

**An Economic Analysis of Factors Associated with Higher Re-entry  
Probability within the Oregon State Foster Care System**

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**Abstract:** This study uses statistical analysis to analyze the issue of re-entry into the Oregon state foster care system after the reunification of a child with his or her legal guardian(s); analyzing individual foster care data taken during 2005 from the Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) to determine individual case characteristics that may be indicators of a higher or lower likelihood of re-entry. Regression results show statistically confident indicators include: age, special needs children, prior instances of re-entry after reunification, sexual abuse history, parental neglect, child behavioral problems, parents receiving Medicaid, parents with multiple issues, and more. The project discusses in detail the effect these indicators have with the overall probability that a child will re-enter into the foster care system within one year after reunification; which was found to be 14.92% on average. Analysis of these findings will hopefully assist the Oregon Department of Human Services in determining which children are most at risk for re-entry.

*Keyword: Reunification, Re-entry, Case characteristics, Chronic Re-entry, Multiple Problems*

**Approved:** \_\_\_\_\_

Prof. Bruce Blonigen

Date

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## **Introduction:**

When the State of Oregon finds sufficient reason to remove children from their parent(s), those children usually begin a delicate path towards reunification. To ensure that the resulting situation that a child finds him or herself in is an improvement from the environment they were removed from, social service workers for the Department of Human Services (DHS) in the State of Oregon do their best to make the most appropriate and beneficial decisions for the child during their removal from the family, time in the state's custody, and hopefully, placement into a permanent home.

Whether or not that permanent home is the home of the child's birth parent(s) is indeed a difficult decision for the caseworker to make, given that the child was removed from circumstances in that home, that were deemed detrimental to their well being. Nevertheless it has been the long-standing federal policy that the primary goal for a child placed in the state's custody be the reunification of the given child with his or her birth parents. In Quilloin vs. Walcott the Supreme Court affirms this policy with the rationale that it is in the best interest of the child to remain with his or her natural parents if at all possible,

We have little doubt that the Due Process Clause would be offended if a State were to attempt to force the breakup of a natural family over the objections of the parents and their children, without some showing of unfitness and for the sole reason that to do so was thought to be in the children's best interests (Quilloin v. Walcott).

This ruling and many others support the "bedrock assumption underlying child welfare policy [...] that children are better off if raised by their natural birth parents" (Wulczyn), but also leaves

room so that parental rights can be revoked upon showing parental unfitness; that is, that the parents no longer act in the best interest of the child.

This precedent provides for a policy that becomes the backbone in the decision making process for human service workers as they make every effort to reunite removed children with their birth parents. Therefore it is not surprising that in 2002 according to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) that 44% of children in foster care in the United States had reunification stated as their permanency-planning goal<sup>1</sup>. In 1999 the actual percentage of children in foster care who did return to their parents was even higher at 59%<sup>2</sup>. More relevant to the data used in this study, during 2005 in Oregon, 64% of children who entered foster care were reunified with their parents showing a clear preference for reunification over other permanency planning options.

With such a large percentage of the hundreds of thousands of children placed in foster care in the United States returning to situations that the children were previously removed from because of a harmful environment, there is a significant possibility that a child reunified with his or her birth parents will return to the state's care. Even though DHS does its best to bring children back to their parents in the most ideal circumstances sometimes, for various reasons, the child returns to the custody of the state to await another permanency placement decision. This is to the child's detriment as rejection and a lack of stability likely damage their emotional health, making re-entry, also referred to as recidivism, into the state's custody after reunification an outcome to avoid.

Avoiding this outcome has been the focus of studies that address the policy of having reunification as the stated goal for children in foster care. These studies often examine the legal

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. *AFCARS, Report #8*. Washington, DC: DHHS, August 2002.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/FactOverview/foster.html#6> Retrieved, May 24, 2007.

precedent and framework behind this policy and analyze the legitimacy of its foundation, given that a child removed from parental custody indicates plausible reasoning for parental unfitness. Certain case attributes in these studies have been shown to be indicators of a higher probability of re-entry such as poverty (Knowlton & Bischoff), parents suffering from multiple issues; socioeconomic, physical, emotional, substance abuse, and parental ambivalence towards the child's return all seem to be indicators of a higher probability of re-entry. Also, a longer length of contact with caseworkers after reunification was cited as reducing the likelihood of re-entry (Littell & Schuerman). These studies also often discuss post reunification services and their affect on the probability of re-entry into the foster care system.

This study builds on previous ones by using statistical techniques to analyze the effects of individual case characteristics, such as the child's age, race, abuse history, physical impediments and the parent's coping issues, substance abuse habits, socioeconomic status, etcetera, on re-entry to the foster system after reunification with birth parents. Specifically, this study will focus on how the overall probability of re-entry for children in the State's custody during 2005, that was found to be **14.92%**, varies as each child adopts a certain characteristic, or gains an additional year of age.

During the removal and placement process the caseworkers in charge of the child make decisions based on certain characteristics of the child. A caseworker likely makes decisions with limited resources and options. If a caseworker can predict the likelihood of success, i.e. the child does not re-enter, by minimizing the probability that a child re-enters into state custody after placement; then the given caseworker would be able to know where and how to best focus these limited options and resources. Likely, DHS has anecdotal feelings regarding what is best for the child and what will most likely lead to a child's permanency after reunification. However, this

statistical model predicts the probability that a child will return to state care based on individual case characteristics and could prove highly valuable to DHS.

In summation, this project constructs a statistical model for The Oregon Department of Human Services that will predict the probability that a child placed into foster care will return to state custody within a year, using individual case data of all the State's foster care children that were reunified with their birth parents during 2005. This model will use individual characteristics of these children such as: age, race, and gender and case characteristics including: reason for removal from parents, medical history, psychological diagnoses, etc., to see how each of these variables affects the overall probability that a child returns to state care after placement.

Base regressions show that statistically significant characteristics of a child include: advancement in age, special need children, chronic re-entry into system, being of Hispanic origin, recipients of sexual abuse, neglect from parent, parents who have Medicaid, parents who have to cope with multiple issues and more. This paper will discuss the relationship each of these variables has with the overall probability of re-entry.

## **Literature Review**

### *Background:*

The Oregon Department of Human Services (DHS) has many options to choose from while planning the permanency goals for a child removed from his or her parents' custody. However, as discussed, it is the policy of the organization to make reunification the primary goal. In a publication by DHS entitled Foster Care 2005 it states, "DHS remains committed to strengths/needs-based practice, which has been a foundation of Oregon's child welfare system for several years. This practice emphasizes keeping children in their immediate families and with

extended relatives” (Oregon Department of Human Services, 2005). The prioritization of reunification as the permanency option of choice for children makes it important that analysis be done on the issue of children re-entering the system post-reunification, which this study provides.

The doctrine of reunification is not singular to DHS, but is established in federal law by three pieces of social legislation governing the nation's child welfare system that created a strong presumption in regards to a preference for parents raising their children: the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978, the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, and the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (Wulczyn). All three pieces of legislation create a situation that makes re-entry of children into state custody a significant issue given the reunification first policy.

The Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 laid this foundation. It required proof by clear and convincing evidence to establish a cause for a child to be taken into state custody and proof beyond a reasonable doubt for termination of parental rights (Wulczyn). These provisions were established to prevent the erosion of parental rights and to restrict governmental authority over them by requiring that parental unfitness is shown before removal; that the parent does not act in the best interest of the child. Only in these circumstances may the authority of the state supersede parental authority and begin to act in the child's best interest. Caseworkers from DHS then begin to work on behalf of the child. The table below represents the instances from 2003-2005 where DHS found sufficient cause for taking children into custody and breaks down the many reasons that can lead to such action:

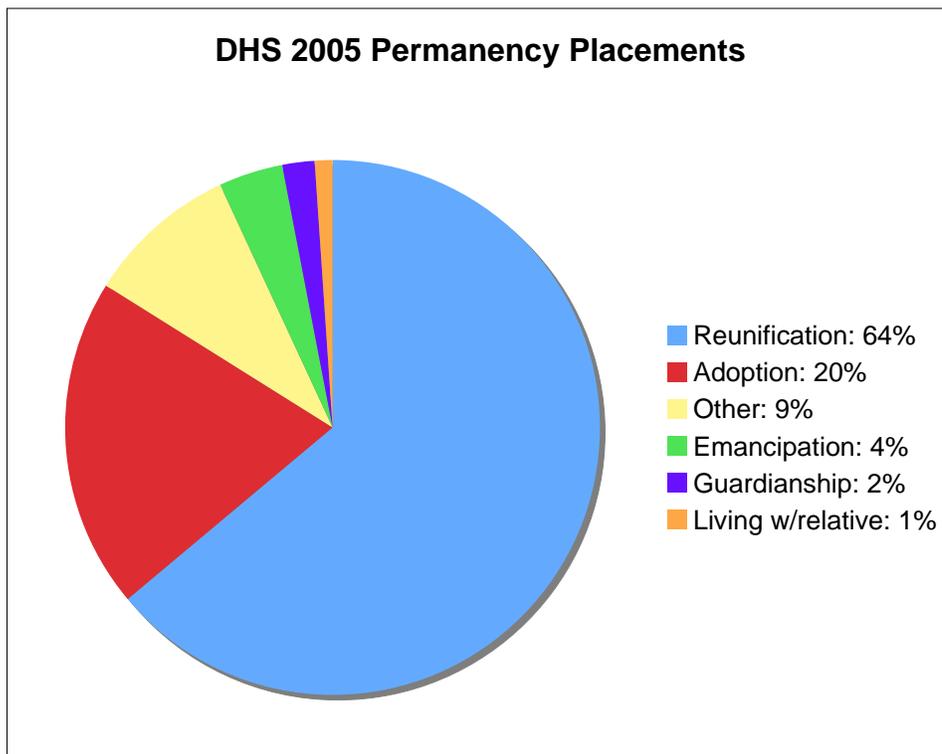
**Reasons children enter foster care** *(includes all types of foster care)*

Removal Reason	FFY 2003		FFY 2004		FFY 2005	
	Number	% of Entrants	Number	% of Entrants	Number	% of Entrants
Parent Drug Abuse	2,715	54.9%	3,151	57.1%	3,855	62.4%
Parent Alcohol Abuse	2,657	53.7%	3,046	55.2%	3,788	61.3%
Physical Abuse	2,838	57.4%	3,239	58.7%	3,697	59.8%
Child's Behavior	1,854	37.5%	2,420	43.9%	2,618	42.4%
Neglect Abuse	1,689	34.1%	2,043	37.0%	2,599	42.1%
Inability To Cope	2,343	47.4%	2,606	47.3%	2,284	37.0%
Inadequate Housing	1,260	25.5%	1,436	26.0%	1,424	23.0%
Child's Disability	429	8.7%	447	8.1%	467	7.6%
Sexual Abuse	358	7.2%	422	7.7%	466	7.5%
Incarceration Of Parent	87	1.8%	112	2.0%	119	1.9%
Abandonment	86	1.7%	127	2.3%	109	1.8%
Child Drug Abuse	81	1.6%	79	1.4%	105	1.7%
Child Alcohol Abuse	99	2.0%	121	2.2%	93	1.5%
Death Of Parent	4	0.1%	3	0.1%	4	0.1%
<b>Total Number of Foster Care Entrants</b>	<b>4,946</b>		<b>5,515</b>		<b>6,178</b>	

\*Table taken from The Oregon Department of Human Services Review on Foster Care 2005.

However these efforts on the children's behalf have to be guided by the underlining principles of reunification established in 1980 by the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act. This piece of legislation also limited the removal of children from their own homes by requiring states to make reasonable efforts to maintain the children there, but also added a stipulation that establishes a reunification first policy; saying that if parents were determined to be unfit and the children were removed from their custody, that efforts must be made first to reunite them expeditiously with their parents. It also required a judicial determination that

showed that efforts had been made to give and offer parents options and plans that would allow the parents to prevent placement of their children into a permanent foster care situation by enabling the return of their children home (Stein). Taking these policies into account, it is no surprise that in Oregon during 2005 64% of children taken into State custody were reunified with their parents. The pie chart below illustrates this figure and represents the various methods that are used to place foster care children:



\*Data utilized from The Oregon Department of Human Services' review of Foster Care 2005.

Slight modification of the “reunify first” mentality comes in The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997. While this law reinforces the policy of reunification by funding time-limited reunification services, the focus on family preservation and reunification shifts with efforts to achieve permanency and stability for children through other placement alternatives, such as adoption. The act's distinguishing characteristics include a change in the time frame for

the dispositional review, a required permanency planning meeting on behalf of the removed child, from 18 months to 12 months, and allowing states to plan reunification and adoption concurrently by seeking adoptive homes for children while attempting to reunify the child (Wulczyn). While this adds flexibility to the reunify first policy it does not change it. However, it does give caseworkers the power to show ambivalent parents that the permanent removal of their children is a reality. This is important as it motivates parents to go through the processes that DHS has to facilitate reunification.

Nevertheless, even with The Adoption and Safe Families Act's added incentives for parents to work to be reunified with their children, re-entry into the system is still a prevalent issue as the foster care policy is still reunification centered and as shown, the majority of kids removed from households are reunified with their parents. It is not the intention of this study to criticize this policy but rather explore the re-entry problem it creates; a situation where children are being returned to homes and environments previously considered detrimental to their well being.

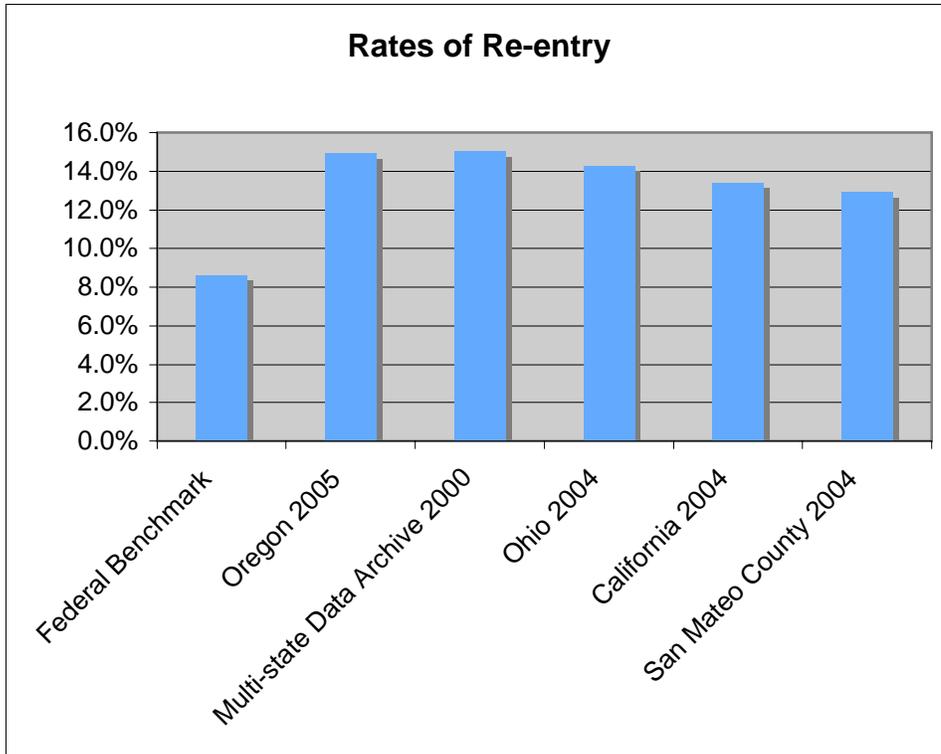
*Prior academic research on re-entry into foster care:*

The majority of previous literature does not directly address the problem of re-entry, but rather discusses it within the context of the policy of reunification. This is logical being that re-entry is an issue endemic to the subject of reunification, which creates a dearth of literature that specifically deals with re-entry. One such article that addresses reunification and briefly discusses the focus of this study, the problem of re-entry, is Family Reunification by Fred Wulczyn. In his study foster care entrants that were reunified with their parents were tracked through the 1990s to the year 2000 using data from the Multi-state Foster Care Data Archive,

maintained by the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago; a data archive of foster care children in the following States: Alabama, California, Illinois, Iowa, Maryland, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and Wisconsin. The archive represents around 55% of the nation's foster care children.

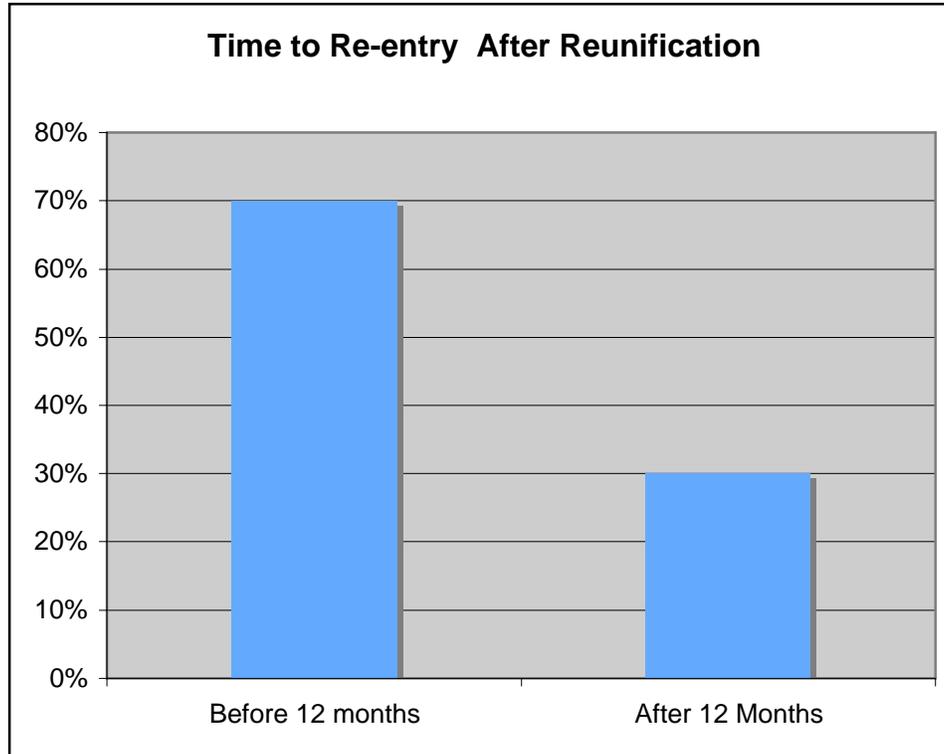
In the Wulczyn study, exit cohorts were distinguished by the year they left State custody to be reunified with their parents. In the last year, 1999, children were tracked for a full year showing that near **15%** of reunified children re-entered the system within the next twelve months. This percentage mirrors that of the data from 2005 used in this study, where **14.92%** of the children whom were reunified with their parents, re-entered the system within twelve months. Additional studies have observed a similar percentage of re-entry. In 2004, **14.3%** of foster care children reunified with their parents re-entered the system (Bronson). In a study done by the sphere institute for San Mateo county California, during 2004, 12.9% of reunified foster care children re-entered in to the system, slightly lower than the state average from the same year of 13.4% (Knowlton & Bischoff).

All of the above rates of re-entry are above the 8.6% federal standard established for the re-entry of foster care children within a twelve-month time frame. The above mentioned states represent well over half of the nation's foster care children; suggesting that re-entry rates are at unacceptable levels. The graph below displays the above-mentioned percentages of children reunified with their parents within 12 months:



It is important to note that the above graph only shows the rate at which children re-enter over the course of one year. The majority of studies analyze this one-year window because federal policy requires states to report re-entry within this time frame. Therefore, the majority of data available involves re-entry within only one year as opposed to a longer time frame. Children do re-enter after one year although at a lower rate.

According to the Wulczyn article the majority of children, almost 70%, re-enter the system within the first year after reunification as the following graph indicates:



\*Data taken from the Multistate Foster Care Data Archive, maintained by Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

The article further breaks down this one- year window, “A more detailed look at the data shows that of the children who returned within a year of reunification, 57% returned within three months. Thus, almost 40% of children who return to care after being sent home to their parents come back to placement within 90 days” (Wulczyn).

Based on the finding that the majority of children who re-enter the system do so within the first twelve months, this project only studies the re-entry trends for reunified foster care children for one year of data from DHS, 2005. As stated, the probability of re-entry during this year for children reunified with their parents in the State of Oregon was found to be 14.92%.

The article by Fred Wulczyn does a sufficient job at establishing re-entry as a significant problem within the foster care policy of family reunification. It concludes its discussion of re-entry by emphasizing that one in every four children reunified with their parents will re-enter

within ten years and emphasizes the importance of the topic by the following, “Perhaps more than any other single piece of data, the likelihood of reentry serves as a reminder that the preference for reunification, absent an investment in families, is no guarantee that children will remain with their parents” (Wulczyn). In other words significant study and attention needs to be given to the decision making process that goes into reunification. The article explicitly calls for studies about caseworker decision making,

relatively little is known about reunification decision making and the process of reintegrating children into their families. [...] It must be emphasized, however, that the lack of research in this area is troubling. Larger studies on factors that affect caseworker decision-making are critical to improving the reunification decision-making process (Wulczyn).

The Wulczyn article sufficiently discusses the policy of reunification and its history and implications, but does not go into statistical detail about the characteristics of the children and their families that re-enter into the system. This study identifies statistically significant indicators of re-entry by using econometric analysis to show how the likelihood of re-entry increases or decrease when a child or his or her family possesses those characteristics.

One report that does address specifically re-entry is one done by the Sphere Institute on behalf of San Mateo County. Several factors such as the child’s initial home environment, the child’s attributes, the parent’s attributes, decisions made the Department of Human Services, and services provided to families are all discussed.

The report indicates that there are several factors that tend to be strongly related to the likelihood of re-entry. For example, cases in which the child required more intensive care because of health or behavioral problems were closely related with foster care re-entry.

Likewise, situations where children entered the system due to an extreme case of neglect or physical abuse were found to re-enter the child welfare system at higher rates than those who experienced other types of mistreatment. This study tests these findings by the Sphere Institute in regards to the data in Oregon and shows the results further ahead.

The significance of some other factors is unclear in the report. Research suggests that as the length of time in foster care increases, so do the chances of successful reunification. However, there have been arguments that there is in fact no causal relationship. In contrast, two factors that have been widely agreed upon as some of the more significant factors in determining re-entry are poverty and parental ambivalence. This is affirmed in the majority of the literature available. This study will also look at poverty, by using whether or not the parents were on Medicaid as a proxy variable, and parental ambivalence, by using such measures as parents cited for neglect and inadequate housing.

According to the report by the Sphere Institute characteristics of a parent can increase the likelihood that their children will return to state care. Substance abuse and criminal history are just a couple factors believed to be significant. In fact, in cases with substance-abusing parents, parental ambivalence toward reunification decreases when the goal of planning permanency is changed to adoption- showing the importance of the Adoption and Safe Families Act's stipulation about allowing adoption and reunification to be planned concurrently. Also mentioned in the report, when substance abuse is a prominent factor, it is important that the parent seek treatment services as soon as possible. Services provided to the families during the reunification process along with the accessibility of those services are seen as strong determinants of re-entry. For the children, child behavioral services and educational support services are advocated to facilitate the reunification process and prevent future problems.

Parental-skills training is believed to be an important factor in preventing re-entry. Such training includes refining skills in parenting, communication, problem solving, and anger management. Some programs even offer training in homemaking, budgeting, and job training. Research also suggests that parents with a strong social network are more likely to have success with permanency. Therefore there are programs available to assist parents in forming social networks in their geographic area. Unfortunately, this study will have to rely on these findings about services from San Mateo County and other literature about the effectiveness of services in lowering the likelihood of re-entry, being that the data it utilizes does not contain information about services during and after the reunification process. The report for San Mateo County discusses, in depth, the aforementioned factors and their believed affect on re-entry. However, the report does not use statistical analysis to support their findings and suggestions. This research project analyzes the re-entry probabilities of children into the Oregon Department of Human Services with statistical analysis to determine the impact of various factors on the probability that a child will re-enter into DHS custody.

One particular aspect of the report to again make a special note about by the Sphere Institute is the analysis on reunification services and the relevance and significance of them. This study lacks the ability to analyze the significance of reunification services, because the individual case files that made up the data provided by DHS lacked information regarding the services that were rendered to the children and families. So while this study will analyze in detail the characteristics of the children and the families and be able to determine re-entry probabilities based on that information, it will not be able to study how the likelihood of re-entry fluctuates with the implementation of certain services. There is a significant need to use econometric methodology in analyzing the effectiveness of these services, as it has not been

done and even so most studies call for an increase of services to family. It would need to be analyzed whether the service itself was the reason for a decrease in re-entry likelihood or rather a correlation between the parents willing to undergo such treatments and the likelihood of re-entry.

## **Methodology and Hypothesis Development**

### *Re-entry Dependent Variable:*

For the regressions, the outcome variable (dependent variable) is whether or not each individual re-entered into the state's custody within 12 months after being reunified with his or her family. For this study, only re-entry cases that occurred within 12 months of the initial removal were looked at because, as literature indicates, a majority of children who reenter state care after reunification do so within a year (Wulczyn). If the individual did not re-enter into state custody over the 12 month time period, it is considered a success and the dependent variable receives a value of zero. If the individual did re-enter state custody the dependent variable instead receives a value of one. Since the dependent variable is binary, not continuous, a probit function is used to estimate the model. If the regression is run without utilizing the probit function, problems with linear probability would be encountered. That being said, probit regressions are ran to determine an overall probability of re-entry, as well as the marginal effects that each independent variable would have on that overall probability. The regression results ahead will hopefully aid the Oregon DHS in determining the effects of specific methods used in trying to establish permanency for foster care children and the overall likelihood of re-entry based on child and parent characteristics.

The following is the function that this study is based on, showing presumptive belief that the probability of re-entry is a function of case characteristics:

## RE-ENTRY =

f ( Age, Male, African American, Caucasian, Hispanic, Indian or Alaskan, Special Needs, Mental Retardation, Visually Impaired, Physically Disabled, Emotionally Disturbed, Other Medical Issues, Number of Removals, Physical Abuse, Sexual Abuse, Neglect, Parental Alcohol Abuse, Parental Drug Abuse, Child Alcohol Abuse, Child Drug Abuse, Child Disability, Child Behavioral Problems, Incarceration of a Parent, Parent's Inability to Cope, Abandonment, Inadequate Housing, Title IV-E Foster Care Reimbursement, Title IV-A Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Child Support, Title XIX Medicaid, Social Security Benefits )

### *Independent Variables:*

There are numerous variables that have either a positive or negative effect on the overall probability of re-entry. The first variables to be examined are the age, gender and race of a child. Unlike the Age variable, which is assigned a number value indicating how old a child is, the gender variable is a dummy variable that receives a value of one if the child is male, two if female. The following races, also dummy variables, are examined: African American, Caucasian, Hispanic and Indian or Alaskan. According to the Sphere Institute's report on factors associated with re-entry in San Mateo County, "literature contains conflicting findings regarding the relationship between most demographic factors and foster care re-entry" (Knowlton & Bischoff). The report goes on to explain that the effect of a child's age, gender, and race or ethnicity on re-entry into the foster care system has been inconclusive across studies. Therefore it is not feasible to hypothesize what the effects of the aforementioned variables will be in this study.

The next sets of dummy variables to be looked at are Special Needs, Mental Retardation, Visual Impairment, Physical Disability, Emotionally Disturbed and Other Medical Issues. Some children require special medical, emotional or physical needs that can be frustrating and challenging for parents to satisfy. Consequently, this study hypothesizes that children possessing

any of these characteristics increases the overall probability of re-entry. The magnitude of each variable is what is especially interesting to examine.

This study hypothesizes that the next variable, Number of Removals, will also cause an increase in re-entry probability. A child's placement history in the foster care system in terms of duration and stability affects that child's chances of re-entry (Knowlton & Bischoff). It is therefore believed that the more removals a child has gone through, the greater the probability of re-entry, understanding that frequent removals and placement generate instability. This was also found in the study on re-entry rates in Ohio (Bronson).

A history of previous abuse will likely play a strong role in determining re-entry. Previous studies have shown that children who initially entered foster care due to strong cases of neglect or physical abuse return to the foster care system at higher rates than children experiencing other forms of maltreatment (Festinger). Looking separately at Physical Abuse, Sexual Abuse, and Neglect Abuse, one could hypothesize that all three dummy variables will increase the probability of re-entry.

Drug and/or alcohol abuse on both the part of the child and the parent are dummy variables that likely increase the probability of re-entry. Literature suggests that drug and alcohol abuse is factor that increases the likelihood of re-entry (Festinger). Therefore it is hypothesized that for this study, Parental Alcohol Abuse, Parental Drug Abuse, Child Alcohol Abuse, and Child Drug Abuse all increase the overall probability of re-entry.

The next dummy variable looks at Disability on the part of the child. If a child with a disability is removed from their home, it is unlikely that the home life changes drastically after reunification. Therefore it is hypothesized that a child with a disability increases the probability of re-entry.

A child with Behavioral Problems is the next dummy variable to be examined. Previous literature has cited a child's behavioral problems as a factor closely associated with re-entry (Knowlton & Bischoff). It is unlikely that a child initially removed from their home for extreme behavioral problems will not exhibit those same problems after reunification. Therefore one can hypothesize that this variable increases the probability of re-entry.

The next variable to be analyzed is whether a parent has been incarcerated. It is the hypothesis of this study that this dummy variable will increase the probability of re-entry as previous literature has suggested (Wulczyn).

A parent's Inability to cope will be the next variable to be examined. There are cases of children in foster care who are removed from their homes because their parent has an inability to cope due to an illness or other reasons. Likely, a parent who has had such extreme circumstances that they are not able to cope with their parental responsibilities has multiple issues to deal with. It is hypothesized that the variable Unable to Cope increases the likelihood of re-entry and is also be examined in a variable this study creates to look at situations where the parent is unable to cope due to multiple problems and circumstances. Other studies have found that parents who have multiple problems are less likely to successfully reunify with their children. For example, parents with a combination of substance abuse problems, mental illness, or housing problems, and/or single parents, were less likely to be reunited than parents who did not face a multitude of concerns (Littell & Scheurman). This study creates a Multiple Problem variable that is measured from degrees one to four based on whether the case indicates that the child was removed from a parent(s) who was cited with more than one of the following problems: Medicaid, Inadequate Housing, Inability to Cope, Alcohol Abuse, and/or Substance Abuse. This study uses these variables as measures for the multiple issues that parents may be

dealing with that can increase the likelihood of re-entry. Medicaid, as mentioned, is the proxy variable for poverty, Inadequate Housing also serves as a proxy variable for poverty but also as a direct measurement of poor living conditions, Inability to Cope is a good measure of emotional, physical, or psychological stress, which all can make child rearing difficult and Substance Abuse and Alcohol Abuse are straight forward measures of a parent's addictive behaviors. If a parent is found to have been cited with two of the five above issues, the variable Multiple Problem of degree 1 defines her or him, with three of the five, the variable Multiple Problem of degree 2 defines her or him and so on, up to having been cited with all five of the issue where the variable Multiple Problem of degree 4 defines that particular parent(s). This study hypothesizes what previous literature has confirmed, that a child with a parent dealing with multiple issues will have a greater probability of re-entry compared to a parent only dealing with one of the above problems.

Abandonment is the next dummy variable to look at. No literature was found relating abandonment of a child to re-entry, but if a child is abandoned by their parent(s) once, what is going to stop them from doing it again after reunification? It is likely that abandonment will increase the probability of re-entry.

The next variable is Inadequate Housing. It is assumed based on literature on the subject that if a child's initial removal from a home was due in large part to inadequate housing, multiple factors such as poverty and drug abuse may also be present; increasing the overall likelihood of re-entry (Jones).

The next set of variables looked at are state and government aids. The first variable is Title IV-E. Part of the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980, Title IV-E provides federal payments to the states for foster care maintenance and adoption assistance payments

made on behalf of certain children. In 1997, President Clinton signed the Adoption and Safe Families Act which further defined the criteria to receive such funds. This dummy variable should decrease the probability of re-entry because if the foster care system is receiving more funds, it should have more able tools to prevent re-entry. The next variable is Title IV- A, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, or the AFDC. Families that are not capable of providing adequate care and support for a dependent child without public assistance are eligible to receive AFDC. This dummy variable should not have a significant impact but will likely increase the probability of re-entry. The next variable addressed is child support, Title IV-D. Oregon's Child Support Program functions to ensure that any child who is eligible for child support receives child support. The program assists in establishing who the father of the child is, getting a child support order established, collecting child support payments, determining the amount of past due child support and more. The assistance provided by this dummy variable should decrease the overall probability of re-entry. The next variable to be examined looks at whether a parent is receiving Supplemental Security Income or Social Security Benefits. Supplemental Security Income, or SSI, is a federal program that provides monthly checks and medical coverage to those who are "financially eligible and either 65 and older, or blind or disabled" (Oregon Department of Justice). This variable should increase the probability of re-entry.

The final variable to be looked at is the Title XIX variable. Title XIX indicates whether or not certain cases are receiving Medicaid. This variable is being used as a proxy variable for poverty because Medicaid is a good indicator of which cases are living at the poverty level. Poverty is likely one of the strongest indicators of re-entry and will therefore increase the probability of re-entry.

## **Data Collection and Analysis:**

Fortunately, the Oregon DHS was able to provide all of the data used in the analysis of this study and de-identified each case to maintain confidentiality. The data was obtained through the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). AFCARS is a federal data collection system which, on a semi-annual basis, provides case-level information on “all children in foster care for whom State child welfare agencies have responsibility for placement, care or supervision” (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services). The AFCARS database was ideal for this project because not only is it specifically designed to address policy development and program management issues at both the state and federal levels, but it is also useful for analyzing United States foster care and adoption programs. For the purposes of this project, the focus will only be on the foster care file, which contains 89 elements ranging from information on child demographics, Medicaid recipients, dates of removal, and more. Credit and thanks to Maria Duryea and Anna Cox of the Oregon DHS extracted from this file the data that was necessary for this project.

Each data line in our file provides the following case-level information on a child’s characteristics: age, gender, race, special needs, mental retardation, visually impaired, physically disabled, emotionally disturbed, number of removals, physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, behavioral problems, drug and/or alcohol abuse. Each case has the following information on the parent(s) as well: drug and/or alcohol abuse, disability, incarceration, inability to cope, and abandonment. And finally, the following information on a family’s economic state and stability is provided: inadequate housing, receiving IV-E foster care reimbursement, Aids to Families with Dependent Children, child support, Medicaid, and social security benefits. The following table provides descriptive statistics of our data:

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

Variable	Obs	Mean	Min	Max
Age	3471	1996.679	1986	2005
Gender	3471	1.501296	1	2
Indian/Alskan	3471	.108038	0	1
African Amer	3471	.0587727	0	1
Caucasian	3471	.6548545	0	1
Hispanic	3471	2.353789	1	3
Special Needs	3471	2.263613	1	3
Mental Ret~n	3471	.0046096	0	1
Visually Imp	3471	.0025929	0	1
Physically~d	3471	.0034572	0	1
Emotionall~d	3471	.1423221	0	1
Other_medi~l	3471	.1031403	0	1
Number remvls	3471	1.292999	1	8
PhysicalAbuse	3471	.613656	0	1
Sexual Abuse	3471	.0916162	0	1
Neglect Abuse	3471	.4307116	0	1
ParentAlcohol	3471	.5859983	0	1
ParentDrugAbs	3471	.5929127	0	1
Child Alcohol	3471	.0221838	0	1
Child DrugAbs	3471	.0204552	0	1
Disability	3471	.0821089	0	1
Behav Problem	3471	.4456929	0	1
Incarceration	3471	.0270815	0	1
InabilityCope	3471	.4272544	0	1
Abandonment	3471	.0126765	0	1
Poor Housing	3471	.2451743	0	1
IV-E Foster	3471	.1656583	0	1
IV-A ADFC	3471	.3733794	0	1
IV-D	3471	.0550274	0	1
Title XIX	3471	.2970326	0	1
SSI/SocSecBen	3471	.0069144	0	1
ReEnter12mos	3471	.1492365	0	1

As you can see in the table, the data set was limited to only those cases where the child was reunified with their family within 12 months, thus eliminating 12,571 observations and leaving a total of 3471 observations. You can see that **14.92%** of those cases, 518 children, re-entered the foster care system within twelve months of reunification. When you look at the ‘min’ and ‘max’ columns, you can infer that a vast majority of the variables in this study are dummy variables. In the case of the gender variable, a value of one indicates a male child while a value of two

indicates a female child. From looking at the ‘mean’ column, the gender variable has a mean of 1.5, indicating that a nearly equal amount of males and females were reunified. The primarily Caucasian demographic in Oregon made the next statistic no surprise: about 65% of the children reunified were Caucasian. Some other telling statistics: 14% were emotionally disturbed, 61% were physically abused, 43% were neglected, 59% of parents abused drug and alcohol and 43% of parents had an inability to cope due to an illness or other reasons. Statistical analysis in this study determines how each of these variables marginally affects the probability of re-entry and whether or not they are statistically confident at the 90 percent level.

## **Econometric Results and Analysis**

### *Initial Regression:*

As previously stated, using Stata software, a probit regression is ran to estimate the effects of various factors on the probability of re-entry of a child into the Oregon Department of Human Services during 2005, within a year of reunification with their birth parents. Initial data analysis indicates that the average overall probability that a removed child re-enters into state care after being reunified with his or her parents is **14.92%**. The following results show how much each variable affects this probability of re-entry, or how much the re-entry probability changes for a one unit increase in the variable, holding all other variables constant. Effects that have at least 90 percent statistical confidence are in bold:

<u>Independent Variables</u>	<u>Effect in Percentage Point Terms</u>
1. Age(in years)	<b>-0.86</b>
2. Male	+1.05
3. African American	+2.50
4. Caucasian	<b>+3.06</b>
5. Hispanic	<b>+3.65</b>
6. Indian or Alaskan	<b>+5.52</b>
7. Special needs child	<b>+8.19</b>
8. Mental retardation	+14.67
9. Visually Impaired	<b>-7.98</b>
10. Physically disabled	+0.20
11. Emotionally disturbed	-3.45
12. Other medical issues	-1.93
13. Number of removals	<b>+14.22</b>
14. Physical abuse	+1.21
15. Sexual abuse	<b>+5.33</b>
16. Neglect	<b>+6.30</b>
17. Parental alcohol abuse	+1.84
18. Parental drug abuse	-1.95
19. Child alcohol abuse	-1.24
20. Child drug abuse	+5.80
21. Child disability	<b>+5.83</b>
22. Child behavioral problems	<b>+5.68</b>
23. Incarceration of parent	-0.15
24. Parent's inability to cope	-0.87
25. Abandonment	+2.01
26. Inadequate housing	-1.75
27. Title IV-E foster care reimbursement	<b>+5.79</b>
28. Aid to Families with Dependent Children	+0.43
29. Child Support	<b>-7.10</b>
30. Title XIX - Medicaid	<b>+13.94</b>
31. Social Security Benefits	+2.25

The first variable on the list, Age, decreases the probability of re-entry by 0.86 percentage points each year. This indicates that as a child gets older, they are less likely to re-enter into the foster care system. This effect has at least a 90 percent statistical confidence.

The results show that the marginal effect that males have on the average probability of re-entry is an increase. However, the 1.05 percentage point increase in the variable is not

statistically confident at the 90 percent level. We can therefore deduce that the gender of a child is not a strong determinant of re-entry.

Next we look at the effects of race. Once again, previous literature provides no conclusive relationship between a child's race and re-entry. However in this study, all races increase the probability of re-entry. Caucasians, Hispanics and Indian or Alaskan children increase the probability of re-entry by 3.06, 3.65 and 5.52 percentage points, respectively. African American children also increase the probability of re-entry but, unlike the other three races, do not do so with 90 percent statistical confidence.

It was hypothesized in the initial analysis that the Special Needs variable and all of the categories defining special needs, increase the probability of re-entry. Of the special needs variables, the only ones with effects that have at least 90 percent statistical confidence are Special Needs and Visually Impaired. Special Needs increases the probability of re-entry by 8.19 percentage points, meaning a child with special needs has a 23.11% probability of re-entering. Contradicting our hypothesis, the Visually Impaired variable *decreases* the probability of re-entry by 7.98 percentage points. Physically Disabled, Emotionally Disturbed, and Other Medical Issues also decrease the probability of re-entry, but do not have 90 percent statistical confidence. Mental Retardation increases the probability by an astounding 14.67 percentage points, but also does not have 90 percent statistical confidence.

The Number of Removals variable proves to, as expected, have a large effect on the re-entry probability; for each additional removal, the variable increases the probability of re-entry by 14.22 percentage points. Adding this number to the average probability and there is a 29.14% probability of re-entry if there is one prior removal to the most recent removal. This variable has at least 90 percent statistical confidence making it a notable and important issue.

It was predicted that all types of abuse would increase the probability of re-entry. The results show that Neglect Abuse, with at least 90 percent statistical confidence, increases the probability of re-entry by 6.30 percentage points. Sexual Abuse, also with at least 90 percent statistical confidence, increases the probability by 5.33 percentage points. While Physical Abuse increases the probability of re-entry by 1.21 percentage points, it does so without 90 percent statistical confidence. This lack of statistical confidence does not indicate that physical abuse is not a worrisome issue; it instead means that in relation to sexual abuse and neglect, it is not a significant variable in affecting the overall probability of re-entry.

The results for drug and/or alcohol abuse on the part of the parent and child are inconsistent with our hypothesis and do not have 90 percent statistical confidence. Parental Alcohol Abuse increases the probability of re-entry by 1.84 percentage points while Parental Drug Abuse decreases it by 1.95 percentage points. Alcohol abuse on the part of the child decreases the probability of re-entry by 1.24 percentage points and drug abuse increases the probability by 5.80 percentage points. The fact that drug and alcohol abuse are not significant indicators of re-entry does not mean that they are not detrimental to the child's well being but rather that in this study relative to other factors it does not affect the likelihood of re-entry.

The Child Disability variable is statistically confident at the 90 percent level and increases the probability of re-entry by 5.83 percentage points. The Child Behavioral Problems variable is also statistically confident and increases the probability of re-entry by 5.68 percentage points. Both variables yield an overall probability of re-entry of about 20%. These results are concurrent with the hypothesis regarding these two variables.

The Incarceration of a Parent leads to the hypothesis that the variable increases the probability of re-entry. Instead, the marginal effect is a decrease of 0.15 percentage points. This

figure however, is not statistically confident at the 90 percent level. A parent's Inability to Cope due to an illness or some other reason was predicted to increase the probability of re-entry because of the belief that a parent's ability to cope would not drastically change after reunification. This variable has a negative marginal effect of 0.87 percentage points on the average probability of re-entry without 90 percent statistical confidence.

Abandonment and Inadequate Housing both do not have 90 percent statistical confidence. Abandonment results in an increase of 2.01 percentage points on the average probability of re-entry while Inadequate Housing decreases the probability of re-entry by 1.75 percentage points. These results corroborate the hypothesis regarding the variables despite the lack of statistical confidence.

Title IV-E, which involves foster care reimbursement to the state, increases the probability of re-entry by 5.79 percentage points with 90 percent statistical confidence. This contradicts the hypothesis that the more funds the foster care system receives, the more capable they are to ensure lasting reunification. Aid to Families with Dependent Children, Title IV-A, increases the probability of re-entry by 0.43 percentage points, but without 90 percent statistical confidence. The Supplemental Security Income increases the probability of re-entry by 2.25 percentage points but lacks 90 percent statistical confidence. Child Support decreases the probability of re-entry by 7.10 percentage points and is statistically confident. This can be seen as a reflection of parental involvement and commitment if one of the parents is committed enough to pay his or her obligation in child support and is supported by the study; the children who are removed from parents whom receive child support are less likely to return to the system. This idea can also be used in support of previous literature citing parental ambivalence as one of the most significant factors in increasing the likelihood of re-entry. If one parent cares enough to pay his or her child

support it could be said that that parent is more likely to honor their responsibilities as parents and thereby showing a *lack* of parental ambivalence in the reunification process and intuitively the probability of re-entry decreases as this study shows.

Lastly, Medicaid has the marginal effect on the overall probability of re-entry that was expected; the variable increases the probability of re-entry by 13.94 percentage points, yielding an overall probability of 28.86%. The result is statistically confident at the 90 percent level. Since recipients of Medicaid are generally at or below the poverty level the study uses whether or not parents are on Medicaid as a proxy for poverty, indicating that children of Medicaid recipients are extremely likely to re-enter the foster care system due to living in poverty. This re-affirms what previous literature suggests regarding poverty; that it is one of the most significant factors increasing the likelihood of re-entry. Poverty is often associated with numerous other situations that can be detrimental to a child's well being, such as substance abuse, poor living conditions, etc. It is therefore important to understand that this study measures the specific relationship poverty has on the likelihood of re-entry independent of everything else, so it can be stated that poverty has a direct effect on the overall probability of re-entry independent of the other factors associated with it.

## **Alternative Specifications**

### *Breaking down the number of removals: Chronic Re-entry*

The first regression results yield, with very strong statistical confidence, high percentage point increases in re-entry probability for the Number of Removals variable. There is a 14.22 percentage point increase in the first regression, yielding over a 29 percent probability of re-entry. The descriptive statistics of the data indicate that the maximum number of times a child

had been removed is eight times and as required by our sample, the minimum being once. Considering the magnitude to which number of removals affected the overall probability of re-entry it is important to further explore this issue by breaking down the number of removals by grouping children according to how many times they had been removed, looking at children removed twice (indicating one re-entry and two removals), three times (indicating two re-entries and three removals), and more than three times. The marginal effects on overall probability of re-entry are as follows:

<u>Independent Variables</u>	<u>Effect in Percentage Point Terms</u>
1. Age(in years)	<b>-0.84</b>
2. Male	+1.06
3. African American	+1.40
4. Caucasian	<b>+2.65</b>
5. Hispanic	<b>+3.35</b>
6. Indian or Alaskan	<b>+4.19</b>
7. Special needs child	<b>+8.55</b>
8. Mental retardation	+11.17
9. Visually impaired	<b>-7.30</b>
10. Physically disabled	+3.39
11. Emotionally disturbed	-3.35
12. Other medical issues	-2.51
<b>13. Number of removals</b>	
<b>a. 2 removals</b>	<b>+35.72</b>
<b>b. 3 removals</b>	<b>+46.93</b>
<b>c. &gt;3 removals</b>	<b>+59.55</b>
14. Physical abuse	+0.11
15. Sexual abuse	<b>+4.50</b>
16. Neglect	<b>+5.36</b>
17. Parental alcohol abuse	+2.48
18. Parental drug abuse	-3.30
19. Child alcohol abuse	+0.93
20. Child drug abuse	+4.70
21. Child disability	<b>+5.61</b>
22. Child behavioral problems	<b>+4.76</b>
23. Incarceration of parent	+1.80
24. Parent's inability to cope	-1.06
25. Abandonment	+2.70
26. Inadequate housing	-1.62
27. Title IV-E foster care reimbursement	<b>+3.80</b>
28. Aid to Families with Dependent Children	-0.12
29. Child Support	<b>-6.79</b>
30. Title XIX - Medicaid	<b>+11.05</b>
31. Social Security Benefits	+4.54

The marginal effects of each additional removal are potent and statistically confident at the 90 percent level. A child removed twice increases the overall probability of re-entry by 35.72 percentage points, a child removed three times increases the overall probability even further by 46.93 percentage points, and finally, a child removed more than three times increases the overall probability by 59.55 percentage points. Looking solely at a child removed more than three times shows that, all else equal, the child has on average around a 75% probability of re-entering. This is one of the more notable observations of this study and can be referred to as a chronic re-entry problem. Likely there are numerous reasons why a child experiences chronic re-entry but it is once again important to note that this study shows that chronic re-entry has its own effect on the likelihood of re-entry independent of all other factors; meaning that the act in and of itself of being reunified and then removed increases the overall probability of re-entry.

*Collapsing all disabilities into one variable: Special Needs*

The Special Needs variable has consistently had statistical confidence of at least 90 percent and a marginal effect on the overall probability of re-entry of around 8.5 percentage points. Each child within the Special Needs variable must also be accounted for in at least one of the following variables: Mental Retardation, Visually Impaired, Physically Disabled, Emotionally Disturbed, or Other Medical Issues. Taking this into consideration, the next regression omits the aforementioned variables based on a suspicion of multi-collinearity, and in so doing, the effect of all the different categories of child disabilities is accounted for within the all-encompassing Special Needs variable. It is hypothesized that after the removal of the sub categories of special needs children, the effect in percentage point terms of the Special Needs variable will increase:

<u>Independent Variables</u>	<u>Effect in Percentage Point Terms</u>
1. Age(in years)	<b>-0.85</b>
2. Male	+1.02
3. African American	+1.51
4. Caucasian	<b>+2.65</b>
5. Hispanic	<b>+3.32</b>
6. Indian or Alaskan	<b>+4.08</b>
<b>7. Special needs child</b>	<b>+4.31</b>
8. Number of removals	
a. 2 removals	<b>+35.74</b>
b. 3 removals	<b>+46.81</b>
c. >3 removals	<b>+59.22</b>
9. Physical abuse	+0.11
10. Sexual abuse	<b>+4.39</b>
11. Neglect	<b>+5.42</b>
12. Parental alcohol abuse	+2.56
13. Parental drug abuse	-3.34
14. Child alcohol abuse	+0.42
15. Child drug abuse	+4.41
16. Child disability	<b>+5.48</b>
17. Child behavioral problems	<b>+4.42</b>
18. Incarceration of parent	+1.73
19. Parent's inability to cope	-1.06
20. Abandonment	+2.94
21. Inadequate housing	-1.67
22. Title IV-E foster care reimbursement	<b>+3.69</b>
23. Aid to Families with Dependent Children	-0.15
24. Child Support	<b>-6.86</b>
25. Title XIX - Medicaid	<b>+11.05</b>
26. Social Security Benefits	+5.04

Contrary to the hypothesis that the effect in percentage point terms of a Special Needs child would increase after removing the sub categories, the effect is instead a *decrease* from +8.55 percentage points to +4.31 percentage points. However, looking closer into the variable's statistical confidence, there was actually an improvement from a 94 percent level of statistical confidence to a 98 percent.

*Removal of Co-lineated Variable Child Disability:*

An even further examination of the variables in the data reveals that Special Needs and Child Disability, both statistically significant, were similar variables by definition. Again, expecting a problem with co-linearity, the Child Disability variable is removed despite its statistical significance in previous regressions. The following marginal effects are observed after the running the regression once more:

<u>Independent Variables</u>	<u>Effect in Percentage Point Terms</u>
1. Age(in years)	<b>-0.86</b>
2. Male	+0.97
3. African American	+1.44
4. Caucasian	<b>+2.71</b>
5. Hispanic	<b>+3.27</b>
6. Indian or Alaskan	<b>+4.20</b>
<b>7. Special needs child</b>	<b>+6.77</b>
8. Number of removals	
a. 2 removals	<b>+36.15</b>
b. 3 removals	<b>+47.42</b>
c. >3 removals	<b>+60.57</b>
9. Physical abuse	+0.07
10. Sexual abuse	<b>+4.12</b>
11. Neglect	<b>+5.43</b>
12. Parental alcohol abuse	+2.94
13. Parental drug abuse	-3.98
14. Child alcohol abuse	+0.24
15. Child drug abuse	+3.78
16. Child behavioral problems	<b>+3.79</b>
17. Incarceration of parent	+1.55
18. Parent's inability to cope	-1.06
19. Abandonment	+2.65
20. Inadequate housing	-1.66
21. Title IV-E foster care reimbursement	<b>+3.62</b>
22. Aid to Families with Dependent Children	-0.06
23. Child Support	<b>-6.90</b>
24. Title XIX - Medicaid	<b>+11.15</b>
25. Social Security Benefits	+5.61

The removal of the Child Disability variable increases the effect the Special needs variable has on re-entry from +4.31 percentage points to +6.77 percentage points. This new percentage isn't as high as in some previous regressions, but it is the most significant with over 99 percent statistical confidence.

*Alternative Specification, Parents with Multiple Issues:*

Previous literature indicates that parents suffering and dealing with multiple issues increases the likelihood that re-entry will occur. Using this as a guide, a multiple problem variable is created by seeing whether or not a particular parent has more than one and up to five of the following problems: Medicaid (proxy for poverty), Inadequate Housing, Inability to Cope, Substance Abuse, and Alcohol Abuse. These variables are good measurements of various problems a parent may face; Medicaid, as mentioned, is the proxy variable for poverty, Inadequate Housing also serves as a proxy variable for poverty but also as a direct measurement of poor living conditions, Inability to Cope is a good measure of emotional, physical, or psychological stress, which all can make child rearing difficult, and Substance Abuse and Alcohol Abuse are straight forward measures of a parent's addictive behaviors. If a parent is found to have been cited with two of the five above issues, the variable Multiple Problem of degree 1 includes that parent. If a parent was cited with three of the five issues, the variable Multiple Problem of degree 2 defines that parent and so on, up to having been cited with all five of the issues; meaning the variable Multiple Problem of degree 4 defines that particular parent(s).

The creation of these variables takes into account the joint effect of dealing with multiple issues on the overall probability of re-entry. As seen ahead, the majority of parents in the reunification population suffer from more than one issue. The following table indicates the

marginal effect of the varying degrees of the Multiple Problem variable. All the variables are in bold indicating they have at least 99% statistical confidence:

<u>Independent Variables</u>	<u>Effect in Percentage Point Terms</u>
<b>1. MultProb_Deg1</b>	<b>+18.75</b>
<b>2. MultProb_Deg2</b>	<b>+27.62</b>
<b>3. MultProb_Deg3</b>	<b>+42.70</b>
<b>4. MultProb_Deg4</b>	<b>+77.25</b>

As seen in the table above the marginal effect is significant and extremely potent. For parents suffering from two of the above problems, it affects the overall probability of re-entry, **14.92%**, by +18.75 percentage points. For parents coping with three problems it increases the overall probability of re-entry by +27.62 percentage points, parents with four issues cited upon removal +42.70 percentage points, and finally parents suffering with five problems +77.25 percentage points bringing the overall probability in these cases to near 93%; meaning that over nine out of ten children whose parents were identified as Medicaid recipients (proxy for poverty), unable to cope, having inadequate housing, and being substance and alcohol abusers, re-enter the foster care system within twelve months after reunification.

Initially, it was thought that a very small percentage of parents of the children making up the reunified population would be identified as having been cited with all five issues. The same goes for parents with three or four problems. Surprisingly, these initial thoughts were incorrect, as a significant percentage of the population had parents who were suffering from more than one of these issues, as shown in the following table:

<u>Degree of Multiple Problem</u>	<u>Number of Observations</u>	<u>Percent of Population Defined by Variable</u>	<u>Number of Parents within variable</u>
MultProb_Deg1	3471	25.12%	<b>872</b>
MultProb_Deg2	3471	27.40%	<b>951</b>
MultProb_Deg3	3471	13.25%	<b>460</b>
MultProb_Deg4	3471	1.47%	<b>51</b>
Total		67.24%	<b>2334</b>
Remaining W/One Problem		32.00%	<b>1137</b>

Fifty one parents were cited with all five problems meaning that their children had on average about a 93% of re-entering the system. Four hundred and sixty parents were cited with having four problems; meaning that their children had on average, around a 57% chance of re-entering, nine hundred and fifty one parents were cited with three problems; indicating that on average their children had a 42% probability of re-entry, and eight hundred and seventy two were cited with two problems; bringing the likelihood of re-entry amongst their children on average to around 34%. 32% of the population, or one thousand thirty seven parents, were only cited with having one of the five problems, meaning that 99% of the population of children who were reunified with their parents during 2005 was defined by these variables. As mentioned, these variables all had at least 99% statistical confidence allowing for a conclusion that a parent suffering from multiple problems is indeed a significant indicator in a higher likelihood of re-entry amongst foster care children.

## **Conclusion:**

In summation, this study thoroughly covers the case characteristics associated with a given child's probability of re-entering into the foster care system within twelve months of reunifying with his or her parent(s). It confirms previous literature's findings that certain factors increasing the likelihood of re-entry are: poverty, removal history, sexual abuse, special needs children, children with behavioral problems, children with parents suffering from multiple problems, and neglect. This study also creates a discrepancy with results of previous studies. It demonstrates that some factors do not affect the overall probability of re-entry, whereas previous studies showed that they did. For example, substance and alcohol abuse by the parent and/or child, and physical abuse were shown in other studies to be significant factors, while this study shows that they are not. Furthermore, it confirms that race can be a factor in affecting the likelihood of re-entry whereas other studies were ambiguous about race. Most importantly, this study uses detailed statistical analysis showing the independent effect of child characteristics, parental characteristics, and other case characteristics on the overall likelihood of re-entry while other studies did not.

The most significant factors found by this study to increase the overall probability of re-entry were, starting with the most influential, parents suffering from multiple problems, a child having more than one previous removal, and poverty. Hopefully, DHS will be able to see these characteristics as indicators of a higher re-entry probability and adjust expectations and use resources accordingly; particularly with indicators such as Chronic Re-entry and Multiple Problems that bring the overall probability of re-entry above 50%.

One lacking area in this study is the amount of information on the families and parents of the child. Certain factors were not analyzed because they were not present in the data, most

notably the lack of information on the parents. Factors that should be included for a study in the future are parental characteristics such as: specific income levels, number of children, marital status, criminal history, and psychological and physical health.

Most lacking in this study is the inability of it, due to data limitations, to study the effectiveness of reunification services rendered. If the data had included individual level data on services provided to families of removed children, then the same statistical analysis would have been conducted. This would have allowed the study to show the independent effect of services on reducing the likelihood of re-entry. Such an analysis could prove very valuable as limited resources need to be used as efficiently as possible; maximizing their return. Hopefully, this study can serve as the impetus for future statistical analysis on services provided by DHS and their effect on re-entry rates.

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