



Highlights of [GAO-07-850T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Income Security and Family Support, Committee on Ways and Means, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Despite substantial federal and state investment, states have had difficulty ensuring the safety, well-being, and permanency of children in foster care. Ensuring these outcomes becomes even more difficult in the event of disasters such as Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, when children and families may become displaced across state lines. This testimony discusses (1) the issues that states reported as most important to resolve now and in the future to improve outcomes for children under their supervision (2) initiatives states reported taking to address these issues and how recent law provides support for additional state efforts and (3) federal action taken to assist states' efforts in developing child welfare disaster plans.

This testimony is primarily based on our October 2006 report on state child welfare challenges ([GAO-07-75](#)) and our July 2006 report on state child welfare disaster planning ([GAO-06-944](#)). The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the Congress took action that addressed our July report recommendations. However, HHS disagreed with our October report recommendation to improve awareness of and access to federal social services by modifying the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance or other means. We continue to believe that taking such action would help improve services to children and families.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-850T.

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

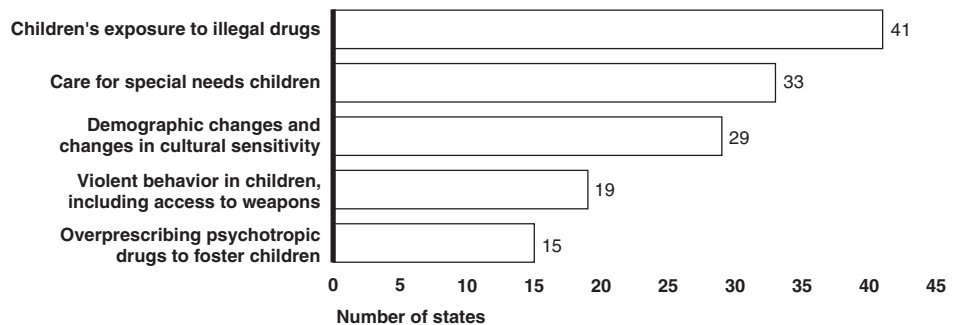
CHILD WELFARE

Additional Federal Action Could Help States Address Challenges in Providing Services to Children and Families

What GAO Found

States reported in our survey that inadequate levels of mental health and substance abuse services, the high average number of child welfare cases per worker, and the difficulty finding homes for children with special needs were the most important challenges to resolve in order to improve outcomes for children under states' care. Child welfare officials cited various reasons these challenges existed in their states, such as a lack of funding for family support services and a lack of caseload standards. Over the next 5 years, major challenges for state child welfare systems were cited as serving a growing population of children with special needs or who have been exposed to illegal drugs, and changing demographic trends that will require greater multicultural sensitivity in providing services to some groups of children and their families.

State-Reported Emerging Issues That Are Likely to Affect Children in the Child Welfare System over the Next 5 Years



Source: GAO analysis of state child welfare survey responses.

States have some initiatives in place to address these challenges, but these initiatives do not always address areas of states' greatest concern. For example, only 4 of 31 states dissatisfied with substance abuse services reported initiatives to improve the level of these services. Similarly, states reported little or no action to address two of the most frequently reported factors underlying the challenge to recruit and retain caseworkers – the administrative burden on caseworkers and effective supervision. Recent law provides additional requirements and funding to help states address these challenges. Some states implemented initiatives under federal demonstration projects, including those to improve substance abuse services and permanent homes for children. However, outcome evaluations of these initiatives have shown mixed results.

Several actions have been taken by HHS and the Congress to better ensure that states are prepared to continue child welfare services for children displaced by disaster. Our earlier work showed that although 29 states, plus Puerto Rico, experienced a federally declared disaster in 2005, only 8 of these states reported having a written child welfare disaster plan. Since that time, HHS has updated its guidance to states and provided technical assistance. In addition, the Congress passed the Child and Family Services Improvement Act of 2006, requiring that states have procedures in place concerning how state child welfare agencies would respond in the event of a disaster. The deadline set by HHS for submission of these plans is June 30, 2007.