 9 years	20.9	22.0	19.4
10 to 13 years	12.7	12.9	16.4
14 to 17 years	7.6	8.0	21.2
Type Relative			
Aunt / Uncle	31.3	32.0	N/A
Grandparent	49.3	48.2	N/A
Other Relative	19.4	19.8	N/A
Gender of Child			
Female	51.0	50.5	48.4
Male	49.0	49.4	51.6
Unknown	<0.1	<0.1	<0.1
Special Characteristics***			
Physical	0.5	0.4	1.2
Medical	3.3	2.9	6.5
Drug/Alcohol	10.3	10.4	11.0
Emotional	6.9	6.5	24.7
Learning	6.8	6.4	19.1

* These percentages include the children in kinship placement.

** “Other” race/ethnicity category includes American Indian, Asian, multiple, and undetermined.

*** Some children have more than one characteristic or may have no characteristics. The percentages do not sum to 100%.