

Regional Differences in Reunification, Adoption, and Guardianship in Illinois: Findings from the FY2024 *B.H.* Monitoring Report

Children and Family Research Center

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All children deserve to grow up in permanent, loving homes. While abuse and neglect may require that children are removed from their homes and temporarily placed into substitute care, federal and state child welfare policies emphasize the importance of finding safe, nurturing, permanent homes for these children as quickly as possible through reunification with their parents, adoption, or guardianship. State performance on the achievement of timely permanence for children in substitute care is monitored in several ways. The Children's Bureau publishes an annual report to Congress that provides information on individual state performance on seven outcome measures, including the achievement of timely reunification and adoption for children in substitute care. Findings from the most recent federal report, which examines performance through federal fiscal year (FFY) 2020, shows that Illinois had the 9th lowest percentage of children reunified within 12 months of entering substitute care (48.6%), but the state significantly improved from the previous year when it had the lowest percentage (36%) in the country (Children's Bureau, 2024, p. 52). Illinois had the second lowest percentages of children adopted within 12 and 24 months (Children's Bureau, 2024, p. 53). Although the Children's Bureau report does not include data on the timeliness of guardianships, Child Trends maintains state-level data which show that the average length of stay in care before exiting to guardianship in Illinois was 50.3 months, which was the longest among all states and territories (Child Trends, 2024).

Examining Regional Differences in Permanency in Illinois

Within Illinois, performance on the achievement of timely reunifications, adoptions, and guardianships is examined in the annual monitoring report of the *B.H.* Consent Decree produced by the Children and Family Research Center. This report examines permanency outcomes at both the state and regional level, and the findings provide some important context for understanding why Illinois lags behind the rest of the country in achieving permanent homes for children in substitute care. Figure 1 shows the regional percentages of children who entered substitute care each year and were reunified with their families within 24 months. The results show that performance in the Cook region is substantially poorer than in any other region. Only 18.6% of the children who entered substitute care in the Cook region in FY2021 were reunified with their families within 24 months, compared to 47.5% in the Northern region, 37.2% in the Central region, and 32.0% in the Southern region.

Figure 1. Children Reunified Within 24 Months by Region

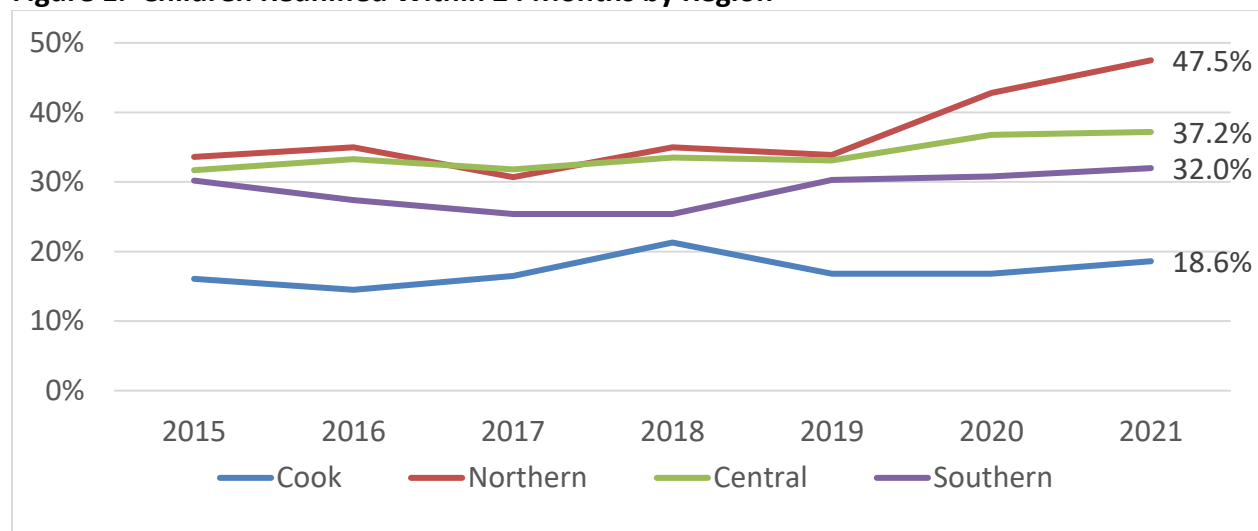


Figure 2 shows the regional percentages of children who entered substitute care each year and were adopted within 24 months. Although performance is poor across all regions, the results again show that performance in the Cook region is substantially worse than any other region. Only 0.5% of the children who entered substitute care in the Cook region in FY2021 were adopted within 24 months, compared to 2.7% in the Northern region, 2.4% in the Central region, and 3.7% in the Southern region.

Figure 2. Children Adopted Within 24 Months by Region

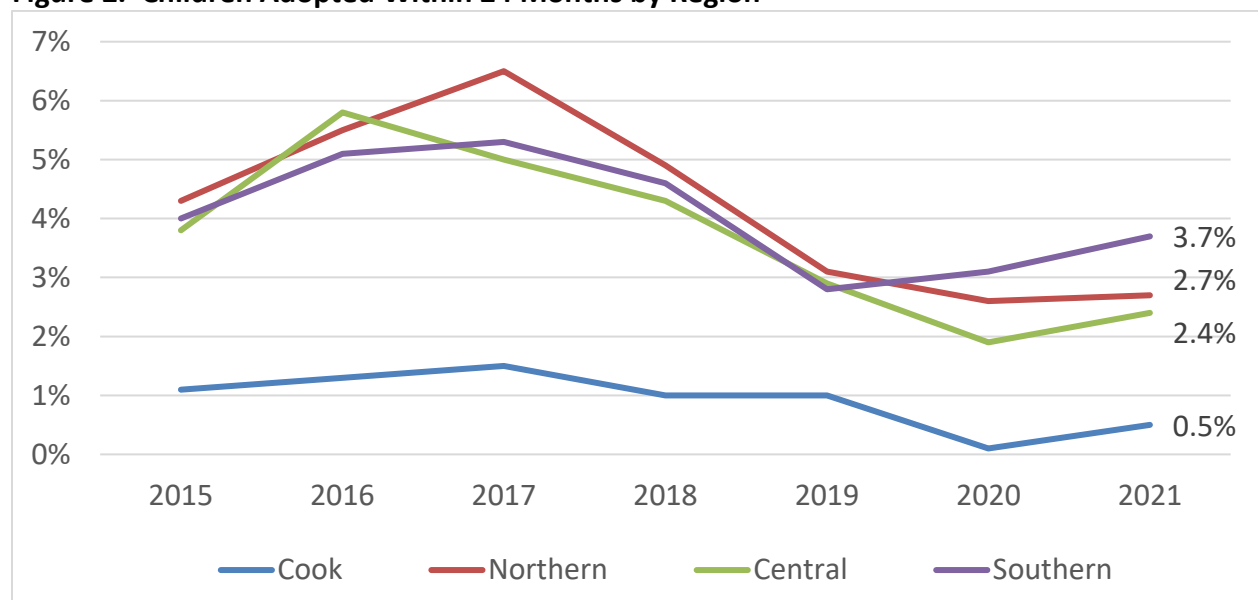
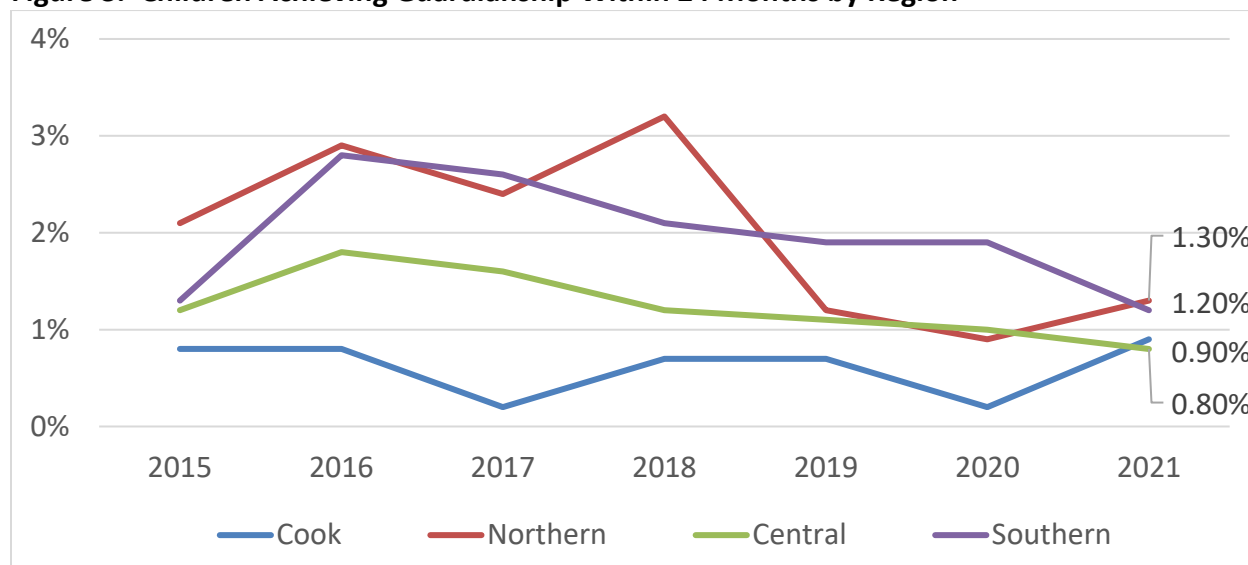


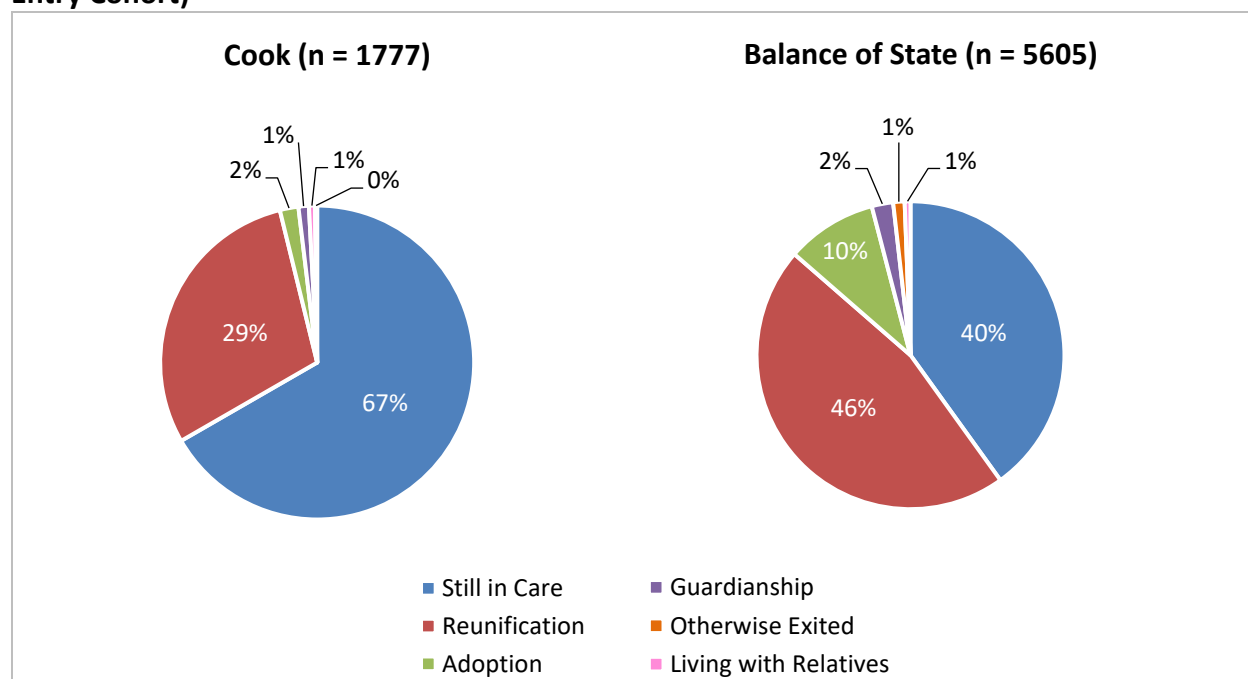
Figure 3 shows the regional percentages of children who entered substitute care each year and were taken into legal guardianship within 24 months. Rates of guardianship within 24 months are small across all regions and have been lowest in the Cook region, except for the most recent year, in which they were similar to those in the Central region.

Figure 3. Children Achieving Guardianship Within 24 Months by Region



Another way to examine regional differences in timely permanence is to compare the Cook region to all the other regions combined (the balance of the state) on permanency outcomes after 36 months in care (see Figure 4). For the children who entered substitute care in the Cook region in FY2020, 67% were still in care after three years, compared to 40% of the children who entered care in the other regions. There were large differences between the Cook region and other regions in exits to reunifications (29% in Cook versus 46% in other regions) and adoptions (2% in Cook versus 10% in other regions) within 36 months.

Figure 4. Exits from Substitute Care Within 36 Months: Cook Versus Balance of State (2020 Entry Cohort)



Discussion and Conclusions

State child welfare agencies are not meant to be long-term caregivers for children. After a child is removed from his or her home, the goal is to find a safe and permanent home in which he or she can develop and thrive. Unfortunately, Illinois lags far behind most of the country in achieving permanent homes for children in a timely manner. When rates of reunification, adoption, and guardianship are examined by region, it becomes clear that a major contributing factor in Illinois' poor performance on these outcomes is the low rate of permanency for children who enter substitute care in the Cook region.

Data in the *B.H.* monitoring report, however, are unable to tell us about the reasons for the variance in performance by region. To understand the underlying reasons, additional information must be gathered about regional differences in practice that may be driving the lags in permanency in the Cook region. Preliminary conversations with Cook County juvenile court personnel suggest that regional differences in permanency court processes impact the timely achievement of reunification, adoption, and guardianship. Recent data from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services confirm that the average time to termination of parental rights (TPR) in the Cook region is substantially longer than that in all other regions and that “efforts to address barriers and effect change in this area...have not yet resulted in sustainable improvement” (Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, 2023, p. 71). Additional research is needed to guide future efforts to improve the time to permanency for children in Illinois. A comprehensive study that combines data from qualitative interviews with child welfare and juvenile court staff with administrative data from both systems would further our understanding of the barriers to permanency in the Cook region. It could also identify system-level changes to improve Illinois' performance on these outcomes.

Recommended Citation

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Related Publications

Children and Family Research Center. (2024). *Conditions of children in or at risk of foster care in Illinois: FY2024 monitoring report of the B.H. Consent Decree*.
<https://www.cfrc.illinois.edu/BH24.pdf>

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