



Protecting Colorado's Children

An Analysis of Available Data on
Referral and Assessment Trends

Paper Produced by the Administrative Review Division

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Collaborative Inquiry Partners

2005

Child Welfare Program Managers
Child Welfare Program Group

2006

Administrative Review Division Review Staff and Mangers
Administrative Review Division Steering Committee
Child Welfare Intake Forum
CDHS State Board

2007

Applied Research in Child Welfare Group
CDHS Field Administrators
Child Welfare Advisory Group

Background

The Division of Child Welfare Services within the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) has a statutory and regulatory responsibility for the oversight of child welfare services in Colorado. The Division of Child Welfare Services is not responsible for providing the direct child welfare services to children and families in Colorado, as Colorado is a State supervised County administered system. This means that programs and services are provided to children and families through local County Department of Human/Social Services. The Division of Child Welfare Services within CDHS provides supervision and guidance to county departments through policies, procedures, and oversight.

The Administrative Review Division (ARD) is located within the Office of Performance Improvement in the CDHS. The ARD is responsible for the federally required Case Review and Quality Assurance (QA) Systems for both the Division of Child Welfare and the Division of Youth Corrections (DYC) in Colorado. A primary purpose of both types of reviews is to monitor the federally prescribed outcomes of safety, permanence, and child and family well-being for children and families receiving services through the Child Welfare or DYC programs. In recent years, the ARD has expanded efforts in designing and implementing Continuous Quality Improvement initiatives with a goal of improving the child welfare system in Colorado.

Through the In-Home Services Reviews, the ARD identified the systemic issue of varied intake processes across counties. As a result, in the winter of 2004, the ARD convened the Child Protection Question Workgroup to create an index reflective of Colorado's Child Welfare system's ability to protect identified vulnerable children. The workgroup consisted of State Child Welfare program staff, county intake supervisors and workers, ARD staff (reviewers and managers), county quality assurance staff, staff from the Butler Institute for Families at the University of Denver, and a member of the Applied Research in Child Welfare group at Colorado State University. The index was to consist of data collected from ARD reviews as well as information entered into Trails (Colorado's Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System) by the counties. As the index was to be comprised of numerous indices, it could accommodate differential weighting for areas of greater importance while also allowing specific feedback on areas of strength as well as those in need of improvement within the system. As the project progressed, it became apparent that work needed to be completed in other areas first. For example, the quantity, validity, and reliability of data available in Trails had to be analyzed prior to any attempted use. In addition, staff from the Division of Child Welfare Services initiated a process to examine and potentially modify existing state rules in the area of assessment. This workgroup, run by the Division of Child Welfare Services with the assistance of the National Resource Center for Child Protection, led to the creation of new safety management rules that went into effect in 2007. These new rules modified many of the prior definitions (e.g., present and impending danger, new response time categories) that will begin to show as this process continues. One of the critical components over the next few years will be to monitor how well the new rules and processes help ensure the safety of Colorado's children.

In an effort to begin the process of assessing the quantity, validity, and reliability of the data available in Trails in order to inform future child welfare policy, practice, and outcome evaluation, the ARD initiated an **action research** project focused on examining referral and assessment data currently captured by Trails. The data in this report have been, and will continue to be, presented to a number of groups and individuals who are stakeholders in Colorado's Child Welfare system (see cover inset for a complete list of stakeholders to date). During each presentation, the participants are asked to interpret the data and findings, with their input being added to this document. In this way, this report serves as a "living document" that will continually reflect the current state of this **collaborative inquiry** project. It is hoped that this process will engage Colorado's Child Welfare professionals in a continual process of evaluation and improvement in efforts to protect children. This document can also be used to inform various constituents.

Action Research: An inquiry guided by data intended to improve the quality of an organization and its performance

Collaborative Inquiry: An action research process conducted by teams of colleagues.

Purpose

Within the context of an action research project, this report serves multiple purposes. First, it contains referral and assessment data entered by Child Welfare and Division of Youth Corrections professionals into the Trails system. As Trails serves as Colorado's online data management system, this data should be reflective of practice and outcomes in Colorado's Child Welfare system. Stakeholders will be asked to examine and interpret this data in an effort to understand the performance of Colorado's Child Welfare system and plan for improvements. Secondly, this report will serve as a central repository, encapsulating stakeholders' interpretations of the data, conclusions, and recommendations. Thirdly, this report will serve as a medium for distribution of the findings to Colorado's Child Welfare professionals with a focus on continuous quality improvement in child protective services.

Methodology

In order to examine the child welfare referral and assessment trends in Colorado, data were extracted and updated from the Trails database in early March of 2007 and reflects what was in the system at that time. Historical information (1995-2000) included in this report is from the legacy child welfare database CWEST. Historical numbers were collected from the Division of Child Welfare Services.

The data were analyzed using the statistical software SPSS and the results were entered into this document in the form of charts and tables. The Continuous Quality Improvement Unit of the ARD added some initial descriptive and interpretive narrative to the document. As of April 2007, this information was provided to various stakeholders for additional interpretation and recommendations. As part the collaborative inquiry, this process will continue, with ARD continuing to update the data and the narrative as the process evolves.

Trails

Trails is Colorado's Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS), as mandated by the Federal government. It is an online data management and analysis system used for Division of Child Welfare Services and Division of Youth Correction (DYC) case management documentation. All 64 counties and the Division of Youth Corrections, and the Division of Child Care use Trails. Since it went live statewide in 2002, the amount of case management information documented within Trails has increased steadily, but the validity and reliability of a significant amount of this information, especially as it relates to outcome studies, has yet to be tested.

Overview of Child Protective Services Intake and Initial Assessment Process

The American Humane Association (AHA, 1992), in their publication Helping in Child Protective Services, provides a concise explanation of the child protection intake and initial assessment process. In Colorado, the initial intake process, as defined by the AHA, is termed "the referral".

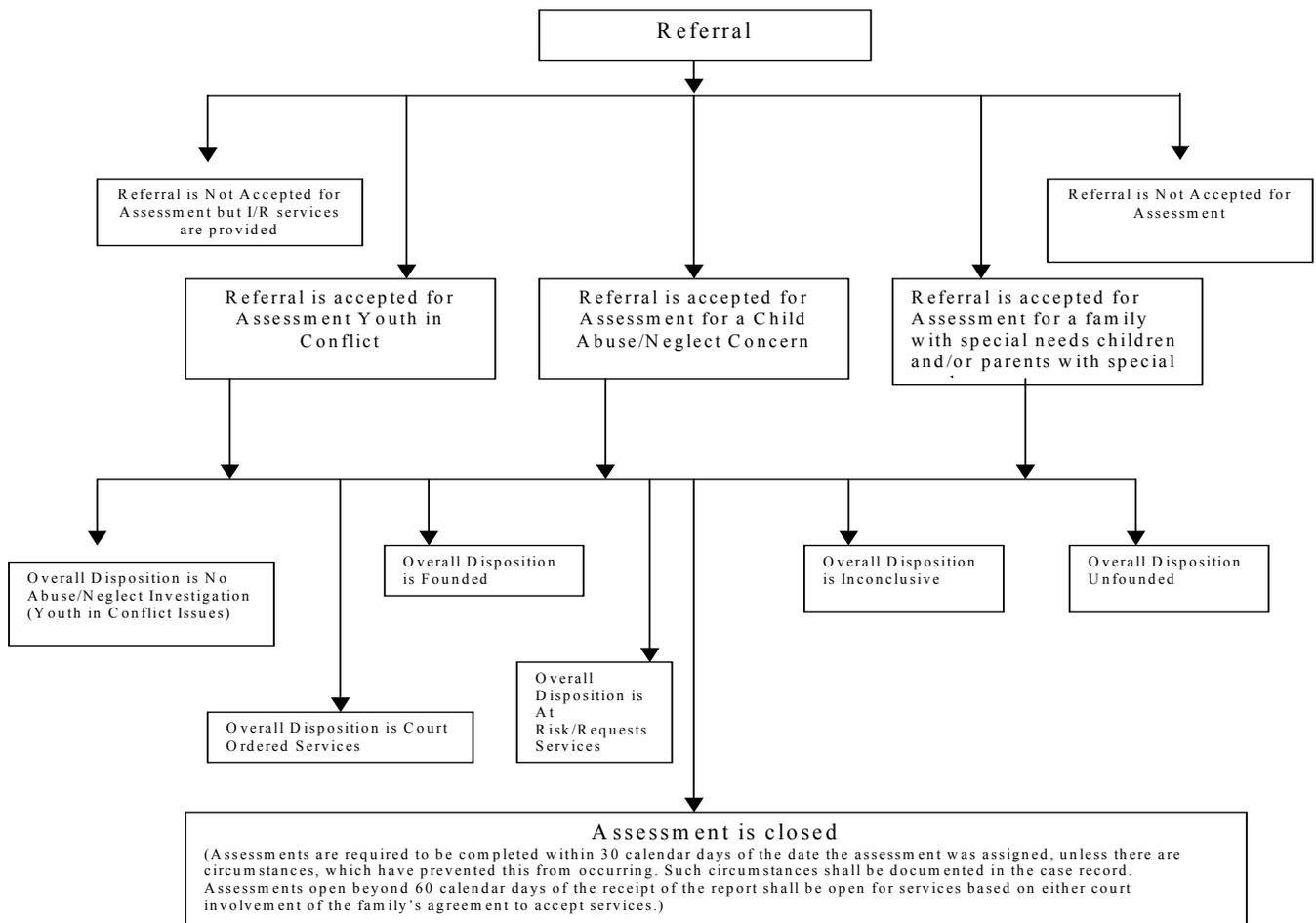
The term intake...refers to all of the activities (agencies) perform in order to receive referrals alleging child maltreatment, assess whether the referral will be accepted as a report of child neglect or abuse, and determine the agency response and the urgency of that response. (AHA, 1992, p.164)

In Colorado, after a county department has taken the initial referral, the county child welfare agency assesses whether or not the referral will be accepted for assessment. AHA (1992) defines this process as

...those activities undertaken in order to evaluate the level of risk to the child, determine whether the report of neglect or abuse can be substantiated, and initiate services for the child and family. (AHA, 1992, p.172)

The flow chart below provides an overview of the decision points in Colorado's referral and assessment process that will be highlighted in this report.

Chart 1: Colorado's Referral and Assessment Decision Points



Results and Findings

While many different data points were analyzed for the study, this section summarizes the more important of the findings. As much as possible, this description will follow the flow of the intake process.

As described earlier under the Overview of Child Protective Services Intake and Initial Assessment Process, a referral is the initial contact an individual makes to the County Department of Human/Social Services regarding a variety of concerns, as defined by Volume VII at 7.200.6 (see Citation below). Volume VII at 7.200.61, (also shown below) requires county departments to enter all reports that meet the definition of a referral into Trails. It should be noted that both of these citations became effective December 1, 2005. As a result, the data shown in this report needs to be interpreted within that context.

Volume VII Citation

7.200.6 REFERRALS [Eff. 12.1.05]

“Referral” means a report made to the county department that contains one or more of the following:

- A. Allegations of child abuse or neglect as defined by Section 19-1-103(1), C.R.S.;
- B. Information that a child or youth is beyond the control of his/her parent;
- C. Information about a child or youth whose behavior is such that there is a likelihood that the child or youth may cause harm to him/herself or to others, or who has committed acts that could cause him/her to be adjudicated by the court as a delinquent;
- D. Information indicating that a child or youth meets specific Program Area 6 requirements and is in need of services

Volume VII Citation

7.200.61 Documentation of Referrals [Eff. 12/1/05]

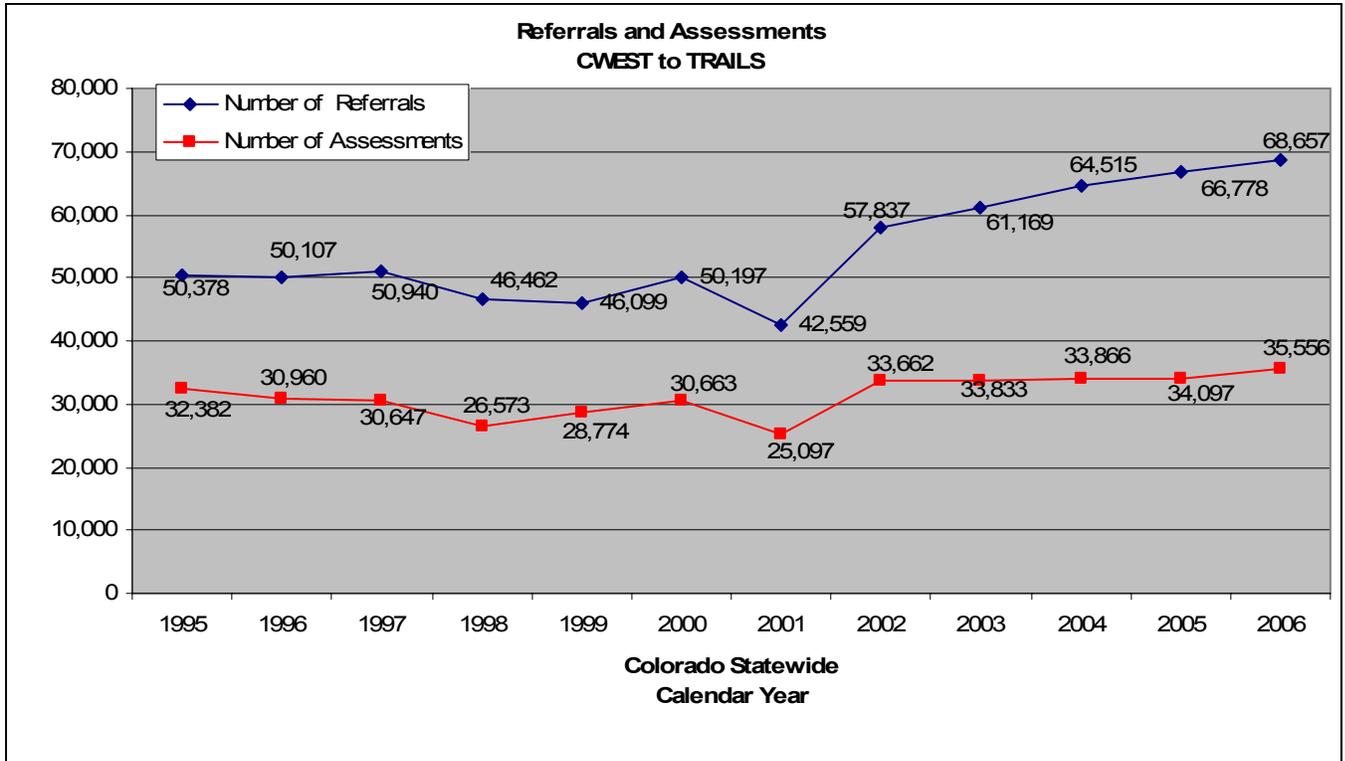
All reports that meet the definition of a referral shall be entered in to the State automated system (TRAILS). Any time a case is opened, it shall come through the referral or assessment process in TRAILS with the exception of Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC), out of state subsidized adoption, and Division of Youth Corrections (DYC) Medicaid-only.

Referral and Assessment Trends

One of the first pieces of information that can be examined within the intake process is the number of referrals received. It is also possible to look at the percentage of those referrals that are accepted for assessment versus those referrals not accepted for assessment.

Chart 2 below displays the trends of referrals received and those accepted for assessment since Calendar Year (CY) 1995. This chart includes data pulled from Colorado's legacy data system, CWEST, and the current SACWIS system, Trails. The transition from CWEST to Trails occurred in early 2001.

Chart 2: Statewide Referral and Assessment Trends from 1999 to 2006



After remaining relatively constant from CY 1995 through CY 2000, the overall number of referrals received increased dramatically over the next six years. While 2001 showed a large dip, this is probably due to the rollout of the Trails system and counties acclimating to the new system. Overall, the number of referrals increased from just over 50,000 in 2000 to slightly over 68,600 in 2006, representing a 37% increase in referrals in six years. While referrals received have increased dramatically, the number of referrals accepted for assessment has remained stable over the past four years. Referrals received since 2002 have increased by 10,820 and yet the number accepted for assessment have only increased by 1,894 (most of which occurred in the last year). As the chart visibly shows, the number of referrals accepted for assessment paralleled the number of referrals received until 2002. Since that time referrals accepted for assessment have remained flat, while the number of referrals received continues to climb. Chart 3 (Page 6) displays the statewide trends since 2001. This depiction also demonstrates how the number of referrals not accepted for assessment has dramatically increased over the past six years.

Chart 4 (Page 6) shows the steady decrease in the percent of referrals accepted for assessment statewide since 2001. Between CY 2001 and CY 2006, there has been an 7% decrease in the percent of referrals accepted for assessment statewide.

Stakeholder feedback, in combination with ARD's initial interpretation, indicates several possible explanations for this dramatic shift in referral and assessment trends statewide. First, counties may be entering referrals they

Chart 3: Statewide Referral and Assessment Trends 2001-2006

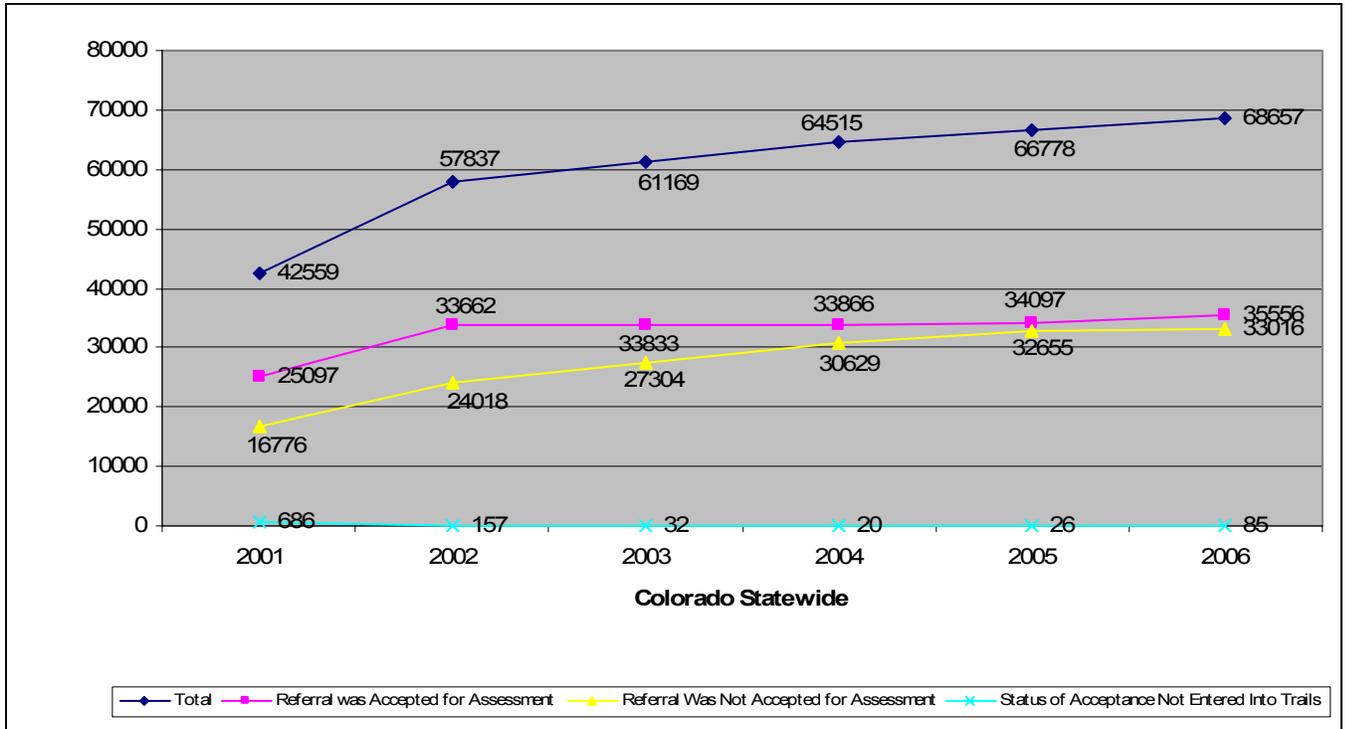
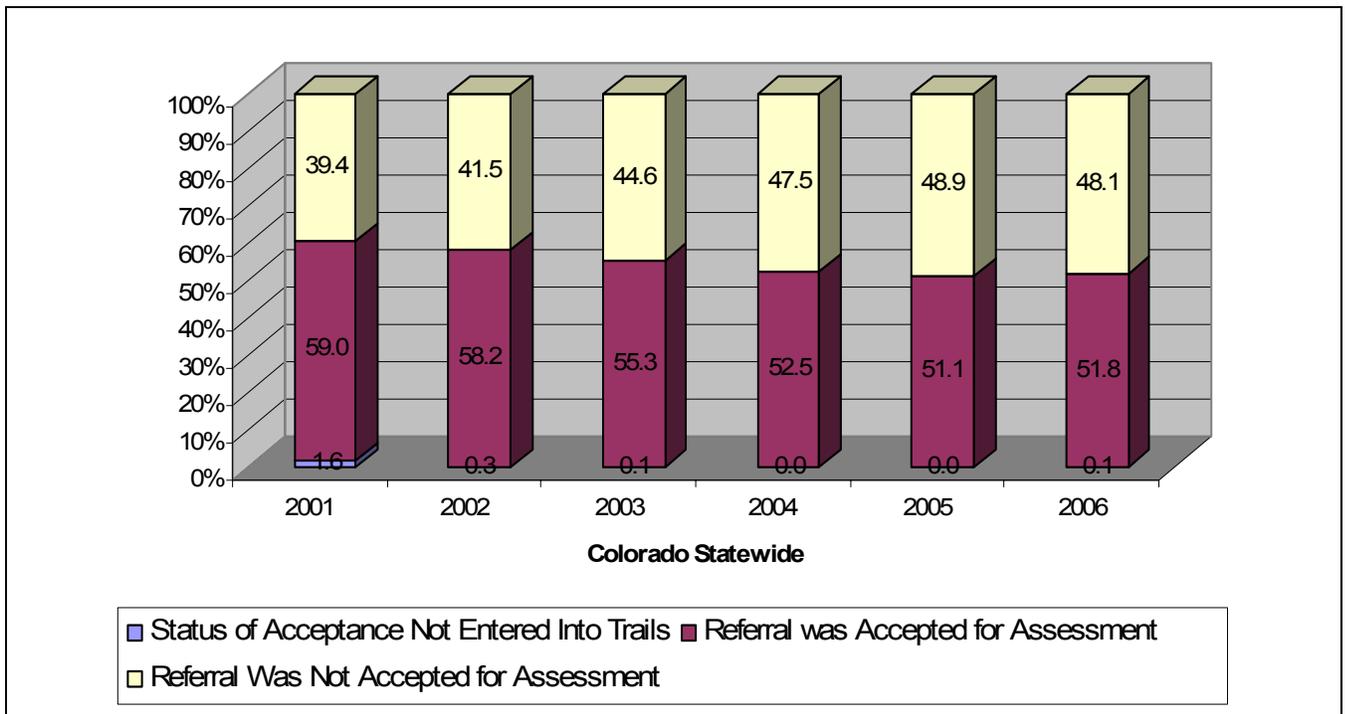


Chart 4: Referrals Accepted vs. Unaccepted for Assessment. A Comparison of Statewide Trends CY 2001-CY 2006



receive at a higher rate due to the Division of Child Welfare Services allocation model that was begun in 2003. This allocation formula was modified in recent years to include an indicator related to the number of referrals and assessments counties have each year. As money is now more directly tied to entering this data, counties may be more likely to ensure that referrals and assessments are entered into the system. A second explanation could be that with the “new” Trails system, counties are entering multiple referrals on what historically presented as a single referral. For example, if several different reporting parties called in the same referral, Trails may reflect

this as separate referrals, although historically this would have been captured (counted) as one single referral. A third possible explanation is budget and staff cuts resulting in fewer referrals investigated. There is a theory that staffing levels will predict the number of referrals to which a county can respond. Of course, it is highly likely that a combination of these factors (and perhaps others) is responsible for the change in referral and assessment trends.

When breaking this information out by county, there is wide variance across the statewide average of an 7% decrease in referrals accepted for assessment. Looking at the difference in Colorado's Ten Large Counties, the statewide average of an 7% reduction in referrals accepted for assessment is not a good indicator of practice in any one county. As Table 1 shows, using the Ten Large Counties for example, there are counties who have increased the percent of referrals accepted for assessment while other counties have decreased the percent of referrals accepted for assessment well beyond the 7% statewide average. For example, Larimer County has increased the percent of referrals accepted for assessment by 11.8% since CY 2001 while Denver County has reduced the percent accepted for assessment by 20%.

Table 1: TLC Change in Referral Accepted CY 2001—CY 2006

Percent Change in Referrals Accepted for Assessment CY 2001-CY 2006 - Colorado's Ten Large Counties	
LARIMER	11.8%
BOULDER	4.3%
ARAPAHOE	-1.9%
MESA	-2.0%
PUEBLO	-3.2%
ADAMS	-5.3%
JEFFERSON	-9.9%
DENVER	-20.0%
EL PASO	-22.9%
WELD	-31.1%

Reasons Not Accepted for Assessment

Referrals not accepted for assessment are commonly referred to as “screened out”. Table 2 (below) shows the statewide trends regarding screen out reasons over the past five years. One could assume that this information would reflect the type of reports received that do not match the Volume VII criteria for being a referral. However, the information found does not appear to be helpful in this regard. For example, the most often selected category is that of “Other”. Another 3% to 9% of screen outs do not have any reason entered into Trails. Thus, almost two-thirds of the time it is impossible to discern clearly why the decision was made to screen out the referral. In the remaining 32% of

Table 2: Reasons for Screen Out CY 2001-CY2006

For Referrals that Were Not Accepted for Assessment - Reasons for Screen Out CY 2001-CY 2006							
	Subject of report is over age 18	Repeated Unsubstantiated Allegations Made by the Same Reporting Party	Other	No Information available from the reporter of abuse and neglect as defined by law	Insufficient information to locate child/family or to proceed	No Information Entered into Trails	Total Referrals Not Accepted for Assessment
CY 2001	38	87	10568	4657	485	941	16776
	0.20%	0.50%	63.00%	27.80%	2.90%	5.60%	100.00%
CY 2002	50	104	15975	6375	594	920	24018
	0.20%	0.40%	66.50%	26.50%	2.50%	3.80%	100.00%
CY 2003	57	142	19331	6299	595	880	27304
	0.20%	0.50%	70.80%	23.10%	2.20%	3.20%	100.00%
CY 2004	67	175	20653	8087	638	1009	30629
	0.20%	0.60%	67.40%	26.40%	2.10%	3.30%	100.00%
CY 2005	64	211	21049	9371	711	1249	32655
	0.20%	0.60%	64.50%	28.70%	2.20%	3.80%	100.00%
CY 2006	46	248	20001	10546	908	1267	33016
	0.10%	0.80%	60.60%	31.90%	2.80%	3.80%	100.00%

screened out referrals “No information available from the reporter of abuse and neglect as defined by law” was selected.

If the caseworker using Trails selects “Other”, Trails then requires that a comment be added to elaborate on the decision. As such, Child Welfare professionals in Colorado should determine if the reasons referrals are not accepted for assessment is important enough to warrant more specific response options in Trails. If it is important enough, then it is suggested that a qualitative study talking with intake workers and/or analyzing the Trails narrative responses when “Other” is selected may indicate themes that could then be added to the drop down option box within the Trails system. The benefit to this approach would be an increased specificity and understanding of reasons why referrals are not accepted for assessment.

Assigned Response Times

For referrals accepted for assessment, the county department must assign a response time within which to initiate the assessment. Currently, Colorado's Volume VII rules provide guidelines at 7.202.4 (shown below). Chart 5 (Page 9) shows the statewide trends for assigned response times from CY 2001 through CY 2006. Over this six-year span, use of the Immediate and 72-hour response time categories has steadily declined. Use of the 24-hour

Volume VII Citation

7.202.4 INITIAL ASSESSMENT [Rev. eff. 12/1/05]

H. The county department shall use a standardized response assessment process to decide the priority of response to reports needing investigation. At a minimum, those factors that shall be addressed and documented are:

1. Age/vulnerability of the alleged victim
2. The specific nature and severity of the alleged maltreatment
3. Prior reports on any family member, child, or alleged perpetrator
4. Parental level of cooperation
5. Stressors
6. Family violence

This information will be obtained by those activities outlined the in the initial assessment. A level of risk shall be assigned using the following definitions:

“High Risk” – Factors present indicate the child's safety may be at great risk of harm

“Moderate Risk” – Factors present indicate the child's safety may not be at inordinate risk, but the potential for further harm is present.

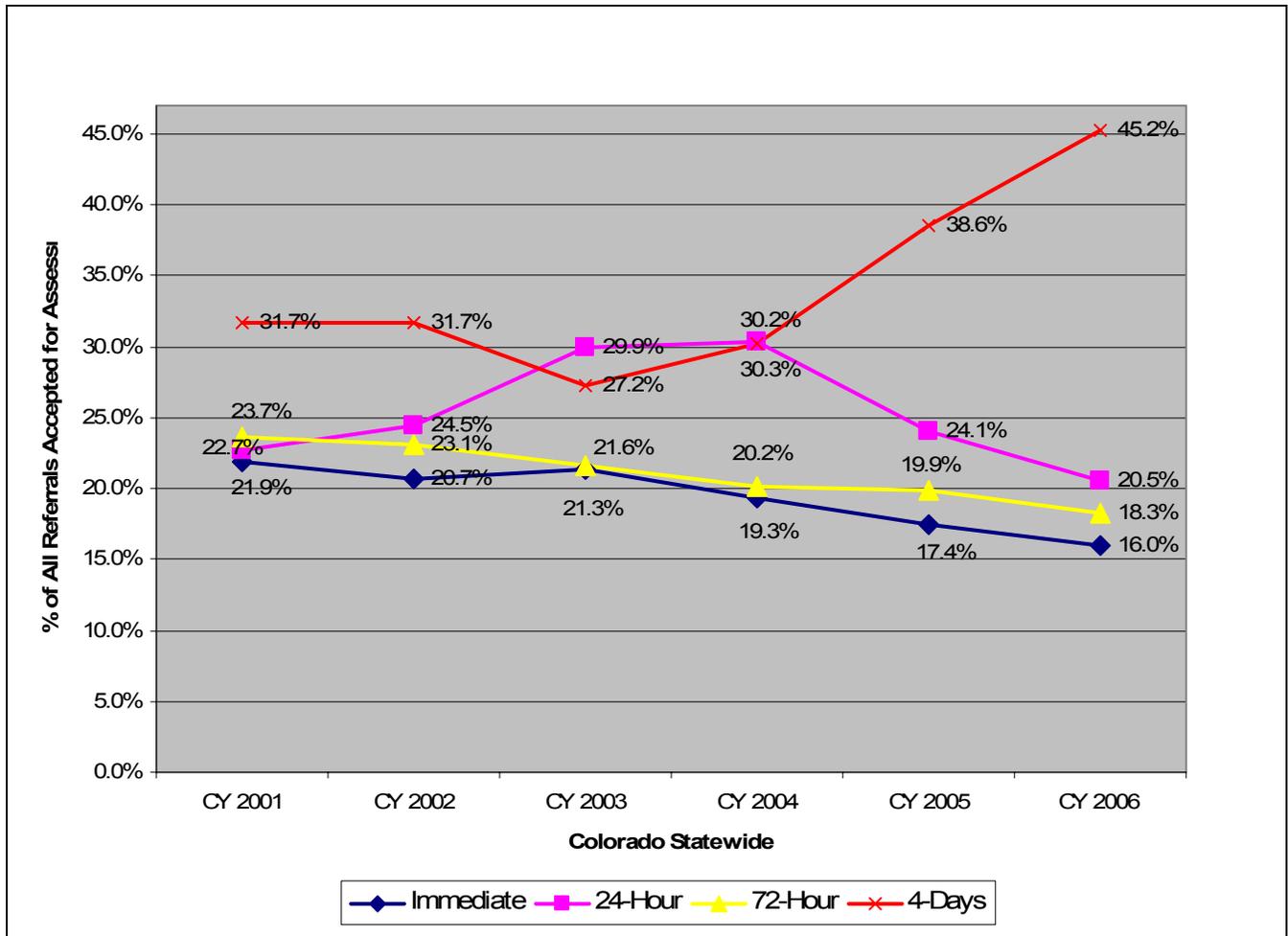
“Low Risk” – Factors present indicate that the child's risk of harm is slight.

If response assessment information cannot be obtained from the reporting party, the county department shall make an immediate response to determine the child's level of safety.

I. The county department shall assign priority in response time using the following time frames:

1. On all high risk referrals: The safety and protection issues shall be addressed immediately and no later than 24 hours after initial receipt of the report.
2. On all moderate or low risk referrals (in which the child's safety has not been secured): The investigation shall be initiated as soon as possible, but no later than 72 hours after receipt of the report.
3. On low risk referrals in which the child's safety has been secured: The investigation shall occur as soon as possible but no later than four working days after receipt of the report.

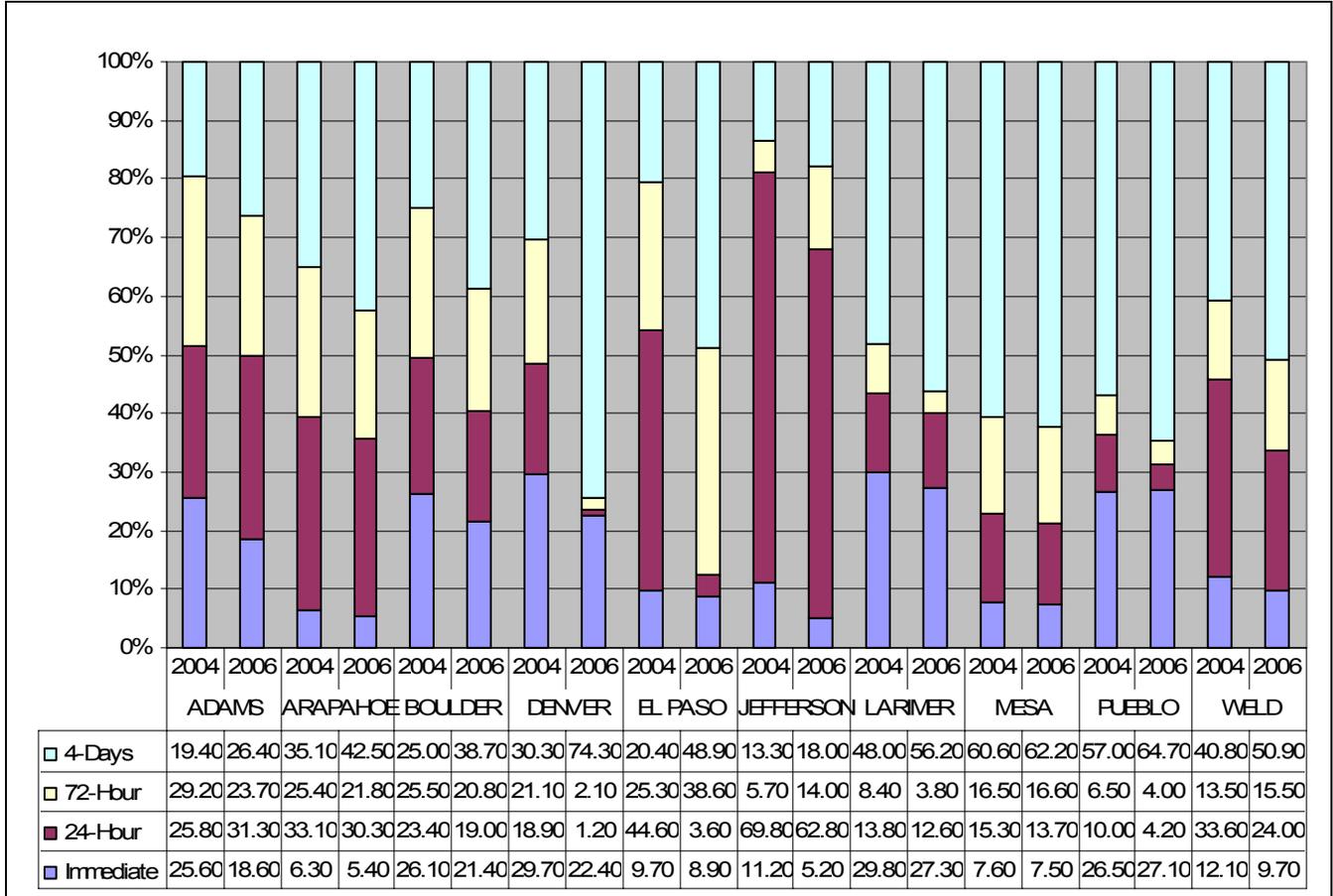
Chart 5: Response Times Assigned to Referrals Accepted for Assessment CY 2001-CY2006 Statewide



response time increased in 2003 and 2004. It then dropped substantially to 24.1% for 2005. From 2003 to 2006 there was a dramatic increase of 18% in the use of the 4-day response time.

According to Volume VII, response time assignment is based on the level of perceived risk involved in the referral. Therefore, one could conclude that counties have increasingly received referrals of lesser severity over the past three years. However, in discussing this data with stakeholders it was suggested that the dramatic increase in the percent of assessments receiving a four-day response time could be due to the implementation of new Volume VII rules. Prior to the Federal Child and Family Services Review, Colorado rule allowed a telephone contact as the initiation of an Assessment. As a result of the federal review, Colorado needed to change this rule to require face-to-face contact with the alleged victim as the initiation of an Assessment. Due to their role in monitoring Colorado's Program Improvement Plan performance, the ARD began to review to the face-to-face standard in July of 2004 and the rule change became effective January of 2005. It may be that the longer response times were assigned to provide adequate time to see the alleged victim face-to-face. Related to this, some stakeholders suggested that the new rule and monitoring may have forced child protective services to think more critically and accurately about response times, as the alleged victim now had to be seen, rather than the previously less stringent rules allowing collateral contact by telephone to count as the initiation point of the investigation. In other words, this new focus may have led to workers applying the differential response protocol more accurately than in the past. If this is true, one might expect the percent of four day response times to level out again, perhaps as soon as CY 2007. Further qualitative work with county child protective service units, as well as future quantitative data, may help further establish interpretation of these trends. It should also be noted that, simply because longer response times are assigned does not mean that counties wait that long to initiate the investigation. In fact, most stakeholders directly involved in intake units noted that contact with alleged victims is attempted as soon as a worker is available, which may often be sooner than the assigned response time.

**Chart 6: Response Time Trends for Referrals Accepted for Assessment
Ten Large Colorado Counties CY 2004 and CY 2006**



Once again, examining county specific information may provide even more insight into the response time trends. Chart 6 (Page 10) provides information related to the Ten Large Counties (TLC) response time assignments for referrals accepted for assessment during CY 2004 and CY 2006. In CY 2004 a fairly substantial discrepancy existed across the TLC. Use of the 24-hour response time varied from a high of 70% for Jefferson County to a low of 10% for Pueblo County. In addition, while five of the counties (Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Denver, and El Paso) appeared to have used the four response times fairly equally, four counties (Larimer, Mesa, Pueblo, and Weld) predominantly used the 4-day response, and Jefferson predominantly assigned a 24-hour response time. When looking at Chart 6, it is important to remember that the rule change requiring a face-to-face contact within the assigned response time would have been in effect since the 2005 calendar year. It is interesting to observe that eight of the ten counties assigned 4 days most frequently in CY 2006. Of the two that did not, Adams selected 24 hours (followed very closely by 4 days) while Jefferson County predominantly assigned a 24-hour response time (63%). This marks a dramatic shift across the TLC, which represent the majority of the child welfare cases in Colorado and therefore explains the dramatic statewide shift between 2004 and 2005.

Chart 7 and Chart 8 (both on Page 11) compare the trends from two metro counties response time assignments and highlights concern that policies and guidelines provided from the Division of Child Welfare Services may not be applied consistently with regard to how response times are assigned in county practice. Denver and Jefferson Counties are used as an example, but there is great variance across the state in response time trends.

Denver County has increased the utilization of the 4-day response time from CY 2002 to CY 2006. While referrals assigned for an immediate response have remained fairly consistent, the percent of referrals assigned a 4-day

(Continued on page 13)

Chart 7: Response Times Assigned to Referrals Accepted for Assessment CY 2001-CY 2006 Denver County

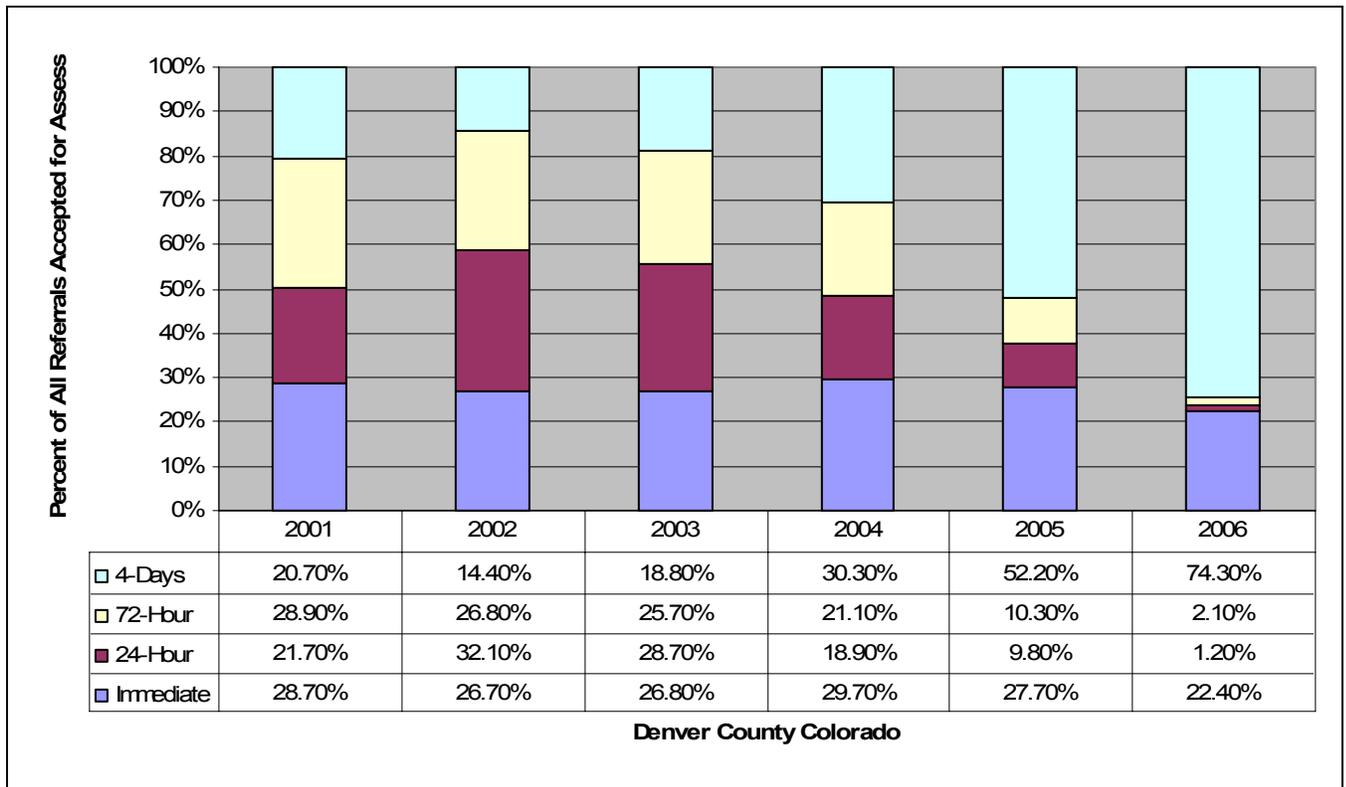
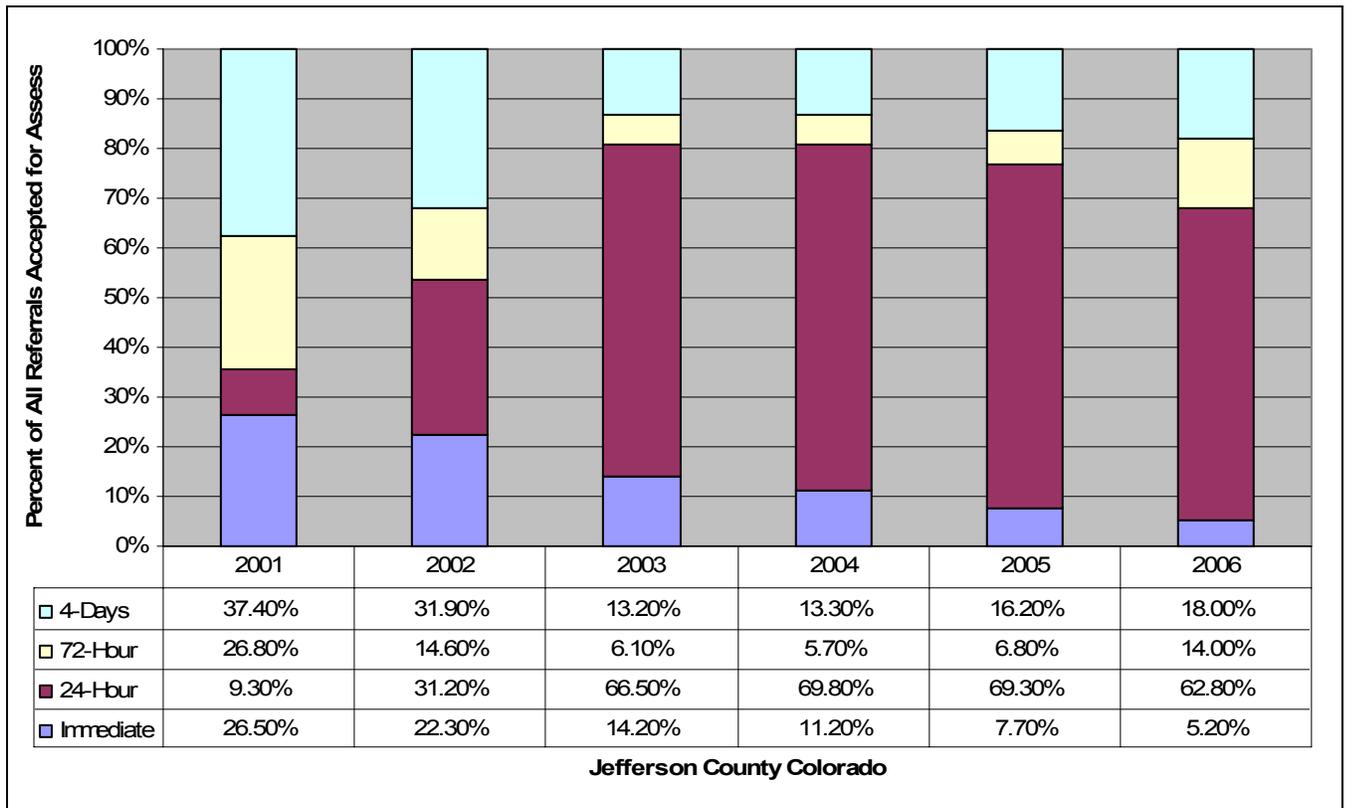


Chart 8: Response Times Assigned to Referrals Accepted for Assessment CY 2001-CY 2006 Jefferson County



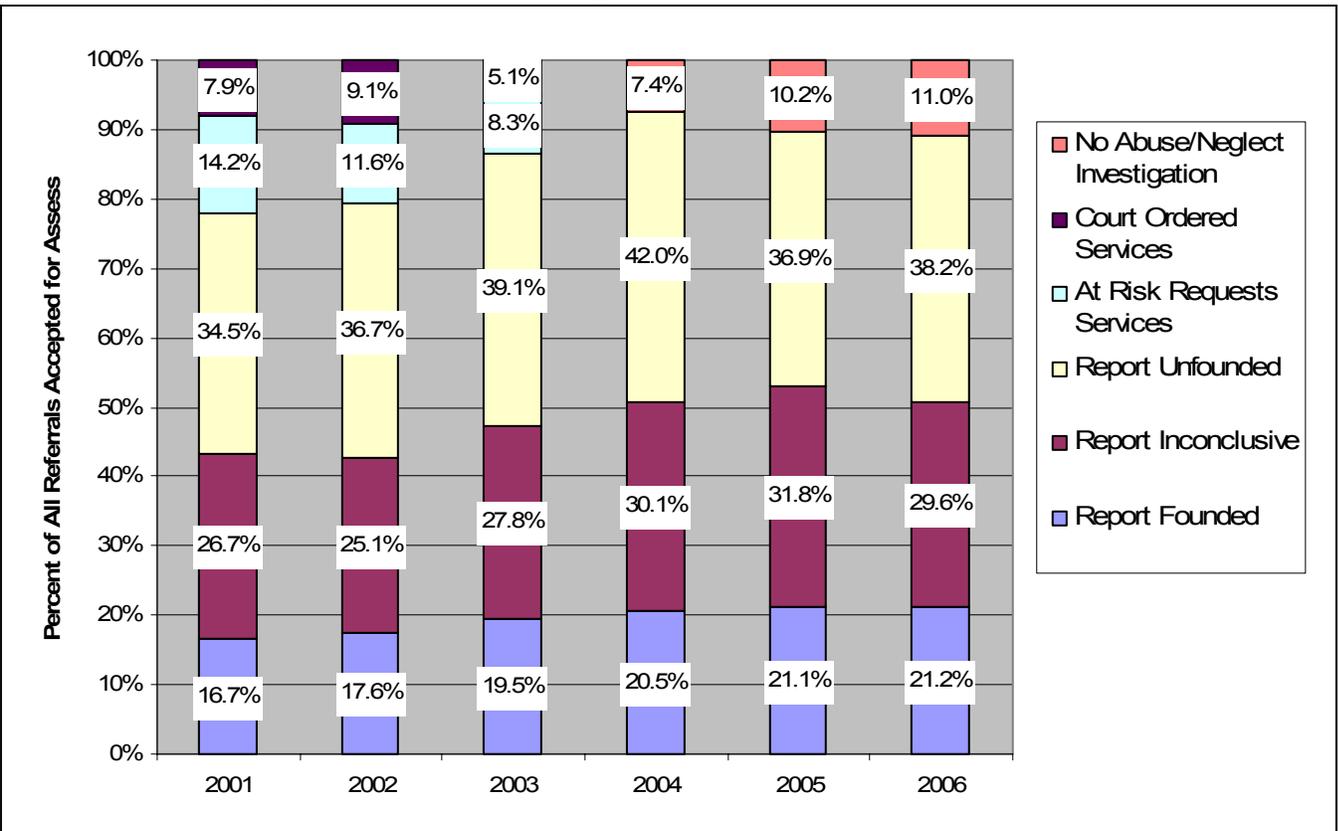
Volume VII Citation

7.202.603 Entering Confirmed Reports of Child Abuse or Neglect [Rev. eff. 2/6/04]

When the investigation of a report results in a confirmed finding of child abuse or neglect by a preponderance of evidence, the county department shall enter the confirmed report into the State Department's automated system in a manner prescribed by the State. The county shall enter the confirmed report even if there is a criminal or civil proceeding pending against the person responsible arising out of the same incident. The reported data shall include the following:

- A. The name, address, sex, date of birth and race of the child(ren) victim(s);
- B. The composition of the victim's immediate family;
- C. At a minimum, the name and last known mailing address of the person confirmed to be responsible for the child abuse or neglect, and the date of birth and Social Security Number, if known;
- D. The type of abuse or neglect;
- E. The severity of the abuse or neglect;
- F. Any previous incidents of child abuse or neglect of child or siblings;
- G. The name(s) and address(es) of any person(s) responsible for previously confirmed abuse or neglect, if known;
- H. The name of the source of the report submitted to the county department, if known;
- I. The county department that investigated the report;
- J. The date the suspected abuse or neglect was reported to the county department, and the date the county department confirmed the abuse or neglect.

Chart 9: Overall Dispositions of Referrals Accepted for Assessments CY 2001—CY 2006



(Continued from page 10)

response have increased by 60% since 2002. Use of the 72 and 24 hour response time all but disappeared. Based on assigned response times, one might conclude that the safety of the child has been secured in more than half of the referrals accepted for assessment in Denver County (see Volume VII cite on Page 8).

In Jefferson County, since CY 2002 the majority of their referrals assigned for assessment have received an immediate or 24 hour response time requirement. During CY 2004 and CY 2005 more than 75% of their referrals identified children endangered or at risk. This dropped somewhat to 68% in CY 2006. Comparing Denver and Jefferson County, one would be led to believe that there is a large difference in the type of referrals being accepted for assessment in these two counties. Specifically, it would appear that Jefferson County receives and accepts referrals that have active safety concerns while Denver County receives and accepts referrals where the safety of the child is believed to be secured prior to the Child Protective Services intervention. One stakeholder also suggested that, as Denver is the only county where police can be first responders, that they may have more referrals received from the police after the safety of the child has been secured. This might result in a longer response time being assigned.

Completion of Assessment: Dispositions

When it is determined whether or not abuse or neglect has occurred, the Assessment in Trails must be given an overall disposition and the individual allegations within the Assessment must also be given a disposition (see Volume VII cite 7.202.603 on Page 12). These dispositions are documented in Trails as Founded, Unfounded, Inconclusive, or No Abuse/Neglect (PA 4). (During CY 2004, there was a change to Trails allowing for a finding to identify those assessments that were not abuse or neglect assessments but involved youth in conflict issues.) Within an assessment, there may be multiple allegations. Each of these individual allegations will have findings associated with them. The following section examines trends in dispositions over time, and across counties.

Chart 9 (Page 12) shows the trends in overall dispositions of referrals accepted for assessment between CY 2001- CY 2005. Statewide, assessments identified with an overall disposition of report founded have fluctuated between 17% and 20% over the past 5 years. CY 2004 and CY 2005 show an increase in assessments where no overall finding is entered into Trails. Data presented in this report reflects what was entered into Trails as of January 2006, so there are still a number of assessments from CY 2004 with no overall disposition entered and 15% of CY 2005 assessments have not received an overall disposition. Since Trails does not require an overall disposition be entered until the case is closed, late data entry appears to be an issue. Also, while Trails was to require that the specific allegations receive a disposition, during the course of this project it was discovered that Trails is not, in fact, enforcing this rule. Therefore, there are numerous allegations without any disposition.

Chart 10 (Page 14) shows variance in overall disposition of assessments during CY 2005 by county size. As of January 2006, statewide 15% of assessments without an overall disposition entered into Trails. Colorado's Middle Sized Counties appear to have a slightly smaller occurrence of this trend. It also appears that the Middle Sized Counties in Colorado tend to give an overall disposition of report inconclusive more often than the Ten Large and Balance of State counties.

In order to determine if variation in overall dispositions occurs across the various county sizes, Chart 10 (Page 14) displayed the overall dispositions of referrals accepted for assessment during CY 2006. The trends shown in Chart 11 (Page 14) highlight that the overall disposition the ten largest counties have entered into Trails vary greatly across county and may indicate that the overall dispositions are used inconsistently across counties.

When comparing the overall dispositions selected by the Ten Large Counties, there is a clear difference in the percent of assessments that are founded. For example, El Paso County selected Founded in 13.6% of their assessments whereas Adams County selected Founded in approximately 30% of assessments.

Chart 10: Overall Dispositions of Referrals Accepted for Assessment CY 2006 Statewide by County Size

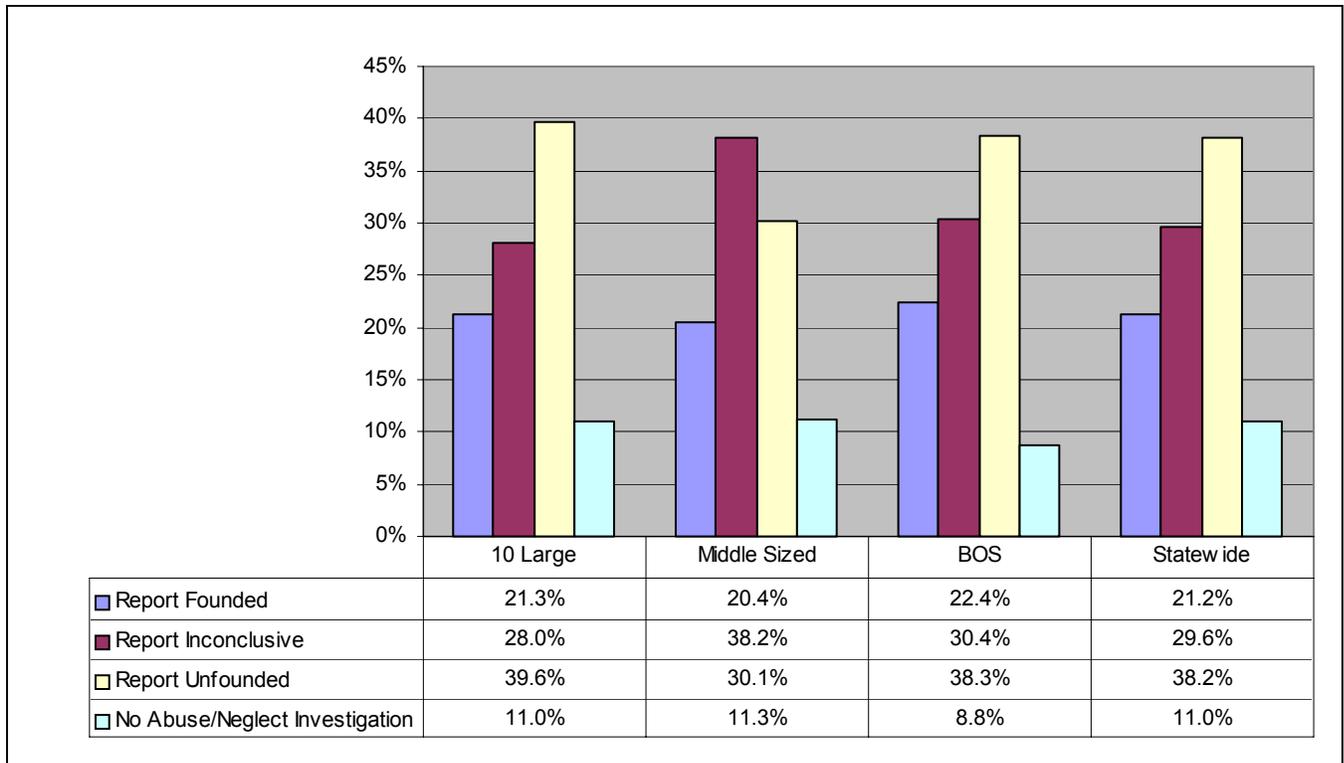
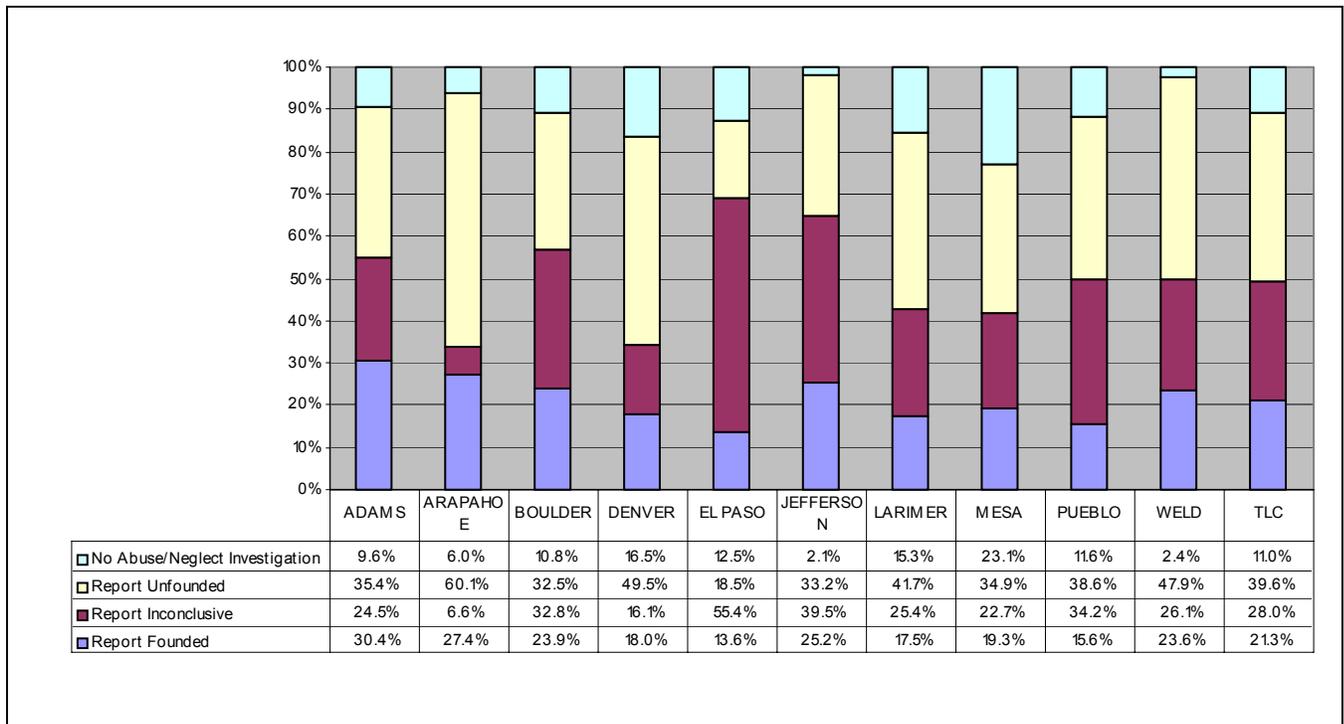


Chart 11: A Comparison of Colorado's Ten Large Counties Overall Dispositions of Assessments CY 2006



When conducting in home quality assurance reviews in several counties, staff from the ARD found that workers and supervisors in some counties are confused about when to use Unfounded vs. Inconclusive. During an in home review in one of Colorado's Ten Large counties, it was found that workers were using the overall disposition of inconclusive when the report seemed to be false or yielded no child protection concerns and unfounded when the assessment yielded a concern for abuse/neglect but lack of evidence to support the finding. This conflicts with how many of the other ten large counties interpret the overall dispositions of unfounded vs. inconclusive. It seems that there is no clear understanding of what the overall dispositions mean at this time.

An important finding in this analysis is the variance in the overall dispositions of Report Inconclusive and Report Unfounded. As Chart 11 (above) shows, Arapahoe County had 6% of assessments with an overall disposition of Report Inconclusive and 60% of Reports Unfounded compared to El Paso County with 55.4% Report Inconclusive and 18.5% Report Unfounded. The remaining counties in the TLC show a similar if somewhat smaller variance in the use of Report Inconclusive versus Report Unfounded.

In summary, counties do not show consistent trends in overall dispositions. As this project continues, there are a number of issues to explore. First, as definitions of Report Inconclusive and Report Unfounded do not exist at Volume VII 7.202.52 (shown below) it would be important to define these dispositions and ensure that they are

Volume VII Citation

7.202.52 Investigation Requirement [Rev. eff. 10/1/04]

N. Upon completion of an investigation, the county department shall consider a report confirmed if there is a preponderance of evidence to support that abuse occurred.

understood consistently across the counties. If not, this could explain the variation found in Trails. Second, are differences in the data truly reflective of different abuse/neglect situations in the assessments counties are completing or are the differences due to variance in the use of the response options based on county specific philosophy and practice? These issues are critical to assessing the validity of the data currently captured in Trails. In addition, this is an area critical for the training of workers. For example, the Kempe Center currently offers training on Consistency in Child Protection. This training walks participants through various case scenarios, asking them to arrive at an overall disposition. The participants then discuss their decisions as a group. During this shared experienced, it is hoped that workers can increase their consistency in using these categories. However, without definitions for Report Inconclusive and Report Unfounded, there is no reference for a starting point or for workers to refer to once back in the field. As such, it is difficult to increase consistency when there is a lack of definitions for use.

Table 3: Number of Assessments with an Overall Disposition of Founded Entered into Trails

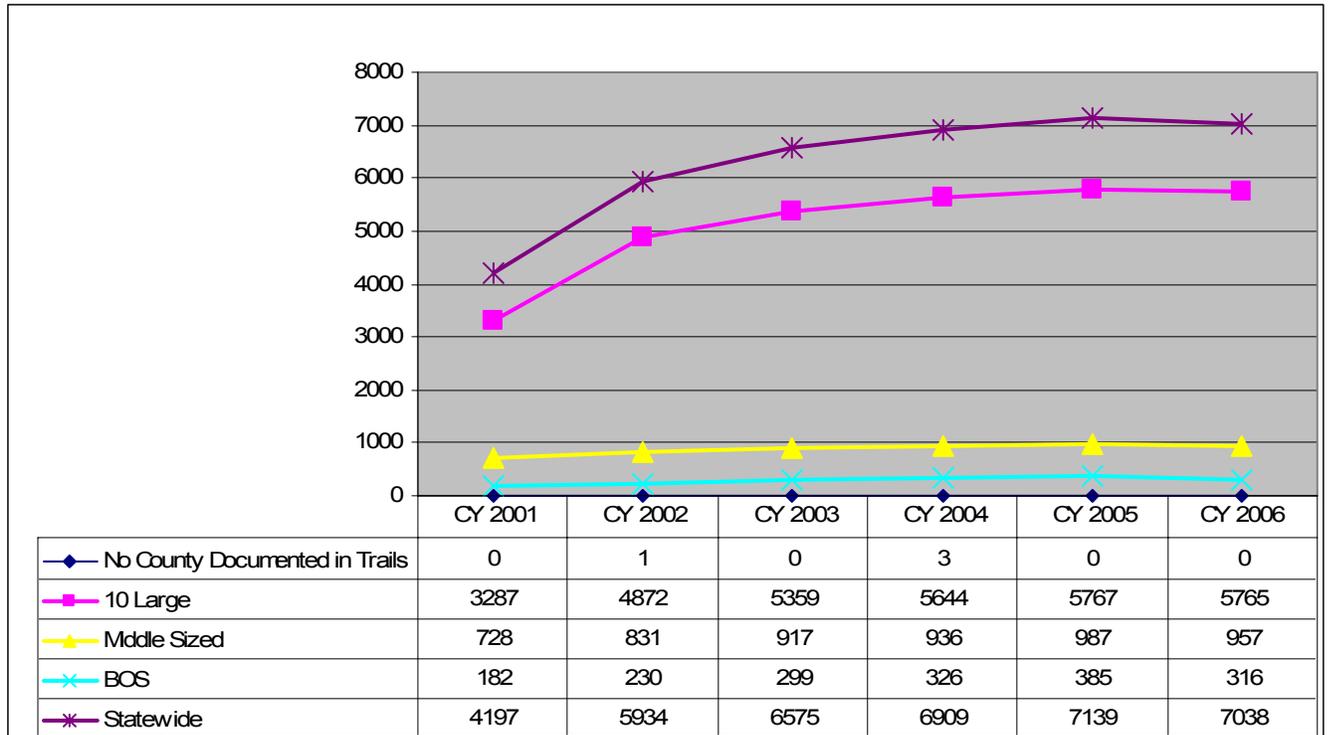
Number of Assessments with an Overall Disposition of Founded Entered into Trails	
CY 2001	4197
CY 2002	5934
CY 2003	6575
CY 2004	6909
CY 2005	7139
CY 2006	7038

Founded Assessments

In Trails an overall disposition is recorded for the assessment and for each individual allegation that is associated with the referral/assessment. If there is a preponderance of evidence to support that abuse or neglect occurred, the allegation level disposition and overall disposition should be Founded for abuse/neglect.

The information presented in Table 3 show the number of assessments founded for abuse or neglect. The information provided is not the number of victims, as each assessment founded for abuse or neglect may have multiple victims. It is interesting to note that, while the number of referrals accepted for assessment has remained relatively stable over the past five years, the number of assessments with an overall disposition of Founded has

Chart 12: Number of Assessments Founded for Abuse or Neglect CY 2001 – CY 2006



increased by approximately 50% from 2001 to 2006. Thus, county departments are finding a preponderance of evidence in a much higher percentage of assessments than previously. .

Chart 12 (above) shows that statewide the number of assessments founded for abuse or neglect steadily increased from CY 2001 to CY 2005. (CY 2005 numbers decline slightly, however this may be due to late data entry and the fact that the data were extracted in January of 2006) This trend also appears to be true across the various sized counties (Ten Large, Middle Sized, and Balance of State).

Table 4 below provides the number of assessments founded for abuse or neglect for the Ten Large Counties. An increase in the number of founded assessments between CY 2001-CY 2006 has not been a consistent trend upward for all counties. Adams, Arapahoe, Jefferson, Larimer, Mesa, and Weld have seen a gradual increase in the number of founded assessments while Boulder, Denver, El Paso, and Pueblo's trends do not show such an increase. Between CY 2003 and CY 2004, El Paso County had nearly a 20% decrease in the number of assess-

Table 4: The Number of Assessments Founded for Abuse or Neglect CY 2001-CY 2006 TLC

The Number of Assessments Founded for Abuse or Neglect CY 2001-CY 2006 Colorado's Ten Large Counties						
	CY 2001	CY 2002	CY 2003	CY 2004	CY 2005	CY 2006
ADAMS	402	763	994	1055	949	896
ARAPAHOE	526	664	710	887	954	1008
BOULDER	321	497	485	462	443	425
DENVER	505	782	733	703	726	785
EL PASO	403	577	696	600	550	556
JEFFERSON	392	574	721	801	820	706
LARIMER	224	304	300	340	440	565
MESA	154	198	184	202	281	260
PUEBLO	189	257	268	250	277	210
WELD	171	256	268	344	327	354

Volume VII Citation

7.202.6 Requirements Concerning County Entry of Confirmed Reports of Child Abuse and Neglect Into the State Automated System [Rev. eff. 2/1/06]

- F. Upon confirmation of the allegation(s) of abuse, neglect, or sexual abuse, the county department shall use the following definitions when determining the severity of the incidents:
1. Abuse:
 - Minor – Excessive or inappropriate force used resulting in a superficial injury;
 - Medium – Excessive or inappropriate force used resulting in an injury, which may require medical attention;
 - Severe – Excessive or inappropriate force used resulting in a serious injury, which requires medical attention or hospitalization;
 - Fatal – Excessive or inappropriate force used resulting in a child's death.
 2. Neglect:
 - Minor – Physical or emotional needs of child are marginally or inconsistently met, but little or no impact on the child's functioning;
 - Medium – Physical or emotional needs of child are inadequately met resulting in some impairment in the child's functioning;
 - Severe – Physical or emotional needs of child are not met resulting in serious injury or illness;
 - Fatal – Physical or emotional needs of child are not met resulting in death.
 3. Sexual Abuse:
 - Severity of sexual abuse should be determined based upon the type of contact, duration of contact, and the emotional impact upon the child

Volume VII Citation

7.202.602 Definitions Applicable to Confirmed Reports of Abuse and Neglect Entered into the State Department's Automated System [Rev. eff. 2/6/04]

In addition to the definitions set forth in Section 7.202.3, the following definitions are applicable to the submission of confirmed reports of abuse and neglect by the county department to the State Department as prescribed herein:

- A. "Severity level" means the assessment of the harm to the child victim of the act of abuse or neglect as minor, medium, severe, or fatal as defined in these rules. Upon confirmation of the allegation(s) of abuse, neglect, or sexual abuse, the county department shall use the following definitions when determining the severity of the incidents:
 1. Physical Abuse

(Continued on page 18)

(Continued from page 17)

“Minor physical abuse” means excessive or inappropriate force used resulting in a superficial injury;
 “Medium physical abuse” means excessive or inappropriate forces used resulting in an injury that may require medical attention;
 “Severe physical abuse” means excessive or inappropriate force used resulting in a serious injury that requires medical attention or hospitalization;
 “Fatal physical abuse” means excessive or inappropriate force used resulting in a child’s death.

2. Neglect

“Minor neglect” means the physical or emotional needs of the child are marginally or inconsistently met, but there is little or no impact on the child’s functioning;
 “Medium neglect” means the physical or emotional needs of the child are inadequately met resulting in some impairment in the child’s functioning;
 “Severe neglect” means the physical or emotional needs of the child are not met resulting in serious injury or illness;
 “Fatal neglect” means that the physical or emotional needs of the child are not met resulting in death.

3. Sexual Abuse

Severity of sexual abuse is to be determined based upon the type of contact, duration of contact, and the emotional impact upon the child.

ments founded for abuse or neglect compared to Arapahoe County and Larimer County where the number of founded assessments increased by 41% and 88% respectively.

Severity Levels of Founded Assessments

Upon making the decision to found an allegation, workers are required to enter a severity level for each specific allegation. Volume VII at 7.202.6 and 7.202.602 (shown on Page 17 and above) provides the following guidelines regarding severity levels for confirmed reports of child abuse and neglect.

In Trails, the severity level is allegation specific. Therefore, the analyses of Trails data presented in this paper selected the highest severity level associated with any founded allegation within the same assessment and associated this highest severity level with the overall disposition. (For example, if there were 4 allegations founded as a part of the assessment; two minor, one severe and one moderate, in this report, the overall disposition will be rated as severe.) Because there are known problems with severity level data related to specific allegations prior to CY 2003, CY 2001 and CY 2002 data were omitted.

Chart 13 (Page 19) shows the statewide trends in the severity levels of founded assessments, which have remained relatively constant between CY 2003 – CY 2006. Assessments founded with a severity level of minor have increased 3% since CY 2003, while those assessments founded with a severity level of medium have fluctuated 1% since CY 2003. Assessments founded with a severity level of Severe have stayed between 9%-10% and those with a severity level of Fatal have been less than 1% since CY 2003. The frequency of when the severity level is missing in Trails has decreased since CY 2003, now sitting at a low of .9%.

Thus, for approximately half (47% in CY 2006) of the Founded Abuse/Neglect allegations across the state, the severity level of the abuse/neglect has been minor. Reflecting back to the definitions provided by Volume VII, this means that there have only been superficial injuries in the physical abuse cases and little or no impact on the

Chart 13: Statewide Trends in the Severity of Assessments Founded for Abuse/Neglect

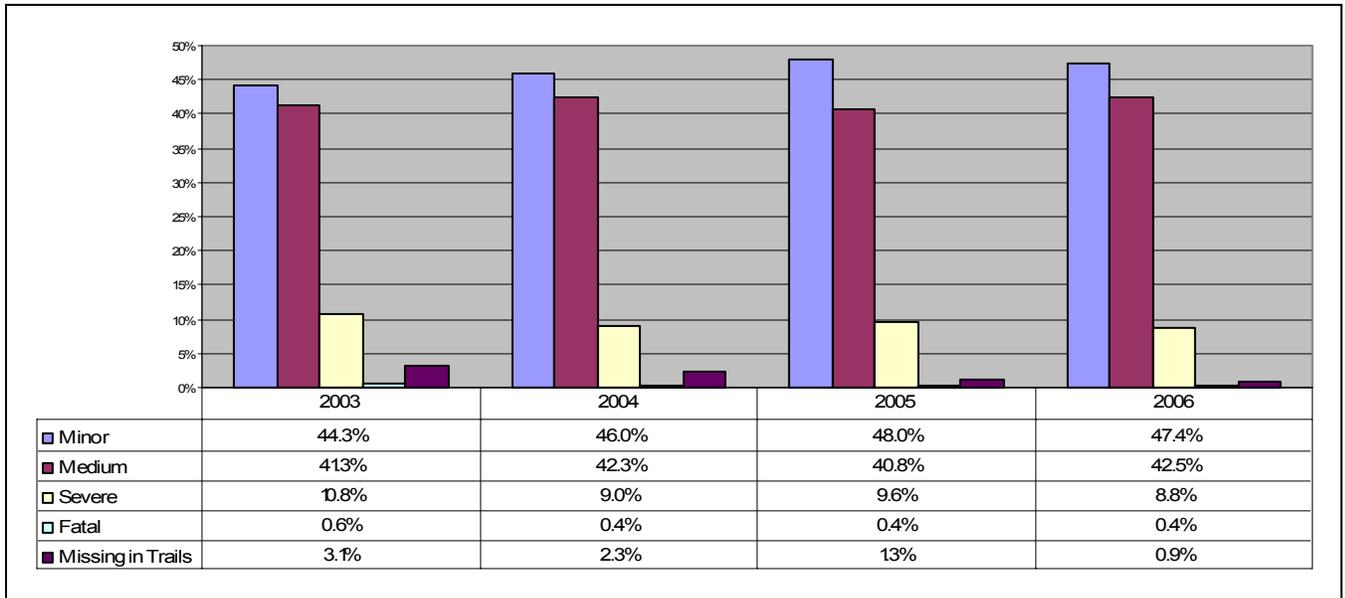
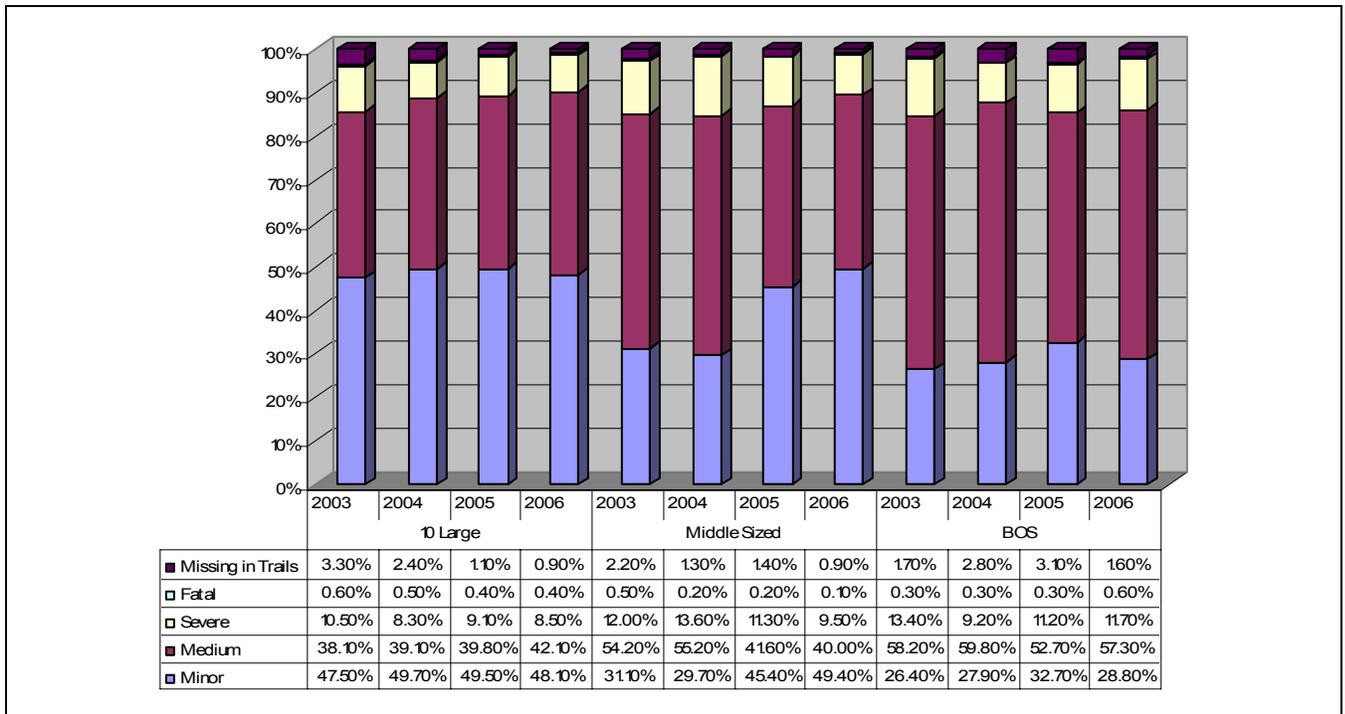


Chart 14: A Comparison of Statewide Trends in the Severity of Assessments Founded for Abuse/Neglect by County Size CY 2003—CY 2006



child's functioning in the neglect cases. Additionally, another 42% of the Founded allegations were given a severity rating of medium, meaning that physical abuse resulted in injury that may require medical attention and neglect resulted in some impairment in the child's functioning. This leaves a relatively small percent (approximately 10%) of children where the child welfare system found severe abuse or neglect. Another positive sign is that the percent of Founded abuse/neglect allegations involving fatalities has declined 50% over the past three years (from .6% in CY 2003 to .3% in CY 2005). Overall, this data reflects that the majority of the children being served by Colorado's child welfare system are the victims of minor to medium abuse and/or neglect.

Chart 14 (Page 19) shows the trends in the severity of assessments founded for abuse or neglect by county size. It is interesting to see the direct correlation between county size and severity of founded assessments. Specifically, the smaller the county size, the higher the percent of medium and severe founded assessments. During CY 2005, the Ten Large counties show that 48% of founded assessments were minor compared to 49% of the Middle Sized counties and 28% of the Balance of State counties founded assessments. The Ten Large counties show 42% of their founded assessments were of medium severity compared to 40% of the Middle Sized counties founded assessments and 57% of the Balance of State Counties founded assessments. It could be concluded from this information that the severity of abuse in the rural areas is much worse than what the urban areas are finding. The other potential interpretation is that counties are applying different standards across these terms resulting in the picture described, even though there may be no true differences between the severity levels of their founded assessments. This will be a critical component to explore further throughout the collaborative inquiry process.

To break down this information even further, Chart 15 (Page 19) shows the severity levels for founded assessments during CY 2006 for the Ten Large counties. As with the other information presented in this paper, the severity levels of founded assessments varies greatly across the Ten Large Counties. The data show that Denver, El Paso, and Larimer counties have identified higher severity levels of founded assessments compared to the other Ten Large counties. Specifically, Denver (14%), El Paso (12%) and Larimer (18.4%) have identified that a significant amount of their founded assessments have a Severe severity level meaning that the injuries children incurred were severe enough to require hospitalization and/or neglect resulted in injury. Adams County, on the

Chart 15: A Comparison of Colorado's Ten Large Counties Severity Levels of Assessments Founded for Abuse/Neglect CY 2006

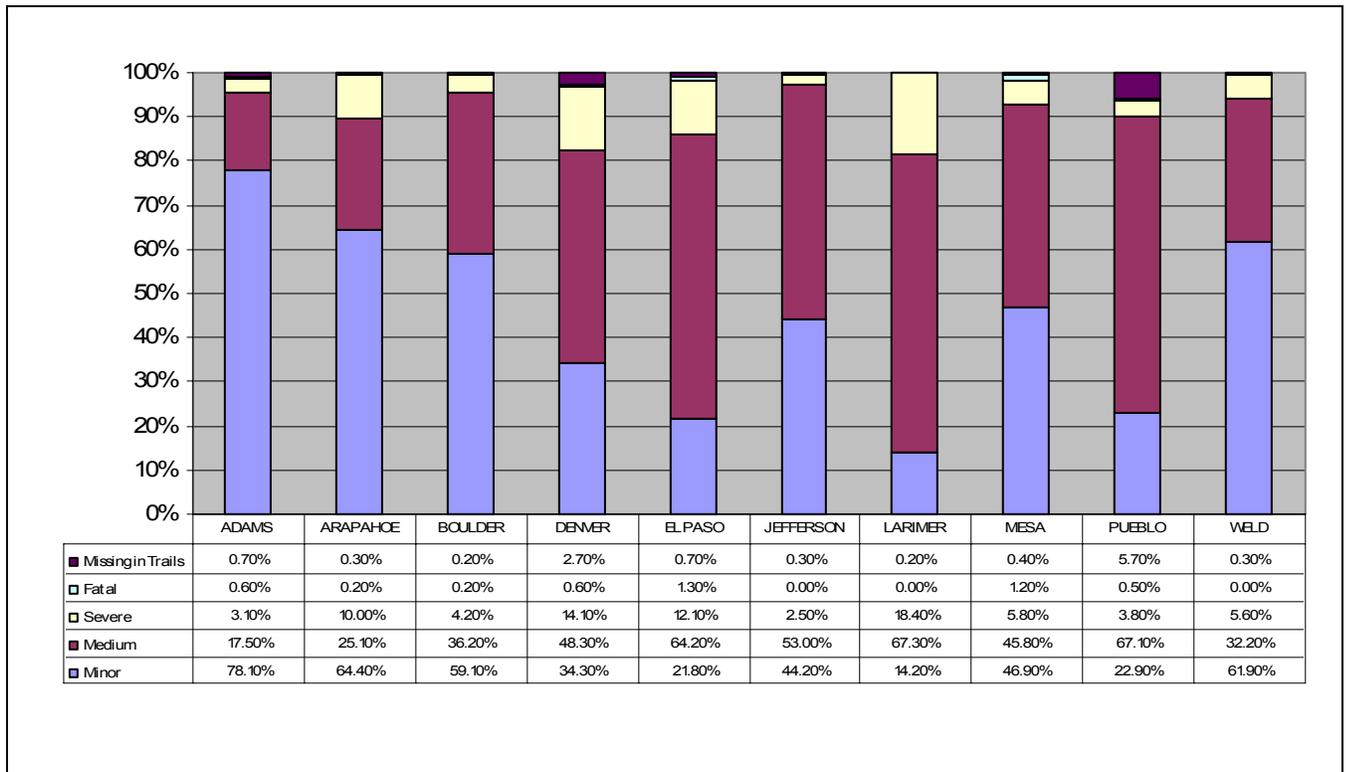
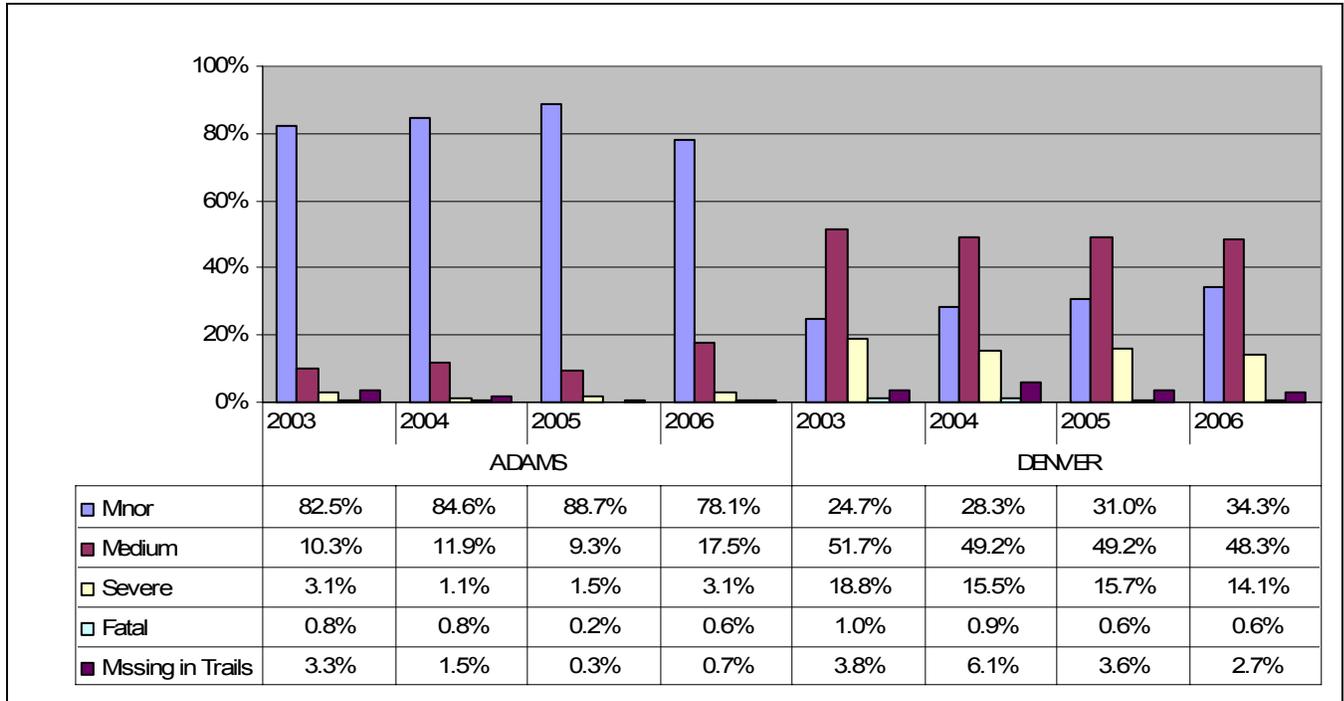


Chart 16: A Comparison of Two Metro Counties Trends of Severity Levels of Assessments Founded for Abuse/Neglect CY 2003-CY 2006

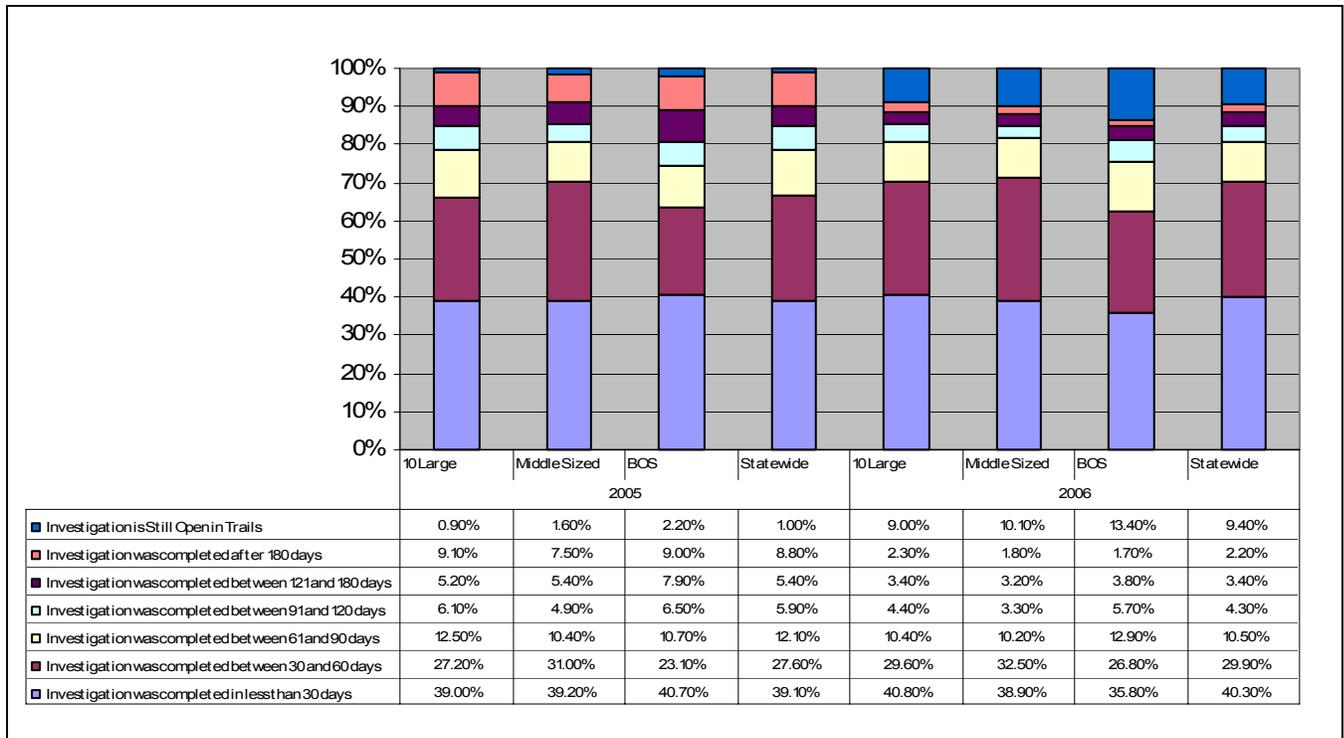


Volume VII Citation

7.202.55 Conclusion of Investigation [Rev. eff. 1/1/04]

- A. An investigation shall be completed within 30 calendar days of the date the investigation/assessment was assigned, unless there are circumstances, which have prevented this from occurring. Such circumstances shall be documented in the case record.
- B. Upon completion of an investigation, the county department shall report the outcome of the investigation on the Department's automated reporting system.
- C. Services provided beyond 60 calendar days of the receipt of the report shall be open for services based on either court involvement or the family's agreement to accept services. Regardless of the outcome of the investigation and as allowable by law, the county department shall notify:
1. The involved child's family of the outcome of the investigation;
 2. The person alleged to be responsible for the abuse or neglect of the outcome of the investigation; and,
 3. Where applicable, its local licensing unit, the director or administrator of the facility, the agency with licensing or certifying authority and the State Department of Human Services' Division of Child Welfare and Division of Child Care, if the abuse or neglect investigation involved a state-licensed or county-certified facility.

Chart 17: Timeliness of Assessments Statewide CY 2005 and CY 2006



other hand has identified 78% of all founded assessments as being minor in severity and only 3.1% of their founded assessments were identified with a severity level of severe indicating that most of Adams County's founded assessments during CY 2006 involved superficial injuries and in the situation of neglect, children's needs were inconsistently met but the neglect did not impact the child's functioning. In the middle of this continuum appears to be Pueblo County, where 67% of all Founded Assessments received a severity rating of medium. Once again, either severity levels are vastly different across counties, or child welfare professionals across the counties are not using the defined severity levels in a valid and consistent manner. As the overall validity of this data is directly related to its usefulness, this area deserves greater research.

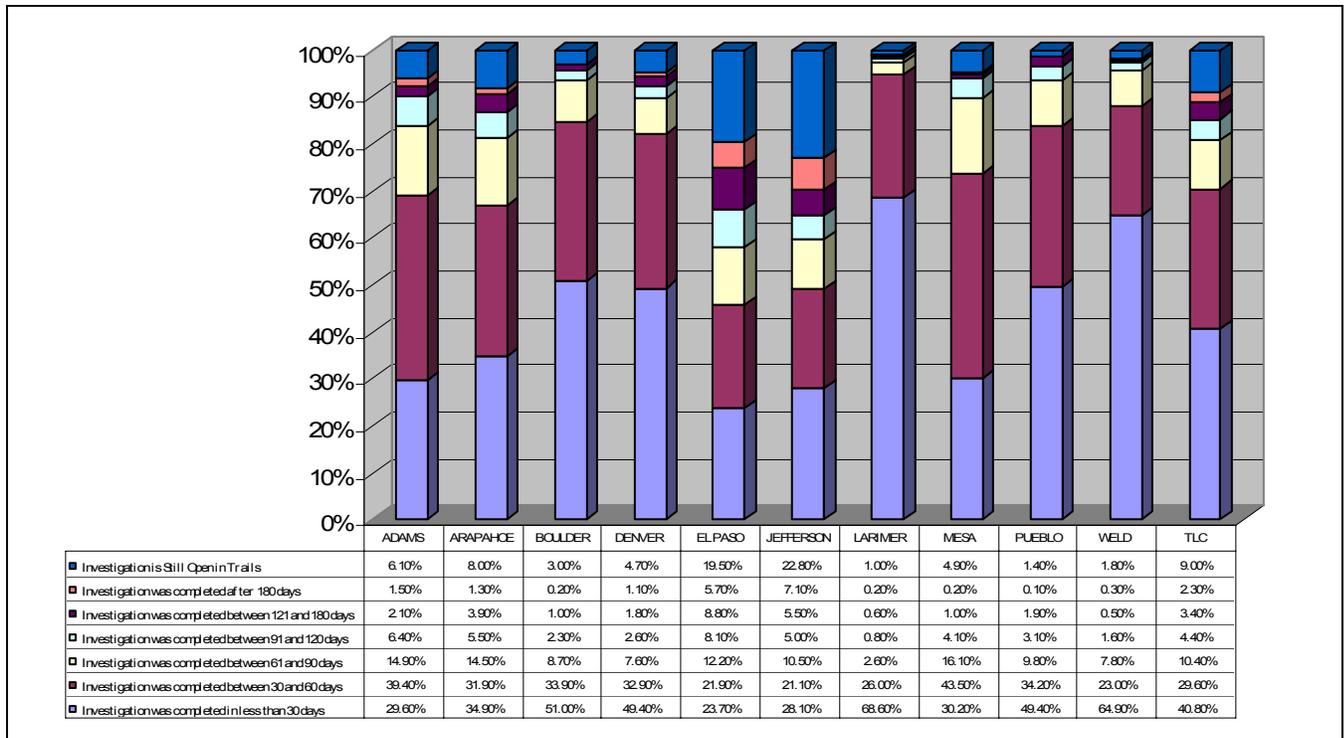
In order to compare severity levels further, Chart 16 (Page 21) compares Adams County and Denver County trends in the severity levels of founded abuse/neglect assessments as identified in Trails. Between CY 2003 and CY 2006 Denver County saw a 10% increase in assessments founded for abuse/neglect with a minor severity level. Adams County, on the other hand, saw a 6% increase between 2003 and 2005 before seeing a 10% decrease from 2005 to 2006. It appears that most of these moved to a rating of Medium, as it rose from 9.3% in 2005 to 17.5% in 2006. This compares to Denver County who identified a Medium severity level in 48.3% of founded assessments in 2006. These was also an 11% difference in the use of the Sever rating, with Adams identifying 3.1% of founded allegations at a Severe level while Denver selected Sever in 14.1% of founded allegations. This leads to the questions: Is there consistency in the use of severity levels between counties? Are founded assessments truly much more severe in Denver County compared to neighboring Adams County?

Completion of Assessments

Volume 7 provides the following rule for timeliness of assessments.

Chart 17 (below) shows the length of time assessments were open in Trails for CY 2005 and CY 2006 across the state. When interpreting this information it is important to remember that the data were extracted from Trails in March 2007, relatively close to the end of CY 2006.

Chart 18: Timeliness of CY 2006 Assessments Ten Large Counties



The Statewide trends for CY 2005 and CY 2006 have remained relatively consistent over the past 2 years, with 39% to 40% of assessments closing within 30 days statewide. There was a 4% increase in the percentage of assessments closing between 30-60 days, per Volume VII requirements, between CY 2005 and CY 2006 Statewide.

The Ten Large Counties and Middle Sized Counties have seen a consistent trend of 38% to 40% of assessments closing within 30 days while the Balance of State Counties had a 3% increase. During this same time, the percent of assessments closed within the various timeframes remained relatively consistent. However, as there was still a large percent of assessments still open for CY 2006, this trend may change as these assessments close.

Chart 18 (Page 23) compares the Ten Large Counties timeliness of assessments during CY 2006. In addition, this information is comparing the referral date with the date entered into Trails when the supervisor approves the closure of the assessment.

Once again, Chart 18 (above) shows great variance across the Ten Large Counties in the time it is taking to complete assessments. For example, the range of compliance with the initial 30 day requirement goes from a low of 24% (El Paso) to a high of 69% (Larimer). Given that, with sufficient cause, it is permissible to take 60 days to close an assessment, one could also look at this timeframe. Doing so shows an even greater variance, with a low of 45% (El Paso) to a high of 94% (Larimer). This variance also provides a picture related to how often counties are meeting Volume VII requirements. This information could be used to identify which counties may be struggling with timely data entry into Trails.

Table 5 shows the percent of CY 2006 assessments closed in Trails within the Volume VII requirements in the Ten Large Counties and Statewide. Statewide, 68.2% of assessments were closed in Trails within 60 days. There is a significant range in the timeliness of assessment closure across the Ten Large Counties, ranging from 45.6% (El Paso) to 94.6% (Larimer).

In discussions that have occurred to date, stakeholders have suggested that completing and closing assessments

timely is hampered by high caseloads, staff turnover, and the intensity of the current child welfare population coming to the attention of county departments.

Table 6 shows the counties with a high percentage of CY 2005 assessments that remained open in Trails as of March 2007. This information is provided as an example of the potential that Trails data has to show where Volume VII rules are not followed. As of March 2007 (over 1 year after the end of CY 2005), there were a handful of counties in Colorado (as shown in Table 6) where a significant percentage of CY 2005 assessments had not been closed in Trails. This trend is not occurring consistently across the state. As of March 2007, 38 counties had closed all CY 2005 assessments in Trails and many more counties had less than 1% of CY 2005 assessments that still remained open in Trails.

Table 5: The Percent of Closed Assessments During CY 2006 that Met Volume VII Requirements

The Percent of Referrals Accepted for Assessment during CY 2006 that Met Volume VII requirement			
	Investigation was completed in less than 30 days	Investigation was completed between 30 and 60 days	Assessment was Completed within The VII Requirements
EL PASO	23.70%	21.90%	45.60%
JEFFERSON	28.10%	21.10%	49.20%
ARAPAHOE	34.90%	31.90%	66.80%
ADAMS	29.60%	39.40%	69.00%
MESA	30.20%	43.50%	73.70%
DENVER	49.40%	32.90%	82.30%
PUEBLO	49.40%	34.20%	83.60%
BOULDER	51.00%	33.90%	84.90%
WELD	64.90%	23.00%	87.90%
LARIMER	68.60%	26.00%	94.60%

Table 6: The Percent of Referrals Accepted for Assessment during CY 2005 that Remained Open as of March 2007

The Percent of Referrals Accepted for Assessment During CY 2006 that Remained Open as of March 2007	
HUERFANO	23.90%
DOLORES	22.20%
COSTILLA	20.00%
CHEYENNE	9.10%
GILPIN	7.50%
MONTROSE	6.50%
BROOMFIELD	6.10%
ROUTT	5.70%
ELBERT	5.40%
LA PLATA	4.60%
MONTEZUMA	2.70%

Recommendations

A Renewed Commitment to Understand the Quality of Information in Trails is Necessary

The information (data) that is extracted from Trails at any given time should accurately reflect the experience of children and families served through our child welfare system. It may be helpful to conduct a study to explore the extent to which Trails reflects the happenings in the child welfare case. Before beginning any rigorous outcome studies, an assessment of the quality of information available in all areas of Trails is needed to better understand the potential the Trails database provides for future outcome studies. A process for ensuring accountability for accurate and timely Trails data entry should also be developed to include several entities within the Colorado Department of Human Services as well as county child welfare staff. Based on the information presented in this study, it does not appear that data is being entered in a particularly timely and/or consistent manner. It is difficult to determine if the variance between counties is related to county practice, county specific policies, county use of the Trails system, or true differences between county child welfare populations.

The Validity of Trails Data is Unknown. Further Study Related to the Validity of Trails Data is Necessary.

At this time, it is unknown if Trails reflects the experience of children served by our child welfare system. Until the question of validity can be better answered, the trends provided in this paper and other studies completed with data from Trails should not be used to summarize that the current system is “not working” or “working”.

To improve the validity of Trails data, clear definitions of specific Trails pick list fields may be necessary. Lack of specific definition of each Trails pick list value is problematic. An example related to this paper is identified when analyzing the overall dispositions of assessments. There is great county variance in the use of Inconclusive as opposed to Unfounded for an overall disposition of an assessment. There appears to be similar issues with Response Times and Severity Level of Founded assessments. Providing clear definitions to these picklist selections will better capture the essence of the child welfare experience for children that we serve.

The Annie E. Casey Foundation, through the Family to Family Initiative publication titled The Need for Self-Evaluation: Using Data to Guide Policy and Practice, articulated this point well: “One of the major causes of poor data quality is the lack of uniform definitions for the fields of information contained on a system and inconsistencies in usage.” They further describe that, “If there is to be good data for self-evaluation, a concerted effort must take place to establish a data model in which key terms have been defined uniformly and systems users within and across localities come to consensus with regard to data definition and usage.” Thus, they emphasize the creation of a core data model that clearly defines key terms to be used in outcome or program evaluation efforts.

At this time, reporting statewide aggregate data may not reflect true child welfare trends due to the variance in county use of Trails and the variance between county's child welfare caseloads. Further exploration should be conducted to determine whether county characteristics are truly different or whether counties are using Trails inconsistently. When providing Trails data to stakeholders, legislators, etc. it is important to provide both State-wide and County specific information, since statewide data does not reflect the discrepancies evident in county specific data.

County Application of Child Welfare Program Policies As Guided by Volume VII Should Be Monitored.

The Trails application should not guide policy or practice. Trails data should reflect what child welfare practice looks like as guided by program policy, rules and guidelines. Trails has the capacity to accurately reflect policy and practice in Colorado if it is used consistently by caseworkers in all locales. If the Trails application is not capable of providing an accurate picture of what child welfare practice is, then it needs to be modified to accurately reflect the experience for children as they move through the system. When changes are made to child welfare rules and policies, this process should include any necessary changes to the Trails system, as well as reporting mechanisms to monitor Trails data to ensure the policies and changes are being followed. Otherwise, it will not be possible to determine if the changes have truly improved child welfare practice in Colorado.

With the county administered system in Colorado, such an effort is even more critical. As displayed throughout this paper, to date there is wide variation in the data being collected across the counties. While some variation is to be expected, due to population differences, it is unlikely that the high level of variation seen is due solely to population differences and more likely due to county specific policies, practices, and definitions. If Colorado is to develop the capacity to conduct sound program evaluation and outcome studies at a state level, or across counties, such issues must be resolved, while preserving the county autonomy necessary due to real differences. This may involve highlighting key data areas where stakeholders feel consensus to be more important and easier to achieve (e.g., response time, severity levels, disposition types) while preserving the more practice based autonomy (e.g., services) critical to counties meeting their distinct population's needs.

Conclusions

This very cursory analysis of a few variables related to referral and assessment trends in Colorado over the past several years is only a beginning step in the work that is required to obtain an understanding of the current state of Colorado's referral and assessment process. Based on the qualitative data gathered through the ARD's In-Home Services Review, and supported by the quantitative data captured in Trails and analyzed here, it is apparent that, in regards to referral and assessment processes and data entry, practice varies greatly across counties. Given that consistent application of established policies and rule, as well as data entry, has serious implications for any future outcome studies, as well as current data reporting, there seems to be a need for an increased effort to ensure that Volume VII policies and rule are well defined, understood, and consistently implemented state-wide. With the ARD already being responsible for a large portion of Colorado's Quality Improvement process, and conducting both in-home and out-of-home reviews in all 64 counties, it may be critical for the ARD to continue to gather information (both qualitative and quantitative) regarding the application of policy and rule in practice across the counties. This information, gathered through the ARD review processes and stored in Trails, could then be added to other administrative data captured by Trails in future descriptive and outcome studies. Ultimately, Colorado should continue to strive to ensure that, as the SACWIS system, Trails is capturing data that is valid, reliable, and useful.