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County faulted for removing kids from parents so often

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Franklin County Children Services takes kids from their parents more often than any other child-welfare agency in the state and has one of the highest rates in the nation, says a national nonprofit advocacy group.

"Franklin County is Ohio's capital of poor child-welfare practice," said Richard Wexler, executive director of the National Coalition for Child Protection Reform in Alexandria, Va. "The policy of Franklin County Children Services can be boiled down to a single sentence: Take the child and run."

The coalition will release a report today comparing the number of children removed from their homes in 2005 with the number of poor children living in each county.

In recent years, Franklin County has reduced the number of children it has removed from their parents, but it still is taking 2 1/2 times the state average and more than triple the national average, Wexler said.

But Franklin County Children Services says the report is "suspect" because the county childwelfare agencies operate differently.

"This report is highly simplistic and misleading," said John Saros, Children Services' executive director. "You can't say a child-welfare agency is doing a poor job on one indicator alone."

The coalition, however, said its report also considered the proportion of children left in their own homes who are abused again and the number of children returned home from foster care who must be placed again.

Franklin County's "re-abuse" rate was well below the other major metropolitan counties, Saros said. "Our focus is safety, permanence and well-being."

About 90 percent of Children Services' caseworkers make face-to-face contact with their children every month, 88 percent of the children in foster care are returned to their parents and more than 1,500 children were placed with adoptive parents from 2000 to 2005, he said.

"Since 2003, we've been returning more children a month than we've been taking in," Saros said.

But nine other Ohio counties had better safety records than Franklin while taking fewer children, Wexler said. And Franklin County's record of putting children back into foster care was worse than all but four counties with populations large enough to measure, he said.

"Trumbull County takes children at less than one-seventh the rate of Franklin, yet Trumbull outperforms Franklin on both key measures of safety."

Franklin County's removal rate also is so high and the county is so large, it skews the average for the entire state, Wexler said.

"Ohio's statewide rate of child removal is 25 percent above the national average, but that is almost entirely because of Franklin County," he said.

In its report, the coalition fails to consider the delicate balance of helping birth families become better parents while still protecting children who are being abused and neglected, said Penny M. Wyman, executive director of the Ohio Association of Child Caring Agencies.

"If they're going to judge counties on their rate of removal, what are the child-welfare agencies supposed to do? Not remove any kids and watch them get hurt?" Wyman said. "If Franklin County has twice as few children being hurt, then maybe the other counties should be doing what they are."

There are other factors, Saros said. To be fair, the coalition also should include unruly and delinquent teens who have been placed in foster and group homes by the juvenile courts in other counties since all of those youth are sent to Children Services in Franklin County.

"More than 52 percent of the 2,500 kids in our custody are age 13 and above," Saros said. "Of those, 75 percent are not in our care because of abuse, neglect or dependency but have gotten in trouble with the law."

Wexler said he believed those figures were taken into account, but wasn't sure. The state Department of Job and Family Services, which provided the data to the coalition, couldn't confirm whether unruly and delinquent teens placed by the courts were included.

"Even if you take those 400 children out for Franklin County, it still ranks as the most horrendous," Wexler said, referring to estimates by Saros last month that Children Services typically has custody of 300 to 400 kids on probation a year.

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