California Family Court Services Snapshot Study
Data Collection Methods

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Malcolm M. Lucas
Chief Justice

William C. Vickrey
Director

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE OF THE COURTS

California Statewide Office of Family Court Services

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California Family Court Services Snapshot Study

1991 Snapshot Study Advisory Panel

Lynn Bundy
Madera County

Jil Chipman
Trinity County

Dennis Hamlet
Alameda County

David Kuroda
Los Angeles County

Lee Yoder
Sacramento County

Administrative Office of the Courts

William C. Vickrey
Director

Stephen V. Love
Chief Deputy Director

Kiri S. Torre
Assistant Director
Court Services Division

Isolina Ricci
Statewide Coordinator
Family Court Services

Report Authors

Charlene E. Depner, Ph.D.
Coordinator for Research, Evaluation, & Statistics

Marlene B. Simon
Field Coordinator

Karen Cannata
Research Analyst

For further information about the
California Family Court Services Snapshot Study, call (415) 396-9153

DATA COLLECTION METHODS

To address questions asked about family court services by policymakers, judges, attorneys, mediators, researchers, special interest groups, and parents who use the family court, California's Statewide Office of Family Court Services conducted the 1991 *California Family Court Services Snapshot Study* (hereafter referred to as Snapshot Study). Export opinion and anecdotal reports have constituted the primary sources of information about these services. The Snapshot Study adds rigorous statistics that can be used to evaluate the utility of family court services as well as the prevailing experience of clients across the state.

The Snapshot study was conducted by California's Statewide Office of Family Court Services,[1] using a collaborative research model that featured consultation with providers and users of court-connected mediation across the state.[2] Primary responsibility for the scientific merit, administration, and analysis of the study rested with the Statewide Office, a coordinating agency. The research questions were formulated in consultation with family and court professionals as well as with parents who had used mediation. Individual court mediation service providers participated in the identification of information needs and the development of data collection methods that would ensure thorough sample coverage while protecting the client's right to participate in the study on a confidential basis. This collaborative model contributed not only to high rates of participation and sample coverage but also to the ultimate utility of the research findings.

Mediation of child custody and visitation issues is the most common of a variety of services provided in court-annexed family court services offices across California.[3]
In this report, the term "family court services" is used inclusively to label all services offered (e.g., mediation, evaluation, guardianships, pre-martial counseling). In some instances, separate statistics are reported exclusively for cases involving mediation, which constituted 79 percent of all family court services sessions conducted during the period of the study.

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[1]Under California Civil Code sections 5180-5183, the California Statewide Office of Family Court Services is mandated to (1) provide statewide coordination to assist counties in implementing mandatory mediation and child custody laws; (2) administer a program of training of court personnel involved in family law proceedings; (3) administer a program of grants for research, study, and demonstration projects in the area of family law; (4) establish and implement a uniform statistical reporting system on custody disposition and other family law matters; and (5) conduct research on the effectiveness of current law for the purpose of shaping future public policy.

[2]For a discussion of collaborative designs, see Weaver, R.R. & Ammar, N.H. (1991). A collaborative approach to applied survey research. *Sociological Practice Review* 2(4), 275-280.

[3]For complete details about services offered in each court, see *Profile: Child Custody Mediation & Evaluation Services in California Superior Courts* (Fall 1990). Statewide Offices of Family Court Services, Administrative Office of the Courts, San Francisco, California.

Study Design and Content

Chart A-1 summarizes the study design and content. Over 400 data elements were gathered from parents and counselors at different stages of each family court services meeting. Materials for parents were available in Spanish as well as in English.

Immediately prior to the session, each client completed the "Family Profile" questionnaire. This questionnaire provided a demographic profile of the family members. Mediation clients also described de facto arrangements for the distribution of parental time and responsibilities. Each party listed issues to be addressed in the sessions and provided a narrative about family circumstances, which ranged from medical care needs of children to issues of violence or substance abuse. The Family Profile also included measures of the interparental relationship, including contact, conflict, and cooperation.

CHART A-1
California Family Court Services Snapshot Study
Study Design and Content

Questionnaire:	**Family Profile**	**Counselor Information**	**Parent Viewpoint**
Completed by:	Each family court services client	Counselor or mediator	Mothers and fathers who used mediation
When completed:	Pre-session	Post-session	Post-session
Percent completed:	92%	99%	72%
Contents:	Demographic profile of parents, children De facto parenting arrangements Presenting issues Special circumstances Interparental relationship	Parties present Services provided Special procedures Issues covered Allegations Description of sessions Agreements made	Service helpfulness Opportunity to discuss the issues Satisfaction with process Satisfaction with agreement Suggestion for improvement

Following the session, the court counselor or mediator completed the "Counselor Information" form, which indicated the parties present in session, the service provided, special procedures used, a summary of the issues covered, any allegations that were made by parents, and a description of the intensity and productivity of the session. For mediation sessions, the mediator noted any agreements made and, if the family remained at impasse, what the next legal steps would be.

Mothers and fathers who used mediation also were asked to fill out a "Parent Viewpoint" questionnaire at the end of the session and to return it to the Statewide Office in a sealed envelope. Using this questionnaire, the parent evaluated the helpfulness of the mediation process, whether the issues were given a fair hearing, and overall satisfaction with the process and outcome of mediation.

Different proportions of eligible parties returned each form. The Family Profile was completed by 92 percent of all eligible parents. The completion rate for Counselor Information forms was 99 percent. Seventy-two percent of all mediation clients completed the Parent Viewpoint questionnaire.[4] Equal proportions of mothers and fathers too part in the study. Fifty-five family court services clients (50 mediation clients) completed forms in Spanish.

Despite the wealth of information provided by the study, there are limitations to the data. Disputes about custody and visitation extend over time and each case proceeds at a different rate. This project was dubbed the "Snapshot" Study because it focused on a brief time interval, depicting a cross section of families in all phases of mediation—those beginning the process, in the midst of negotiation, and concluding with an agreement of impasse. A complete understanding of the mediation process and its outcomes will require following events for families over time.

Coverage and Representativeness

The Snapshot Study was the first study with sufficient sample coverage to provide uniform statewide statistics for family court services, including court-annexed mediation. Pioneering research in mediation was often limited to specific programs or geographical regions or based on convenience samples not meant to represent the diverse population of parents using California's family court system.[5] Previous research had identified important issues but could not

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[4]Although lower than that for the Family Profile, the completion fate for the Parent Viewpoint is well within acceptable bounds for survey research and exceeds that obtained for comparable research in the general field of mediation. A combination of factors contributed to the lower response rate for the Parent Viewpoint questionnaire, including administrative oversights, the press of time, or simply a reluctance to complete additional paperwork. Elaborate measures were taken to ensure that responses to the Parent Viewpoint were confidential.

[5]California is diverse with respect to population and regional characteristics as well as court programs. Each superior court has the discretion to design a unique mediation program. Gathering valid statewide statistics about mediation clients, processes, and outcomes requires the use of a sample that cross-cuts the population in order to ensure that no particular type of client or program is systematically excluded or undercounted (thereby giving others undue weight).

Among the basic requirements of any statewide representative sample are two fundamental criteria: (1) All eligible individuals across the state must have equal opportunity to be included in the research. Studies confined to a particular mediation program or practice do not meet this requirement because they exclude other mediation programs across the state; and (2) A sizable proportion of all eligible subjects must be included. (The level of confidence in the findings increases with the proportion of eligible individuals who actually participate in the research. For example, because the Snapshot Study covered an unusually high proportion of eligible families, it is less likely that any particular type of client was systematically excluded.)

Research that does not meet the two criteria listed above cannot claim to be representative. Some research claims representativeness of the sample demographics are similar to those of the population being studied. However, this approach cannot guarantee sound statistics, since the sample could vary on consequential social and behavioral characteristics (e.g., the type of conflict, the amount of geographical mobility). Such unmeasured differences could profoundly affect the results.

take the next step—establishing the prevalence of those same issues across the state as a whole. In other words, gathering statewide statistics about mediation clients, processes, and outcomes requires the use of formal sampling methods designed to ensure that no particular type of program or client is excluded from the investigation. The Snapshot Study's sampling methods met these criteria and, as a result, the study offers what are to date the most representative and comprehensive data about court-based mediation in California.

CHART A-2
California Family Court Services Snapshot Study
Completion rates

Study period:	June 3-14, 1991
Sample coverage:	51 of 58 California counties 75 of 82 branch courts 1,699 of 2,047 FCS sessions statewide (83%) (91% of sessions in participating courts) 1,388 of 1,693 mediation sessions statewide (82%)
Mediation sample:	1,388 families 1,268 mothers 1,236 fathers 2,226 children 1,183 families with data from both mothers and fathers

Chart A-2 outlines the completion rates for the Snapshot study. The objective was to include all families who used family court services in the state of California during the study period, June 3-14, 1991. The study covered 51 of California's 58 counties, including 75 branch courts. Information was gathered from 1,699 families seen by court-based counselors during that period. This constituted 91 percent of all families seen in the courts participating in the study. If families in the 7 nonparticitpating counties are included in the statistic, the covered 83 percent of all families who used family court services in the state of California during the study period (82 percent of the families who used mediation). Within the 1,388 families who used mediation, 1,268 mothers and 1,236 fathers participated in the study. Questionnaires from both mothers and fathers are available for 1,183 families. There were 2,226 children in the pool of mediation families.

Ten superior courts had case volumes sufficiently high to yield sound statistics within a one-week period. Data for the one-week courts were weighted to permit extrapolation to the full two-week study period. Estimates of population parameters are based on a weighted sample of 2,140 families.

The study design calls for future follow-up interviews with the mediation parents. Eighty-four percent (2,276-1,159 mothers and 1,117 fathers) of parents seen in mediation during the study period agreed to be re-contacted at a later date.