



## Utilization of “Reunification Bypass” in Six California Counties

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The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 includes a provision that allows child welfare agencies to deny reunification services to parents in certain circumstances known as “reunification exceptions.” Because state reporting is not required, we know little about when or how often these reunification exceptions are invoked. This study sought to determine the number and nature of parents who meet the reunification exception criteria in California, and to determine whether these characteristics distinguish parents who will not reunify from parents who will. This study examined case files in six California counties of children age 0 to 10 entering care in ‘98-’99 (n=2,314 parents).

The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA) described five allowable conditions for reunification exception:

1. Murder of another child of the parent
2. Voluntary manslaughter of another child of the parent
3. Aided, abetted, etc., murder or manslaughter
4. Felony assault resulting in serious bodily injury
5. Parental rights to a sibling terminated

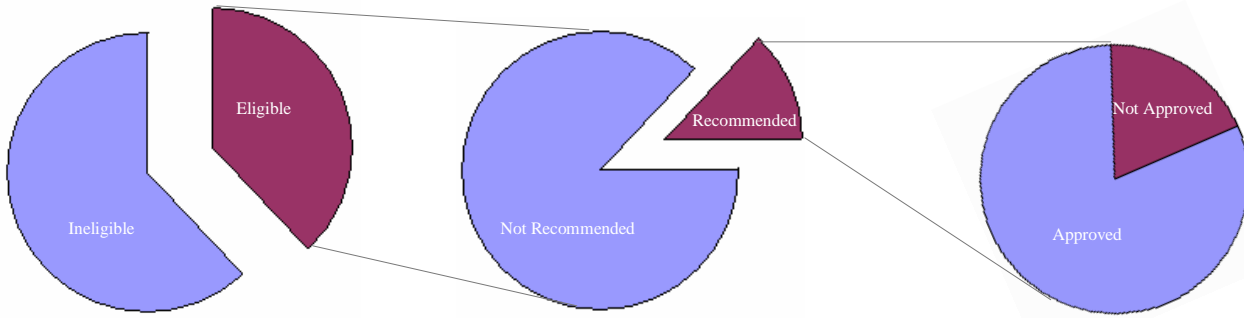
ASFA also allowed states to create their own reunification exceptions. For example, California has 15 conditions for reunification exception.

1. Parents’ whereabouts unknown.
2. Mental disability rendering parent incapable of making use of services.
3. Child or sibling a prior dependent, removed, returned, and re-abused.
4. Parent caused another child’s death.
5. Child under five made dependent due to severe physical or sexual abuse.
6. Child or sibling suffered severe physical or sexual abuse.
7. Sibling did not receive reunification services due to #3, #5 or #6.
8. Child conceived by rape.
9. Child willfully abandoned or endangered.
10. Reunification services terminated for sibling.
11. TPR ordered for sibling.
12. Parent convicted of a violent felony.
13. Chronic history of substance abuse, resisting treatment within the last 3 years, or failing case plan compliance with treatment twice.
14. Parent does not want services, nor the child returned.
15. Parent abducted child or sibling and refuses to disclose whereabouts.

Because these criteria are not based upon research evidence, questions remain. What proportion of cases entering care are eligible for, recommended for, and approved for reunification bypass? What parent characteristics are associated with reunification exception? Are parents who are eligible for reunification exception less likely to reunify?

## Key Findings:

- Among parents whose children (ages 0-10) entered out-of-home care in 1998-1999 in California, 38.2 percent were eligible for a reunification bypass.
- Although there is great variability across counties overall, a very small proportion of cases are recommended to the court for a reunification bypass. Of those cases that are recommended, the majority are approved.

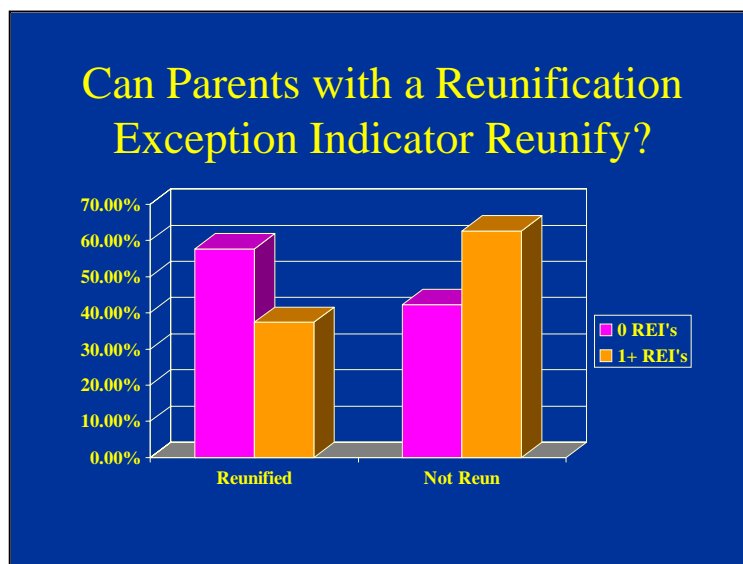


In the 1998-1999 cohort 38 percent of cases were eligible for reunification bypass...

...of those eligible cases, only 13 percent were recommended for reunification bypass...

...of those recommended cases, 81 percent were approved.

- Some of the most common reunification exception eligibility indicators included Chronic History of Substance Abuse (14%), Parent Convicted of a Violent Felony (12%) and Termination of Parental Rights for a Sibling (8%)\*. Eligible parents for whom reunification bypass recommendations were made tended not to be in good health, not to be employed, not to have a strong support network, and to have income from “other” (usually illegal) sources. Parents who had a child removed previously, and those with a child current in the care were more often recommended. And parents without younger children were more often recommended for a bypass.
- Parents with a reunification exception indicator are less likely to reunify than other parents, but a significant proportion of parents eligible for a bypass eventually reunify. More than a third of parents eligible for a bypass reunified.



\* Percentages of the total sample.

**Methods**

This quantitative study examined case files from six California county child welfare agencies, including information on 1,296 parents. A random sample of children ages 0-10 entering care in 1998-1999 was included.

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