

Drivers of Custody Rates in Vermont: Phase 1

Executive Summary

Submitted to: Vermont General Assembly

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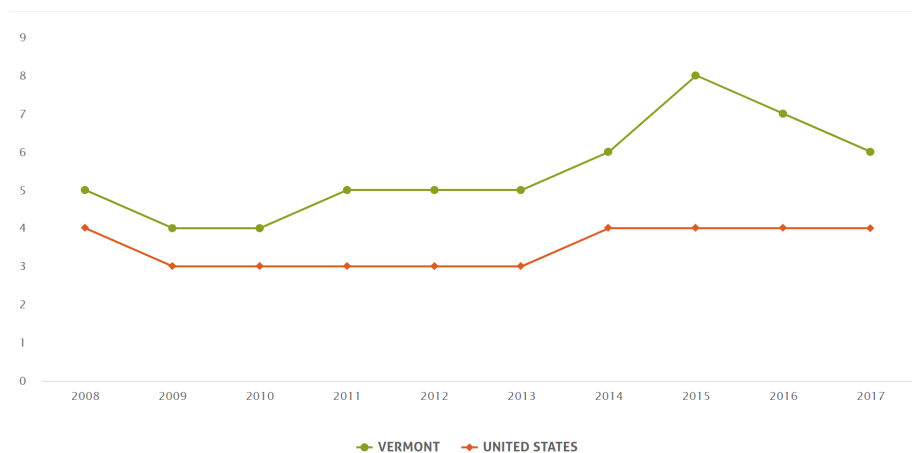


Executive Summary

Problem statement

At the national level, four children in every 1,000 entered foster care in 2017. At a rate of 6 children per every 1,000, Vermont's respective foster care entry rate was above the national average, and the thirteenth highest in the country (Child Trends, 2019). For the past decade, Vermont custody entry rates have consistently trended above the national average (see figure 1 below). The trend in the Vermont custody rate contrasts markedly with the fact that Vermont scored among the lowest in child fatalities and sixth highest on the Kids Count overall child well-being ranking. Together, this paints a contradictory picture within our child-serving system.

Figure 1: Children 0-17 entering foster care (rate per 1000) – 2008-2017



As such, the Vermont state legislature has contracted with the University of Vermont's College of Education and Social Services to conduct research that will help shed light and give an evidence-based understanding of the drivers of Vermont's custody rates over time. Specifically:

"This work will result in a report to the Vermont Legislature detailing the drivers of variance in Vermont's custody rates over time. Analyses informing the report will explain why custody rates have varied over time in Vermont. These analyses will consider the influences of policies, programs, casework practices, and other practices or conditions that are presumed to prevent or influence foster care placement. (pg 5, UVM-JFO contract #39513)

Purpose of report

This report represents the *first phase in a multi-phase study.* The findings contained herein provide a foundation for the next phases of the project. Future reports will include quantitative analysis of state and national datasets, survey data collection, and in-depth stakeholder interviews. This report shares findings from a literature review of over 100 articles and reports. It provides a rigorous, evidence-based analysis of the literature presenting correlates, causes, and preventative child welfare practices. In the public child welfare system, there are several decision-making points, including screening (hotline call), assessment (or investigation), placement (custody), and reunification (or TPR). This report will focus on the placement decisions and concludes with recommendations that will guide the next steps in the project.

Organization of report

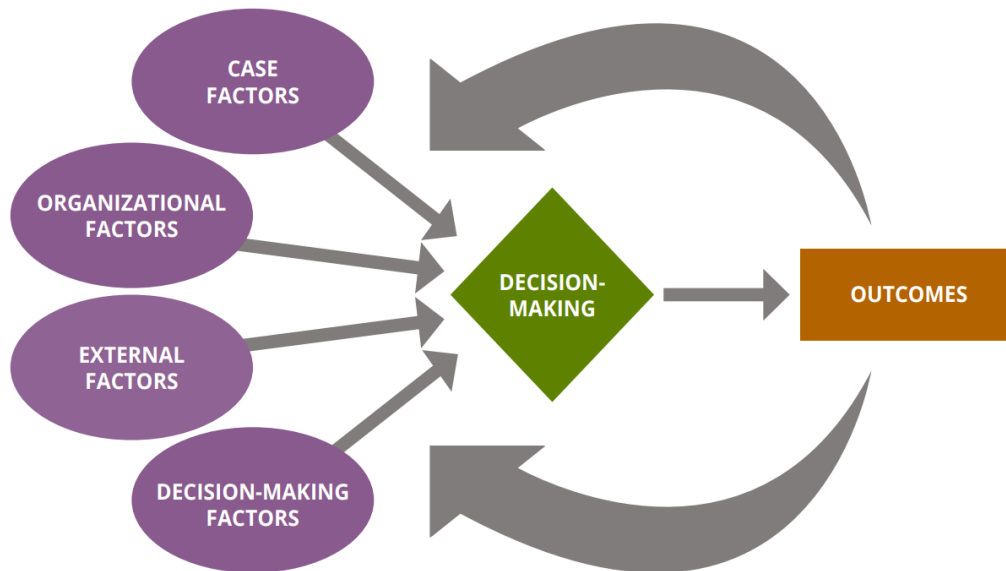
Many decision points exist within public child welfare systems. These include screening (accepted hotline calls), assessment & investigation (substantiation), services (referrals/in-home), custody/foster placement, and reunification. When looking across Vermont, Maine, and New Hampshire, there are relatively consistent rates of maltreatment investigations. However, rates of established victims and foster care placements differed more notably (see Table 1).

Table 1. Rate of child protective services outcomes across states in 2017. All per 1,000 children in state population unless otherwise noted.

State	Screening (accepted for investigation)	Investigations (Substantiated victim)	Foster care entry
Vermont	40.3	7.5	6.5
New Hampshire	47.1	4.4	3.6
Maine	44.4	13.8	3.2

The data in Table 1 illustrate the complexity of a system with multiple decision points and decision-making factors. To understand the outcome of foster care placement, we must understand the decision-making stemming from four broad factors: Case Factors, Organizational factors, External Factors, and Decision Maker Factors, as depicted in the *Decision-Making Ecology* framework in Figure 2 (Fluke, et al., 2014).

Figure 1: Decision Making Ecology (Baumann, Dalgleish, Fluke, & Kern, 2011)



Key Findings

The forces at play in Vermont’s foster care entry rates are multifaceted and interactive. This review of the literature provides a grounding and organization that will inform the next steps in the research. Specifically, it has led to the identification of key variables and factors that will be included in the subsequent phases of this study. Case factors, organizational factors, external factors, and decision-maker factors all emerged as significantly impacting custody outcomes. The full report details the drivers of custody within each factor. Below, we summarize three key findings from each factor.

Case Factors

- **Parental Substance Use/mental health.** Since 2000, there has been a steady rise in the number and proportion of removals attributable to parental drug use, from around 15% in 2000 to 36% in 2017. There are higher foster care rates among parent with depression and anxiety disorders.
- **Child Factors.** Child factors including age, race, and developmental challenges are all associated with foster care entry.
- **Maltreatment & Risk.** Prior abuse reports, history of severe maltreatment, type of abuse (sexual, physical), risk scores, and early emotional maltreatment are all related to foster care entry.

Organizational Factors

- **Staff Turnover.** High rate of staff turnover is associated with high foster care entry rates and high number of placements.
- **Climate/culture.** Foster care rates increase with inadequate organizational support, likely due to case workers' feelings of time pressure, caseload size, inadequate supervision and decreased risk tolerance.
- **Policy and statutes.** State definitions and statutes influence substantiations of maltreatment and custody rates.

External Factors

- **Availability of social services and treatment.** When services are available, several programs have been found to reduce entry into foster care and child maltreatment reports by up to 50% compared to families that did not receive services.
- **High profile cases, media, and legislative response.** Public, media, and legislative responses to grievous cases of child maltreatment contribute to a cycle of increased foster care entry. It is likely that “foster care panic” is only part of the problem, as preceding the high-profile child fatalities in 2014, Vermont already had higher rates of foster care entry than the national average.
- **Economic policies.** Although money per child spent on foster care appears negatively associated with reunification, money spent on preventive services or cash assistance is associated with positive child welfare outcomes.

Decision Maker factors

- **Risk threshold / Attitudes toward removal.** Decisions about foster care placement are influenced by risk tolerance/threshold, attitudes toward removal, and self-reported casework skills. The risk threshold of those individuals influencing the direction of a case (caseworker, supervisor, court professionals, community partners, etc) impacts custody entry rates.
- **Secondary traumatic stress & burnout.** Risk assessment scores are positively associated with case worker stress, whereas more years of employment predicted diminished caseworker ability to empathize with clients, resulting in lower placement rates.
- **Confirmation bias.** Case worker interpretation of evidence can be influenced by caseworkers' existing attitudes toward child protection, family preservation, and a child's right to safety.

Summary

This literature review confirms the complexity that must be taken into account when trying to understand the drivers of a child welfare outcome. Often, states strive to understand the rationale for particular child welfare outcomes by looking only at *case factors*, ignoring the context and influence of the organization, the external environment, and individual decision-making thresholds. The *Decision Making Ecology* helps us understand the

other factors that impact the relationship between risk, decision-making, and outcome. Thus, case factors alone and those items that are captured in the state's child welfare databases will be insufficient in gaining a holistic picture of what drives custody rates.

Additionally, decisions about foster care placement are influenced by decision-maker risk threshold, attitudes toward removal, and self-reported casework skills. The risk threshold of those individuals influencing the direction of a case (caseworker, supervisor, court professionals, community partners, etc.) impacts custody entry rates. For instance, a previous experience of a child fatality will influence the risk threshold, as will an individual's values related to foster care. When a worker has positive views of foster care as a consequence of their actions, the threshold for action is lower than another who may have less favorable views of foster care (see pg. 17 in full report for image). The risk threshold is important because it allows an understanding of how similar cases can end up with different outcomes, explaining variance in custody rates.

Phase 2 of this study will utilize existing and new data from state databases, decision maker surveys, and interviews to understand Vermont's decision-making ecology as related to foster care placement.

Next Steps

Building on the variables and factors identified in the Phase 1 final report, the UVM research team will engage in in depth data collection and analysis with the goal of gaining a comprehensive understanding of the drivers of decision making and custody in Vermont.

Plan and Timeline

- I. Literature Review – January 2020
- II. Decision Maker Survey (Spring/Summer 2020)
- III. Quantitative Data Modeling (Spring/Summer 2020)
- IV. Qualitative Interviews (Summer-Fall 2020)