
Introduction

This study was requested in the 1998 crime bill.

Children are placed away from their homes for a variety of reasons and in a variety of settings. The residents receiving care and treatment in juvenile facilities range from infants to adolescents. They include delinquents, abused and neglected children, emotionally disturbed children, and children with drug and alcohol problems.

The 1998 Legislature's omnibus crime bill requested the Legislative Auditor to study out-of-home placements and included a lengthy list of suggested topics for study.¹ The Legislative Audit Commission approved this study in April 1998, and our research posed the following questions:

- **How do counties and courts decide when to make placements? Is there adequate screening and assessment of children?**
- **What is the total public cost of out-of-home placements in Minnesota, and what trends in placements and spending have occurred? To what extent do counties vary in their placement spending, and what are the reasons for the variation? What strategies have counties used to control placement spending?**
- **What are the characteristics of the children served in out-of-home placements? In what types of facilities are they placed, for how long, and how far away from home? To what extent do children complete the programs they enter, and what are the reasons for non-completion?**
- **Does Minnesota need more beds to serve children placed out of home? If so, what types of beds (or supportive services) does the state need? Does Minnesota have sufficient non-residential service alternatives and aftercare following residential placements?**
- **Is there sufficient information on the performance and operation of Minnesota's out-of-home placement system?**

In our study, we analyzed placement and spending information obtained from state agencies, counties, and residential facilities. Because of the absence of statewide data on placements paid for by county agencies other than social services

¹ *Minn. Laws* (1998), ch. 367, art. 10, sec. 16.

Our methods included surveys, file reviews, interviews, and analysis of existing data.

departments, we collected information on these placements with a survey in June and July 1998.² To help us better understand the perceptions of county officials and judges about the placements they make and the adequacy of existing services, we surveyed the human services director and a juvenile corrections supervisor (or lead probation agent) in each county in August 1998. We also surveyed district court judges at that time, limiting our analysis to those judges who had presided over ten or more juvenile cases in the previous year. We received responses from all of the county corrections and human services officials, and 92 percent of the judges.³ The judgments of these three surveyed groups sometimes differed, perhaps reflecting differences in the types of cases with which they were most familiar or their interpretations about what constituted “adequate” or “available” service.

We also reviewed samples of case files during site visits to seven counties, and we reviewed selected case information that we obtained directly from residential facilities.⁴ In addition, we interviewed numerous county and facility staff.

To avoid duplicating research done by others (or previously by our office), there were some topics related to out-of-home placement that we did not evaluate in depth. For example, a 1998 House-Senate task force examined education costs for children in out-of-home placement, so we limited our research in this area. Also, the Legislature requested that our study analyze “the effectiveness of juvenile out-of-home placement, including information on recidivism, where applicable, and the child’s performance after returning to the child’s home.” Based on subsequent discussions with legislators, we did not collect information on juvenile recidivism--which had been a topic of extensive review in an earlier report by our office.⁵ But chapters 5 and 6 of this report offer general observations and suggestions on performance measures for children placed out of home.

Our study uses the term “juveniles” to refer to persons under age 18, plus persons 18 or over who continue to receive child welfare services or who remain under the juvenile court’s jurisdiction. In addition, we focused on juveniles whose placements were partly or fully funded by public agencies--not those whose placements were funded entirely by their families or private insurance. Finally, we examined juveniles in a broad range of state-licensed residential “facilities,” ranging from family foster homes to large institutions.

2 We requested summary information on 1992 and 1997 placements not paid for by social services budgets. We received responses from 100 percent of Minnesota counties. The agencies (other than social services) that most often paid for placements were county corrections and law enforcement agencies.

3 Some agencies in Minnesota’s 87 counties are jointly administered or share staff, so we surveyed 84 human services directors and 82 juvenile corrections supervisors. Some counties contract with the Department of Corrections to provide juvenile probation services, so our survey respondents in some counties were state employees.

4 We reviewed 164 files in Crow Wing, Hennepin, Nicollet, Olmsted, Ramsey, St. Louis, and Washington counties, and we reviewed facility discharge reports for 98 juveniles. The sample sizes were not large enough to ensure that the reviewed cases were representative of all cases within these counties or the state as a whole.

5 Office of the Legislative Auditor, Program Evaluation Division *Residential Facilities for Juvenile Offenders* (St. Paul, February 1995).

Chapter 1 of this report provides background information on residential placement options and laws governing child placements. Chapter 2 discusses how decisions are made about out-of-home (and out-of-state) placements. Chapter 3 examines the total cost of child placements in Minnesota, plus variation in county costs. Chapter 4 describes characteristics of children in out-of-home placement. Chapter 5 discusses the availability of residential and non-residential services for juveniles in Minnesota, and Chapter 6 offers our recommendations.