NORTH CAROLINA EARLY CHILDHOOD ACTION PLAN:
DATA CONSIDERATIONS IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PROGRAM AND POLICY CHANGES
GOAL 6: PERMANENT FAMILIES FOR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE

Caroline Chandler, MPH; PhD Candidate, UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health, Department of Maternal and Child Health; Research and Engagement Team, Jordan Institute for Families

Paul Lanier, PhD; Kuralt Distinguished Associate Professor, UNC School of Social Work; Associate Director for Child and Family Well-Being, Jordan Institute for Families

Executive Summary

The North Carolina Early Childhood Action Plan (ECAP) was released in February 2019 and established goals and targets based on the current state of child health and well-being to improve early childhood outcomes by 2025. When this plan was released, we could not have known that the COVID-19 pandemic would disrupt lives across the state and nation. COVID-19 necessitated a sudden shift in how programs function and families are served. The pandemic has and will continue to have major public health implications. Further, children and families will experience ripple effects from school closures, the economic recession, extended time away from peers, and strain to the social safety net. Black and Brown families in particular have suffered greatly from COVID-19 due to structural racism and systemic oppression.

The goal of this document is to record changes to NC programs and policies that serve North Carolina families in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, identify data limitations resulting from those changes, and make recommendations about how to use ECAP data moving forward. This project aims to address the unforeseen challenges that have developed due to the COVID-19 pandemic by identifying programs are being implemented differently and changes to data that are being collected as a result of new implementation approaches.

Background

The North Carolina Early Childhood Action Plan (ECAP), which was released in 2019, establishes 10 goals aimed at addressing children's ability to live healthy lives, have safe and nurturing relationships, and learn and be ready to succeed. Each of the 10 goals includes targets and sub-targets that serve as indicators of improvement as the State works towards those goals. Goals, targets, sub-targets, and measures reflect the data that were available and the expected function of early childhood service systems prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has disrupted nearly all aspects of those service systems. Therefore, it is important to consider how service systems and data collection changed beginning in March 2020 so we can measure changes in each target and sub-target and make recommendations about how goals may need to shift or be re-prioritized in light of the pandemic.

Current Considerations

We reviewed each indicator in the ECAP and identified concerns about data quality based on our knowledge in July 2020 about how programs and policies have changed thus far. The summary table is color coded to indicate levels of concern over data reliability and validity due to changes in data collection, reporting, or practice in response to COVID-19. Reliability means that data are consistent across time. Validity means that the data are actually measuring the factor(s) they are intended to.

- Low data quality (red) indicates a measure that relies on data we anticipate will be unreliable and potentially invalid due to data collection and reporting changes or due to unknown procedural implications from COVID-19.
- Moderate data quality (yellow) indicates a measure that relies on data we anticipate is reliable but may be affected by currently unknown sources of bias. Data may have uncertain validity.
- High data quality (green) indicates a measure that relies on data we anticipate is reliable and valid and do not have reason to believe that there will be changes in data quality due to COVID-19 related barriers.

We do not recommend eliminating any data sources at this time despite some questions regarding data reliability and validity. It is reasonable to expect to see changes in trends for nearly all indicators beginning in March 2020 due to widespread policy and practice changes. By maintaining all original data sources and indicating where data may be unreliable or invalid, we can better identify whether there were actual changes in key indicators or whether some variance during the COVID-19 period may be due to data quality. We also recommend adding new data sources to some targets in cases where we believe the current data source may not be designed to capture nuanced variation.

We also rate the priority of each target for achieving ECAP goals in 2025 based on current predictions of the level of vulnerability and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the existing ECAP measures.

- High priority (red) means that efforts to meet a target need to increase substantially to overcome deficits that may by imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic or that efforts to meet a target are prioritized because they will have secondary effects on other targets.
- Moderate priority (yellow) means that efforts to meet a target may need to increase but that we do not anticipate downstream impacts due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Low priority (green) means that the indicator is still important but that we do not anticipate needing to increase existing efforts to meet targets once programs re-open.

Goal 6: Permanent Families for Children in Foster Care

ECAP Commitment: Babies, toddlers, and young children in North Carolina's foster care system will grow up in stable, consistent, and nurturing families, whether that is the child's birth family or through an adoptive family.

COVID-19 and Possible Impacts on Goal 6 Indicators:

- Families may face challenges completing the court ordered services that DSS is looking for them to complete due to closings, limited space available in programs, or limited remote access to services. This may have a long-term effect on the number of days to reunification beyond the COVID-19 emergency period.

- Families may face new or exacerbated challenges due to the stress and economic impact of COVID-19 that could extend time to reunification, adoption and termination of parental rights.

- In-person hearings were suspended from March 13-June 1, 2020. While some cases were heard via video conference or decided based on consent during this period, it is unknown if adjudication hearings were heard.
- District and superior courts were instructed to reschedule hearings to be heard after June 1, 2020 except in the case of emergency proceedings, including a domestic violence protection order, temporary restraining order, juvenile custody order, judicial consent to juvenile medical treatment order.

Indicator	Data Quality Considerations	Vulnerability
Number of Days to Reunification, Guardianship, or Custody for Children in Foster Care *Current Data Sources: Division of Social Services, Child Placement and Payment System, NC FAST*	**Moderate** – There may be delays in processing court records that could impact data quality.	**High** – Impacts will likely extend beyond acute COVID-19 quarantine period(s). Courts may be more lenient with parents with regard to the time it takes to achieve service/treatment goals due to COVID-19 closures.
Median Number of Days to Adoption for Children in Foster Care, if Reunification is Not Appropriate *Current Data Sources: Division of Social Services, Child Placement and Payment System, NC FAST*	**Moderate** – There may be delays in processing court records that could impact data quality.	**High** – Many factors may increase the average number of days to adoption for children in foster care, including delays in decisions to terminate parental rights or and new barriers to identifying adoptive families resulting from COVID-19.
Percent of Child Welfare Cases Adjudicated Within 60 days *Current Data Sources: Juvenile Court Record Database (JWISE), NC Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC)*	**Moderate** – There may be delays in processing court records that could impact data quality.	**Low** – Court cases are currently being held remotely or with as many people in the court room as deemed safe with other parties remote through Webex. We do not anticipate any long-term impacts on time to adjudication once courts re-open.
Percent of Child Welfare Cases That Have an Initial Permanency Planning Hearing Within 12 Months of Removal from the Home *Current Data Sources: Juvenile Court Record Database (JWISE), NC Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC)*	**Moderate** – There may be delays in processing court records that could impact data quality.	**High –** We anticipate potential delays to an initial permanency planning hearing, including barriers parents face to accessing recommended services and court closures. Delays in initial permanency planning hearings may have downstream implications for the number of days to reunification, termination of parental rights, and adoption.

Indicator	Data Quality Considerations	Vulnerability
Median Number of Days to Termination of Parental Rights *Current Data Sources: Juvenile Court Record Database (JWISE), NC Administrative Office of the Courts (AOC)*	**Moderate** – There may be delays in processing court records that could impact data quality.	**High** – Decisions to terminate parental rights may be postponed if family of origin is not able to access services that may promote reunification. This may impact other indicators, including time to adoption.