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

- Misunderstandings among agency officials
- Difficulties in meeting eligibility requirements
- Limited help from mental health agencies and schools
- Limited health insurance coverage
- Shortages of mental health services
- The Family
- Child placed
- Child welfare and juvenile justice systems

Source: GAO.