

## Child Welfare in Illinois: From 'Calcutta' to the 'Gold Standard'

The child population in substitute care in Illinois was roughly the same in 2007 as it was in 1987—approximately 15,000. But the state's story of child welfare—the transformation from a system that Time magazine dubbed “Calcutta, Illinois,” to what was ultimately called by the Congressional Quarterly Reporter, the “gold standard”—provides a fascinating look into the enormous changes that occurred during these 20 years and a glimpse into the future.

**Kinship foster care growth (1987–1997):** The foster care population expanded from 15,000 to 51,000 in 10 years, an increase primarily attributed to the growth of kinship foster care. During this time, Chicago and other large cities struggled with a crack cocaine epidemic and, as a result, many aunts and grandparents informally cared for kin. Their attempts to enroll children in school or access medical care often led to formal placements into foster care. Before 1995, children left by a parent in the care of kin could be brought into state custody on a neglect petition. Whether the child was safe or in need of protection was not the top consideration. By the late 1990s, Illinois had the largest foster care population in the nation.

**Time for reform (1997–2007):** At that time, local newspapers painted a picture of a system out of control. Lawsuits and consent decrees demanded change in Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) policy and practice. The definition of neglect changed first—a child would no longer be considered neglected if left safely in a responsible relative's care. This alone diverted thousands of children from formal foster care and into supportive arrangements at home. Follow-up showed that children were just as safe when left at home and given the family support services they needed.

These changes, however, did little to help the 30,000 children living with kin in foster care with no foreseeable exit plan. In some states, these children were formally discharged from the child welfare rolls, but not in Illinois. Research conducted with kin caregivers revealed that the vast majority of families expected to raise these children to adulthood and were eager to move beyond state custody but reluctant to terminate parental rights.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Testa, M., Shook, K., Cohen, L., & Woods, M. (1996). Permanency planning options for children in kinship care. *Child Welfare, 5*, 452-470.



School of Social Work  
UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

<http://cfrcwww.social.uiuc.edu>  
[cfrc@social.uiuc.edu](mailto:cfrc@social.uiuc.edu)  
(217) 333-5837



In response, the state developed the Subsidized Guardianship program, creating an option in which parental rights remained intact but families left state custody and oversight. This program intensified discussions with foster families around permanence, resulting in 81,000 children exiting foster care to permanent homes between 1997 and 2007. In fact, 32,000 were reunified with their birth families, 39,000 were adopted, and 10,000 were placed under the permanent guardianship of relatives and former foster parents.

**The future of child welfare (2007 and beyond):**

In 2007, the foster care population returned to 1987 levels, but there were 43,000 children in publicly assisted permanent homes—two and one-half times the number of children in care. As Illinois contemplates child welfare's future, the state must balance serving children in foster care and serving those who have exited care to permanent homes. Although the shift from foster care to permanent family care bodes well for children and families, the transfer of legal responsibilities does not mean that the work of supporting and strengthening these new families ends. Since 1997, an estimated 3 percent (1,200 children) of this population face difficulties that may necessitate re-entry into foster care. Preventing breakdowns so that families can receive preservation services without coming into foster care is a new focus.

**Author:**

**Nancy Rolock**

Research Specialist at the Children and Family Research Center  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign