

## THE NCCPR MICHIGAN RATE-OF-REMOVAL INDEX

Released March 10, 2009

For the past five years, NCCPR has published a rate-of-removal index comparing the propensity of *states* to adopt a “take-the-child-and-run” approach to child welfare. The index compares the number of children taken from their parents 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.

We have previously applied the same methodology to several states, including California, Ohio, Florida, New York State and Georgia. In every case, we found wide differences in practice from county to county or region to region. While that might be expected in states where individual counties run their child welfare systems, such as California and Ohio, often we have found the same problem where a state agency theoretically is in charge and, theoretically, has uniform standards for when a child needs to be taken from her or his home.

And, sadly, the pattern holds in Michigan. Among counties large enough to compare, the rate of child removal is four times higher in St. Joseph County than in Bay County. Even among the largest counties, there are significant differences. The rate of removal in Ingham County is more than triple the rate in Wayne County.

In the other states we’ve measured, the state data confirmed what national data and experience already revealed: *It is not necessary to take away large numbers of children in order to keep children safe.* In Ohio, California, Florida, New York, and Georgia, counties which took proportionately fewer children tended to do *better* on key safety outcomes.

**We are unable to provide these outcome data statewide for Michigan. Of all the states we have explored in depth, Michigan is tied with Arizona for being, by far, the worst at providing basic data in a timely manner. NCCPR requested entry into care and safety outcome data from the Michigan Department of Human Services on October 30, 2008. The entry data were not made available until January 15, 2009 – and they were incomplete. The outcome data still have not been received. In contrast, California, Florida Georgia, Nebraska, Tennessee, Missouri and New Jersey make these data instantly available to anyone online. New York provided the figures within two weeks, and Ohio did it within a month.**

**We do know, however, that in Wayne County, even as entries into care dropped during the period from 2004 to 2006, there was a comparable drop in substantiated allegations of child abuse, suggesting that efforts to fully implement the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Family to Family program improved child safety. (For many years, the Casey Foundation also has helped to fund NCCPR.) But the current DHS administration is scaling back Wayne County’s participation in that program. (For details, see *Cycle of Failure*, NCCPR’s report on Michigan child welfare, available online at <http://www.nccpr.org/reports/michigan1976.pdf>)**

We also know that it is not necessary to take away huge numbers of children to keep them safe – on the contrary, this take-the-child-and-run approach is likely to overwhelm child welfare systems and make all children less safe. And, it is clear that in Michigan, and in much of the rest of the country, whether a child is torn away from everyone loving and familiar and forced to endure the trauma of foster care depends far more on where he happens to live than on any objective measure of child maltreatment.

### **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

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year. That is a very important number, but it is a less accurate measure of a county's propensity to remove children. (Indeed, Michigan DHS has tried to divert attention from the rate at which it takes away children by focusing on the "snapshot number" instead.)

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 serious problem, but not a measure of the county's propensity to take away children in the first place.) Conversely, a county may have a low snapshot number and still take away many children, but take them for only a very 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 Michigan Rate-of-Removal Index* relies on Department of Human Services data listing the total number of children removed over the course of ten months. **In other states, a full year's data were available, and in some states data are readily available going back many years. But, ten months was the best DHS could do.** So we *projected* the annual rate-of-removal by taking each county's ten-month total and adding a figure equal to two times the monthly average. So if, for example, County X took away 200 children between January and November 2008, we based the county's rate-of-removal on the assumption that the county took away 240 children over the course of the entire year.

### **FACTORING IN POVERTY**

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 largest risk factor for actual abuse, not to mention the factor most often confused with "neglect:" poverty. So, in order to factor that out, and come closer to an apples-to-apples comparison, we compare removals to the number of *impoverished* children in each county, according to the most recent available figures from the Census Bureau.

Factoring in poverty also has another advantage: Relatively affluent counties sometimes have exceptionally high rates of removal when poverty is factored in. This suggests that counties that have relatively little poverty are more likely to confuse that poverty with "neglect." So, for example, the rate of removal in Grand Traverse county, one of the state's wealthiest, is three-and-a-half times the rate in Wayne County. An index which compares removals to total child population would hide the extent that some affluent counties may be targeting the poor in their midst.

### **THE IMPACT OF WAYNE COUNTY**

Indeed, factoring in poverty has a particular advantage in Michigan: It helps reveal the impact of Wayne County on the statewide average. Because Wayne County is so large and, relatively speaking, so poor, it's relatively low rate of removal distorts the entire statewide average and makes Michigan look better than it deserves to.

But even with this relatively low rate of removal, Wayne County still takes children at more than double the rate of metropolitan Chicago (Cook County, Il.) when poverty is factored in. Yet it is the Illinois system that is, relatively speaking, a national model for keeping children safe. In addition, the landmark Michigan Race Equity Review, available online at <http://www.cssp.org/uploadFiles/michigan%20report%201%2014%2009%20FINAL.pdf>, found widespread evidence of needless removal in Wayne County.

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### RANKINGS

NCCPR's national *Rate-of-Removal Index* includes a ranking for each state. We did not try to do this for every Michigan county. That's because many of Michigan's 82 counties are so small that even very small changes in the number of children removed, which could be the result of factors beyond the county DHS offices' control, could significantly change their rankings.

So the first two charts on the following pages provide data and rankings for all Michigan counties in which at least 2,000 impoverished children resided according to the Census Bureau estimate. Though that is only 38 of 82 counties, those counties included about 90 percent of the children taken away statewide over the course of a year. We also provide a chart with data for all 82 counties but without 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.

There are two primary means for measuring how a child welfare system does in keeping children safe.

One is to track how often, when maltreatment is substantiated, the child is maltreated again, typically within six months. 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 a specified period of time, usually 12 months?

As noted previously, in other states, counties with lower rates of removal tended to have better child safety outcomes. But also as noted previously, Michigan DHS has been unable to provide these data, even though DHS is required to provide statewide data on these outcomes to the federal government.

### OTHER CAVEATS

One cannot say, based on these data, that county X "took Y percent of its poor children from their parents." 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 authorities in Isabella County appear more prone to resort to foster care than their counterparts in any of the other ranked counties.

### THE TABLES

The first two tables on the following pages are the *NCCPR Rate-of-Removal Index*. They compare rates of child removal for 39 counties in 2008, using the projection from the first ten months of data described above. The first table lists the counties alphabetically, the second in the order of their propensity to take away children. That is followed by a table providing the data for every Michigan county, without rankings.

**In each table, the first column represents the *actual* number of children taken from their parents over the first ten months of 2008, as reported by DHS. But the rate-of-removal is a *projection* based on adding two times the monthly average for that county to the actual number of removals and then comparing this figure to the Census Bureau estimate for the number of impoverished children in the county.**

**PROJECTED RATE-OF-REMOVAL IN MICHIGAN COUNTIES  
WITH AT LEAST 2,000 IMPOVERISHED CHILDREN, 2008**

County	Children removed, first ten months of 2008	Impoverished children	Projected rate-of-removal	Rank
Allegan	78	3,516	26.6	10
Bay	37	4,191	10.6	37
Berrien	154	8,134	22.7	13
Branch	57	2,104	32.5	8
Calhoun	91	8,321	13.1	32
Cass	50	2,024	29.6	9
Clare	21	2,141	11.8	33
Eaton	56	2,734	24.6	11
Genesee	454	27,127	20.1	19
Grand Traverse	66	2,019	39.2	3
Hillsdale	20	2,251	10.7	36
Ingham	334	11,221	35.7	4
Ionia	42	2,477	20.3	18
Isabella	82	2,094	47.0	1
Jackson	120	7,657	18.8	22
Kalamazoo	181	9,335	23.3	12
Kent	420	28,633	17.6	26
Lapeer	29	2,421	14.4	31
Lenawee	82	3,309	29.7	8
Livingston	43	2,725	18.9	21
Macomb	591	20,972	33.8	5
Mecosta	31	2,284	16.3	28
Midland	46	2,647	20.9	16
Monroe	56	3,777	17.8	25
Montcalm	47	3,857	14.6	30
Muskegon	233	8,661	32.3	7
Newaygo	42	2,715	18.6	23
Oakland	606	32,176	22.6	14
Ottawa	80	5,235	18.3	24
Saginaw	216	12,609	20.6	17
Sanilac	15	2,002	9.0	38
Shiawassee	27	2,960	10.9	35
St Clair	102	6,383	19.2	20
St Joseph	118	3,370	42.0	2
Tuscola	45	2,405	22.5	15
Van Buren	63	4,434	17.1	27
Washtenaw	96	7,771	14.8	29
Wayne	1,536	161,943	11.4	34
<b>Large county total</b>	<b>6,367</b>	<b>420,635</b>	<b>18.2</b>	

*For the same data with counties listed by rank, see following page.*

**PROJECTED RATE-OF-REMOVAL IN MICHIGAN COUNTIES  
WITH AT LEAST 2,000 IMPOVERISHED CHILDREN, BY RANK, 2008**

<b>County</b>	<b>Children removed, first ten months of 2008</b>	<b>Impoverished children</b>	<b>Projected rate-of-removal</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Isabella	82	2,094	47.0	1
St Joseph	118	3,370	42.0	2
Grand Traverse	66	2,019	39.2	3
Ingham	334	11,221	35.7	4
Macomb	591	20,972	33.8	5
Branch	57	2,104	32.5	6
Muskegon	233	8,661	32.3	7
Lenawee	82	3,309	29.7	8
Cass	50	2,024	29.6	9
Allegan	78	3,516	26.6	10
Eaton	56	2,734	24.6	11
Kalamazoo	181	9,335	23.3	12
Berrien	154	8,134	22.7	13
Oakland	606	32,176	22.6	14
Tuscola	45	2,405	22.5	15
Midland	46	2,647	20.9	16
Saginaw	216	12,609	20.6	17
Ionia	42	2,477	20.3	18
Genesee	454	27,127	20.1	19
St Clair	102	6,383	19.2	20
Livingston	43	2,725	18.9	21
Jackson	120	7,657	18.8	22
Newaygo	42	2,715	18.6	23
Ottawa	80	5,235	18.3	24
Monroe	56	3,777	17.8	25
Kent	420	28,633	17.6	26
Van Buren	63	4,434	17.1	27
Mecosta	31	2,284	16.3	28
Washtenaw	96	7,771	14.8	29
Montcalm	47	3,857	14.6	30
Lapeer	29	2,421	14.4	31
Calhoun	91	8,321	13.1	32
Clare	21	2,141	11.8	33
Wayne	1,536	161,943	11.4	34
Shiawassee	27	2,960	10.9	35
Hillsdale	20	2,251	10.7	36
Bay	37	4,191	10.6	37
Sanilac	15	2,002	9.0	38
<b>Large county total</b>	<b>6,367</b>	<b>420,635</b>	<b>18.2</b>	

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**PROJECTED RATES OF REMOVAL, ALL COUNTIES, 2008**

<b>County</b>	<b>Children removed, first ten months of 2008</b>	<b>Impoverished children</b>	<b>Projected rate-of-removal</b>
Alcona	3	467	7.7
Alger	1	276	4.3
Allegan	78	3,516	26.6
Alpena	8	1,348	7.1
Antrim	21	868	29.0
Arenac	19	927	24.6
Baraga	26	352	88.6
Barry	34	1,589	25.7
Bay	37	4,191	10.6
Benzie	7	566	14.8
Berrien	154	8,134	22.7
Branch	57	2,104	32.5
Calhoun	91	8,321	13.1
Cass	50	2,024	29.6
Charlevoix	11	837	15.8
Cheboygan	39	1,326	35.3
Chippewa	14	1,393	12.1
Clare	21	2,141	11.8
Clinton	49	1,303	45.1
Crawford	25	758	39.6
Delta	16	1,271	15.1
Dickinson	16	830	23.1
Eaton	56	2,734	24.6
Emmet	16	963	19.9
Genesee	454	27,127	20.1
Gladwin	10	1,458	8.2
Gogebic	10	648	18.5
Grand Traverse	66	2,019	39.2
Gratiot	25	1,918	15.6
Hillsdale	20	2,251	10.7
Houghton	4	1,331	3.6
Huron	8	1,220	7.9
Ingham	334	11,221	35.7
Ionia	42	2,477	20.3
Iosco	16	1,368	14.0
Iron	12	444	32.4
Isabella	82	2,094	47.0
Jackson	120	7,657	18.8
Kalamazoo	181	9,335	23.3
Kalkaska	27	926	35.0
Kent	420	28,633	17.6
Lake	9	756	14.3
Lapeer	29	2,421	14.4
Leelanau	5	475	12.6
Lenawee	82	3,309	29.7
Livingston	43	2,725	18.9
Luce	3	281	12.8
Mackinac	10	380	31.6

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Macomb	591	20,972	33.8
Manistee	7	1,047	8.0
Marquette	41	1,873	26.3
Mason	11	1,366	9.7
Mecosta	31	2,284	16.3
Menominee	18	925	23.4
Midland	46	2,647	20.9
Missaukee	7	711	11.8
Monroe	56	3,777	17.8
Montcalm	47	3,857	14.6
Montmorency	2	510	4.7
Muskegon	233	8,661	32.3
Newaygo	42	2,715	18.6
Oakland	606	32,176	22.6
Oceana	19	1,919	11.9
Ogemaw	17	1,199	17.0
Ontonagon	4	214	22.4
Osceola	13	1,325	11.8
Oscoda	3	517	7.0
Otsego	30	1,004	35.9
Ottawa	80	5,235	18.3
Presque Isle	9	543	19.9
Roscommon	22	1,528	17.3
Saginaw	216	12,609	20.6
Sanilac	15	2,002	9.0
Schoolcraft	1	351	3.4
Shiawassee	27	2,960	10.9
St Clair	102	6,383	19.2
St Joseph	118	3,370	42.0
Tuscola	45	2,405	22.5
Van Buren	63	4,434	17.1
Washtenaw	96	7,771	14.8
Wayne	1,536	161,943	11.4
Wexford	51	1,720	35.6
<b>Statewide</b>	<b>7,066</b>	<b>463,666</b>	<b>18.6</b>

**Sources:** Entries into care for each county from January through October, 2008 were provided by DHS. Entries into care for Cook County II, are from, Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, Executive Statistical Summary, January, 2009, available online at <http://www.state.il.us/DCFS/docs/execstat.pdf>. Impoverished child population data are from the census bureau Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates for 2007 (the most recent year available). These data are available online at <http://www.census.gov//did/www/saipe/>

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