



**Multiple Response System (MRS)  
Evaluation Report to the  
North Carolina Division of Social Services  
(NCDSS): Review of Juvenile Petitions**

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# **Multiple Response System (MRS) Evaluation Report to the North Carolina Division of Social Services (NCDSS): Review of Juvenile Petitions**

## **Executive Summary**

At the request of the North Carolina Division of Social Services (NCDSS), the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University evaluated the effects of the Multiple Response System (MRS), examining child safety after MRS implementation with a special focus on the rate of child welfare juvenile petitions. This study explored concerns raised about a perceived reduction in juvenile petitions since MRS began and the possible impacts on child safety across the state. Four key questions were explored: (1) Are the rates of juvenile petitions decreasing in North Carolina? (2) What factors have influenced this trend? (3) Has the severity of petitions changed over time? (4) How has child safety been affected?

Quantitative and qualitative analyses were performed using data from state administrative systems as well as original data collected by evaluators. Data sources included Child Protective Services (CPS) reports, Administrative Office of the Courts data on juvenile petitions, personal interviews conducted with county DSS staff, GALs and court officials, web-based surveys of GALs and DSS staff, and CPS case file reviews.

## ***Major Findings***

### ***Juvenile Petition Rates***

AOC administrative data indicate that, based on aggregate data across North Carolina judicial districts, petitions as a proportion of the total number of CPS assessments show a pattern of decline beginning in 2006. While there are numerous possible explanations for changing petition rates, this decrease may indicate that: (1) CPS had less severe cases, (2) there was an expansion in the strategies available for addressing higher risk cases, and/or (3) policy has shifted so that a higher severity threshold is reached prior to filing a petition.

### ***Factors Influencing Trends***

Major policy changes within the state such as MRS and the Title IV-E Waiver project do not appear to have been primary factors in the downward trend in petitions. Analysis of the data by judicial districts shows that petition rates did not decrease at or immediately following MRS implementation for Wave 1 or Wave 2 counties. The state decline in petitions after FY 2005-2006 does coincide with MRS implementation for Wave 3 counties, but given the overall statewide trend, it is unlikely that MRS is the primary cause. Similarly, comparisons of judicial districts with IV-E waiver counties versus those that did not participate in the program show identical declining trends, indicating that the project's end in 2006 was likely not a significant factor in explaining changes in petition rates.

Survey respondents offered numerous reasons for the decreases in petitions, centered on the implementation of MRS and voluntary kinship placements. Despite the fact that administrative data does not suggest that MRS implementation is directly associated with reductions in juvenile petitions, many GALs and DSS staff do believe it has played a role. Interview data showed that DSS staff members believe that MRS has helped reduce petitions by providing a mechanism to engage families in new ways such as CFTs and frontloading services. GALs counter that MRS and the related strategies also seem to increase the amount of time that DSS works with families prior to involving the court system, effectively raising the bar for when a petition is filed.

Increases in the use of voluntary kinship placements as an alternative to involving the court system may be an important factor in understanding decreases in petitions. It appears that the frequency of such placements may have increased in recent years based on data collected through surveys, interviews and case file reviews. Systematic data on the usage of voluntary kinship placements would be necessary to confirm this hypothesis.

### ***Severity of Petitions***

Analysis of AOC administrative data suggests that the court system may be seeing a higher proportion of severe cases, as measured by increases in the rates of TPRs and decreases in the number of cases dismissed by the court over time. The rise in TPRs and the decrease in dismissals may indicate that the threshold for a CPS case to reach juvenile petition has shifted. The raw number of TPRs has not increased, however.

### ***Child Safety***

Analysis of CPS administrative data indicates that children are not less safe, as evidenced by the rates of repeat assessments. Given that the numbers of children in DSS custody are also declining, the steady decline in re-assessment rates since 2001-2002 suggests that child safety is continuing to increase over time.

Anecdotally, GALs believe that individual cases themselves may be more severe by the time they reach the court system, simply due to the amount of time that children have been in the home prior to court involvement. Cases may be escalating or spending increasing amounts of time with no progress towards case goals before a juvenile petition is filed. Quantitative data indicate that there is a decrease in the *number* of children who are unsafe (based on TPR numbers and repeat assessments), but the severity of individual cases is not documented in ways that allow us to evaluate the level of safety within those cases that remain.

### ***Recommendations***

It is clear that juvenile petitions have decreased since 2006 and that simultaneously the court system is seeing a higher proportion of severe cases. This suggests a shift in the threshold for when cases are brought to the attention of the juvenile court system, but this shift does not coincide with significant policy changes such as MRS. It is unclear whether or not the threshold has shifted too far, excluding cases from court oversight that should have it or lengthening the

time that children are in unsafe circumstances prior to court involvement. This question may require further exploration, but it does not appear that this shift is impacting child safety overall. The use of voluntary kinship placements may be the most important factor in explaining reductions in juvenile petitions without a corresponding decrease in child safety. With this in mind, the following recommendations are offered as strategies to foster continuous improvement and monitoring around this issue.

- Incorporate database fields within the NCDSS administrative data warehouse to capture voluntary kinship placements, allowing for consistent tracking of the frequency, transitions in, and overall duration of such placements.
- Provide ongoing training and outreach efforts to GAL and other court officials specific to MRS policy, practice and intent in order to reduce incorrect perceptions and improve collaboration among systems.
- Develop mechanisms to improve communication and information dissemination between DSS and the court system regarding policy and budgetary changes that may affect various stakeholders.
- Work to create more uniform policies and processes related to petitions across counties within the same judicial district in order to increase continuity and consistency.
- Create a task force with representatives from NCDSS and AOC that conducts a periodic review of administrative data sources to ensure early identification of trends (e.g., increasing repeat assessments) and to strategize solutions as necessary.
- Create multi-disciplinary, district-level teams that include DSS staff, GAL representatives, court officials and other stakeholders for purposes of reviewing complex cases and anecdotal experiences to identify areas of concern (e.g., too much time passing before petitions are filed), strategizing solutions, standardizing practices for the handling of “like cases” and enhancing cross-agency collaboration. With regular discussion, such groups may be able to identify factors that predict greater safety concerns and establish guidelines on when to involve the court system.

# **Multiple Response System (MRS) Evaluation Report to the North Carolina Division of Social Services (NCDSS)**

## **Introduction**

### ***Purpose***

This report presents the findings of the 2010-2011 evaluation of the Multiple Response System (MRS) reform of family support and child welfare services. As part of continuous improvement efforts, the North Carolina Division of Social Services (NCDSS) has supported ongoing evaluation to ensure that child safety is maintained, that families continue to receive timely response and needed services, and that local human service agencies are working together to accomplish these goals. In 2003, at the request of NCDSS, the Center for Child and Family Policy (CCFP) at Duke University undertook a comprehensive evaluation of MRS to examine these issues. The findings were presented in three separate reports dated April 2004, June 2006 and June 2009. As a continuation of those efforts, and in response to concerns raised by the North Carolina Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC), the current evaluation examined MRS with a special focus on the rate of child welfare juvenile petitions. This report builds upon the work conducted over the past eight years examining child safety following MRS implementation. Specifically, this report explores concerns raised about a perceived reduction in juvenile petition rates since MRS began and the possible impacts on child safety across the state.

### ***Evaluator***

The Center for Child and Family Policy (CCFP) brings together scholars, policy makers, and practitioners to solve problems facing children in contemporary society by undertaking rigorous social science research and then translating important findings into policy and practice. Kenneth Dodge, Ph.D., who has served as the Principal Investigator for this evaluation, is the William McDougall Professor of Public Policy, Professor of Psychology and Neuroscience, and the Director of the Center of Child and Family Policy at Duke. For the past 25 years, Dr. Dodge has published over 250 scientific articles and has been the PI on research grants totaling over 35 million dollars, several involving multi-site collaborations. He is the recipient of a Senior Scientist Award from the National Institute on Drug Abuse to study the development and prevention of drug use in youth. Most recently, he has been concerned with translating knowledge from prevention science into effective public policies for children, youth and their families.

### ***Background***

North Carolina's Multiple Response System (MRS) began with a mandate by the North Carolina General Assembly (Session Law 2001-424, Senate Bill 1005, "Appropriations Act of the General Assembly"). This mandate required that the North Carolina Division of Social Services pilot an alternative response system for child protection with selected reports of suspected child neglect. Ten pilot counties began preliminary field-testing of MRS in 2002, and

implementation in those counties began in earnest in January 2003. MRS was expanded to 42 additional counties in 2004 (wave 2), following the passage of legislation in mid 2003 that increased the number of counties allowed to implement an alternative response system in child protection. As of January, 2006, all one hundred North Carolina counties are implementing the Multiple Response System.

## **MRS Strategies: A Family-Centered Approach**

The Multiple Response System reform aims to increase family involvement in assessment and planning to address child welfare concerns and prevent future harm to children. The goal is to respond not only to the specific incident that brought a particular family to the attention of DSS, but to understand and address the broader spectrum of needs that might have undermined the caregivers' ability to parent effectively. Using a team approach, social workers work with the family to explore these needs and identify the available strengths and resources that will help them improve their lives and better care for their children. The MRS assessment process sets a more cooperative tone and is designed to be more open and transparent than the traditional forensic assessment. The purpose is to engage the family and gain a more complete picture of their circumstances so that appropriate assistance can be offered and concerns remedied. When services are deemed necessary, the case planning process includes strategies to facilitate family participation and cooperation. When placement of children outside the home is required, MRS reform extends to the relationship between foster and birth parents, promoting interaction that supports a more seamless transition of childcare and reunification as soon as possible.

North Carolina's Multiple Response System policies outline seven key strategies for carrying out a family-centered approach to child protection, including:

- 1) **Introduction of choice between two approaches to reports of child abuse, neglect or dependency.** This strategy allows for a differential response to reports of child abuse, neglect and dependency. Intake workers choose between two responses: the traditional investigation track or the family assessment track. The family assessment track provides a more tailored and holistic approach to working with individual families. This process engages families using a strengths-based approach and facilitates a partnership among local agencies and communities to address all the needs of a child and family. Certain accepted reports are not eligible for the family assessment track. For example, cases involving alleged sexual abuse of a child must utilize the investigative track.
- 2) **Collaboration between Work First (TANF) and Child Welfare Program.** This strategy involves coordinating a number of aspects common to both Work First and CPS programs including: Joint home visits, Coordinated case plans, Regular communication and information sharing between Work First and CPS staff, Inclusion of Work First personnel in Child Protective Services (CPS) case staffing, and Inclusion of Work First personnel in Child and Family Team (CFT) (as appropriate).
- 3) **Implementation of a strengths-based, structured intake process.** This strategy allows for the concerns of the reporter to be heard, documented and screened by intake workers

using a highly structured tool that enhances both the quality and consistency of information collected across the state and emphasizes the strengths of the family.

- 4) **Redesign of in-home services.** This strategy restructures the case management system in two key ways: it provides more intensive services and contacts for families with greater needs and provides less intensive or voluntary services to families with fewer needs or identified risks. Further, the redesign of in-home services emphasizes the engagement and involvement of families in the case planning/management process through CFT meetings, as well as other mechanisms.
- 5) **Utilization of a team decision making approach in Child and Family Team meetings.** This strategy aims to achieve safety, well-being and permanency for children and families by reaching out to family members (including extended family), natural family supports, and other community agencies. In doing so, CFTs encourage inclusion and active participation of these stakeholders in decision making and planning in all stages of the process, from case management through foster care placement. Building this natural support team is critical to the long-term success of families, particularly after CPS is no longer involved.
- 6) **Implementation of Shared Parenting meetings in placement cases.** This strategy provides an opportunity for the development of ongoing interaction between birth parents and foster parents with the intent of creating a bridge between the two for the purposes of enhancing the child's care, facilitating the mentoring of birth parents, and improving the chances of family reunification.
- 7) **Coordination between law enforcement agencies and child protective services for the investigative assessment approach.** This strategy facilitates the development of formal Memoranda of Agreement between CPS and local law enforcement agencies to ensure collaboration and information sharing during the investigation and prosecution of specific cases.

The MRS strategies outlined above represent a type of secondary prevention model designed to prevent more serious maltreatment and/or the removal of children from the custody of their parent(s). Using this model, the court system is typically involved using a petition as the mechanism, after CPS has made reasonable efforts to engage families and alleviate risk without success. It is this delay in involving the court system that has created concerns about child safety among Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) staff and volunteers who serve as advocates for North Carolina's children. The key concerns raised include: (1) fewer petitions filed, therefore fewer CPS cases reaching the court system, and (2) cases for which there are petitions tend to be of greater severity, may include a long history of CPS involvement, or are cases which have languished for a significant amount of time without reasonable movement on the case plan.

North Carolina's GAL program is housed within the Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) and its mission is to represent and promote the best interests of abused, neglected and dependent children within the court system and to work toward a plan that ensures that these



children are in a safe, permanent home. GALs are assigned to cases as required by North Carolina statute, after a juvenile petition has been filed by DSS.

A DSS director or his/her designee may invoke the legal system by filing a juvenile petition if it is decided that such action is needed to ensure the protection of a child alleged to be abused, neglected or dependent. Often, petitions are accompanied by a request to assume non-secure custody. DSS can request non-secure custody when they deem it unsafe for a child to remain in the custody of their caregiver(s). It is important to note that cases requiring juvenile petitions make up a relatively small percentage of CPS cases. Often petitions are not necessary because the family participates in services voluntarily; a protection plan is established between DSS and the family; the abuser is no longer in the home; or DSS feels that the child is safe in the home (NCDSS Policy Manual).

Family-centered practice, as operationalized by the 7 strategies of MRS is rooted in a non-adversarial approach and seeks to partner with parents in overcoming barriers that may hinder their ability to care for their children. Conversely, the court system is a hierarchical system that takes an authoritative approach designed to ensure justice by enforcing the laws, preserving the rights of citizens and enacting consequences for disobedience of the law. Both serve clear and important roles but given these contrasting approaches, it is not surprising that two systems, often serving the same families, may have different perspectives on how CPS cases should be handled. This report explores perceptions about MRS from various stakeholders as well as examines administrative data from multiple sources in order to understand how this change in child welfare policy has impacted juvenile petitions and child safety.

## **Method and Sources**

The following sections describe the selection of county samples and the sources of data used for qualitative and quantitative analysis. Quantitative data, drawn from administrative sources, were used to measure:

- Changes over time in the rates of juvenile petitions filed across judicial districts;
- Changes in outcomes for juvenile petitions (i.e., proportion dismissed, proportion resulting in Termination of Parental Rights);
- Rates of CPS re-assessment; and
- Relation between juvenile petition rate and re-assessment rate.

Additionally, online surveys administered to district-level Guardian Ad Litem (GAL) and CPS Administrators were used to further define the concerns of stakeholders, identify key areas of focus for the evaluation and assist in the selection of sample counties for data collection activities. Case file reviews were conducted in order to identify possible changes in the handling of cases with similar severity over time relative to social work practice. Lastly, personal interviews with GAL and other court staff as well as CPS administrator and/or lead supervisors were facilitated.

## ***Selection of Counties***

Six counties nested within four judicial districts were selected to participate in personal interviews and case file reviews. The counties and corresponding judicial districts are not listed in this report because the sample size is too small to ensure the anonymity of those interviewed is preserved. The counties were selected using a stratified sampling strategy accounting for geographic location within the state, county size and the year/wave in which they began MRS implementation. Additionally, survey responses were analyzed in an effort to select counties that showed variation in perceptions about petition rates, allowing for an examination of the reasons associated with such differences.

## ***Data Sources***

### **Child Protective Services (CPS) Reports**

The North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) collects data regarding accepted CPS reports of child maltreatment from each county. The data from these reports are entered into the Central Registry and stored in the Client Services Data Warehouse. Data for all 100 counties were extracted from the Data Warehouse, providing information on individual children that included report and assessment dates, the type of maltreatment reported, and the case finding. See Appendix A for a detailed description of the CPS report data used in this evaluation.

### **Juvenile Petitions/AOC Data**

The AOC collects aggregated data by judicial district as provided by district-level GAL administrators. These data include information about the number and type of petitions filed, resulting court orders, adjudication outcomes and termination of parental right (TPR) outcomes. The AOC provided data sets from FY 2000-2001 through 2009-2010.

## **Surveys**

Two different online surveys were developed to solicit feedback from CPS program administrators and GAL representatives in order to identify perceived changes in the volume of juvenile petitions filed and/or possible factors influencing the handling of cases requiring out of home placement. The surveys included a mix of both open-ended and closed-ended response options and had an average of 16 items. Each of the thirty-nine GAL district administrators in the state were sent an email invitation and survey link. The invitation was preceded by an email from the state-level GAL administrator highlighting the importance of the survey and requesting that each district administrator complete it. A total of 26 surveys were completed by GAL administrators. Similarly, NCDSS sent an explanatory email and survey link to each of the 100 county DSS agencies requesting participation and feedback. Thirty-eight responses were received from county DSS agencies. The responses were collected and managed using the web survey program Checkbox®. Descriptive statistics were generated to explore the survey responses provided as a whole and by subgroup. The surveys are available for review in Appendix B.

## **Interviews**

Fourteen personal interviews were conducted from February through March of 2011. Interviewees included the CPS program administrator or lead supervisor from each of the six selected counties, the GAL administrator from each of the four judicial districts, and four court officials inclusive of judges and attorneys. A number of areas were discussed during the interviews but were collapsed into five key topic areas including: perceptions of MRS, perceptions about changes in the rate of juvenile petitions, factors affecting juvenile petitions, other related issues/factors and suggestions for improvements. These semi-structured interviews were approximately 1.5 hours in duration and were digitally recorded and transcribed in preparation for analysis. The transcriptions were coded and analyzed using Atlas.ti qualitative software. The guiding questions developed to facilitate the interviews are provided in Appendix C.

## **CPS Case File Reviews**

Case file reviews were conducted from March through May of 2011 for the purpose of identifying possible differences in the handling of similar cases pre-MRS and post-MRS using a small sample of cases. The process was designed to collect a small number of data points on each case including: report date, case decision, case closure date, case finding, maltreatment type, number of services referred, service completion level, removal of perpetrator from the home, juvenile petitions filed and dates, foster care placements and dates, kinship care placements and dates, and family history with CPS. The evaluation team requested that DSS staff pull case files that were initially rated as high-risk during the investigation or assessment phase and also resulted in a finding of substantiated or services needed. To standardize the way in which counties chose these cases, DSS staff were instructed to start with cases that were accepted in the month of February for each of the review years (2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009) and select the first two cases that were both high risk and substantiated and the first three that were high risk and found in need of services. For some of the review years counties only had high risk substantiated cases because they had not yet begun implementing MRS. The final count from the six counties, after cases were excluded because they did not meet criteria for review, was 99.

## **Findings**

### ***Administrative Data***

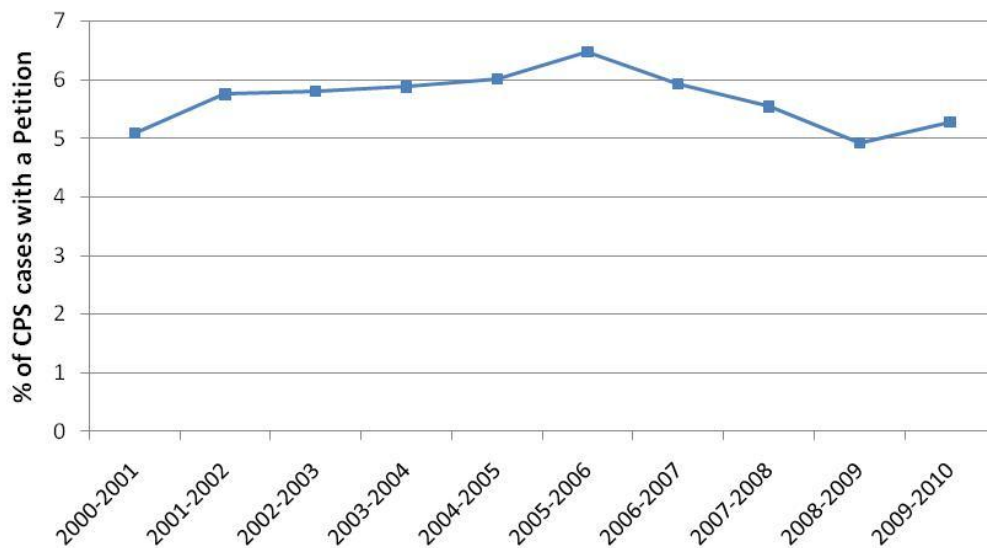
#### **Juvenile Petitions/AOC Data**

The first area of concern assessed in this report is that of change in juvenile petition rates over time across the state. Using AOC data, we began by examining yearly petitions by district, averaged across the 39 districts in North Carolina. Because child population in many districts has increased across the past ten years, we looked at petitions as a proportion of the total number of CPS assessments within the district. If CPS case policy and severity remained constant, one would expect to see petitions on an equivalent proportion of cases across the years.

The aggregate data (Figure 1) show a consistent pattern of increase in the proportion of cases with petitions filed each year through fiscal year 2005-2006, going from 5.1% to 6.5%. In absolute numbers, this is an increase from an average of 154 petitions per district in 2000-2001 to 186 petitions per district in 2005-2006. Following that year, there is a clear shift in the trajectory of petition rates, with rates declining each year. By fiscal year 2008-2009, the proportion of assessments with petitions filed had returned to baseline (5.3%, with an average of 150 petitions per district). Of course, not all districts show identical patterns in petition rates, but the majority (56%) show this decline in petitions from fiscal year 2005-2006 to fiscal year 2009-2010. Another 26% maintained a stable rate of petitions in this time period, and the remaining 18% increased the proportion of CPS assessments with petitions.

These numbers indicate that overall (with some exceptions), the perceptions of GALs and other child advocates are accurate: there are fewer child welfare petitions reaching the court system in recent years. This downward trajectory prompts two questions: (1) what is causing this decline in petitions? and (2) does less court involvement mean that children are less safe?

*Figure 1: Proportion of CPS assessments with juvenile petitions filed, averaged across districts*



### **Possible Reasons for Declining Petition Rates**

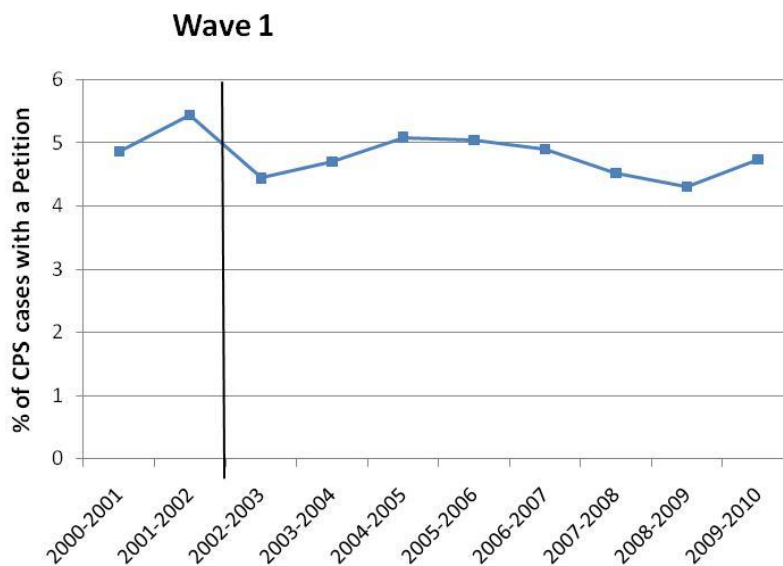
There are many possible explanations for the changing petition rates over time. An increasing proportion of petitions could indicate that either CPS cases were growing more severe or that there was a lowered threshold set for filing petitions. Correspondingly, a decrease in the proportion of assessments with a petition could indicate that CPS had less severe cases or that CPS experienced a shift in policy so that a higher severity threshold is reached prior to petition. Alternatively, a lowered rate of petitions could result from the availability of more options for case workers to pursue in improving child safety.

## MRS

In recent years, the largest policy change within CPS is the transition to MRS. Indeed, several policy changes that are a part of MRS could translate into fewer petitions being filed. For instance, MRS emphasizes family-centered assessment with frontloading of services to try to address safety concerns while keeping the family intact. Family preservation is a clear goal of this system, where safety issues can be adequately addressed. Secondly, MRS has a greater focus on incorporating extended family members and informal support persons through Child and Family Team meetings. As a result, a broader family network may be involved in service planning, and kinship placement may be more commonly used. CPS administrators who responded to our survey estimated that children removed from the home were placed in kinship care an average of 50% of the time (though informal kinship placements are not tracked in any systematic way, so changes in the use of kinship care over time could not be examined). Further, administrators reported that fewer than half of kinship placements include petitions. Thus, through service frontloading and increased use of kinship care, it is logical that MRS could have a role in reducing petition rates.

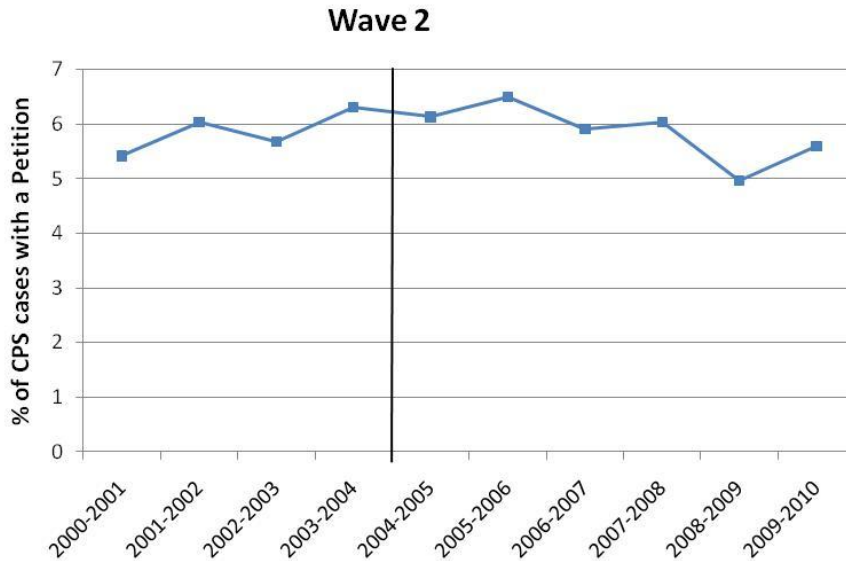
To investigate this hypothesis, we examined districts where all counties entered MRS at the same time: in 2002 for wave 1 (4 districts), in 2004 for wave 2 (9 districts), or in 2006 for wave 3 (11 districts). Figures 2 through 4 show petition rates over time for the districts in each wave. If MRS were the reason for petition changes over time, one would expect to see drops in petition rates during the years following MRS implementation. Although there is an initial drop for wave 1 districts immediately following MRS (in 2002-2003), rates then increase slightly and resume the downward trajectory in 2005-2006.

*Figure 2: Petition rates over time in districts with Wave 1 MRS implementation*



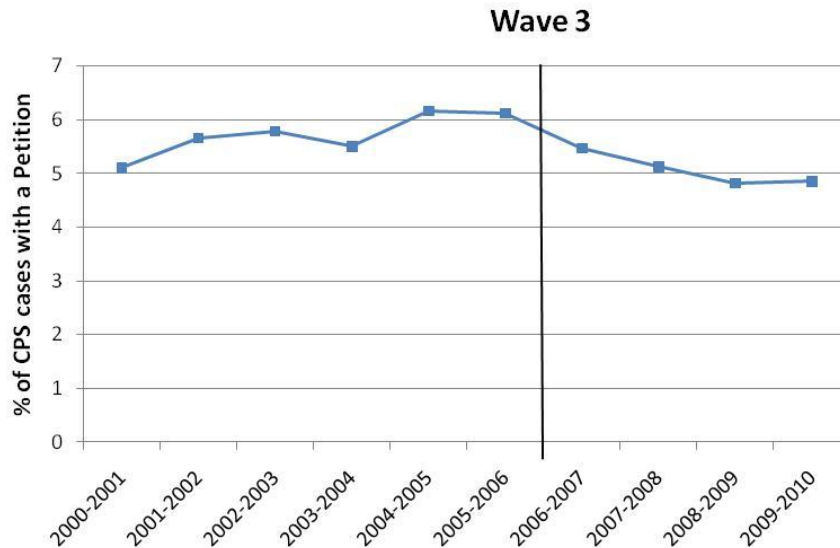
For wave 2 districts (Figure 3), there is no decrease in petition rates following MRS implementation. Petition rates do begin to decline after 2005-2006, however.

*Figure 3: Petition rates over time in districts with Wave 2 MRS implementation*



Like the other two groups, wave 3 districts begin a downward slope in petition rates after 2005-2006 (Figure 4). For this group, the decrease in petitions coincides with MRS implementation. Given the similar patterns for waves 1 and 2, however, this reduction is not clearly linked with MRS. Even if MRS policy changes have played a role in petition reductions, the consistency of downward trajectories across districts post-2006 suggests that there are other factors at play.

Figure 4: Petition rates over time in districts with Wave 3 MRS implementation



#### **IV-E Waiver**

A second large policy shift in North Carolina involved the demonstration project using Title IV-E dollars to reduce out-of-home care for CPS-involved children. North Carolina was one of the first states to implement a Title IV-E waiver demonstration, beginning in 1997. Waiver counties in the first demonstration period (through 2002) did show a reduced likelihood of out-of-home placements for CPS-involved children, thus the waiver demonstration was extended through the end of 2006, when it was terminated due to increasing costs. The timing of the demonstration's end coincides with the observed decline in petitions—though given the reduction in out-of-home placements that accompanied the IV-E waiver, one would expect the waiver's end to result in an *increase* in petitions. Nonetheless, we examined the waiver demonstration as a possible cause of the shift in petition rates observed after 2006.

The waiver demonstration involved 38 counties in North Carolina, spread among 26 judicial districts. To explore possible effects of the waiver's termination on petition rates, we aggregated petition rates only among the 13 districts that included no waiver counties. These districts should not have been impacted by the end of the waiver demonstration; however, as seen in Figure 5, these districts show the exact same pattern of declining petition rates beginning in 2006-2007. For comparison, Figure 6 shows the aggregated petition rates for districts that include at least one waiver county. The post-2006 trends are almost identical, suggesting that the Title IV-E waiver demonstration's end was not a contributing factor in the reduction in juvenile petitions.

Figure 5: Petition rates over time in districts without IV-E waiver counties

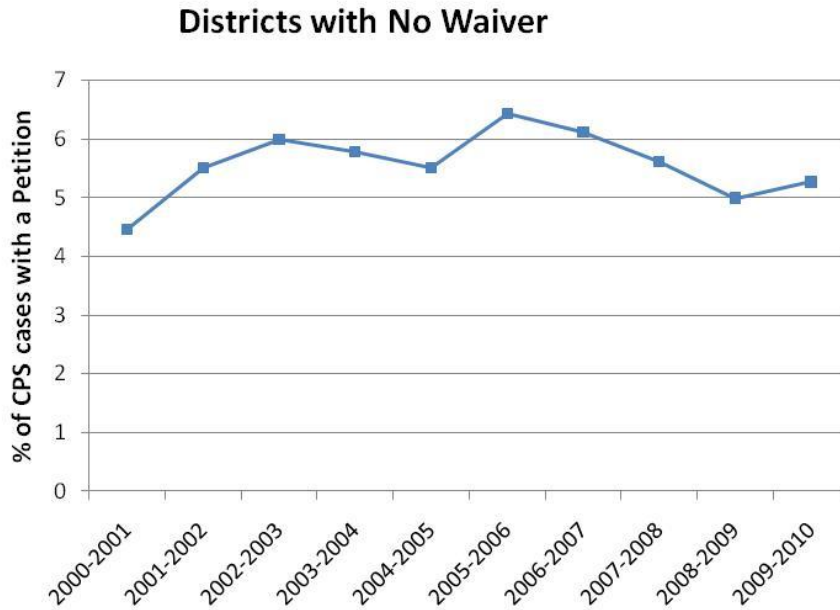
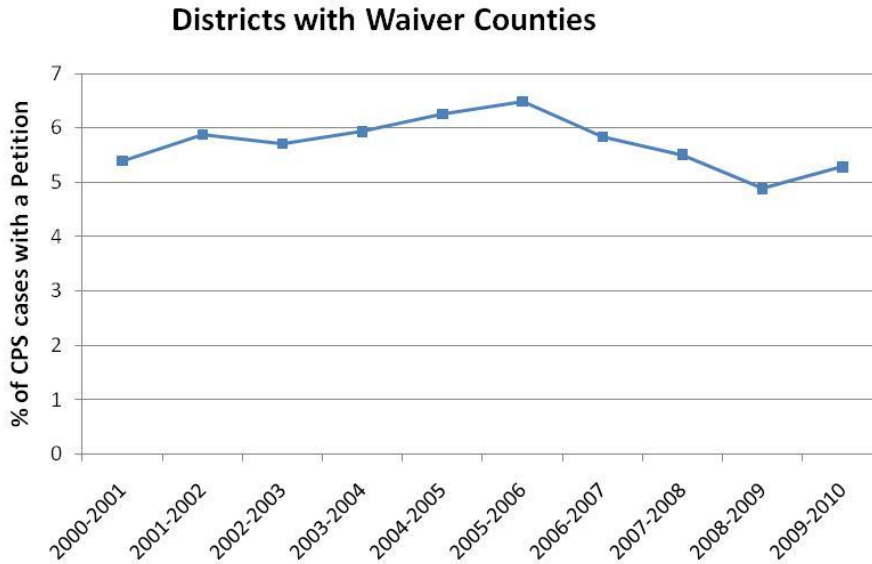


Figure 6: Petition rates over time in districts with IV-E waiver counties



There were no other statewide policy changes that could be identified as possible contributors to the change in petition rates over time. Clearly the rates have gone down, but there are no obvious precursors to this shift. MRS principles of family preservation and use of kinship care may play a role in declining petition rates, but the consistent timing of the shift in petitions across districts with different MRS start dates suggests that petition decline was not sparked by MRS per se.



### **Changes in Petition Severity**

A second concern voiced by GALs has been that cases that do have juvenile petitions filed are of greater severity. Some worry that this is the result of increased focus on family preservation: with more time spent trying to engage families in services, cases are taking longer to reach the court system, with the possible result that family situations become more severe before petitions are sought.

To investigate whether petition cases have altered in their level of severity in recent years, we examined the relative proportions of two possible court outcomes over time: termination of parental rights (TPRs) and case dismissals. Figure 7 displays the proportion of petitions resulting in TPR each year over the past decade, aggregated across judicial districts. Indeed, TPR rates do appear to mirror petition rates: after 2005-2006, as petition rates began dropping, TPR rates have been increasing. In 2009-2010, when petition rates showed a slight increase, TPR rates dropped sharply. An increase in TPR rates does not necessarily suggest a reduction in child safety, however—merely a change in the types of cases seen through juvenile petition. As petition rates declined, a larger percentage of the cases that remained were severe enough to warrant TPR. The raw number of TPR cases, however, remained steady after 2006-2007, with a drop in 2009-2010. Similarly, the number of children in foster care and DSS custody throughout the state has declined since 2006 (Figure 8). So, the increased severity of petition cases does not mean that *more* children are unsafe; rather, the cases that reach the level of juvenile petition are those with higher risk.

Consistent with this conclusion, the proportion of petition cases that end in case dismissal has declined over the past decade, with a slightly accelerated drop after 2006 (Figure 9). With a lower rate of petitions, fewer of those cases that do reach the level of juvenile petition are found to be worthy of dismissal. Taken together with the rise in TPR rates, this would suggest that cases with petitions filed in recent years are indeed more severe. It appears that the threshold for a case to reach juvenile petition has shifted, with the result that a higher proportion of cases are severe enough for children to be removed from the home. It is not clear whether this shift in petition threshold is positive or negative, however. It may be that more of the cases of “borderline” severity are being managed through intensive services or temporary kinship care, with the result that safety issues are resolved without court involvement. Anecdotal reports and estimates of kinship care increases would support that this is the case (though without data on kinship care rates over time, it is impossible to measure this effect). It is also possible, however, that this threshold has shifted too far, leaving children in unsafe homes for longer periods of time before petitions are filed. Anecdotal reports would support this concern, as well. The stability in raw numbers of TPRs/DSS custody in recent years would suggest that there is no growth in these most serious cases, but it is possible that cases are taking longer to reach the point of child removal.

Figure 7: Percentage of juvenile petitions that end in termination of parental rights, averaged across districts

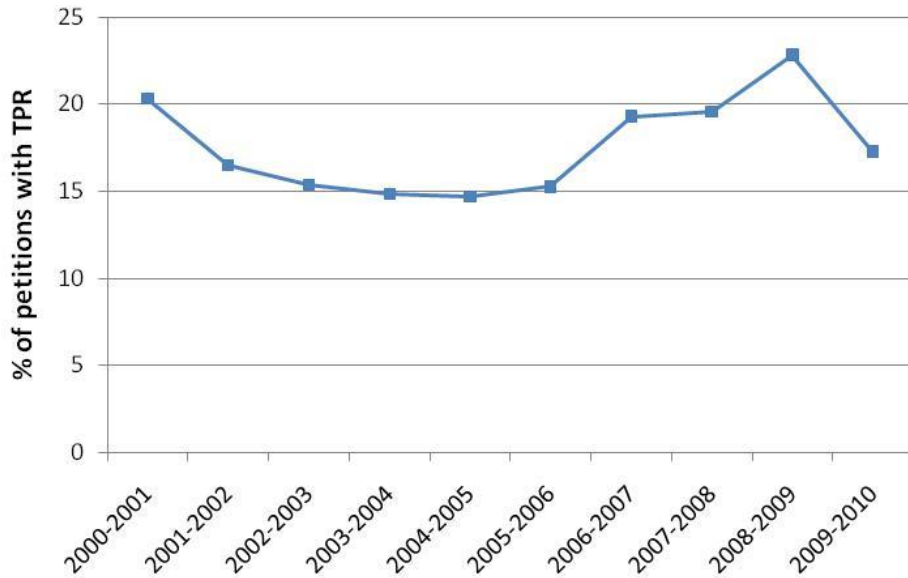
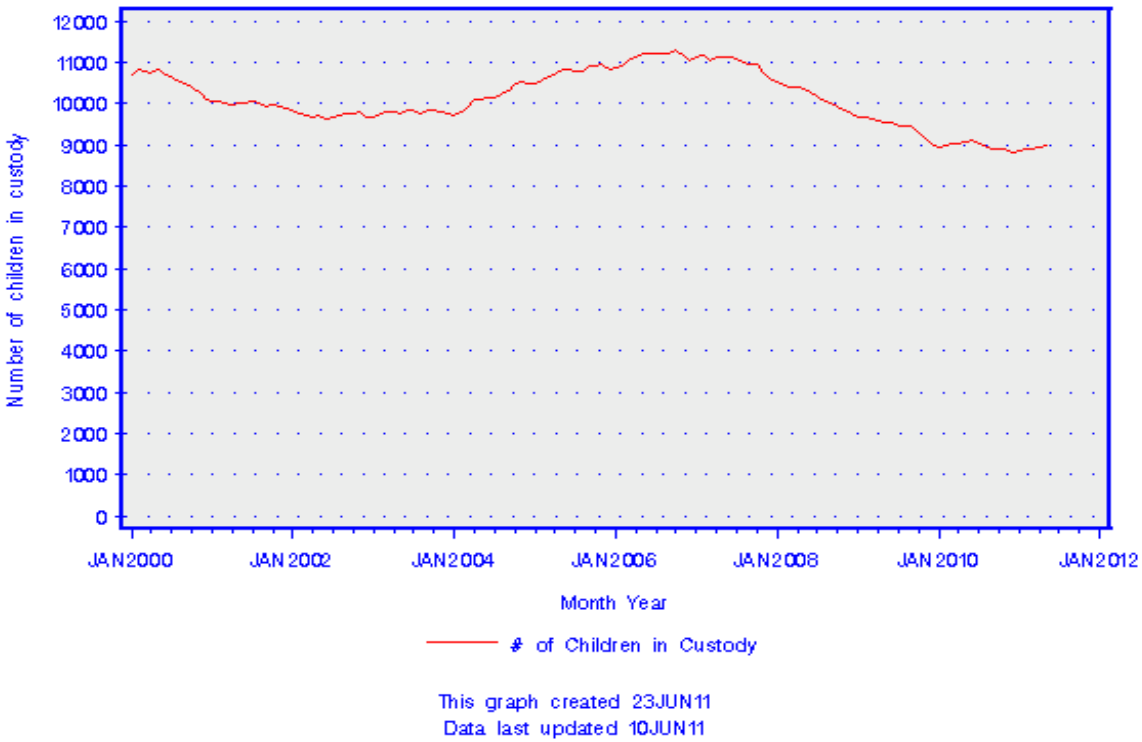
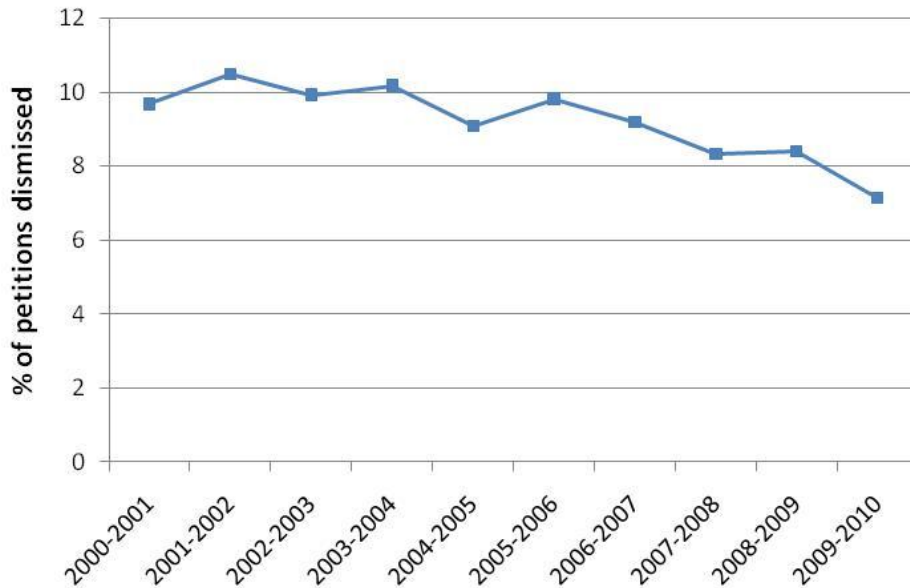


Figure 8: Number of children in North Carolina who are in the custody of DSS



Note: This graph was retrieved from the Management Assistance website developed and maintained by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, School of Social Work.

Figure 9: Percentage of juvenile petitions that end in case dismissal, averaged across districts



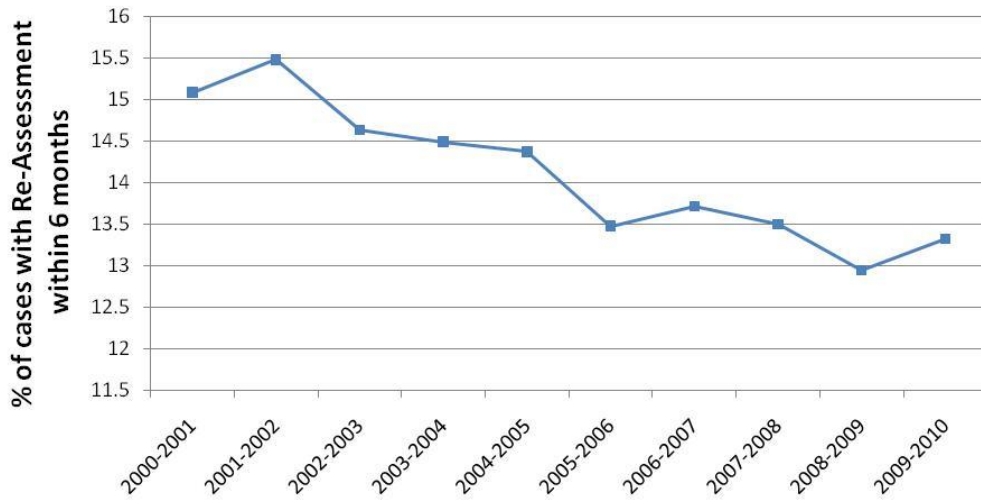
## Child Protective Services (CPS) Reports

The ultimate question for CPS is whether child safety is affected by the decline in petition rates in recent years. One way to look at this is through repeat assessments: if children were more frequently kept in their homes when they should have been removed, one would expect them to be more likely to return to CPS with repeat maltreatment allegations. In this case, repeat assessment rates would show an increase mirroring the decrease in petitions.

Figure 10 displays the yearly rate of cases that return to CPS for a second assessment within six months of the first (aggregated across all 100 counties). There is a clear and steady decline in repeat assessment rates going back to the 2001-2002 fiscal year, suggesting that child safety has not declined concurrent with the change in petition rates. In fact, repeat rates would indicate that child safety is continuing to increase over time.

To confirm that the rate of repeat assessment is not worsened by a decrease in juvenile petitions, we examined the correlation between petition and repeat assessment rates. These two rates are positively correlated at 0.15 ( $p < .05$ ), indicating that repeat assessment rates are actually higher when there are higher petition rates, and vice versa. This is logical—when there are repeat assessments, social workers are more likely to determine that the case severity warrants the filing of a petition. This correlation confirms that the decline in petition rates has not worsened repeat assessment rates, however, suggesting that child safety is not adversely affected.

Figure 10: Percentage of juvenile petitions that end in case dismissal, averaged across districts



## Original Data

### Surveys

The Checkbox® Survey link was emailed to each district GAL (N = 39) and county DSS administrator (N=100) in December of 2010. Respondents were mailed a \$10 Wal-Mart gift card for their participation. Approximately 82% of GAL administrators and 38% of DSS county agencies participated in the survey, although some respondents did not complete all of the survey questions. Table 1 presents the DSS participants by current position, showing that mostly program administrators and supervisors responded. Tables 2 and 3 highlight that the majority of respondents had been in their position as a GAL or with DSS for ten or more years and therefore could presumably provide perspective on changes in the system over time and since MRS implementation began.

Table 1: DSS Positions

Position	% of Respondents
Program Administrator	48.6%
Supervisor	46%
Director	2.7%
Social Worker	2.7%

Table 2: DSS Position Longevity

Years at Position	% of Respondents
0-3	0%
4-6	13.2%
7-9	5.3%
10-12	10.5%
13 or More	71%

*Table 3: GAL Position Longevity*

<b>Years as GAL</b>	<b>% of Respondents</b>
<b>0 – 3 years</b>	11.1%
<b>4 – 6 years</b>	18.5%
<b>7 – 9 years</b>	7.4%
<b>10+ years</b>	63%

Both DSS and GAL administrators were asked about changes in juvenile petition filings within their county or district. As shown in Table 4, most county DSS administrators felt that the number of juvenile petition filings increased, whereas the majority of GAL administrators felt that the number had decreased. For those who reported on their county or district, perceptions of changes in petition rates were compared with actual changes in petition rates, as reported in the AOC data. Table 5 shows the percent of accurate perceptions by answer type and respondent. Overall, respondents accurately gauged the change in petition rates only about half of the time. Across DSS and GAL, respondents were more accurate in perceptions of petition decreases, but even then only half to three-quarters of respondents' perceptions reflected the true district trends in juvenile petitions. This suggests that concerns about changing petition rates should always be checked against the AOC data on petitions to be sure concerns are warranted and to resolve discrepant perceptions between agencies. DSS and GAL staff often had differing perceptions within the same district, with DSS more likely to perceive petition increases and GAL staff more likely to perceive petition decreases.

*Table 4: Perceptions of change in Juvenile Petitions*

<b>Change</b>	<b>DSS</b>	<b>GAL</b>
<b>Decreased</b>	31.6%	63%
<b>Increased</b>	44.7%	18.5%
<b>Remained the Same</b>	7.9%	18.5%
<b>Not Sure</b>	15.8%	0%

*Table 5: Perceptions of change in Juvenile Petitions: Accuracy of Perceptions for those reporting their judicial district*

<b>Change</b>	<b>DSS</b>	<b>% Accurate (DSS)</b>	<b>GAL</b>	<b>% Accurate (GAL)</b>
<b>Decreased</b>	34.4%	45.5%	68.4%	76.9%
<b>Increased</b>	50.0%	18.8%	21.1%	50.0%
<b>Remained the Same</b>	15.6%	100%	10.5%	100%

An examination of open-ended responses describing contributing factors to change revealed that those who reported decreases in petitions most often cited MRS, the use of family-centered practice, and voluntary kinship placements. Those citing perceived increases most often noted the severity of cases involving substance abuse and chronic neglect, poor economic conditions and non-compliance with the CPS case plan on the part of caregivers.

DSS survey participants were also asked about the use of kinship placements in cases that require the removal of children. Approximately 44% of DSS administrators estimated kinship care was utilized in 26% to 75% of placements. One-fourth (25%) estimated higher, noting that

relatives were utilized in 76-100% of those cases (see Table 6). To gauge how kinship placements may affect juvenile petitions, DSS respondents were asked how often they filed petitions in cases where kinship placements were used. Approximately 45% of respondents indicated that they do so less than half of the time (see Table 7) with an additional 16% noting that they “never” or “almost never” file. Informal kinship placements that are not legally secured may be an important factor in understanding changes in the rates of juvenile petitions.

*Table 6: Use of Kinship Care Placements (DSS)*

Kinship Use	# of Respondents (Percentage)
0 - 25%	11 (30.6%)
26 – 50%	12 (33.3%)
51 -75%	4 (11.1%)
76 – 100%	9 (25%)

*Table 7: Use of Petitions with Kinship Care*

Filing Petitions within Kinship Care	Percentage
Always/Almost Always	13.2%
More than half the time	26.3%
Less than half the time	44.7%
Never/Almost never	15.8%

In the interest of exploring how the use of “slow petitions” or “non-compliance petitions” may impact this issue, participants were questioned on how often such petitions are filed. Slow petitions are sometimes used as a mechanism to force compliance via court oversight in situations where families are not following through with key elements of their CPS case plan. Both DSS and GAL respondents felt similarly regarding the use of slow petitions, with only about 20% reporting that they are “often” or “very often” utilized (Table 8).

*Table 8: Use of Slow Petitions*

Use of Slow Petitions	DSS	GAL
Very Often	2.7%	12.5%
Often	19%	8.3%
Sometimes	32.4%	33.3%
Rarely	35.1%	37.5%
Never	10.8%	8.3%

Respondents were asked about any local-level policy changes that may affect the handling of placements and petitions. There was little difference between groups in the percentage of those indicating that there were policy changes, as shown in Table 9. However, there was a 20% difference between groups in their awareness of any policy changes, with GALs reporting higher levels of uncertainty. Open-ended comments from DSS respondents suggest that local polices encourage kinship placements when possible, but there were considerable differences between counties on how policy around petitions is executed. The following represent some examples of the responses offered.

*“Our agency took the stand to make placements legally secure. In other words, if parents left their children with relatives with or without power of attorneys, we filed for custody*

*to make the placement more secure legally. In physical abuse cases, we almost always file a petition, not necessarily for custody though.” (DSS)*

*“We have a policy that requires the filing of a juvenile petition if the child can’t safely return home at the time the case is substantiated or found as services needed (when service changes from 210 to 215). This policy respects the parent’s right to due process if the children can’t safely return to them.” (DSS)*

*“We have established staffing team for cases with the potential for entering care. We have instilled in our line staff the importance of exhausting every resource option before removal.” (DSS)*

*“Our Courts have made it clear that they do not want to hear "regular" petitions that are filed because children are with kin for a period of time and we cannot close the case out without legal permanence. Though this is state policy, our courts do not see this as fitting into the purpose of juvenile court. Due to this, we used some local funds to contract with a private attorney to resolve some of these cases when all parties are willing. We have done this in about 20 cases and plan to ask for more funds next month.”(DSS)*

*“It is agency policy that we file a petition on any case in which we have asked the parent to make an out of home placement. We must secure the placement before case closure.”(DSS)*

*“Once a child is placed in kinship, we consider whether there is a need to file petition at each CFT. At the 6 month point, we generally file unless the family is making significant progress at that time that would warrant holding off for awhile longer. In serious cases, we may file early on to have the court monitor progress. We do not take custody just because a petition is filed. We may leave custody with the parent as they work on the case plan, or give custody to the kinship care provider. When custody is given to a relative, we transfer the case to our Prevention Unit who will generally work toward supporting the custody with the relatives or work toward reunification with the parent if the court decides to give the parents more time before ordering no re-unification. In the latter, the case is managed much like an In Home case with the use of case plans and CFTs. Some kinship care providers request assistance with foster care licensure, and in those situations, we obtain legal custody to provide more financial assistance.”*

GAL respondents also described policy changes and the effects. Some examples of the comments offered are highlighted below.

*“Since MRS, DSS works with the families longer before seeking court action. The result is more severely abused and neglected children and virtually no chance of reunification once the case reaches court.” (GAL)*

*“DSS workers have told us that they have been told not to file petitions. Some of the social workers have indicated concern over this.” (GAL)*

*“DSS is reluctant to file petitions that will bring children into foster care because of the cost involved. It is cheaper to provide in home services whether or not that is working.”*  
(GAL)

*“The assessment now focuses more on risk of serious injury verses wellbeing. The SW has more paperwork and the case review process has changed prior to filing petitions.”*  
(GAL)

**Table 9: Policy Changes in handling placements and petitions**

<b>Policy or Procedural Changes</b>	<b>DSS</b>	<b>GAL</b>
<b>Yes</b>	42.1%	41.6%
<b>No</b>	36.8%	20.8%
<b>Not Sure</b>	21.1%	41.6%

The two groups were also questioned on their knowledge of possible budgetary changes that could affect foster care placements in their respective county or district (see Table 10). Only 21% of DSS administrators reported that budgetary changes have affected foster care placements, with the majority indicating no changes (65.8%). More GALs (38%) believed that there were underlying budgetary issues. Open-ended comments offered by both groups of respondents highlighted tighter county and state budgets, increased costs for group and therapeutic care, and the need to prioritize given these restraints.

**Table 10: Budget Changes affecting foster care placements**

<b>Budget Changes</b>	<b>DSS</b>	<b>GAL</b>
<b>Yes</b>	21.0%	37.5%
<b>No</b>	65.8%	25%
<b>Not Sure</b>	13.2%	37.5%

In order to identify other factors that could impact the rate at which juvenile petitions are filed, DSS and GAL respondents were asked about changes in social work case loads, social worker turnover, and length of time spent working with families prior to filing a petition. Such factors could impact juvenile petitions because they create additional strain on DSS resources and have the potential to affect the quality of social work provided to families. The majority of DSS administrators reported that assessors and In-Home workers had an average of 8-12 cases (51.4% & 46%, respectively). Approximately 22% reported that assessment workers had an average of 13-17 cases, and 24% said that In-Home case workers had an average of 7 or fewer cases (Table 11). There was little difference between the DSS and GAL responses concerning changes in the rates of social worker turnover in the past 5 years. The majority in both groups reported that there have been changes, both increases and decreases, in the rates of turnover (Table 12). Review of the open-ended comments found that decreases in social work turnover were primarily attributed to the poor economy and job market.



*Table 11: Average Case Load for Assessors and In-Home Workers (DSS)*

<b>Case Load</b>	<b>Assessors</b>	<b>In Home</b>
<b>7 or Fewer</b>	13.5%	24.3%
<b>8 – 12</b>	51.4%	46%
<b>13 – 17</b>	21.6%	21.6%
<b>18 – 22</b>	5.4%	5.4%
<b>23 or More</b>	8.1%	2.7%

*Table 12: Change in Rates of Social Worker turnover*

<b>Change</b>	<b>DSS</b>	<b>GAL</b>
<b>Yes</b>	59.5%	54.2%
<b>No</b>	32.4%	33.3%
<b>Not Sure</b>	8.1%	12.5%

The vast majority of both groups noted changes in the length of time that social workers work with families prior to filing a petition. DSS administrators were more likely to indicate that there were no changes in the length of time spent working with families (DSS 33.3% versus GALs at 8.3%) (Table 13). Open-ended responses from DSS staff suggest that increases in the length of time spent working with families are attributable to: increased efforts to keep children in their homes, frontloading of services and identification of family supports to avoid foster care, helping to remove barriers, and providing ample opportunity for families to make positive changes. Open-ended responses from GAL administrators suggest that increases in the length of time to petition are related to: the implementation of MRS, financial constraints, and utilizing the court system as a last resort once cases have become very severe. Collectively, these findings suggest that unusually large case loads and social worker turnover are not likely key factors; however, MRS and the associated strategies are thought to extend the length of time that social workers work with families prior to involving the court system.

*Table 13: Changes in the length of time in working with families*

<b>Change</b>	<b>DSS</b>	<b>GAL</b>
<b>Yes</b>	58.3%	79.2%
<b>No</b>	33.3%	8.3%
<b>Not Sure</b>	8.3%	12.5%

Lastly, DSS respondents were asked about changes in agency leadership, as this could impact both agency priorities and the prevailing philosophies related to social work practice. Seventy-nine percent reported having only 1 to 2 directors in the past 10 years, 15% reported having 3 to 4 directors, and 6% indicated having 5 to 6 directors in their county DSS in the past 10 years (Table 14). The majority of DSS respondents (66.7%) reported having 1 to 2 DSS attorneys in the past 10 years and only 3% of county DSS respondents reported having 7 to 8 DSS attorneys (Table 15). While the numbers indicate that some counties have experienced substantial turnover in leadership, overall this does not appear to be a factor for the majority of counties.

*Table 14: Number of DSS Directors in the past 10 years*

Number of Directors	% of Respondents (DSS)
1 – 2	78.8%
3 – 4	15.2%
5 – 6	6%

*Table 15: Number of DSS Attorneys in the past 10 years*

Number of DSS Attorneys	% of Respondents (DSS)
1 – 2	66.7%
3 – 4	21.2%
5 – 6	9.1%
7 – 8	3%

In summary, the information collected through these surveys provides insight into the differing perceptions of this issue and the role of MRS. The surveys explored a number of factors that may impact juvenile petitions, such as policy and budget changes, time spent working with families, use of kinship placements and slow petitions, as well as worker turnover and changes in agency leadership. Data from the surveys showed that DSS and GAL administrators had both similar and conflicting perceptions regarding juvenile petitions and related issues. For example, the groups differed on their thoughts about changes in the rate of petitions. The majority of GALs reported that the number had decreased whereas the majority of DSS respondents reported an increase (though both groups' perceptions frequently differed from the actual trend in petition rates seen in the AOC data). In addition, GALs reported higher uncertainty than DSS in their knowledge of policy or budgetary changes. In spite of the differences, a large proportion (20%) of DSS respondents reported being unsure of local policy or procedural changes in the handling of placements and petitions. These findings point to a need for improved communication and information sharing between the two groups, as well as within DSS.

A key finding from the survey may warrant further exploration but should also be tempered by the fact that the survey had a low response rate from DSS (38%). First, 69% of DSS respondents indicated that they use kinship care in more than 25% of the cases where the removal of children is necessary. Of those, 45% indicated that they filed petitions related to these cases less than half the time, with an additional 16% noting that they never or almost never file petitions for children in kinship care. The use of this alternative to foster care calls for a more thorough investigation of the outcomes for children and families, as well as a systematic process for reporting and monitoring the number of kinship care placements, transitions, and placement length.

## **Interviews**

Each of the 14 interviews were conducted in person and were typically held at offices of the interview participants in order to make the process as convenient as possible for those being interviewed. Participants were welcoming and responsive to CCFP evaluators and seemed very willing to share their perspectives based on considerable collective experience in this arena. DSS administrators had been in their current position between 1 and 17 years (M = 7.6 years), GALs length in their position ranged between 5 and 30 years (M = 16.8 years), and court officials had held their current positions between 2.5 and 20 years (M = 11.9 years). The five topic areas and

associated themes are presented below. In most cases, only a few examples of the ideas and opinions expressed are provided.

### **Perceptions of MRS**

In order to better understand how different stakeholders view MRS, participants were asked to share their knowledge of MRS policy, experience with MRS implementation, associated challenges, changes to implementation over time, and the perceived effects on child safety.

About half of the eight interviewees representing GAL staff and court officials demonstrated a lack of knowledge about MRS with the remaining four exhibiting greater understanding of the tenets underlying this policy. Most GALs acknowledged the positive intentions of MRS, but expressed concerns about its effectiveness. When asked if MRS affected child safety, some GALs shared a belief that a decrease in child safety was likely not solely attributable to MRS. Others believed that MRS is causing cases to languish or causing DSS to take too long to file a petition, thereby leaving children in unsafe environments. Another concern noted was the MRS policy that encourages social workers to interview children in the presence of their parents (when possible) rather than separately. A number of respondents felt that this practice may impact the level of candor offered when children provide accounts of alleged neglect and abuse. It is important to note that MRS policy does not preclude social workers from interviewing children separately if they believe that it is necessary or if the severity of the allegations warrant. Some examples of the comments made are highlighted below.

*“When you are looking at MRS and CFTs, I don’t really know because I’m not involved. I don’t even know how many MRS cases there are. I have often wondered about the percentage of MRS cases that actually come to court or MRS cases where they have worked with them for many years and then they finally come to court. I really wonder about the Family Assessment track. In terms of what is least effective about MRS, I’d have to say interviewing the child while the parent is there. I don’t think that is a wonderful thing to do because I don’t know how honest children will be.” (GAL)*

*“I think we really need to look at what DSS is doing to change the way they are working with the parents. I don’t know how exactly they are working with parents to get them to do what they need to do, but it obviously isn’t working. I don’t know how often they contact the parents, how often they see the parents and talk to them, how long it is between the contacting of the parents, how hands on they are, how long it is between referrals, or how long they need to get parents to get to services, but maybe those are things to be looked at.” (GAL)*

*“I think the rhetoric is that family preservation is at the heart of what the intent of MRS is – to work with families upfront in hopes of preserving the family situation. It’s catastrophic for children to be removed from the home, so putting services in as a prevention of having to do a far more invasive process and working with the families in a respectful and sensitive way and in a way that really meets the needs of families and doesn’t impose our sense of what families should be.” (GAL)*

*“I think the MRS approach is far less intimidating to families, and I think that’s been helpful, especially for the parents. I think there are children who will not be open to talking in front of their parents. Perhaps only neglect was reported, but there are far more serious issues in the house.” (GAL)*

*“It’s (MRS) been a long process and granted, everyone is slow at implementing policy, but you can’t blame what happens on just one thing, because it’s never just one thing.” (GAL)*

One court official admitted a complete lack of knowledge, illustrating the need for ongoing education and communication about MRS. Other court officials reported that they considered MRS to have a positive effect on child safety. However, one court official conveyed disapproval of MRS, stating that this process aimed at helping families was too difficult and had unrealistic expectations of families involved with CPS, often leading to unsuccessful outcomes.

*“In my 19 years, things have come and gone. I am sure they informed me what MRS is and the policies associated, but to tell you the truth, I have no clue. I hear so much and if it doesn’t affect us directly, sometimes I don’t retain all of that information.” (Court Official)*

*“I don’t agree with it. We have to understand that the people DSS is dealing with typically have very low levels of education. They are almost always poor and some lack basic upbringing themselves. I think MRS just sets a family up for failure. Also with some of these cases, there are cultural issues at play. Obviously, I don’t support it, but do you know that in Mexico it isn’t illegal to beat your wife? So we are telling people that they have to stop doing something that they have either done or seen all their lives. This can be difficult for some of these families. MRS also makes the assumption that these families can avail themselves of the services DSS recommends. Sometimes people don’t have the wherewithal or there are transportation issues, etc. Also, it seems like we keep on raising the bar on these families. The more they do, the more we ask them to do.” (Court Official)*

*“MRS, to my understanding, is a two track system. Part of it is investigative, which isn’t fixing anything; it is just getting the facts. The assessment is getting to the root of the problem. The investigative track is for cases deemed more serious. The cases that come in, you can tell pretty early on what kind of case that is, and having all of them under one umbrella would be overdoing it.” (Court Official)*

Conversely, DSS administrators expressed positive views of MRS and did not see a relationship between MRS implementation and reduced child safety. Some noted a changed relationship between DSS and parents suggesting that it allows social workers to help neglectful and abusive families in different ways. The following quotes highlight these ideas.

*“I think what MRS does is allow social workers to deal with families who have issues of neglect. It doesn’t mean that we don’t have the authority to invoke involuntary services, but it allows us to work more with families first. On the other side of this, for those people*

*who really hurt children, it gives us a better ability to hold them accountable. In the old days, there was little distinction between neglect and abuse.” (DSS)*

*“I think it’s been better for the family. I think it has made a world of difference, because now families call us to ask our advice. DSS is better understood. They appreciate everything we do for them. There has been a shift in the relationship between parents and social workers.” (DSS)*

*“We are showing that we are not the enemy; we are trying to help them.” (DSS)*

DSS staff shared comments on the MRS implementation process and how it has changed from the first year. Admitting there was a learning curve, DSS administrators now believe that social workers have adjusted and honed their skills. However, they also described challenges that they have faced. The following are quotes from DSS staff regarding the implementation of MRS and challenges they’ve encountered:

*“We do much better than when we started. We are much better at doing CFTs. We are much better at engaging families. We are much better at involving fathers. We are much better with the overall process.” (DSS)*

*“Absolutely, there has been a learning curve. One of the biggest challenges prior to MRS is that we had to treat every family exactly the same, regardless of what kind of allegation it was. From the get-go, I think that we felt like it would give us an opportunity to really work with the family and impact change instead of telling a family that they were neglectful and forcing services on them. It has evolved and I think our staff now would be very resistant to going back to not using MRS.” (DSS)*

*“Originally we had staff that operated over the old system. I think there was definitely a learning curve. I also think that we have increased the utilization of MRS in terms of family-centered practice and utilizing those services as well as the CFTs and bringing more relatives to the table to address barriers. We seek out fathers and relatives, trying to keep the children in their own environment. We have just had to learn. I don’t think you can go from one environment to another cold turkey. I think over the past few years, it has been a positive change.” (DSS)*

*“I do hear from my staff that they are still uncomfortable on going out to new referrals with new families that they don’t know - You’re talking to the whole family and asking kids in front of their families about how things are like at home.” (DSS)*

*“CFTs were a little harder to incorporate. We did have the funding for a facilitator and that has gone away. It meant that we had to have an increase in training for all of our workers and then they help each other out. But you’re talking about people who have a full case load and now they have to carve out a couple of hours to help someone else’s case.”(DSS)*

*“I don’t know if it’s a matter of the services or if it’s just us. It does seem that our assessments take longer - trying to get things frontloaded, trying to get it in place, and then trying to get that first appointment scheduled and attended by the parents.” (DSS)*

*“The community of people that are still familiar with the old way have questions like, “why are you calling to set up an appointment, why are you alerting them that you’re coming, why are you giving them a heads up?” Some accept it once we talk to them and we say, “just wait and see”. They just need to see how it plays out and then they can see the good in it and how it helps the family.”*

### **Perceptions about changes in Juvenile Petitions**

Participants were asked a series of questions to explore observed changes in the number of juvenile petitions within their district. All of the GALs interviewed reported a decrease in the number of filings as did the four court officials. Half of the DSS administrators indicated a decrease while the other half indicated that had been no change in filings. For districts containing multiple counties, GALs and court officials were also asked whether there were differences between the counties in the number of juvenile petitions filed. All of them reported discrepancies between counties based on factors such as leadership (legal and agency), implementation of policy, and perceptions about what the numbers may indicate. Some examples highlighting these ideas are as follows:

*“In some ways, I think MRS has raised the bar for when you file a petition. They wait a lot longer, and the situation has to be significantly more dangerous for a child to be removed.” (GAL)*

*“I think that in some of our stronger counties with a good DSS, they are providing the sorts of intervention that prevent petitions from being filed. That might mean staying in the home or that they are placed in voluntary kinships so that they still receive services and there is not a petition. But, I think in some of our other counties, there is a feeling that the fewer petitions you file, the better job you are doing.” (Court Official)*

*“The state may have policy, but it is still up to the individual agencies how they interpret and implement that policy. The types of cases that get filed in one county look drastically different than ones in other counties.”(GAL)*

*“Agency leadership makes a tremendous difference on what they prioritize. It depends on their philosophy; like for instance, the director in one county has a mental health background and understands the difficulties his social workers have with these cases, so he’s always advocating for safety issues. Other directors have different background and priorities – you just have differences.” (GAL)*

*“There are differences between the counties. I will tell you that leadership matters (on filing petitions). Change in who is managing things at DSS has a lot to do with it. I mean some counties do it correctly but others don’t rely enough on legal staff and instead bring things to court that they should not.” (Court Official)*

*“I think some of this depends on whether DSS controls their attorney or whether the attorney can be more proactive in controlling DSS. It is better when DSS attorneys can take a leadership role in making decisions about petitions based on their knowledge and experience in court. Again, much depends on the attorney you are working with. Another issue is that turnover among attorneys is high.” (Court Official)*

### **Factors affecting Juvenile Petitions**

There are a number of possible factors that could impact the number of juvenile petitions filed and may have contributed to the downward trend. Some DSS administrators suggested that the reduction in juvenile petitions was a positive effect stemming from MRS strategies such as increased frontloading of services and family engagement. Earlier MRS evaluation reports support this idea, finding that the practice of frontloading services reduced the likelihood of a re-assessment within 6 months. Participants noted that social workers spend more time and energy on the front end, arranging for services and working with families to help them make needed changes earlier in the process thereby reducing the need to file juvenile petitions. Examples of comments about the impact of frontloading of services on petitions are highlighted below.

*“MRS has helped us engage with the families much more and frontload services a lot more. We really are doing these things and families are becoming a lot more involved than they have in the past.” (DSS)*

*“Petitions may have dropped some because we are frontloading services. We are able to work with and help families more.” (DSS)*

*“I think it (frontloading) has been positive. It is good social work. The more services you provide up front, the better it is for the family. If you can provide more services upfront and meet the needs, then we don’t need to stay involved. If we reduce the risk in investigation through providing services, there is really no reason for it to go into case management and hopefully not into foster care.” (DSS)*

Child and Family Team meetings (CFTs) bring together identified sources of support within the family and community and are intended to engage families, assist them in developing a case plan and overcoming barriers to effective parenting. Most respondents, including both DSS administrators and GALs, stated that CFTs were a positive process for families. When questioned about the impact of CFTs on the rate of juvenile petitions, most interviewees reported that CFTs had a slight effect. Another benefit noted was the identification of possible kinship placements through the use of CFTs which can provide DSS with alternatives to foster care and thereby reduce juvenile petitions.

*“It’s all about talking about the strengths, even the little things can be strengths, and then the family starts thinking more positively and they think about the people they do have that support them and who are vested in their success.” (DSS)*

*“It helps the family to see how many people are committed to their success. It helps them see how serious we are all about them and how committed we are to do this together.”*  
(DSS)

*“I think CFTs are helpful. The more family members you involve, sometimes the bigger mess, but looking at the family for solutions and being the solution has been a positive for a lot of families.”* (GAL)

*“I think it is really helpful to identify early on kinship placement options. I think it has been very helpful. I think that is one of the reasons why petitions haven’t been filed.”*  
(Court Official)

Conversely, one court official expressed concerns about the use of CFTs.

*“Honestly, those round table meetings or CFTs they have with families can be a problem. Sometimes they are creating unrealistic case plans that the family can’t do.”* (Court Official)

The increased use of informal or voluntary kinship placements may have the potential to significantly impact juvenile petitions. Such placements are not legally secured and may occur while parents are in the assessment phase of the case or while they are receiving case management services, but prior to a determination about whether or not safety concerns can be sufficiently alleviated to allow the children live in the home safely. DSS administrators were asked about their use of such placements and the relative frequency. Five of the six counties indicated that they use informal kinship placements frequently or very frequently in cases requiring placement. These placements can provide a window of time for further assessment of the household and to determine parental commitment to change, leading to more informed decision making about the need to legally secure placements outside of the home. Some respondents offered thoughts about why such placements were preferable, noting that kinship placements can be more comfortable for children, can increase the involvement of extended family members, and can help cases reach resolution sooner. Examples of some of the comments made by DSS administrators are highlighted below.

*“A lot...we do kinship placements a lot. It’s probably at least half...that sounds high but we do a lot of kinship placements.”*(DSS)

*“We do use kinship placements a lot. We use them as much as we can.”* (DSS)

*“We do kinship placements about half of the time, but if the placement is not legally secured and we don’t think the child can go back with the parents, then we have to file a petition. If we do a kinship placement, we aren’t going around the system.”* (DSS)

*“It [kinship placements] is significant, because it still gives the parent an opportunity to have a relationship with the child and it puts it in the family and allows them to work it out without DSS being involved. We have found that they will call us if they have a concern. It has definitely reduced the number of petitions we’ve had to file. It is so much*



*better for the child, because they aren't going to a stranger; the children are handling it better."* (DSS)

GAL administrators and other court staff such as judges and attorneys were also asked about the use of informal kinship placements. It is important to reiterate that such placements are not legally secured therefore they would not yet have been brought to the attention of legal system. The responses provided below represent some perceptions about the use and benefits of informal kinship placements from different perspectives. Many indicated that they believed the increased use of these placements has reduced the number of juvenile petitions filed but not all saw this as a bad outcome for children and families. The following are examples of some of the comments made.

*"I usually don't know about it unless a petition has been filed. I know that many counties use kinship placement rather than foster care placement if they can. Sometimes they still file a petition and do a kinship placement, though sometimes the parents do a voluntary kinship placement. Usually the reason I know about those, however, are because mom tries to take the child away and then DSS files a petition, so I know about the voluntary placements in retrospect. I do think counties use kinship care as much as possible and that foster care really is a last resort, which in my mind, if it is a safe place better someone you know than a complete stranger."*(GAL)

*"I think informal kinship placements have a huge impact on petitions. They [DSS] can just place kids and not have to file a petition, which is what they want to do."*(GAL)

*"I think sometimes when DSS is on the fence with a family, they might lean toward not filing a petition. I don't know why DSS would not file it, because they usually have enough to adjudicate them. The one thing I do see is they might be leaning on kinship more heavily. They are more actively seeking family placement and more interested in keeping them out of foster care."*(Court Official)

*"I think it is really helpful to identify early on kinship placement options. I think it has been very helpful. I think that is one of the reasons why petitions haven't been filed."*  
(Court Official)

*"I think sometimes it allows petitions to not have to be filed; if we can place a child in a safe home for a while, we don't have to file a petition, and I think that is a good thing. Sometimes that means a petition is filed later, but at least you can file it knowing the services have been tried."*(Court Official)

### **Additional Issues/Factors**

A number of other issues were noted in the interviews that were thought to impact MRS and/or juvenile petition rates. Participants cited factors such as service array and availability, financial resources, and training.

The selection and availability of services for families in a given area could affect the number of juvenile petitions filed. A community that offers many types of services at various

times has the ability to influence whether families succeed. On the other hand, parents may be willing to engage but the lack of services or poor accessibility of services could be a barrier. Interviewees were asked about the role that service availability may play in this issue and the responses overwhelmingly pointed to a lack of appropriate services or transportation to services.

*“We just don’t seem to have the level of services necessary for some of our families. In our county, we don’t have resources for substance abuse, and that is a high percentage of our clients.” (DSS)*

*“I think in some of our more rural counties where mental health services may only be available on Tuesday, that can create and a huge barrier. It is hard to take a motivated parent and sustain that if the services are not available.” (Court Official)*

*“That is a major concern we’re dealing with because the mental health service reform has hurt many. It’s a huge barrier for us to get enough agencies.” (DSS)*

Budget constraints and the costs associated with filing juvenile petitions as well as providing foster care were cited by GALs as a reason for the reduction in juvenile petitions filed. However, most DSS staff stated that cost was not a factor in deciding whether or not to engage the court system.

*“I do believe it is just about numbers for the feds and the state, and the fewer children in foster care, the less money it costs them.” (GAL)*

*“Safety, that’s it. Budget is not a concern here.” (DSS)*

Both GALs and DSS administrators mentioned the need to enhanced education and training about the respective systems.

*“So for me it’s that the training does not match the MRS policy. I think the level of training of the CPS workers who are administering MRS needs to be a lot higher.” (GAL)*

*“Not only do they need to be trained in mental health, but they also need court training so that when they get there, they are not totally blown out of the water. I think a case manager would work the case a lot differently if they knew they had to be the person on the stand if and when the plug was pulled. They would look at how they’re approaching the case a lot differently.” (GAL)*

*“This is not their (GAL’s) career. They go through a 6-week orientation class and then they’re thrust into the court system and they’re asked to make decisions.” (DSS)*

### **Suggestions**

Many respondents had suggestions for policy change, process change, or strategies for improving communication between stakeholders. The issue most mentioned by GALs, DSS and

Court Officials alike was lack of continuity in policy and practice within DSS. Respondents indicated a problematic disconnect in how policies are viewed and handled between state and county DSS offices. Other suggestions included the utilization of a tracking system for cases, a pre-court advocate for families, a mandated child health and dental evaluation, mandated identification of fathers, improved communication between DSS and the judiciary branch, and updated policy for chronic neglect cases. The following are examples of quotes for some of the aforementioned issues:

*“There’s such a focus on local government and local control that it creates problems with consistency.” (GAL)*

*“We see very little continuity in DSS.” (Court Official)*

*“The various levels in DSS need to align because they don’t align right now and give people different, confusing answers.” (DSS)*

*“I do think there needs to be a tracking system to see how long people are languishing in the system.” (GAL)*

*“You ought to at least know who the father is. There should never be a petition filed where you have been offering services for years and years and you don’t know who the father of this child is.” (GAL)*

*“Having almost a pre-advocate, because the first time the family has seen an advocate is when they have an attorney or GAL after the petition has been filed. A lot of them don’t understand what is going on until they get to court. So they really need a court official or someone else to tell them what they need to do before they get to the mess of court.” (Court Official)*

These interviews provided insight into a number of key issues related to perceptions of MRS, changes in juvenile petitions, factors affecting petitions, and suggestions for improvements. The findings suggest that knowledge of MRS policy and practice outside of DSS may be limited indicating a need for DSS to conduct ongoing outreach and education about the policies, goals and intent of this systemic change in child welfare. Most interviewees acknowledged the positive intentions of MRS but some GAL and court officials expressed concerns about the effectiveness of MRS suggesting that the policies allow cases to languish and leave children in unsafe situations. All DSS staff expressed positive views of MRS offering that it improves relationships with families and provides opportunities to work with families in different ways. Many also noted a learning curve in implementing various aspects of MRS including CFTs and frontloading of services.

When asked about issues that affect petitions, DSS staff specifically cited MRS as a contributory factor noting that the use of CFTs and frontloading of services has helped to engage families in services and reduce risk, ultimately leading to fewer petitions. The majority of those interviewed believed that an increased use in informal or voluntary kinship placements was likely a factor in decreasing rates of juvenile petitions and some highlighted benefits associated

with utilizing extended family as caregivers when necessary. The suggestions offered centered on the need for greater consistency in how MRS policy is administered, improved ability to track children in the system, improved communication between DSS and the judicial system, and updated policy for chronic neglect cases.

## Case File Reviews

Case reviews consisted of examining both report-level and case-level data, extracting key information as presented in Table 16. Case reports were categorized as either pre-MRS or post-MRS according to the date of MRS implementation in the respective county. All 41 pre-MRS reports resulted in the case decision of “Substantiated”, as “Services Needed” was not an option before MRS implementation (see Table 17). There were 58 Post-MRS cases reviewed, with 29 “Substantiated” and 29 found to be “Services Needed”.

*Table 16: Data points*

Report-Level	Case-Level
Dates of report, case decision, and case closure	Juvenile petition filing and date
Case finding	Foster care placement dates
Maltreatment type found	Kinship care placement dates
Number of services referred	Number of reports overall
Service completion level	
Removal of perpetrator	

*Table 17: Number of case reviews by MRS status and finding*

MRS Category	N
Pre-MRS (Total)	41
Post-MRS (Total)	58
Substantiated	29
Services Needed	29

This sample of cases from six counties highlights some interesting differences between Pre-MRS cases and Post-MRS cases in 4 areas (See Table 18). The percentage of juvenile petitions filed was lower in Post-MRS cases (17.2%) than in Pre-MRS cases (26.8%). However, kinship placements were utilized more in Post-MRS cases (32.8%) than Pre-MRS cases (24.4%). As use of kinship placements increased, the likelihood of petitions filed with kinship cases declined: kinship placements were only half as likely to have an accompanying petition filed Post-MRS. Evaluators also examined the number of services, such as mental health, substance abuse and parenting, offered to families and found the mean number of services offered was higher in Post-MRS cases (2.6) than in Pre-MRS cases (1.9). Another important finding refers to the time spent working with families after case decision, calculated by using the case decision date and the case closure date. The average number of days a case was open was higher in Post-MRS cases (224.2) than in Pre-MRS cases (198.4).

*Table 18: Pre- to Post-MRS changes in case characteristics*

	<b>Pre-MRS</b>	<b>Post-MRS</b>
Juvenile Petitions Filed	26.8%	17.2%
Kinship Placements Used	24.4%	32.8%
% Kinship Placement with Petitions	40%	20%
Mean # of Services Offered	1.9	2.6
Mean # of Days Open	198.4	224.2

In sum, this descriptive information indicates that in the counties sampled, fewer juvenile petitions were filed and more informal kinship placements were used after MRS implementation began. It also suggests that on average, caseworkers were offering more services to families and working with families over a longer time period Post-MRS. It is possible that increased use of kinship placements, frontloading of a higher number of services and increased time spent working with families could impact the number of juvenile petitions that are filed, as well as the timing of juvenile petitions. It should also be noted, however, that this is a small sample of cases from a small number of counties within the state. Findings should be interpreted cautiously, and are meant only to support and inform conclusions from other data sources.

## **Conclusions**

It is valuable to consider the findings from each of these sources of data individually, but it is equally important to understand the story the data tell collectively. To that end, this section will summarize the quantitative and qualitative findings around four key questions: (1) Are the rates of juvenile petitions decreasing across the state? (2) What factors have influenced this change? (3) Has the severity of petitions changed over time? (4) How has child safety been affected?

### ***Are the rates of juvenile petitions decreasing in North Carolina?***

AOC administrative data indicate that, based on aggregate data across North Carolina judicial districts, petitions as a proportion of the total number of CPS assessments show a pattern of decline beginning in 2006. While there are numerous possible explanations for changing petition rates, this decrease may indicate that: (1) CPS had less severe cases, (2) there was an expansion in the strategies available for addressing higher risk cases, and/or (3) policy has shifted so that a higher severity threshold is reached prior to filing a petition.

### ***What factors have influenced this trend?***

Some of the major policy changes that were hypothesized to impact petition rates include the implementation of MRS and the Title IV-E Waiver demonstration project. Analysis of the data by judicial districts shows that petition rates did not decrease at or immediately following MRS implementation for Wave 1 or Wave 2 counties. However, as previously noted, the state as a whole did experience declining rates of petitions after FY 2005-2006. This decline coincides with MRS implementation for Wave 3 counties, but given the overall statewide trend, it is unlikely that MRS is the primary cause.

The Title IV-E Waiver project was also examined as a possible cause for the shift in petition rates after 2006. The program was credited with reducing the likelihood of costly out-of-home placements through the utilization of federal dollars to provide services and supports to families involved with CPS. Despite the fact that the project ended in 2006, a large proportion of North Carolina counties participated (n=38), so it was thought the program may have had some residual effect on petitions. Analysis of the data indicated that the 13 judicial districts that had no waiver counties showed the same declining trend as the 26 districts containing one or more waiver counties. This finding suggests that the Title IV-E waiver demonstration's end was not a factor in reduced rates of juvenile petitions.

These findings are augmented by surveys, interviews and case file review data. While survey respondents' perceptions about changes in the rates of petitions within their county or judicial district were correct only about half of the time, exploring the factors they cite as contributing to change may help to explain current trends. A review of open-ended survey questions revealed that those noting decreases in petitions most often cited the implementation of MRS, the use of family-centered practice and voluntary kinship placements. Despite the fact that administrative data does not suggest that MRS implementation is associated with reductions in juvenile petitions, it is interesting to note that many GALs and DSS staff do believe it has played a role. Interview data showed that DSS staff believes that MRS has helped reduce petitions by providing a mechanism to engage families in new ways, particularly through the use of CFT meetings and frontloading of services. GALs offered that MRS seemed to increase the amount of time that DSS works with families prior to involving the court system, effectively raising the bar for when a petition is filed.

Voluntary kinship placements as an alternative to involving the court system are not currently tracked in a systemic way; however, they have the potential to reduce petitions. Furthermore, it appears that the frequency of such placements may have increased in recent years. For example, 44% of the DSS administrators surveyed estimated that kinship care was utilized in 26% to 75% of all placements. One-fourth put the estimate higher at 76% to 100% of all placements. Further, 45% of these respondents indicated that they file petitions for these placements less than half of the time, with another 16% noting that they "never" or "almost never" file. Case file data supports these findings, showing that kinship placements were utilized more post-MRS and were only half as likely to be accompanied by a petition. Findings from the interview data build on these ideas, with five of the six DSS administrators indicating that they use voluntary kinship placements frequently or very frequently. Taken together, these data suggest that an increase in voluntary kinship placements, in part encouraged by the implementation of MRS, may be a large factor in the reduction in juvenile petitions. Systematic data on the usage of voluntary kinship placements would be necessary to confirm this hypothesis.

### ***Has the severity of petitions changed overtime?***

Analysis of AOC administrative data suggests that a higher proportion of severe cases are reaching the court system in recent years, as measured by increases in the rates of TPRs and decreases in the number of cases dismissed by the court over time. The rise in TPRs and the

decrease in dismissals may indicate that the threshold for a CPS case to reach juvenile petition has shifted. While it seems that the cases that do reach the court system are appropriate given that fewer are dismissed, it is unclear if the threshold has shifted too far. Importantly, the raw number of TPRs has not increased; there has only been an increase in TPRs as a proportion of those cases seen in the court system.

Data obtained through surveys, interviews and case files reviews suggest that CPS cases are staying open for longer periods of time. Extending the time that DSS works with families may potentially leave children in risky situations and/or allow cases to reach a greater level of severity by the time they reach the court system. Analysis of case file data showed that the average number of days a case was open was nearly 26 days longer after MRS implementation began in the counties sampled. Survey responses supported this finding, with both GAL and DSS noting changes in the length of time that CPS is working with families prior to filing petitions. Both groups cited MRS and the associated strategies as the primary reason for this change; however a number of GALs also listed budgetary constraints as a factor in the delayed involvement of the court system. Analysis of interview data provided additional perspective, with GALs expressing concerns about children being left in unsafe environments for an extended period while DSS works with their caregivers. DSS staff said that they are spending more time on the front end of cases working to engage families in appropriate services and identifying natural supports in an effort to avoid filing petitions. It is not clear to what extent this shift is the result of philosophical changes in the DSS role, or rather is influenced by budgetary concerns in funding court costs and child placement. Both likely contribute to an intensification of efforts to meet safety needs within a family preservation model prior to court involvement. Because the severity of individual cases at the time of court involvement is not systematically documented in administrative data, we cannot evaluate whether this delayed court involvement is increasing safety concerns at the level of the individual child.

### *How has child safety been affected?*

Analysis of CPS administrative data indicates that, on the whole, children are not less safe, as evidenced by the rates of repeat assessments. Given that the numbers of children in DSS custody are also declining, the steady decline in re-assessment rates since 2001-2002 suggests that child safety is continuing to increase over time.

## **Recommendations**

For some child welfare cases involving situations where children may be in immediate danger, involvement of the juvenile court system is imperative. However, it is important that social workers and supervisors weigh the risks against the negative and sometimes permanent consequences associated with bringing to bear the jurisdiction of the court system. In some instances, court involvement helps families to recognize the seriousness of abuse and neglect and pushes them to make needed changes that can improve their capacity to care for their children. However, if less adversarial strategies can be employed resulting in similar outcomes, involving the court may needlessly increase disruption to the family unit and limit the ability of DSS to work with families. This natural tension is unavoidable and decisions about when to involve the court system are often more subjective or “gut” level based on varying familial circumstances

and the experience of social work professionals. For this reason, changes in this tension are difficult to measure.

It is clear that juvenile petitions have decreased since 2006 and that simultaneously the court system is seeing a higher proportion of severe cases. This suggests a shift in the threshold for when cases are brought to the attention of the juvenile court system, but this shift does not coincide with significant policy changes such as MRS. It is unclear whether or not the threshold has shifted too far, excluding cases from court oversight that should have it or lengthening the time that children are in unsafe circumstances prior to court involvement. This question may require further exploration, but it does not appear that this shift is impacting child safety overall. The use of voluntary kinship placements may be the most important factor in explaining reductions in juvenile petitions without a corresponding decrease in child safety. With this in mind, the following recommendations are offered as strategies to foster continuous improvement and monitoring around this issue.

- Incorporate database fields within the NCDSS administrative data warehouse to capture voluntary kinship placements, allowing for consistent tracking of the frequency, transitions in, and overall duration of such placements.
- Provide ongoing training and outreach efforts to GAL and other court officials specific to MRS policy, practice and intent in order to reduce incorrect perceptions and improve collaboration among systems.
- Develop mechanisms to improve communication and information dissemination between DSS and the court system regarding policy and budgetary changes that may affect various stakeholders.
- Work to create more uniform policies and processes related to petitions across counties within the same judicial district in order to increase continuity and consistency.
- Create a task force with representatives from NCDSS and AOC that conducts a periodic review of administrative data sources to ensure early identification of trends (e.g., increasing repeat assessments) and to strategize solutions as necessary.
- Create multi-disciplinary, district-level teams that include DSS staff, GAL representatives, court officials and other stakeholders for purposes of reviewing complex cases and anecdotal experiences to identify areas of concern (e.g., too much time passing before petitions are filed), strategizing solutions, standardizing practices for the handling of “like cases” and enhancing cross-agency collaboration. With regular discussion, such groups may be able to identify factors that predict greater safety concerns and establish guidelines on when to involve the court system.



# Appendix A: Data Sources and Data Processing

## Child Protective Services (CPS) Assessments

### Source

Data provided in the Central Registry records of the Client Services Data Warehouse are from the DSS-5104 form. These data include records for all CPS assessments. For this evaluation, data were extracted with the following parameters:

*Dates of Downloads* – 5/15/2011 and 5/16/2011.

*Time Period* – Records from 7/1/1999 to 12/31/2010 (inclusive) were selected based on the Investigation Completed Date.

*County* – County Name was used to select data for all 100 counties.

*View* – All fields were selected from the Central Registry with an Individual Type of “Victim.”

*Fields* – The following fields were included:

Initial Report Date	Investigation Initiated Date	Investigation Completed Date
County Case Number	Form Number	County Name
First Name	Middle Initial	Last Name
Birth Date	Race	Race Code
Sex	SIS Client ID	Social Security Number
Type Reported	Type Reported Code	Type Found
Type Found Code	Primary Maltreatment Type Found	Perpetrator Relationship
Caretaker Contributory Factor	Child Contributory Factor	Household Contributory Factor
Social Worker First Initial	Social Worker Middle Initial	Social Worker Last Name

### Processing

#### Initial Processing

The ten data files were downloaded from the Data Warehouse, and converted into SAS® datasets<sup>1</sup>. This process included re-naming variables, converting dates, converting “#EMPTY” values to blanks, and other non-substantive changes. Records with a Perpetrator Relation of “Female Employee of Institution/Group Home,” “Female Employee of a Day Care Facility/Plan,” “Male Employee of Institution/Group Home,” or “Male Employee of a Day Care Facility/Plan” were deleted, as were records with any variation of “Delete,” “Do Not Use,” “Invalid,” or “Duplicate” for the First Name or Last Name. Also, 42 records were deleted because they were complete duplicates (based on

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<sup>1</sup> All data processing was done with the SAS® statistical package, version 9.2.

the downloaded fields). Following this, a unique ID was assigned to all records for each child according to the following rules:

1. Records in the same County with the same SIS # were assigned the same ID, AND
2. Records in the same County with the same Last Name, First Name, Birth Date, and Sex (where all values for these fields are non-missing) were assigned the same ID.

There were a total of 1,612,788 records (all 100 counties, 7/1/1999 to 12/31/2010).

### **“Fuzzy” Matching**

The data were further processed to assign the same unique ID to records with slight variations in the First Name, Last Name, Birth Date, or Sex fields. In all cases, the records were required to be within the same county, and the identifying fields were required to be non-missing. In some cases, SSN, SIS Number, Case Number, or Form Number were used to verify whether variations in the identifying variables indicated the records were for different children.

### **Children with Duplicate Records Except Form Number**

For these, only one record was kept since all other information is the same, and the Form Number was not used in analyses.

### **Records with Missing Finding**

These records were deleted.

### **Multiple Overlapping Assessments**

Records showing multiple overlapping assessments for the same child exist in the CPS data. These records were combined if they had the same Investigation Completed Date. When combining, each field was looked at separately and the worst case for the field was kept in the combined record.

### **Final Data File**

The final data file contains 1,566,554 records (all 100 counties, 7/1/1999 to 12/31/2010). The final SAS® programs to process these data are as follows:

ReadCPS_S10	5/18/2011 11:22:59 AM
ID1_Init_S10	5/19/2011 3:01:19 PM
ID2_FName_S10	5/23/2011 12:40:24 PM
ID3_LName_S10	5/24/2011 1:32:43 PM
ID4_BDate_S10	5/25/2011 2:31:07 PM
ID5_Sex_S10	5/25/2011 3:31:11 PM
CrMastCPS_S_9010	5/27/2011 2:25:34 PM
CleanCPS_S_9010	5/31/2011 3:52:51 PM

## Population Estimates

### Source

All county level source data files for child population were downloaded from the NC Office of State Budget and Management (OSBM) web site (<http://www.osbm.nc.us/>). While both the Census Bureau and the NC OSBM web site release intercensal population estimates for July 1 every year, the NC OSBM data use a methodology that is more precise than that used by the Census Bureau. For this evaluation, population estimates were downloaded as follows:

*Dates of Downloads* – For 1990 to 2006: 9/25/2008 and 9/29/2008  
For 2007 to 2010: 12/8/2010

*Time Period* – 1990 - 2010. 1990 is the 1990 Census (posted on the NC OSBM web site). The 1991-2010 data are July 1 estimates.

*Counties* – All North Carolina counties.

### Processing

For the years 1990 and 1999-2010, the NC OSBM data files provide estimates for individual ages 0-17. For the remaining years 1991-1998, OSBM supplies population estimates for select child age groups 0-2, 3-4, 5, 6-9, 10-13, 14, 15, and 16-17. In each case, the child population was calculated as the sum of the population for the individual ages, or the age groups, for ages 0-17.

## Appendix B: Surveys

### County GAL Administrators- Web based Surveys: 2010-2011 MRS Evaluation

As part of the Multiple Response System (MRS) Evaluation, the North Carolina Division of Social Services and the Administrative Office of the Courts are jointly requesting your feedback via the following web-based survey. Your responses will help to shape the current evaluation which is exploring a possible link between the implementation of MRS, a reduction in the number of juvenile petitions filed by CPS across jurisdictions, and the impact that this may have on child safety. This survey is *confidential* and only researchers at Duke's Center for Child and Family Policy will see your responses. We are requesting that you provide researchers with your name and contact number because you may be selected to complete a brief phone interview at a later date. Please take 10 minutes to complete the survey by clicking on the link below. Thanks for your assistance!

If you have questions or concerns, please contact Nicole Lawrence at the Center for Child and Family Policy at (919)668-3282 or [nicole.lawrence@duke.edu](mailto:nicole.lawrence@duke.edu)

1. Judicial District: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Name and contact number (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

3. Approximate length of time you have worked as an active GAL employee or volunteer in the State of North Carolina (select one):

0-3 years

4-6 years

7-9 years

10 or more years

4. In the past 10 years, do you think that the number of juvenile petitions filed by CPS in your district your have (select one):

Increased

Decreased

Remained about the same

Not Sure

5. Briefly describe what factors you believe have caused or influenced any changes in the rates of juvenile petitions.

---

6. To your knowledge, have there been any county or local DSS policy or process changes relative to the handling of placement cases and/or petitions? (select one)

Yes

No

Not Sure

7. Briefly describe local policy/process changes and the effects.

---

8. To your knowledge, have there been any county or local DSS budgetary changes that affect foster care placements? (select one)

Yes

No

Not Sure

9. Briefly describe local budgetary changes and their effects.

---

10. How frequently is CPS filing juvenile petitions without assuming custody? Such petitions are sometimes referred to as “slow petitions” or “non-compliance petitions”? (select one)

Very often

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

11. What changes, if any, have there been relative to the filing of juvenile petitions without assuming custody? To what do you attribute these changes?

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12. Have the rates of social worker turnover changes in your district in the last 5 years? (select one)

Yes

No

Not sure

13. How has social worker turnover changed? What factors contribute most to turnover in your county?

---

14. Over the past five years, have you seen changes in the length of time that social workers work with families prior to filing a petition? (select one)

Yes

No

Not Sure

15. How have things changed relative to the length of time social workers work with families? To what do you attribute these changes?

---

16. Other related issues/concerns not mentioned? Please describe. \_\_\_\_\_

## DSS Program Administrators/Supervisors - Web based Surveys: 2010-2011 MRS Evaluation

As part of the Multiple Response System (MRS) Evaluation, the North Carolina Division of Social Services is requesting your feedback via the following web-based survey. Your responses will help to shape the current evaluation which is exploring the effects of MRS on juvenile petitions filed by CPS across jurisdictions. This survey is **confidential** and only researchers at Duke's Center for Child and Family Policy will see your responses. At the end of the survey we ask that you provide researchers with your name and contact number because you may be selected to complete a brief phone interview at a later date. Even if you decide not to provide your name and contact number, we would still appreciate your responses to the survey. Keep in mind that any reports developed using the information collected will be presented in the aggregate and as such would not include names or county of origin, etc. Please take 10 minutes to complete the survey by clicking on the link below. Thanks for your assistance!

If you have questions or concerns, please contact Nicole Lawrence at the Center for Child and Family Policy at (919)668-3282 or [nicole.lawrence@duke.edu](mailto:nicole.lawrence@duke.edu)

1. County: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Name and Contact Number (optional): \_\_\_\_\_

3. Job Role/Function (select one):

CPS Supervisor

CPS Program Administrator

Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

4. How many years have you worked in CPS within the State of North Carolina? (select one):

1-3 years

4-6 years

7-9 years

10 -12

13 or more

5. In the past 10 years, do you think the number of juvenile petitions filed by CPS in your county have (select one):

Increased

Decreased

Remained about the same

Not sure

6. Briefly describe what factors you believe have caused or influenced any changes in the rates of juvenile petitions filed in your county.

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7. What percentage of case with safety issue significant enough to warrant removing children from their home, pare placed with kin (relatives) rather than in a foster care setting? Please estimate to the nearest 5% for your county. \_\_\_\_\_

8. Of those cases where children are placed with kin, how often does your county file petitions to assume custody? (select one)

Always/almost always

More than half of the time

Less than half of the time

Never/almost never

9. To your knowledge, have there been any county or local DSS policy or process changes relative to the handling of placement cases and court petitions? (select one)

Yes

No

Not Sure

10. Briefly describe local policy or process changes and the effects.

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11. To your knowledge, have there been any county or local DSS budgetary changes that have affected foster care placements? (select one):

Yes

No

Not Sure

12. Briefly describe local budgetary changes and the effects.

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13. How frequently does your county file juvenile petitions without an order to assume custody? Such petitions are sometimes referred to as “slow petitions” or “non-compliance petitions”.

(select one):

Very often

Often

Sometimes

Rarely

Never

14. What changes, if any, have there been related to juvenile petitions without assuming custody? To what do you attribute these changes?

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15. What would you estimate to be the average case load for social workers in your county? Please select a range for both investigators/assessors and in home services workers. (Think about your answer in terms of all types of social workers including assessors/investigators, in-home services workers and foster care workers)

- 7 or less
- 8-12
- 13-17
- 18-22
- 23 or more

16. Have the average case loads changed in the last five years? If so, how and why?

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17. Have the rates of social worker turnover changed in the last 5 years? (select one):

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

18. How has turnover changed? What factors contribute most to social worker turnover in your county?

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19. Over the past five years, have you seen changes in the length of time that social workers work with families prior to filing a petition? (select one):

- Yes
- No
- Not Sure

20. How have things changed relative to the length of time that social workers work with families? To what do you attribute these changes?

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21. In order to understand how changes in leadership affect practice, we want to know how many DSS directors your county has had in the past 10 years. (select one):

- 1-2
- 3-4
- 5-6
- 7-8
- 9 or more

22. Similarly, how many DSS attorneys (or lead counsel who may or may not be employed by DSS directly) has your county had in the past 10 years??

- 1-2
- 3-4
- 5-6
- 7-8
- 9 or more

23. Other related issues/concerns not mentioned? Please describe.

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## Appendix C: Personal Interview Questions

### DSS Staff Questions:

1. How long have you worked as a DSS, CPS Program Administrator or CPS Supervisor in North Carolina?
2. Since MRS implementation began in your county (i.e. 2002 for pilot, 2003 for wave 2, 2006 for wave 3), have you noticed a change in the rates of juvenile petitions?
  - What factors do you think have contributed to any changes in the rates of petitions?
3. Do you think the implementation of MRS changed overtime? Have such changes been good or bad? Why?
4. What percentage of cases requiring placement are placed informally with kin? (i.e. not legally secured or without a petition) What role do you think these types of kinship placements play in impacting the number of petitions filed?
5. If such placements are not legally secured, how can kinship providers make medical or educational decisions on behalf of the children in their care?
6. In cases for which you utilize kinship care placements, can you walk me through the legal processes that you typically follow?
  - Does your county file a petition for abuse/neglect and at adjudication request that the court grant temporary custody to the relative providing care? Why or why not?
  - Alternatively, does DSS typically retain custody in such situations? Why or why not?
  - Under what circumstances would you ask that temporary custody be granted to kin or decide to retain custody within DSS? Can you provide case examples?
7. For a child successfully residing in an informal kinship care placement, what steps are usually taken to close a case when the child is going to remain in the kinship placement rather than be reunified with birth parent(s)?
  - What proportion of cases has this kind of outcome?
  - What are the implications of these long-term kinship placements? Associated legalities?
  - Possible affects/outcomes for involved children?
8. Do you think that the implementation of CFT meetings within in-home services has impacted the rate at which petitions are filed? (Based on early identification of possible

kinship placements, more transparent case planning/management processes and enhanced family engagement?)

9. Similarly, what impact has the practice of frontloading services had on petitions if any? Has it reduced the need to file petitions? Why or why not?
10. What role does the availability of appropriate services play in this issue? i.e. parents are willing to engage in services to avoid having their children removed but such services may or may not be available or accessible.
11. Do you think that NCDSS placement prevention policies (often used to constitute reasonable efforts required under the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980) have been strengthened as a result of MRS? Why or why not?
  - What impacts have increased family support, family preservation services (including intensive family preservation services), and other community-based supports/services had specific to reducing the need to file petitions?
12. Are there other factors that may motivate DSS not to file petitions? i.e. avoiding permanency planning requirements or other components of the Adoption and Safe Families Act, budgetary constraints, etc.
13. Has the use of slow petitions changed in your county?
14. Are there policy/process changes that could be implemented within the court system to address concerns associated with languishing CPS cases?
  - i.e. increased use of slow petitions where the court provides more authoritative oversight through the review of CPS services provided, progress toward meeting the goals of the case plan and specification of the circumstances under which children will be permanently removed from parental custody. Similar to family treatment court but in close coordination with DSS case workers and community-based service providers.
15. Do you have ideas for policy/practice changes within CPS in-home services/case management that may provide insights into the management of “stuck cases”? (i.e. cases where families are mostly non-compliant with the terms of their case plans but the risk level has remained the same for victim children).
16. Do you think MRS has affected child safety?
17. If you could speculate, why do you think that some GAL representatives/volunteers are concerned that the implementation of MRS is affecting child safety in North Carolina?

18. Do you believe that MRS has had the effect of reducing petitions? Why or why not? If fewer petitions are filed do you think that means children are less safe?
19. Are there any other aspects of this issue that you want to tell me about that we haven't already discussed?

GAL and Court Official Questions:

1. How long have you worked as a North Carolina GAL administrators? GAL volunteer? Other court staff? (as applicable)
2. I want to start by getting a sense of your understanding of MRS policy, how you think it changed the way CPS works with families and your overall impressions of its effectiveness. (may have to provide a brief synopsis of MRS policy to some court staff at this juncture as some may not have a good understanding)
  - What components of MRS are good/effective? Less effective? Why?
  - Do you think the implementation of MRS changed over time? Have such changes been good or bad? Why?
3. Thinking about all the counties within this judicial district, are there significant differences in the rates of petitions filed among them? (may not be applicable if the judicial district only serves one large county i.e. Buncombe)
  - What factors do you think most influence those differences in each county?
4. Do you think the implementation of MRS has affected the rate in which CPS files juvenile petitions?
  - Are there specific elements of MRS policy that you believe have had the most impact?
  - Are there policy changes that could be made to improve MRS implementation? If so what?
5. Do you think that there are there other factors that may motivate DSS not to file petitions for custody of children? i.e. avoiding permanency planning requirements or other components of the Adoption and Safe Families Act, budgetary constraints, etc. If so, please describe.
6. Do you think there have been changes in the use of informal kinship placements in this district?
  - What impact might increased use of kinship placements have on petitions?
7. What percentage of petitions do you think involve kinship placements?

8. What do you think the quality of such placements has been? Level of stability?
9. Are there informal or formal county level DSS policy changes that you are aware of within your judicial district that affect the handling of placement cases and/or petitions? Please describe any policy changes and the impact on children and families.
  - What were the drivers behind policy changes? Why?
10. As mentioned previously, some GAL representatives have noted that they have seen increases in the length of time that social workers work with families prior to filing a petition since MRS began. Have you seen such changes? Think about this question in terms of individual counties within this judicial district (if applicable).
  - Is working with a family for a longer period to time in an effort to avoiding placement bad social work practice? Why or why not?
11. What role does the availability of appropriate services within counties play in this issue? i.e. parents are willing to engage in services to avoid having their children removed but such services are not available or easily accessible?
12. Is MRS to DSS what family treatment court or drug court is to the judicial system? Why or why not? i.e. a more service oriented, individualized approach that focuses less on the acts of offenders but rather on the underlying problems associated.
13. Are there policy/process changes that could be implemented within the court system to address concerns associated with languishing CPS cases? i.e. encouraging the increased use of slow petitions where the court provides more authoritative oversight through the review of CPS services provided, progress toward meeting the goals of the case plan and specification of the circumstances under which children will be permanently removed from parental custody. Similar to family treatment court but in close coordination with DSS case workers and community-based service providers.
14. Do you have recommendations or ideas for policy/practice changes within CPS in-home services/case management that may provide more guidance to DSS about how to better manage “stuck cases”? (i.e. cases where families are mostly non-compliant with the terms of their case plans but the risk level has remained the same for victim children).
15. Do you think MRS has affected child safety? Why or why not?
16. Are there any other aspects of this issue that you want to tell me about that we haven’t already discussed?