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Nevada Parent Survey

Parent Perceptions of the Child Welfare Court Process

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Introduction

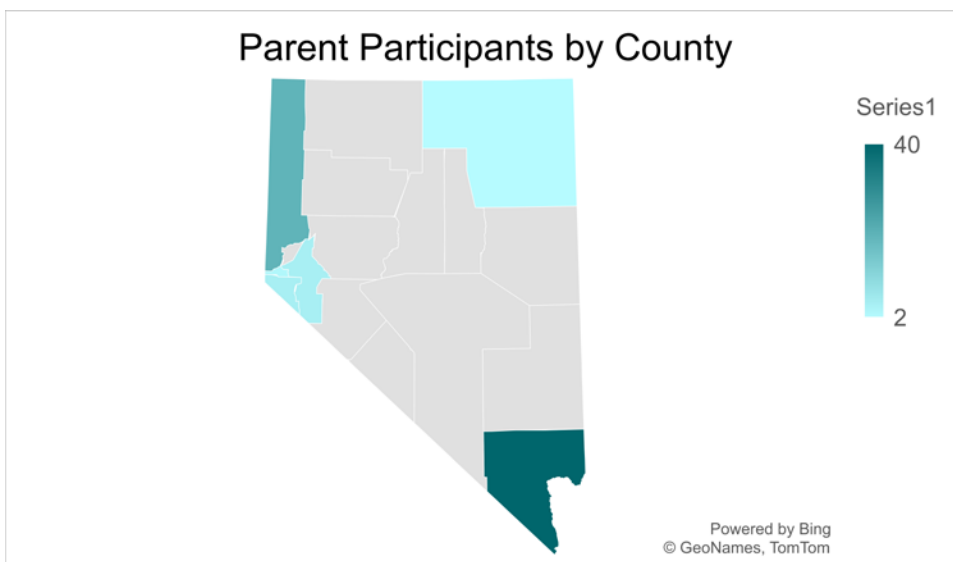
The Nevada Court Improvement Program (CIP) is interested in learning how parents perceive the child welfare court process. Research suggests that parents who feel engaged in the court process may be more likely to show up to court and to better engage in their case plan. Engagement of parents has also been linked to reunification and timelier permanency in child welfare cases.

Method

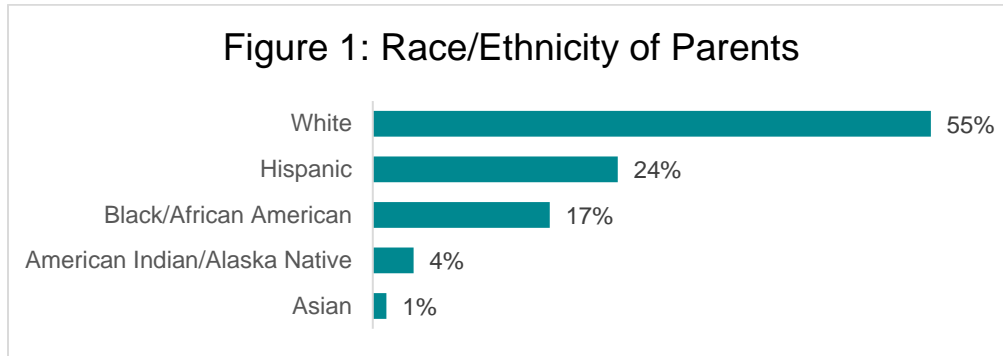
A survey was developed in collaboration with the NV CIP to examine parents' perspective of the child welfare court process. Parent attorneys and Community Improvement Council representatives were sent information about the survey with links and asked to share with their clients. We offered a \$20 gift card to Walmart as incentive for participation in the survey. Because the study used a snowball sampling approach (sending the link to one person and asking them to send it on), it is impossible to calculate a response rate. That is, we do not know what percentage of parents who were asked to complete the survey actually completed the survey.

Sample

Seventy-five participants completed the survey. This included 51 mothers (68%), 17 fathers (23%), 3 grandparents (4%), and one each of the following individuals: legal guardian, foster parent, relative, and older sibling. The largest percentage of participants were from Clark County (53%), followed by Washoe (27%).



Parents were asked about their race and ethnicity. They could select more than one answer. The majority of parents were White (55%), followed by Hispanic (24%). See Figure 1.

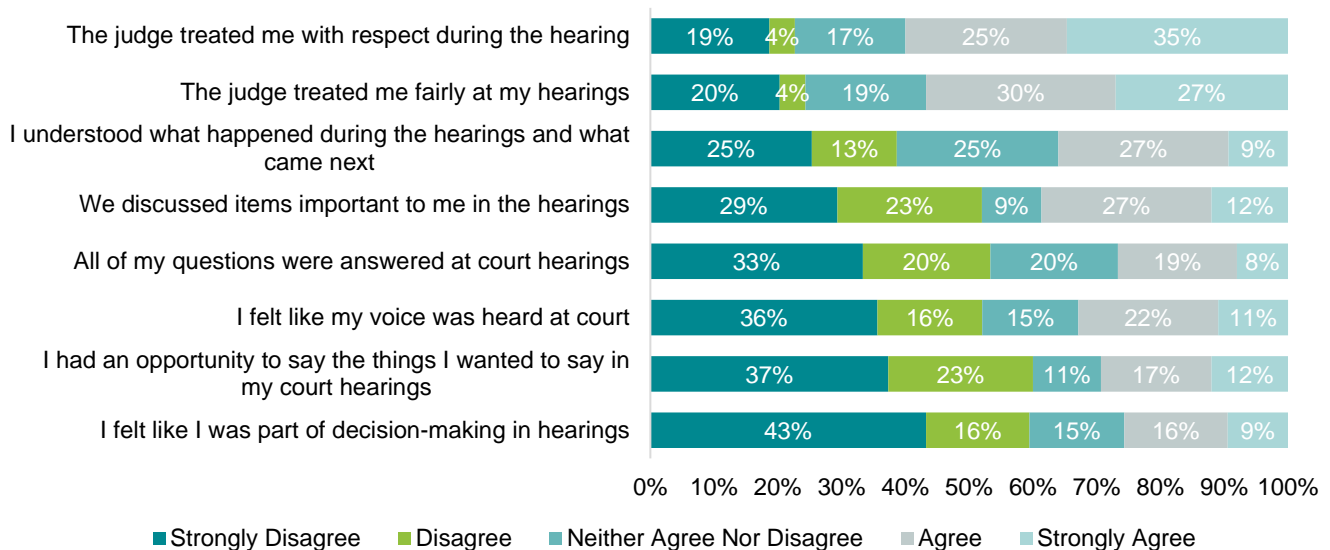


The survey asked parents about their perception of the hearing process. This included questions about how they felt at court hearings, their opinion about their attorney, as well as their understanding of safety and permanency. Parents were also asked about access to virtual hearings. Most questions were asked on a 5-point agreement scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. Responses are reported below by question topics.

Findings

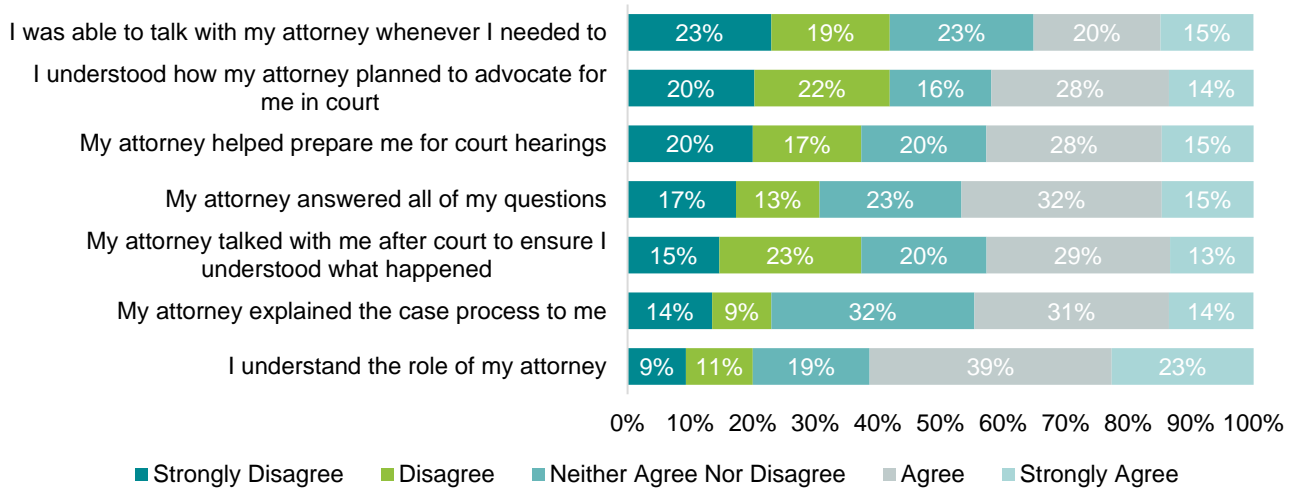
Parents were asked to respond to a series of statements about their engagement in hearings, indicating whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement. Parents were most likely to agree that the judge treated them with respect in the hearing and that the judge treated them fairly. They disagreed that they were part of decision-making however, and that they had an opportunity to say the things they wanted to say in court hearings. See Figure 2.

Figure 2: Parents Perception of Engagement in Hearings



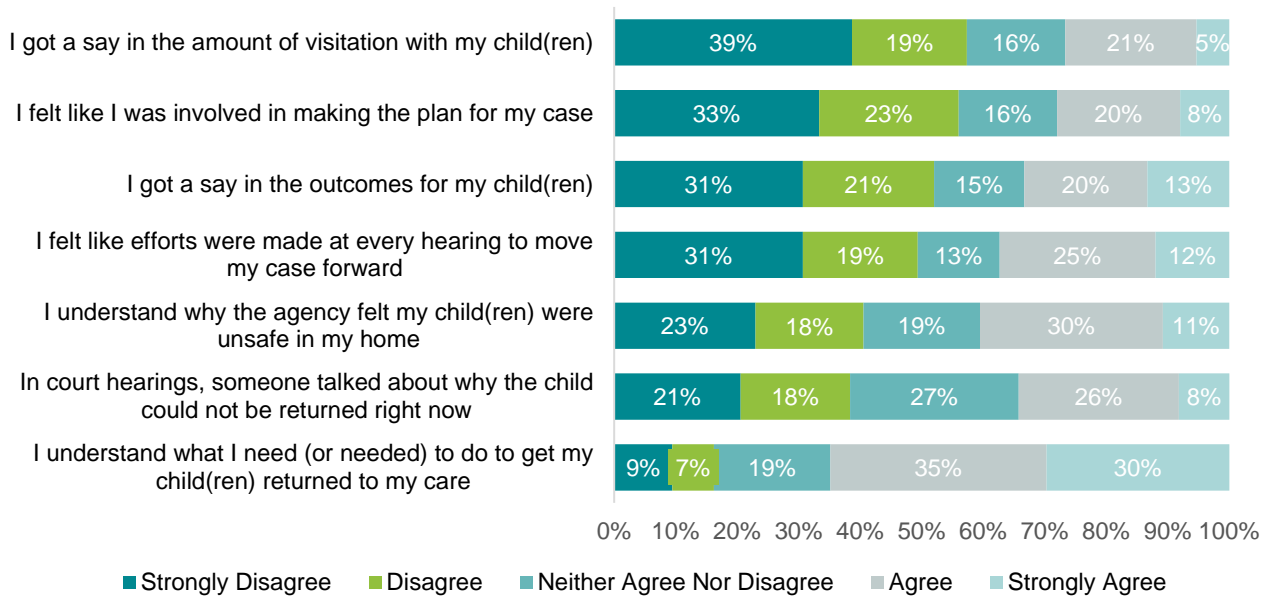
Parents were asked about their perception of their attorney. Figure 3 illustrates the statements that parents responded to. Parents were most likely to agree that they understand the role of their attorney. They disagreed or were neutral on all other statements. They disagreed most often that they were able to talk to their attorney whenever they needed to.

Figure 3: Perception of Attorney Practice



Finally, the survey asked parents about their perceptions of safety and permanency planning in the court process. Parents were less likely to agree that they got a say in visitation, that they were involved in making a plan for the case or that they got a say in outcomes. See Figure 4.

Figure 4: Parents Perception of Safety and Permanency



Some additional questions were asked of parents about their experience in the process. The questions are identified below with the responses provided.

Think about the first court hearing on your case. Did someone explain to you, in a way you understood, that your children may be out of your care for an extended time period?

- Yes 54%
- No 46%

Did you know what needed to happen for your children to be returned to you?

- Yes - 55% yes
- No - 32%
- Not applicable - 13%
- Of applicable cases, 63% said Yes

Were you given a choice about participating in your hearings, either in-person or remote/virtual (e.g., phone or video)?

- Yes 64%
- No 36%

Are you able to easily access remote hearings?

- Yes 89%
- No 11%
- Participants that indicated that they were unable to access remote hearings noted an issue of having access to WiFi or to reliable Wifi.

Participants were asked if there was anything else they would like to say about their experience with the court system. Forty-one of 75 participants (55%) had comments they wanted to share.

Most of the comments were negative.

- 15 of the 41 indicated concerns with CPS, being unhelpful or unfair.
 - *“More could have been done to help me and my child get out of the situation we were in. I was not given any resources until my child was removed from my home. I was not given anything to prevent removal from the home.”*

Responses specific to the court were evenly split with 7 positive and 7 negative comments. Comments concerning challenges were sometimes vague (e.g., “It was terrible”), but when descriptive, included:

- Parents did not feel understood
- Parents did not feel heard
- The court process was long
- The court process was hard to understand

- The judge showed bias – favoring the DA and caseworker and not allowing parents to respond with evidence.
- Cases were not treated as unique
- Challenges due to COVID -including delaying the case
- *“No one ever clearly says hey this means we have your kids now”*

Positive court responses included that the court process was easy, or that the judge was good in the case.

- *“Everything was handled with the utmost care for my son to stay with us and to get me the help I needed. I am grateful for them and especially for the presiding judge.”*
- *“I feel lucky that I had a case in Washoe county because the court system here actually works.”*

Two respondents noted additional comments about attorneys. One comment indicated that unless you have an attorney who cares about you, no one else will help you. The other noted challenges with contacting their attorney.

Race Differences

There were small number of African American/Black parents who participated in the study (n=10), making statistical testing impossible. We did examine differences between White and non-white participants and between Hispanic (n=17) and non-Hispanic parents. There were no statistically significant differences in participants between White and non-White parents. There were, however, a few differences for Hispanic parents.

Averaging the agreement items allows the statement to receive a score between one and five. Five indicates strong agreement, while one indicates strong disagreement. Lower numbers indicate less agreement with the statement. Hispanic families were consistently less likely to agree with the following statements, compared to non-Hispanic parents.

- I understand why the agency felt my child(ren) were unsafe in my home (2.3 for Hispanic vs 3.1 for non-Hispanic).
- I got a say in the outcomes for my child(ren) (2.1 for Hispanic vs 2.8 for non-Hispanic)
- I got a say in the amount of visitation with my child(ren) (1.7 for Hispanic vs 2.6 for non-Hispanic)

Site Differences

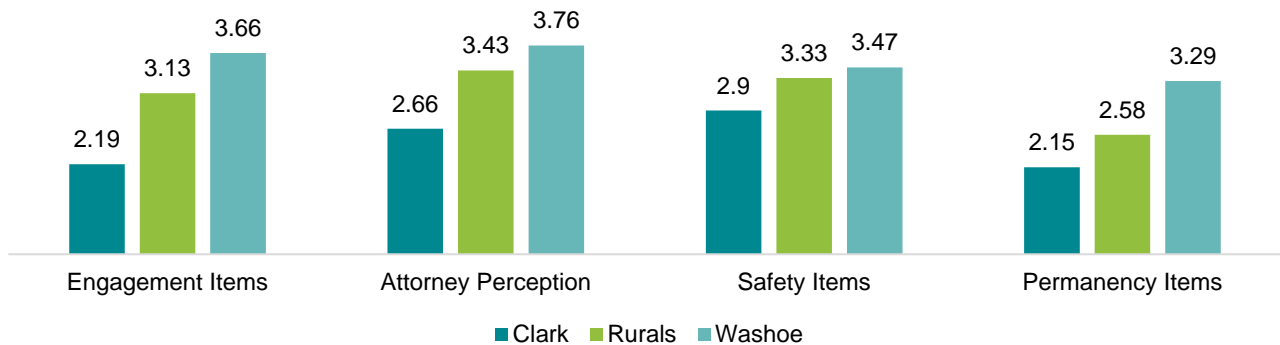
In addition to exploring the data by race, we examined data by site. Only Washoe and Clark had enough participants to make comparisons. To simplify analysis, we combined variables into constructs. The table below identifies the grouping of items into categories.

	I had an opportunity to say the things I wanted to say in my court hearings
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Court Engagement Items	All of my questions were answered at court hearings
	I understood what happened during the hearings and what came next
	The judge treated me with respect during the hearing
	I felt like I was part of decision-making in hearings
	We discussed items important to me in the hearings
	The judge treated me fairly at my hearings
	I felt like my voice was heard at court
Attorney Perception Items	I understand the role of my attorney
	My attorney explained the case process to me
	My attorney helped prepare me for court hearings
	My attorney talked with me after court to ensure I understood what happened
	My attorney answered all of my questions
	I was able to talk with my attorney whenever I needed to
	I understood how my attorney planned to advocate for me in court
Safety Items	I understand why the agency felt my child(ren) were unsafe in my home
	I understand what I need (or needed) to do to get my child(ren) returned to my care
	In court hearings, someone talked about why the child could not be returned right now
Permanency Items	I felt like efforts were made at every hearing to move my case forward
	I felt like I was involved in making the plan for my case
	I got a say in the outcomes for my child(ren)
	I got a say in the amount of visitation with my child(ren)

Washoe County parents had the highest positive scores related to perception of the court process, while Clark County had the lowest. It is important to note that the average was still between 3-4 (indicating somewhere between neutral and agree). See Figure 5.

Figure 5: Average Perception of Court by County



Conclusion

The parent survey was an attempt to better understand the parent perspective in Nevada related to child welfare court hearings. All judicial districts were contacted to participate in the survey in hopes of getting a statewide understanding of parent perception. Most of the responses were from Clark or Washoe County although four of the rurals also participated.

Responses indicated that parents feel that the judge treats them fairly and respectfully in hearings. However, there was much that could be improved in the court process. Parents did not feel like they were part of decision-making in hearings, they did not feel like their voice was heard or that they had an opportunity to say the things they wanted to say at hearings. Parents also did not feel that they had got a say in outcomes for their case, decision-making for their case or in visitation. Parents were also mixed in their perceptions of their attorneys.

These findings should be used to support system improvement. Considerations for improved practice could include:

- *Work to enhance parents' engagement in the process.* Find opportunities to ensure parents have a voice in the process. Consider whether judges, for example, could enhance their engagement of parents in hearings (e.g., explaining goals and purpose of the hearing, ask if they have questions), including providing an opportunity for voice when appropriate (and not just through the parent's attorney).
- *Ensure parents are part of decision-making on their own cases.* Parents should be provided opportunities to engage in case planning, discuss visitation in a meaningful way, and have an opportunity to feel they can contribute to the outcomes in the case.
- *Identify opportunities to enhance legal representation.* While some parents felt their attorney was helpful and advocated for their needs, others did not feel like their attorney sufficiently helped them in the process. It is important to consider opportunities to enhance legal representation.
- *Work to ensure Hispanic families feel like they have a voice in the process.* There were several items indicating that Hispanic families felt less engaged than other parents in the process. Efforts should be made to ensure all families feel part of the process.
- *Consider the strategies used in Washoe County and how they might be applied to other sites.* Washoe had some of the highest scores of perception of parents. While scores could definitely improve, it is important to identify if specific strategies are being used that other sites could benefit from.