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Public Attitudes Regarding the Federal Child Welfare System's Financing and Performance

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This report summarizes the results of a survey conducted online within the United States by Harris Interactive via its QuickQuery online omnibus on behalf of the National Council For Adoption between February 23-27, 2007 among 2,021 adults (aged 18 and over). Figures for age, sex, race/ethnicity, education, region and household income were weighted where necessary to bring them into line with their actual proportions in the population. Propensity score weighting was also used to adjust for respondents' propensity to be online.

With a pure probability sample of 2,021, one could say with a ninety-five percent probability that the overall results would have a sampling error of +/- 3 percentage points. Sampling error for data based on sub-samples would be higher and would vary. However, that does not take other sources of error into account. This online survey is not based on a probability sample and therefore no theoretical sampling error can be calculated.

The survey posed a number of questions regarding perceptions of and experiences with the federal child welfare system. More specifically, the survey asked respondents their opinions on the effectiveness of current government policies and practices; their beliefs regarding the appropriateness of income eligibility requirements for federal funding, performance measures for courts, and concurrent planning for children in foster care; and their perceptions of obstacles to foster and adoptive parenting. The survey also inquired as to the experiences of those who had ever cared for or attempted to care for a child in foster care. Re-

sults show that the public has a more negative than positive view of the federal government's foster care policies and practices, and that a sharp divide exists between the public will and the federal government's policy in regard to federal funding allocations and income eligibility requirements. Also, both the negative perception of the government's policies and practices and a desire to change specific policies mentioned were more pronounced among those respondents who had considered foster parenting or adopting a child in foster care.

Attitudes toward Federal Government Policies and Practices

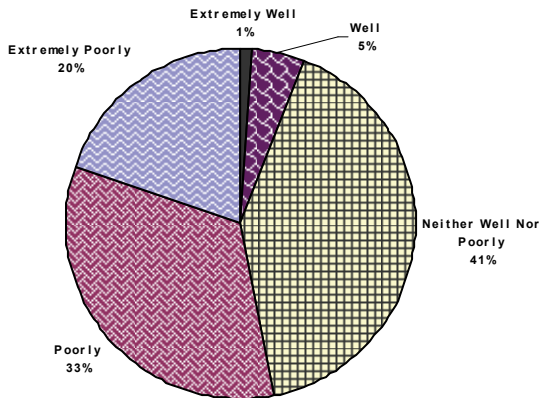
About half of all respondents (53 percent) felt that current government foster care policies and practices serve neglected and abused children poorly (33 percent) or extremely poorly (20 percent). Conversely, 41 percent of respondents thought the current policies and practices serve such children neither poorly nor well, while only 6 percent thought they served children well (5 percent) or extremely well (1 percent).

The survey identified several specific areas where the respondents disagreed with current government policies and practices. First among

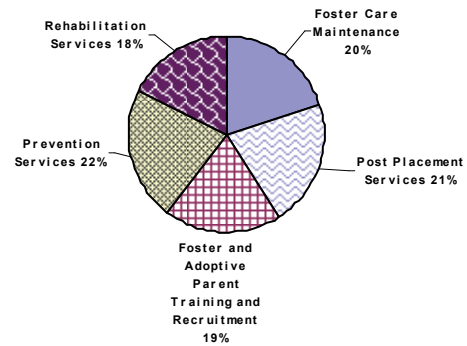
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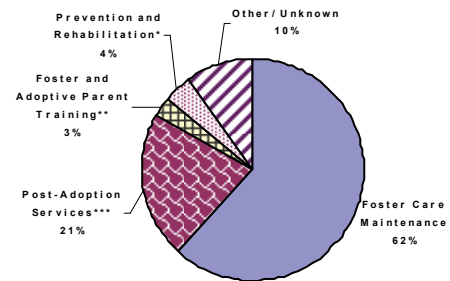
How well do you think current government foster care policies and practices serve at-risk children who are unsafe in their own homes due to neglect or abuse?



Preferred allocation of federal child welfare funds by category



Actual allocation of federal child welfare funds by category (fy 2002)



*Prevention and rehabilitation expenses are tracked together.
 **Foster & adoptive parent recruitment expenses are unknown.
 ***Post-foster placement services are tracked as part of foster care maintenance.

these was in the realm of federal funding priorities. When informed that nearly two-thirds of *all* federal child welfare funding is earmarked for services which maintain abused and neglected children in foster care, 61 percent of respondents agreed that federal policy should allow states the flexibility to spend more of their federal foster care dollars on prevention services, post-placement services, adoptive and foster parent recruitment services, and rehabilitation services. Furthermore, when asked to distribute 100 points across five current child welfare service areas to represent how federal funds should be allocated to best help at-risk children who are victims of neglect and abuse, respondents allocated funds almost equally between the five options, rather than nearly two-thirds for foster care maintenance. The average point distribution was as follows: prevention services (22.2), post-placement services (21.0), maintaining children in foster care (20.1), adoptive and foster parent recruitment (19.2), and rehabilitation services (17.5).¹ The graphs below juxtapose the public's preferred distribution of federal funds with their actual distribution in fiscal year 2002.²

As the graphs illustrate, there is a significant disconnection between public will and government policy in the area of federal child welfare financing. The public clearly feels that it is in the best interest of the abused and neglected children in America for the federal government to fund adoptive and foster parent training and recruitment services, prevention services, rehabilitation services, and foster care maintenance services in relatively equal amounts. However, government policy provides nearly nine times the amount of funding to foster care maintenance services as it does to adoptive and foster parent training services, prevention services, and rehabilitation services combined.

A majority of respondents were also at odds with government policy in regard to income eligibility requirements for access to federal funds. Currently, the two largest funding streams for child welfare services available to the states

are designated under Titles IV-E and IV-B of the Social Security Act. Title IV-E is by far the larger of the two. In 2004, the federal government allocated approximately \$6.1 billion in Title IV-E dollars and \$639 million in Title IV-B dollars to the states. While a state may spend Title IV-B funds on services to any child in its care, children receiving Title IV-E funds must meet a low-income requirement. As a result, a large number of children in foster care are effectively cut off from the primary federal funding stream. However, 65 percent of respondents to the Harris Interactive survey agreed with the statement that “all children who are victims of abuse or neglect should be eligible for federal foster care funding, regardless of family income.” A plurality (34 percent) strongly agreed, while 31 percent somewhat agreed, 13 percent somewhat disagreed, 7 percent strongly disagreed, and 15 percent neither agreed nor disagreed.

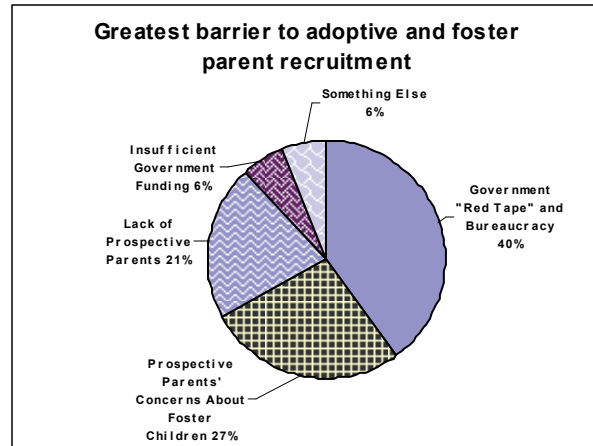
Attitudes toward Performance Measures for Courts, Concurrent Planning, and Obstacles to Adoptive and Foster Parent Recruitment

A large majority of respondents (77 percent) agreed with the statement, “Family courts’ performance of their key responsibilities for children in foster care should be measured and reported to the public in order to promote court accountability and improvement.” A plurality (45 percent) strongly agreed, while 32 percent somewhat agreed, 16 percent had no opinion, 7 percent somewhat disagreed and only 3 percent strongly disagreed.

A large majority of respondents (83 percent) also agreed with the statement, “While pursuing family reunification for a child in foster care, social workers should also prepare an alternative permanency plan for the child, such as adoption or guardianship, in case the child cannot be safely reunited with the original family.” A majority of all respondents (54 percent) strongly agreed, while only 6 percent disagreed and 11

percent neither agreed nor disagreed.

When asked to identify the greatest obstacle to adoptive and foster parent recruitment, 40 percent cited government “red tape” and bureaucracy, 27 percent cited prospective parents’ concerns about problems with foster children, 21 percent cited a lack of prospective parents, 6 percent cited insufficient government funding, and another 6 percent believed the greatest obstacle was “something else.”



Prospective and Actual Foster and Adoptive Parents' Attitudes toward the Federal Child Welfare System

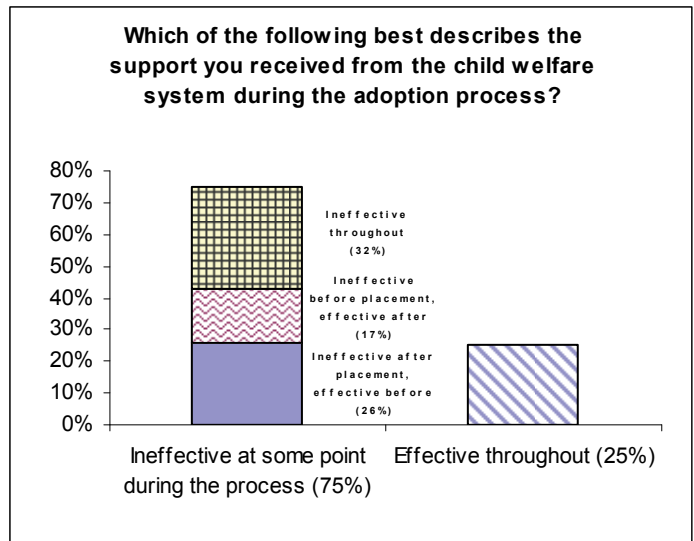
Thirty four percent, or 690 of the 2,021 survey respondents reported having considered adopting or foster-parenting a child in foster care. Relative to those who hadn't considered adopting or foster-parenting a child in foster care, these respondents were significantly more likely to say that government foster care policies and practices serve neglected and abused children poorly or extremely poorly (63 percent versus 48 percent). They were also more likely to agree that federal policy should allow states the flexibility to spend more of their federal foster care dollars on adoptive and foster parent recruitment, and on post-placement services for adoptive and foster families (68 percent vs. 57 percent). Finally, they were more likely to strongly agree with the statement that all children who are victims of neglect and abuse should be eligible for federal foster care funding regardless of family income

(40 percent vs. 32 percent).

Of the 690 survey respondents who had considered adopting or foster-parenting a child in foster care, 29 percent, or 201, had actually inquired with their state social service agency about doing so. Of these 201 respondents, 52 percent described the agency as either slightly responsive and helpful (35 percent) or not at all responsive and helpful (17 percent), while 48 percent described the agency as either somewhat responsive and helpful (29 percent), or very responsive and helpful (19 percent).

Respondents with high income levels were most likely to be dissatisfied with their service agency. Sixty-six percent of those earning more than \$75,000 per year who had considered adopting or foster-parenting a child in foster care described their service agency as only slightly or not at all responsive and helpful, versus 30 percent of those earning less than \$35,000 per year.

Three percent of all respondents (67) had ever adopted or foster-parented a child in foster care. When asked to describe the support they received from the child welfare system, 25 percent of these 67 respondents described it as effective and satisfactory throughout the process; 26 percent described it as effective and satisfactory before placement, but ineffective and unsatisfactory after; 17 percent described it as ineffective and unsatisfactory before placement, but effective and satisfactory after; and 32 percent described it as ineffective and unsatisfactory throughout the process. In other words, a strong majority (75 percent) described the support they received from the child welfare system as ineffective and unsatisfactory at some point during the process (i.e. before and/or after placement), while a plurality (32 percent) described the support they received as ineffective and unsatisfactory throughout the process (i.e. both before *and* after placement).



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¹ In this survey, the term "prevention services" was defined as "money spent to help parents avert the abuse or neglect that would require putting children in foster care;" the term "post-placement services" was defined as "money spent to help foster and adoptive families ensure safety, stability, and well-being for

children after being placed in the home;" the term "adoptive and foster parent recruitment" was defined as "money spent to recruit and train foster and adoptive parents for children in foster care;" and the term "rehabilitation services" was defined as "money spent to help parents reform themselves so their children can safely return to their families."

² Scaresella, C.A. et. al, *The Cost of Protecting Vulnerable Children IV*. Washington DC, The Urban Institute. December 20, 2004, available online at http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/411115_VulnerableChildrenIV.pdf