

# RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JUVENILE AND FAMILY COURT JUDGES

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## EXPLORING OUTCOMES RELATED TO LEGAL REPRESENTATION FOR PARENTS INVOLVED IN MISSISSIPPI'S JUVENILE DEPENDENCY SYSTEM

The State of Mississippi is currently the only state with no provision for providing counsel to indigent parents in juvenile dependency proceedings. Despite this, a number of Mississippi judicial leaders are interested in having the right to appointed counsel extended to indigent parents. In 2012, after various discussions and trainings, a parent representation pilot program began in Adams, Forrest, Harrison, and Rankin Counties.

This study was a preliminary examination of juvenile dependency case-level outcomes and parental perceptions related to the parent representation program in Mississippi. Case files were reviewed in Forrest and Rankin Counties to obtain case outcomes. Surveys were distributed to parents currently involved in the juvenile dependency system in DeSoto, Harrison, Forrest, and Rankin Counties to obtain experiential perceptions.

### Case File Review

Twenty-one case files were reviewed in Forrest County to examine differences between those parents who had (n = 15) or did not have (n = 6) legal representation. Sixty-nine cases were reviewed in Rankin County to examine differences between those parents who had no legal representation (n = 23), those parents who were represented by an attorney (n = 29), and those parents who met with an attorney, but did not receive formal representation (i.e., advice and counsel) (n = 17).

Each group was compared across several outcome measures: time to attorney appointment, number of shelter hearings, appearance of parents at hearings, child placement at hearings, adjudication hearings, amount of visitation, number of continuances, and number of court-ordered services.

The number of cases coded in Forrest County was too small to analyze using inferential statistics (e.g., whether there is a significant difference between two groups on some outcome measure), so these findings are descriptive. In comparison to mothers in the no attorney group, mothers in the attorney group appeared at a higher percentage of hearings across the life of the case and received more hours of visitation at the adjudication and permanency hearings. Parents in the attorney group had their children placed in foster care less often at the review hearing, stipulated to all allegations less often, received fewer court-ordered services, and had their cases continued more often than parents in the no attorney group.

## Key Findings



- Parents who had an attorney, in comparison to those who did not:
  - stipulated to all allegations less often
  - had their children placed in a foster care less often
  - had a higher number of case continuances
  - generally appeared at a higher percentage of hearings across the case
  - generally expressed more positive opinions about their courtroom experience

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The number of cases in Rankin County was large enough to allow for inferential statistics. There were few significant differences across all of the groups: the likelihood of having a shelter hearing was higher for the attorney group than the no attorney group; there was a higher percentage of children in foster care (as opposed to placed with a relative or parent) at the shelter and adjudication hearings for no attorney group than attorney group; there were more continuances for the advice and counsel group than the no attorney group; and there were more court-ordered services for parents in the attorney group than the no attorney group or the advice and counsel group.

### Parent Surveys

Parents were given a survey that asked them several questions to elicit their perceptions of their courtroom experience.

There were no significant differences between the attorney and no attorney groups on parents' perceptions of their courtroom experience. However, as indicate in Table 1, parents who had an attorney indicated more agreement to several statements.

Although there were few significant differences between groups so far, the preliminary findings indicate that there was a trend toward more positive outcomes when parents had an attorney. When parents were represented by an attorney, they attended court more often, they stipulated to fewer allegations, and their children were placed in foster care less often. In addition, parents who were represented by an attorney believed that they had a greater sense of voice and understood the court process better.

Table 1. Parental Perceptions of Courtroom Experience across Groups <sup>a</sup>				
	No Attorney	Court-Appointed Attorney	Hired Attorney	Hired or Appointed Attorney
The judge treated me with respect	4.66	4.59	4.56	4.58
I had a chance to speak	4.45	4.41	4.00	4.26
I helped make the decisions for my case	3.67	4.17	4.00	4.10
I agreed with the case plan ordered for me	4.33	4.23	4.11	4.19
I understood what happened in court today	4.58	4.59	4.44	4.54
I understand what I am supposed to do next	4.53	4.78	4.67	4.74
My questions were answered	4.26	4.41	4.33	4.38
I agree with the decisions made in court today	4.39	4.28	4.33	4.30

<sup>a</sup>A five point rating scale was used where 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree

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