

# RESEARCH SNAPSHOT

NATIONAL COUNCIL OF JUVENILE AND FAMILY COURT JUDGES

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## ONE FAMILY, ONE JUDGE: EVALUATING A *RESOURCE* GUIDELINES “BEST PRACTICE”

The practice of having judicial continuity across the life of the case (called the one family, one judge [OFOJ] model), is considered a best practice in juvenile and family cases. According the *Resource Guidelines*<sup>2</sup>, the OFOJ model can enhance decision-making by allowing a judicial officer to become familiar with the case, the parties, and the issues that brought them to court. Despite the recommendation of OFOJ as a best practice, there has been little empirical research to support its validity.

Working with the Baltimore City Juvenile Court, a professor from the University of Maryland (UM) School of Social Work, in partnership with the NCJFCJ, assessed how OFOJ may affect case processing and outcomes. Research staff worked with social work students from UM to design and implement a stakeholder survey to identify perceptions of OFOJ and reviewed case files comparing cases both pre- and post-OFOJ implementation. Stakeholder surveys focused on perceptions of the OFOJ model and how it had affected workload, while the case file review focused on outcomes related to timeliness and permanency. Results from the studies are presented in this snapshot.

### *OFOJ and Timeliness*

The first study<sup>3</sup> explored the implementation of the OFOJ model, which showed a trend toward improved timeliness. The study used a pre-post design to test the effectiveness of OFOJ. The study demonstrated that every additional judge on the case increased time to permanency by 31 days.

What does this mean for children? They are spending one additional month in care per judge assigned to their case. Resolving cases quicker could improve the courts' ability to meet statutory timelines, and could lead to better outcomes for children and families.

The study was expanded<sup>4</sup> to examine how continuances effect case processing and whether the OFOJ model reduces continuances. Continuances are a source of delay in juvenile dependency cases that may increase the length of time the child is in care.

Results demonstrated that continuances delayed case events up to the adjudication hearing. However, they did not delay time to permanency. Results also

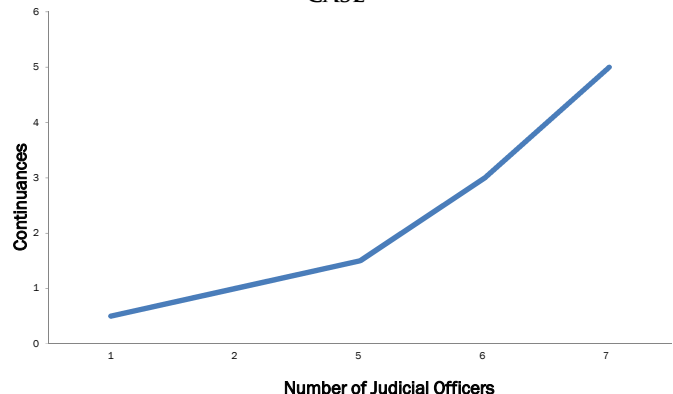
## KEY FINDINGS

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- Implementation challenges can impact workload for stakeholders
- Most stakeholders believe the model increases fairness and consistency of decisions
- Increases in the number of judges on the case are related to increased time to case closure (permanency) and increases in the number of continuances
- Use of the model is related to increased number of reunifications and timelier reunifications

showed when there is only one judicial officer per case, the majority of cases have one or no continuances. Every two judicial officers added to the case resulted in one additional continuance. This indicates that judicial continuity can be an effective way to improve case efficiency.

NUMBER OF CONTINUANCES BY NUMBER OF JUDICIAL OFFICERS ASSIGNED TO THE CASE



1. NCJFCJ wishes to acknowledge that this material is made possible by Cooperative Agreement No. 2009-MU-MU-K001.

2. National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (1995). *Resource Guidelines: Improving Court Practice in Child Abuse & Neglect Cases*. Reno, NV: Author.

3. Summers, A. & Shdaimah, C. S. (2013a). Improving juvenile dependency case timeliness through use of the one family, one judge model. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, 64(1), 35-44.

4. Summers, A. & Shdaimah, C. S. (2013b). One family, one judge, no continuances. *Juvenile and Family Court Journal*, 64(1), 23-34.

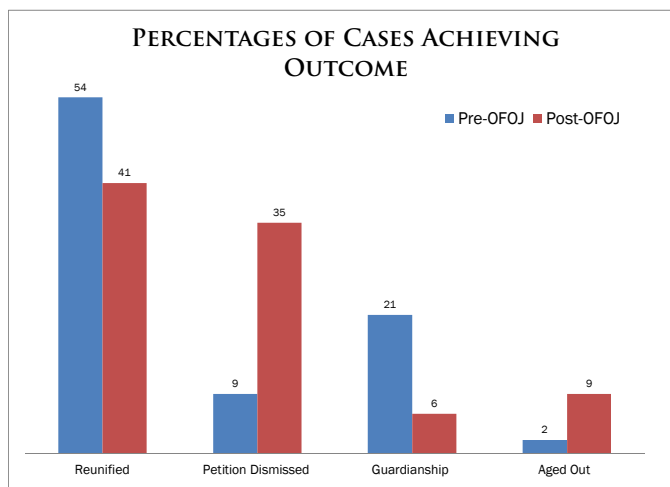
5. Shdaimah, C., & Summers, A. (2013). One family, one judge practice effects on children: Permanency outcomes on case closure and beyond. *Journal of Juvenile Justice*, 2(2), 37-45.

6. Shdaimah, C., & Summers, A. (2013). Baltimore City's Model Court: Professional stakeholders' experience with Baltimore City's one family, one judge docketing. *Family Court Review*, 51, 286-297.

## OFOJ and Permanency Outcomes

A pre-post design<sup>5</sup> was utilized to examine the effects of implementation of OFOJ on permanency outcomes. Eighty-nine cases were selected and outcomes were examined from Baltimore City's Juvenile Court (43 pre- and 46 post-implementation). The results showed that post-implementation cases were more likely to result in reunification through dismissal of case petitions and timelier reunifications (within 12 months of removal) compared to pre-implementation cases. There were no differences in reentry into care, implying that the timelier permanency outcomes did not result in detriments to safety.

Although limited in scope, this study provided a first step in examining judicial continuity in juvenile dependency case outcomes. Even without full implementation of OFOJ (Baltimore City oversees the emergency removal before assigning a case to a home court), the changes in judicial practice were related to improved permanency outcomes. While it may be hard to say that the OFOJ caused these changes, positive relations following the implementation were seen. Replication and expansion of this research with more rigorous methodology could provide a complete understanding of how important judicial continuity might be in complex cases such as these.



## Professional Stakeholder's Experience with OFOJ

Another study<sup>6</sup> explored the findings from a professional stakeholders survey (N =165) in Baltimore regarding their perception of the recently implemented OFOJ model in their jurisdiction. The study used a survey that was of the OFOJ practice in Baltimore. In addition, interviews and focus groups were conducted. All the responses were analyzed to gauge stakeholders' take on the program.

Overall, perceptions of the OFOJ model in Baltimore City are positive; many stakeholders feel that it improves fairness and consistency of decision-making, at the same time not adversely affecting the court process. However, concerns were raised regarding the OFOJ practice. The majority of these focused on implementation, scheduling, and familiarity among stakeholders. Identifying these concerns and ways to mitigate them will help future courts address issues when or before they arise and provide material for continued research. This survey assessment provided valuable insight into the one family, one judge practice and a solid foundation on which to build future work.

*"I believe that masters who have stayed with the same juvenile will extend a more balanced ruling, because of that familiarity."*

*"I believe that some of the masters are partial to a particular side, and the outcome of your case depends on the master you get."*

## Future Research

In sum, research from Baltimore demonstrated a positive relationship between OFOJ and case processing and outcomes. This work, however, was a first step in evaluating the OFOJ model. There is still much to learn. Future research should seek to replicate these findings and begin a broader exploration of how OFOJ may affect cases processing. A more in-depth exploration of the topic with more rigorous methodology may not only help to identify causal links between OFOJ and positive outcomes for families and children, but also help explain *why* judicial continuity is important.

RESEARCH SNAPSHOTS HIGHLIGHT KEY ELEMENTS OF REPORTS AND PROJECTS THAT ADDRESS THE NEED FOR EMPIRICALLY-BASED RESEARCH ON SYSTEMS CHANGE IN THE JUVENILE AND FAMILY COURT SYSTEM. FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE VISIT OUR WEBSITE: [WWW.NCJFCJ.ORG](http://WWW.NCJFCJ.ORG)

*The mission of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges is to provide all judges, courts, and related agencies involved with juvenile, family, and domestic violence cases with the knowledge and skills to improve the lives of families and children who seek justice.*

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