

Return on Investment of a Family Resource Center to the Child Welfare System:

Westminster Family Resource Center
Orange County, CA



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Background and Importance

Family Resource Centers (FRCs) are welcoming hubs of support, services, social connection, and opportunities for families that work with them utilizing a strengths-based, family-centered, multi-generational approach.ⁱ Resources available through FRCs range from basic needs (such as food pantries and utility assistance) to parenting classes, peer support, family development, leadership development, and more. FRCs meet families where they are, help them build on their strengths, and connect them to resources so that they can sustainably meet their needs. There is evidence that FRCs generate economic returns to the community; a 2014 analysis found that the Alabama Network of FRCs provided a return on investment of \$4.93 per dollar spent to the State of Alabama.ⁱⁱ These encouraging findings suggest that services provided across a network of FRCs have cost-saving implications at a state level.

FRCs play a key role in preventing child abuse and neglect. Child maltreatment is a pressing issue in the United States with far reaching effects for both individuals and systems.ⁱⁱⁱ Child maltreatment affects at least one in seven children in the United States annually,^{iv} and in 2015 the estimated cost of child abuse and neglect across the country was \$428 billion.^v Child maltreatment can have devastating effects on an individual's mental and physical health, and can also have far-ranging social and systemic impacts, including criminal justice, healthcare, education, and lifetime productivity costs. These broad impacts are estimated to cost society \$268,544 over the course of an individual's life.^{vi} Reducing child maltreatment not only benefits children, families and communities but also has the potential to save the country billions of dollars and allow for investment in other areas of need.^{vii}

FRCs often partner with local child welfare jurisdictions to prevent child maltreatment across the child welfare continuum, from providing primary prevention services to serving families who have been screened out of child welfare^{viii} to supporting families with open child welfare cases and post-reunification.^{ix} The majority of child maltreatment cases include neglect^x that often results from challenges accessing key resources such as food, clothing, shelter, medical care, or supervision.^{xi} A core FRC service is connecting families to these vital resources in their communities. Studies have found that FRCs increase protective factors for children's safety^{xii} and that programs delivered by FRCs can reduce subsequent family involvement in the child welfare system.^{xiii} Studies estimating the return on investment of FRCs to local child welfare systems would help advance our understanding of the important role that these community-based services play for families. Additionally, such studies can provide a more granular understanding of how the return on investment is realized within this particular sector.

The National Family Support Network (NFSN) is an organization made up of statewide networks of FRCs that aims to promote positive outcomes for all children, families, and communities by leveraging the collective impact of state networks and championing quality family support and strengthening practices and policies. Currently, 33 states and the District of Columbia have networks that include over 3,000 FRCs.^{xiv} NFSN advances the family support field by convening member networks and facilitating knowledge-sharing; promoting Family Support best practices and evaluation; and raising the visibility of how FRC networks support families across the U.S. In 2020, with support from Casey Family Programs, NFSN contracted with the OMNI Institute to explore opportunities to leverage existing research, evaluation, and/or data to quantify the economic return on investment that FRCs provide to local child welfare systems.

Between December 2020 and January 2021, OMNI and NFSN reached out to NFSN member networks and reviewed existing evaluations of FRCs to identify potential opportunities that could serve as return on investment case studies. Through this process, OMNI explored five potential options and ultimately identified two cases that met the following criteria:

- There were available data demonstrating a plausible connection between FRC services and child welfare system outcomes (e.g., comparisons between families who did and did not receive services; longitudinal data showing improved outcomes upon FRC or program initiation);
- There were available quantitative data demonstrating that the child welfare system has benefited (e.g., through reductions in the incidence of child abuse/neglect);
- The site was willing to work with the OMNI team to field questions, share data (e.g., operational costs), and be highlighted in a final public report; and
- Sites represented demographically different communities being served by FRCs to, as best as possible, reflect the diversity of communities served by family support programs across the United States (e.g., rural versus urban locations; racial/ethnic makeup of the community).

In this report, OMNI quantified the savings to the child welfare system in Orange County, California, from investment in Westminster Family Resource Center (WFRC), a member of the Families and Communities Together network of FRCs. A companion report quantifies the savings to the child welfare system for Teller County, Colorado, from investment in the Community Partnership Family Resource Center.¹

Families and Communities Together

Families and Communities Together (FaCT) is a collective impact initiative made of up 15 FRCs dedicated to strengthening prevention and intervention services to reduce child abuse and neglect. FaCT FRCs serve Orange County, a county of approximately 3.2 million people adjacent to Los Angeles in southern California. Across the county, 40% of residents identify as non-Hispanic White, 34% identify as Hispanic or Latino, 22% identify as Asian, 2% identify as Black or African American, 1% identify as American Indian or Alaska Native, and less than 1% identify as Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. Approximately 10% of the county's residents live in poverty.^{xv}

FaCT's mission is "to identify and promote promising best practices, train, fund, and advocate for FaCT-supported Family Resource Centers to be Orange County's community-based platform for prevention activities and family support services."^{xvi} FaCT follows NFSN's Standards of Quality for Family Strengthening and Support^{xvii} that detail quality family support practices that are aligned with Family Support America's Principles of Family Support Practice and the Center for the Study of Social Policy's Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework.^{xviii} In alignment with these standards, FaCT FRCs offer nine core services for families seeking support, including information and referral, family support, comprehensive case management, counseling, after school programs, domestic violence personal empowerment program, parenting classes, family reunification family fun activities, and adoption promotion services.

In 2021, Casey Family Programs, Charitable Ventures, Orange County Social Services Agency, and Catherine Roller White Consulting collaborated to conduct an evaluation that examined outcomes for the

¹ This companion report can be accessed at omni.org/cpfrfc-roi

child welfare system across the FaCT network.^{xx} This evaluation provided the opportunity to use data to calculate the return on investment for an FRC within the network that was serving a diverse community and had a large service area. After consultation with the evaluation team and a review of the demographic profile of the areas served by FRCs within Orange County as a whole, OMNI identified Westminster Family Resource Center (WFRC) as a strong option for this project.

Westminster Family Resource Center

WFRC was founded in 2000 and is “dedicated to improving the lives of families by facilitating the strengthening of the family unit through appropriate resources and services that promote self-sufficiency and healthy families.”^{xx} In service of this mission, WFRC offers an array of services to serve as a “one stop shop” for community residents to increase knowledge and gain access and linkage to family-friendly, strength-based support systems. WFRC is operated by the City of Westminster and works as a collaborative with various community-based organizations to support its target population of culturally diverse and low-income families. WFRC strives to be a welcoming place for all families, providing free services in an accessible location. These varied and comprehensive services are designed to help families build and maintain a strong foundation, encourage growth, enhance self-sufficiency, and support individual members and the family unit as a whole.

WFRC is centrally located in the City of Westminster, home to approximately 91,000 residents.^{xxi} During WFRC’s 2016-17 fiscal year, 75% of individuals who participated in services at WFRC identified as Hispanic or Latino, 13% identified as Asian, 8% identified as Caucasian or White, and 4% identified as another race or ethnicity; for 57%, Spanish was their primary language, and for 10% Vietnamese was their primary language. The majority (83%) of individuals who participated in services reported family income of less than \$50,000 per year, and 46% of families received food stamps.^{xxii}

Methods

Existing Evaluation Evidence

After selecting WFRC as the focus for this study, we leveraged the methods and data used in the FaCT evaluation, which included a quasi-experimental design, to consider child welfare outcomes. Specifically, in the evaluation, child welfare outcomes were examined within an FRC’s service area, which was defined as the census tracts^{xxiii} in which at least 1% of households were served by the FRC. For WFRC, 11 census tracts made up the service area, and on average, WFRC served 1.77% of households in that area. Once an FRC’s service area was defined, comparison areas from neighboring counties were statistically matched to each service area based on ten community-level indicators related to child maltreatment (e.g., percent of children in families with incomes below the poverty level; unemployment rate). Twelve census tracts from Los Angeles County were matched to WFRC’s service areas and these 12 census tracts served as the comparison area. This statistical matching method was used to compare child welfare outcomes for WFRC’s service area to a demographically similar area not served by an FRC over the course of two years (2016 and 2017, the most recent years for which complete data were available). These comparisons became the basis for the return on investment examined in this report.^{xxiv}

Social Return on Investment Model

Broadly, return on investment is a metric used to determine the efficiency of an investment, quantified as the net value of benefits relative to the net value of the investment. To calculate the return on investment of an FRC for the child welfare system, OMNI used a *social* return on investment (SROI) model. SROI describes the impact of a program or organization in dollar terms relative to the investment required to create that impact.^{xxv} SROI studies often examine a broad range of costs and benefits, including social, environmental, and economic, that could influence individuals, communities, and society as whole.^{xxvi} Because we were focused on benefits for the child welfare system in particular, we only considered those sector's outcomes. We excluded savings or increased expenditures in other social systems that may result from child maltreatment (e.g., educational, criminal justice, and health care costs), as well as other societal benefits (e.g., productivity).^{xxvii}

Using the framework provided by the New Economics Foundation,^{xxviii} we specified our SROI model as follows:

$$\text{SROI} = \frac{(\text{Outcome of Interest} - \text{Deadweight}) \times \text{Attribution} \times \text{Monetized Value of the Outcome}}{\text{WFRC Intervention Cost}}$$

Such that:

- *Outcome of Interest* is reduction in substantiated assessments of child maltreatment;
- *Deadweight* is the counterfactual number of substantiated assessments that would have occurred in the absence of WFRC;
- *Attribution* is the share of those substantiated assessments that is attributable to, or results from, WFRC;
- *Monetized Value of the Outcome* is the child welfare expenditure per substantiated assessment; and
- *WFRC Intervention Cost* is the cost of operating WFRC.

In this study, all calculations were conducted for each year for which data were available (2016 and 2017), and the final return on investment is the average of these two years' estimates. The following section identifies the data sources and calculations used to develop these estimates.

Data

In this section, we provide information on the underlying data used to estimate the SROI model depicted above, including narrative describing the data sources and underlying assumptions for each model component. When relevant, we provide the corresponding estimates used for each model component in the side bars. Unless otherwise noted, source data and estimates are drawn from the FaCT evaluation.

Outcome and Deadweight

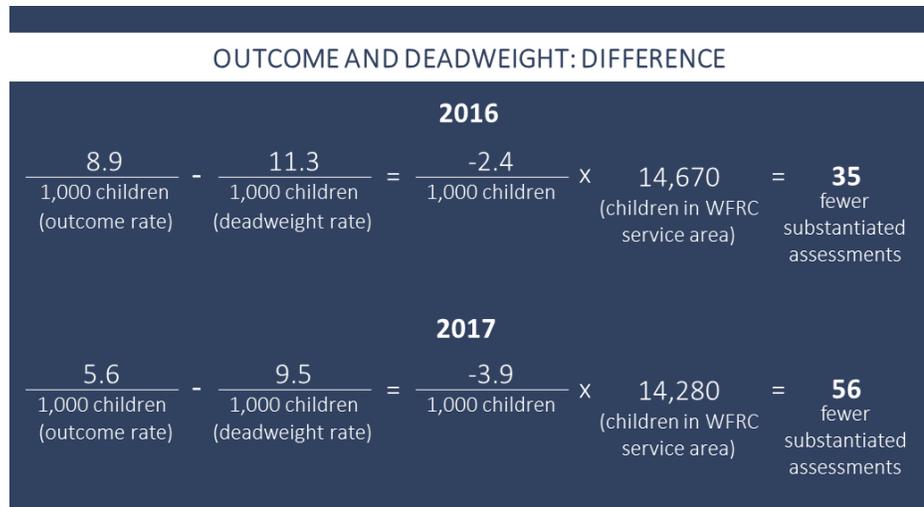
In this study, the outcome of child maltreatment is indicated by the population-adjusted estimated rate (per 1,000 children) of substantiated assessments in WFRC's service area (i.e., the 11 census tracts served by

WFRC) in 2016 and 2017. Deadweight is represented by the estimated rate of substantiated assessments in the comparison area (i.e., the 12 matched census tracts) in 2016 and 2017. Substantiated assessments refer to children who are experiencing verified cases of abuse and neglect and are one of the major sources of costs to child welfare systems across the country.^{xxix}

To calculate the difference in rate of substantiated assessments, we subtracted the calculated Deadweight rates from the Outcome rates. These differences in rates were then multiplied by the number of children in WFRC's service area in a given year, as compiled across the WFRC service area census tracts,^{xxx} to estimate the difference in number of substantiated cases between WFRC's service area and the comparison area, controlling for population differences. These analyses were conducted separately for 2016 and 2017.

Attribution

Best practices in determining attribution rely on experimental designs or quasi-experimental evaluation designs.^{xxxi} In this study, the assessment of outcomes is based on a subset of data from a quasi-experimental evaluation of the FaCT network that showed that substantiated assessments were lower in the WFRC service area than the comparison area in 2016 and in 2017. However, there are no definitive guidelines on what level of attribution should result from a quasi-experimental evaluation, and this evaluation was at a community level (i.e., did not directly assess maltreatment among families served by WFRC, but instead considered maltreatment in areas served by WFRC). Considering the lack of guidelines available, we estimated attribution at 50% for the SROI calculations and conducted sensitivity analyses to determine at what attribution rate the net value of benefits would be the same as the net value of investment.



Monetized Value of the Outcome

The monetized value of the outcome was defined as the estimated cost incurred by the child welfare system in California for each substantiated assessment in 2016 and 2017. Prior research estimates that in 2019, each substantiated assessment in California cost \$68,636 to the child welfare system.^{xxxii}

This estimate was developed using the steady-state methodology in which the total annual child welfare costs in one year serve as a proxy for the lifetime child welfare costs of maltreatment cases in that year.^{xxxiii}

To convert these estimates to 2016- and 2017-dollar values, we used the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index. In 2016, prices were 6.12% lower than in 2019; in 2017, prices were 4.12% lower than in 2019.^{xxxiv}

MONETIZED VALUE OF THE OUTCOME

2016		
\$68,636	- (\$68,636 x 6.12%)	= \$64,435
2019 estimated cost per substantiated assessment	Consumer Price Index inflation adjustment	adjusted cost per substantiated assessment
2017		
\$68,636	- (\$68,636 x 4.12%)	= \$65,808
2019 estimated cost per substantiated assessment	Consumer Price Index inflation adjustment	adjusted cost per substantiated assessment

Intervention Cost

The intervention cost is estimated as the total amount of funding WFRC used to provide services for families in 2016 and 2017. Because WFRC is not a standalone 501(c)3, we could not use publicly available tax records to specify the intervention cost. Therefore, we worked with WFRC and the City of Westminster to determine the total amount of funding required to operate WFRC, including direct funding across multiple sources and in-kind funding provided by the City of Westminster.^{xxxv} In 2016, this total was \$402,745; in 2017, this total was \$408,567; the average across both years was \$405,656.^{xxxvi}

Results

Return on Investment

The estimates used to calculate WFRC’s return on investment to Orange County’s child welfare system are provided below. First, we calculated the SROI in 2016 and 2017 separately because the child maltreatment outcomes and associated costs were different in each year. To estimate the overall SROI, we then averaged across the two years.

The estimated net value of benefits in 2016 is \$1,127,613; that is, in 2016 the estimated 35 fewer substantiated assessments saved the Orange County child welfare system \$1,127,613 relative to the comparison area. Relative to the net value of the investment in WFRC in 2016, there is a return on investment of 280%, or \$2.80. In other words, for every \$1 invested in WFRC in 2016, the Orange County child welfare system saved \$2.80.

$$\begin{array}{r}
 \begin{array}{l}
 35 \\
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The estimated net value of benefits in 2017 is \$1,842,642; that is, in 2017 the estimated 56 fewer substantiated assessments saved the Orange County child welfare system \$1,842,642 relative to the comparison area. Relative to the net value of the investment in WFRC in 2017, there is a return on investment of 451%, or \$4.51. In other words, for every \$1 invested in WFRC in 2017, the Orange County child welfare system saved \$4.51.

$$\begin{array}{r}
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 56 \\
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Estimated child maltreatment costs and WFRC expenses were slightly higher in 2017 than in 2016; however, the major difference in the 2016 and 2017 estimates are based on differences in the estimated

reduction of substantiated assessments in WFRC’s service area in those years (i.e., 35 fewer in 2016 and 56 fewer in 2017).

To estimate the overall return on investment, we calculated the average across 2016 and 2017; the average provides a more robust estimate of the return on investment than any one year, as it accounts for fluctuations across years and is therefore less susceptible to potential external influences that could have also contributed to changes in the number of substantiated assessments each year that are not accounted for in these models. Overall, results indicate that there is a return on investment of 365%. That is, for every \$1 invested in WFRC in 2016 and 2017, the Orange County child welfare system saved \$3.65.

$$\frac{\$2.80 + \$4.51}{2} = \$3.65$$

return on investment in 2016 and 2017

overall return on investment

Sensitivity Analyses for Attribution

We conducted sensitivity analyses by substituting the full range of attribution estimates (between 0 and 100%) into the SROI calculations in 2016 and 2017. These sensitivity analyses allow us to identify the minimum number of reduced cases of child maltreatment attributed to WFRC that results in a positive return on investment, specifically a return of at least \$1.01. Results indicated the lowest possible attribution estimate for a positive return on investment in 2016 is 18% (7 out of 35 cases of child maltreatment) and the lowest possible attribution for a positive return on investment in 2018 is 12% (7 out of 56 cases of child maltreatment). That is, if in each year at least seven of the cases of reduced child maltreatment are attributed to WFRC, there is a positive return on investment to the child welfare system in Orange County.

FIGURE 1. 2016 SENSITIVITY ANALYSIS FOR ATTRIBUTION

There is a positive return on investment in 2016 if at least 7 of the 35 cases (18%) of reduced child maltreatment are attributed to WFRC.

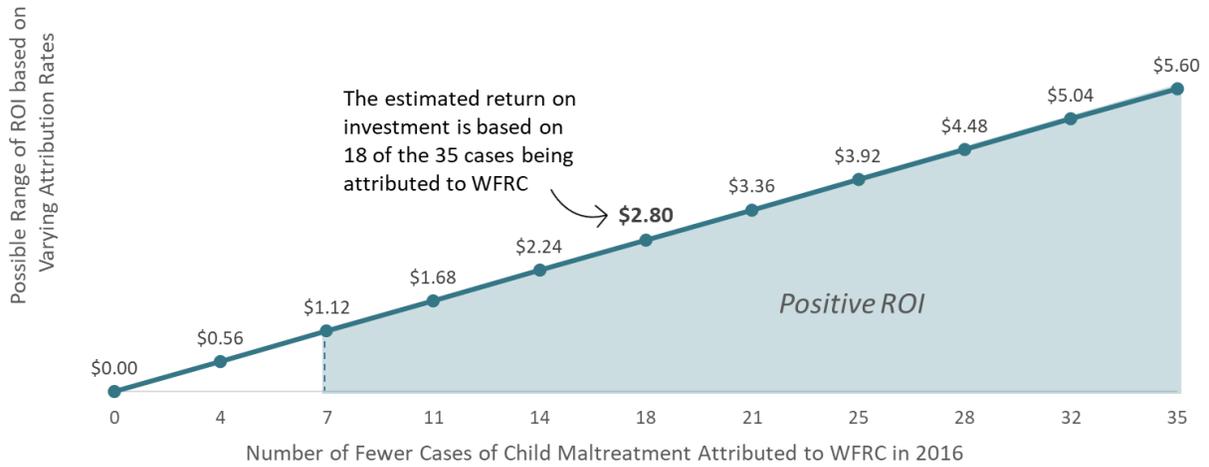
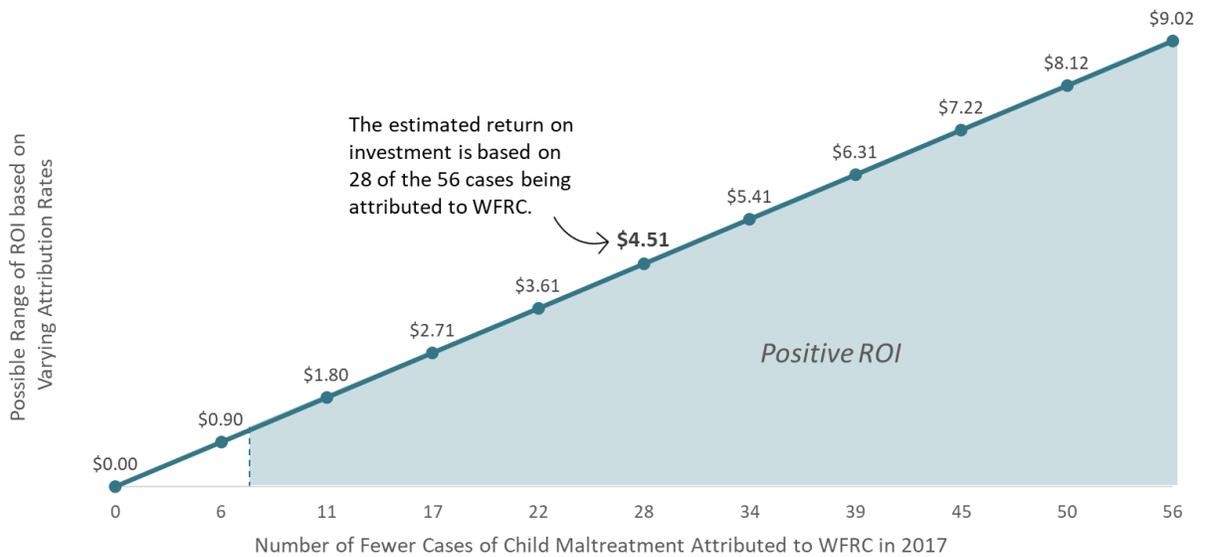


FIGURE 2. 2017 SENSITIVITY ANALYSIS FOR ATTRIBUTION

There is a positive return on investment in 2017 if at least 7 of the 56 cases (12%) of reduced child maltreatment are attributed to WFRC.



Conclusions

This report quantifies the estimated return on investment to a local child welfare system from investment in a Family Resource Center, providing economic evidence of the benefit of community-based family support services. These findings estimated a measurable benefit to the Orange County child welfare system provided by Westminster Family Resource Center, with a return of \$3.65 for every \$1 invested across 2016 and 2017.

OMNI examined the return on investment of an FRC with a 20-year history of serving the community as part of a larger network of FRCs focused on strengthening families and preventing child maltreatment. By comparing child welfare outcomes to a demographically similar area in California that is not served by an FRC, these results suggest that WFRC contributes to a reduction in child maltreatment, which in turn provides a cost saving to the child welfare system. In addition, these benefits were found consistently over the course of two years. Further, these preventative benefits were found for an FRC that serves ethnically/racially and linguistically diverse families.

The WFRC overall return on investment of \$3.65 can be considered in tandem with the 2014 findings from the Alabama Network of FRCs, which provided an estimated return of \$4.93 in immediate and long-term social value to the State of Alabama. The approach used to estimate the WFRC return on investment differed in important ways from study conducted in Alabama. This study examined one FRC rather than a network and focused solely on the return to one sector (i.e., the child welfare system) rather than the overall return across the state. Methodologically, we attached cost savings to changes in the target outcome (i.e., substantiated cases of child maltreatment) rather than to the services provided by FRCs, and we did not include broader family and societal impacts of child maltreatment.^{xxxvii} As such, we do not recommend making direct or relative comparisons between the estimated return on investment in Alabama of \$4.93 and the WFRC return on investment of \$3.65. Rather, both findings provide evidence for the economic benefits of FRCs, and this study estimates one way that these benefits are realized by one community in one sector.

FRCs provide community- and family-responsive services designed to meet the unique needs of the people they serve. They often blend and braid funding, and families who participate in services under one funding stream are not typically limited to those services only, but rather have broad access to the FRC and the many resources and referral networks at its disposal. As a result, it is challenging to implement rigorous research practices that quantify the impact FRCs have on families or on the child welfare system. In this report, we leveraged the results from a unique quasi-experimental evaluation of a network of FRCs in Orange County, California. However, there are a number of limitations inherent in this approach:

- The project relied on data from a quasi-experimental study that examined community-level outcomes. Ideally, we would have been able to examine child welfare outcomes for families served directly by WFRC and similar families who were not. Because these data were not available, we relied on data from the evaluation that used the most proximal community level available (i.e., census tracts). Further, although the identified comparison areas were matched based on a series of community-level indicators known to relate to risk of child maltreatment, the evaluation could not account for potential ecological differences between the FRC service areas in Orange County and the comparison areas in Los Angeles County (e.g., child welfare policies in how substantiations are

determined) that may be partially responsible for differences in substantiations across communities.^{xxxviii}

- There is not clear guidance on best practices in estimation of attribution in SROI models, even in the context of quasi-experimental evidence.^{xxxix} In the absence of specific information to guide our estimate, we used 50% because it is the midpoint of the possible attribution (ranging from 0 to 100%). Sensitivity analyses suggested that the return on investment is positive as long as the attribution rate is greater than 14%, but lower attribution rates return lower estimates of this return.
- Lastly, FRCs are as diverse as the communities that they serve. This study estimated the impact of one FRC in one county in California and may not be generalizable to other communities; thus, this analysis should be considered a case study of the possible return on investment that this type of family support can provide. This report was conducted in tandem with estimates of the return on investment of another FRC in Teller County, Colorado; those findings are available at omni.org/cpfrc-roi.

Despite the challenges of conducting rigorous evaluations in the context of FRCs and the limitations of this case study, these findings contribute to a growing body of evaluative data on the benefits of FRCs for their communities.^{xl} Specifically, they provide support for the economic benefits that an FRC can provide to a local child welfare system by reducing incidences of child maltreatment. Future evaluations that estimate cost-savings to the child welfare system in other localities and contexts will help the field better understand the economic contributions of FRCs in preventing child maltreatment. However, such evaluations rely on the availability of sufficient data; to support these efforts, FRCs, networks, and states should pursue efforts to directly link data systems that would allow tracking of service provision by FRCs and child welfare outcomes over time. In the meantime, the findings here suggest that in Orange County, California, WFRC provides a meaningful return on investment to the child welfare system, with a return of \$3.65 for every \$1 invested over a two-year period.

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- ^{xxxii} Safe & Sound (2019). *The economics of child abuse: A study of California*. <https://safeandsound.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Safe-Sound-2019-CA-Report.pdf>
- ^{xxxiii} *Child welfare services and their associated costs vary widely (e.g., the cost of an in-home service is lower than out-of-home placement) and the length of time that services last can also vary widely, from single points of contact to years of support. However, there are no longitudinal studies that provide direct estimates of the average cost to the child welfare system from a substantiated case; therefore, researchers have drawn on the steady state methodology (used in other fields such as chronic illness) to provide a best estimate. As applied here, this approach assumes that the types and length of services provided by a child welfare agency remains relatively steady year over year, and that the average cost captures the variation in types of and length of services provided to families and their varying circumstances*. Birnbaum, H., Leong, S., & Kabra, A. (2003). Lifetime medical costs for women: Cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and stress urinary incontinence. *Womens Health Issues*, 13(6), 204–213. doi: [10.1016/j.whi.2003.07.001](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.whi.2003.07.001); Fang, X., Brown, D. S., Florence, C. S., & Mercy, J. A. (2012). The economic burden of child maltreatment in the United States and implications for prevention. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 36(2), 156-165. doi: [10.1016/j.chiabu.2011.10.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2011.10.006)
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^{xxxvi} Per communications with Orange County's Social Service Agency, 54% of FaCT funding originates from Child Welfare Services funding; this includes a blend of federal (4%), County (4%), and 2011 Realignment (92%) funds (in California, the 2011 Realignment shifted fiscal and program responsibilities for a number of social service programs, including Child Welfare Services, from the state to counties).

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^{xxxviii} For a more complete discussion of the limitations of this evaluation, see: White, C.R., Bonfanti, P., Pecora, P.J., Santini, K., Danczak, E., Cabrera, J., & Rozanski, T. (forthcoming). *The impact of Families and Communities Together on referral rates to Child Protective Services: A census tract comparison group study*. Seattle, WA: Casey Family Programs.

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