

AN EVALUATION OF THE  
NEBRASKA STATE FOSTER CARE REVIEW BOARD

by

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Introduction

An evaluation of the Nebraska State Foster Care Review Board was begun in the Spring of 1984 with a brief survey of other foster care review boards. Information was sought on the methodology used by these boards for evaluation purposes. Whenever possible, copies of evaluation reports and methodology were obtained for study. A review of the pertinent literature was conducted at this time.

Existing data was examined to determine what sources of information exist and what type of data is currently available. An analysis of what types of data is regularly collected by the staff was conducted to determine if changes were necessary.

In-depth interviews were conducted with agency personnel. The information gained from these interviews, along with data obtained from other foster care review board evaluation reports, was used to identify research variables. From this process, research questions to be answered by the evaluation were formulated.

Instruments have been designed and tested for use by staff assistants during the review process. These instruments were designed for a two-fold purpose. First, they will aid staff assistants in organizing relevant information for the review itself. Secondly, they will aid in the evaluation process by gathering the necessary data for analysis.

## METHODOLOGY

Sample Selection

All 1174 children who entered care before January 1, 1985 and who were reviewed by the Foster Care Review Board anytime between August 1, 1983 and October 31, 1985 were selected as the "reviewed" sample. Some 456 children had been reviewed once; 421 were reviewed twice; 167 were reviewed three times; 96 were reviewed four times; 33 were reviewed five times; and 1 child was reviewed six times.

Using several criteria, a comparison group was constructed of children who were eligible for review but who were not reviewed during the target time. The child had to have entered care before January 1, 1985 and, if no longer active, have a case termination date after August 1, 1983. Additionally, the time between the initial placement date and the termination date had to be greater than or equal to 9 months.

Since children at home are not reviewed, no children coded "at home awaiting placement" were included. If the child had only one placement and was coded "at home trial basis", he/she also was not included. If the child was "at home trial basis" and had been in more than one placement (ie. had been placed somewhere except at home), the file was pulled to see if he/she had been in out-of-home care with non-relatives over 6 months.

Children living with relatives are not usually reviewed. If a child was coded "with relative", the file was pulled to see if he/she had been in out-of-home care for 6 months or more with non-relatives. If the child had been living with relatives most or all of the time, he/she was not included in the comparison group.

Children living in adoptive homes are not reviewed so infants who were placed directly into an adoptive home were not included in the comparison group. Children whose adoptive placement took place before August 1983 also were not included in the comparison group.

Using these criteria, a comparison group of 1299 children was constructed.

In assessing the comparability of the two groups, it was evident that the comparison group was much older (16+ years) compared to the reviewed group (12+ years). Therefore, it was decided to select a random sample of the 1299 non-reviewed children stratified on age. A sample of 611 children was selected which was comparable in age to the reviewed group.

To test the comparability of the two groups after age was controlled for, comparisons were made on sex, race, agency, county of placement and adjudication status. A comparison was made for Department of Social Services children on permanency planning reviews.

Sex

The two groups were quite similar. The "reviewed" group had 53% males while the "comparison" group had 54.7% males. These differences

were not statistically significant.

### Race

The "reviewed" group had 72.6% white children while the "comparison" group had 79.5%. The "reviewed" group had 13.1% black and 5.2% Indian children while the "comparison" group had 7.5% black and 6.4% Indian children. These differences were statistically significant with the "reviewed" group having slightly more minority children than the "comparison" group. These differences were also present for all abused, neglected, dependent, and voluntarily placed children considered separately and for recent entries as well.

### Agency

Ninety five percent of the "reviewed" group were served by the Department of Social Services while 93% of the "comparison" group were served by DSS. These differences were not statistically significant. Some 92% of the reviewed Department of Social Services children had had permanency planning reviews while 85% of the comparison children had.

### County of Placement

More (52%) of the "reviewed" group children were placed in urban areas (Douglas, Lancaster, and Sarpy Counties) than "comparison" group children (44%). This difference was statistically significant. Surprisingly, the difference was not greater given the urban location of the local review boards in the first year of reviews. Most counties had both "reviewed" and "comparison" group children. Only 8 counties had solely "reviewed" children and only 10 counties had solely "comparison" children.

Some 6.8% of the "reviewed" group and 3.9% of the "comparison" group children were placed out of state.

### Adjudication Status

There were differences in adjudication status between the two groups. The "reviewed" group had fewer delinquents and status offenders (15%) than the comparison group (27.5%). The "reviewed" group had a higher percentage of abused/neglected/dependent or voluntarily placed children (70.9%) than the comparison group (56.3%). These differences will be controlled for in the analysis.

### Length of Time in Care

There were also differences between the two groups on this variable. Those who were reviewed were more likely to be in care longer (13.8% entered care before 1980) than those in the "comparison" group (5.1% entered care before 1980). In the "reviewed" group, 31.9% entered care in 1984 while in the comparison group 49.3% entered care in 1984. This difference will need to be taken into account when interpreting the results.

Except for the length of time in care and adjudication status, the

"comparison" group was quite similar to the "reviewed" group in most demographic variables. Because of the stratification, the two groups were nearly identical in age. There were not differences in sex, and the differences in race were small. Slightly more of the reviewed children were under the supervision of DSS and living in the three urban counties (Douglas, Lancaster, and Sarpy).

Thus, while not identical to the reviewed group, the comparison group is similar enough to allow meaningful comparisons.

When looked at as a separate group, the abused/neglected/dependent/voluntarily placed children in the reviewed and comparison groups were very similar to each other. There were no differences in age or sex between reviewed group abused/neglected/dependent/voluntarily placed children and comparison group abused/neglected/dependent/voluntarily placed children. Abused/neglected/dependent/voluntarily placed children in the reviewed group were compared to abused/neglected/dependent/voluntarily placed children in the comparison group in order to control for the differences in adjudication status in the larger sample.

## RESULTS

Comparisons were made between the 1174 children who were reviewed at least once by the Foster Care Review Board and the 611 similar children who were eligible for review but not reviewed before November 1, 1985.

### Current Placement Type

There were large significant differences between the two groups in terms of what type of placement the children were in. Children who were reviewed were over twice as likely to be in adoptive placements as children who were not reviewed.

The ages of the adopted children were also interesting. Most of the children not reviewed who were placed for adoption were young (53.8% were 5 or under and 30.8% were between 6 and 11 years old). None were over 12 years of age.

Children in the reviewed group who were placed for adoption however were more likely to be older. While 44.1% were 5 or younger, 20.6% were over 12 years of age. In fact, 11 of the children were 15-17 years of age!

For children who became eligible for review after the implementation of the Foster Care Review process (ie, entered care after February 1983) and were reviewed before November, 1985, the differences were even more dramatic. Children were 3.6 times more likely to be adopted than similar children who entered care after February 1983 but were never reviewed.

These adopted children were younger than the adopted children who had been in care longer. Seventy seven percent of the children were five or younger while 19% were age 6-11. Only one was a teenager (age 16).

The non-reviewed adopted children were also young with 75% under five and no teenagers. Additionally, four children were placed for adoption

after their reviews in November or December 1985 (too late to be counted in the study).

Of particular interest is that all but 2 of the 32 adoptions of reviewed children occurred without the assistance of subsidy resulting in a large cost savings.

Reviewed children were 1.85 times more likely to be placed with relatives as comparison children. Reviewed children were 1.23 times more likely to be in more homelike foster care settings than the comparison children who were 1.33 times more likely to be in an institution. The percentage of children in group homes was almost identical for both groups. Comparison group children, however, were 1.6 times more likely to be returned to parents than reviewed children. This was true even for children who had been in care over two years (a group usually not expected to return home).

#### Closeness to Home

Approximately one half of each group were placed in the county from which they were committed. There were no differences between the reviewed and not reviewed groups on this variable.

#### Current Plan

There were significant differences in the current plans between the two groups. The reviewed children were 1.7 times more likely to have adoption as their plan compared with the non-reviewed group. The reviewed children were 2.2 times more likely to have long term foster care as their plan as well.

On the other hand, the comparison group was 1.6 times more likely to have "return to parents" as its plan.

The percentage of children with plan of group home, institution, relative placement, or semi-independent/independent living were nearly the same between the two groups.

#### Plan Achievement Date

The lack of a plan achievement date for many of the children in both groups is a concern. Some 43% of the reviewed children and 28.8% of the non-reviewed children had no targeted date for the achievement of the child's plan. Additionally, a considerable number of target dates were more than two years in the future - 7.7% for reviewed and 2.1% for non-reviewed children.

Some of the differences between the two groups can be accounted for by the selection for review (in the first year of the reviews primarily) of children who didn't have a plan or whose plan achievement date was far in the future.

#### Number of Placements

There were no significant differences between the groups in the

number of placements the children had. Fifty seven percent (57%) of the reviewed children and fifty three percent (53%) of the non-reviewed children had 3 or fewer placements. Thirty four percent (34%) of the reviewed and forty one percent (41%) of the non-reviewed children had 4-9 placements, and six percent (6%) of the reviewed and five percent (5%) of the non-reviewed children had 10 or more placements.

### Parental Rights Status

There were significant differences between the two groups in terms of the status of parental rights. Children in the reviewed group were 3.6 times more likely to have had a petition for termination filed against their fathers and 1.3 times more likely to have termination completed against their fathers.

Likewise, children in the reviewed group were 5 times more likely to have had a petition for termination filed against their mothers and 1.6 times more likely to have termination completed against their mothers.

### Adoption Free Date

The differences between the two groups was dramatic and indicated the influence of the review process. Before the implementation of the review process in August, 1983, the likelihood of a child being freed for adoption was identical between the two groups. After the implementation of the review process, the likelihood of a child being freed for adoption was 2.1 times greater for the reviewed group than the comparison group. The likelihood of a child in the comparison group being freed for adoption remained the same as it had been previous to August, 1983.

Since the implementation of the review process in 1983, 26 of the reviewed children have been legally freed for adoption while only 5 of the comparison group children have been freed for adoption.

### Court Review Results

The lack of information on court reviews is a concern. Only 22.12% of the reviewed children and 32.6% of the comparison group children had reports of the court reviews submitted to the Foster Care Review Board. With these small percentages, it is not feasible to compare court reviews between the two groups because we have no way of knowing if the reported results are representative of the results not being reported.

### Number Terminated

Some 287 reviewed children (24.4%) and 247 comparison group children (40.4%) were terminated from the system. It appears that reviewed children were less apt to be terminated from care than children not reviewed by the foster care review process. However, much of this difference may be a function of length of time in care. The reviewed group had a larger proportion (42.6%) of children who had been in care over two years (and less likely to leave care) than the comparison group (22.9%).

### Reason Case Terminated

Thirty four percent of the reviewed children who were terminated from care returned to their parents' custody while thirty six percent of the non-reviewed children returned to parents. More reviewed children (13.9%) left care through adoption or guardianship than non-reviewed children (8.9%). Also, more reviewed children (11.1%) left care by emancipation (age, marriage, or military) than non-reviewed children (2.8%).

Fewer of the reviewed children (21.3% were terminated by the court than non-reviewed children (30.4%).

### Length of Time in Care of Terminated

Fifty four percent of the reviewed children who left care were in the system two years or less compared to eighty three percent of the non-reviewed children who left care.

The large difference indicated that most of the comparison group children who left care had been in care a short time (1-2 years) and were more likely to leave. The reviewed group on the other hand included a sizable proportion of children considered difficult to move out of the system. For example, 13 of the reviewed children who left care had been in the system 10 years or longer while only 1 non-reviewed child who left care had been in care over 10 years. A large number of reviewed children (105) had been in care 3-5 years before they were reviewed and left the system while only 34 non-reviewed children had been in care that long before they left.

### SUMMARY

Since most evaluations of new programs show no significant differences, the dramatic differences shown by this evaluation were much more than expected. Particularly surprising were the large differences between the two groups in adoption rate and placement with relatives.

As the reviewed children were not more likely to return home, the effect of the reviews appears to be primarily on the children who tend to get caught in the system because they can't go home. The review process seems to be helping them find other permanent placements. The fiscal impact of the adoptions and relative placements was very large and will continue for six or seven years since the average age of the adopted children was about 12. A conservative estimate of the net per year savings was \$236,680.

The reviews appear to be effecting the legal system as well as agencies, ie. guardians ad litem, county attorneys, and judges. Legal barriers to permanency seem to be overcome in many cases when children are reviewed and complex systems begin working together.

The value of an external citizen review system like the Foster Care Review Board is that its effects are system-wide. It can impact the legal system as well as agencies and communities.