

Children in Out-of-Home Care and their Contact with Siblings: Findings from 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study

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Children’s relationships with siblings contribute greatly to their well-being.¹ Relationships with brothers and sister are especially important if parents abuse or neglect the child.² Siblings can be reliable sources of comfort and support. Children’s relationships with their siblings may be the one source of familial love that they can count on when they are placed in out-of-home care. Yet, placement in out-of-home care can separate children from their siblings. About two-thirds of children in out-of-home care in the United States also have a sibling in care, but, for a variety of reasons, siblings often go to different placements and are separated. Shlonsky and colleagues’ studied over 11,000 children in foster care who also had siblings in care³, and only 45.9% of these children were placed with all their siblings.

The state of Illinois enacted the Children in State Care and Adopted through DCFS Public Act 97-1076 in 2012. This act sets requirements regarding siblings when the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) places children in substitute care: “the Department shall place the child with the child’s sibling or siblings [...] unless the placement is not in each child’s best interest, or is otherwise not possible under the Department’s rules. If the child is not placed with a sibling under the Department’s rules, the Department shall consider placements that are likely to develop, preserve, nurture, and support sibling relationships, where doing so is in each child’s best interest.”⁴

The Children and Family Research Center’s (CFRC) annual FY2019 B.H. monitoring report presents results on whether Illinois children in out-of-home care were placed with their siblings in 2018.⁵ The likelihood of being placed with siblings depended on the number of siblings in the

¹ See, e.g., Gass, K., Jenkins, J. & Dunn, J. (2006). Are sibling relationships protective? A longitudinal study. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines*, 48, 167–175.

² Child Welfare Information Gateway (2013). *Sibling Issues in Foster Care and Adoption*. Washington, DC: Children’s Bureau/Administration for Children, Youth and Family. Retrieved from <https://www.childwelfare.gov/pub-PDFs/siblingissues.pdf>

³ Shlonsky, A., Webster, D., & Needell, B. (2003). The Ties That Bind: A Cross-Sectional Analysis of Siblings in Foster Case. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 29, 27–52.

⁴ The full text of P.A. 97-1076 is available online: <http://www.ilga.gov/legislation/97/HB/PDF/09700HB5592lv.pdf>

⁵ Fuller, T., Nieto, M., Wang, S., Adams, K.A., Wakita, S., Tran, S., Chiu, Y. Braun, M., Cross, T.P., Lee, L., Burnett, A., & Meyer, B.A. (2019). *Conditions of children in or at risk of foster care in Illinois: FY2019 Monitoring Report of the B.H. Consent Decree*. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

family. When children had one or two siblings in out-of-home care, 80.7% of children initially placed with kin caregivers were placed with their siblings, as were 63.8% of children initially placed in traditional foster care. However, when children had three or more siblings in out-of-home care, only 54.8% of children initially placed with kin caregivers in Illinois in 2018 were placed with siblings, and only 13.5% of those placed in traditional foster care were placed with siblings.

If children in substitute care have siblings living elsewhere, it is important that they have opportunities to see them. This research brief reports results on children's living with their siblings in out-of-home care, and also additional results on the *contacts* children in out-of-home care have with their siblings who do not live with them. These data come from interviews with caseworkers and children conducted as part of the 2017 Illinois Study of Child Well-Being (IL-CWB).⁶ This brief is one in a series that presents capsule summaries of results from the 2017 IL-CWB in different domains of well-being.

2017 Illinois Study of Child Well-Being

The 2017 Illinois Study of Child Well-Being (IL-CWB) is a study of the well-being of children and youths who were in out-of-home care through the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). The Children and Family Research Center (CFRC) drew a stratified random sample of 700 children who were listed as "in care" in DCFS' SACWIS client information system on October 23, 2017³. Interviewers from Survey Research Laboratory of the University of Illinois at Chicago interviewed the caseworkers in these cases, the caregivers and the children themselves, age seven and older. For more information, see the full report of the study⁴.

Caseworker Reports on Siblings in Care

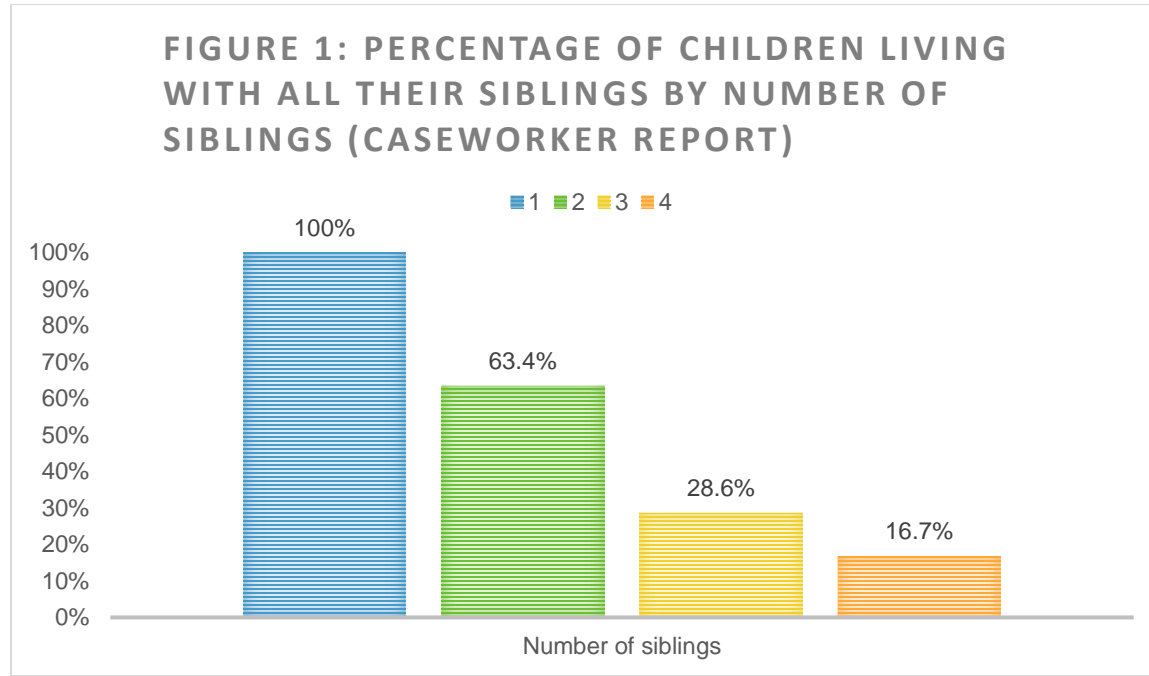
In 69.4% of cases in the sample, caseworkers reported that the child had one or more siblings in substitute care. Of those with siblings in substitute care, 39.8% had one sibling, 29.9% had two siblings, 14.3% had three siblings, 9.8% had four siblings, and 6.0% had five or more siblings in substitute care.

As Figure 1 illustrates, the likelihood that children were living with all their siblings dropped precipitously as the number of siblings increased. When children in the sample had one sibling in care, 100% lived with their sibling, but that dropped to only 16.7% when children had four siblings in care.⁷

⁶ Cross, T.P., Tran, S., Hernandez, A. & Rhodes, E. (2019). *The 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study. Final Report*. Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The full report is available at https://cfrc.illinois.edu/pubs/rp_20190619_2017IllinoisChildWell-BeingStudy.pdf

⁷ One out of four children in the sample who had five siblings in care lived with all of them, as did one child out of three children who had six siblings in care. No child in the sample with seven to ten siblings in care lived with all their siblings.

According to caseworkers, a large majority of children who had siblings in other placements (88.9%) were in contact with those siblings. The child’s caseworker was in touch with the child’s siblings in other placements 90.2% of the time. Despite this contact, only 9.2% of these cases included plans to bring the child and sibling together in the same home.



Children’s Reports of their Contact with Siblings

For each sibling the child did not live with, interviewers asked the child a) how often they saw that sibling, b) whether they wanted to see that sibling more, and c) whether they expected to live with that sibling in the future. Table 1 shows the results for up to six siblings⁸. Children reported on their siblings in whatever order they chose; Sibling 1 is the first sibling the child chose to talk about, Sibling 2 is the second sibling the child chose to talk about, and so forth. Children saw the first sibling they mentioned at least monthly in 57.1% of cases, but other siblings were seen less often. Most children wanted to see their siblings more often. Only a minority of children thought they would live with their siblings in the future, even the first sibling they mentioned.

⁸ Table 1 is adapted from Table 8-19 of the original report. Table 1 also includes results on which siblings children thought they would live with in the future, which were not included in the original report. Sample sizes for Siblings 7 through 10 were below 10 and results for these siblings are not shown.

Table 1 Children’s report of contact with siblings they do not live with

	See at least once a month			Want to see more			Think they will live with in the future		
	N	f	%/ se	N	f	%/ se	N	f	%/ se
Sibling 1	119	68	57.3 (4.5)	118	83	70.1 (4.2)	107	49	45.5 (4.8)
Sibling 2	94	46	49.4 (5.2)	90	58	64.4 (5.1)	87	35	40.1 (5.3)
Sibling 3	66	32	48.3 (6.2)	66	44	65.8 (5.9)	65	21	32.6 (5.8)
Sibling 4	51	27	52.0 (7.0)	50	31	63.2 (6.9)	50	20	39.9 (6.9)
Sibling 5	34	19	54.7 (8.6)	34	21	62.8 (8.4)	33	11	33.4 (8.2)
Sibling 6	18	7	40.0 (11.9)	18	15	86.0 (8.5)	17	2	11.3 (7.7)

Discussion

Most children in the sample had siblings who were also in care. If children had one or two siblings in care, they usually lived with their siblings, but if they had three or more siblings in care they usually did not live with all their siblings. This is consistent with the findings on siblings from the B.H. monitoring report. It is likely that the difficulty placing larger sibling groups together relates to the extra space, attention, and resources these sibling groups require.

A majority of the children had contact with their siblings in different placements, according to caseworkers, but many children reported that they saw their siblings less than once a month. They usually wanted to see their sibling more often, but a majority did not think they would live with their siblings in the future.

These findings suggest the need for more progress to realize the goals of Public Act 97-1076. Despite the Act’s intention to facilitate placement with siblings, many children did not live with all their siblings and only a small percentage of cases had a plan to reunite siblings who lived apart. Moreover, the limited contact many children had with their siblings who lived elsewhere raises questions about whether sibling relationships receive adequate support when siblings must live apart. We can imagine the sorrow for those children who wanted more contact with a sibling who lived elsewhere, but did not think they would live with that sibling in the future.

These findings underline the need for recruitment of substitute caregivers who can take in larger sibling groups, and suggest the value of enhanced support to enable siblings to get together more often. They also point to the need for further inquiry to identify what obstacles prevent the vision behind Public Act 97-1076 from fully becoming reality.

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