

South Carolina  
Office of the Governor  
Division of Children's Foster Care Review

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Report and Recommendations



2002-2003

"The secret of success is constancy to purpose."  
Benjamin Disraeli



# *South Carolina Children's Foster Care Review Board Annual Report: 2002-2003*

## **Mission Statement:**

The Division of Children's Foster Care Review provides an external system of accountability and advocacy for children and families involved with the foster care system. The Division utilizes panels of community volunteers to promote safe, permanent homes for children in foster care in a timely manner and to increase public awareness regarding the impact of child abuse and neglect.

The South Carolina Children's Foster Care Review Board (SCCFCRB) was legislated in 1974 by the General Assembly to monitor the progress in achieving permanent placements for children in foster care. The SCCFCRB is administered by the Governor's Office of Executive Policy and Programs. Local review boards are required by S.C. Code Sec 20-7-2376 to review cases of children who have been in public foster care for at least four consecutive months and every six months thereafter. Local review boards meet monthly to discuss the progress made in achieving the permanent plan for each child reviewed.

During each review, the local boards collect information from interested parties who attend the review. Interested parties include staff from the Department of Social Services, foster parents, birth parents, guardians ad litem, treatment providers and other relevant parties. Foster children who are at least ten years old are also invited to attend their review. Case review of a child in an out-of-home placement ends either when the child leaves the foster care system or reaches the age of 18. From January 1, 2002 to December 31, 2002, the SCCFCRB reviewed the cases of 4,810 children in foster care.

The SCCFCRB also operates a quality assurance review program for emotionally disturbed foster children who reside in therapeutic placements funded by Medicaid. During 2002, 1,295 of the children reviewed (27 percent) resided in these placements.

During 2002, a staff of 19 served 37 local review boards across the State. At monthly reviews, local boards generate statistical data to evaluate the status of foster care in South Carolina. The Children's Review Board State Board of Directors uses this information to make recommendations for improvements to the child welfare system. These recommendations are sent to the Governor, the General Assembly, the Department of Social Services, and the Family Court.

This year's annual report includes the following:

- ❖ Overview of Foster Care in South Carolina
- ❖ Children Entering Foster Care in 2002
- ❖ Children Reviewed in 2002
- ❖ Children Leaving Foster Care in 2002
- ❖ Recommendations of the SCCFCRB

### SCCFCRB Board of Directors

Burnet Mendelsohn  
Louise McFarland  
Elizabeth Weaver  
Jane W. Daniel  
Elizabeth Rivers  
Carrie Sinkler-Parker  
Vernon McCurry

Denise Barker, Division Director  
December 2003

# Overview of Foster Care in South Carolina

Approximately 5,000 South Carolina children are in foster care. On average, these children spend nearly three years in foster care, changing placements almost four times. More than one child in three does not receive a permanent home by either being returned to a birth parent or by adoption. While the length of time spent in care decreased in 2002, the number of placements increased and the percent of children achieving permanency declined. As a result, these children are at risk of not becoming self-supporting, contributing members of our communities and our state.

The number of children returning to foster care also continues to increase and reached an all-time high in 2002. More than half reentered care after being placed with one or both of their birth parents and an additional third returned to foster care after being placed with relatives. Fewer than five percent returned after being adopted.

The tracking of agency policies and state/federal statutes shows that there has been improvement in holding timely permanency planning hearings. This occurred in 17 percent of all reviewed cases in 2000, decreasing to 14 percent in 2002. Similarly, by 2002 only 10 percent of cases showed a lack of progress towards permanent plans, compared to 16 percent two years prior.

However, the number of untimely merit hearings increased from 11 to 12 percent of all reviewed cases between 2000 and 2002. Likewise, there has been no improvement at conducting thorough adoption assessments, which remains cited in three percent of all cases during each of the last three years.

In 2002, overall numbers of children in foster care, recidivism rates and the average number of foster care placements experienced by children all were higher than in 2000 and 2001.

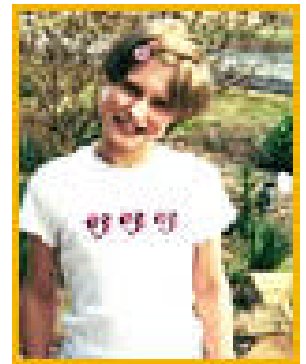
## Children Entering Foster Care in 2002

There were 1,412 children who entered foster care during 2002 and were reviewed at least once by local review boards. Of these, 85 percent were in a regular foster care placement at the time of their first review and the remaining 15 percent were in a therapeutic foster care placement funded by Medicaid.

### Reasons for Placement

Neglect was the most frequently cited reason for placement of children in foster care during 2002, accounting for over half of all cases. Abuse was also prominent, the placing reason for nearly a third of the total, with virtually no distinction between regular and therapeutic placements. All other reasons for placement combined constituted less than ten percent. Children who entered due to dependency or juvenile delinquency were seven times more likely to be placed in therapeutic foster care.

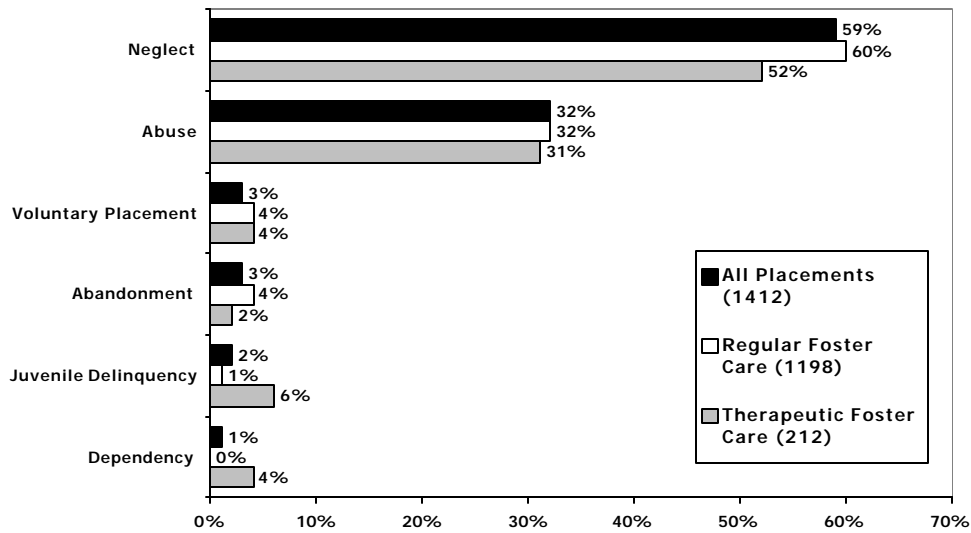
On average, children spend nearly three years in foster care, changing placements almost four times.



In 2002, overall numbers of children in foster care, recidivism rates and the average number of foster care placements experienced by children all were higher than in both 2000 and 2001.

Neglect was the most frequently cited reason for placement of children in foster care during 2002.

**Placement Reasons for Children Entering Foster Care**



In 2002, 257 children returned to foster care, a recidivism rate of 18 percent.

**Demographics of Children Entering Care**

Children who entered foster care in 2002 were almost evenly split between boys and girls, and between Caucasians and African-Americans. But the rates at which they entered varied tremendously by age, clustered at ages five or younger and between ten and fifteen. Therapeutic placements tended to have the nearly the same distribution as regular placements by ethnicity and gender, with slightly more boys and more African-Americans. The largest difference with regular placement was by age. Sixty-four percent of therapeutic placements were children between ten and fifteen years of age, compared to only 33 percent of regular placements. On the other hand, children aged five and younger were three to four times less likely to be in a therapeutic placement.

Sixty percent of the children who re-entered foster care returned from a birth parent and thirty-one percent from a relative, while only four percent were from an adoptive placement.

**Age of Children Entering Foster Care**

<u>Age</u>	<u>All Placements</u>	<u>Regular Foster Care</u>	<u>Therapeutic Foster Care</u>
5 years or younger	41%	46%	13%
6 to 9 years	16%	16%	13%
10 to 15 years	37%	33%	64%
16 years or older	6%	5%	10%

**Re-entry of Children**

In 2002, 257 children returned to foster care, a recidivism rate of 18 percent. Children in therapeutic placements were more likely than those in regular placements to have re-entered; their rate was 25 percent. Sixty percent of children who re-entered foster care returned from a birth parent and thirty-one percent from a relative, while only four percent were from adoptive placements. These percentages did not vary between therapeutic or regular placements.

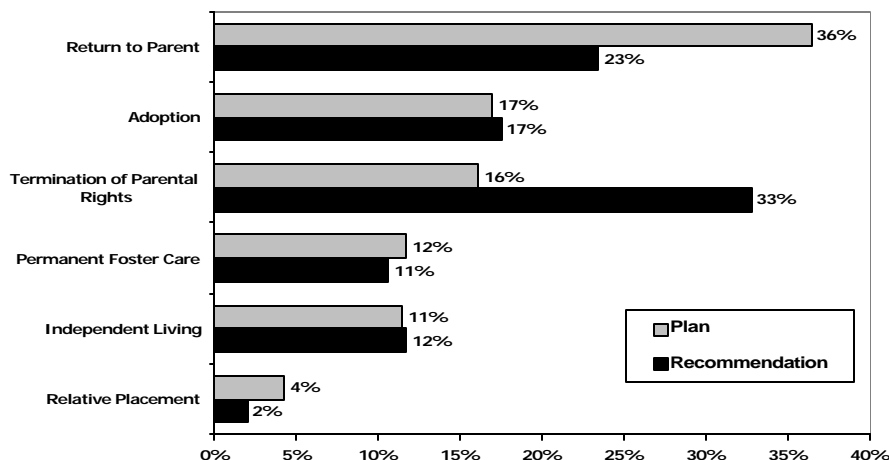
## Children Reviewed in 2002

A total of 4,810 children were reviewed by local review boards during 2002. Of these, 1,295 (27 percent) were placed in therapeutic foster care. With 1,412 new children entering foster care and 1,639 leaving, this implies that at least 1,759 children entered foster care prior to 2002 and remained in care as 2003 began. Thus, slightly more than half of children in foster care at the start of 2002 did not leave within the year.

The length of time in care for all those reviewed, including those entering in 2002, averaged 2.9 years, and was longer for children in therapeutic care (4.1 years) than for those in regular foster care (2.6 years). The average number of placements for all children was 3.9, but was much higher for those in therapeutic placements (6.7) than for those in regular placements (2.9).

The age, gender and ethnic profile of all children reviewed in 2002 does not differ much from that of children who entered that year, with a few notable exceptions. The proportion of African-Americans among those reviewed is slightly higher than among those entering, implying longer lengths of stay. The proportion of those reviewed who are aged sixteen and older stands at 22 percent, compared to only 6 percent of those entering. Children in therapeutic placements remained in foster care more often than those in regular placements, with 38 percent of those reviewed aged sixteen or older.

**Agency Plans and Review Board Recommendations**



During 2002, local review boards recommended that parental rights be terminated for a third of all cases, compared to only 16 percent of DSS plans. A low recidivism rate suggests that adoption is the permanent plan least likely to cause subsequent disruption of the placement. The Department of Social Services planned for return home and relative placement more frequently than was recommended by local review boards. These variations between the review boards and DSS were true for both therapeutic and regular foster care placements. These differences between recommendations and permanent plans may be linked to the high number of untimely merits and permanency planning hearings. DSS often seeks court sanctioning prior to changing a child's permanent plan. Conversely, the local review boards base their recommendations on the information available at the time of the review.

Slightly more than half of all children in foster care at the beginning of 2002 did not leave care within the year.

The average number of placements was much higher for children in therapeutic placements.

Children in therapeutic placements remained in foster care until aged sixteen or older more often than those in regular placements.

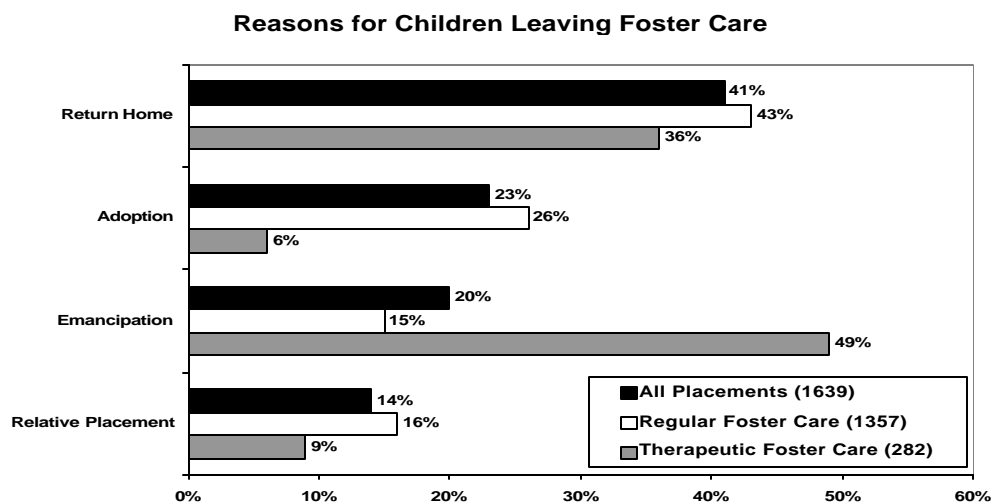
Nearly two-thirds of children who left foster care in 2002 were placed in a permanent setting: 41 percent were returned home and an additional 23 percent were adopted.

## Children Leaving Foster Care in 2002

During 2002, there were 1,639 children who were reviewed and subsequently left foster care. Of these, 83 percent left a regular foster care placement and 17 percent left a therapeutic placement funded by Medicaid.

### Reasons Children Left Care

Nearly two-thirds of children who left foster care in 2002 were placed in a permanent setting: 41 percent were returned home and an additional 23 percent were adopted. The remaining children reported were either emancipated (20 percent) or placed with a relative (14 percent).



Children in regular placement were four times more likely to be adopted than those in therapeutic settings, where nearly half were likely to remain in foster care until emancipation.

The reasons children left care varied greatly by the type of placement. Children in regular foster care placements were four times more likely to be adopted than those in therapeutic settings, where nearly half were likely to remain in foster care until emancipation. In both types, children were returned home at almost the same rate.

### Length of Time and Number of Placements for Children Leaving Care

Children leaving foster care in 2002 faced varying lengths of stay and a greater number of placements depending on the type of placement and the reason they left care.

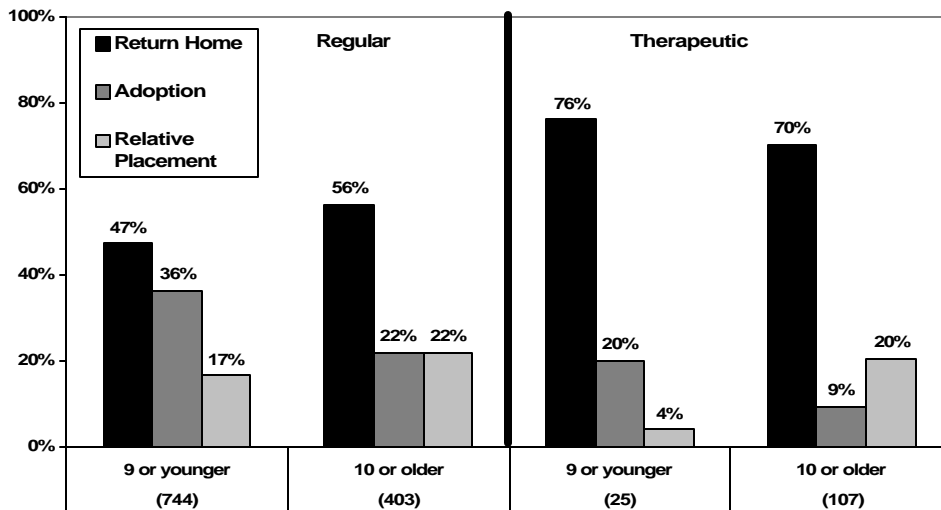
Closing Reason	Number of Years in Care		Number of Placements	
	Regular Care	Therapeutic Care	Regular Care	Therapeutic Care
Return Home	1.2	2.2	2.3	4.6
Relative Placement	1.5	2.8	2.4	8.8
Adoption	3.7	6.0	2.6	4.9
Emancipation	4.8	5.8	5.8	9.1

For each closing reason, children in therapeutic placements had longer stays and more placements. Among reasons for leaving, those emancipated experienced the longest stays and the most number of placements.

## Demographics of Children Leaving Care

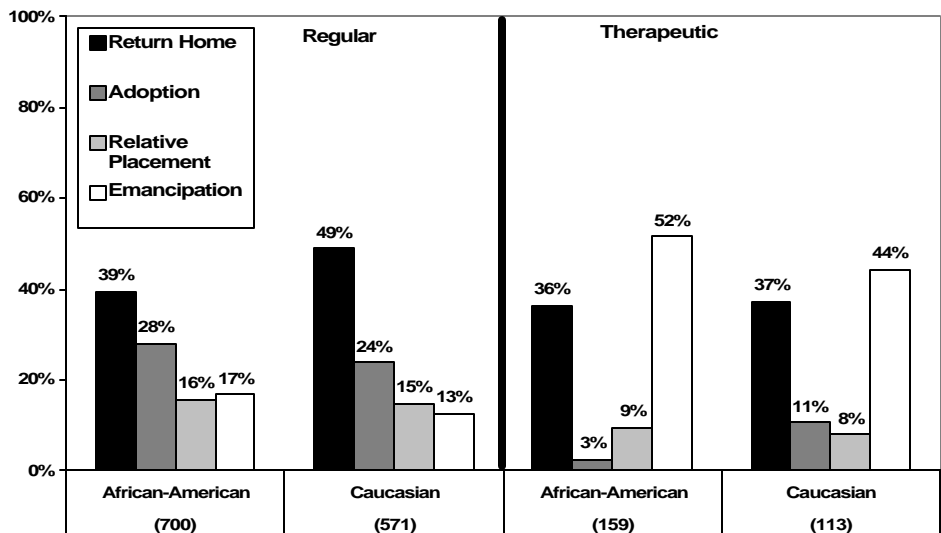
The proportion of children leaving care by gender and ethnicity was nearly the same as those entering; however there was a difference by age. Those leaving care were much older, with 28 percent aged 16 and above. The age profile for children in therapeutic placements is even more skewed, with 64 percent aged 16 or older compared to only 20 percent of regular placements. Ninety percent of children leaving a therapeutic placement were aged ten or older.

**Outcomes by Age and Type of Placement (not incl. emancipations)**



Older children are not as likely to be adopted regardless of setting. They leave foster care for this reason at half the rate of younger children; only 28 percent of all adoptions are those aged ten and older. Both younger and older children in therapeutic settings are adopted less often than those in regular placements; more than 70 percent of those not emancipated are returned home. Ethnicity was not a factor in whether a child achieved permanency compared to other options, as African-American and Caucasian children were adopted or returned home (combined) in nearly the same proportions.

**Outcomes by Ethnicity and Type of Placement**



Older children were not as likely to be adopted regardless of setting; only 28 percent of all adopted children were aged ten and older.

Both younger and older children in therapeutic settings are adopted less often; more than 70 percent of those not emancipated are returned home.

Ethnicity was not a factor in whether a child achieved permanency.

## Recommendations

The impact of the economic crisis and severe budget reductions in South Carolina are just beginning to be reflected in the faces of her children and families. The State Board of Directors is deeply concerned about the ability of the Department of Social Services (DSS) to provide even minimal levels of care under existing conditions. Now, more than ever before, the Department must take steps to strengthen relationships with all local review boards in order to maximize this underutilized resource for children and families. The Children's Foster Care Review Board must be considered an integral member of the community team responsible for addressing the needs of the community's children. Legal and programmatic data tracked by the Review Board should be viewed as indicators of systemic concerns and addressed in a collaborative manner by all entities responsible for children in South Carolina.

During 2002, local review boards continued their efforts to initiate collaborative partnerships in their communities. Most boards used the most frequently occurring Areas of Concern tracked by their boards as a starting point for discussion or specific activities. To begin addressing the most frequently noted legal concerns, which both related to the timeliness of required court hearings, local boards:

- Continued or initiated regular meetings with Family Court judges in their circuits to address specific concerns and seek solutions;
- Continued or initiated regular meetings with Department of Social Services county directors, the attorneys representing DSS in the Family Court, Volunteer Guardian ad litem staff, as well as General Counsel for the Review Board to address county specific barriers to timely hearings and identify possible solutions to these problems.

The most frequently noted concerns related to program involved the lack of progress reports from those providing services to children in care, case planning issues for children in foster care and the overall lack of progress toward securing permanent plans for children once they enter foster care. Local review boards engaged in the following activities in an effort to promote improvement in each of these areas:

- Continued or initiated monthly meetings with Department of Social Services county directors to discuss county specific barriers in each of these areas;
- Enhanced involvement with county Foster Parent Associations by attendance at their regular meetings, by providing training about the Review Board and through the coordination of special projects related to Christmas for foster children and the provision of school supplies - all efforts to benefit the children in care and to facilitate better communication with these important advocates.

Looking ahead to 2003, the Review Board plans to be actively involved with the DSS as they complete requirements related to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service's Child and Family Review. The Review Board is participating as a member of the Department's Advisory Committee for this federal review process and will work with them and other stakeholders in the development of a required Program Improvement Plan (PIP). This document will outline specific areas needing improvement in South Carolina as defined by the federal review, as well as time lines for correction of identified problems. The Review Board plans to incorporate relevant issues identified in the PIP into its tracking system, allowing the Review Board to provide on-going information to DSS from individual case reviews and providing a vehicle for continued collaborative efforts and improved services to children and families impacted by South Carolina's foster care system.

This report was prepared by the SCCFCRB. Additional data about South Carolina children in foster care is available through the publication *Foster Kids Count 2003*, with editions for each of the state's 46 counties.

For information, visit our website: [www.govoepp.state.sc.us/children/foster.htm](http://www.govoepp.state.sc.us/children/foster.htm), or contact us at:

Governor's Office, Division of Children's Foster Care Review, 1205 Pendleton St., Rm 436, Columbia, SC 29201



