



North Carolina Rural Child Welfare Success Project

Summary of Facts, Findings, Themes,
& the Future
June, 2008

Core Facts and Findings

- On average, rural counties in NC achieve just as good, if not better child welfare outcomes as their metropolitan counterparts, despite operating with fewer resources and greater perceived need as measured by the fact that rural counties in NC:
 - Had **shorter stays** in care (165 fewer median number of days) than NC's urban counties.
 - Had on average **one less placement** during first placement spells than do their urban counterparts.
 - Performed just as well as urban NC counties with respect to **placements in non-family settings**, and rate of **re-entry** into foster care.
- On average rural communities in NC demonstrate just as good if not better quality of child welfare practice as measured by the NC Child and Family Service Review indicators as illustrated by the following:
 - The average score for **compliance on outcomes** reported from the NC Child and Family Services Review was 5.8 (perfect score =7) for those NC counties that are 100% rural – the highest score of any of the county groups.
 - The average score for indicators on the NC CFSR that **did not need improvement** was 20.9 (perfect score is 23) for 100% rural NC counties, the highest average score of any county group.
 - Rural counties outperformed urban counties on **8 practice indicators** from the NC CFSR. Most other indicator scores were similar between the two groups (rural and urban).

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- Rural communities, on average demonstrate comparative success on child welfare outcomes and measures of practice quality, but the incidence of their successes is more variable. Small differences and changes in rural communities can have a bigger impact on the overall performance of rural child welfare agencies. What follows are a few examples that illustrate the impact that just one variable can have on rural counties:
 - Beliefs, values, norms, and practice approaches of **one worker** making important decisions about children can impact either positively or negatively on the child and family outcomes in that county.
 - **One economic factor**, for example the closing of one manufacturing facility or one natural disaster, can have more magnified, long-lasting effects on the well-being of children and families in rural communities.
 - Children in care in rural counties are a small group (compared to more urban counties), so custody of **one large sibling group** can have profound effects on that county's child welfare resources as well as county data as this group moves through the system.
- Based on the qualitative evaluation findings, comparative success in rural child welfare outcomes and practice is believed to be, in part the product of the informal culture and social capital in rural child welfare agencies and communities. The following themes and their associated values represent strengths from which we can learn as we think about policy and practice in both urban and rural communities.

Themes

- **Sense of Place** – Place is a mixture of land and climate, cultural and social networks, traditions, spirituality, and customs that tie these networks of people together. All are unique, valued, and honored. A sense of place enables rural families to stay grounded and connected to their home and to their community, which helps them adapt to changes in their families and communities. When their sense of place is disrupted, it is difficult for these families to successfully navigate the transitions they face.
- **Culture of Self-Reliance** – For individuals, the culture of self-reliance is grounded in the belief that one must turn first to oneself and family, then secondarily to

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neighbors and community for basic needs and support. Possessing a culture of self-reliance becomes challenging to families and communities as it fosters a belief that it is not acceptable to receive assistance from government, people, and organizations that are unfamiliar and outside their informal networks of support.

- **Sense of Community** – Because rural communities are sparsely populated and resources are scarce, people know and call upon each other for their needs. Being isolated (compared to urban counties), and cut-off from larger support networks is a challenge for many families, particularly for families belonging to certain ethnic and racial groups. Stereotypes and labels can perpetuate untrue and unfair biases and assumptions about these families and groups. They can result in needs going unaddressed and assets and strengths being overlooked and underutilized.
- **Communities in Transition** – Changing age composition and ethnicity of the residents, as well as changes in the environment and economy confront people in rural areas, newcomers, and longtime residents alike. How to preserve the best of the past while thoughtfully adapting to the future is a challenge.

The Future

Urban and rural communities and the national child welfare system itself can learn a good deal from successful rural communities. Effective child welfare is more than the product of formal evidence-based practices. Successful child welfare policy and practice should reflect, represent, and honor informal beliefs and values about self-reliance, community, and place.

Successful child welfare policies and practices that cultivate self-reliant adaptive leadership and behavior on the part of families and the institutions that serve them will result in greater success for all. Success is enhanced through strong communities, people helping one another, programs - public and private alike, working together in and with the community toward a common outcome. Success is nurtured by allowing communities the freedom to experiment and learn from their successes and failures in exchange for greater accountability for results.

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Specific Recommendations for Rural and Urban Communities:

- Reward results through incentives linked to permanence, decreasing the rates of entry, and length of stay in foster care.
- Foster the freedom to experiment with methods for greater permanence in exchange for accountability.
- Adopt a state and county longitudinal outcome tracking system that fosters shared learning around comparative results and methods for achieving results.
- Engage and create a court system with lower caseloads and increase accessible training offerings specific to rural and urban judges and social services attorneys.
- Create systems that are accessible and honor rural & urban culture while addressing challenges of domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health, and transportation.
- Grow a skilled work force by providing social workers and others in local communities with access to on-line, and distance education and training programs.

Notes:

1. Child welfare outcome finding come from examining data from a three year cohort of children who entered care from 2002 through 2004. Counties were grouped into five categories: 100% rural, 66-99% rural, 50-60% rural, 33-50% rural, 0-33%rural (mostly urban), based on the US census definition of “rural.” The outcome data was collected from the NC Child Welfare Experiences of Children data website: <http://ssw.unc.edu/cw>.
2. NC Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) data comes from state-level data gathered across all counties from state fiscal year 2003-04 and 2004-05. The review process was formerly called the “biennial review process,” and now assesses county social services agencies on seven outcomes (2 on safety, 2 on permanence, and 3 on child well-being). Performance on these outcomes is measured by 23 indicators which are similar to the federal CFSR measures.
3. Variables profoundly impacting rural data were gathered from the Child Welfare Rural Success Project focus groups, dialogues, and interviews in project counties and verified by the Experiences Data extracted from <http://ssw.unc.edu/cw>.
4. The Child Welfare Rural Success Project is made possible by a grant from the US Children’s Bureau, Administration on Children and Families (90CT0108). The website contains more information about the project at www.ruralsuccess.org.

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