

THE 2011 NCCPR CALIFORNIA RATE-OF-REMOVAL INDEX

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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 an important 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 March 31, 2011 (the most recent data available) to the number of *impoverished* children in that county, according to a Census Bureau estimate for 2009 – 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 112 impoverished children, according to the Census Bureau estimate, and the county took away a total of three children in the year ending March 31, 2011. 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 over the past four years.

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 26 such counties, but those counties include well over 90 percent of all California children taken from their families. The third chart provides the 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 26-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 September 30, 2010, 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 March 31, 2010.

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.

Yes, there are counties with low rates of removal that do badly on the safety measures. But other counties, such as Monterey, Stanislaus, and 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 Orange County did far better than Los Angeles on both key safety measures.

Many counties continue to show decreases in rates of removal compared to two years ago. This is particularly true in Sacramento, long among the worst among the state's larger counties. The significant decline in entries was accompanied by improvements in both key safety measures – indicating that the new emphasis on family preservation made Sacramento County children safer.

Other counties in what was once the Bay Area Child Removal Belt, such as Santa Clara, Alameda and Contra Costa continue to improve. But San Francisco remains an extreme outlier, taking away children at the second highest rate among larger counties.

CAVEATS

- The Census Bureau child poverty estimates represent the middle of a wide range. For example, when the Census Bureau says there are 349 impoverished children in Mono County, the Bureau means there could be anywhere from 274 to 425 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 San Francisco, 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 does not document changes over time. But thanks to the CSSR 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 several 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 – a sharp sudden surge in removals as a result of political or journalistic demagoguery.

- 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 the year ending March 31, 2011, when poverty is factored in, San Francisco County is more prone to resort to foster care than almost any of the other ranked counties.

A NOTE ON THE CSSR DATABASE

The CSSR database is an outstanding resource. Only Florida comes close to having anything like 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	Impoverished children, 2009	Entries into care, year ending March 31, 2011	Rate of Removal	Rank	% of children reabused within six months	Foster care recidivism*
Alameda County	47,805	658	13.8	16	4.00%	15.90%
Butte County	10,398	381	36.6	1	10.20%	15.80%
Contra Costa County	31,930	497	15.6	14	4.20%	11.50%
Fresno County	82,440	931	11.3	20	9.20%	8.40%
Imperial County	14,986	203	13.5	18	11.70%	14.00%
Kern County	73,530	1,243	16.9	7	9.10%	12.50%
Kings County	10,256	198	19.3	5	0.00%	8.20%
Los Angeles County	561,661	10,399	18.5	6	7.30%	11.90%
Madera County	13,030	140	10.7	23	12.40%	8.70%
Merced County	26,559	367	13.8	16	5.30%	9.30%
Monterey County	26,723	121	4.5	26	5.10%	8.80%
Orange County	112,156	1,389	12.4	19	4.60%	8.10%
Riverside County	114,807	2,977	25.9	3	6.20%	12.80%
Sacramento County	76,716	1,230	16.0	10	3.60%	12.60%
San Bernardino County	139,488	2,199	15.8	11	8.40%	10.70%
San Diego County	122,455	2,028	16.6	8	5.50%	8.80%
San Francisco County	16,221	439	27.1	2	4.30%	21.70%
San Joaquin County	41,045	465	11.3	20	6.30%	19.80%
San Mateo County	15,056	150	10.0	24	6.70%	19.20%
Santa Barbara County	18,758	294	15.7	12	6.80%	10.20%
Santa Clara County	48,183	715	14.8	15	9.60%	10.90%
Solano County	14,917	246	16.5	9	10.40%	16.40%
Sonoma County	12,445	243	19.5	4	4.70%	6.80%
Stanislaus County	33,199	372	11.2	22	3.40%	9.90%
Tulare County	45,909	428	9.3	25	8.00%	13.90%
Ventura County	30,097	474	15.7	12	8.30%	8.40%
Large County total	1,740,770	28,787	16.5			
STATEWIDE TOTAL	1,846,994	30,984	17.1		6.80	11.80

See following page for same data in rank order

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

County	Impoverished children, 2009	Entries into care, year ending March 31, 2011	Rate of Removal	Rank	% of children reabused within six months	Foster care recidivism
Butte County	10,398	381	36.6	1	10.20%	15.80%
San Francisco County	16,221	439	27.1	2	4.30%	21.70%
Riverside County	114,807	2,977	25.9	3	6.20%	12.80%
Sonoma County	12,445	243	19.5	4	4.70%	6.80%
Kings County	10,256	198	19.3	5	0.00%	8.20%
Los Angeles County	561,661	10,399	18.5	6	7.30%	11.90%
Kern County	73,530	1,243	16.9	7	9.10%	12.50%
San Diego County	122,455	2,028	16.6	8	5.50%	8.80%
Solano County	14,917	246	16.5	9	10.40%	16.40%
Sacramento County	76,716	1,230	16.0	10	3.60%	12.60%
San Bernardino Cty.	139,488	2,199	15.8	11	8.40%	10.70%
Ventura County	30,097	474	15.7	12	8.30%	8.40%
Santa Barbara County	18,758	294	15.7	12	6.80%	10.20%
Contra Costa County	31,930	497	15.6	14	4.20%	11.50%
Santa Clara County	48,183	715	14.8	15	9.60%	10.90%
Alameda County	47,805	658	13.8	16	4.00%	15.90%
Merced County	26,559	367	13.8	16	5.30%	9.30%
Imperial County	14,986	203	13.5	18	11.70%	14.00%
Orange County	112,156	1,389	12.4	19	4.60%	8.10%
Fresno County	82,440	931	11.3	20	9.20%	8.40%
San Joaquin County	41,045	465	11.3	20	6.30%	19.80%
Stanislaus County	33,199	372	11.2	22	3.40%	9.90%
Madera County	13,030	140	10.7	23	12.40%	8.70%
San Mateo County	15,056	150	10.0	24	6.70%	19.20%
Tulare County	45,909	428	9.3	25	8.00%	13.90%
Monterey County	26,723	121	4.5	26	5.10%	8.80%
Large County total	1,740,770	28,787	16.5			
STATEWIDE TOTAL	1,846,994	30,984	17.1		6.80	11.80

For data for all California counties, see following page

NCCPR CALIFORNIA RATE-OF-REMOVAL INDEX, ALL COUNTIES

County	Impoverished children, 2009	Entries into care, year ending March 31, 2011	Rate of Removal	% of children reabused within six months	Foster care recidivism*
Alameda County	47,805	658	13.8	4.00%	15.90%
Alpine County	65	0	0.0	0.00%	0
Amador County	990	34	34.3	3.80%	35.30%
Butte County	10,398	381	36.6	10.20%	15.80%
Calaveras County	1,535	55	35.8	10.20%	9.70%
Colusa County	1,287	30	23.3	17.60%	18.20%
Contra Costa County	31,930	497	15.6	4.20%	11.50%
Del Norte County	1,943	57	29.3	6.00%	23.30%
El Dorado County	4,424	189	42.7	6.20%	13.40%
Fresno County	82,440	931	11.3	9.20%	8.40%
Glenn County	1,860	57	30.6	1.50%	19.10%
Humboldt County	6,005	157	26.1	10.60%	26.40%
Imperial County	14,986	203	13.5	11.70%	14.00%
Inyo County	702	8	11.4	0.00%	0
Kern County	73,530	1,243	16.9	9.10%	12.50%
Kings County	10,256	198	19.3	0.00%	8.20%
Lake County	4,318	68	15.7	6.00%	12.00%
Lassen County	1,153	29	25.2	9.60%	30.40%
Los Angeles County	561,661	10,399	18.5	7.30%	11.90%
Madera County	13,030	140	10.7	12.40%	8.70%
Marin County	4,296	62	14.4	7.40%	28.60%
Mariposa County	659	26	39.5	6.80%	23.10%
Mendocino County	4,885	156	31.9	12.00%	15.40%
Merced County	26,559	367	13.8	5.30%	9.30%
Modoc County	541	6	11.1	0.00%	0
Mono County	349	0	0.0	14.30%	0
Monterey County	26,723	121	4.5	5.10%	8.80%
Napa County	3,813	93	24.4	5.90%	2.60%
Nevada County	2,704	85	31.4	10.30%	18.80%
Orange County	112,156	1,389	12.4	4.60%	8.10%
Placer County	7,743	217	28.0	10.50%	7.80%
Plumas County	695	30	43.2	16.70%	50.00%
Riverside County	114,807	2,977	25.9	6.20%	12.80%
Sacramento County	76,716	1,230	16.0	3.60%	12.60%
San Benito County	2,960	64	21.6	3.20%	16.20%

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San Bernardino County	139,488	2,199	15.8	8.40%	10.70%
San Diego County	122,455	2,028	16.6	5.50%	8.80%
San Francisco County	16,221	439	27.1	4.30%	21.70%
San Joaquin County	41,045	465	11.3	6.30%	19.80%
San Luis Obispo County	7,088	214	30.2	12.30%	18.90%
San Mateo County	15,056	150	10.0	6.70%	19.20%
Santa Barbara County	18,758	294	15.7	6.80%	10.20%
Santa Clara County	48,183	715	14.8	9.60%	10.90%
Santa Cruz County	9,077	179	19.7	2.50%	14.20%
Shasta County	9,275	309	33.3	9.00%	6.70%
Sierra County	112	3	26.8	11.10%	0
Siskiyou County	2,433	61	25.1	7.10%	16.90%
Solano County	14,917	246	16.5	10.40%	16.40%
Sonoma County	12,445	243	19.5	4.70%	6.80%
Stanislaus County	33,199	372	11.2	3.40%	9.90%
Sutter County	5,585	110	19.7	4.60%	26.30%
Tehama County	4,256	162	38.1	7.40%	14.40%
Trinity County	755	25	33.1	3.10%	0
Tulare County	45,909	428	9.3	8.00%	13.90%
Tuolumne County	1,901	86	45.2	2.60%	12.50%
Ventura County	30,097	474	15.7	8.30%	8.40%
Yolo County	7,007	143	20.4	4.80%	14.50%
Yuba County	5,807	62	10.7	3.70%	5.10%
California	1,846,994	31,645	17.1	6.80%	11.80%

***-Foster care recidivism is the percentage of children sent home from foster care who are taken away again within 12 months**

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”
- Click “Next” for additional options, or “Finish”

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