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# Characteristics of Children in Placement

## CHAPTER 4

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### Residential facilities serve juveniles with various needs.

**M**innesota residential facilities serve a variety of types of children. In fact, it is difficult to identify a “typical” child in placement because they vary considerably in age, reasons for placement, and the nature of their placement settings. We asked:

- **To what extent are children placed away from home because of their own behaviors, their parents’ behaviors, or other reasons?**
- **What are the demographic characteristics of children placed away from home in Minnesota? How far from home are children placed?**
- **How common is it for juveniles to have multiple placements away from home?**
- **Does the state’s primary information system on child placement have accurate, reliable data?**

Overall, we found that the reason reported by counties for a majority of child placement days is a parent-related reason, not a child-related one. We also found that African American and American Indian children are more likely to be placed out of home than other racial/ethnic groups. In addition, we found that most children placed in shelters and foster care live within their home counties, but children placed in Rule 5 mental health treatment facilities, group homes, and correctional facilities are more likely to be placed farther away.

For some analyses in this chapter, we profiled Minnesota’s placement population by integrating information we obtained from counties, the Department of Human Services (DHS), and the Department of Corrections (DOC). In other cases, however, we found that this would be difficult or impossible with existing information systems, so we based these analyses solely on placements paid for by county social services agencies.<sup>1</sup> Placements funded by social services agencies accounted for 91 percent of the days that children spent in placement in 1997.

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<sup>1</sup> These analyses did not include placements for juveniles in chemical dependency treatment facilities that were paid for by the state’s consolidated treatment fund. The analyses also did not include most juveniles served at the Department of Corrections’ Red Wing and Sauk Centre facilities and placements paid by county agencies other than social services. Statewide, social services budgets only paid for 33 percent of spending at correctional facilities.

As we discuss later in the chapter, we found various problems in the data we obtained from DHS on placements paid for by social services agencies. The DHS data are county-reported, but we found many cases where counties had more complete, accurate information than what had been reported to DHS. As a result, we obtained comparable placement data directly from eight counties (which accounted for 62 percent of the state's 1997 total days that children spent in placement), and we often used the county data to adjust or correct the DHS data.<sup>2</sup>

## REASONS FOR PLACEMENT

### Out-of-home placements often result from the actions of parents.

Children are placed away from home due to a variety of underlying problems. Sometimes the immediate reason for placement is a child's behavior--such as when a child breaks the law or abuses alcohol or drugs. In other cases, placements may occur due to parental behavior--such as child abuse or neglect.

For each placement paid for by social services budgets, counties report to DHS the reason for placement. The vast majority of placements not paid for by social services budgets are delinquency and chemical dependency cases, and we assumed that the reason for placement in each of these cases was the child's behavior. By combining DHS data with information we collected from counties and DOC, we found that:

- **Children spent more time in out-of-home placement in 1997 due to their parents' actions than their own conduct.**

Table 4.1 shows the reasons for child placements--by 1997 days of care and by the number of 1997 child placements. Because many of the 1997 placements were very short-term placements in detention centers, we think that the days of care column in Table 4.1 presents a better measure of the reasons for placement. Among children in placement in 1997, 46 percent of days of care resulted from parents' conduct, and other parent-related reasons accounted for another 12 percent. In contrast, children's conduct was the cause of 30 percent of the 1997 days of care, and other child-related reasons accounted for another 6 percent. Family interaction problems accounted for 5 percent of the 1997 days of out-of-home care.

We also looked at the reasons that children were placed in various categories of facilities. Seventy-one percent of children in foster care during 1997 were placed there because of a parent's conduct or other parent-related reasons. In contrast, a large majority of children in Rule 8 group homes, Rule 5 mental health treatment, and correctional facilities in 1997 were placed due to child behaviors or other child-related reasons.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Hennepin, Ramsey, Anoka, Dakota, Washington, St. Louis, Crow Wing, and Blue Earth counties.

<sup>3</sup> Child behavior and other child-related reasons accounted for 71 percent of group home residents, 75 percent of Rule 5 residents, and 92 percent of correctional facility residents whose placements were funded by social services budgets.

**Table 4.1: Reasons for Out-of Home Placements, 1997**

Reason for Placement	Percentage of:		Average 1997 Days of Care Per Placement <sup>1</sup>
	Placements (N=35,705)	Days of Care (N=3,327,066)	
<b>Parent conduct</b>			
Neglect/abandonment	8.9%	18.7%	195
Physical abuse	4.2	8.2	180
Substance abuse	2.9	8.0	257
Termination of parental rights	1.0	4.8	422 <sup>2</sup>
Sexual abuse	1.4	2.8	187
Parent cannot cope	1.3	2.5	172
Parent incarceration	1.4	1.7	107
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>	<b>21.2</b>	<b>46.2</b>	<b>203</b>
<b>Other parent-related reason</b>			
Illness/disability	2.1	4.0	181
Temporary absence	1.1	1.4	120
Other	4.0	6.7	157
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>	<b>7.2</b>	<b>12.2</b>	<b>158</b>
<b>Child conduct</b>			
Delinquency, status offense	51.8	21.4	38
Substance abuse	3.9	1.8	42
Other behavior problem	7.3	7.1	91
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>	<b>63.1</b>	<b>30.3</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Other child-related reason</b>			
Child disability	1.3	4.0	286
Other	1.9	1.9	96
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>	<b>3.2</b>	<b>5.9</b>	<b>175</b>
Family interaction problems	<u>5.4</u>	<u>5.4</u>	<u>93</u>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>100.0%</b>	<b>93</b>

<sup>1</sup>Total days of care during 1997 for children in this category (regardless of the year the placement occurred) divided by the number of placements in this category in 1997.

<sup>2</sup>For cases involving termination of parental rights, the 1997 days of care per 1997 placement exceeded 365 days because many of these cases' days of care were for placements made prior to 1997.

SOURCE: Program Evaluation Division analysis of DHS substitute care database and Consolidated Treatment Fund data; DOC data on Red Wing and Sauk Centre placements; and Program Evaluation Division's June-July 1998 surveys of counties. Excludes cases where reason for placement was unknown and cases where children were discharged on the same day they entered placement.

Some juveniles who have been placed away from home because of their own conduct have previously been placed for their parents' conduct. Among children placed away from home for delinquency during 1997, we found that about 6 percent also had at least one placement in 1995-97 for which the reason was a parent's conduct. Undoubtedly, the percentage of delinquent children with prior placements for child protection reasons would be higher than 6 percent if their placement histories could be tracked for longer than three years.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> According to information collected by the Minnesota Council of Child Caring Agencies, 32 percent of children discharged from member agencies' correctional programs during 1997 had previously been victims of documented abuse or neglect, and many others were suspected victims.

## DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

The 1998 Legislature requested that we summarize the demographics of children in placement, including information on race, gender, and age.<sup>5</sup> We developed profiles of children in placement and examined differences in placement patterns, primarily using data on 1997 placements paid for by social services agencies.

### Race/Ethnicity

Our review of 1997 placement patterns indicated that:

- **African American and American Indian children had disproportionately high rates of out-of-home placement, compared with children from other racial/ethnic groups.**

As Table 4.2 shows, African American children comprised 4 percent of Minnesota's population under age 18 in 1997, but they comprised 22 percent of the children in placement. Likewise, only 2 percent of Minnesota children are American Indian, but American Indians accounted for 12 percent of children in placement in 1997.

**Some minority groups have had disproportionately high rates of out-of-home placement.**

**Table 4.2: Percentage of Children in Placement and Average Length of Placement, By Racial and Ethnic Groups, 1997**

Racial/Ethnic Category	Percentage of State Population Under Age 18 <sup>1</sup>	Percentage of Children in Out-of-Home Care <sup>2</sup>	Average 1997 Days of Care Per Child in Placement <sup>3</sup>
White, non-Hispanic	87.8%	60.8%	162
African American	4.1	22.3	194
American Indian	1.9	11.6	212
Hispanic	2.2	3.4	168
Asian American	4.0	1.9	152
TOTAL	100.0%	100.0%	175

NOTE: This analysis was based solely on placements funded by local social services budgets. It does not include most detention and chemical dependency placements, plus some longer correctional placements. It excludes cases where the racial/ethnic category was unknown.

<sup>1</sup>In 1997, the estimated population under age 18 was 1,250,685.

<sup>2</sup>In 1997, the number of children in out-of-home care totalled 18,142.

<sup>3</sup>Total days of care during 1997 (regardless of the year the placement occurred) for each child who was in placement at some time during 1997.

SOURCE: Program Evaluation Division analysis of Department of Human Services and county placement data.

<sup>5</sup> *Minn. Laws* (1998), ch. 367, art. 10, sec. 16.

Table 4.2 also shows that the average African American and American Indian child spent more time in placement during 1997 than the average child in other racial/ethnic categories. For example, American Indian children who were in placement during 1997 spent an average of 212 days in placement that year, compared with 162 days for white, non-Hispanic children.

We also found disparities in the statewide percentage of each racial/ethnic group’s children who were in placement at some time during 1997. Specifically, 8.1 percent of Minnesota’s African American children and 8.8 percent of the state’s American Indian children were in out-of-home placement at some time during 1997, compared with 1.0 percent of Minnesota’s white, non-Hispanic children, 2.2 percent of Hispanic children, and 0.7 percent of Asian American children. Thus, African American and American Indian children were eight times as likely to have been in out-of-home placement in 1997 as white, non-Hispanic children.

**Twin Cities suburban counties have below average placement rates in all racial/ethnic categories.**

We observed some regional differences in patterns of placement among racial/ethnic groups, as shown in Table 4.3. In all racial and ethnic groups, suburban Twin Cities counties, as a group, had below average days of out-of-home care per child in the population. For instance, African American children from suburban counties had about 6 days of care per African American child in the population, compared with a statewide total of 15 days of care per African American child. Hennepin County’s total days of care per child in the population exceeded the state average by 60 percent (4.0 vs. 2.5), but its days per child were below the state average for children who were (1) white, non-Hispanic, (2) Hispanic, or (3) Asian American. Ramsey County’s total days of care per child in the population exceeded the state average by 44 percent (3.6 vs. 2.5), but its days per child were below the state average for children who were (1) American Indian, or (2) Hispanic. The total days of care for counties in Greater Minnesota (as a group) was near the state average (2.3 vs. 2.5), but Greater Minnesota had days of care per child that were above the state average for children who were (1) white, non-Hispanic, (2) Hispanic, or (3) Asian American.

**Table 4.3: 1997 Days of Care Per Child in Population, By Racial/Ethnic Category and Region**

Racial/ Ethnic Category	Days of Care Per Child in the Population						Population Under Age 18 (in 000s)
	Hennepin County	Ramsey County	Twin Cities Suburban Counties	Twin Cities Metro Area-Total	Greater Minnesota	State Total	
White, non-Hispanic	1.3	2.1	1.0	1.3	1.8	1.6	1,098
African American	16.4	15.9	6.2	15.3	12.5	15.2	51
American Indian	28.2	11.5	5.1	20.9	15.5	17.9	24
Hispanic	1.2	3.2	2.0	2.2	6.2	3.7	28
Asian American	0.7	1.7	0.7	1.1	1.4	1.1	50
TOTAL	4.0	3.6	1.1	2.6	2.3	2.5	1,251

NOTE: This analysis was based on placements funded by social services budgets, plus placements at the Hennepin County Home School and Ramsey County Boys Totem Town. Excludes days of care for which racial/ethnic category was unknown.

SOURCE: Program Evaluation Division analysis of data from DHS substitute care database, selected counties, and the U.S. Census Bureau.

**American Indian and African American children are far more likely to be placed for parent-related reasons.**

In 1997, children from racial/ethnic minority groups accounted for at least half of children in placement in 6 of Minnesota’s 87 counties (Mahnommen, Beltrami, Hennepin, Clearwater, Sibley, and Ramsey).<sup>6</sup> In some counties, these high rates reflected large numbers of minority children in the general population **and** high rates of placement within certain minority groups. For example, Mahnommen County had (1) the state’s highest percentage (36 percent) of minority children in its county population under age 18, mainly American Indians, and (2) a high percentage of its American Indian child population in placement during 1997 (13 percent, compared with 9 percent statewide).

Counties’ stated reasons for placement differed considerably among the racial and ethnic groups, as shown in Table 4.4. For example, compared with white, non-Hispanic children, we found that American Indian children had more than 16 times as many days of placement per capita in 1997 that were due to parent conduct or other parent-related reasons, and African American children had 12 times as many. Thus, it is possible that differences among racial/ethnic groups in their respective levels of family dysfunction explained some of their differences in rates of child placement. Also, compared with white, non-Hispanic children, American Indian children had six times as many days of placement per capita for child conduct or child-related reasons; African American children had five times as many.

**Table 4.4: Reasons for Placement, by Racial and Ethnic Groups**

Racial/ Ethnic Category	Population Under 18 (in 000s)	1997 Days of Care Per Child in Population That Were Attributed To:			Total
		Parent Conduct or Parent-Related Reasons	Child Conduct or Child-Related Reasons	Family Interaction Problems	
White, non-Hispanic	1,098	0.8	0.7	0.1	1.6
African American	51	11.9	3.3	0.3	15.5
American Indian	24	13.6	3.9	0.8	18.3
Hispanic	28	2.2	1.3	0.3	3.8
Asian-American	50	0.5	0.7	0.0	1.2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,251</b>	<b>1.5</b>	<b>0.8</b>	<b>0.1</b>	<b>2.5</b>

NOTE: This analysis was based on placements funded by local social services budgets and the Consolidated Chemical Dependency Treatment Fund, plus placements at Hennepin and Ramsey County correctional facilities. We excluded cases where the racial/ethnic category and reasons for placement were unknown.

SOURCE: Program Evaluation Division analysis of Department of Human Services and county placement data.

Finally, we looked at juvenile placements in chemical dependency treatment programs publicly funded by Minnesota’s Consolidated Chemical Dependency Treatment Fund. We found that about 1.2 percent of Minnesota’s American Indian population under age 18 entered a residential chemical dependency program

<sup>6</sup> The percentage of placed children who were from racial/ethnic minority groups in these counties was 88, 73, 72, 62, 60, and 60 percent, respectively.

during 1997, compared with 0.2 percent of Hispanic juveniles, 0.1 percent of white, non-Hispanic juveniles, 0.1 percent of African American juveniles, and less than 0.1 percent of Asian American juveniles.<sup>7</sup>

### Age

Children in out-of-home placement represent a wide range of ages. For example, children born to chemically dependent mothers are sometimes placed in foster care at birth. Occasionally, children continue to receive foster care services or remain in correctional placements after their eighteenth birthdays.

Statewide, the median age of children in placement in 1997 was 13.7 years.<sup>8</sup> However, this varied considerably by type of facility. Children in foster care had a lower median age (10.7 years) than children in other types of facilities. Children in correctional facilities (16.0 years) and group homes (15.5 years) had the highest median ages. Table 4.5 shows the percentage of children in various age groups by facility type.<sup>9</sup>

The median age of African-American children in placement (9.0 years) was considerably lower than the median ages of children from other racial/ethnic categories. This apparently reflected the greater likelihood of an African-American child being placed for child protection reasons.

**Children in foster homes tend to be younger than children in other facilities.**

**Table 4.5: Ages of Children in Placement During 1997, By Facility Type**

Type of Facility	Number of 1997 Placements Funded by Social Services	Median Age (in Years) of Children in Placement	Percentage of Placed Children Who Were Ages:					Total
			0 to 4	5 to 9	10 to 14	15 and up		
Shelters	7,765	13.1	15.8%	18.5%	36.2%	29.5%	100%	
Family foster homes	13,728	10.7	22.4	24.4	28.7	24.5	100	
Rule 8 group homes	1,912	15.5	0.2	2.0	37.0	60.8	100	
Rule 5 facilities	2,105	14.9	0.9	3.8	46.5	48.8	100	
Correctional facilities	3,468	16.0	0.0	0.0	27.0	72.9	100	
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>28,978</b>	<b>13.7</b>	<b>14.9%</b>	<b>16.9%</b>	<b>32.4%</b>	<b>35.8%</b>	<b>100%</b>	

NOTE: This analysis was based solely on placements funded by local social services budgets. We examined all such cases in which children were in placement at some time during 1997, including some in which the placements started before 1997. For placements starting in 1997, we examined each child's age at the time of placement. For placements starting before 1997, we examined each child's age as of January 1, 1997. We excluded cases where children were discharged on the same day they entered placement.

SOURCE: Program Evaluation Division analysis of Department of Human Services and county placement data.

<sup>7</sup> These are not unduplicated counts; a juvenile who entered a program twice in 1997 would be counted twice.

<sup>8</sup> For children who were placed during 1997, we computed their ages on the date of placement. For children whose 1997 placement started before 1997, we computed their ages as of January 1, 1997.

<sup>9</sup> Table 4.5 only shows placements paid for by social services agencies. We obtained information on children who entered placements in 1997 paid for by Minnesota's Consolidated Chemical Dependency Treatment Fund, and it showed that 83 percent of the children placed were ages 15 or older.

## Gender

Statewide, 1.5 percent of Minnesota children were in out-of-home placement at some time during 1997.<sup>10</sup> We found that 1.6 percent of Minnesota boys were in placement during 1997, and 1.3 percent of girls were in placement. The average number of days spent in placement during 1997 was nearly identical for boys and girls (172 days for boys and 176 days for girls). However, we found that:

- **Boys were much more likely than girls to be placed in correctional, Rule 5, and chemical dependency facilities.**

Boys accounted for 80 percent of the 1997 days of care in correctional facilities and 74 percent in Rule 5 facilities. We did not have information on the days of care children spent in chemical dependency facilities, but we did find that boys represented 65 percent of all 1997 placements paid for by Minnesota's consolidated chemical dependency treatment fund. In contrast, boys accounted for 56 percent of days of care in group homes, 51 percent of foster home days of care, and 52 percent of shelter facility days of care.

Using information on placements paid for by social services agencies, we also examined the relationship between child gender and the reasons for placement. We found that boys accounted for 68 percent of the 1997 days of care that were attributed to child-related reasons and 50 percent of days of care attributed to parent-related reasons.

## DISTANCE PLACED FROM HOME

The Legislature requested that our study include "a summary of the geographic distance between the juvenile's home and the location of the out-of-home placement."<sup>11</sup> Some people have expressed concerns that placement far from home discourages family participation in facility programs and makes it more difficult for a county or facility to plan for supportive services following a juvenile's return to the community.

For children in placement during 1997, we determined the distance between the county seats of the child's home county and the county in which the residential facility was located. In addition, we examined whether each child was placed at facilities in his or her own county or in bordering counties. As shown in Table 4.6,

- **Statewide, 62 percent of days that children spent in placement during 1997 were at facilities in the children's home counties. Eight percent of days in placement were at Minnesota facilities more than 100 miles**

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**Children spend most days of out-of-home care in their home counties.**

<sup>10</sup> This is based solely on placements funded by county social services budgets, which in 1997 represented 91 percent of all days of care and three-fourths of placement spending.

<sup>11</sup> *Minn. Laws* (1998), ch. 367, art. 10, sec. 16.



**Table 4.6: Distance of Placements From Home, By Facility Type, 1997**

Facility Type	Total Days in Care in 1997	Percentage of 1997 Days of Care Spent in Placements:					TOTAL
		Within Same County	In Border County	In State and Within 100 Miles, But Not in Same or Border County	In State, But More than 100 Miles Away	In Another State	
Shelters	183,143	79.8%	13.3%	4.7%	2.2%	0.0%	100%
Family foster homes	2,086,280	71.6	13.5	6.5	4.9	3.4	100
Rule 8 group homes	166,279	25.8	26.4	23.3	20.7	3.8	100
Rule 5 facilities	228,579	12.9	17.0	31.1	25.2	13.8	100
Correctional facilities	436,031	45.2	12.2	19.3	13.7	9.7	100
TOTAL	3,100,312	61.6%	14.3%	10.9%	8.3%	4.9%	100%

NOTE: For placements in correctional detention facilities that were not paid for by social services agencies, we assumed that the placements occurred in the juvenile's home county. This is usually true, but we did not have case-specific information on the location of these placements.

SOURCE: Program Evaluation Division analysis of Department of Human Services, county placement data, Program Evaluation Division June and July 1998 surveys of counties, and Department of Corrections data on Red Wing and Sauk Centre placements.

**from home, and 5 percent of days in placement were in facilities in other states.**

Juveniles placed in shelters or foster homes usually remained in their home counties. Statewide, 80 percent of time spent in shelters occurred in the juveniles' home counties, and 72 percent of time spent in foster homes occurred in juveniles' home counties. In both of these categories of facilities, it was relatively rare for juveniles to be placed more than 100 miles from home or out-of-state.

Placements in Rule 5 mental health treatment facilities, correctional facilities, and group homes were the most likely to be at locations far from children's homes. Only 30 percent of the time spent in Rule 5 facilities was in juveniles' home or neighboring counties, and 39 percent of the time was in another state or at a Minnesota facility more than 100 miles from the child's home.

As we discussed in Chapter 2, placements with relatives accounted for most of the out-of-state foster care placements, and delinquent juveniles accounted for most of the out-of-state placements in the Rule 5 and correctional facility categories.

**NUMBER AND LENGTH OF PLACEMENTS**

To better understand the frequency and length of child placements, we examined data on all children who were in placements funded by social services agencies at some time during 1995-97. For the three-year time period, we found that:

- **Of children who were in at least one placement that lasted more than three days, 45 percent had multiple placements of this length.**

- **Of children who were in at least one placement that lasted more than 30 days, 39 percent had multiple placements of this length.**
- **Of children who were in at least one placement that lasted more than 90 days, 28 percent had multiple placements of this length.**

Although most children did not have multiple placements during this three-year period, some had many placements. For example, one child had 21 placements that each exceeded three days. Another child had 11 placements that each exceeded 30 days.<sup>12</sup>

We examined the total amount of time children spent in placement during 1995-97, as shown in Table 4.7. Some children had placements that lasted a long time. Of all children in placement on January 1, 1995, 23 percent remained in placement continuously for at least the next three years. Children who remained in placement for this full three-year period comprised 6 percent of all children who were in placement at some time during 1995-97. Most of the children who were in placement for large portions of this three-year period lived in foster homes and had been placed for parent-related reasons.

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**Some juveniles live in out-of-home care continuously for years, while others are in placement only for brief periods.**

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**Table 4.7: Total Time That Individual Children Spent in Placement, 1995-97**

Total Time in Placement	Percentage of Children Who Were in Placement at Some Time During 1995-97 (N=33,852)	Percentage of Children in Placement on January 1, 1995 (N=8,720)
1 day	5.4%	0.2%
2 to 7 days	15.3	0.9
8 to 30 days	11.5	3.5
At least 1 month but less than 3 months	11.8	7.2
At least 3 months but less than 1 year	27.6	28.0
At least 1 year but less than 2 years	14.8	19.6
At least 2 years but less than 3 years	7.8	17.9
3 years	<u>5.9</u>	<u>22.8</u>
	100.0%	100.0%

NOTE: Analysis excluded placements in which children were discharged on the same day they entered placement.

SOURCE: Program Evaluation Division analysis of Department of Human Services and county placement data.

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<sup>12</sup> We obtained information from eight individual counties that enabled us to examine the specific facilities in which children were placed (DHS placement data do not identify individual facilities). In these counties, the largest number of separate facilities in which a child was placed during 1995-97 was 16. One child was placed in 14 separate facilities that each cared for the child more than 3 days. Another child was placed in 9 separate facilities that each cared for the child more than 30 days.

Table 4.7 also shows that many children were in out-of-home placement for relatively short periods during 1995-97. Of all children who were in placement at some time during this period, 32 percent were in placement for a total of 30 days or less.

We found variation in the average number and length of placements among various racial/ethnic groups. Among children in placement during 1995-97, Asian American children were less likely to have multiple placements than children in other racial/ethnic groups, and American Indian children were the most likely to have multiple placements.<sup>13</sup> Over this three-year period, the average American Indian juvenile in placement spent a total of 362 days in residential settings, which was higher than the averages for children in other racial/ethnic categories.<sup>14</sup> Of American Indian children in placement during 1995-97, 11 percent remained in placement for the full three years.<sup>15</sup>

In general, young children tended to spend more time in placement during 1995-97 than older children. Among children who were in placement at some time during 1995-97, children under age ten at the beginning of 1995 spent an average of 337 days in placement during the three-year period, compared with 256 days for children ages 10 to 15.<sup>16</sup> We also found that children who were ages 10 to 13 at the beginning of 1995 were somewhat more likely to have multiple placements during 1995-97 than children in other age groups.<sup>17</sup>

## ACCURACY OF STATE PLACEMENT INFORMATION

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### DHS collects placement information from counties.

Recently, Minnesota policy makers have shown increasing interest in measuring trends in placements, lengths of stay, and outcomes for different types of placements. The Department of Human Services' information system for out-of-home placements is important because it has the most comprehensive statewide data available to examine placement trends and child characteristics. This information system is based on data reported to DHS by county social services agencies.

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<sup>13</sup> This was true when we examined placements of (1) all lengths, (2) more than 3 days, (3) more than 30 days, and (4) more than 90 days.

<sup>14</sup> Other averages included 334 days for African American juveniles, 245 days for Asian American juveniles, 250 days for Hispanic juveniles, and 259 days for white, non-Hispanic juveniles.

<sup>15</sup> The comparable percentages for other racial/ethnic groups were 9.4 percent for African Americans, 2.8 percent for Asian Americans, 4.5 percent for Hispanic juveniles, and 4.4 percent for white, non-Hispanic juveniles.

<sup>16</sup> Related to our age findings, we found that children first placed in 1995-97 for parent-related reasons tended to spend more time in placement (an average of 338 days) over this period than children first placed for child-related reasons (an average of 216 days).

<sup>17</sup> Among children with at least one placement, children ages 10 to 13 were the most likely to have two or more placements during this three-year period. This was true when we examined placements of (1) all lengths, (2) more than 3 days, (3) more than 30 days, and (4) more than 90 days.

To examine the accuracy of the state's placement information, we first examined the DHS data from 1992 through 1997.<sup>18</sup> Second, we reviewed a sample of county case files during site visits and interviewed county officials. Finally, we compared DHS data with data that we independently collected from eight counties that have placed large numbers of children away from home, and we followed up with county staff to resolve significant differences.<sup>19</sup> We found that:

- **The state's main database of records on individual out-of-home placements has shortcomings that, if uncorrected, could hinder certain analyses and county comparisons.**

As described below, the DHS placement data has many problems--missing placements, inaccurate discharge dates, duplicate or overlapping placements, and single placements inappropriately reported as multiple placements. The magnitude of these errors varies greatly among the counties, and we were not able to assess the exact magnitude of the problems in counties for which we did not independently collect and review county placement data. We think that the DHS database provides fairly accurate statewide estimates for many measures, including days of care, reasons for placements, demographic characteristics of children in placement, and type of facilities in which children are placed. For example, the cumulative effect of errors we found would have changed the total statewide days of care by about three percent for both 1996 and 1997--partly because errors of underreporting helped offset errors of overreporting.

However, we think that the data problems could hinder analyses of county by county trends in a variety of important measures, including days of care, number of placements, and placement length. For example, we estimate that DHS' analysis of county-reported data overstated *days of care* during 1996 by more than 20 percent for four of the eight counties we examined (Crow Wing, Dakota, St. Louis, and Washington), by 9 to 15 percent for two counties, and by less than 2 percent for two counties. Also, the data used by DHS were missing at least 10 percent of total 1996 *placements* in two of the eight counties we examined (Crow Wing and Ramsey).

We found similar problems in the 1997 data, although the size of the errors was not as large as in 1996. Our analysis of 1997 data reported by counties to DHS indicated that *days of care* would be overstated by 20 percent for Crow Wing County, by 9 to 12 percent for four counties, and by less than 2 percent for three counties. The DHS data on total *placements* for 1997 differed from our estimates by more than 10 percent for one county (Crow Wing). These reductions in error rates reflect improvements by the department in its review of the 1997 data.

The DHS database overstates days of care for a variety of reasons, including inaccurate placement discharge dates and duplicate or overlapping placements.

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**There have been significant errors in some placement data, but DHS has been trying to improve accuracy.**

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<sup>18</sup> Our discussion of DHS data accuracy is based on our review of data edited by DHS following its submission by counties. For 1997 data, we reviewed data that were edited by DHS as of December 1998.

<sup>19</sup> The counties were Hennepin, Ramsey, Dakota, Washington, St. Louis, Anoka, Crow Wing, and Blue Earth. They accounted for 62 percent of Minnesota's days of placement in 1997.

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**Problems with placement data include inaccurate discharge dates, overlapping placements, and missing placements.**

The most common problem with placement discharge dates is that some counties fail to enter these dates in a timely way. As a result, counties have reported to DHS that placements were open at the end of the reporting period even though the children were actually discharged months or even years prior to this time.<sup>20</sup>

The DHS database contains placements that duplicate or overlap other placements of the same individual. While counties may hold open a bed for a child staying in a different facility for a short time, records of many placements in the DHS database duplicate or overlap other placements for several months. For example, the DHS 1996 database contains over 300 duplicate records in 20 counties. Most of these placements appear to be county corrections to placement data that were previously submitted to DHS. The average length of the duplicate placements exceeded six months. Four large counties (Ramsey, St. Louis, Dakota, and Washington) had duplicate records that increased the reported days of care by between 7 and 14 percent. Three smaller counties had duplicate records that inflated their total days of care by 5 to 7 percent.

The main reason that placement counts were inaccurate was that some counties submitted incomplete placement records to DHS because of delays in entering placement data into their own information systems. Several counties told us that their information systems do not contain complete placement information for a reporting period at the time they are required to report it to DHS (within 15 days of the end of each six-month reporting period). For example, Ramsey County staff said that their placement database is not substantially complete until approximately three to six months after the reporting period.

Another reason that the database contains inaccurate placement counts is that some counties divide continuous placements in a single foster home or residential facility into multiple placements when certain case circumstances change. For example, counties told us that this may occur due to changes in (1) the social worker assigned to the case, (2) the facility's vendor number, (3) the case's legal status, or (4) the funding source. In our analysis of 1997 placement data from the eight counties, we found about 600 placements that were inappropriately divided into multiple placements.

Another problem with the placement data is that counties do not consistently report unique identifiers that would allow DHS to reliably track placement histories for children who move among Minnesota counties. Presently, social security numbers are the only unique identifiers reported to DHS that can be used to track placements in different counties, but we found that these numbers were reported for only half of the children. While counties do not collect social security numbers for all cases, we think DHS could obtain social security numbers for a higher percentage of children in placement. For example, by obtaining social security numbers directly from Hennepin County, we increased the database's percentage of children with social security numbers to over 70 percent.

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<sup>20</sup> For example, we examined 1997 placements that DHS indicated were more than 90 days. In three of eight counties, the DHS data overstated the actual placement length by at least 90 days in more than 10 percent of the cases.

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**A new information system may help to address data problems.**

We also found that some counties assign more than one case number to a child in certain circumstances, including cases involving termination of parental rights and children under 18 bearing their own children. In these cases, DHS cannot easily track the child's complete placement history, even within a county. For example, we found that Ramsey County changed case numbers during the past year for about 80 children who were in placement during 1997.

Currently, the department is in the process of implementing its new Social Services Information System, and this may address some of the problems we found. For example, the new system is designed to reduce duplicate records by requiring one placement to be ended before another placement is entered for the same child. Also, social workers will directly enter data into this system, and DHS hopes this will reduce delays in data entry. In addition, DHS designed the system so that counties can use it for their own management purposes, and this may contribute to improved data accuracy and timeliness. Implementation of this system will continue into 1999, so it is too early to evaluate how much the system will improve the accuracy of out-of-home placement data. In general, however, we think that the magnitude of problems with the existing database indicates that DHS should carefully monitor the quality of data produced with the new system. In addition, as recommended in Chapter 6, we think that DHS should make corrections in its existing information system so that these data can provide reasonably accurate benchmarks for trend analyses.

## **SUMMARY**

Most of the time spent by juveniles in out-of-home placement in Minnesota results from parent-related reasons, not the conduct of the children. In particular, many juveniles are placed out of home due to a parent's abuse, neglect, or chemical dependency. Juveniles placed out of home for parent-related reasons tend to remain in placement for longer periods than juveniles placed because of their own conduct. Juveniles placed away from home for their own conduct tend to be placed farther from home than juveniles placed for parent-related reasons.

African American and American Indian children are eight times more likely to be placed out of home as white, non-Hispanic children, and the average African American and American Indian child spends more time in placement than the average child from other racial/ethnic groups. Although we do not fully understand the reasons for high placement rates among some racial/ethnic groups, the disproportionate rates of placement underscore the need for placing agencies and residential service providers to aim for culturally appropriate services.