

# Foster Care Placement Settings and Permanency Planning

## *Patterns by Child Generation and Ethnicity*



FINDINGS FROM TEXAS

THE URBAN INSTITUTE



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**T**he experiences leading up to Child Protective Services removing a child's from his or her home, and the removal itself, are traumatic. To lessen the potentially negative effects of involvement with Child Protective Services, federal law requires that states consider giving preference to relatives when a child is placed outside the home—under the premise that a child will fare better with relatives than with strangers. But relatives are not always available, and they often face hardships that make them less-than-ideal candidates for foster parents. In these cases, children may be placed in non-relative family foster care, group homes, or institutions.

For immigrant children, involvement with Child Protective Services can be especially traumatic. These children are

### KEY FINDING

*In Texas, only 8 percent of Latin American immigrant children in out-of-home care are living with relatives compared with 20–28 percent of U.S.-born children.*

new to the country, may not speak English, are likely to have different cultural backgrounds, and may lack relative networks in the country. Placements in nonrelative family foster care, group homes, or institutions may be particularly upsetting and difficult for immigrant children.

Additionally, permanency planning decisions for these children are more complex.

This brief focuses on the latest placement settings and case goals for Latin American immigrant children and children of Latin American immigrants compared with Hispanic and non-Hispanic children of U.S.-born parents in the custody of the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) on March 31, 2006. Latin American children in out-of-home care were placed with relatives less often than other children in care, and Latin American children were more often placed in group homes and institutions than other children. Placement in group homes and institutions, however, is a function of age (i.e., older children are more often placed in group homes and institutions than younger children). In addition, fewer Latin American immigrants have case goals associated with relatives—reunification and relative adoption—than other children in care, and more have other case goals, such as long-term foster family care and independent living.

### About the Series

The *Identifying Immigrant Families Involved with Child Welfare Systems* series provides estimates of first- and second-generation immigrant children in out-of-home care and describes the experiences of these children in state child welfare systems. This brief compares four groups of children living in out-of-home care in Texas: Latin American immigrants, Latin American children of immigrants, Hispanic natives, and non-Hispanic natives. Latin American immigrants—often called “the first generation”—( $n = 200$ ) are children born in Mexico, Central or South America, or the Caribbean who have immigrated to the United States. These children are distinguished from Latin American children of immigrants—“the second generation”—( $n = 1,697$ ) who are born in the United States and have at least one parent born in Mexico, Central or South America, or the Caribbean. Nearly 90 percent of the children we identify as Latin American immigrants or children of immigrants are from Mexico or have parents from Mexico. Natives are children with at least one parent born in the United States and no foreign-born parents. We identify Hispanic and non-Hispanic natives ( $n = 6,589$  and  $n = 11,920$ , respectively).<sup>1</sup> We do not identify non-Hispanic immigrants or other children of immigrants because their numbers in the data are too small for reliable analysis.

One key factor to note: we find evidence of underrepresentation in the child welfare system for the two Latin American populations. Latin American immigrants represent approximately 1 percent of all children in care, but they made up 7 percent of all children in Texas in 2005. Similarly, approximately 8 percent of all children in care are Latin American children of immigrants, who made up nearly 20 percent of all children living in Texas in 2005.<sup>2</sup>

Third-generation Hispanic children (children of native-born Hispanics), on the other hand, are *overrepresented* in the child welfare system. While approximately 33 percent of the children in care in Texas are Hispanic natives, they only represent 22 percent of all children in Texas.<sup>3</sup>

While immigrant children are underrepresented in the Texas child welfare system, the number of Latin American

immigrants increased 178 percent from 1980 to 2005, and the number of Latin American children of immigrants increased 240 percent. These increases suggest more Latin American immigrants and immigrants' children will come into contact with Child Protective Services.<sup>4</sup>

### Differences in Placement Settings between Immigrant and Nonimmigrant Children

We identify four basic placement setting types: foster family home—relative, foster family home—nonrelative, group homes or institutions, and other settings. Relative foster care refers to children who are in state custody and are living with relatives. Nonrelative family foster care refers to children who are in state custody and living in a family setting but not with their own relatives. Group homes and institutions can include community-based group homes, campus-style residential facilities, and secure facilities. These settings provide multiple services including mental health, educational, and medical services. The “other” category encompasses a small number of children in preadoptive placements, in jail or hospitals, or in independent living situations, and children who have run away.

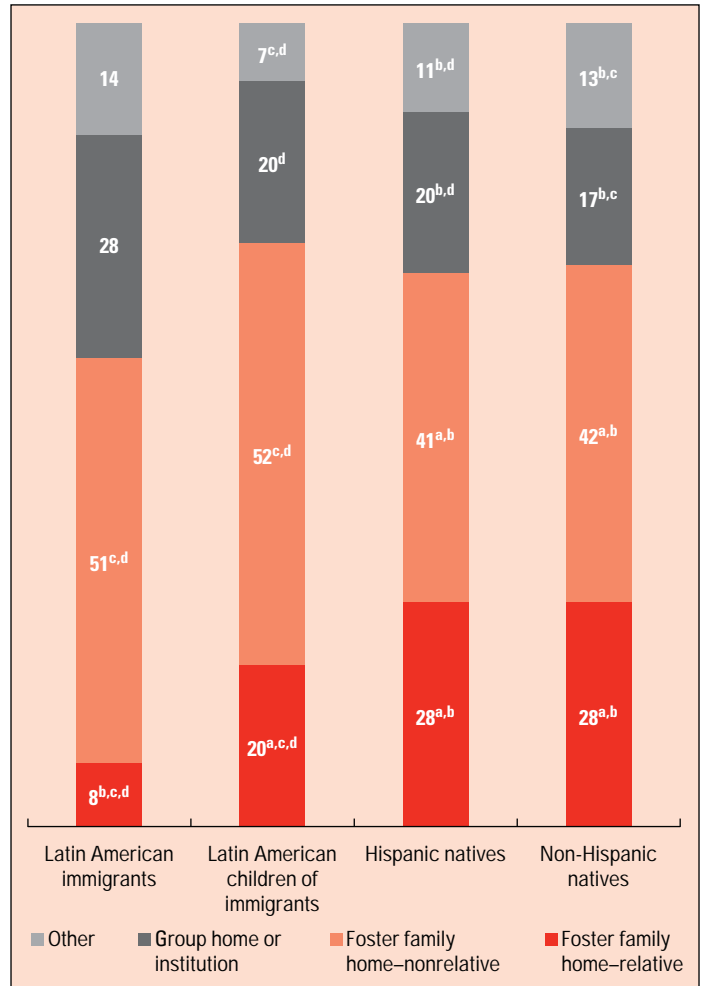
There are clear differences in placement settings between our four groups (figure 1). Nonrelative family foster care was the most predominant placement setting for all children. However, Latin American immigrants were placed with relatives much less frequently than other children in care, and these differences are significant between all groups after controlling for age. Only 8 percent of immigrants in care in March 2006 were living with relatives, compared with 20 percent of children of immigrants and 28 percent of all native children. Latin American children of immigrants were placed with relatives more frequently than immigrant children but less frequently than children of natives.

Latin American immigrants were also placed more frequently in institutions or group homes than were other children. After controlling for age, however, this difference was not significant. This finding suggests that immigrant children may be more likely to be in group homes because they are older—a factor typically associated with placement in group homes and institutions.

### Differences in Case Goals between Immigrant and Nonimmigrant Children

We identify six categories of case goals:<sup>5</sup> reunification, adoption, relative conservatorship, long-term foster family care (DFPS conservatorship), independent living, and other. Reunification occurs when a child leaves out-of-home care to return to the home from which he or she was originally removed. Adoption refers to both relative and nonrelative adoptions. Conservatorship is a term used in Texas for legal custody. A relative conservatorship is one in which a relative receives legal custody of the child. Likewise, in

FIGURE 1. Latest Placement Setting of Texas Children in Out-of-Home Care, March 31, 2006 (percent)



Source: Urban Institute tabulations of Texas child welfare administrative data (March 31, 2006) and Texas birth certificate administrative data (April 1988–2004).

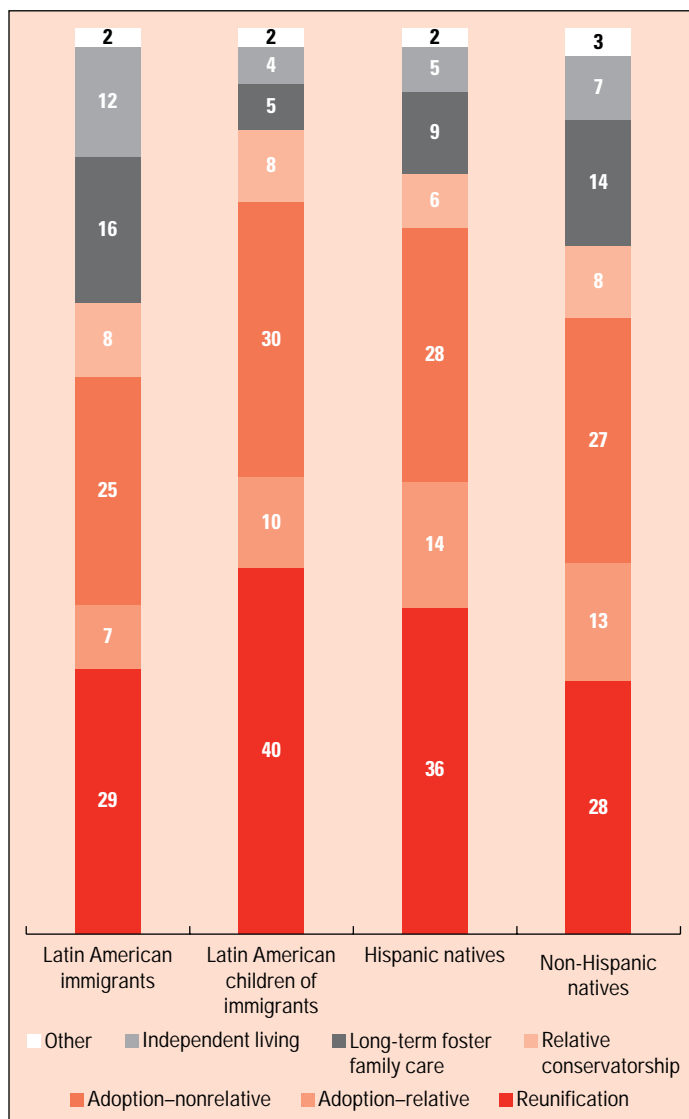
Notes: Estimates do not include children born after December 31, 2004, born outside the United States in a non-Latin American country, or born out of state, and all children not matched with vital statistics records.

- a. Significantly different from Latin American immigrants at the 95% confidence level.
- b. Significantly different from Latin American children of immigrants at the 95% confidence level.
- c. Significantly different from Hispanic natives at the 95% confidence level.
- d. Significantly different from non-Hispanic natives at the 95% confidence level.

long-term foster family care (DFPS conservatorship), DFPS retains legal custody of the child. Independent living is often used for foster children who are approaching age 18 and are not likely to leave the system through adoption or reunification. Independent living typically includes services or programs that prepare young adults to care for themselves (i.e., maintain a job, home, and/or education) once they have left the child welfare system. These programs may include independent living skills, employment training, or housing support. The “other” category encompasses other, rare living situations such as community care.

Figure 2 depicts differences in case goals between the study groups. The most striking differences are between Latin American immigrants and all other children, though non-Hispanic natives have some similar trends in case goals as immigrant children. In general, Latin American immigrants were much less likely than other children to have reunification and relative adoption as case goals. For example, 29 percent of Latin American immigrants had a goal of reunification, compared with 40 percent of Latin American children of immigrants and 36 percent of Hispanic natives. Interestingly, Latin American children of immigrants were

FIGURE 2. Latest Case Goal for Texas Children in Out-of-Home Care, March 31, 2006 (percent)



Source: Urban Institute tabulations of Texas child welfare administrative data (March 31, 2006) and Texas birth certificate administrative data (April 1988–2004).

Notes: Estimates do not include children born after December 31, 2004, born outside the United States in a non-Latin American country, or born out of state, and all children not matched with vital statistics records. Sample sizes were too small in most cases to detect statistically significant differences.

comparable to Hispanic native children. Latin American immigrants also had a goal of adoption less frequently than other children (33 percent of Latin American immigrants versus 40 percent of Latin American children of immigrants and non-Hispanic natives and 42 percent of Hispanic natives). However, most of this difference was attributable to far fewer Latin American immigrants having a goal of relative adoption than other children. Only 7 percent of immigrant children had a goal of relative adoption compared with 10 to 14 percent of other children in care, whereas a comparable percent of immigrants had a goal of nonrelative adoption. Thus, Latin American immigrants in Texas were less likely to have case goals associated with relatives.

Additionally, 12 percent of Latin American immigrants had a goal of independent living—three times higher than Latin American children of immigrants, over twice as high as Hispanic natives, and nearly twice as high as non-Hispanic natives.

Finally, 16 percent of Latin American immigrants had a case goal of long-term family foster care (DFPS conservatorship), which was much higher than other children in care, except non-Hispanic natives (14 percent).

### Possible Reasons for Differences

For placement settings and case goals, we hypothesize that differences are associated with the size of the relative network in the country, legal status, and the child's age.

**Placements.** The low share of Latin American immigrants placed with relatives compared with Latin American children of immigrants might imply that the longer a family has been living in the country, the more relatives are available to serve as foster families.

Another possible reason for differences in placements and case goals is that the Latin American immigrants' families often include undocumented adults. Undocumented adults may be more reluctant to become kinship caregivers, as research shows they are often reluctant to apply for government benefits and services (Holcomb et al. 2003). In 2005, nearly half of Latin American immigrant parents were undocumented.<sup>6</sup>

It may also be the case that relatives in mixed-status families (those including undocumented parents and U.S.-born children) are unwilling to step forward as potential foster parents owing to fears of deportation.

Age is also a factor associated with a child's placement. Older children are more likely to be placed in group homes and institutions than younger children, and Latin American immigrants in foster care are older than other children in care (table 1). After controlling for age of the child we find no statistically significant differences between the number of immigrant children placed in group homes and institutions and other children in care. But significant differences in relative versus nonrelative family foster care placements remain between Latin American immigrants, Latin

**TABLE 1. Characteristics of Texas Children in Out-of-Home Care**  
March 31, 2006 (percent)

	A. Latin American immigrants (n = 200)	B. Latin American children of immigrants (n = 1,697)	C. Hispanic natives (n = 6,589)	D. Non-Hispanic natives (n = 11,920)
<b>Age</b>				
1–5 years	7	32	32	30
6–10 years	20	35	29	28
11–15 years	37	21	24	24
16–18 years	37	12	15	18
<b>Gender</b>				
Female	59	49	49	48
Male	41	51	51	52
<b>Latest removal reason</b>				
Neglect	73	78	84	82
Emotional abuse	4	4	4	4
Physical abuse	27	30	28	29
Sexual abuse	32	16	11	10

*Source:* Urban Institute tabulations of Texas child welfare administrative data (March 31, 2006) and birth certificate administrative data (1988–2004).

*Notes:* Estimates do not include children born after December 31, 2004, born outside the United States in a non-Latin American country, or born out of state, and all children not matched with vital statistics records.

*Significance:* Significant differences assessed at the 95% confidence level. **Age:** 1–5 years: all groups significantly different except B and C; 6–10 years and 16–18 years: all groups significantly different; 11–15 years: all groups significantly different except C and D. **Gender:** all groups significantly different except B and C and B and D. **Latest removal reason:** Neglect: all groups significantly different except A and B; emotional abuse and physical abuse: no groups significantly different; sexual abuse: all groups significantly different except C and D.

American children of immigrants, and children of natives, even after accounting for age.

**Case Goals.** There is also a likely association between having family living in the country and a child’s case goal. For instance, it is not surprising that fewer Latin American children have case goals of family adoption than children of natives. As with placement type, family members are likely unavailable or not in a position to adopt these children. Our finding that Latin American immigrants more frequently have a case goal of long-term family foster care or independent living further illustrates the premise that immigrant children do not have relatives they can turn to when they are removed from their homes.

It is also notable that non-Hispanic natives have similar case goal patterns to Latin American immigrants. This could be because non-Hispanic families are typically smaller than Hispanic families and therefore have fewer relatives that could serve as foster families.<sup>7</sup> This would support the hypothesis that case goals are associated with whether family is available for support.

Additionally, a U.S. state is not empowered to finalize adoptions from another country. In many cases, movement toward adoption would need to occur at the international level. This would also explain why immigrant children have a goal of

adoption less frequently than their peers in the child welfare system.

It is also important to remember that immigrant children are older than other children, making them more likely candidates for independent living programs.

Differences in case goals could also be a function of a child’s removal reason. Latin American immigrants are underrepresented in the child welfare population. Data suggest that when these children are removed from their homes, it is typically for the more serious reason of sexual abuse (see table 1). Children who are brought into care based on sexual abuse might be less frequently reunified than other children and more often have other case goals such as long-term foster family care and independent living than children of natives. For children overall, 33 percent of those removed due to neglect have a goal of reunification, compared with 28 percent of those removed for sexual abuse. Further, among children removed from their homes for neglect, 11 percent and 6 percent, had case goals of long-term foster family care and independent living, respectively, compared with 17 percent and 8 percent of children removed because of sexual abuse.

## Implications

The findings of this study have major policy and practice implications for serving immigrant children in the child welfare system both in terms of placement settings and case goals.

Latin American immigrants are more often placed in group homes and institutions and less often placed with relatives, likely because families are unavailable or the child welfare system cannot legally arrange adoptions. However, federal law promotes the use of relative care whenever possible. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 contained language promoting the use of kinship care when appropriate, and the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 made it clear that Congress viewed kinship care as a potential “planned permanent living arrangement” (42 U.S.C. 675(5)). The prevailing belief in the field is that placement settings should be the least restrictive and most like a family setting as possible (Geen 2003).

If the problem is that relatives are not living in the country, one option would be to offer licensed nonrelative family foster caregivers specialized training tailored toward working with children who speak other languages or have cultural differences. This would help immigrant children deal with the trauma of being removed from their homes and immersed in unfamiliar settings.

Another option is to allow children to be taken to other countries to live with relatives. This has occurred in some states, but it requires special consideration by the courts (Xu 2005). Unfortunately, there is little evidence, if any, on whether this is a good placement option.

For case goals, there are clear implications from our study for Latin American immigrant children. The field supports find-

ing a permanent placement, such as reunification, adoption, or guardianship, for children in out-of-home care. Our findings suggest that while Latin American immigrants have these goals most often, they are still more likely than natives to have goals such as long-term foster family care and independent living. These situations may not be ideal for children who have endured the trauma of coming to a new country and being removed from their homes for abuse or neglect.

## Next Steps

We plan to further examine all reports of abuse, neglect, or removals occurring in Texas between 2002 and 2005. This will allow us to investigate report, substantiation, and removal rates for all child generation and ethnicity categories, as well as placement trajectories within the child welfare system, recidivism rates, and outcomes for children who were removed. Pending data availability, we plan to repeat these analyses in other states and conduct qualitative research to help interpret findings.

## Data and Methodology

We linked Texas vital statistics data from birth certificate records (all births from April 1988 through December 2004) to Texas child welfare administrative data (all children in care of the state as of March 31, 2006). This link with vital statistics data was necessary to determine whether children in out-of-home care had foreign-born parents. With data on parental nativity, we were able to determine whether the children were second-generation immigrants or children of natives. Immigrant children were already identified in the child welfare administrative data.

We use two methods of linking records. The first method uses a probabilistic-matching software, LinkageWiz version 4.1,<sup>8</sup> which allows for exact and phonetic/near matches across a range of numeric and character variables. Once LinkageWiz matched cases, we undertook a second round of linking records based on our review of the LinkageWiz output. Using this output, we established additional linking rules and adjusted the cutoff thresholds to determine appropriately matched cases.

Using LinkageWiz and our matching strategy, we achieved a high match rate between the child welfare administrative data and the vital statistics administrative data—92 percent (child welfare file N = 22,419; matched file n = 20,658). The denominator in the match rate excludes two groups of cases that we were unable to match because they were not in our vital statistics files: (1) children born after 2004 (2,906) and (2) children born out of state (2,376). In developing our matching rules, we took care to exclude as many false positives as possible.

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## Notes

1. If both parents are listed in the vital statistics record but one is missing nativity status, the generation/ethnicity of the child was based on the parent whose information was available.
2. From Urban Institute tabulations of the 2005 Current Population Survey (CPS) Annual Social and Economic Supplement.
3. From Urban Institute tabulations of the 2005 CPS.
4. From Urban Institute tabulations of the 1980 Census Integrated Public Use Microdata Sets and the 2005 CPS.
5. A substantial share of records—24 percent—had missing values for case goal. We examined such key characteristics as age, placement type, and county of removal and found little evidence of systematic bias. Children with missing case goals tended to be slightly younger, more likely to be living in relative foster care or group homes, and removed in counties with larger caseloads than other children in care.
6. From Urban Institute tabulations of the 2005 CPS augmented by assignment of legal status to noncitizens.
7. The average family size of a non-Hispanic family with children under the age of 18 is 3.15, while the average size of a similar Hispanic family is 3.86 (2005 American Community Survey tabulations for Texas; see <http://www.census.gov>).
8. LinkageWiz Software. *LinkageWiz User Manual Version 4.1*, June 2004. Available at <http://www.linkagewiz.com>.

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