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Outcomes Research Report #7

Preliminary Report on Timely Reunification in Oklahoma: A Cohort Analysis

OKDHS Children and Family Services Division

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Prepared by:

Tom McDonald, Ph.D.
Stephanie Bryson, M.S.W.

University of Kansas
School of Social Welfare, Twente Hall
Lawrence, Kansas 66045

In collaboration with:

Bill Hindman
Carol Clabo
Mary Grissom
Johnna Lynch

Oklahoma Department of Human Services
Children and Family Services Division
5905 N. Classen Ct. Rm 402
Oklahoma City, OK

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Executive Summary

Purpose of the Research

Under federal outcome standards established by the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA), 76.2% of all children reunified with their parents or caretakers must be reunified in less than twelve months from their latest removal from the home. However, a number of studies have identified critical time periods during which reunification is more or less likely to promote long-term stability. Additionally, a number of studies have demonstrated that the federal measure, as calculated in the Child and Family Services Reviews, may falsely elevate reunification outcomes.

Event history analysis or survival analysis has been proposed as an alternative method to generate more accurate and useful data on which to base program improvement efforts. To address these issues in Oklahoma, this research report describes reunification trends across time and administrative areas. Survival analysis was used to determine trends and differences in reunification rates.

The report was designed to address the following questions:

- Are children placed in foster care achieving acceptable rates of reunification in a timely manner?
- Have reunification rates improved over time in Oklahoma?
- Do reunification rates vary significantly across administrative areas in Oklahoma?
- How does the child's chance for reunification vary with time in foster care?

This report is preliminary to a report on predictors of reunification in Oklahoma, which will provide more insight into how reunification might be impacted by characteristics of children, families, and service delivery systems.

Findings

- Oklahoma appears to have experienced a strong trend toward improvement in the timeliness of reunification (i.e. within 12 months) between 1997 and 1999. After 1999, however, improvement levels off.
- In all years examined (1997-2003), the highest reunification rates are found in the first 30-day interval after the child is placed in out-of-home care. These results may indicate unnecessary removals from the home; however, this is only a hypothesis. Future research will examine this issue.
- For each annual cohort, the range of additional children reunified between the 12-month mark and the 18-month mark was 7.1-8%. Although these reunifications fall outside the CSFR target outcome period of 12 months, they indicate ongoing efforts to reunify children in Oklahoma and may actually promote long-term stability as suggested by the research literature (Wulczyn, 2002).
- The reunification trend from 1997 to 2002 indicates that more children are returning home after a slightly longer stay in foster care. As short stays of less than 3 months in care are correlated with higher reentry rates, slightly longer stays in care may allow more sufficient time for families to make necessary changes and thus may lead to longer-term stability. Statewide, reunification may be occurring in a more optimized manner (maximizing reunification while minimizing re-entry) since 1997; however, future research matching reunification rates with reentry rates will confirm or disconfirm this speculation, which is based on the available research literature.
- Significant differences in reunification profiles were observed across Areas. Area 3 appeared to have the lowest reunification rates at every monthly interval, contrasted with Area 6, in which a higher proportion of children were reunified within the first

month in care and comparatively lower percentages were reunified in the more optimal six to 12-month period identified by the research literature. Other areas appeared to have reunification profiles that may be more optimum in terms of reducing the risk of reentry.

- A comparison of Oklahoma County, Tulsa County, and combined Rural Counties mirrors the Area comparison described above. In Tulsa County, the proportion of children exiting foster care to reunification is significantly higher during the first 30 days than in either Oklahoma County or in the remaining rural counties combined. High reunification rates during the first 30 days in Tulsa County may indicate unnecessary removals from the home; however future research will evaluate this hypothesis. Based on findings from available research, rural counties currently demonstrate a more optimized reunification performance—slower in the first three months and steadily increasing thereafter.

Recommendations

- Examine the effect of early reunification in Oklahoma on reentry rates.
- Perform additional analyses to determine what child, family, organizational, and service factors promote optimal vs. sub-optimal reunification performance.
- Perform additional analyses to determine the characteristics of early and late reunifications.
- In KIDS, track reentry rates for early (less than 3 months), optimal (6-12 months), and late (12-24 months) reunifications.
- Present these findings to staff and engage them in discussion about how they can use these findings (e.g. whether differences in Areas 3 and 6 indicate that reunifications

are happening too soon to promote long-term stability) to develop program improvement strategies.

Introduction

Under federal outcome standards established by the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA), 76.2% of all children reunified with their parents or caretakers must be reunified in less than twelve months from their latest removal from the home. As currently defined, the federal reunification outcome measure is a discharge measure. That is, it indicates, for a given time period, the percentage of children who are reunified who exit to reunification in less than 12 months.

The construction of the federal outcome measure for reunification limits its utility for evaluating performance. The federal measure is not the percentage of all reunification cases that enter out-of-home care and achieve permanency within 12 months because it omits children who have been waiting for reunification for at least 12 months but who have not been discharged. As with the federal adoption measure, the mathematical problem with the federal reunification outcome is its denominator. The federal measure is an exit measure that excludes from the denominator children still in placement for whom reunification is the goal. The preferred method for constructing such a measure is based on an entry cohort rather than an exit cohort. The entry cohort consists of all children entering foster care within a specified time period who have reunification as a goal. This becomes the denominator for our alternative measure (described in the following section). The numerator is the number from the entry cohort who exit to reunification within specified time periods.

The second issue with the federal reunification measure is its arbitrary time limit. On what basis was a 12-month benchmark selected for reunification? Although widely debated in the child welfare literature for the pressure this 12-month timeframe places on caseworkers,

parents, and the judicial system, the 12-month deadline was based on an agreement among ASFA drafters that shorter periods in foster care were in the best interest of the child. This may be true; however, recent research suggests that long-term stability may actually be promoted between 12 and 18 months.

In a longitudinal study of reentry into foster care following reunification (Wulczyn, 2002), one measure of long-term stability, children reunified after short placements were most likely to return to placement. Reentry was particularly high among children returning home in less than three months. However, the sharpest decline in reentry rates among cohorts was observed among children who went home between 18 and 35 months, clearly after the 12-month ASFA deadline. The utility of the 12-month timeframe for program improvement deserves further research attention.

Furthermore, at the level of aggregate outcomes, considerable precision is lost by a measurement in which all reunifications that take place in less than 12 months are considered equal and all placements taking 12 or more months are considered equal. This aggregation of data treats reunifications occurring at 1 month the same as those occurring at 11 months. Placements occurring at 11 months are considered successful, but those occurring at 13 months are not. In short, the 12-month measure is not based on data about the long-term stability of placements made before or after 12 months, but rather on the ideal of moving children quickly through the foster care system.

Moreover, the combination of the use of an exit cohort (discharges to reunification only) and the arbitrary 12-month cutoff may actually create disincentives for continued efforts to reunify children with their families after the 12-month benchmark has passed. As the federal outcome measure is currently constructed, family reunifications happening at or after 12 months can actually lower outcome performance because, if reunified, these "late" reunification children

increase the denominator, thus decreasing the overall percentage score for reunification. If not reunified, these children never appear in the outcome measure at all. Under the federal measure, an agency that discharges 76.2 percent (the federal compliance standard) of its reunification cases within 12 months would be in compliance on the reunification outcome measure even if no further efforts were made to reunify children after the 12-month window. Another problem created by the use of a 12-month benchmark occurs when agencies remove children from the home unnecessarily and then reunify them quickly, thereby inflating their reunification rates.

The shortcomings of the federal measure are fairly well understood by researchers and administrators in the child welfare field (Courtney, Needell, and Wulczyn, 2003). These problems are largely created by limitations in the data sets from which they must be computed (AFCARS), which are annual cross-sectional files rather than the longitudinal files required to build entry cohorts.

To compare the experiences of children who are reunified with those who are not reunified requires the construction of a longitudinal dataset that follows children through foster care to discharge. This research report describes a preliminary analysis of a longitudinal data file created from a May 2003 extract of the Oklahoma KIDS data system and semiannual AFCARS foster care files submitted by the State of Oklahoma for the reporting years from 1997 through March 2003.

The reunification outcome is examined from a number of statistical and practical perspectives. The outcome measure itself is refined to consider not just total time to reunification finalization, but also critical time periods during which children are more or less likely to exit to reunification. In light of the demonstrated connection between very short stays in foster care (less than three months) and the diminished probability of long-term stability measured by reentry into care, (Barth, 1997; Davis, Landsverk, & Newton, 1997; Davis & Ellis-

MacLeod, 1994; Courtney, 1994; Rzepnicki, Schuerman, & Johnson, 1997), and between very long stays in care (more than two years) and the diminished probability of reunification (Courtney, 1994; Goerge, 1990; Maluccio, 2000), information on critical periods would be extremely useful for targeting optimized reunification outcomes.

Information on the critical time periods identified by the research literature is presented in this preliminary report; however future research is needed to determine whether early, middle, and late reunifications are indeed correlated with reentry and other measures of long-term stability in Oklahoma. Findings should be read in this spirit.

Findings

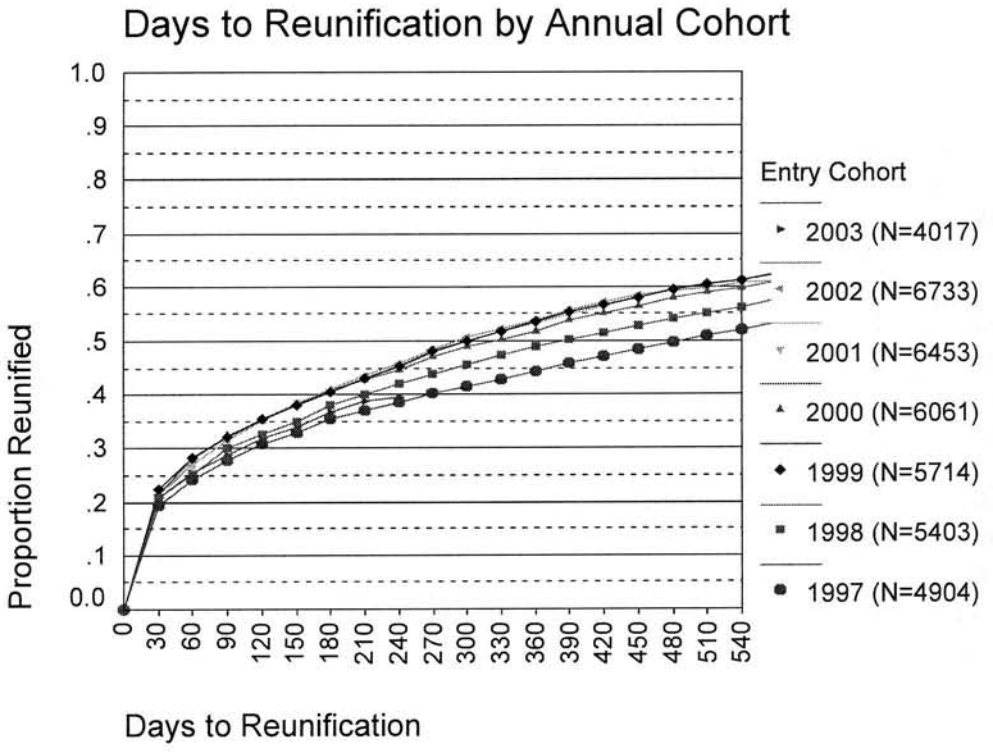
Use of Survival Analysis to Measure Time to Reunification

As mentioned, this Research Report presents an alternative way of measuring reunification performance outcomes. It is based on a statistical method known as survival analysis. Survival analysis was first used in biological research and insurance industry actuarial analyses. This technique was developed first to analyze the survival of species and later to analyze the life expectancy of insurance clients with particular characteristics. The technique is well suited to measuring the length of time between any two events. Survival analysis requires two variables: 1) a time variable indicating how long each case was observed, and 2) a status variable indicating whether the event of interest had occurred at the end of the observation period.

The event of interest in this report is reunification with the caretaker or parent. For this report children are first grouped into annual cohorts. In other words, children entering care in 1997 are in one group; children entering care in 1998 are in another group, and so forth. There are seven annual cohorts presented in this analysis. Data for the 2003 cohort is incomplete, as the year is not yet over and the follow-up period has not been long enough. Chart 1 summarizes

Days to Reunification by Annual Cohort. Data for the most recent complete cohort year (2002) are then used to examine area differences in reunification performance.

Chart 1



Annual Cohort Analysis

In Chart 1, higher and steeper sloping lines indicate faster movement toward reunification and thus improvement in reunifying more children more quickly. Examination of Chart 1 indicates a strong trend toward improvement in the timeliness of reunification between 1997 and 1999. After 1999, however, improvement levels off. In all years the highest reunification rates are found in the first 30-day interval after the child is placed in foster care.

Table 1 summarizes the same information shown in Chart 1 at specified time intervals from placement. The first column on the left enumerates the number of months children have been in foster care. The remaining columns are for each cohort year. The rows represent specific time periods counting from the removal date. The month of care summarized is the

child's first month in care, not the first month of the calendar year. For example, the first row of the table summarizes the percentage of children reaching reunification during their first month of care for each of the years included in this analysis (1997-2003).

Months to Reunification by Annual Cohort

Table 1. Time (in months) to Reunification by Annual Cohorts							
Time	**Percent Reaching Reunification**						
	1997 (N=4904)	**1998 (N=5403)**	**1999 (N=5714)**	**2000 (N=6061)**	**2001 (N=6453)**	**2002 (N=6733)**	**2003 (N=4017)**
1 month	19.3%	21.0%	22.4%	21.7%	21.9%	21.5%	20.9%
2 months	24.2%	25.3%	28.3%	28.1%	27.2%	27.1%	25.6%
3 months	27.8%	30.0%	32.1%	32.5%	31.5%	31.6%	28.9%
4 months	30.9%	32.6%	35.4%	35.3%	35.5%	35.1%	31.8%
5 months	32.8%	35.0%	38.0%	38.2%	38.4%	38.3%	34.0%
6 months	35.3%	37.9%	40.6%	40.7%	40.8%	41.2%	36.7%
9 months	38.6%	43.9%	48.2%	47.2%	48.1%	48.6%	38.8%
12 months	44.4%	48.9%	53.5%	51.9%	53.4%	53.8%	39.5%
15 months	48.5%	52.9%	58.0%	56.5%	58.1%	58.4%	
18 months	51.9%	56.1%	61.2%	59.8%	61.4%	60.9%	

Just as summarized in Chart 1, Table 1 depicts Oklahoma's consistent improvement from 1997 to 1999 in reducing the length of time from foster care entry to family reunification. For example, between 1997 and 1999, the proportion of children exiting to reunification within 12 months increased from 44.4% in 1997 to 53.5% in 1999. However, just as in Chart 1, this improvement levels off in 2000. In 2002, only a very slight improvement over 1999 levels can be observed (53.8% vs. 53.5%).

Reading across Table 1 the percentage of children reunified within 12 months, one can see a significant difference between the percentage of children who must be reunified in order meet the federal reunification standard (76.2%), and the best 12-month reunification performance of any annual cohort in this analysis, 53.8% of children in the 2002 cohort. In other words, in 2002, of all children who entered care, 53.8% were reunified within 12 *months. Since*

the federal measure begins with an exit cohort—those children who were reunified at a certain point in time—it falsely elevates the number of children who appear to be reunified within 12 months. This entry cohort analysis paints a more accurate picture of reunification trends.

One of the most important differences between the survival analysis approach to outcome measurement and the federal approach is that this approach includes the experience of children who did not achieve reunification within 12 months but who were reunified eventually. By examining Table 1 and Chart 1, we can see that at each six-month interval measured, more children achieve reunification. For example, in 1997, 44.4% of children had experienced reunification at 12 months. However, six months later, 7.5% more children, 51.9 %, had achieved reunification. For each annual cohort, the range of additional children reunified between the 12-month mark and the 18-month mark was 7.1-8%. Although these reunifications fall outside the CSFR target outcome period of 12 months, they indicate ongoing efforts to reunify children in Oklahoma.

Another important difference between the federal measure and this survival analysis is the ability of the latter to indicate reunification optimization. In other words, survival analysis can tell us the proportion of children who are potentially reunified too quickly for long-term stability (in less than three months according to the research literature), the proportion of children who are reunified within the optimal six to 12-month period, and the proportion reunified after the 12-month mark.

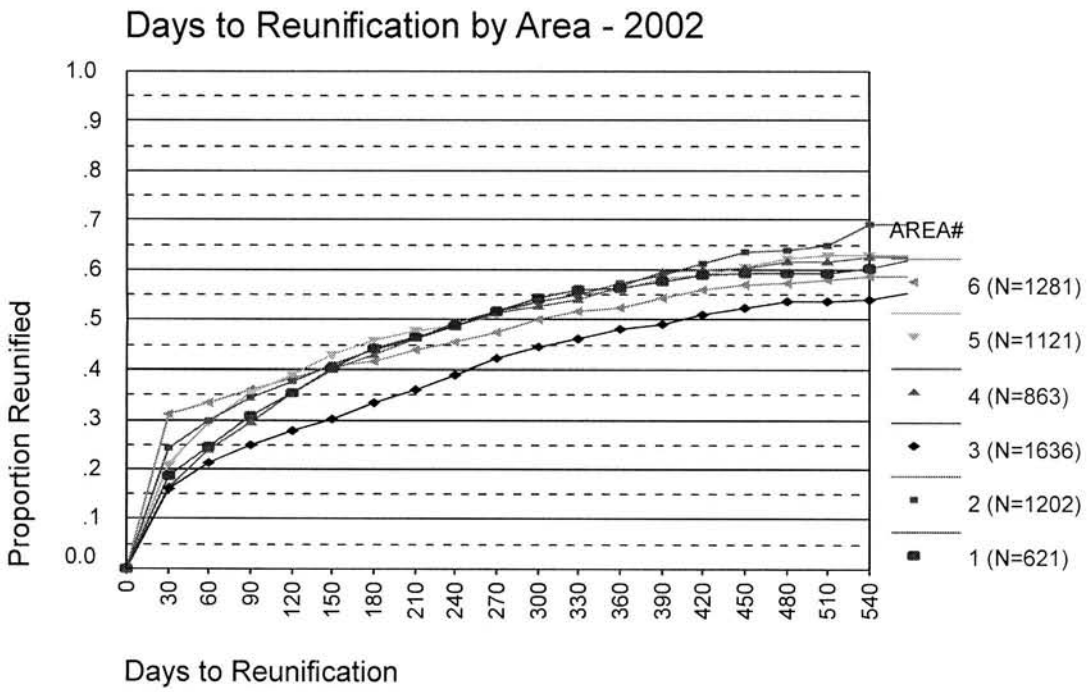
If we compare the percentage of children achieving reunification in 1997 and 2002, we see that at each monthly increment, more children were reunified in 2002 than in 1997. More importantly, the percent increase in children reunified is greater at each monthly increment. For example, between 1997 and 2002, the percentage of children reunified in one month (not favorable for long term stability) increases by 2.2%. By contrast, at the six, nine, and 12-month

marks (more optimal reunification periods for long term stability), these percentages increase by 5.9%, 10%, and 9.4% respectively. These increases may indicate a more optimized approach to reunification in the years between 1997 and 2002.

Area Comparisons

Chart 2 illustrates Days to Reunification by Area in 2002. As 2003 data are not yet complete, 2002 was chosen for this and all subsequent analyses presented in this report.

Chart 2



Examination of Chart 2 reveals significant differences in reunification timeliness and trends by Area. Areas 3 and 6 are of particular interest. For example, Area 3 appears to have the lowest reunification rates at every monthly interval. In contrast, in Area 6, a higher proportion of children are reunified within the first month in care (30 days) than in any other area. Furthermore, reunifications in Area 6 appear to climb more steeply in the first 150 days (5 months) than in other areas, after which they fall. In other words, Chart 2 suggests that in Area

6, a greater proportion of children are reunified with parents and caretakers during the less-than-optimal early period. Moreover, fewer children achieve reunification in the optimal six to 12-month period identified by the research literature. This pattern in Area 6 may indicate an unoptimized "safety" model in which some children are taken into care unnecessarily and then quickly reunified. Future research will explore this and other possible explanations.

Reunification rates in other areas demonstrate potentially better reunification optimization. For example, in Area 1, the proportion of children achieving reunification increases most dramatically between the optimal six to 12-month window, suggesting the achievement of a balance between safety and family preservation. After the 12-month mark, a good number of children continue to be reunified in Area 1. However, unlike Areas 2, 4, and 5, Area 1 rates level off after the 12-month mark rather than exceeding rates in previous monthly intervals (indicating that reunification efforts may be better targeted for compliance with the federal measure). Just as summarized in Chart 2, Table 2 depicts Oklahoma Area performance in reducing the length of time from foster care entry to family reunification.

Table 2. Time (in months) to Reunification by Area

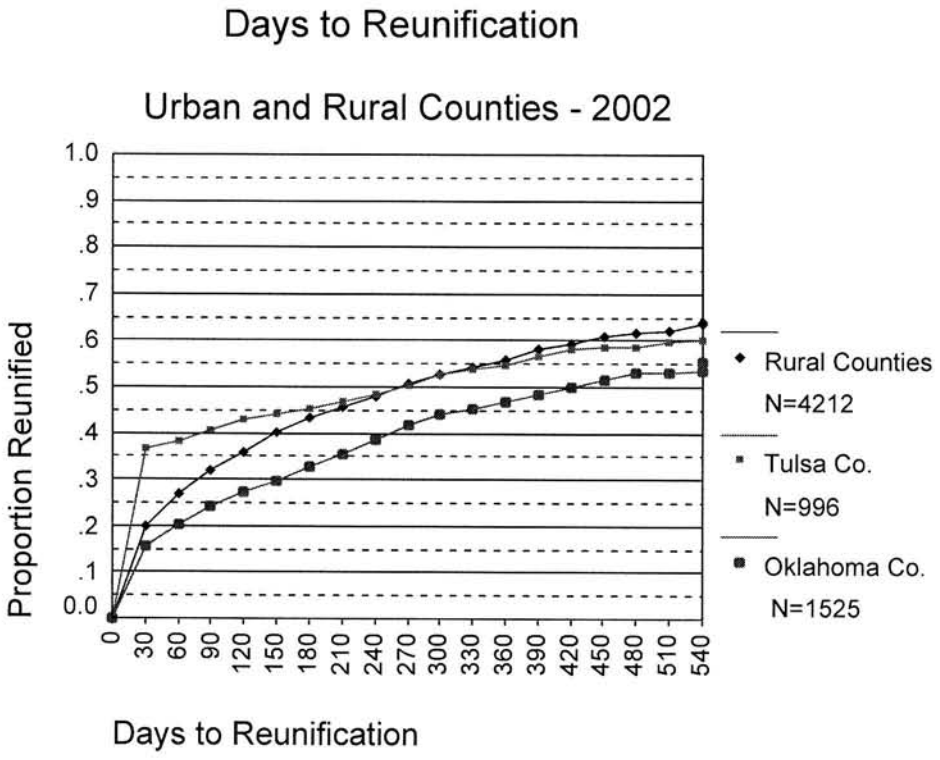
Time	**Percent Reaching Reunification**					
	Area 1 (N=621)	**Area 2 (N=1202)**	**Area 3 (N=1636)**	**Area 4 (N=863)**	**Area 5 (N=1121)**	**Area 6 (N=1281)**
1 month	18.8%	24.3%	16.0%	16.3%	21.1 %	31.3%
2 months	24.6%	29.8 %	21.3%	23.8 %	29.6%	33.4%
3 months	30.7%	34.4%	25.1%	29.5%	35.4%	35.9%
4 months	35.4%	37.8%	28.0%	35.3%	39.0%	38.3%
5 months	40.3%	41.0%	30.1%	39.9%	42.8%	40.5%
6 months	44.2%	43.0%	33.4%	42.8%	45.8%	41.8%
9 months	51.9%	49.4 %	39.0%	49.0%	51.1 %	47.5%
12 months	56.4%	57.2%	48.1%	56.6%	56.0 %	52.6%
15 months	59.3 %	63.7%	52.4%	60.3%	60.8%	57.1%
18 months	60.3%	69.3%	54.2 %	62.3 %	63.0%	58.7 %

As expected, Area 6 has the highest percentage of children achieving reunification in the first month, 31.3%, but the second lowest reunification rate at 12 months, 52.6%. Area 3 has the lowest rates at every monthly interval. Reunification performance in all areas shows need for improvement; however, early reunification in Area 6 and low reunification in Area 3 deserve more research attention.

Urban Vs. Rural Counties

Chart 3 compares Days to Reunification in the two largest urban counties, Tulsa County and Oklahoma County, to all remaining rural counties.

Chart 3



As Oklahoma County comprises a significant portion of Area 3, and Tulsa County makes up a significant portion of Area 6, outcomes for these counties mirror those of Areas 3 and 6, discussed above. In Tulsa County, the proportion of children exiting foster care to reunification is significantly higher during the first 30 days than in either Oklahoma County or in the remaining rural counties combined. Theoretically, rural counties demonstrate a more optimized reunification performance—slower in the first three months and steadily increasing thereafter. However, as evidenced by the inclining slope of the line after 360 days, rural counties could improve their efforts to target reunification between three and 12 months so as to improve performance on the federal measure.

In Oklahoma County, the percentage of children reunified is significantly lower at each monthly interval than in all other counties. This may be an artifact of better risk assessment, greater use of kinship care, or significant variations in child, family, organizational, or community factors in Oklahoma County. Subsequent analyses will attempt to explain these observed differences in reunification patterns. These trends are also evident in Table 3. For example, in 2002, Tulsa County reunified 36.8% of children within the first month of their entry into care, compared to 15.7% in Oklahoma County and 20.1% in the remaining Rural Areas of the state. Rural Areas performed best overall, with a 12-month reunification rate of 56%, and an18-month rate of 63.7%.

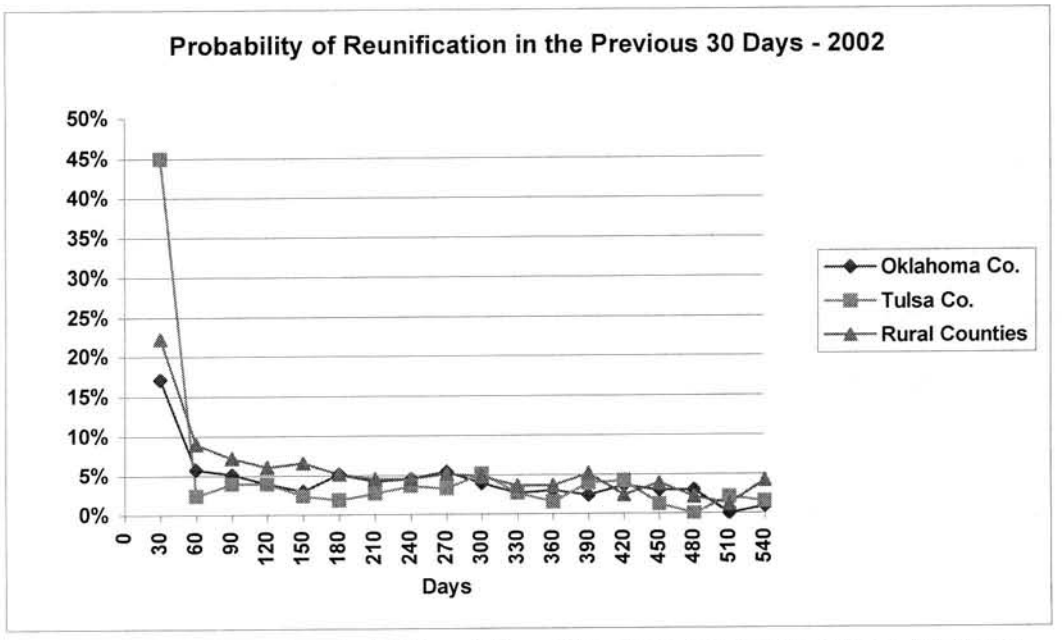
Months to Reunification by Urban/Rural Areas

Table 3. Time (in months) to Reunification by Urban/Rural Areas			
Time	**Percent Reaching Reunification**		
	Okalahoma City (N=1525)	**Tulsa (N=996)**	**Rural Areas (3) (N=4212)**
1 month	15.7%	36.8%	20.1%
2 months	20.3%	38.3%	27.0%
3 months	24.4%	41.0%	32.1%
4 months	27.4%	43.0%	36.1%
5 months	27.4%	44.2%	40.1%
6 months	29.5%	45.2%	43.2%
9 months	38.5%	50.3%	50.6 %
12 months	47.0%	54.8%	56.0%
15 months	51.6%	58.8%	60.8%
18 months	53.4%	60.3%	63.7%

Probability of Reunification

Chart 4 (below) illustrates the Probability of Reunification for individual children in Oklahoma County, Tulsa County, and all other Rural Areas. Hazard rates were calculated to determine a child's differential chances of being reunified or not being reunified depending on how long they remained in foster care. Notable in Chart 4 is the high probability of reunification within the first 30 days in care. For example, a child in Tulsa County has a 45% chance of being reunified within the first 30 days in care, compared to an approximately 22% chance in Oklahoma County and an approximately 17% chance in all other Rural Counties. Although not conclusive, research suggests that these early reunification rates would appear to be too high to guarantee long-term stability. Ideally, a more dispersed distribution across time intervals—particularly between sixmonths and one year—would be achieved.

Chart 4



Probability of Reunification in the Previous 30 Days

Conclusion

This analysis of time to reunification by annual cohort, area, and urban vs. rural counties suggests that there is significant variability in child, family, service, organizational, or community characteristics between years and among counties and areas. Chiefly, counties and Areas were found to vary considerably with regard to optimal and less optimal patterns of reunification. To summarize, statewide,

- Oklahoma appears to have experienced a strong trend toward improvement in the timeliness of reunification (i.e. reunification within 12 months) between 1997 and 1999. After 1999, however, improvement levels off.

- In all years examined (1997-2003), the highest reunification rates are found in the first 30-day interval after the child is placed in out-of-home care. These results may be indicative of unnecessary removals from the home.
- For each annual cohort, the range of additional children reunified between the 12-month mark and the 18-month mark was 7.1-8%. Although these reunifications fall outside the CSFR target outcome period of 12 months, they indicate ongoing efforts to reunify children in Oklahoma and may actually promote longer-term stability, as suggested by the research literature (Wulczyn, 2002).
- In the last five years, reunification in Oklahoma may be happening in a more optimized manner. The trend from 1997 to 2002 indicates that more children are returning home after a slightly longer stay in foster care. As short stays in care are correlated with higher reentry rates, slightly longer stays in care may allow sufficient time for families to make necessary changes and may lead to longer-term stability.
- Significant differences in reunification optimization were observed across Areas. Area 3 appeared to have the lowest reunification rates at every monthly interval, contrasted with Area 6, in which a higher proportion of children were reunified within the first month in care and comparatively lower percentages were reunified in the more optimal six to 12-month period identified by the research literature. Other areas appeared to have more optimized reunification patterns.
- A comparison of Oklahoma County, Tulsa County, and combined Rural Counties mirrors the Area comparison. In Tulsa County, the proportion of children exiting foster care to reunification is significantly higher during the first 30 days than in either Oklahoma County or in the remaining rural counties combined. Rural counties

demonstrate a more optimized reunification performance—slower in the first three months and steadily increasing thereafter.

Recommendations and Future Research

This is a preliminary report that largely guides future research. Therefore, it is premature to provide specific program or policy recommendations. To improve reunification outcomes for children in Oklahoma and elsewhere, it is important to understand what factors contribute to the length of time between children's entry into foster care and reunification, as well as those factors that predict long-term stability. In future research, additional variables will be added to survival analyses in order to build a model with sufficient power to predict the length of time to reunification for children with different characteristics and experiences, as well as those factors which seem to predict lower reentry rates.

Research is currently underway to identify:

- pertinent child, family organizational, and service characteristics that predict timely, optimized reunification
- the effect of parental alcohol and drug use on reunification
- the characteristics of children who have early vs. late reunifications.

Additionally, a county level analysis of reunification and reentry rates, using both federal standards and survival analysis, has recently been completed. Data from this and future reports could inform program improvement efforts at the agency, county, and Area levels.

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