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Nevada Hearing Quality Study

Examining the Quality of Child Welfare
Court Hearing Practice in Nevada

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Nevada Hearing Quality Study

Executive Summary

The Nevada Court Improvement Program (CIP) began working on improving timeliness to permanency in 2009. They discovered that they needed to better understand how the courts were doing. In 2014, Nevada CIP conducted a hearing quality assessment to provide baseline data to counties on court practice. Nine of 10 judicial districts participated. In 2018, the CIP contracted with researchers to expand on the findings from the 2014 study. This study explores changes in practice between 2014 and 2017 court hearings as well as links between hearing quality factors and case outcomes in the state of Nevada. The study used a multi-method approach, including court observation, case file review, and administrative data to explore changes in practice and links to outcomes.

Changes between 2014 & 2017. Findings from this study of hearing quality indicate a number of areas in which Nevada child abuse and neglect hearing practice has improved between 2014 and 2017. These changes suggest significant improvement over time.

- The **presence** of fathers, children and attorneys for fathers and children at hearings has increased significantly between 2014 and 2017.
- **Engagement** of fathers and mothers in hearings has increased significantly between 2014 and 2017.
- The breadth of **discussion** in hearings has increased significantly between 2014 and 2017, with hearings averaging discussion of 47% of all applicable topics (topics were pulled from Nevada Revised Statutes and *Enhanced Resource Guidelines* best practices) in 2014 compared to 60% of all applicable topics in 2017.
- There was a statistically significant increase in the percentage of hearings in which judges made reasonable efforts **findings** orally on the record –23% of hearings in 2014 compared to 71% of hearings in 2017.

Linking Hearing Quality to Outcomes. This study also provides evidence of a linkage between a number of hearing quality factors and specific case outcomes – supporting the premise that a high-quality child abuse and neglect hearing process can have a positive impact on timely permanency and permanency outcomes. Specifically, this study found:

- **Presence** of key parties was related to decreased time to permanency, increased reunification rates, and decreased likelihood of aging out of care.
- **Engagement** of parents was related to timelier permanency, reunification, aging out of care and achieving permanency within 12 months. Higher parent engagement predicted shorter times to permanency, higher rates of reunification and lower rates of aging out.
- **Discussion**, both breadth of discussion across topics and discussion of key issues (e.g., efforts to reunify), was related to timelier permanency, higher rates of reunification, and lower rates of aging out.

Overall, the study shows statistically significant change in practice between 2014 and 2017 and significant links between hearing quality factors and case outcomes.

Nevada Hearing Quality Study

Statewide Trends, Improvements, and Links to Outcomes

Introduction

The Nevada Court Improvement Program (CIP) has been working to improve the quality of child welfare court process and practice for several years. In 2010, the Nevada CIP asked each judicial district to create a platform/forum for ongoing identification of strengths and improvement opportunities as they pertain to child welfare outcomes. As a result, each judicial district created a Community Improvement Council (CIC) of local stakeholders to identify barriers to timely permanency, adoption, and termination of parental rights (TPR) and to develop and implement solutions to these barriers in its locale. In 2014, the CICs began to focus on the quality of child welfare court practices and processes. As part of this process, the National Resource Center on Legal and Judicial Issues worked with the CIP (in 2014) to observe a random sample of court hearings for 9 of the 10 judicial districts. A summary of findings (site specific) was presented to each judicial district that participated in the study at the 2014 CIC Summit. Each CIC began action planning for change to improve both the quality of child welfare hearing practice and processes, as well as outcomes for children and families.

For 2018, the Nevada CIP decided to expand upon its hearing quality work within the state by conducting a follow-up study. The follow-up hearing quality study had three goals:

1. Explore statewide trends in practice to identify areas of strengths and opportunities for improvement across the state;
2. Observe how hearing practice has changed in each judicial district between 2014 and 2017; and
3. Examine how hearing quality is related to case outcomes.

Hearing quality, for the purpose of this study, was defined based on what should occur in a hearing, prescribed by Nevada Revised Statute and taken from the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judge's *Enhanced Resource Guidelines: Improving Court Practice in Child Abuse and Neglect Cases*. The case files included active presence and participation of key parties, engagement of parents and youth, in-depth discussion of key topics, and oral findings on the record. These hearing quality factors are discussed in more depth later in the report.

Method

The hearing quality study used a mixed method approach to examine hearing quality in the state. All judicial districts were invited to participate in the study. In 2014, Nevada had

10 judicial districts and 9 participated. In 2018, Nevada has 11 judicial districts and 10 chose to participate in the study. The methods include: court observation, case file review, review of administrative data, and secondary analysis of 2014 hearing quality data. Each method is described below.

Court Observation. The primary method for obtaining data to examine hearing quality is court observation. For the current study, the researchers asked all judicial districts to provide a sample of recorded hearings. The random sample of recent hearings was provided electronically to the researchers via USB, CD, or secure file transfer site (e.g., Dropbox). The court observation tool provided data on parties present, engagement of parties, length of hearing, key areas of discussion, and findings on the record.

Case File Review. Case file review was used to supplement court observation data. Researchers examined the case files of the 2014 cases that had been observed for the hearing quality study so that case outcomes could be individually linked to hearing quality. Researchers traveled to each site to conduct case file reviews. These reviews collected data on case allegations, dates of key events (e.g., petition filing, 72-hour hearings, adjudication, etc.), parties present at key hearings, placement of the child, and outcomes of the case (e.g., reunification, adoption). These data were used to link 2014 hearing quality data to outcomes.

Administrative Data. In addition to data collected from the cases on site, the researchers gathered aggregate jurisdiction level data on key outcomes of interest. These data represent averages of outcomes, instead of case level outcomes. These data were gathered for both 2014 and 2017 and included: median time to permanency, percentage of cases resulting in reunification, percentage of cases resulting in youth emancipating/aging out of care, percentage of cases that achieve permanency within 12 months, and percentage of cases still in care after 24 months. These data were used to explore aggregate level relationships between typical hearing practice and outcomes by judicial district.

2014 Data. Researchers also used 2014 data for further analysis so that comparisons could be made between cases. These data also included the court observation data for 2014.

Overview of Report

This report presents findings from the study first by the portraying the statewide trends in hearing quality variables of interest. The statewide trends illustrate the variation in practice across the 10 jurisdictions and illustrates the statewide numbers for comparison. Following the statewide trends for each variable, is an overview of the 2014 and 2017 numbers for

comparison, including whether the differences are statistically significant. Finally, the report presents information on hearing quality factors that are related to case outcomes.

Statewide Trends

The 2018 study included 128 hearings that were observed across the 10 judicial districts that participated in the study. Efforts were made to include at least 10 hearings from each site, with larger judicial districts submitting additional hearings. These included 45 72-Hour (35%), 12 Adjudication (9%), 5 Disposition (4%), 5 Adjudication/Disposition combined (4%), 9 Review hearings (7%) and 52 Permanency hearings (41%). Data below are reported across hearing types and judicial districts.

Using these graphs: “The Hearing Length (in minutes) Across the State” graph and many of the subsequent graphs are created to illustrate data points in the 10 judicial districts reviewed. Graphs have 10 columns of data as well as a statewide column (when applicable). The columns are not labeled so as to maintain anonymity of site-specific information. For example, in the Figure 2, the first site had an average hearing time of 33 minutes in 2017 and 32 minutes in 2014. The second column (13 minutes in 2017 and 12 minutes in 2014) represents another judicial district. Graphs are intentionally setup this way so that trends and variations across sites can be seen without identifying site specific information.

Length

Figure 1 illustrates the diversity of average hearing times across the state. Statewide numbers are depicted at the end of graphs in a red rectangle. Each data point represents the average for a specific judicial district. While hearings averaged almost 20 minutes, there was a lot of diversity across the state. Some sites averaged much shorter hearings (closer to 10 minutes), while others averaged closer to 30. Of course, part of the difference may be due to the type of hearing that was observed.

Figure 1: Hearing Length (in Minutes) Across the State (2017)

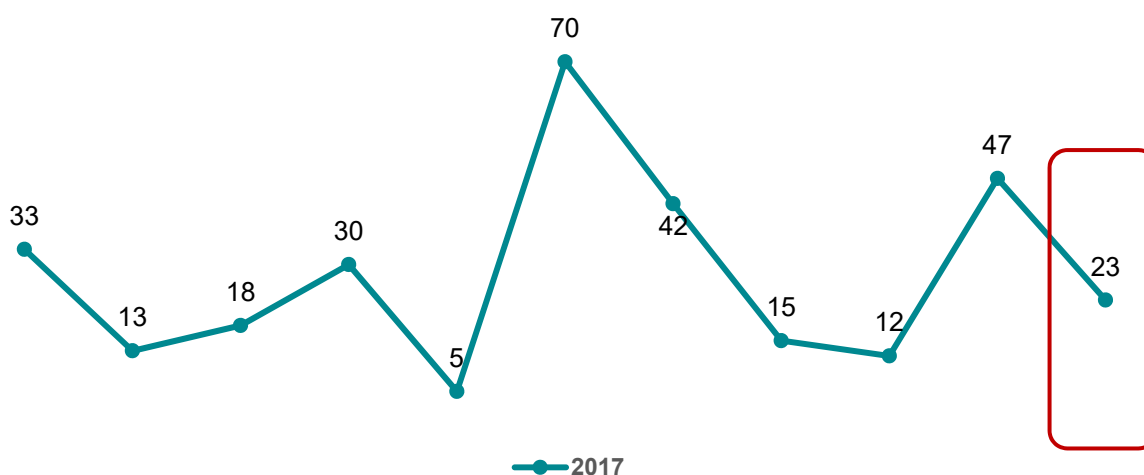
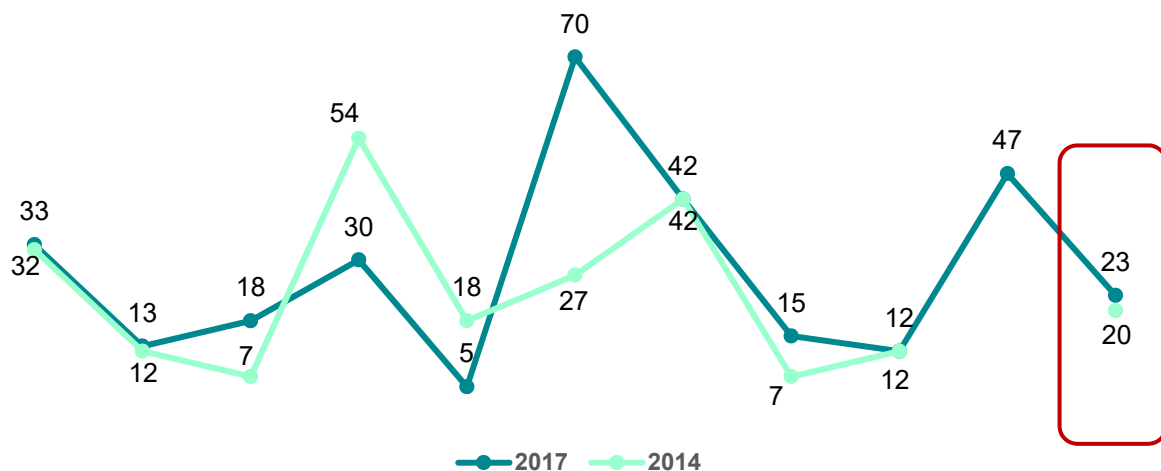


Table 1 below indicates the average time by hearing type. As noted below, combined adjudication/disposition hearings averaged the longest (92 minutes) and review hearings were the shortest (8 minutes),

Table 1: Average Length of Hearing Time in Minutes by Type of Hearing		
Hearing Type	2017	2014
72 Hour Hearing	22 (n=45)	31 (n=21)
Adjudication	43 (n=12)	37 (n=7)
Adj/Disposition	92 (n=5)	34 (n=3)
Disposition	20 (n=5)	7 (n=21)
Review	8 (n=9)	17 (n=22)
Permanency	16 (n=52)	19 (n=31)

There were few significant differences in hearing length over time. Hearing length (in minutes) ranged from 5 minutes to 70 minutes in 2017 and from 7 to 54 minutes in 2014, with an average of 23 minutes for hearings statewide in 2017 and 20 minutes for hearings statewide in 2014.

Figure 2: Hearing Length (in Minutes) Across the State Over Time



Statistically significant differences between 2014 and 2017:
There is no difference between hearing length in 2014 and 2017

Parties Present

Parties present varied by site and hearing type. For example, mothers were more likely to be present at 72-Hour hearings than any other hearing type. Table 2 illustrates the percentage of parties present across hearing types.

Party	72 Hour	Adj/Disp	Review/Perm
Mother	84%	68%	41%
Father	73%	45%	51%
Child	6%	27%	39%
Mother's Attorney	33%	82%	64%
Father's Attorney	27%	64%	56%
Child's Attorney	89%	100%	85%

Presence of mothers was somewhat diverse across the state in 2017, ranging from an average of 42% (low) to a high of 86% in one site. Most sites hovered around mother present 50% of the time. Percentage of time mother's attorneys were present also varied by site but appeared to be related to mother's presence at the hearings. Figures 3-5 illustrate variations in mother's, father's, and youth's presence as well as their respective attorney over time. As previously noted, statewide data are presented in the red rectangles.

Figure 3: Presence of Mother and Mother's Attorney by Judicial District and Statewide (2017)

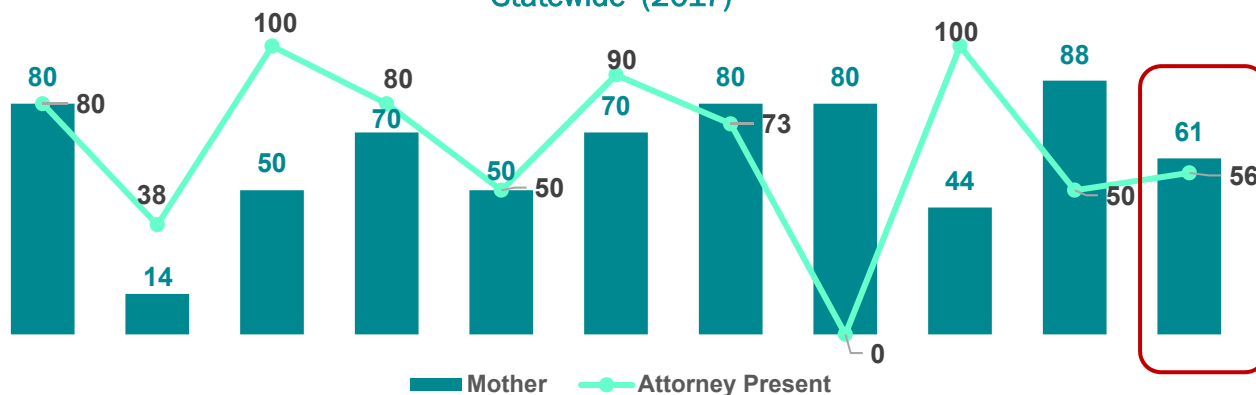


Figure 4: Presence of Father and Father's Attorney by Judicial District and Statewide (2017)

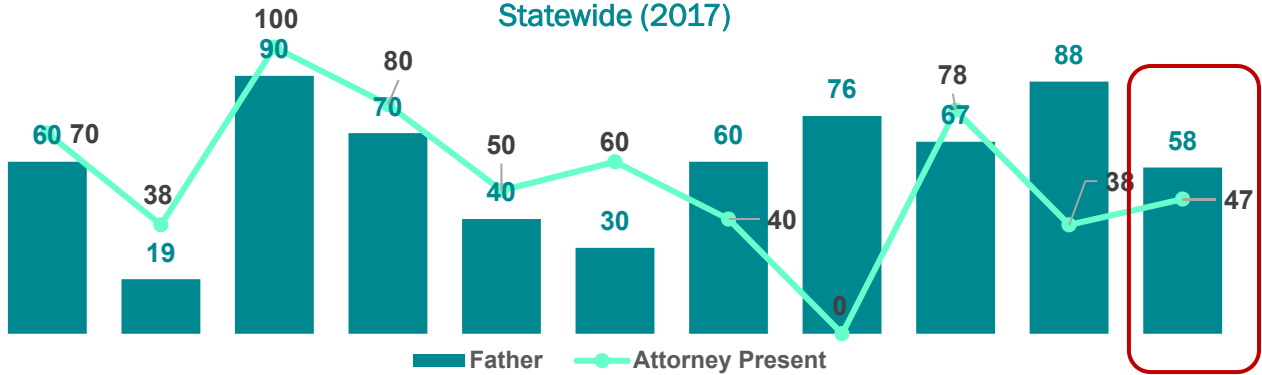
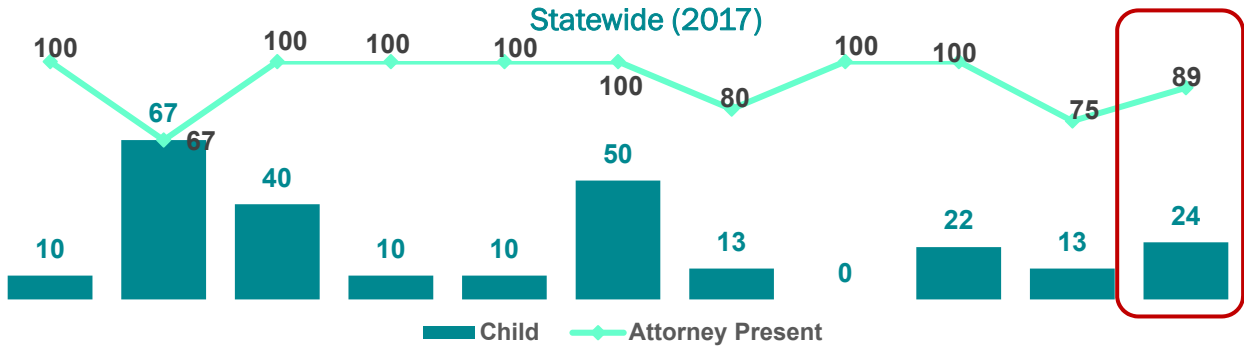


Figure 5: Presence of Child and Child Attorney by Judicial District and Statewide (2017)



Presence Changes Over Time. Overall, the presence of parties changed very little over time. However, presence of the father, child, father’s attorney and child’s attorneys have increased significantly between 2014 and 2017.

Table 3: Percentage of Hearings with Party Present

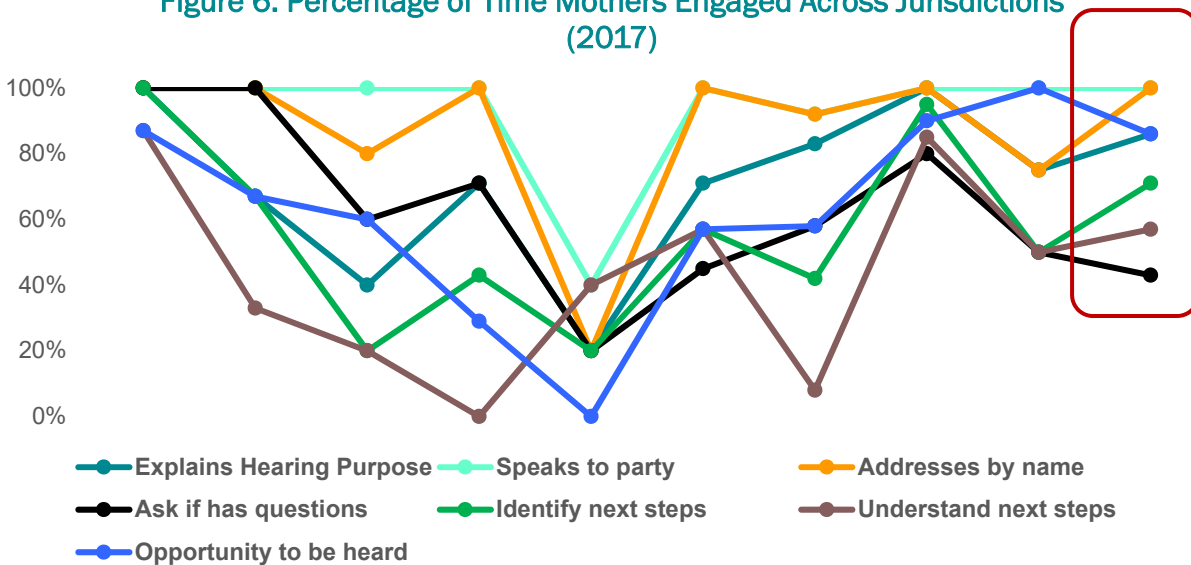
Party	Presence in 2017	Presence in 2014
Mother	61%	52%
Father	58%	40%*
Child	24%	9%*
Mother’s Attorney	56%	57%
Father’s Attorney	47%	42%*
Child’s Attorney	89%	57%*
Agency worker	98%	100%
Attorney General/District Attorney	98%	100%
Relative	27%	23%
Foster Parent	16%	15%

Statistically significant differences for each present person are denoted with a star in Table 3 above. In addition, researchers explored whether parent and child attorneys were more likely to be present at the 72 Hour hearing in 2017 than in 2014. There was no difference in appearance of mother’s or father’s attorneys at the 72 Hour hearing between 2014 and 2017. However, children’s attorneys were more likely to be present at the 72-Hour hearing (89%) than at the 72 Hour hearings in 2014 (62%).

Parental Engagement

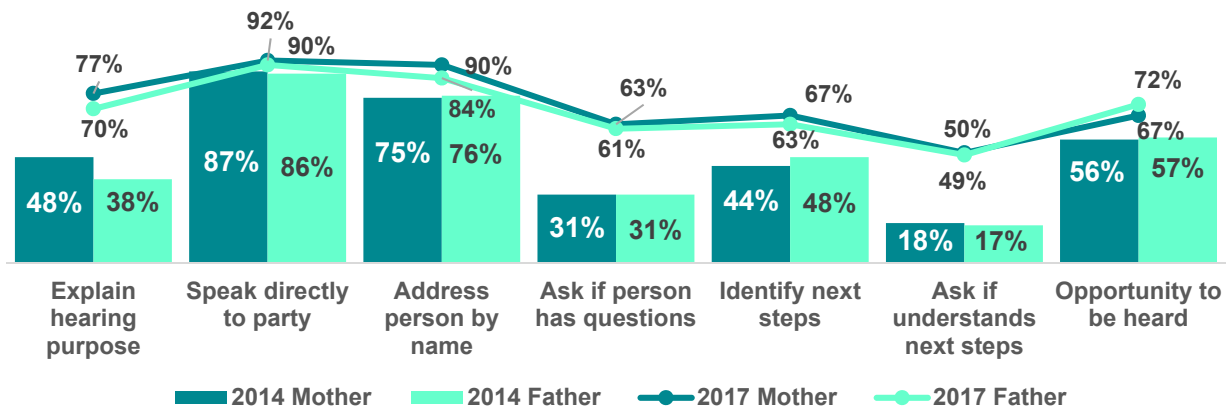
Engagement of parents in the hearing process is considered essential to holding a high-quality hearing. Researchers examined judicial behaviors, interactions, and engagement with parents and children. When parents were present in court, judges mostly spoke to them directly and addressed them by their names. The *Engagement of Mothers Across Jurisdictions* figure (6) below portrays the percentage of time (when the mother was present) that the judicial officers engaged the party in a specific way. These numbers reflect differences in practice across multiple sites. Engagement strategies varied widely by site, but the most common was speaking directly to the mother and addressing her by name. Engagement strategies were similar for fathers.

Figure 6: Percentage of Time Mothers Engaged Across Jurisdictions (2017)



Engagement can be conceptualized as a percentage of strategies that judges used to engage parents and youth in the process. Consider the seven engagement strategies identified in Figure 6. Each hearing was coded with a yes or no as to whether the judge engaged in this behavior. These were averaged to calculate a percentage of yeses. In 2017, judges engaged mothers with 72% of these strategies and fathers with 70% of these strategies. In 2014, these percentages were 51% and 50%. Individual responses are reported in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Percentage of Time Parents Were Engaged in Specific Ways (2014 & 2017)



Statistically Significant Changes Over Time: Both engagement of the father and engagement of the mother increased significantly over time from 2014 to 2017.

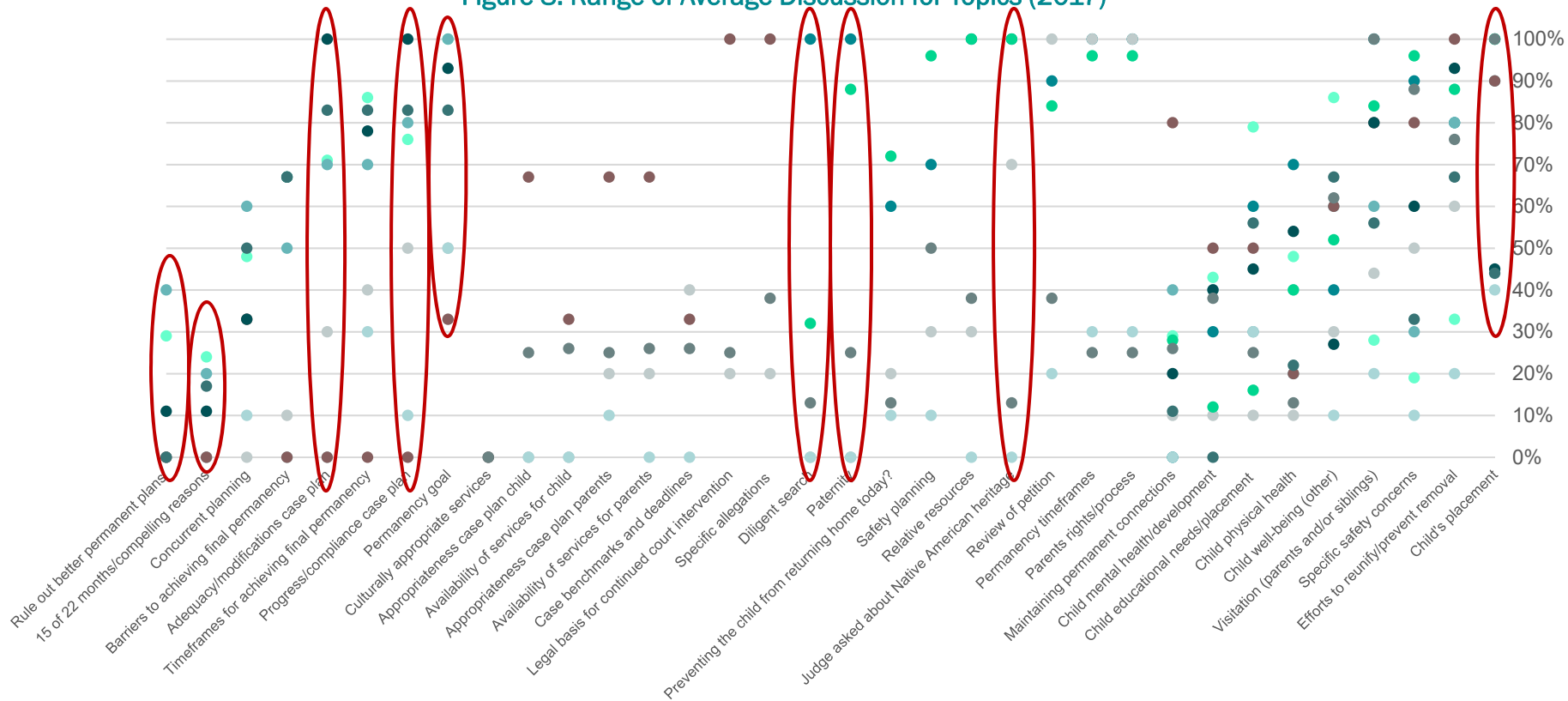
Hearing Discussion

Discussion was measured using a list of topics that could be relevant to discuss at the hearing. When presenting the findings, topics listed next to specific hearings are those that are considered most relevant for discussion in those specific hearings, while topics listed under “all hearings” are those that could be relevant for any hearing. Topics were derived from Nevada Revised Statutes (NRS) and from best practice guidelines from the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.¹

Breadth of Discussion. Breadth of discussion is the percentage of items discussed out of all the potential topics (derived from NRS and best practice guidelines) that were applicable to be discussed at the hearing. On average, hearings across the state included discussion of 60% of all applicable topics, with the percentage of items discussed in each hearing ranging from 7% to 100% of all applicable topics. The *Range of Average Discussion for all Topics* in Figure 8 below illustrates the range of discussion across judicial districts. Each dot represents the average discussion of a topic in a judicial district. For example, child’s placement was discussed at a low 40% in one jurisdiction, and a high of 100% in another. The purpose of this graph is to illustrate diversity of practice across sites. The red ovals identify the least and most diverse topics. The most diverse topics are those that some sites discuss 100% of the time and others never discussed in their hearings. The shorter ovals illustrate the topics that are consistently discussed (or not discussed) by all jurisdictions.

¹ “Best practices” for dependency court hearings include those practices outlined in the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges’ *ENHANCED RESOURCE GUIDELINES: Improving Court Practice in Child Abuse and Neglect Cases*, which provides recommendations for conducting a high- quality child abuse and neglect hearing process.

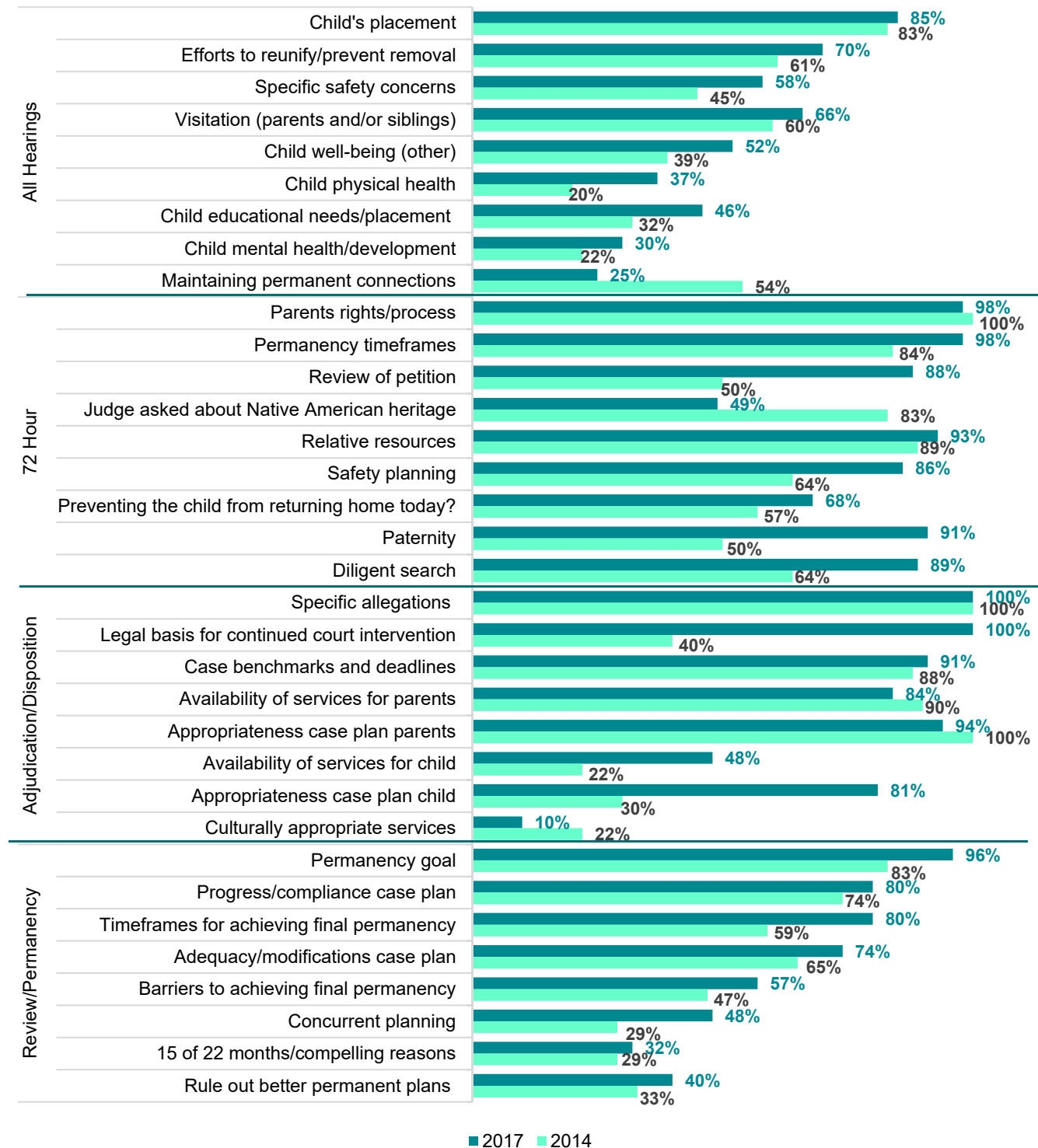
Figure 8: Range of Average Discussion for Topics (2017)



***The ovals represent the variation in the discussion practice. The ovals that stretch from top to bottom illustrate topics that some sites never discussed but others discussed 100% of the time, indicating great variation in the state. The smaller ovals represent topics that are more consistently discussed or not discussed. For example, rule out better permanent plans (discussion when the permanency plan is not the preferred plan about how the court ruled out more preferred plans) and 15 of 22 months/compelling reasons were rarely discussed, even when applicable. On the other hand, permanency goals and child’s placement were often discussed in all jurisdictions.*

Discussion is also explored across time. The chart below (Figure 9) illustrates the percentage of time that topics were discussed across all sites. The sample size varied for items as sites primarily focused on one hearing type.

Figure 9: Discussion of Key Court Topics Between 2014 & 2017

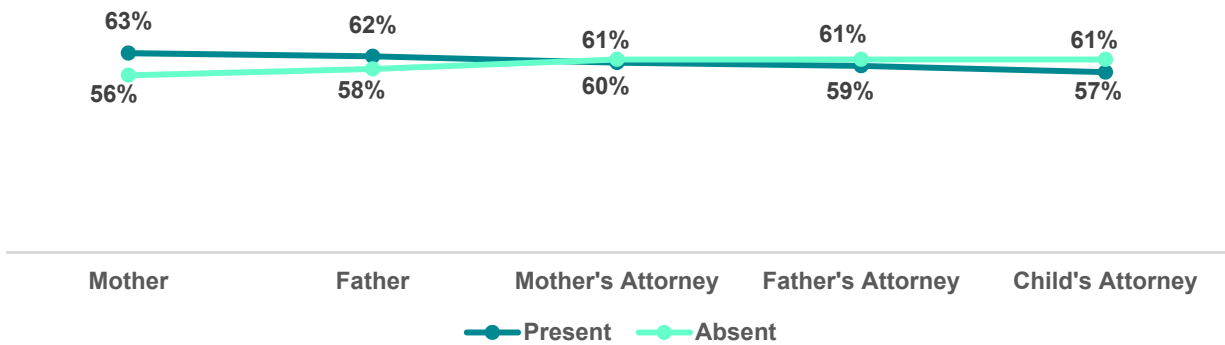


Statistically significant differences over time: There was a statistically significant increase in breadth of discussion over time. Hearings averaged discussion of 47% of applicable topics in 2014 compared to 60% of applicable topics in 2017 ($p < .001$).

Digging Deeper Into Discussion

As additional analyses, researchers explored length of hearings by parties present. As noted in Figure 10 below, there were very little difference in how much discussion was held when parents were present versus when they were absent.

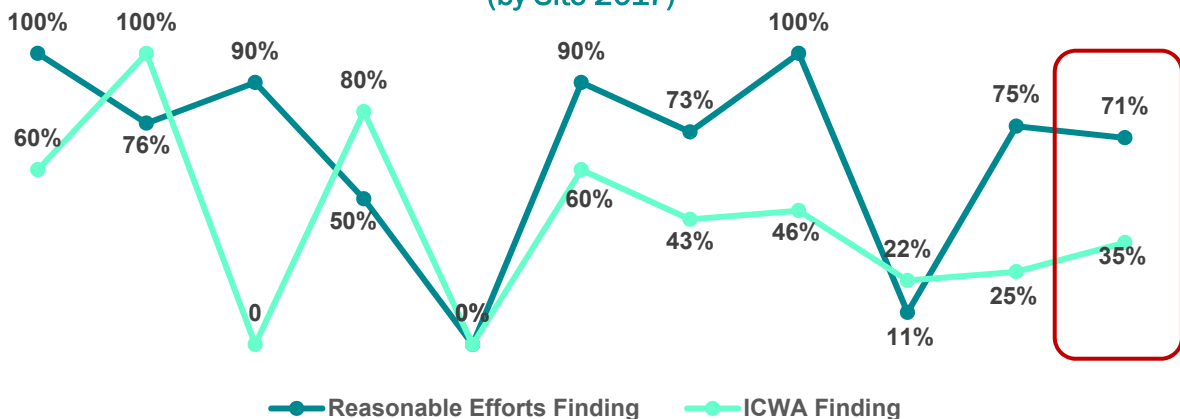
Figure 10: Breadth of Discussion by Presence of Parties (2017)



Findings and Orders

Two types of oral findings on the record were examined, the finding of Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) applicability and the finding that Reasonable Efforts were made. These were calculated as percentage of time that findings were made. The Statewide data are presented in the red rectangle.

Figure 11: Oral Reasonable Efforts and ICWA Findings on the Record (by Site 2017)



Statistically significant differences over time: There was a statistically significant increase in oral findings on the record over time. Judges made oral reasonable efforts findings in 71% of cases in 2017 compared to 23% in 2014. ICWA findings

Summary of Significant Differences Over Time

Practice changes improved significantly between 2014 and 2017 in all key areas. Court practice demonstrated improved engagement of parties, enhanced discussion, and an increase in findings on the record, overall.

Table 4: Summary of Significant Differences Found between 2014 and 2017 Hearing Practices	
Hearing Practice	Significant Change Over Time
Length of Hearings	NO
Parties Presence (Child Atty, Father Atty, Child, Father)	YES
Engagement of Parties	YES
Discussion	YES
Findings on the Record	YES

Relationships Between Hearing Quality and Case Outcomes

Multiple hearing quality variables were examined to determine their impact on case outcomes. Two types of methods were used to examine outcomes. These methods are described in detail later in this section. The following variables explored were related to hearing quality:

- *Breadth of discussion*: the percentage of time key topics (identified from the *Enhanced Resource Guidelines* and NRS) were discussed in hearings, when applicable.
- *Key discussion topics*: discussion topics were coded at each hearing on a scale of 0 to 3, with 0 indicating no discussion and 3 indicating substantive discussion.² Across multiple hearings, these variables were calculated as a percentage of time specific discussion topics were discussed at hearings. Key discussion topics used in analysis were topics that should be discussed at all hearings, including:
 - Child safety
 - Efforts to reunify
 - Child well-being
- *Presence of parties*: Presence of parties was coded as a yes/no variable at each hearing. This was further calculated across hearings to include percentage of time key parties were present at hearings. Parties included mothers, fathers, and youth.
- *Presence of attorneys*: Presence of attorneys was coded as a yes/no variable at each hearing. This was further calculated across hearings to include percentage of time attorneys were present at various hearings. This was calculated for mother's, father's and child attorneys.

² Substantive discussion was defined as an in-depth discussion of a topic.

- *Findings on the record*: At each hearing, the coders determined whether reasonable efforts and ICWA findings were made on the record (yes/no variable).

The child welfare outcomes identified for study were based on nationally accepted performance measures for dependency courts. These outcomes were identified from case outcomes in the case file review (see methods discussion later) as well as from aggregate level Fostering Court Improvement website performance measurement data for the most currently available child welfare data. These include:

Time to Permanency: Time to permanency was calculated as an average (and median) time from entry into care to case closure. Time to permanency was also calculated as percentage of cases that achieve permanency within 12 months.

Reunification: Reunification was examined in terms of what percentage of cases result in a child reunifying with family.

Aging Out: The percentage of youth aging out of child welfare system without achieving permanent legal connection was examined through Fostering Court Improvement data, as a percentage of youth that had this outcome in the most recent Nevada data.

Permanency within 12 Months: The percentage of cases for each judicial district that achieve permanency within 12 months of the child entering care.

Percentage of Legal Orphans: The percentage of legal orphans is the percentage of cases that have a TPR but have not yet achieved permanency in the judicial district.

Methods

Two methods were used to examine the relationship between hearing quality and case outcomes. The first method included predictive analysis of 2014 court observation data that was linked to case file review data. Specifically, researchers used 2014 court observation data and the case file review data collected (in 2018) for those same cases to match the hearing quality data in the case to case outcomes. Descriptions of the methods are presented below. The second method included correlations of aggregate level judicial district hearing quality and performance measurement data.

Predictive Analysis. Predictive analyses use data and statistical algorithm to identify the likelihood of future outcomes based on historical data. Linear regression analysis was used to examine what hearing quality factors predicted time to permanency for the 2014 hearing quality cases. This analysis shows when there is a relationship between the variables and the outcomes of interest. Because this analysis explores outcomes directly related to the hearings observed, it is more robust than comparing aggregate level “typical” practice as in the correlational method.

Table 5: Factors in Predictive Analysis

Hearing Quality Indicators	Performance Measures
Number of judges per case	Time to permanency
Number of continuances per case	Reunification
Breadth of discussion	Age Out
Presence of Mother	
Presence of Father	
Presence of youth	

Statistical Significance. Predictive analysis and correlations (discussed below) rely on tests of statistical significance; essentially, this is testing whether the researcher believes that the relationship is more than can be explained by chance alone. Statistical significance can be explained as evidence on a scale of 0 to 1, with smaller values indicating more evidence that the values derived were not chance, and that there is actually something there. Traditionally, researchers use a value of .05 as a cutoff (also called p value). In applied research with smaller sample sizes, researchers chose to use a value of .1, indicating 90% certainty that our results are not just chance.

Correlations. To examine relationships between hearing quality and case outcomes, researchers explored correlations, a common statistic that provides a single number that describes the degree of relationship between two variables. For this method, researchers took the averages from the 10 sites on a series of hearing quality measures (identified above) and compared this to average jurisdiction level data from the Fostering Court Improvement or Chapin Hall websites for that specific site. For example, for the 10 hearings observed in site A, researchers calculated the percentage of time the mother was present. This variable was entered into a database as a number (e.g., 67% = .67). Researchers also took outcome data from the Fostering Court Improvement website, such as percentage of cases reaching reunification within 12 months and added that number to the dataset. This resulted in 10 cases (each jurisdiction is 1 case) and 30 variables to correlate. The hearing quality variables and case outcome variables were all added into a correlation matrix and examined for statistically significant relationships.

Correlation Values. Correlation values range from 0 to +/-1, with those closer to 1 being stronger relationships. A value of .2 to .39 is considered weak, .4 to .59 is considered moderate, .6 to .79 is considered strong and .8 to 1.0 is considered a very strong association between two variables.

Correlation Direction. Correlations also include a direction. A positive correlation means that variables both increase or decrease in the same direction. That is, as one increases so does the other. For example, a positive correlation (.80) between height and shoe size indicates that as people get taller their shoe size increases. A negative

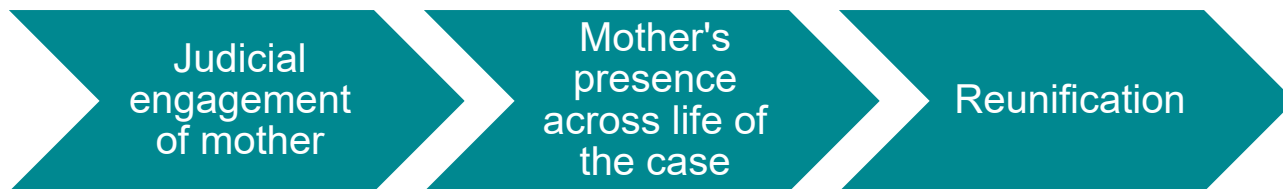
correlation (any value -.1 to -1.0) indicates that the variables are related in opposite directions. For example, smoking and life expectancy are negatively correlated, as the amount of smoking you do per day increases, your life expectancy decreases. The direction is not related to the strength. A -.8 correlation shows a stronger relationship than a +.5).

Findings (Predictive Analysis)

A series of linear and logistic regression analyses were conducted to determine which factors predicted the outcomes of Time to Permanency, Reunification, and the youth Aging Out. Several analyses were conducted because the sample size is too small to include all variables in one analysis. Table 6 below presents the findings. The yes in the table indicates that this item is a statistically significant predictor of the outcome of interest. The – or + indicates the direction. For time to permanency, the – means that as the hearing quality indicator goes up, time to permanency goes down. The + means that as the hearing quality indicator goes up, so does time to permanency. As an example, as percentage of time the mother is present increases, the time to permanency decreases in cases. On the other hand, as the number of judicial officers increases the time to permanency also increases. For reunification and age out outcomes, positive means this outcome is more likely as the variable increases.

Table 6: Hearing Quality Factors that Predict Specific Case Outcomes			
	Time to Permanency	Reunification	Age Out
PARTIES PRESENT			
Percent Mother Present	Yes (-)	Yes (+)	
Percent Child Present			Yes (-)
Percent Mother Attorney Present			Yes (-)
Father Attorney Present	Yes (-)		
Child Attorney Present	Yes (-)		
DISCUSSION			
Breadth of Discussion	Yes (-)		
Disc: Child Safety		Yes (-)	
Disc Efforts to Reunify	Yes (-)	Yes (+)	Yes (-)
ENGAGEMENT			
Average Engagement			
Addresses Mom by Name	Yes (-)		
Opportunity to be heard			
ORDERS			
Reasonable efforts finding on record			
Number of Judicial Officers	Yes (+)		
Number of Continuances	Yes (+)		

Moderating variable. Not all relationships are direct. Researchers predicted that judicial engagement of parents might lead to increased parent’s presence across the life of the case. The data support this. There was a *statistically significant* relationship between judicial engagement of both mother and father and their presence across the life of the case. When the judge had higher engagement in the hearing, parents were more likely to be present at multiple hearings across the life of the case. For mothers only, engagement has an indirect effect on reunification. As higher levels of parent engagement significantly predicted mom’s presence throughout the case and mom’s presence was related to increased likelihood of reunification. The relationship between these variables is indicated in the diagram below.



Findings (Correlations)

In addition to the findings from the matched case file review and court observation data, a series of correlational analyses explored relationships between aggregate level hearing quality factors and case outcomes. This allowed for additional analysis of the data. No additional significant findings were found related to reunification, time to permanency, or aging out. However, two new outcomes were identified with correlations to hearing quality – percentage of cases achieving permanency within 12 months and percentage of legal orphans.

Percentage of Cases Achieving Permanency within 12 Months. Giving parents an opportunity to be heard in hearings was significantly related to achieving permanency within 12 months. The correlation was .61 indicating a positive relationship. Jurisdictions that are more likely to give parents an opportunity to be heard also had a higher rate of cases achieving permanency within 12 months.

Percentage of Legal Orphans. Researchers explored the percentage of cases within a jurisdiction that are legal orphans (e.g., termination of parental rights but not achieved permanency). Two factors were related to this: mother’s attorney’s presence (-.61); and child’s attorney present (-.69). Increased presence of mother’s attorneys and increased child’s attorney presence were both related to a decreased number of legal orphans for that jurisdiction.

Summary of Linking Hearing Quality Factors to Outcomes

Table 7, below, illustrates the relationship between hearing quality and case outcomes. As noted in the table below, engagement of parties was related to almost every outcome of interest. Discussion, both generally as well as discussion of specific topics were also commonly related to outcomes. The table identifies which factors are related to outcomes and

indicates how an increase in the hearing quality factor is related to the case outcome factor. For example, as breadth of discussion increases (hearing quality factor), time to permanency decreases, so the (-) show that increases in the factor result in lowering this. For number of judges, the relationship is reversed, as the number of judges increases, the time to permanency also increases.

Table 7: Summary of Findings Linking Hearing Quality to Outcomes					
	Time to Permanency	Reunification	Permanency <12 Months	Age Out	Legal Orphans
Breadth of Discussion	Yes (-)			Yes (-)	
Discussion (Specific Topic)	Yes (-)	Yes (+)		Yes (-)	
Parties Present		Yes (+)		Yes (-)	Yes (-)
Engagement of Parties	Yes (-)	Yes (+)	Yes (+)	Yes (-)	
Findings on the Record					
Number of Judges	Yes (+)				
Number of Continuances	Yes (+)				

Recommendations

The Nevada Court Improvement Program (CIP) has been working to improve the quality of child welfare court process and practice for nearly a decade, including supporting judicial district Community Improvement Councils (CICs) in their efforts to identify local barriers to timely permanency, adoption, and termination of parental rights (TPR) and to develop and implement solutions to these barriers. The CIP has also supported training throughout the state on the elements of an effective and high-quality hearing process in child abuse and neglect cases. This study revealed significant improvements in hearing quality in Nevada in the last three years. Some recommendations are suggested to continue hearing quality efforts in Nevada and to suggest ideas for potential future research.

Based on the findings of the study, it is recommended that Nevada CIP

- *Continue discussion/training with the CICs on engagement strategies with parties who are present.* While engagement of mothers and fathers has improved since 2014, the hearing observations conducted in 2017 indicated that judges could further enhance their engagement of parties by directly asking questions, inquiring about their understanding of what happened in the hearing/hearing process, and giving parties an opportunity to be heard (and not only through their attorneys). As engagement is related to nearly all outcomes of interest, it is key that judges understand and implement strategies to engage both mothers and fathers in the process.

- *Continue discussion/training with the CICs on the importance of providing clear oral findings on the record in hearings.* When judges give clear oral findings on the record in hearings, they are providing added assurance that parties leave the hearing knowing what just happened (i.e., parties do not just have to rely on their attorneys to summarize the findings and orders of the judge). This could be used as an engagement strategy so that parents understand what happened today. As engagement is significantly related to outcomes, oral findings on the record may help contribute to parent's participation and perception of engagement in the case.
- *Increase training and efforts with CICs to integrate more robust discussion of key topical areas into court practice.* Discussion was a significant predictor of positive case outcomes. Discussion varies significantly across the state. For example, discussion of efforts to reunify, which is linked to multiple case outcomes, varied from occurring in 20% of hearings to 100% of hearings depending on the judicial district. Efforts to identify the critical topical areas and increase discussion of these may result in improved outcomes.
- *Continued discussion and efforts around ensuring parent and child attorneys are appointed early and present throughout the case.* Presence of parent and youth attorneys were linked to some positive outcomes. A better understanding of how attorneys impact hearing quality would be beneficial to Nevada.

In addition to recommendations, for improved trainings and discussions around hearing quality, some suggestions for future research and evaluation efforts are put forth. These include:

- *Continue efforts to examine relationship between findings on the record /next steps on the record and case outcomes.* The current study did not find a relationship between making a finding on the record and outcomes. However, further exploration could determine what information is provided, how detailed findings are, and whether they are explained to parents in a lay friendly way. Findings may serve as an engagement strategy and further ensure parents fully understand what occurred in the hearing.
- *Explore more closely the relationship between legal representation and case outcomes.* At present, the data could only examine the presence of the attorneys and the presence across the life of the case. A more robust study could examine time to appointment of counsel, continuity of counsel, and specific attorney trainings and behaviors that may be related to both improved hearing quality and outcomes on the case.
- *Continue to explore more fully the 72-hour hearing.* Prior research has demonstrated that the first hearing on the case can set the tone for all future hearings and parent's engagement in the process. Research has linked this hearing to multiple positive outcomes. A few judicial districts chose to explore this hearing, but the majority did not. Focusing specifically on one hearing type could further allow for cross site comparisons of practice and focus efforts on a critical stage in the process.