

# THE IMPACT OF SERVICE EXCLUSION ON CHILD WELFARE OUTCOMES

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## ABSTRACT

An empirical study of 75 counties in the state found that accessibility of resource services is less in rural than urban counties, accounting for 36% of the variance in foster care reentry, signaling a need for public policy to address implications of service exclusion, for the rural population. Implications are discussed for compliance with child welfare outcomes affecting the safety, permanence, and well being of children, specified in the 1997 federal Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) [1].

## RURAL CHILD WELFARE CONCERNS

Rural children, face numerous difficulties, affecting their safety, permanence, and well-being, and confront these problems with less access to resources than their urban counterparts [3]. Child poverty rates are higher in rural than urban areas [7], with children of rural single mothers comprising the poorest demographic group in the nation [8]. Rural workers earn significantly less, compared to urban workers [2]. The social and economic disadvantage [6] experienced by the rural population is compounded by service exclusion, which is a type of social exclusion. Social exclusion deprives a population segment of access to needed social resources [5], while service exclusion is caused by a lack of availability and barriers to access of necessary social services [4]. The purposes of this study are: 1) to determine and analyze differences between the availability and accessibility of critical social service resources for rural and urban children and 2) to determine the impact of service exclusion through resource availability and accessibility on children's outcomes.

## Rural Study and Research Questions

This study, mandated by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and its National Advisory Committee for Rural Social Services, examines the comparative availability and accessibility of resources between rural and urban counties, addressing the following questions: 1) Do fewer resources exist in rural counties? 2) Are resources equally accessible in rural vs. urban counties? 3) Does resource availability and accessibility represent service exclusion, impacting child welfare outcomes?

## METHODS

The population for this study consisted of the state public child welfare Department of Social Services (DSS) offices, located in each of the midsouth state's 57 rural and 18 urban counties. The state Department of Social Services (DSS) provided all dependent variable data, representing foster care outcomes deemed critical to the safety, permanence, and well being of children [4], measured in each state's Child and Family Service Review, and required under provisions of the federal government's Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 [1]: 1. Percent of children who have been in foster care, returned to their families, but re-entered foster care, because of instability at home. 2. Percent of

children who were re-united with their families within one year of entering foster care. 3. Percent of children in foster care experiencing fewer than three placements in their first year under foster care.

## RESULTS

### Research Question 1: *Do fewer resources exist in rural vs. urban counties?*

Results suggest that substance abuse treatment for children and teens, residential treatment for children and teens, school social work programs, and tutoring, mentoring, and enrichment for children are significantly less available for rural children, than urban children. Table 1 shows both numbers and percentages of counties experiencing a lack of resource.

**Table 1: Resource Availability**

Resources	Urban Number	Rural Number	Total	Urban	Rural	Combined
Substance Abuse Treat - Children /Teens	4	36	40	22%**	63%**	53%
Residential Treatment - Children / Teens	11	52	63	61%**	91%**	84%
School Social Work	4	32	36	22%*	56%*	48%
Tutoring/Mentoring/Enrichment for Children	3	16	19	17%*	30%*	26%

\*p≤.05; \*\*p≤.01

### Research Question 2: *Are resources equally accessible in rural vs. urban counties?*

Results suggest that substance abuse treatment for children and teens, residential treatment for children and teens, and after school programs for youth are significantly less available to rural children, than urban children. The scaled survey score results appear in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Resource Accessibility**

Variable	Urban Score	Rural Score
Substance Abuse Treatment for Children and Teens	2.61**	1.21**
*Residential Treatment for Children and Teens	1.11*	.28*
*After School Programs for Youth	3.00*	1.89*

\*p≤.05; \*\*p≤.01

### Research Question 3: *Does resource availability and accessibility represent service exclusion, impacting child welfare outcomes?*

A stepwise regression equation [ $F(4,54)= 7.782$ ,  $p<.00$ ,  $r^2=.366$ ], indicated a relationship existed between children reentering foster care (ASFA outcome) and resources of school social work, domestic violence services, mental health for children / teens, and adult mental health. (See Table 3.)

**Table 3** Regression Analysis: Percent of Children Reentering Foster Care

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	Beta
School Social Work	-2.329	0.655	-.399**
Domestic Violence	1.340	0.650	.232*
Mental Health Children	-4.239	1.147	-.539**
Mental Health Adults	3.447	1.137	.453**

\*p<.05; \*\*p<.01

## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings suggest access and availability of children's services is restricted in rural and urban settings, indicating that service exclusion exists. In addition, fewer services are accessible to rural children. This condition poses policy questions, related to the distribution of resources by state and non-governmental organizations, resulting in the exclusion of a population segment from accessing a needed service. This concern is particularly relevant, given the fact that in this study, 36.6% of the variance of re-entry into foster care in this exploratory study is attributable to resource distribution, raising questions about public policy that prevents the safe return of a child to his or her home, because of poor resource accessibility.

## SELECTED REFERENCES

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