



Annual Report

Court Year 2022-2023





“After 20 years of hard work, we have reformed our system from one lacking basic structure, statewide coordination, and adequate resources to a national leader among child- and family-serving systems.”

*DCF Commissioner
Beyer Budget Testimony
May 2022*

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New Jersey Child Placement Advisory Council

Executive Board

Executive Board

Chair	Lorene S. Wilkerson	Middlesex County
Vice Chair	Eunice I. Salton	Middlesex County
Secretary	Vacant	Ocean County
Treasurer	Mary “Twinkie” Polizzi	Bergen County

Voting Members

Sarah Black	Cumberland County
Michael Krasner	Union County
Susan B. Lubalin	Essex County
Mary Parham	Middlesex County
Frank E. Petrucci	Essex County
Joe Prussin	Passaic County
Colleen McKenna Tucker	Hudson County

Non-Voting Members

Emeritus	Sandra Wilson Moss, Esq., MSW	Passaic County
	Susan Rodgers	Mercer County
Honorary	Rev. Dr. Darrell L. Armstrong	Mercer County
	Greg Rapport	Mercer County



“True progress demands a collaborative partnership that takes advantage of the best resources our community has to offer.”

*AOC Director, Glenn A. Grant
Budget Testimony
April 2022*



Letter from the Chair

**To the Esteemed Members
of the New Jersey Supreme Court,
Governor and Legislators:**

On behalf of the New Jersey Child Placement Advisory Council (NJ CPAC)
I am honored to present this annual report.

NJ CPAC's report must, by state statute, focus on the New Jersey Division of Child Protection and Permanency's (DCP&P) child welfare practices and policies as they relate to the care and placement of abused and neglected children. This report highlights the progress DCP&P has made and challenges encountered during Court Year 2023 (June 30, 2022-July 1, 2023) in attaining safe, healthy and permanent homes for children and youth. NJ CPAC's recommendations for improvement are summarized within. Data on a range of social, health and economic issues associated with placement also are included, in addition to data on CPR board activities.

NJ CPAC is pleased to report that New Jersey continues to make improvements in meeting the needs of children and families despite the obstacles presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the data represented in this report reinforces the need to examine the impacts of poverty and implicit bias on children placed outside of their home.

Through memberships on the Children in Court Improvement Committee (CICIC), the New Jersey Task Force on Child Abuse and Neglect (NJTFCAN), and through NJ CPAC trainings and conferences, our organization is kept current on the transformation of New Jersey's child welfare system, enabling us to make informed recommendations as to how DCP&P should move forward.

Lorene S. Wilkerson

Chair

New Jersey Child Placement Advisory Council (NJ CPAC)



NJ CPAC Annual Report for 2022 - 2023 CY

The New Jersey Child Placement Advisory Council

NJ CPAC is a statewide advisory council composed of dedicated citizen volunteers elected by county Child Placement Review (CPR) boards. NJ CPAC serves in an advisory capacity to the Supreme Court, the New Jersey Division of Child Protection and Permanency (DCP&P), and the governor regarding the practices of CPR boards, policies and procedures for the placement of children, and the effectiveness of the Child Placement Review Act. NJ CPAC is required by law to produce an annual report, which relies on data submitted by the New Jersey Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC) and DCP&P.

CPR boards consist of individuals who understand the need for children in foster care to be safely reunited with their families whenever possible. CPR volunteers review cases of children in foster care to ensure that the children entering each year experience out of home placement as a temporary, not a permanent solution. When a child is unable to return to their home, we advocate for a permanent, healthy, and stable placement such as kinship legal guardianship or adoption.

CPR volunteers who represent New Jersey communities are vital to our mission of advocating for every child removed from their home. With the support of the AOC, NJ CPAC offers comprehensive training and support to CPR volunteers, across all 21 counties in New Jersey.

NJ CPAC Training and Annual Conference

Activities for Court Year 2023

NJ CPAC's activities for Court Year 2023 focused on advancing equity and understanding bias. By strategically partnering with the Office of Communications and Community Relations at the AOC and the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), NJ CPAC offered three robust webinars to a broad network of professionals invested in the welfare of New Jersey's children.

NJ CPAC on Aug. 8, 2022 hosted a two-hour webinar, *Tools for Advancing Equity: A Virtual Workshop on Advancing the Elimination of Bias in Child Welfare-Related Decision Making*. Through a series of interactive experiences and breakout session discussions, the program built on a general understanding of implicit bias and advanced awareness and understanding of implicit associations, assumptions, thought processes and decision-making.

During the winter of 2023, NJ CPAC hosted a two-part webinar series. *Looking at Mental Health through a Cultural Lens* with the National Alliance on Mental Illness of New Jersey. This two-part webinar featured personal stories and voices about mental health journeys shaped by race, family and gender. Both segments provided interactive sessions and lived experiences illuminating how various cultures address the issue of mental health in their families.

NJ CPAC on June 23, 2023 hosted its annual conference, *Putting the Child First: The Multidisciplinary Team (MDT)*, with the New Jersey Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the New Jersey Children's Alliance (NJCA). This conference featured an engaging collection of methods-based presentations and panels from family advocates, the multi-faith community, and members of the MDTs, which included medical and mental health professionals, social workers, and prosecutors.



CPR Board Activities for Court Year 2022-2023

Of the 21 counties in New Jersey, only four have recruited enough volunteers to constitute the required number of child placement review boards. The CPR Act states that each board shall consist of at least five board members and two alternates, and there shall be at least one board for each 200 reviews. The court performs the 60-day review when a CPR board is unavailable.

Table 2 below shows the number of 60-day reviews conducted in each county. This data from the AOC does not differentiate between reviews that the court conducts and those conducted by CPR boards. As a result of data errors relating to judges conducting CPR initial reviews, several counties underreported the total number of CPR initial reviews. These data entry issues have been resolved, and future reporting should be accurate.

County	Distinct Volunteers
Atlantic	3
Bergen	7
Burlington	6
Camden	0
Cape May	3
Cumberland	3
Essex	10
Glouster	2
Hudson	1
Hunterdon	0
Mercer	7
Middlesex	10
Monmouth	5
Morris	3
Ocean	3
Passaic	2
Salem	0
Somerset	2
Sussex	1
Union	0
Warren	3
Total	71

County	Number of Board Reviews
Atlantic	60
Bergen	40
Burlington	81
Camden	202
Cape May	2
Cumberland	44
Essex	55
Glouster	79
Hudson	33
Hunterdon	4
Mercer	58
Middlesex	68
Monmouth	42
Morris	19
Ocean	38
Passaic	63
Salem	16
Somerset	7
Sussex	15
Union	16
Warren	24
Total	966

Tables 1 and 2 were provided to NJ CPAC by the Administrative Office of the Courts. Table 1: Number of Active Child Placement Review Board Volunteers in Each County. Table 2: Number of Board Reviews by County.



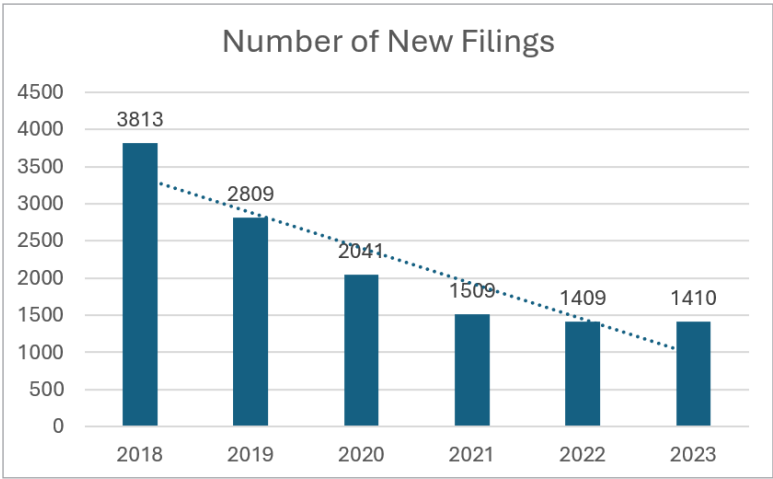
New Jersey Children and Youth: Out of Home (OOH) Placement Facts and Figures

In March 2024, the Children’s Bureau, part of the U.S. Administration for Children and Families reported a decrease of children in foster care nationwide over the last five years (*Administration for Children and Families, 2024*). New Jersey data also shows a consistent decrease in new case filings and children in placement for Court Year 2023.

New Case Filings for OOH Placements Over Time

Between the previous *NJ CPAC Annual Report* and this report, the number of new OOH child placement filings (FC docket) has remained constant (*Administrative Office of the Courts, New Filings Dashboard, 2023*).

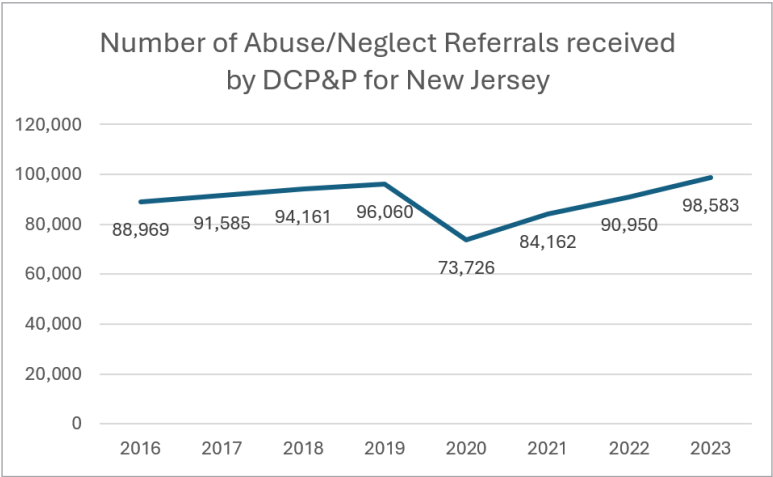
Chart 1: Number of New FC Case Filings Over Time



Increase in Number of Children Referred to DCP&P for an Abuse or Neglect Investigation

During the same period between Court Year 2022 and Court Year 2023, there was an increase in the number of referrals to the New Jersey Child Abuse Hotline as shown in Chart 2. The total number of referrals was 98,583, an 8 percent increase from the prior *NJ CPAC Annual Report*. The number of referrals has steadily increased from a low of 73,726 in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic. The number of referrals in 2023 exceeded the pre-pandemic referral number of 96,060 in 2019 (*DCP&P, child abuse/neglect, 2023*).

Chart 2: Number of Abuse and Neglect Combined Referrals to DCP&P Over Time





Essex County Continues to Have the Highest Number of Referrals

In 2022, Essex County had 9,587 referrals, an increase of 1,265 or 15 percent, since the last *NJ CPAC Annual Report*. In 2023, the number of DCP&P referrals in Essex County rose to 10,288, an increase of 7 percent from 2022 and 24 percent since NJ CPAC last reported data in 2021 (*DCP&P, child abuse/neglect, 2023*).

While Essex County is the second most populated county in New Jersey, the population alone does not account for the number of referrals compared to Bergen County, which has the largest population in the state. A total of 863,728 people lived in Essex County, according to the 2020 U.S. Census, and 15.7 percent, of the population is experiencing poverty, well above the state average of 9.7 percent (*U.S. Census Bureau, Essex County, New Jersey Data Profile 2020*). Only 30 percent of Essex County residents identified as White during the 2021 U.S. Census, while 38.8 percent of Essex County residents identified as Black, compared to the state average of 13.1 percent (*U.S. Census Bureau, 2021*).

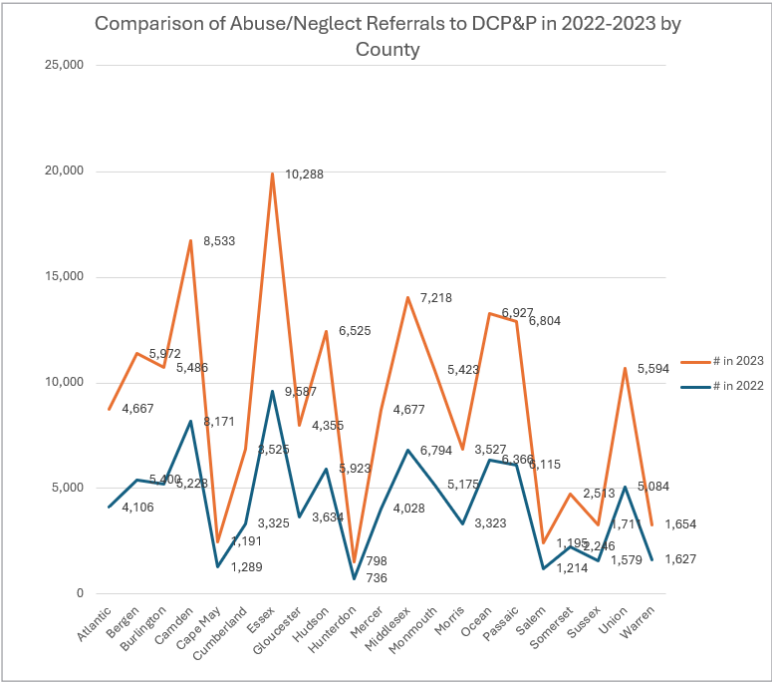
By comparison, Bergen County has the highest population in New Jersey with 955,732 residents. Bergen County, while more populous than Essex County, has a much smaller percentage of residents living in poverty at just 7.1 percent. Bergen County also has fewer Black residents at 5.7 percent compared to Essex County's 38.8 percent. Bergen County also has a much higher percentage of residents who identify as White, 57 percent (*U.S. Census Bureau, Bergen County, New Jersey Data Profile, 2020*).

These numbers illustrate that the New Jersey Courts and DCP&P must study the intersection of race, poverty and out of home placements.

The Number of Abuse Referrals Increased from 2022 to 2023

Chart 3 depicts the change in abuse and neglect referrals to DCP&P from Court Year 2022 to Court Year 2023. The impact of COVID-19 was still evident in 2022, but as children returned to school and other activities outside of the home in 2023, abuse and neglect referrals again increased.

Chart 3: Number of Abuse and Neglect Referrals in 2022 and 2023 by County

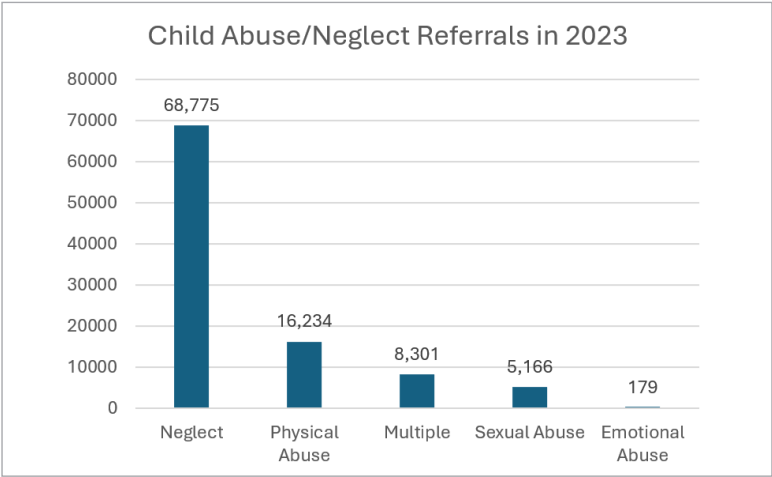




Most Referrals to DCP&P Were for Neglect

The Rutgers University School of Social Work Child Welfare Data Hub shows that in 2023, as in years prior, most referrals made to DCP&P were for neglect. A total of 98,655 referrals were made in 2023, 68,775 or 70 percent of which were to report a family for neglect (*Rutgers University School of Social Work, Institute for Families, 2023*).

Chart 4: Number of Referrals by Referral Type in 2023



Only 3% of Referrals to DCP&P for Neglect Are Established and Substantiated

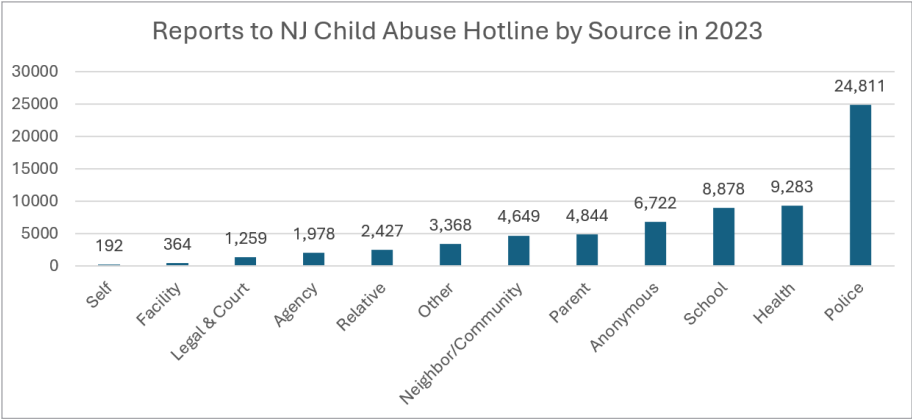
In 2023, 68,775 referrals were made to DCP&P for neglect, and of these referrals only 737 referrals, or 1%, were substantiated. 1,820 referrals, 3 percent, were established and substantiated (*Rutgers University School of Social Work, Institute for Families, 2023*).



Police Were the Source of Most Neglect Reports to the NJ Child Abuse Hotline in 2023

A total of 24,811 referrals to DCP&P for neglect came from police. This data raises the question of whether additional training can be given to law enforcement to prevent unnecessary referrals. Given that only 3 percent of all neglect referrals are ever established and substantiated, it is important that policies regarding referrals resulting from calls to 911 be examined.

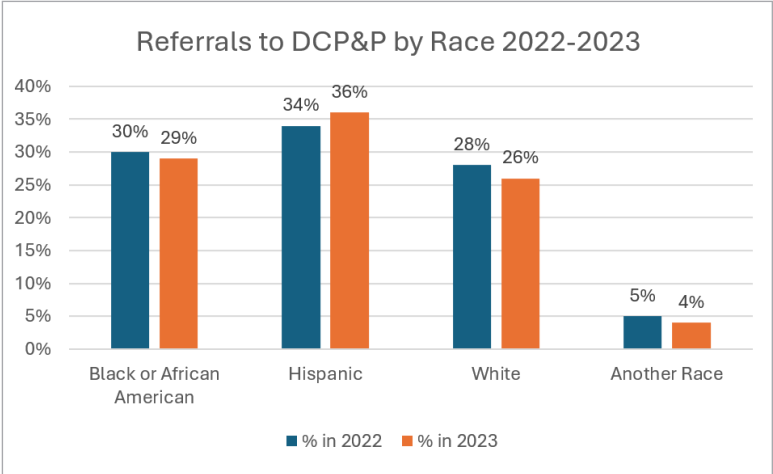
Chart 5: Reports to DCP&P By Source in 2023



The Majority of Children Referred to DCP&P in 2022-2023 Were Hispanic

In 2022, 34 percent of children referred to the DCP&P hotline for possible child abuse or neglect were Hispanic. This figure rose to 36 percent in 2023. Black children also comprise a large portion of referrals, as shown below. The percentage of referrals for White children decreased from 28 percent to 26 percent during this same time (*Rutgers University School of Social Work, Institute for Families, 2023*).

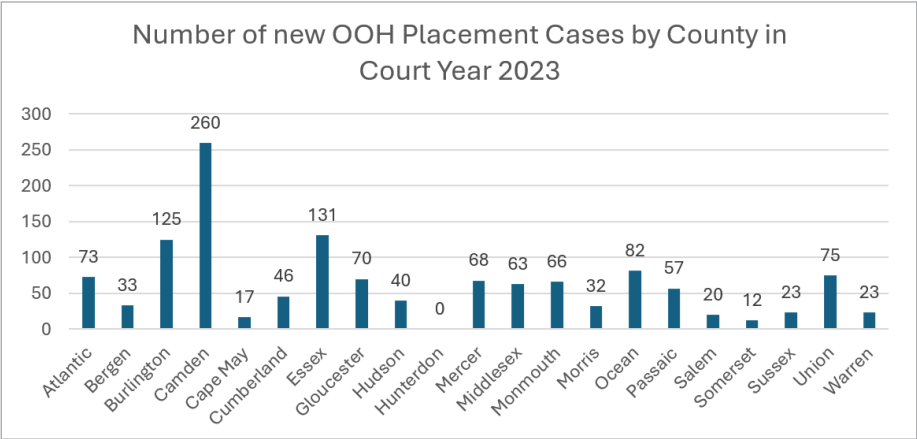
Chart 6: Percent of All Child Abuse & Neglect Referrals to DCP&P By Race in 2022-2023



Number of OOH Placements by County in 2023

Camden County had the highest number of new OOH placement cases, followed by Essex and Burlington counties, respectively. (*DCP&P, placement rates, 2023*).

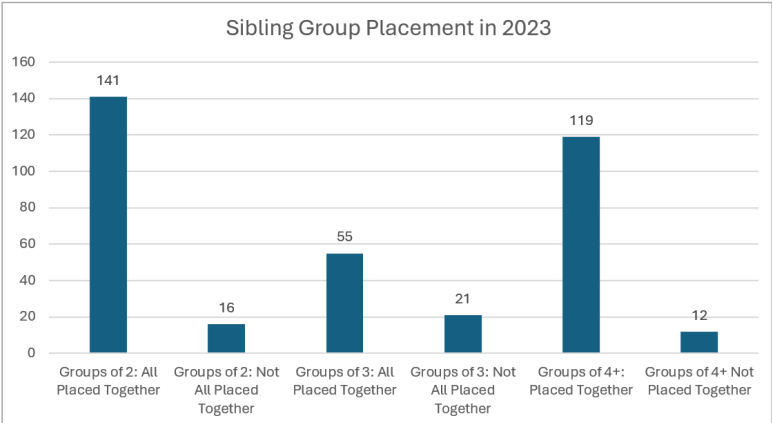
Chart 7: Number of New OOH Placement Cases by County in 2023



Most Sibling Groups Were Placed Together

In 2023, most sibling groups (86.5 percent) were placed together with the same resource family or kin (*DCP&P, siblings placed together, 2023*).

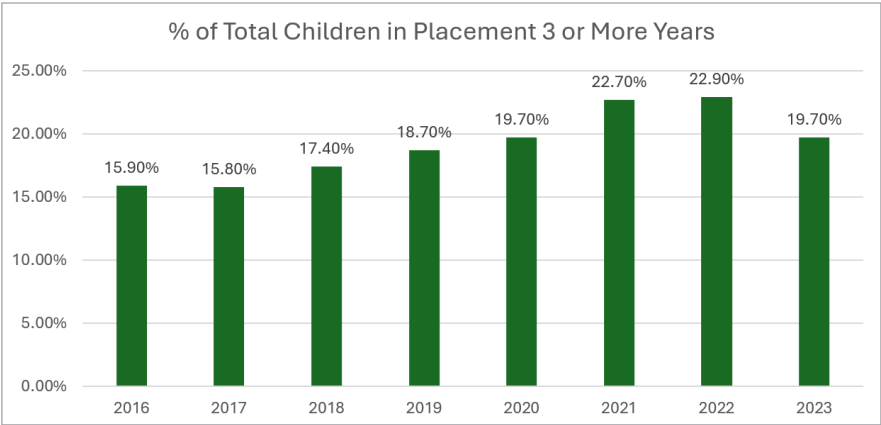
Chart 8: Number of Sibling Groups and Whether They Were Placed Together in 2023



The Number of Children in Placement Longer than Three Years Continues to Decrease, But the Proportion of Children Experiencing Long Stays Continues to Increase

From 2016 to 2023, the number of children in placement for longer than three years has steadily declined. However, the proportion of children in OOH placement for three years or longer among all those in placement has increased (*DCP&P, children in placement - point in time, 2023*).

Chart 9: Percentage of Children in Placement since 2016



To address this inequity, the statewide Children in Court Improvement Committee (CICIC) has developed a strategic plan to track, analyze, and address racial disparities in those children in placement for three or more years.

Beginning in 2019, members of all county CIC Advisory Committees (CICACs) began learning data analytics to build statewide capacity through the study of the children in care for three years and longer in their county. The CICACs would use the data to determine why these children were still in care, to identify the barriers to permanency, and to resolve local court and system issues. The counties then began the study of their race and ethnicity data by decision points in the fall of 2020 to determine which decision points showed disparities. Counties were then taught how to develop specific goals. The counties file quarterly reports with the AOC on a quarterly schedule and an annual report every January.

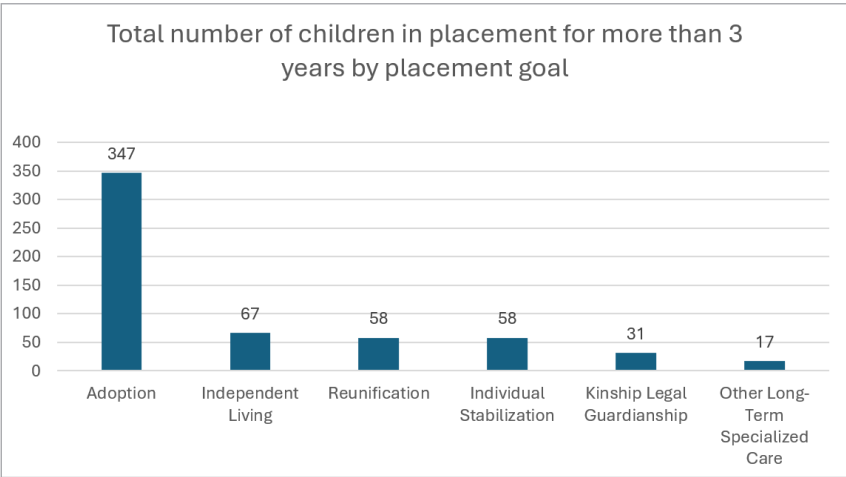
Given the disparity in the number of children in placement across counties, NJ CPAC is pleased that the local offices are encouraged to create subcommittees that address the needs of the families they serve.



Children Waiting for Adoption Account for Most Extended OOH Placements

Of New Jersey’s 579 children and youth in OOH placement for three years or longer in 2023, 347 or 60 percent, had a case goal of adoption (*DCP&P, children in placement - point in time, 2023*).

Chart 10: Number of Children in Placement for 3+ Years by Placement Goal





Mandated Reporting Can Be a Cause of Racial Disparity and Unnecessary Investigations

The federal Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) requires each state to have provisions or procedures for requiring certain individuals to report known or suspected instances of abuse or neglect (*Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2023*). In 46 states, the District of Columbia, American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, and the Virgin Islands, specific professionals are designated as mandatory reporters, including but not limited to teachers, physicians and nurses, social workers, childcare workers, and law enforcement (*Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2023*).

New Jersey is one of only four states that require by law that any person with reasonable suspicion of child abuse must make a report, regardless of their profession or qualifications to assess child abuse or neglect. The other three states are Indiana, North Carolina, and Wyoming (*Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2023*).

As the data in this report illustrates, most referrals to the New Jersey Child Abuse Hotline are for neglect, and of those referrals, less than 3 percent are ever substantiated (*Rutgers University School of Social Work, Institute for Families, 2023*). Developments in state laws in California, Washington, Minnesota, Texas, and New York provide a blueprint for the future of New Jersey families. Each of these states has made progress reforming their mandatory reporting policies, trainings, and procedures to allow grace and provide services for families experiencing poverty (*Children's Trust Fund Alliance, 2024*). For example, in 2022, California passed a law that prohibits reports to Child Protective Services (CPS) for poverty-related reasons alone. Stakeholders such as activists, parents, caregivers, and child welfare officials have been looking at mandated reporting concerns through the lens of "mandated supporting." The training curriculum for mandated reporters in Los Angeles County now emphasizes connecting families to services and support systems. In a similar vein, Washington passed the *Keeping Families Together Act* in 2023. This legislation was designed to "safely reduce the number of children placed into foster care," with an eye towards understanding and reducing racial disparity (*Children's Trust Fund Alliance, 2024*).



The Harm of Removal

Removing children from their homes is an inherently harmful and traumatic experience for all family members involved. This harm cannot be represented in a chart or through data, but through the lived experiences of those involved in this system. In 2022, the Children's Trust Fund Alliance interviewed parents with experience in the child welfare system who described feeling judged by staff who already assumed their guilt, saying that they felt "acutely aware" that the agency could take their children (*Children's Trust Fund Alliance, 2024*). Well-meaning but untrained citizens who report these families do not realize that a report can "increase fear and trauma, scare families away from helpful systems, and lead to ongoing surveillance" (*Fong, 2020*).

NJ CPAC Recommendations

Each year, NJ CPAC considers the data supplied by the AOC and DCP&P, as well as lived experiences from those previously involved with the child welfare system, to draft recommendations for the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of state government. These recommendations are published annually in this report as mandated by the Child Placement Review Act (N.J.S.A. 30:4C-50, et seq.).

1. Legislation is required to introduce another option for those concerned about a child or family's welfare such as referrals to support services. New Jersey can adopt a "mandatory supporting" model like those in New York and California, which connect impoverished families to services as opposed to punitive actions.
2. Additional Judiciary effort is needed in the recruitment and retention of CPR volunteers. Currently, only four out of the 21 counties in New Jersey have sufficient volunteers to constitute a board as required by the statute. NJ CPAC recommends that court staff connect with community organizations and other forms of interpersonal outreach to spread awareness about the CPR program and volunteer opportunities.



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