



FACTS ABOUT FOSTER KIDS

Lexington County 2003

A Publication of the South Carolina Governor's Office – Division of Foster Care Review

OVERVIEW

Facts About Foster Kids is intended to provide annual data about children in foster care for every county in South Carolina. It covers: **Demographics** -- how many children there are in foster care, their characteristics and whether their prevalence is increasing or decreasing; **Areas of Concern** -- legal and program shortcomings identified at monthly citizen reviews; and **Progress Measures** -- length of time in care, number of placements, achieving permanency, and recidivism rates. The report concludes with an **Overall Assessment** of this county. Information is collected from local volunteer citizen review boards that review the cases of all children who have been in foster care at least four months; each case is then reviewed every six months thereafter until the child leaves care. The 2003 edition includes complete information about children who were reviewed at least once in 2002. It also includes demographics on those children who entered foster care late in the year and were not reviewed until 2003, but does not yet incorporate them into progress measures or areas of concern.

Facts About Foster Kids replaces the previously produced *Foster Kids Count*. This streamlined version is easier to read, faster to find information, and more suitable for cross-comparing areas and discerning trends over time. Consequently, we hope it will have a greater impact on getting out the message that children need permanent homes.

DEMOGRAPHICS

The number of foster care children reviewed has risen in Lexington County for each the last three years. Reviewed children now constitute .25% of all children living in the county, up from .21% in 1999, but still under half of the statewide average of .52%. Encouragingly in 2002, the number leaving approached the number entering, with a small percent of leavers over age 15.

| | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | Average |
|-----------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|---------|
| Number of Children Reviewed | 111 | 119 | 135 | 147 | 128 |
| Change from Prior Year | | 8 | 16 | 12 | |
| Percent of all Children in County | 0.21% | 0.21% | 0.24% | 0.25% | 0.23% |
| Number Entering | 25 | 21 | 58 | 38 | 36 |
| Number Leaving | 12 | 29 | 32 | 36 | 27 |

| | Children Reviewed | | Children Entering | | Children Leaving | |
|---------------------|-------------------|---------|-------------------|---------|------------------|---------|
| | Number | Percent | Number | Percent | Number | Percent |
| ALL CHILDREN | 147 | | 38 | | 36 | |
| Race: | | | | | | |
| African-American | 25 | 17% | 9 | 24% | 3 | 8% |
| Caucasian | 108 | 74% | 24 | 63% | 30 | 83% |
| Other | 14 | 10% | 5 | 13% | 3 | 8% |
| Gender: | | | | | | |
| Male | 71 | 48% | 22 | 58% | 13 | 36% |
| Female | 76 | 52% | 16 | 42% | 23 | 64% |
| Age: | | | | | | |
| 5 and younger | 49 | 33% | 17 | 45% | 11 | 31% |
| 6 to 9 | 22 | 15% | 6 | 16% | 8 | 22% |
| 10 to 15 | 51 | 35% | 11 | 29% | 9 | 25% |
| 16 and older | 25 | 17% | 4 | 11% | 8 | 22% |

AREAS OF CONCERN

In 2002, Review Board members held 12 meetings with an average of 20 children reviewed at each meeting. Of the 240 reviews held, 80% had at least one area of concern cited by the local Review Board. A total of 425 deficiencies in systemic efforts to secure permanent homes for children in care were cited in 2002. This was a hefty increase of 197 from 2001 after years of remaining fairly stable and as the statewide numbers were decreasing. In 2002, Lexington County reached an average of 1.77 citations per review, much higher than the state average of 1.02 and the first time above it in recent years.

In 2002, the most often cited legal violations remained *No Timely Permanency Planning Hearing*. The failure to hold these hearings according to time frames outlined by state and federal law unnecessarily lengthens the time children remain in foster care. The incidence of *No Timely Merits Hearing* increased after progress the prior year, and the number of cases with *No Thorough Adoption Assessment* rose substantially.

The most often cited program violations were *No Progress Reports*, *Lack of Progress Towards a Permanent Plan* and *Incomplete/Inappropriate Case Plan*, which together accounted for nearly half of the rise in violations. The case plan document is critical to permanency planning as it serves as the road map for successfully moving children through the foster care system. Through sound case planning, children can be moved through the foster care system safely and swiftly, with the end result being permanent and stable homes.

| Table 3: Frequently Cited Areas of Concern, 2000 to 2002, Lexington County | | | | | |
|---|------|------|------|----------|----------|
| | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | Change: | |
| | | | | 00 to 01 | 01 to 02 |
| LEGAL | | | | | |
| No Timely Permanency Planning Hearing | 56 | 51 | 56 | -5 | 5 |
| No Timely Merits Hearing | 41 | 31 | 44 | -10 | 13 |
| No Thorough Adoption Assessment | 5 | 11 | 32 | 6 | 21 |
| No Court Order at Review | 8 | 7 | 11 | -1 | 4 |
| No Face to Face Contact | 27 | 21 | 8 | -6 | -13 |
| PROGRAM | | | | | |
| Lack of Progress Towards Permanent Plan | 22 | 19 | 54 | -3 | 35 |
| No Progress Reports | 33 | 36 | 58 | 3 | 22 |
| No Copy of Pleadings | 1 | 0 | 13 | -1 | 13 |
| Incomplete/Inappropriate Case Plan | 4 | 9 | 42 | 5 | 33 |
| No Current Case Plan | 3 | 0 | 9 | -3 | 9 |
| ALL AREAS OF CONCERN | | | | | |
| Total Number: Areas of Concern | 225 | 228 | 425 | 3 | 197 |
| Total Number of Reviews | 185 | 213 | 240 | 28 | 27 |
| Areas of Concern per Review | 1.22 | 1.07 | 1.77 | -0.15 | 0.70 |
| Percent of Reviews with an Area of Concern | 75% | 70% | 80% | | |

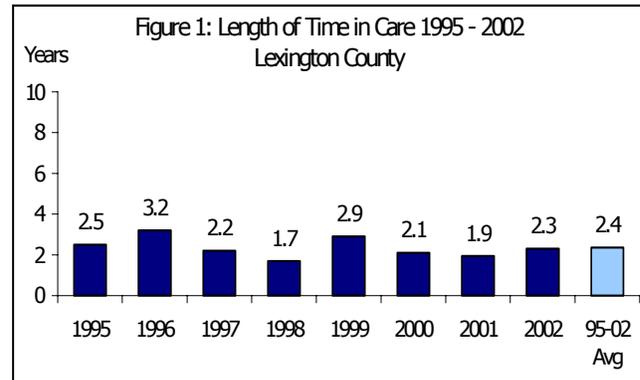
The 2004 edition of *Facts About Foster Kids*, when published during the second half of that year, will include complete information about children who were reviewed at least once in 2003. Because these reviews are now complete, a supplement is currently available on request that contains updated 2003 data on Areas of Concern -- legal and program shortcomings identified at monthly citizen reviews. Please see the contact information at the end of this report if you wish to obtain this supplement. Demographics and Progress Measures will not be ready until all children entering foster care for the first time in 2003 have been reviewed during the first half of 2004.

PROGRESS MEASURES

Four main indicators are used to measure progress towards better outcomes for children in foster care. For each, trends since 1995 and the average for this eight-year time period are provided.

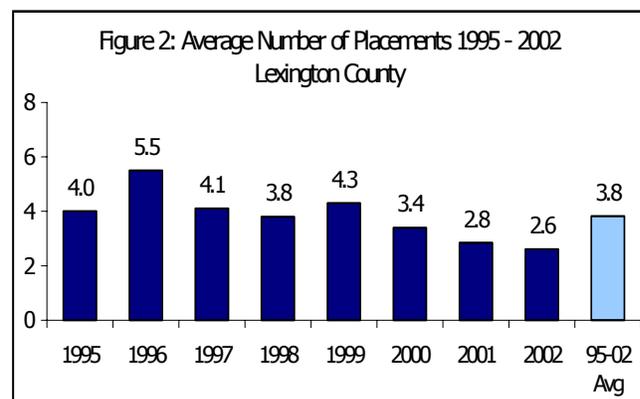
LENGTH OF TIME IN CARE:

The longer a child is away from their home or a nurturing family environment, the more damaging it can be to the normal development of the child. For this reason, a major goal of the Review Board is to ensure that children achieve permanency as quickly as possible. The average length of time in care for children in Lexington County rose to 2.3 years in 2002 after falling each of the prior two years. But it remains below the statewide average of 2.8 years.



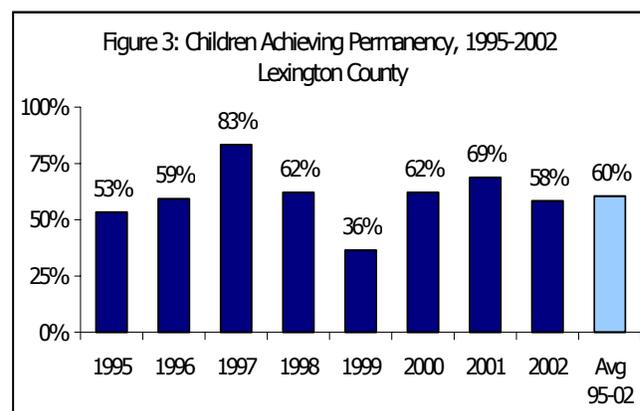
NUMBER OF PLACEMENTS:

Research shows the initial placement in foster care is extremely traumatic for a child. Additional changes in placement once in the foster care system can be detrimental to children's development, affecting their ability to learn, establish relationships and develop as stable, secure individuals. The average number of placements in Lexington County has now fallen for three straight years to 2.6, its lowest ever and well below the state average of 3.7. Only 16% of the children who left care in 2002 experienced 5 or more placements versus 42% in 1999.



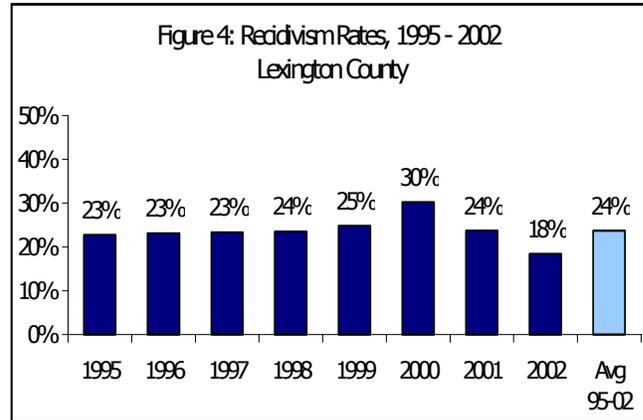
PERCENT ACHIEVING PERMANENCY:

Permanency for a child means placement with a "forever family." Families are the single most important influence in a child's life. Children depend on their families for their material needs and wants, nurturing and leadership. A child can achieve legal permanency upon leaving the foster care system either by returning home to their natural parent or by being adopted. After reaching a high 69% in 2001, the share of children achieving permanency in Lexington County fell back to 58% in 2002, putting it again under the statewide average of 64%.



RECIDIVISM RATES:

Children who re-enter care are some of the most vulnerable children in foster care because they have been taken into custody more than once. Subsequent removals increase the risk for further developmental delays and have an even greater impact on a child’s ability to succeed later in life. In 2002, Lexington County lowered its rate of re-entry to 18%, its best showing ever and the first time it has bested the statewide rate, which has risen to 20%.



For children re-entering foster care, the previous location matters. During the last three years, 93% of them came from either their parents or another relative. Only 7% came from an adoptive parent.

| Previous Location | 2000 | | 2001 | | 2002 | | Average | |
|-------------------|--------|---------|--------|---------|--------|---------|---------|---------|
| | Number | Percent | Number | Percent | Number | Percent | Number | Percent |
| Parents | 27 | 84% | 26 | 81% | 18 | 67% | 24 | 78% |
| Relatives | 3 | 9% | 4 | 13% | 7 | 26% | 5 | 15% |
| Adoptive Parents | 2 | 6% | 2 | 6% | 2 | 7% | 2 | 7% |
| Other | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% | 0 | 0% |
| Total | 32 | 100% | 32 | 100% | 27 | 100% | 30 | 100% |

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

In most respects, Lexington County’s measures gauging foster care in 2002 remain better than both their historical averages and statewide figures. This is true for length of time in care, number of placements and recidivism rates. The overall incidence of children in foster care, while rising, remains less than half of the statewide average. The percent of children achieving permanency faltered in 2002, but any one year’s record in this measure is suspect, as its based on a small number of children leaving care often at different ages from year to year.

The more troubling statistics for Lexington County have to do with the bump-up in the number of children entering care during each of the last two years. All of this rise came from new entrants as reentry rates and numbers fell. The area may be seeing an influx of more families with young children and/or more difficult economic conditions. That in turn might be putting strains on the system to cope; a related problem is the huge rise in the cited Areas of Concern in 2002. Many program violations went up substantially as did *No Thorough Adoption Assessments*. If these processes do not improve going forward, progress measures that have been holding up might be the next to suffer.

Inquiries about this report and requests for copies of this and other counties’ reports should be made to:
 Don Hilber, Data and Research Manager or to Denise Barker, Division Director
 Division of Foster Care Review, 1205 Pendleton St., Columbia, SC 29201 Phone: (803) 734-0480 Fax: (803) 734-1223.
 Comparable reports for other counties and for the state can also be found on the World Wide Web at:
<http://www.govoepp.state.sc.us/children/foster.htm>