

The Impact of Child Age in Court-Involved Child Welfare

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Introduction

- Previous research has found differences in child welfare processes and outcomes based on child age
- Stahmer et al. (2020) found children who remained in-home during child welfare (CW) involvement were more likely to be older than children who were removed from home. Additionally, children who remained in-home during CW involvement were less likely to use offered services.
- Wildeman et al. (2020) found infants in foster care were less likely to be reunified with parents than older children.
- Acknowledging and addressing age-related challenges is important when helping families achieve stability after child welfare involvement and should be considered during the entire court process

Research Questions:

- Do families with younger children experience differences in court case timelines compared to families with older children?
- Are there age-related differences in youth trauma assessment completion?

Methods

Data Collection

- Data come from court record review of juvenile court cases in Lancaster County, Nebraska (n = 233 cases) that contain allegations of child abuse or neglect
- The sample includes cases that are included in specialized *problem-solving tracks* (n = 122) and cases that are on *traditional court processes* (n = 111)
- Cases were grouped for analyses based on the age of youngest child in the family: less than 4 years old, between 4 and 8 years old, or older than 8 years old

Definition of Terms

- **Trauma Assessment:** Therapeutic assessment for children used to determine the presence and impact of traumatic events on psychological well-being (e.g., Child-Parent Psychotherapy)
- **Petition:** Official court filing that includes allegations of child abuse or neglect pursuant to Neb. Rev. Stat. §43-247(3)(a)
- **Disposition:** Hearing to determine what is in the best interest of the child and where the court will order services to help remediate issues that brought the family to court

Results

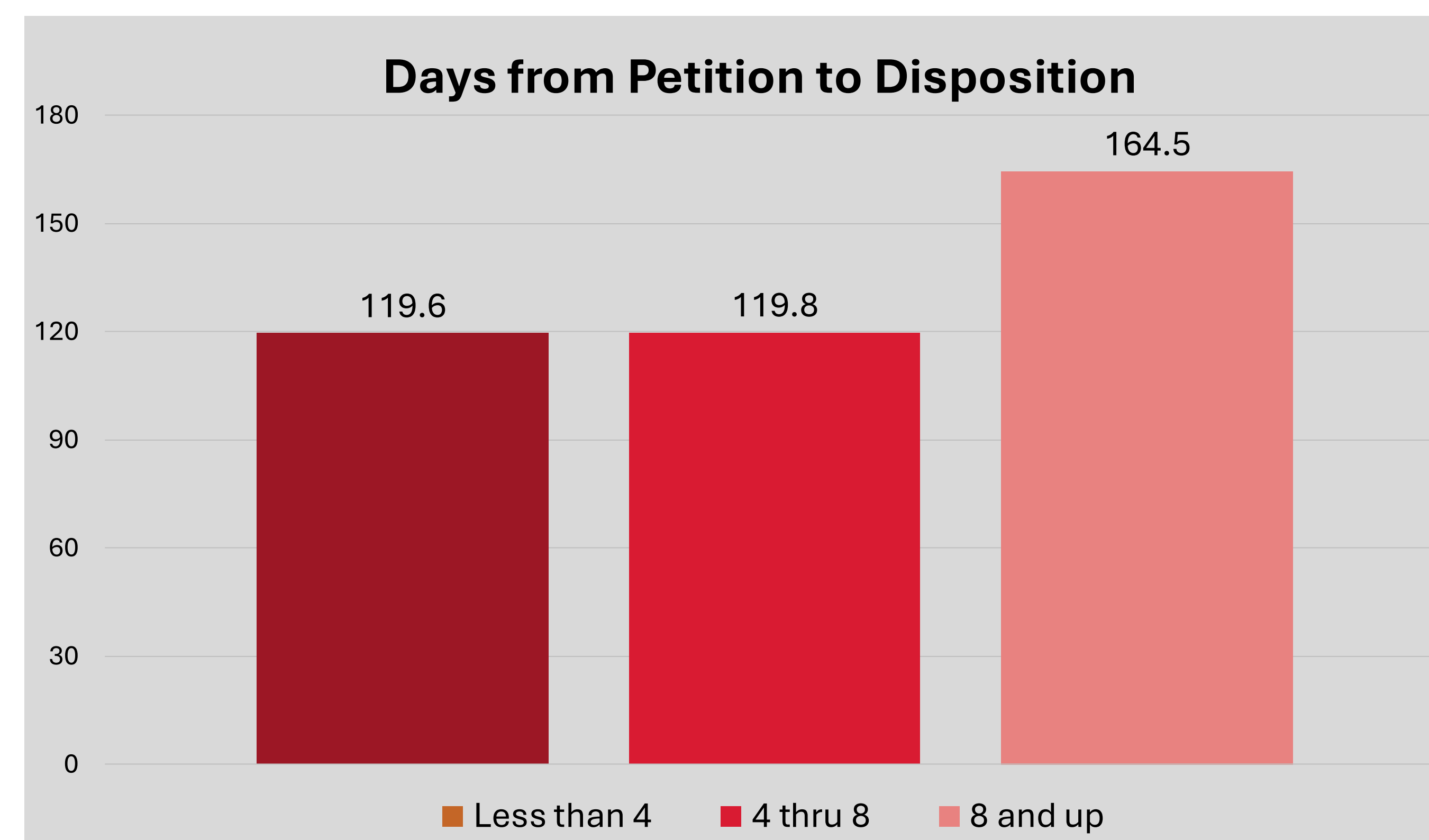
Case Timelines

Traditional Process:

- Families whose youngest child is less than 4 years old had *more hearings* ($F=4.454, df=2; p=.014$) and *more motions* ($F=3.886, df=2; p=.023$) filed compared to the families of the other two age groups.

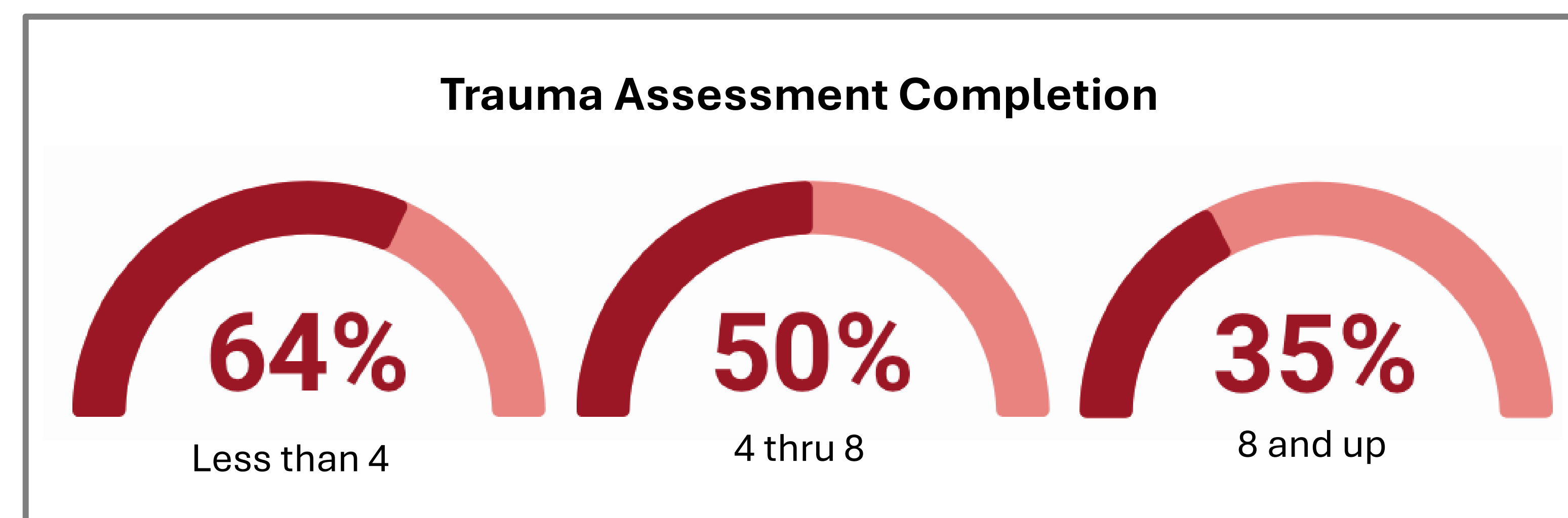
Problem-Solving Track:

- Families whose youngest child is less than 4 years old and families whose youngest child is between 4- and 8-years old experience *fewer days from petition to disposition* than those whose youngest child is over 8 years of age completion ($F=4.140, df=2; p=.019$)



Trauma Assessments

- When examining the entire sample, there is a significant group difference in child trauma assessment completion ($F=6.673, df=2; p=.002$)
- Cases where the youngest child is less than 4 years old were more likely to have a trauma assessment completed than cases where the youngest child is 8 years old or older.



Discussion

- There were significant age-related differences for families with younger children regarding the case timeline of days from petition to disposition.
- However, no differences were found for other case timeline variables (e.g., time to reunification or case closure) as a factor of child age.
- For the sample as a whole, cases involving younger children were more likely to have completed trauma assessments. One possible explanation is that older children may have had assessments previously or may already be receiving trauma-informed services.

Practice and Policy

- The findings can help inform efforts to raise awareness about the need and availability of infant and early childhood mental health services.
- While the high rate of trauma assessments among very young children is encouraging, it does raise concerns about whether there are enough IECMH providers to meet the need.

Future Research

- Research should continue to explore age-related differences both for the children involved and for the services being ordered, as some services may be more appropriate or effective for different groups.

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NEBRASKA RESOURCE PROJECT FOR VULNERABLE YOUNG CHILDREN

