

THE NCCPR *GEORGIA* RATE-OF-REMOVAL INDEX

May 3, 2007

For the past three years, NCCPR has published a rate-of-removal index comparing the propensity of *states* to adopt a “take-the-child-and-run” approach to child welfare. The index compares the number of children taken from their parents in each state during the most recent year for which data are available to a Census Bureau estimate of the number of children living in poverty in that state. The result is the number of removals of children from their homes for every 1,000 impoverished children in that state.

We have applied the same methodology to two states, California and Ohio, where individual counties run child welfare, and to Florida, where the state is divided into regions which have a great deal of autonomy.

The inspiration for doing a similar analysis in Georgia, even though the Georgia system is, theoretically, state-run, came from the state’s Office of Child Advocate. That office is known for embracing a take-the-child-and-run approach to child welfare, and for issuing blistering audits of county child welfare offices. So when we saw OCA lavish praise on one county, Cobb, we figured Cobb County must take children at an exceptionally high rate. That led us to the comparison below.

We say Georgia child welfare is *theoretically* state run, because we found that there actually is a wider variation in the propensity of county child welfare offices to take children in Georgia than in any of the other states we’ve examined. The county that takes children at the highest rate takes those children at a rate *25 times* higher than the county that takes children most sparingly. (The county that takes the most children, Fayette, takes children at, by far, the highest rate we’ve seen anywhere in the nation; but it also has so few impoverished children that we did not include it among counties we formally ranked. It is included however, in the table listing rates of removal for all Georgia counties).

In the other states we’ve measured, the state data confirmed what national data and experience already revealed: It is not necessary to take away large numbers of children in order to keep children safe. In Ohio, California and Florida, counties which took proportionately fewer children tended to do better on key safety outcomes. For reasons discussed below, it was not possible to analyze outcomes to the same degree in Georgia. But what is clear in all of these jurisdictions and in much of the rest of the country, is that whether a child is torn away from everyone loving and familiar and forced to endure the trauma of foster care depends far more on where he happens to live than on any objective measure of child maltreatment.

THIS IS NOT THE “SNAPSHOT NUMBER”...

The measure of 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

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county may have a low snapshot number and still take away many children, but take them for only a very short 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. 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 Georgia Rate-of-Removal Index* relies on Division of Family and Children Services data listing the total number of children removed over the course of a year.

HOW THE INDEX IS COMPILED

We could have simply compared the number of children removed to a county’s total child population. But then all the 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, according to the 2000 Census. (In Georgia, however, it turns out that the counties with the three highest rates of removal using this measure also have the lowest child poverty rates, suggesting that where there is very little poverty it may be more likely to be confused with “neglect.”)

RANKINGS

NCCPR’s national *Rate-of-Removal Index* includes a ranking for each state. We did not try to do this for every Georgia county. That’s because many of Georgia’s 159 counties are so small that even very small changes in the number of children removed, which easily could be the result of factors beyond the county’s control, could significantly change their rankings. Safety data also can fluctuate greatly based on a small change in raw numbers in these counties.

So the first two charts on the following pages provide data and rankings for all Georgia counties in which at least 2,000 impoverished children resided according to the 2,000 census. Though that is only 44 of 159 counties, those counties include about 70 percent of the children taken away statewide over the course of a year. We also provide a chart with data for all 159 counties but without rankings.

THE GROWTH FACTOR

Parts of Georgia are experiencing extraordinary population growth. Of the 100 fastest-growing counties in America from 2000 through July 2006, 13 are in Georgia. And three of the top ten are in metropolitan Atlanta. But the counties that take children at the highest rates take them at rates so extreme that even this huge growth doesn’t change things much.

For example, if we assume that the impoverished child population in Cherokee County grew as much as the population as a whole, (37.6 percent), Cherokee’s rate-of-removal would drop to 58.8 children taken for every thousand impoverished children. But that still would be the highest rate-of-removal among the ranked counties.

Among all counties, the rate of removal in Fayette County is so extreme that, if one assumes the impoverished child population grew at the same rate as the population as a whole (16 percent), its rate of removal would drop, but only from 134.3 to 115.8.

Nevertheless, we have marked with an * all counties where total population increased by at least 25 percent since the 2000 census.

SAFETY DATA

As a group that believes strongly in family preservation, we feel that a high rate-of-removal almost always is a sign of a bad system. But a low rate-of-removal is not necessarily a sign of a good system. A low rate-of-removal can be accomplished either by embracing safe, proven programs to keep families together, or by ignoring children in real danger.

There are two primary means for measuring how a child welfare system does in keeping children safe.

One is to track how often, when maltreatment is substantiated, the child is maltreated again, typically within six months. The other measure is foster-care “recidivism.” That is, what percentage of children entering foster care are entering again, after having been discharged from foster care within 12 months.

Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, we were unable to calculate reabuse outcomes for most counties. Though DFCS was generous with its time and efficient in providing a wealth of data, it comes in a form that is cumbersome to calculate, particularly in a state with 159 counties.

Therefore we had to limit ourselves to a sample. Among the 44 ranked counties, we calculated the rate at which children were reabused in the five counties with the highest rates of removal, the five with the lowest rates of removal, as well as Fulton and DeKalb.

Those data are presented in the third table below.

We believe the second safety measure, foster-care recidivism, cannot be used reliably for individual counties in Georgia because in most cases the raw numbers are so small that a fair comparison is impossible. However we have provided the data for the ranked counties in supplemental tables at the end of this document.

OTHER CAVEATS

One cannot say, based on these data, that county X “took Y percent of its poor children from their parents.” 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. One can say only that authorities in Cherokee County appear more prone to resort to foster care than their counterparts in any of the other ranked counties – and indeed, it is tied with two other jurisdictions for the highest rates of removal in the nation among places that can be ranked. (As noted earlier, Fayette County’s rate-of-removal is far higher still.)

THE TABLES

The first two tables on the following pages are the *NCCPR Georgia Rate-of-Removal Index*. They compare rates of child removal for 44 counties for the 12 months ending February 28, 2007. The first table lists the counties alphabetically, the second in the order in which they took away children.

The next table repeats these data for the five counties with the highest and lowest rates-of-removal, plus Fulton and DeKalb Counties, adding in outcomes based on a key safety measure, reabuse of children within six months.

That is followed by a table providing the data for every Georgia county, without rankings. The last two tables are the supplemental tables which add data for foster-care recidivism.

Sources: All child welfare data in the charts on the following pages, except foster-care recidivism, were provided by the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services; Impoverished child population data are from the census bureau via the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Kids Count project, www.kidscount.org/census. The Rate-of-Removal calculation was done by NCCPR. Population growth data are from the Census Bureau, *100 Fastest Growing Counties*, available at <http://www.census.gov/popest/counties/CO-EST2006-08.html> and *Annual Estimates for the Population of Counties, April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2006*, available online at <http://www.census.gov/popest/counties/CO-EST2006-01.html>

*-County where total population grew by more than 25 percent since the 2000 census.

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**RATE-OF-REMOVAL IN COUNTIES
WITH AT LEAST 2,000 IMPOVERISHED CHILDREN,
12 MONTHS ENDING FEBRUARY 28, 2007**

County	Children removed from their homes	Impoverished Children	Rate of removal /rank
BALDWIN	22	2,126	10.3/39
BARTOW	117	2,119	55.2/02
BIBB	200	5,601	35.7/09
BULLOCH	14	2,574	5.4/44
BURKE	15	2,709	5.5/43
CARROLL	116	3,498	33.2/11
CHATHAM	313	12,752	24.5/19
CHEROKEE*	207	2,559	80.9/01
CLARKE	79	4,428	17.8/32
CLAYTON	307	9,503	32.3/12
COBB	633	11,595	54.6/03
COFFEE	44	2,489	17.7/33
COLQUITT	55	2,979	18.5/29
COWETA*	108	2,523	42.8/07
CRISP	72	2,660	27.1/17
DECATUR	30	2,642	11.4/35
DEKALB	764	23,308	32.8/10
DOUGHERTY	59	9,463	6.2/41
DOUGLAS*	141	2,600	54.2/04
EMANUEL	43	2,185	19.7/27
FLOYD	139	4,355	31.9/13
FULTON	876	44,992	19.5/28
GLYNN	71	3,943	18.0/31
GWINNETT*	451	10,334	43.6/06
HALL	68	5,810	11.7/34
HOUSTON	102	4,541	22.5/33
LAURENS	70	3,158	22.2/24
LIBERTY	90	3,760	23.9/20
LOWNDES	117	5,487	21.3/25
MITCHELL	28	2,483	11.3/36
MUSCOGEE	75	10,975	6.8/40
NEWTON*	62	2,590	23.9/20
RICHMOND	268	14,535	18.4/30
ROCKDALE	59	2,065	28.6/15
SPALDING	140	3,360	41.7/08
SUMTER	33	2,999	11.0/37
THOMAS	15	2,512	6.0/42
TIFT	83	2,933	28.3/16
TOOMBS	77	2,528	30.5/14
TROUP	67	3,351	20.0/26
WALKER	59	2,616	22.6/22
WALTON	54	2,165	24.9/18
WARE	29	2,625	11.0/37
WHITFIELD	147	2,977	49.4/05
44 counties	6519	257,407	25.3
Statewide	9,417	359,913	26.2

For the same data with counties listed by rank, see following page.

**RATE-OF-REMOVAL IN COUNTIES
WITH AT LEAST 2,000 IMPOVERISHED CHILDREN, BY RANK, 12 MONTHS
ENDING FEBRUARY 28, 2007**

County	Children removed from their homes	Impoverished children	Rate of removal/rank
CHEROKEE*	207	2,559	80.9/01
BARTOW	117	2,119	55.2/02
COBB	633	11,595	54.6/03
DOUGLAS*	141	2,600	54.2/04
WHITFIELD	147	2,977	49.4/05
GWINNETT*	451	10,334	43.6/06
COWETA*	108	2,523	42.8/07
SPALDING	140	3,360	41.7/08
BIBB	200	5,601	35.7/09
DEKALB	764	23,308	32.8/10
CARROLL	116	3,498	33.2/11
CLAYTON	307	9,503	32.3/12
FLOYD	139	4,355	31.9/13
TOOMBS	77	2,528	30.5/14
ROCKDALE	59	2,065	28.6/15
TIFT	83	2,933	28.3/16
CRISP	72	2,660	27.1/17
WALTON	54	2,165	24.9/18
CHATHAM	313	12,752	24.5/19
LIBERTY	90	3,760	23.9/20
NEWTON	62	2,590	23.9/20
WALKER	59	2,616	22.6/22
HOUSTON	102	4,541	22.5/23
LAURENS	70	3,158	22.2/24
LOWNDES	117	5,487	21.3/25
TROUP	67	3,351	20.0/26
EMANUEL	43	2,185	19.7/27
FULTON	876	44,992	19.5/28
COLQUITT	55	2,979	18.5/29
RICHMOND	268	14,535	18.4/30
GLYNN	71	3,943	18.0/31
CLARKE	79	4,428	17.8/32
COFFEE	44	2,489	17.7/33
HALL	68	5,810	11.7/34
DECATUR	30	2,642	11.4/35
MITCHELL	28	2,483	11.3/36
SUMTER	33	2,999	11.0/37
WARE	29	2,625	11.0/37
BALDWIN	22	2,126	10.3/39
MUSCOGEE	75	10,975	6.8/40
DOUGHERTY	59	9,463	6.2/41
THOMAS	15	2,512	6.0/42
BURKE	15	2,709	5.5/43
BULLOCH	14	2,574	5.4/44
44 COUNTIES	6519	257,407	25.3
STATEWIDE	9,417	359,913	26.2

REABUSE OF CHILDREN IN COUNTIES WITH THE HIGHEST AND LOWEST RATES-OF-REMOVAL, AND DEKALB AND FULTON

County	Children removed from their homes	Impoverished children	Rate of removal/rank	% of children reabused within six months
CHEROKEE*	207	2,559	80.9/01	7.1
BARTOW	117	2,119	55.2/02	5.0
COBB	633	11,595	54.6/03	3.3
DOUGLAS*	141	2,600	54.2/04	1.6
WHITFIELD	147	2,977	49.4/05	5.6
Average rate of reabuse:				4.5
MUSCOGEE	75	10,975	6.8/40	3.9
DOUGHERTY	59	9,463	6.2/41	3.4
THOMAS	15	2,512	6.0/42	8.7
BURKE	15	2,709	5.5/43	5.8
BULLOCH	14	2,574	5.4/44	1.4
Average rate of reabuse:				4.6
DEKALB	764	23,308	32.8/10	1.9
FULTON	876	44,992	19.5/28	5.1

*-Because of the high population growth in Cherokee and Douglas counties, which is not reflected in 2000 Census figures for the impoverished child population, we also performed this calculation by assuming that the impoverished child population in Cherokee and Douglas Counties had grown as quickly as the population in those counties as a whole. While this reduced the rate-of-removal, Cherokee still would have the highest rate of removal among the ranked counties – 58.8 children removed for every thousand impoverished children. The rate of removal in Douglas would be 41.7, still higher than the next highest counties that did not grow quickly, Bibb and Spalding. Nevertheless, we also performed the calculation substituting Bibb and Spalding for Cherokee and Douglas. The results were the same.

**RATES OF REMOVAL, ALL COUNTIES,
YEAR ENDING FEBRUARY 28, 2007**

County	Children removed from their homes	Impoverished children	Rate of removal
APPLING	12	1,120	10.7
ATKINSON	10	636	15.7
BACON	17	802	21.2
BAKER	1	365	2.7
BALDWIN	22	2,126	10.3
BANKS	11	563	19.5
BARROW*	96	1,177	81.6
BARTOW	117	2,119	55.2
BEN HILL	30	1,591	18.9
BERRIEN	25	1,107	22.6
BIBB	200	5,601	35.7
BLECKLEY	1	727	1.4
BRANTLEY	45	841	53.5
BROOKS	18	1,456	12.4
BRYAN*	7	1,082	6.5
BULLOCH	14	2,574	5.4
BURKE	15	2,709	5.5
BUTTS	43	714	60.2
CALHOUN	2	539	3.7
CAMDEN	21	1,613	13.0
CANDLER	14	948	14.8
CARROLL	116	3,498	33.2
CATOOSA	107	1,715	62.4
CHARLTON	28	779	35.9
CHATHAM	313	12,752	24.5
CHATTAHOOCHEE	2	494	4.0
CHATTOOGA	38	1,014	37.5
CHEROKEE*	207	2,559	80.9
CLARKE	79	4,428	17.8
CLAY	3	378	7.9
CLAYTON	307	9,503	32.3
CLINCH	3	526	5.7
COBB	633	11,595	54.6
COFFEE	44	2,489	17.7
COLQUITT	55	2,979	18.5
COLUMBIA	63	1,528	41.2
COOK	22	1,276	17.2
COWETA*	108	2,523	42.8
CRAWFORD	20	604	33.1
CRISP	72	2,660	27.1
DADE	17	271	62.7
DAWSON	22	407	54.1
DECATUR	30	2,642	11.4
DEKALB	764	23,308	32.8
DODGE	33	909	36.3
DOOLY	11	857	12.8
DOUGHERTY	59	9,463	6.2
DOUGLAS*	141	2,600	54.2
EARLY	6	1,274	4.7
ECHOLS	9	365	24.7
EFFINGHAM*	45	1,229	36.6
ELBERT	3	1,243	2.4
EMANUEL	43	2,185	19.7
EVANS	12	1,054	11.4
FANNIN	55	607	90.6
FAYETTE	107	797	134.3
FLOYD	139	4,355	31.9
FORSYTH*	39	1,590	24.5
FRANKLIN	21	818	25.7

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FULTON	876	44,992	19.5
GILMER	15	741	20.2
GLASCOCK	9	71	126.8
GLYNN	71	3,943	18.0
GORDON	138	1,407	98.1
GRADY	40	1,935	20.7
GREENE	20	1,191	16.8
GWINNETT*	451	10,334	43.6
HABERSHAM	33	1,214	27.2
HALL	68	5,810	11.7
HANCOCK	9	1,105	8.1
HARALSON	35	1,254	27.9
HARRIS	14	586	23.9
HART	43	1,058	40.6
HEARD	15	457	32.8
HENRY*	155	1,938	80.0
HOUSTON	102	4,541	22.5
IRWIN	17	629	27.0
JACKSON*	74	1,485	49.8
JASPER	5	603	8.3
JEFF DAVIS	44	742	59.3
JEFFERSON	16	1,422	11.3
JENKINS	3	966	3.1
JOHNSON	8	649	12.3
JONES	37	795	46.5
LAMAR	39	575	67.8
LANIER	9	458	19.7
LAURENS	70	3,158	22.2
LEE*	9	816	11.0
LIBERTY	90	3,760	23.9
LINCOLN	3	399	7.5
LONG	9	860	10.5
LOWNDES	117	5,487	21.3
LUMPKIN	84	686	122.4
MACON	23	1,518	15.2
MADISON	13	938	13.9
MARION	6	630	9.5
MCDUFFIE	22	1,537	14.3
MCINTOSH	30	718	41.8
MERIWETHER	40	1,558	25.7
MILLER	5	474	10.5
MITCHELL	28	2,483	11.3
MONROE	20	676	29.6
MONTGOMERY	9	498	18.1
MORGAN	6	592	10.1
MURRAY	60	1,641	36.6
MUSCOGEE	75	10,975	6.8
NEWTON*	62	2,590	23.9
OCONEE	16	613	26.1
OGLETHORPE	12	514	23.3
PAULDING*	68	1,477	46.0
PEACH	44	1,497	29.4
PICKENS	40	733	54.6
PIERCE	17	1,064	16.0
PIKE	13	432	30.1
POLK	110	1,852	59.4
PULASKI	14	427	32.8
PUTNAM	14	928	15.1
QUITMAN	0	164	0.0
RABUN	8	449	17.8
RANDOLPH	16	764	20.9
RICHMOND	268	14,535	18.4
ROCKDALE	59	2,065	28.6
SCHLEY	0	286	0.0
SCREVEN	9	952	9.5
SEMINOLE	11	871	12.6
SPALDING	140	3,360	41.7
STEPHENS	20	1,057	18.9

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STEWART	15	388	38.7
SUMTER	33	2,999	11.0
TALBOT	3	618	4.9
TALIAFERRO	0	154	0.0
TATTNALL	5	1,707	2.9
TAYLOR	8	808	9.9
TELFAIR	30	701	42.8
TERRELL	0	1,278	0.0
THOMAS	15	2,512	6.0
TIFT	83	2,933	28.3
TOOMBS	77	2,528	30.5
TOWNS	17	207	82.1
TREUTLEN	2	561	3.6
TROUP	67	3,351	20.0
TURNER	24	996	24.1
TWIGGS	7	711	9.8
UNION	26	475	54.7
UPSON	66	1,552	42.5
WALKER	59	2,616	22.6
WALTON	54	2,165	24.9
WARE	29	2,625	11.0
WARREN	4	589	6.8
WASHINGTON	29	1,701	17.0
WAYNE	25	1,560	16.0
WEBSTER	0	153	0.0
WHEELER	14	411	34.1
WHITE	40	560	71.4
WHITFIELD	147	2,977	49.4
WILCOX	3	590	5.1
WILKES	0	614	0.0
WILKINSON	9	693	13.0
WORTH	23	1,561	14.7
STATEWIDE	9417	359,913	26.2

SUPPLEMENTAL TABLES

**Rate-of-removal in counties with at least 2,000 impoverished children,
plus foster-care recidivism**

County	Children removed from their homes	Impoverished Children	Rate of removal /rank	% of children re-entering foster care within 12 months*
BALDWIN	22	2,126	10.3/39	20
BARTOW	117	2,119	55.2/02	4
BIBB	200	5,601	35.7/09	3
BULLOCH	14	2,574	5.4/44	0
BURKE	15	2,709	5.5/43	0
CARROLL	116	3,498	33.2/11	10
CHATHAM	313	12,752	24.5/19	8
CHEROKEE*	207	2,559	80.9/01	16
CLARKE	79	4,428	17.8/32	11
CLAYTON	307	9,503	32.3/12	7
COBB	633	11,595	54.6/03	11
COFFEE	44	2,489	17.7/33	6
COLQUITT	55	2,979	18.5/29	2
COWETA*	108	2,523	42.8/07	5
CRISP	72	2,660	27.1/17	10
DECATUR	30	2,642	11.4/35	8
DEKALB	764	23,308	32.8/10	13
DOUGHERTY	59	9,463	6.2/41	5
DOUGLAS*	141	2,600	54.2/04	9
EMANUEL	43	2,185	19.7/27	16
FLOYD	139	4,355	31.9/13	6
FULTON	876	44,992	19.5/28	8
GLYNN	71	3,943	18.0/31	8
GWINNETT*	451	10,334	43.6/06	4
HALL	68	5,810	11.7/34	5
HOUSTON	102	4,541	22.5/33	10
LAURENS	70	3,158	22.2/24	8
LIBERTY	90	3,760	23.9/20	20
LOWNDES	117	5,487	21.3/25	3
MITCHELL	28	2,483	11.3/36	9
MUSCOGEE	75	10,975	6.8/40	9
NEWTON*	62	2,590	23.9/20	5
RICHMOND	268	14,535	18.4/30	2
ROCKDALE	59	2,065	28.6/15	12
SPALDING	140	3,360	41.7/08	1
SUMTER	33	2,999	11.0/37	2
THOMAS	15	2,512	6.0/42	9
TIFT	83	2,933	28.3/16	2
TOOMBS	77	2,528	30.5/14	15
TROUP	67	3,351	20.0/26	8
WALKER	59	2,616	22.6/22	6
WALTON	54	2,165	24.9/18	5
WARE	29	2,625	11.0/37	4
WHITFIELD	147	2,977	49.4/05	5
44 counties	6519	257,407	25.3	
Statewide	9,417	359,913	26.2	7

NCCPR GEORGIA RATE-OF-REMOVAL INDEX/12

Reabuse of children in counties with the highest and lowest rates-of-removal, and DeKalb and Fulton, plus foster-care recidivism

County	Children removed from their homes	Impoverished children	Rate of removal/rank	% of children reabused in own home	% re-entering foster care w/in 12 months of discharge*
CHEROKEE*	207	2,559	80.9/01	7.1	16
BARTOW	117	2,119	55.2/02	5.0	4
COBB	633	11,595	54.6/03	3.3	11
DOUGLAS*	141	2,600	54.2/04	1.6	9
WHITFIELD	147	2,977	49.4/05	5.6	5
Averages for outcome measures:				4.5	9
MUSCOGEE	75	10,975	6.8/40	3.9	9
DOUGHERTY	59	9,463	6.2/41	3.4	5
THOMAS	15	2,512	6.0/42	8.7	9
BURKE	15	2,709	5.5/43	5.8	0
BULLOCH	14	2,574	5.4/44	1.4	0
Averages for outcome measures:				4.6	4.6
DEKALB	764	23,308	32.8/10	1.9	13
FULTON	876	44,992	19.5/28	5.1	8

*12 months ending Sept 30, 2006; other data are for 12 months ending Feb. 28, 2007

Source for re-entry data: Barton Child Law and Policy Clinic/Pew Charitable Trusts, *Fostering Court Improvement*, http://fosteringcourtimprovement.org/ga/County/removals_summary.html