

Highlights of [GAO-03-397](#), a report to Congressional Requesters

CHILD WELFARE AND JUVENILE JUSTICE

Federal Agencies Could Play a Stronger Role in Helping States Reduce the Number of Children Placed Solely to Obtain Mental Health Services

Why GAO Did This Study

Recent news articles in over 30 states describe the difficulty many parents have in accessing mental health services for their children, and some parents choose to place their children in the child welfare or juvenile justice systems in order to obtain the services they need. GAO was asked to determine: (1) the number and characteristics of children voluntarily placed in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems to receive mental health services, (2) the factors that influence such placements, and (3) promising state and local practices that may reduce the need for child welfare and juvenile justice placements.

What GAO Recommends

The Departments of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Justice (DOJ) should consider the feasibility of tracking children placed by their parents in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems to obtain mental health services. HHS, DOJ, and the Department of Education (Education) should develop an interagency working group to identify the causes of the misunderstandings at the state and local levels and create an action plan to address those causes. These agencies should also continue to encourage states to evaluate the programs that the states fund or initiate and determine the most effective means of disseminating the results of these and other available studies.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-03-397.

To view the full report, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Cornelia Ashby at (202) 512-8403 or ashbyc@gao.gov.

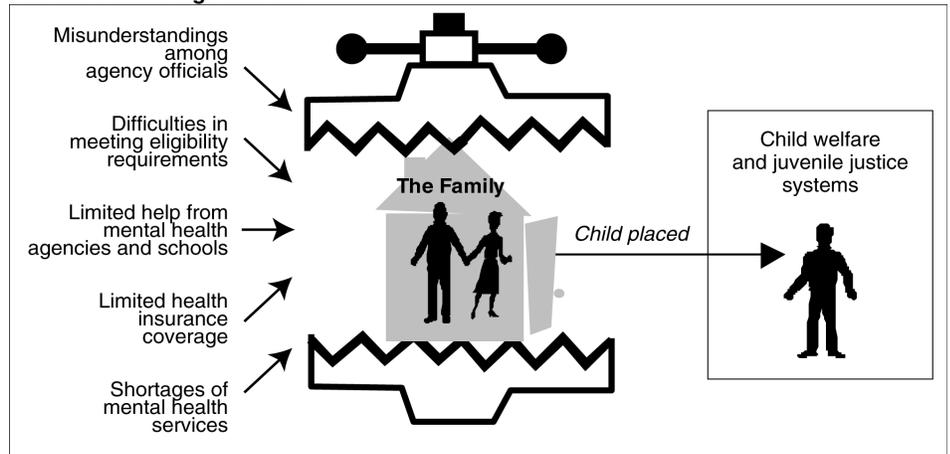
What GAO Found

Child welfare directors in 19 states and juvenile justice officials in 30 counties estimated that in fiscal year 2001 parents placed over 12,700 children into the child welfare or juvenile justice systems so that these children could receive mental health services. Nationwide, this number is likely higher because many state child welfare directors did not provide data and we had limited coverage of county juvenile justice officials. Although no agency tracks these children or maintains data on their characteristics, officials said most are male, adolescent, often have multiple problems, and many exhibit behaviors that threaten the safety of themselves and others.

Neither the child welfare nor the juvenile justice system was designed to serve children who have not been abused or neglected, or who have not committed a delinquent act. According to officials in the 6 states we visited, limitations of both public and private health insurance, inadequate supplies of mental health services, limited availability of services through mental health agencies and schools, and difficulties meeting eligibility rules for services influence such placements. Despite guidance issued by the various federal agencies with responsibilities for serving children with mental illness, misunderstandings among state and local officials regarding the roles of the various agencies that provide such services pose additional challenges to parents seeking such services for their children.

Officials in the states we visited identified practices that they believe may reduce the need for some child welfare or juvenile justice placements. These included finding new ways to reduce the cost of or to fund mental health services, improving access to mental health services, and expanding the array of available services. Few of these practices have been rigorously evaluated.

Factors Influencing Placement



Source: GAO.