

PPCD Research Memo

Assessing the Relationship between Efficiency and Effectiveness in Juvenile Dependency Cases

November, 2011



Prior NCJFCJ research (Wood, Russell, Macgill, & Summers, under review) suggests that lower judicial workloads are related to timely permanency in juvenile dependency cases. Lower judicial workloads were associated with a higher percentage of juvenile dependency cases achieving permanency within timeliness guidelines. This important finding could be expanded upon in two ways. First, specifying which permanent outcome was being achieved (e.g., termination of parental rights, reunification, or relative placement) would add precision. Second, a consideration of effectiveness (i.e., safe permanency without re-entry) in addition to efficiency (i.e., timeliness) of case processing, would provide a more complete understanding of the effects of judicial workloads. Therefore, the current analysis seeks to answer two questions: (1) Do judicial workloads (estimated from judicial time logs and structured hearing observations¹) predict reunification? (2) Are timely outcomes (within statutory guidelines or state goals) related to safe and permanent outcomes?

In order to answer the first question, PPCD researchers examined several county-level “efficiency” variables from Washington State:

- Percentage of cases that reunify within 12 months
- Percentage of children who exit care in less than 24 months
- Percentage of children in care more than 24 months who exit within the year
- Percentage of children in care less than 12 months who have less than 2 placements

A series of linear regression models examined whether judicial workloads predicted the efficiency variables. Judicial workloads were a statistically significant predictor of reunification within 12 months (see Figure 1). Courts with lower judicial workloads had a higher percentage of cases achieving reunification within 12 months than courts with greater judicial workloads. Seventy-eight percent of cases experienced reunification within 12 months in courts with lower judicial workloads, versus 59% in courts with higher judicial workloads. Judicial workloads did not have any apparent effect on any of the other efficiency variables listed above.

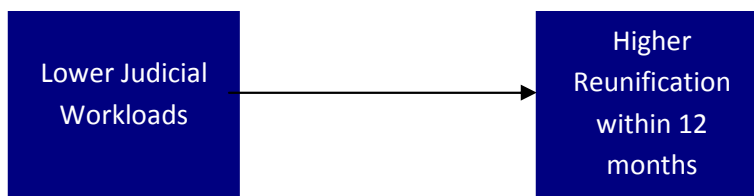


Figure 1. Relationship between judicial workloads and reunification within 12 months.

¹ National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (2011). *Judicial workload in Washington State*. Reno, NV: Author.

In order to assess whether timely outcomes are related to safe and permanent outcomes, the “efficiency” measures were used as predictors to examine “effectiveness”:

- Percentage of cases that re-enter foster care within 12 months of permanency²

Another series of regression models examined the effects of efficiency factors and re-entry. These analyses showed that reunification within 12 months was a significant negative predictor of re-entry. As demonstrated in Figure 2, counties with higher rates of reunification within 12 months also had fewer re-entries within 12 months of case closure. When reunifications were more likely to occur in shorter time periods, re-entries were less likely—implying that more efficient jurisdictions were more effective. None of the other efficiency variables (i.e., percentage of children who exit care in less than 24 months, percentage of children in care more than 24 months who exit within the year, percentage of children in care less than 12 months who have less than 2 placements) significantly predicted re-entry.



Figure 2. Relationship between reunification within 12 months and re-entry into care within 12 months of permanency.

Discussion and Conclusions

Efficiency of case processing (i.e., more timely reunifications) helps achieve effective outcomes (i.e., fewer re-entries). Judicial workloads play an important role on influencing re-entry into care within 12 months of permanency (see Figure 3). Lower judicial workloads are related to more reunifications within 12 months. In turn, increases in reunification within 12 months are related to decreases in re-entry within 12 months of permanency.

Judicial officers with more manageable workloads are allowed more opportunities than others to engage parents, discuss case facts in more detail, ask more questions of parents, child welfare workers and other stakeholders, ensure appropriate service plans, and follow-up on case progression and parental compliance with services. This, in turn, appears to significantly affect the rates at which children are reunified with their family and their long term safety.

Decreasing judicial workloads is a crucial component to helping children reunify with their parents and experience more safe and stable reunifications. Courts that may be considering whether to increase their number of judicial officers should take these findings as an indicator of the benefits of

² This variable was the main outcome of interest to researchers and the State of Washington AOC.

increasing judicial personnel³. Further, these courts that achieve more timely reunifications also achieve more safe and stable reunifications.



Figure 3. Relationship between judicial workloads and reunification within 12 months, and reunification within 12 months and re-entry into care within 12 months of permanency.

By increasing their number of judicial officers, courts can decrease judicial workloads and increase timely reunifications. These timely reunifications, precipitated by sufficient judicial oversight, result in reductions of re-entry into care. Therefore, children are returning home faster and remaining at home without incident, the ideal outcome for children and families.

³ These findings fit into a larger discussion of financial reform within the juvenile dependency system. For more information, see National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (n.d.). *Child welfare finance reform policy statement*. Reno, NV: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.ncjfcj.org/images/stories/dept/resolutions/childwelfarefinancereform.pdf>