

# Needs Assessment of Reintegrated Families in Georgia

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## **Abstract:**

Georgia's child welfare reform has focused largely on ending child institutionalization. Today, development of alternative care services for children is a reform success. While more is needed to build on positive outcomes there are no empirical data available on the needs of children reintegrated from State care to their biological families.

The goal of the study was to identify diverse needs of reunified families and develop evidence-based policy-level recommendations to prevent re-entry into State care. The study assessed 93 families in which 155 children were reintegrated during 2011-2012 representing about 30% of all families/children reunified during the same period. The methodology was structured interview (with child and family, sometimes collateral) conducted by trained social workers based on a specifically designed tool that gathered information on variables like child and caretaker demographics, child and caretaker health and education status, family income and material situation, housing type and condition, basic need satisfaction of each reunified child, risk of abuse and neglect of each reunified child, family risks and family strengths, types of help provided to families, current family needs as seen by families and by social workers. The methodology also entailed social workers' assessment based on their observations. According to findings, children's safety status in biological families was mostly satisfactory and their basic needs were mostly met; however, numerous challenges and unmet needs were identified that are to be addressed in order to strengthen the families and prevent child re-entry into State care. The most acute and common problems identified were housing related problems, poor economic condition/parental unemployment, child's school/education related problems, substance abuse, parental conflict with law and mental health issues.

Different strengths and risks were associated with rural vs. urban families and single parent vs. two-three parent/caretaker families. Surprisingly, families with two or three caretakers appeared at greater risk of child antisocial behavior, parental conflict in law, substance abuse and corporal punishment. Families with 3 and more reunified children also appeared in greater risk of child antisocial behavior, substance abuse, and parental conflict with law.

Based on the study findings the following evidence-based policy level recommendations were made to Government of Georgia: (1) enhance multi-sectorial participation in child welfare reform, especially involvement of: (a) the Ministry of Education in solving children's school/education related issues; (b) local governments, housing and employment entities to address housing, economic and employment needs; (c) law enforcement entities to work on crime prevention; (2) enhance monitoring of reunified families, especially the ones with many children and many adults as high-risk groups; (3) increase access to psychological support, substance abuse and mental health counseling and programs fostering pro-social behavior (including employment); (5) develop programs tailored to regional and family characteristics.

In conclusion, the findings demonstrated that strengthening reunified Georgian families requires complex approach that entails minimizing factors that hinder and fostering programs that support family functioning.

