

## **THE 2009 NCCPR CALIFORNIA RATE-OF-REMOVAL INDEX**

*Released June 14, 2010, Updated June 21, 2010*

For the past several years, NCCPR has published a rate-of-removal index which compares the propensity of *states* to adopt a “take-the-child-and-run” approach to child welfare. The index compares the number of children removed from their homes in each state during the most recent year for which data are available to a Census Bureau estimate of the number of children living in poverty in that state. The result is the number of removals of children from their homes for every 1,000 impoverished children in that state.

But in 13 states, including California, individual counties run their own child welfare systems. Thanks to the Child Welfare Research Center at the University of California at Berkeley Center for Social Services Research (CSSR), which has compiled the relevant data and posted it online, it is possible to perform an even more detailed comparison for California. That’s because CSSR compiles not only the relevant foster care data but also data on two key indicators of child safety.

**The data show that some of the counties with the best child safety records are those which take, proportionately, the fewest children.**

### **THIS IS NOT THE “SNAPSHOT NUMBER”...**

The measure of a county’s foster care population usually seen in news accounts is the so-called “snapshot number,” indicating the number of children in foster care in a county on one particular day each year. That is a very important number, but it is a less accurate measure of a county’s propensity to remove children.

A county may have a high snapshot number even if it takes away very few children, if it hangs on to those it takes for a very long time. (That is, in itself, a problem, but not a measure of the county’s propensity to take away children in the first place.) Conversely, a county can have a low snapshot number and still take away many children, if the state takes them for a relatively short time. Thus, a county which takes away many children in January, but returns most of them by August will have a low number if the “snapshot” is taken in September. Also, a county which took away a great many children a decade or more ago and let them languish in foster care may have a low snapshot number now simply because those children are “aging out” of the system at 18 – hardly a testament to a system’s success.

### **...RATHER, THIS INDEX USES REMOVALS OVER THE COURSE OF A YEAR**

So instead of measuring the foster care population on any given day, the *NCCPR California Rate-of-Removal Index* relies on CSSR data listing the number of children removed by child welfare agencies at some point over the course of a given year.

### **HOW THE INDEX IS COMPILED**

As noted above, the source for data on removals is the Child Welfare Research Center at the University of California at Berkeley Center for Social Services Research. These data are available online here: <http://cssr.berkeley.edu/CWSCMSreports/> There are a number of ways to compare the data. **NCCPR’s comparison includes all entries into foster care under the**

**auspices of county child welfare agencies, regardless of length and regardless of whether it was a first entry or a subsequent entry. We excluded entries categorized as “probation” or “other,” which represent fewer than ten percent of all entries.** (For full details on how to find these data and do comparisons to other time periods, see the “Sources” section on the last page.)

We could have simply compared the number of children removed to a county’s total child population. But then all the counties with high rates-of-removal and high child poverty rates would complain that this was unfair because we didn’t consider the single biggest risk factor for actual abuse (not to mention the factor most often confused with “neglect”) – poverty. So, in order to factor that in, and come closer to an apples-to-apples comparison, we compare removals in each county for the year ending September 30, 2009 (the most recent data available) to the number of *impoverished* children in that county, according to a Census Bureau estimate for 2008 – again, the most recent data available.

## **RANKINGS**

NCCPR’s National *Rate-of-Removal Index* includes a ranking for each state. We did not try to do this for every California county. That’s because some counties are so small that even tiny changes in the number of children removed could significantly change their rankings. For example, Sierra County has only about 104 impoverished children, according to the Census Bureau estimate, and the county took away a total of three children in the year ending Sept. 30, 2009. That’s up from two in the year ending June 30, 2007 – but it would be absurd to argue that there had been a “50 percent increase” in removals in the county.

So we’ve provided three charts below. The first two charts include rankings. They are limited to counties in which the Census Bureau estimates that at least 10,000 impoverished children live. There are 25 such counties, but those counties include more than 90 percent of all California children taken from their families. The third chart provides data for the ranked counties on kinship care (see discussion below) and the fourth provides entry data for every county, but does not include rankings.

## **SAFETY DATA**

As a group that believes strongly in family preservation, we feel that a high rate-of-removal almost always is a sign of a bad system. But a low rate-of-removal is not necessarily a sign of a good system. A low rate-of-removal can be accomplished either by embracing safe, proven programs to keep families together, or by ignoring children in real danger.

Fortunately, the California data offer clues about this as well.

There are two primary means for measuring how a child welfare system performs in keeping children safe. Both are used by the federal government in evaluating state systems and both are available from the CSSR database.

- One is to track how often, when maltreatment is substantiated, the child is maltreated again within six months. (The CSSR database also includes data for longer time periods, but six months is the standard used by the federal government, so we use it here.)

- The other measure is foster-care “recidivism.” That is, how often, when a child is returned home from foster care, must that child be placed in foster care again within 12 months?

For a county to be considered to be doing relatively well, it should rank toward the bottom of the 25-county list in every category: rate-of-removal, reabuse, and foster-care recidivism.

The time frames for these data are significant in assessing the performance of counties. The key decisions affecting the reabuse figures in this table were made during the six months ending March 31, 2009, since the figures show what happened to those children in the six months that followed. The key decisions affecting foster care recidivism were made in the 12 months ending September 30, 2008.

## **HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE RESULTS**

**Once again, the data provide clear evidence that the claim that one must take large numbers of children from their parents in order to keep children safe is false. Counties with low rates of removal often did better on child safety measures than counties embracing a take-the-child-and-run approach.**

For example, Sacramento County, which performs worst among the ranked counties, takes away children at a rate more than double the rate of Orange County. Yet Orange County keeps children safer – in fact, it has the best safety record among the ranked counties.

Yes, there are counties with low rates of removal that do badly on the safety measures. But other counties, such as Monterey, Stanislaus, and, as noted above, Orange, take children at relatively low rates, and score among the best at keeping children safe.

Orange County takes children at a rate far lower than neighboring Los Angeles County, yet, as noted above, Orange County had the best safety outcomes among the ranked counties – a record significantly better than Los Angeles. But Los Angeles performed better than counties which took, proportionately, even more children, such as San Francisco and Santa Barbara.

It is encouraging that, compared with two years ago, almost all counties saw decreases in their rates of removal. The change in Riverside County, which two years ago was worst in the state among the ranked counties, is particularly impressive. There also were significant declines in removals – and improvements in child safety – in Santa Clara, Alameda, and Contra Costa counties, all of which used to be part of a “removal belt” of Bay Area counties with exceptionally high rates of removal.

On the other hand, Los Angeles worsened compared to other counties; showing only a small decline in entries. And the time period covered by these data don’t include most of the months since a newspaper-fueled foster-care panic – a sudden surge in removals of children in the wake of high-profile child abuse fatalities. (For details, see our report on the Los Angeles foster-care panic, available online at: <http://www.nccpr.org/reports/LA2010.pdf>). Ventura County also did significantly worse; and again, this was even before a high-profile tragedy that may have set off a foster-care panic in that county. And, as noted above, California’s capital, Sacramento, is now the state’s child removal capital as well, with a rate-of-removal nearly double the average for the larger counties.

## **KINSHIP CARE**

A supplemental table provides data on the percentage of children in each ranked county who were placed with relatives instead of strangers, a type of placement known as “kinship care.” The table shows the percentage of children counties say were placed with relatives immediately upon entry during the year ending September 30, 2009, and the percentage of all foster children in the county living with relatives.

Kinship care cushions the blow of foster care. Multiple studies have found that kinship care placements typically are more stable, better for children’s well-being and, most important, *safer* than what should properly be called “stranger care.”

But make no mistake. When the placement is demanded by the child welfare agency and/or ordered by the courts *kinship care is still foster care*. Indeed, the federal government counts such placements as foster care placements. Kinship care is still a blow to the child, and it is no substitute for safe, proven alternatives to keeping children in their own homes. That’s why, when calculating rates of removal, we include all placements including kinship care placements.

So, for example, the fact that San Francisco does a particularly good job placing children with relatives is not an excuse for its extremely high rate of removal. But when counties are otherwise equal, the county that makes extensive use of kinship care is doing less harm – and the county which relies more on stranger care is inflicting an even more severe blow to vulnerable children.

Thus, Sacramento County’s dismal performance is even worse than it initially appears when one considers that it not only takes children at the highest rate among the ranked counties, it also places a larger proportion of them with total strangers than most other counties.

## **CAVEATS**

- The Census Bureau child poverty estimates represent the middle of a wide range. For example, when the Census Bureau says there are 352 impoverished children in Mono County, the Bureau means there could be anywhere from 273 to 431 such children in the county. That means the index should not be used to compare small counties and, even with larger counties, should not be used to draw conclusions about counties with similar rates. Rather, the index is a way to spot the outliers, counties like Sacramento, for example, that still are wedded to a take-the-child-and-run approach to child welfare, as well as those that have embraced safe, proven alternatives to foster care.

- This Index cannot be compared to our previous *California Rate of Removal Indexes*. That’s because we’ve made some small changes in methodology, and the CSSR database also has undergone some revisions.

But thanks to that database, anyone can do an apples-to-apples comparison over time, for their own county or the entire state, with a few keystrokes. (For instructions, see the “Sources” section on the last page.) That is important because the data in these charts don’t reveal trends over time. A county such as Riverside, which still has a high rate of removal but which has dramatically and safely reduced entries into foster care over the past two years, may

be a better “role model” than a county which removed relatively few children in 2009, but now is in the midst of a foster-care panic.

- One cannot say, based on these data, that county X “took Y percent of its poor children from their parents in 2009.” That would be inaccurate because, while the overwhelming majority of children taken from their parents are poor, not all of them are. Thus, we are comparing a pool of children – those removed from their parents – which is mostly poor, to a general population that is entirely poor. One can say only that, for example, according to this index, in 2009, when poverty is factored in, Sacramento County is more prone to resort to foster care than any of the other ranked counties. (For the record, when entries are compared to total child population, Sacramento is second worst.)

#### **A NOTE ON THE CSSR DATABASE**

The CSSR database is an outstanding resource. We are aware of nothing in any other state that comes close to it, both in the wealth of available data and ease of use. Users can find trend data all the way back to 1998, and they have access to a great deal of detailed demographic data and data on placement settings.

The California Department of Social Services, the University of California at Berkeley Center for Social Services Research and the Stuart Foundation (which helps fund the project) are to be commended for creating the database, and especially for making so much information readily available to the general public.

*TABLES BEGIN ON THE FOLLOWING PAGE*

**NCCPR CALIFORNIA RATE-OF-REMOVAL INDEX, LARGER COUNTIES**

County	Entries into care, year ending Sept. 30, 2009	Impoverished children, 2008	Rate of removal	Rank	% of children reabused within six months	Foster care recidivism
Alameda	765	44,060	17.4	12	6.1%	19.9%
Butte	375	11,696	32.1	2	10.2%	11.0%
Contra Costa	569	30,485	18.7	10	5.3%	12.4%
Fresno	1,139	83,435	13.7	17	10.0%	5.6%
Imperial	201	13,328	15.1	15	12.1%	16.1%
Kern	1,346	62,540	21.5	6	7.8%	18.1%
Los Angeles	10,468	548,487	19.1	9	6.1%	11.5%
Madera	139	10,930	12.7	21	10.8%	22.5%
Merced	430	21,790	19.7	8	2.2%	12.0%
Monterey	152	19,867	7.7	25	6.1%	8.1%
Orange	1,362	101,146	13.5	18	5.3%	5.4%
Riverside	2,490	97,440	25.6	5	6.9%	8.6%
Sacramento	2,229	67,561	33.0	1	5.6%	14.0%
San Bernardino	1,585	119,707	13.2	19	8.8%	9.3%
San Diego	2,232	121,555	18.4	11	6.4%	10.6%
San Francisco	435	15,848	27.4	3	6.2%	19.9%
San Joaquin	517	41,994	12.3	22	6.0%	12.5%
San Mateo	141	12,584	11.2	23	6.7%	17.7%
Santa Barbara	320	14,733	21.7	4	8.3%	16.3%
Santa Clara	797	39,650	20.1	7	6.9%	12.6%
Solano	203	12,134	16.7	13	5.6%	17.1%
Sonoma	201	12,898	15.6	14	11.8%	5.1%
Stanislaus	286	28,010	10.2	24	6.7%	8.6%
Tulare	530	41,040	12.9	20	11.2%	11.6%
Ventura	357	23,649	15.1	15	9.10%	9.4%
<b>LARGER COUNTIES</b>	<b>29,473</b>	<b>1,602,839</b>	<b>18.4</b>			
<b>STATE TOTAL</b>	<b>32,298</b>	<b>1,702,065</b>	<b>19.0</b>		<b>7.00%</b>	<b>11.60%</b>

*See following page for same data in rank order*

**NCCPR CALIFORNIA RATE-OF-REMOVAL INDEX,  
LARGER COUNTIES, BY RANK**

County	Entries into care, year ending Sept. 30, 2009	Impoverished children, 2008	Rate of removal	Rank	% of children reabused within six months	Foster care recidivism
Sacramento	2,229	67,561	33.0	1	5.6%	14.0%
Butte	375	11,696	32.1	2	10.2%	11.0%
San Francisco	435	15,848	27.4	3	6.2%	19.9%
Santa Barbara	320	14,733	21.7	4	8.3%	16.3%
Riverside	2,490	97,440	25.6	5	6.9%	8.6%
Kern	1,346	62,540	21.5	6	7.8%	18.1%
Santa Clara	797	39,650	20.1	7	6.9%	12.6%
Merced	430	21,790	19.7	8	2.2%	12.0%
Los Angeles	10,468	548,487	19.1	9	6.1%	11.5%
Contra Costa	569	30,485	18.7	10	5.3%	12.4%
San Diego	2,232	121,555	18.4	11	6.4%	10.6%
Alameda	765	44,060	17.4	12	6.1%	19.9%
Solano	203	12,134	16.7	13	5.6%	17.1%
Sonoma	201	12,898	15.6	14	11.8%	5.1%
Imperial	201	13,328	15.1	15	12.1%	16.1%
Ventura	357	23,649	15.1	15	9.1%	9.4%
Fresno	1,139	83,435	13.7	17	10.0%	5.6%
Orange	1,362	101,146	13.5	18	5.3%	5.4%
San Bernardino	1,585	119,707	13.2	19	8.8%	9.3%
Tulare	530	41,040	12.9	20	11.2%	11.6%
Madera	139	10,930	12.7	21	10.8%	22.5%
San Joaquin	517	41,994	12.3	22	6.0%	12.5%
San Mateo	141	12,584	11.2	23	6.7%	17.7%
Stanislaus	286	28,010	10.2	24	6.7%	8.6%
Monterey	152	19,867	7.7	25	6.1%	8.1%
<b>LARGER COUNTIES</b>	<b>29,473</b>	<b>1,602,839</b>	<b>18.4</b>			
<b>STATE TOTAL</b>	<b>32,298</b>	<b>1,702,065</b>	<b>19.0</b>		<b>7.0%</b>	<b>11.6%</b>

*See following page for data on kinship care*

**PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN PLACED WITH RELATIVES (KINSHIP CARE)**

County	Entries into care, year ending Sept. 30, 2009	Impoverished children, 2008	Rate of removal	Rank	% of children placed with relatives upon entry, during year ending Sept. 30, 2009	Rank	% of all foster children living with relatives	Rank
Alameda	765	44,060	17.4	12	23.0	5	35.4	9
Butte	375	11,696	32.1	2	4.3	25	23.0	20
Contra Costa	569	30,485	18.7	10	26.2	3	35.5	8
Fresno	1,139	83,435	13.7	17	8.2	21	22.9	21
Imperial	201	13,328	15.1	15	7.0	22	42.9	3
Kern	1,346	62,540	21.5	6	5.1	23	32.8	11
Los Angeles	10,468	548,487	19.1	9	23.9	4	36.3	7
Madera	139	10,930	12.7	21	9.4	17	52.7	1
Merced	430	21,790	19.7	8	13.5	14	22.9	21
Monterey	152	19,867	7.7	25	19.1	9	34.0	10
Orange	1,362	101,146	13.5	18	29.4	2	42.2	4
Riverside	2,490	97,440	25.6	5	15.2	11	29.3	16
Sacramento	2,229	67,561	33.0	1	9.3	18	29.1	17
San Bernardino	1,585	119,707	13.2	19	22.6	6	29.6	15
San Diego	2,232	121,555	18.4	11	8.3	20	32.8	11
San Francisco	435	15,848	27.4	3	30.1	1	49.3	2
San Joaquin	517	41,994	12.3	22	10.1	15	21.5	24
San Mateo	141	12,584	11.2	23	19.9	7	30.9	14
Santa Barbara	320	14,733	21.7	4	16.6	10	41.5	5
Santa Clara	797	39,650	20.1	7	12.3	14	41.4	6
Solano	203	12,134	16.7	13	9.9	16	22.8	23
Sonoma	201	12,898	15.6	14	8.5	19	25.4	19
Stanislaus	286	28,010	10.2	24	15.0	12	20.4	25
Tulare	530	41,040	12.9	20	5.1	23	27.0	18
Ventura	357	23,649	15.1	15	19.3	8	32.3	13
<b>California</b>	<b>32,298</b>	<b>1,702,065</b>	<b>19.0</b>		<b>17.4</b>		<b>32.9</b>	

*For data for all California counties, see following page*

**NCCPR CALIFORNIA RATE-OF-REMOVAL INDEX, ALL COUNTIES**

County	Entries into care, year ending Sept. 30, 2009	Impoverished children, 2008	Rate of removal	% of children reabused within six months	Foster care recidivism
Alameda	765	44,060	17.4	6.1%	19.9%
Alpine	0	57	0.0	0.0%	0.0%
Amador	33	816	40.4	0.0%	6.7%
Butte	375	11,696	32.1	10.2%	11.0%
Calaveras	52	1,408	36.9	1.5%	11.1%
Colusa	17	1,157	14.7	8.0%	9.1%
Contra Costa	569	30,485	18.7	5.3%	12.4%
Del Norte	67	1,816	36.9	14.6%	28.6%
El Dorado	214	3,864	55.4	9.4%	19.3%
Fresno	1,139	83,435	13.7	10.0%	5.6%
Glenn	54	2,003	27.0	17.3%	3.1%
Humboldt	119	6,272	19.0	9.2%	20.5%
Imperial	201	13,328	15.1	12.1%	16.1%
Inyo	9	643	14.0	0.0%	.
Kern	1,346	62,540	21.5	7.8%	18.1%
Kings	183	9,066	20.2	1.6%	1.7%
Lake	60	3,371	17.8	7.7%	22.2%
Lassen	42	1,181	35.6	18.2%	19.0%
Los Angeles	10,468	548,487	19.1	6.1%	11.5%
Madera	139	10,930	12.7	10.8%	22.5%
Marin	66	3,958	16.7	11.6%	18.2%
Mariposa	11	611	18.0	10.8%	25.0%
Mendocino	137	4,579	29.9	11.7%	15.4%
Merced	430	21,790	19.7	2.2%	12.0%
Modoc	10	519	19.3	0.0%	26.7%
Mono	1	352	2.8	0.0%	.
Monterey	152	19,867	7.7	6.1%	8.1%
Napa	86	3,411	25.2	10.1%	8.3%
Nevada	43	2,306	18.6	13.3%	.
Orange	1,362	101,146	13.5	5.3%	5.4%
Placer	166	5,579	29.8	8.8%	9.3%
Plumas	38	693	54.8	9.1%	3.2%
Riverside	2,490	97,440	25.6	6.9%	8.6%
Sacramento	2,229	67,561	33.0	5.6%	14.0%
San Benito	83	2,219	37.4	5.1%	16.4%
San Bernardino	1,585	119,707	13.2	8.8%	9.3%
San Diego	2,232	121,555	18.4	6.4%	10.6%
San Francisco	435	15,848	27.4	6.2%	19.9%

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<b>San Joaquin</b>	517	41,994	12.3	6.0%	12.5%
<b>San Luis Obispo</b>	195	6,233	31.3	13.3%	10.5%
<b>San Mateo</b>	141	12,584	11.2	6.7%	17.7%
<b>Santa Barbara</b>	320	14,733	21.7	8.3%	16.3%
<b>Santa Clara</b>	797	39,650	20.1	6.9%	12.6%
<b>Santa Cruz</b>	209	9,035	23.1	5.6%	14.9%
<b>Shasta</b>	344	9,290	37.0	11.4%	11.6%
<b>Sierra</b>	3	104	28.8	10.0%	.
<b>Siskiyou</b>	101	2,167	46.6	12.1%	13.3%
<b>Solano</b>	203	12,134	16.7	5.6%	17.1%
<b>Sonoma</b>	201	12,898	15.6	11.8%	5.1%
<b>Stanislaus</b>	286	28,010	10.2	6.7%	8.6%
<b>Sutter</b>	102	5,204	19.6	4.0%	14.9%
<b>Tehama</b>	154	3,688	41.8	3.9%	10.3%
<b>Trinity</b>	23	713	32.3	36.4%	.
<b>Tulare</b>	530	41,040	12.9	11.2%	11.6%
<b>Tuolumne</b>	74	1,662	44.5	9.3%	14.3%
<b>Ventura</b>	357	23,649	15.1	9.1%	9.4%
<b>Yolo</b>	192	6,536	29.4	10.4%	11.9%
<b>Yuba</b>	83	4,986	16.6	8.7%	16.5%
<b>Missing</b>	58				
<b>STATE TOTAL</b>	32,298	1,702,065	19.0	7.0%	11.6%

### Sources:

- All data on entries into care and child safety: Child Welfare Research Center at the University of California at Berkeley Center for Social Services Research, *CMS/CWS Dynamic Report System*, available online at: <http://cssr.berkeley.edu/CWSCMSreports/> (Two sections of this database lead to entry data, to find the data used above, readers need to click on the *second* of the two links mentioning entries, toward the bottom of the long list of links on the page.)
- Impoverished child population: Bureau of the Census, *Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates*, available online at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/saipe/>

### TO COMPARE THE DATA IN THESE TABLES TO OTHER TIME PERIODS:

- Go to this URL: <http://cssr.berkeley.edu/CWSCMSreports/>
- Scroll down to the second link for “entries,” the one toward the bottom of a long list, and click on that link.
- Check the box for “child welfare” and choose the combination of time period and counties you want to review.
- Click on “Next”
- Under “Days in Care” and “Entries” check the boxes for “All”
- To compare the use of kinship care, under “Column Dimension” check the box for “Placement Type”
- Click “Next” for additional options, or “Finish”

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