



## Family Permanence After Foster Care

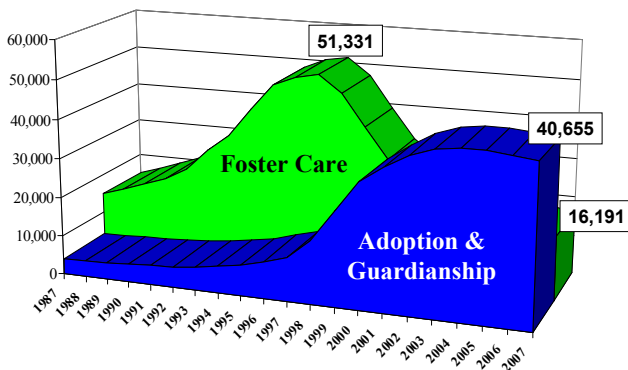
December, 2007

### A Decade of Family Permanence in Illinois

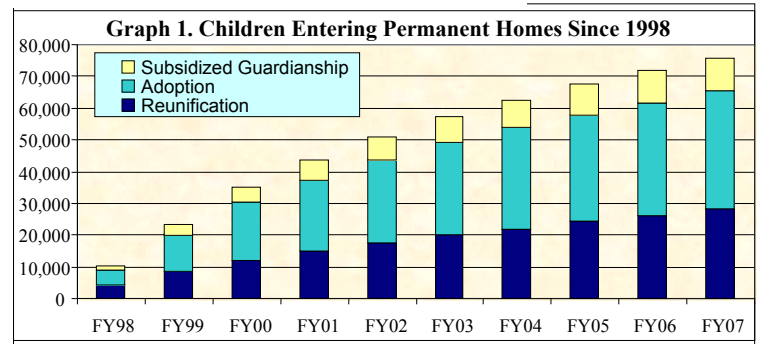
Since 1998, 75,500 children in Illinois have moved from foster care to permanent families: 28,000 children have been reunified with their birth parents, 37,000 have been adopted, and 10,500 have been placed under the permanent guardianship of relatives and former foster parents. These accomplishments have brought national attention to Illinois' leadership in bringing family permanence to the lives of thousands of children who otherwise would have spent their childhood in foster care (Graph 1 at right).

Because of these permanency reforms and earlier reductions in the number of children entering foster care, the number of children in publicly-assisted permanent homes surpassed for the first time in July of 2000 the number of children in state-funded foster care in Illinois. Currently, there are two and one-half times as many children in publicly-assisted permanent homes as there are children in publicly-funded foster care (see Graph 2). The Congressional Budget Office predicts that the federal IV-E program will be in a similar situation next year, in 2008.

**Graph 2. Children in Foster Care and in Subsidized Permanent Homes**



Although the shift from indefinite 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 necessarily ends. Even though regular casework and judicial oversight



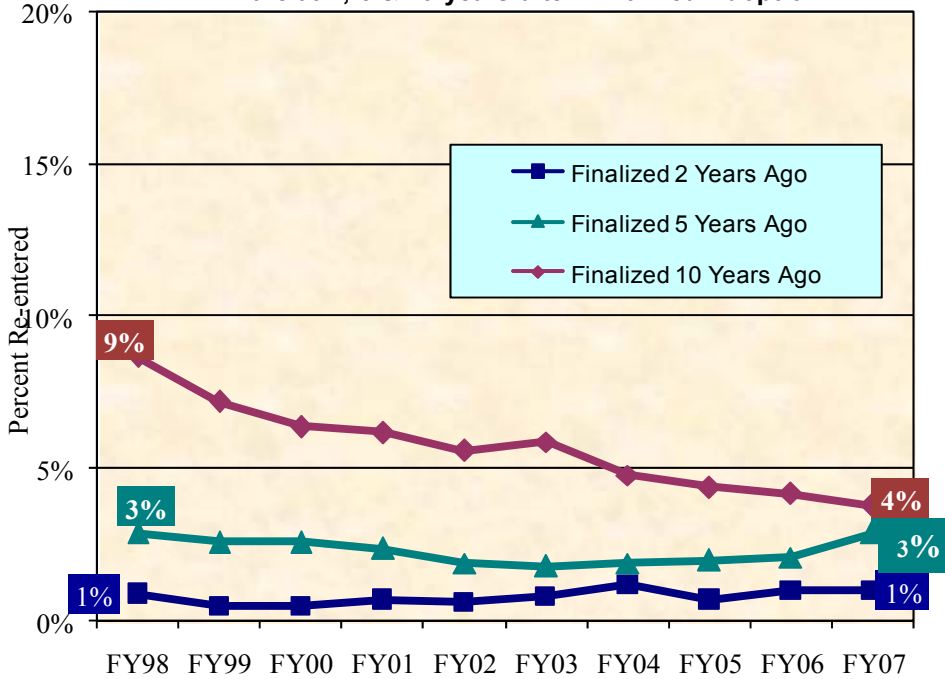
are no longer required, these homes still need occasional support to ensure child well-being and sometimes more intensive interventions to preserve family stability.

Since 1998, an estimated 3.2% of the 37,000 foster children adopted between 1998 and 2007 have faced special difficulties that necessitated their removal and re-entry into foster care. Although in percentage terms these re-entries are small, in absolute numbers they add up to approximately 1,200 former foster children who have re-entered foster care since 1998. The federal child welfare reporting system, AFCARS, shows that as a percentage of all entering cases, the percentage of previously adopted children has increased in Illinois over the past eight years from 1.3% to 2.9%. Preventing these breakdowns so that adopted children and children under the private guardianship of relatives and former foster parents can receive preservation services without coming into foster care has become a new focus of the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services.

### Illinois' Track Record in State Comparative Perspective

Looking only at the increased percentage of foster children entering care, who have previously been adopted, raises alarms with lawyers and caseworkers that the child welfare system may be soon inundated with many more failed adoptions and guardianships. But when examined from the perspective of the

**Graph 3. Percent of Children that Re-entered Foster Care at 2, 5 & 10 years after Finalized Adoption**



re-entered foster care<sup>1</sup> is shown on Graph 5 on the next page. It takes into consideration the cumulative number of adoptions that have occurred in each state. Based on AFCARS data, Illinois ranks among the lowest, at 1.7% of adopted children that re-enter foster care. This is close to the figures presented above using state data. Illinois data show a slightly higher percentage – in 2005 an estimated 2.6% of adopted children re-entered foster care because more accurate information is available on the date that adoptions occurred.

Looking at the data in this manner allows us to see that while the sheer number of children that have re-entered foster care from adoption

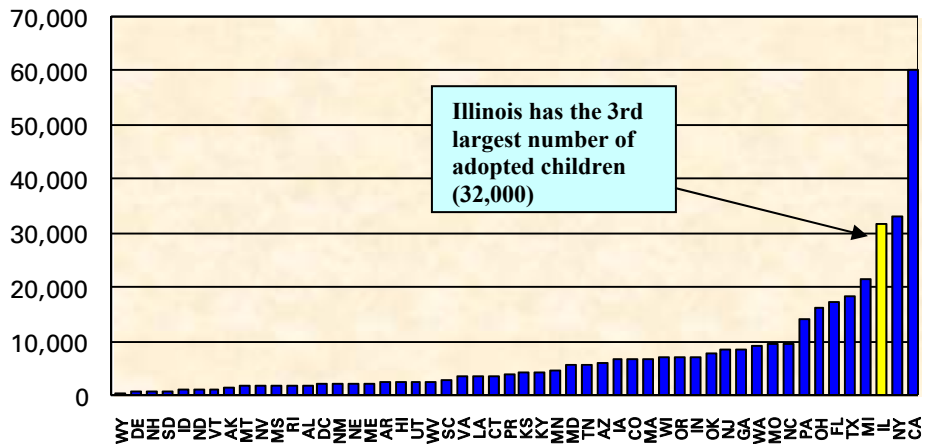
children who have been adopted since 1998, the probability of re-entry has significantly decreased. As shown in Graph 3 above, in 1998, 3% of children adopted five years earlier and 9% adopted a decade earlier had re-entered foster care. Ten years later in 2007, only 3% of children adopted five years earlier and 4% adopted a decade earlier had returned to care. This represents a significant improvement in post-permanency stability during this period.

may in fact have increased over the past several years, it is in no way a sign that the system is failing, nor is it a sign that the push toward permanence was too much too fast. The vast majority of these adoptions are permanent homes for the children that have moved to them.

The reasons that the trend lines look different from the perspectives of lawyers and caseworkers compared to the point of view of the families and children is that the pool of children in permanent homes who are at risk of re-entry has grown so enormously in Illinois.

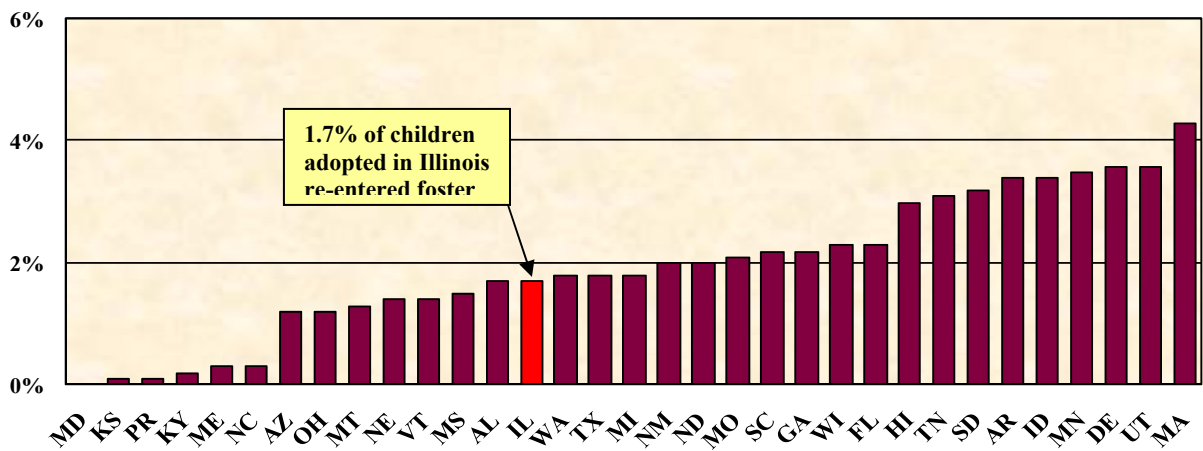
Between 1998 and 2005, according to federal AFCARS data, Illinois moved more children from foster care to adoptive homes than most states: 32,000 children according to the most recent AFCARS data. Only New York and California moved more foster children into adoptive homes than Illinois (see Graph 4 at right). The estimated percent of children adopted since 1998 that have

**Graph 4. Cumulative Number of Children Adopted Between 1998 and 2005**



<sup>1</sup> AFCARS data analysis by CFRC. This is the cumulative number of re-entries based on the estimated year of adoption. States with more than 5% of their re-entries listed as 'not able to determine' on the question of previously adopted, or where data was missing, were excluded from this analysis.

**Graph 5. Percent of Children Adopted Between 1998 and 2005 That Re-entered Foster Care During the Same Time Period**



As Illinois leads the nation in the future world of post-permanence and celebrates its accomplishments of moving 75,500 children into permanent homes, careful planning needs to occur to ensure that adoption and other permanency options continue to be viable options for foster children. The challenge of a post-permanency world in child welfare is to support these families that have exited foster care. With the increase in the number of former foster children living in permanent homes, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services has embarked upon a project that is designed to address the service needs of this population. This project builds upon findings from a 2006 survey conducted by the Center that asked caregivers of former foster youth about the needs of the children they adopted or took legal guardianship. The survey found that the majority of respondents (84%) stated that they were able to meet the needs of their children on their own. The responses from the remaining 16% suggested that these families could benefit from post-permanency support services<sup>2</sup> and 5% of the population in need may require more intensive diagnostic and therapeutic support services to stabilize the family structure and prevent disruptions. This new project seeks to address the

issues facing the families that have been discharged from foster care into permanent homes. Through this project, private agency staff are seeking interviews with families that have a 13 or 16 year old in an open subsidy case when their annual subsidy renewal is due. Through these interviews, the Department hopes to find out what the needs of these families are, if any, and to link them with services.



<sup>2</sup> If we take this proportion of children with unmet needs and apply it to the population of children in Illinois who have achieved permanence, it represents a population of about 5,000 (between 3,700 and 5,840) children that may be in need.