

THE 2007 NCCPR FLORIDA RATE-OF-REMOVAL INDEX SUNCOAST SUPPLEMENT

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In June 2007, NCCPR released its second annual comparison of the propensity of districts within Florida to take children from their parents. We found that districts which took proportionately fewer children tended to do a better job of keeping children safe than those which followed a take-the-child-and-run approach.

But it was difficult to detect patterns in one region because of its unusual size and organizational complexity. The Suncoast Region includes six counties, two of them quite large, and two privatized “lead agencies” (soon to be three or more). In many counties within the region, county sheriff’s offices, rather than the Department of Children and Families, handle initial child abuse investigations.

Then, right after our *Florida Rate-of-Removal Index* was released, the Suncoast Region was plunged into controversy over the abuse of a child known-to-the-system. Then the lead agency for five of the six counties, the Sarasota YMCA, came under long-overdue scrutiny. (NCCPR had highlighted the failings of this agency as part of a report on Florida child welfare issued in 2002).

And finally, there was much speculation about why Pinellas County was functioning so poorly while neighboring Pasco County was doing so well, even though both were part of the same “subdivision” of the same lead agency.

So we asked DCF to provide entry into care data for each county within the Suncoast Region for every month from January 2003 to the most recent available. Although the most recent was October 2007, we’ve excluded that month from this index because data for the most recent month tend to be incomplete and often are revised. In addition, because DeSoto County is so small, its rate of child removal can fluctuate easily even with a relatively small change in raw numbers. So while DeSoto data are presented in the tables below, that county is not included in the rankings.

We did not obtain child safety data for this index. The DCF “Dashboard” which includes such data is offline, and those data were not broken down to the county level. However, as noted above, the statewide *Rate-of-Removal Index* clearly shows a high rate of removal is not necessary to keep children safe.

KEY FINDINGS

- Pasco County, the region’s shining star, takes proportionately far fewer children than Pinellas County, considered the region’s biggest failure. As readers familiar with NCCPR will expect, we do not consider this a coincidence. Less wrongful removal gives workers more time to find children in real danger, and lower caseloads. It also makes the job less frustrating and more rewarding, and that is likely to reduce caseworker turnover. The lower rate of removal helps explain Pasco’s strong performance, and the weak performance in Pinellas.

The gap between the two counties has grown over the years, with Pasco removing fewer and fewer children each year since 2003.

- In the county that took proportionately the fewest children in 2006, Pasco, and the county that took the most, Manatee, Sheriff's offices do the initial investigations. Manatee also may be the only county that will take more children from their parents in 2007 than in 2006 (though see the "Special Caution" below). In contrast, the head of the privatized lead agency in Hillsborough County says the fact that the Sheriff's office assumed responsibility for investigations there in July 2006 is a major reason for a significant *reduction* in removals.¹ This suggests significant disparities in the approaches taken by Sheriff's offices. In addition, since high rates of removal expose children to the terrible trauma of needless foster care, and make all children less safe by overwhelming workers, it also suggests the children of Manatee County are being ill-served.

- With the exception of Pasco, all of the counties in the region take children at a rate above the state average – and that state average is well above the national average and far above the rate in systems widely-regarded as, relatively speaking, models.

THE LEAD AGENCY RESPONSIBILITY

Poorly-performing lead agencies often try to duck responsibility for high rates of removal, arguing that they don't make the initial decision to remove a child, DCF or Sheriff's offices do. But that's a copout. Those DCF and Sheriff's decisions are heavily influenced by the array of services available as alternatives to placing a child in foster care. And providing those alternatives is the lead agency's responsibility.

It is notable that the two counties that are performing best are Pasco, which, it appears, somehow avoided control by the Sarasota YMCA, though it was nominally the lead agency there, and Hillsborough, which has a different lead agency.

SPECIAL CAUTION:

Although raw data for the first nine months of 2007 are included, they should be viewed with caution. In late July, DCF switched to a new computer system. The *Daytona Beach News Journal* reported serious problems with the new system, including questions about the reliability for figures about children in care. The head of the privatized "lead agency" in District 12 says flatly that "The reports we are getting are not accurate."² And even when a new system works perfectly, it requires considerable training for workers to use it correctly.

In this case, the new computer system went online shortly after a case of severe abuse made headlines in the Suncoast Region. So while the 2007 data do not show this case setting off a foster-care panic, the data may not be accurate. Similarly an apparent sharp decline in entries into care in Sarasota and Hillsborough Counties should be viewed with caution until data can be confirmed. On the other hand, the head of the privatized lead agency in Hillsborough says the decline in his county is real, and a major step in the right direction.³

¹ Sherri Ackerman, "Foster agency a model success," *Tampa Tribune*, November 10, 2007.

² Deborah Circelli, "Welfare workers say computer woes putting kids at risk," *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, August 15, 2007.

³ Ackerman, note 1, supra.

HOW THE RATE-OF-REMOVAL INDEX WORKS

THIS IS NOT THE “SNAPSHOT NUMBER”...

The measure of a district or a county’s foster care population usually seen in news accounts is the so-called “snapshot number” indicating the number of children in foster care in a county on one particular day each year. That is a very important number, but it is a less accurate measure of a county’s propensity to remove children.

A county may have a high snapshot number even if it takes away very few children, if it hangs on to those it takes for a very long time. (That is, in itself, a serious problem, but not a measure of the county’s propensity to take away children in the first place). Conversely, a county can have a low snapshot number and still take away many children, but take them for only a very short period of time. Thus, a county which takes away many children in January, but returns most of them by August will have a low number if the “snapshot” is taken in September.

This also is why another measure of success, average length of stay in foster care, should be viewed with caution. A county with a low average length of stay may have achieved this simply by taking away far too many children and then returning a lot of them after only a very short time in foster care – much the worse for the experience.

Also, a county which took away a great many children a decade or more ago and let them languish in foster care may have a low snapshot number now simply because those children are “aging out” of the system at 18 – hardly a testament to a system’s success.

...RATHER, THIS INDEX USES REMOVALS OVER THE COURSE OF A YEAR

So instead of measuring the foster care population on any given day, the *NCCPR Florida Rate-of-Removal Index* and this supplement rely on DCF data, obtained through public records requests, listing the number of children removed over the course of a given year. Once again, DCF responded to our requests promptly and thoroughly and we thank the agency for its cooperation.

HOW THE INDEX IS COMPILED

We could have simply compared the number of children removed over the course of a year to a county’s total child population. But then counties with high rates-of-removal and high child poverty rates would complain that this was unfair because we didn’t consider the single largest risk factor for actual abuse (not to mention the factor most often confused with “neglect”) – poverty.

So, in order to factor that out, and come closer to an apples-to-apples comparison, we compare removals to the number of impoverished children in each county. We use a Census Bureau estimate for 2004 (the most recent year for which census data are available).

THE “PANIC DETECTOR”

The final table arranges the rate-of-removal data for each county month-by-month for each year from 2003 through September 2007, allowing for an examination of trends in each county over time. Where there is a sharp rise in removals during the same month from one year

to the next for at least two months in a row, that suggests a foster-care panic. Figures that meet this criterion are in bold and the boxes are shaded. The final column in the table notes significant increases or decreases in child removals from year to year.

COMPARING THE FLORIDA DATA TO NCCPR’S NATIONAL RATE-OF-REMOVAL INDEX

These data are roughly comparable to the data in NCCPR’s national *Rate-of-Removal Index*. So readers now can compare a county’s total to other districts in Florida, to other states or to the national average. But this still should be done with caution because it is more difficult to accurately estimate the number of impoverished children in a smaller jurisdiction.

ADDITIONAL CAVEATS

- The child poverty estimate has a relatively wide margin of error. Therefore, the rankings cannot be used to suggest that a county is better or worse than one with a similar rate-of-removal. Rather, this index can be used to spot the outliers - those doing particularly well or particularly poorly, and to detect trends.

- One cannot say, based on these data, that county X “took Y percent of its poor children from their parents in 2006.” That would be inaccurate because, while the overwhelming majority of children taken from their parents are poor, not all of them are. Thus, we are comparing a pool of children – those removed from their parents – which is mostly poor, to a general population that is entirely poor.

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NCCPR SUNCOAST REGION RATE-OF-REMOVAL INDEX

County	Children living in poverty, 2004	Children removed from their homes, 2006	Rate of removal (per thousand impoverished children)	Rank
DeSoto	1,811	45	24.8	N/A*
Hillsborough	50,195	1,725	34.5	4
Manatee	9,497	411	43.3	1
Pasco	14,343	382	26.6	5
Pinellas	28,862	1,209	41.5	2
Sarasota	7,467	281	37.6	3
Region average	112,175	4,053	36.1	
State Average	699,284	22,386	32.0	

*-DeSoto is too small to rank, since rates of removal can fluctuate greatly with only a small change in raw numbers of entries into care.

Detailed data for January 2003 through September 2007 are on the following page.

THE PANIC DETECTOR: CHANGES IN REMOVALS FROM YEAR TO YEAR

DeSoto*	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total	
2003	2	1	4	5	15	1	4	5	9	12	9	3	70	
2004	21	11	18	13	5	7	0	5	1	1	4	4	90	
2005	8	4	8	4	18	4	12	11	7	6	0	2	84	
2006	1	2	12	2	6	2	2	11	2	2	2	1	45	
2007**	0	0	5	2	2	0	4	3	5					
Hillsborough	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total	
2003	181	135	123	169	136	109	193	151	170	143	165	122	1797	
2004	116	119	138	140	147	190	125	132	168	167	88	145	1675	
2005	147	150	174	169	215	175	182	192	276	145	108	141	2074	+24%
2006	196	163	144	147	157	121	139	131	128	155	151	97	1729	-12%
2007**	133	97	64	107	83	111	106	110	83					
Manatee	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total	
2003	22	20	36	45	25	41	50	32	35	36	18	22	382	
2004	36	30	33	37	24	24	14	18	17	25	19	41	318	-16%
2005	28	28	31	23	26	22	10	32	32	22	13	34	301	
2006	40	38	25	39	28	32	32	35	59	49	19	15	411	+35%
2007**	54	39	20	24	54	32	36	32	42					
Pasco	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total	
2003	61	52	42	50	68	52	73	38	40	64	45	20	605	
2004	40	53	60	52	53	42	43	49	30	48	47	49	566	
2005	55	41	62	50	48	35	37	37	50	47	32	36	530	
2006	26	36	42	35	44	47	25	25	25	30	34	13	382	-29%
2007**	28	19	38	25	16	18	21	32	23					
Pinellas	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total	
2003	87	102	106	120	108	99	104	103	128	99	82	71	1209	
2004	92	104	103	97	73	85	75	81	91	99	49	64	1013	-16%
2005	85	96	122	105	118	91	114	113	116	81	79	73	1193	+18%
2006	86	92	143	146	88	108	112	113	85	73	83	80	1209	
2007**	95	102	104	70	101	94	93	83	91					
Sarasota	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total	
2003	29	13	34	22	43	15	27	22	37	36	23	14	315	
2004	11	26	23	15	31	28	18	15	20	18	18	32	255	-19%
2005	18	10	20	28	18	22	22	20	22	19	17	19	235	
2006	32	36	22	15	18	26	31	28	22	23	18	10	281	+20%
2007**	14	9	19	17	20	6	17	21	13					

*-DeSoto is too small to rank, since rates of removal can fluctuate greatly with only a small change in raw numbers of entries into care.

** 2007 data should be viewed with caution because of DCF's switch to a new computer system.

Sources:

Children removed from their homes: Florida Department of Children and Families response to NCCPR public records request.
Impoverished children: U.S. Census Bureau, *Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates: Estimates for Florida Counties, 2004*, available online at: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/saiep/county.html>