MRS!

INFORMATION IN SUPPORT OF NORTH CAROLINA'S MULTIPLE RESPONSE SYSTEM

October 2011

Has MRS Affected Rates of Juvenile Petitions?

by Nicole Lawrence, Ph.D.

After North Carolina's Multiple Response System (MRS) was implemented, some stakeholders believed they saw a decline in the number of juvenile petitions and expressed concern about what it might mean for child safety.

Responding to these concerns, the NC Division of Social Services asked Duke University's Center for Child and Family Policy to evaluate the impact MRS has had on child safety, with a special focus on the rate of child welfare juvenile petitions. Their evaluation explored four key questions:

1. Are the rates of juvenile petitions decreasing in North Carolina?
2. If so, what factors have influenced this trend?
3. Has the severity of petitions changed over time?
4. How has child safety been affected?

To answer these questions, evaluators from the Center for Child and Family Policy performed quantitative and qualitative analyses of data sources that included child protective services (CPS) reports, Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) data on juvenile petitions, interviews conducted with county DSS staff (n=6), Guardians ad Litem (GALs) (n= 4), and court officials (n= 4), web-based surveys of GALs and DSS staff, and CPS case file reviews in six counties.

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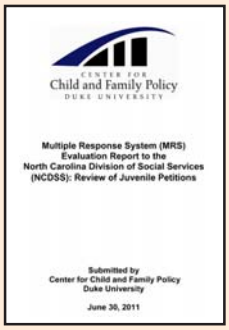

Read the Full Report

As part of North Carolina's efforts to continually improve its child welfare system, Duke University's Center for Child and Family Policy has regularly evaluated North Carolina's Multiple Response System (MRS). The 2011 MRS evaluation report can be found at <http://www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/mrs/docs/MRS%20Report%202011.pdf>. Evaluation reports from previous years can be found at <http://www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/mrs/index.htm>.

MRS Meetings

MRS and System of Care meetings take place three times monthly via conference call.

Dates and call-in information are listed below.

November 28, 29, & 30

10 a.m.-12 p.m.

Call-in number:
(218) 936-4141

Access code: 956303

MRS Questions?

If you have questions regarding the implementation of any aspect of MRS, please contact Holly McNeill 828/757-5672
holly.mcneill@dhhs.nc.gov

Training Dates

Adult Mental Health Issues Which Impact Families Served by Child Welfare
Oct. 20-Nov. 9
Online

Building Awareness and Cultural Competency
Nov. 1-3
Charlotte
Nov. 14-16
Greensboro
Nov. 29-Dec. 1
Raleigh
Dec. 13-15
Candler

To learn about these courses or to register, go to http://www.ncswLearn.org

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Comments?
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Online
www.ncdhhs.gov/dss/mrs

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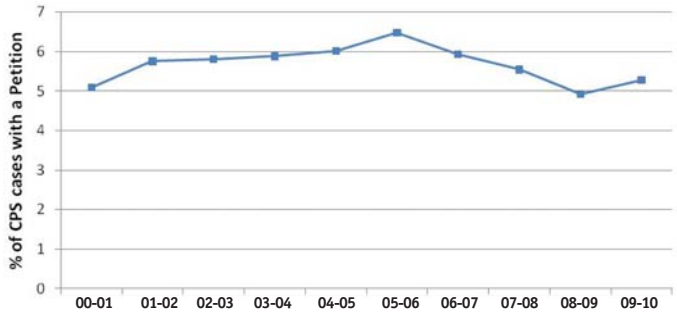
Are the rates of juvenile petitions decreasing in North Carolina?

Yes. 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 (see figure 1).

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

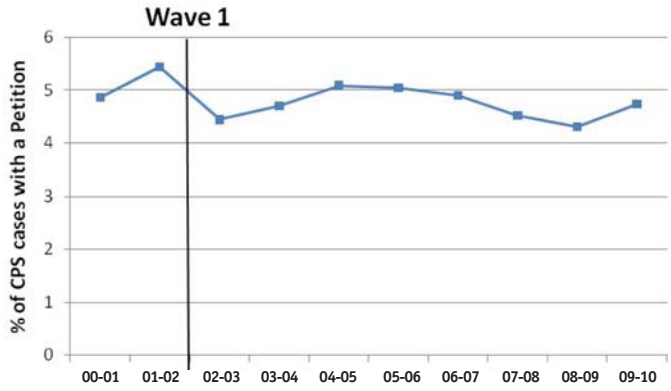


There are many possible explanations for this change. For example, a decrease in the proportion of assessments with a petition could indicate that CPS is seeing families with less severe problems. Or, a decrease could be the result of shifts in CPS practice allowing for a higher severity or risk threshold to be reached before petitions are filed. A lowered rate of petitions might also result from the availability of more options for DSS case workers to pursue in improving child safety.

What factors have influenced this trend?

Analysis of administrative data indicate MRS implementation was not a direct factor in the decline in rates of juvenile petitions. As figures 2 and 3 illustrate, petition rates did not decrease during or immediately following MRS implementation for Wave 1 or Wave 2 counties.

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



Like the other two groups, Wave 3 districts saw a downward slope in petition rates after 2005-2006. For this group, the decrease in petitions coincided 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 played a role

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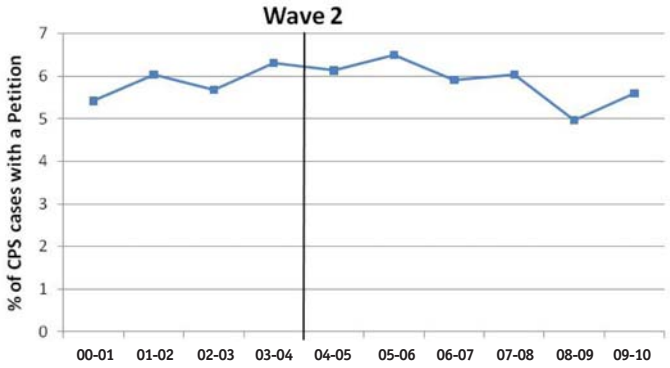
in petition reductions, the consistency of downward trajectories across districts after 2006 suggests there are other factors at play.

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



The Title IV-E Waiver project was also examined as a possible cause for the decline in petition rates after 2006. The waiver was credited with reducing the likelihood of out-of-home placements through use of federal dollars to provide services and supports to families involved with CPS. Though the waiver ended in 2006, many counties participated (n=38), so it was thought the waiver may have had a residual effect on petitions. Analysis of 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 suggests the Title IV-E Waiver demonstration was not a factor in reduced rates of juvenile petitions

Despite the fact that administrative data do not support the idea that MRS implementation is associated with reductions in juvenile petitions, it is interesting to note that many GALs and DSS staff do believe MRS has played a role. DSS staff feel MRS has helped reduce petitions by providing a mechanism to engage families in new ways, particularly through the use of CFTs and frontloaded services. GALs feel MRS increased the amount of time DSS works with families prior to involving the courts, effectively raising the bar for when a petition is filed.

Use of voluntary kinship placements is another factor with the potential to reduce juvenile petitions. What's more, it appears that the frequency of such placements has increased. Of the DSS administrators surveyed, 44% estimated kinship care was used in 26% to 75% of all placements; one-fourth estimated it was used 76% to 100% of the time. Further, 45% of DSS administrators said they file petitions for kinship placements less than half the time, with another 16% noting that they "never" or "almost never" file petitions for kinship placements. Case file data support these findings, showing that kinship placements were utilized more post-MRS and were only half as likely to be accompanied by a petition. Five of the six DSS administrators interviewed said they use voluntary kinship placements "frequently" or "very frequently." *continued page 4*

A rise in voluntary kinship placements may be a key cause of the decline in juvenile petitions.

Training Dates

Child Development in Families at Risk
Nov. 8-Dec. 12
Online
After a live session participants complete a self-paced online session and take a knowledge assessment to receive a certificate of completion. 12 credit hours

Child Forensic Interviewing
Dec. 12-16
Greensboro

Child Welfare Practices for Cases Involving Domestic Violence
Nov. 17-18
Greensboro
Dec. 7-8
Raleigh

Connecting with Families: Family Support in Practice
Oct. 25-Nov. 2
Concord

CPS Assessments
Nov. 1-4
Candler
Nov. 29-Dec. 2
Fayetteville

CPS In-Home Services
Dec. 7-10
Candler
Dec. 13-16
Fayetteville

To learn about these courses or to register, go to http://www.ncswLearn.org

Training Dates

Effects of Separation and Loss on Attachment
Nov. 1-2
Greenville
Dec. 6-7
Greensboro

Intake in Child Welfare Services
Oct. 26-28
Jacksonville

Legal Aspects of Child Welfare in North Carolina
Dec. 1-2
Beafort

Medical Aspects of Child Abuse and Neglect for Non-Medical Professionals
Nov. 3-4
Candler
Nov. 16-17
Charlotte
Dec. 1-2
Greenville

Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting (MAPP-GPS)
Oct. 18-28
Fayetteville
Nov. 15-Dec. 2
Greensboro

Motivating Substance Abusing Families to Change: An Advanced Practice Course
Nov. 3
Charlotte

To learn about these courses or to register, go to http://www.ncswLearn.org

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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 use of voluntary kinship placements would be necessary to confirm this hypothesis; unfortunately, voluntary kinship placements in North Carolina are not tracked in a systemic way at this time.

Has the severity of petitions changed over time?

Yes. Analysis of AOC administrative data suggests that in recent years a higher proportion of severe cases are reaching the court system, as measured by increases in the rates of TPRs and decreases in the number of cases dismissed by the court. Importantly, the total number of TPRs has not increased; there has only been an increase in TPRs as a proportion of those cases seen by the courts.

The severity of petitions has increased in recent years.

The rise in TPRs and the decrease in dismissals may indicate 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 whether the threshold has shifted too far.

CPS cases are staying open longer. Analysis of case file data showed that in the counties sampled, on average cases were open nearly 26 days longer after MRS implementation began. GAL and DSS survey respondents agreed that MRS and the associated strategies were the primary reason for this change. DSS staff said 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.

A number of GALs also cited budgetary constraints as a factor in the delayed involvement of the court system, expressing concern about children being left in unsafe environments for an extended period while DSS works with their caregivers.

It is not clear to what extent this shift is the result of philosophical changes in the DSS role, or whether it is influenced by concerns about the costs of court involvement 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, evaluators could not determine whether delayed court involvement is increasing safety concerns at the level of the individual child.

How has child safety been affected by the decline in petition rates?

One way to assess this is through repeat assessments: if children are 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 4 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 2001-2002, sug-

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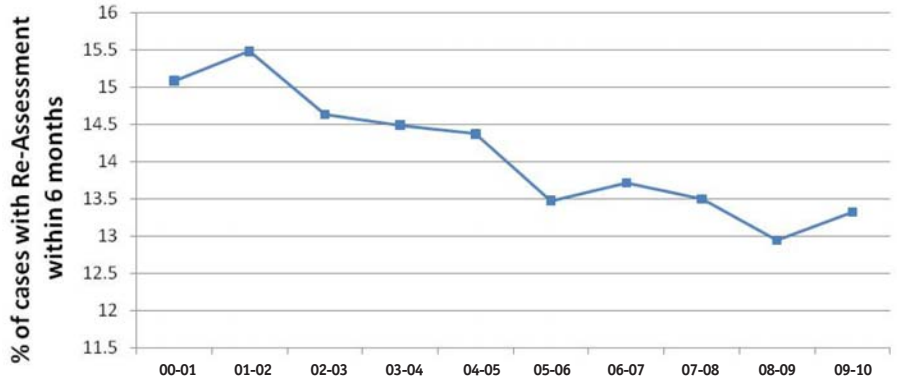
Figure 4: Percentage of juvenile petitions that end in case dismissal, averaged across districts



gesting that although petition rates have declined, child safety has not. In fact, declining repeat assessment rates suggest that the safety of North Carolina's children is continuing to increase over time.

Conclusions

For some child welfare cases involving situations where children may be in immediate danger, prompt involvement of the juvenile court system is imperative. It is also true that court involvement helps some families 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 achieve similar outcomes, involving the court may needlessly increase disruption to the family unit and limit the ability of DSS to work with families. It is important that social workers and supervisors weigh the risks to the child against the negative and sometimes permanent consequences associated with bringing to bear the jurisdiction of the court system.

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. However, this shift does not coincide with significant child welfare system policy changes such as MRS. It is unclear whether the threshold for court involvement 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. It is advisable that database fields be incorporated into the stateside administrative data warehouse in order to capture voluntary kinship placements and allow for consistent tracking of the frequency, transitions in, and overall duration of voluntary kinship placements.

Training Dates

Placement in Child Welfare Services
Nov. 7-10
Charlotte

Shared Parenting
Oct. 31-Nov. 1
Charlotte

Staying Power! A Supervisor's Guide to Retaining Child Welfare Staff
Nov. 2-4
Morehead City

Step-by-Step: An Introduction to Child and Family Teams
Oct. 26-27
Lake Waccamaw
Nov. 2-3
Danbury
Nov. 15-16
Raleigh
Nov. 16-17
Asheboro
Nov. 29-30
Kenansville

Understanding and Intervening in Child Neglect
Nov. 1-15
Online
Participants have two weeks to complete a self-paced online session (approximately 6–8 hrs.) after which they take a knowledge assessment and receive a certificate of completion. 12 credit hours

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