

INQUIRY AND COMPLAINT PROFILES

The Ombudsman listens to families and citizens who **contact** the office with questions or concerns about services provided through the child protection and child welfare system. By listening carefully, the Ombudsman is able to respond effectively to their **inquiries** and **complaints**.

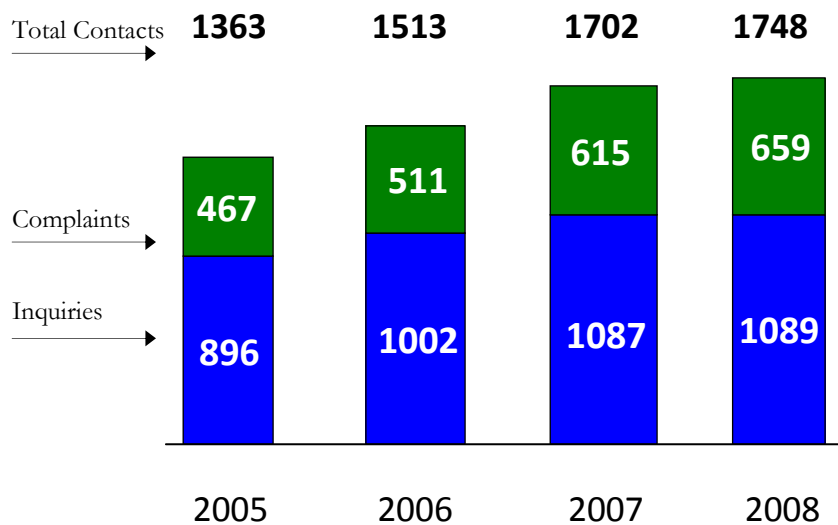
This section describes contacts made by families and citizens during the Ombudsman’s 2007 and 2008 reporting years.³ Data from previous years are included for comparison.

CONTACTS

Families and citizens contacted the Ombudsman **1702** times in 2007 and **1748** times in 2008. These contacts were **inquiries** made by people seeking information and assistance. Approximately **one third** of these contacts were formal **complaints** seeking an Ombudsman investigation.

Contacts to the Ombudsman

September 1 to August 31



Contacts. When families and citizens contact the Ombudsman, the contact is documented as either an inquiry or complaint.

Inquiries. Persons call or write to the Ombudsman wanting basic information on how the office can help them with a concern, or they have questions about the child protection or child welfare system. The Ombudsman responds directly to these inquiries, some of which require additional research. The office refers other questions to the appropriate agency.

Complaints. Persons file a complaint with the Ombudsman when they have a specific complaint against the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) or other agency that they want the office to investigate. The Ombudsman reviews every complaint that is within its jurisdiction.

³ The Ombudsman’s annual reporting period is September 1 to August 31.

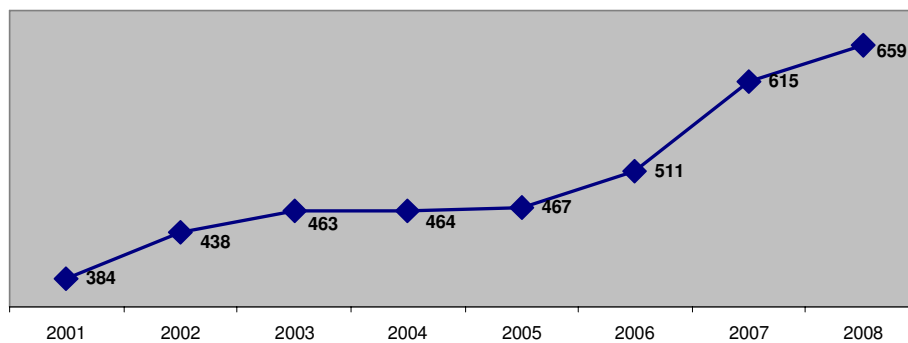
COMPLAINTS RECEIVED

A complaint to the Ombudsman must involve an act or omission by the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) or another state agency that affects:

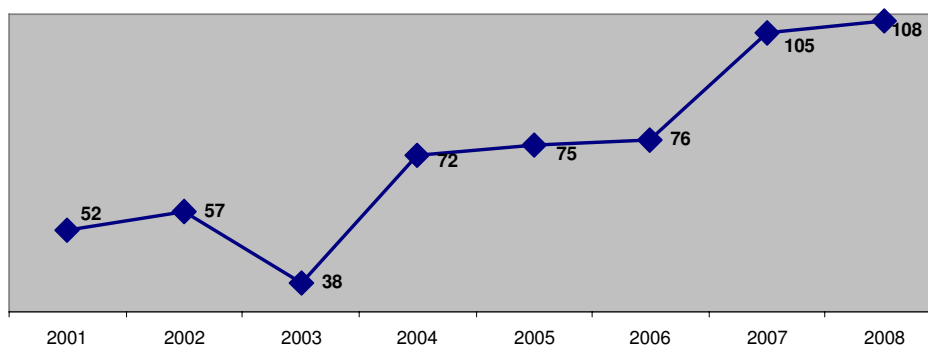
- A child at risk of abuse, neglect or other harm by a parent or caretaker.
- A child or parent who has been the subject of a report of child abuse or neglect, or parental incapacity.

Total complaints to the Ombudsman have increased by nearly 30% since 2006. The Ombudsman received 615 complaints in 2007, an increase of 20% over 2006. In 2008, complaints increased 7% over 2007. The graphs below describe the increase in total and emergent complaints since 2001. **Emergent complaints have increased over 40% since 2006.**

Total Complaints Received
September 1 to August 31



Emergent Complaints Received
September 1 to August 31



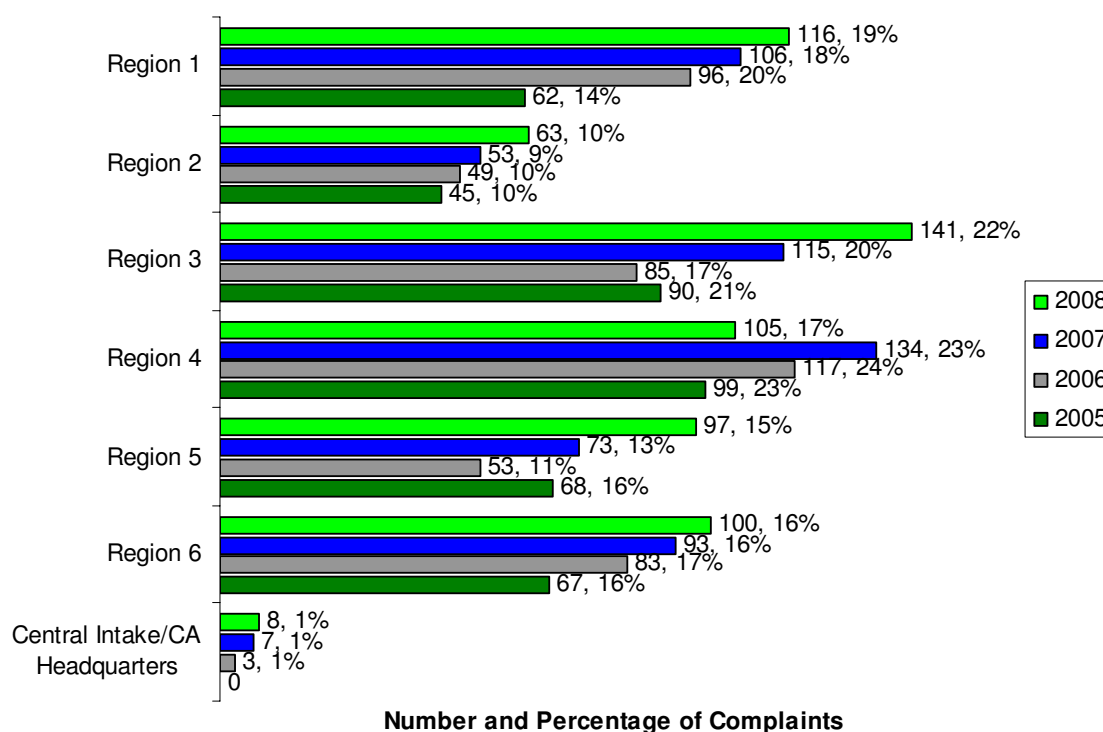
DSHS REGIONS AND DIVISIONS IDENTIFIED IN COMPLAINTS

The Department of Social and Health Services' (DSHS) Children's Administration (CA) is the state's largest provider of child protection and child welfare services. It is therefore not surprising that the Children's Administration was the subject of 94% of complaints in 2007 and 96% of complaints in 2008 to the Ombudsman.⁴

Of the complaints against the Children's Administration, 97% were directed at the Division of Children and Family Services (DCFS), which includes Child Protective Services, Child Welfare and Adoption Services, and Family Reconciliation Services. A small percentage (3%) involved the Division of Licensed Resources (DLR), which licenses and investigates alleged child maltreatment in foster homes, group homes, and other residential facilities for children.

During the 2007 reporting year, complaints increased from all 6 regions. In 2008, all regions except for Region 4 had an increase in complaints received, with the most significant increases coming from Regions 3 and 5.

Complaints about the Children's Administration by DSHS Region

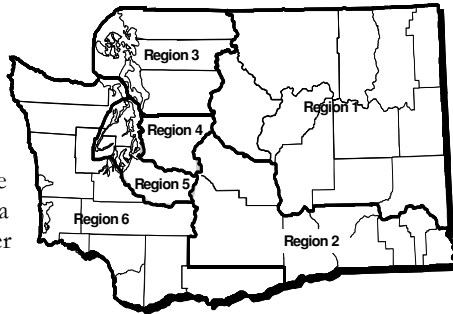


⁴ The remaining complaints were directed against other DSHS divisions (such as Developmental Disabilities and Mental Health), Washington Courts, local CASA/GAL programs, DSHS contract providers, and tribal welfare services.

Complaints by DSHS Region and Office

Regional Offices:

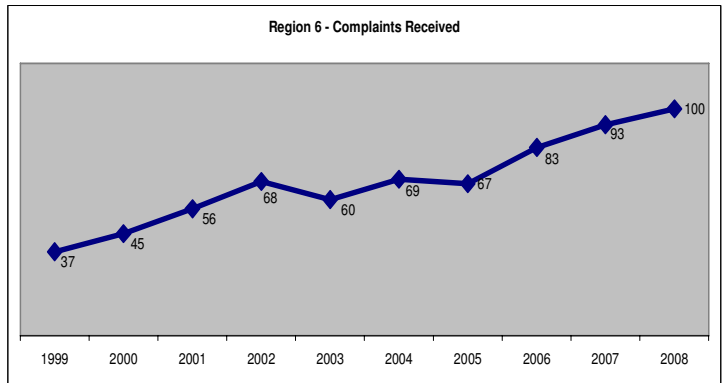
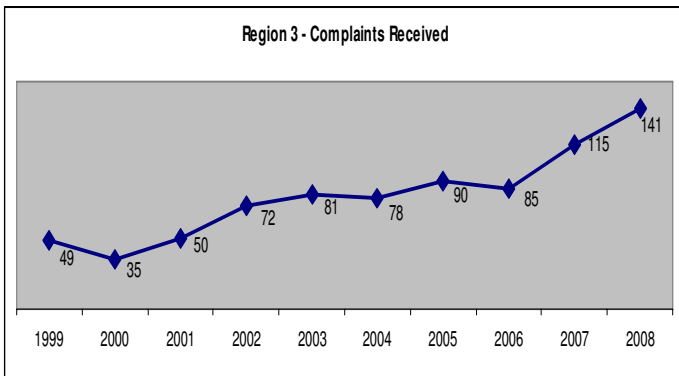
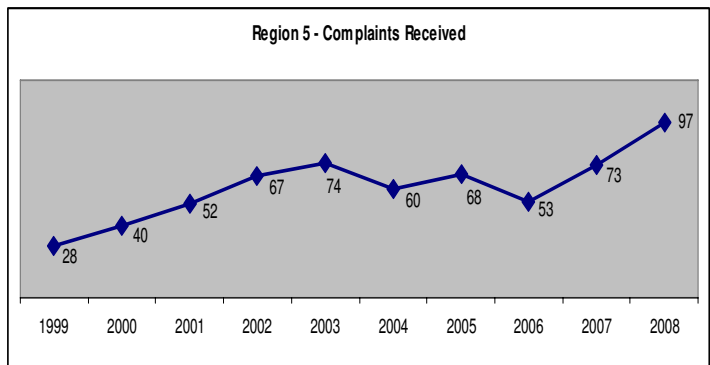
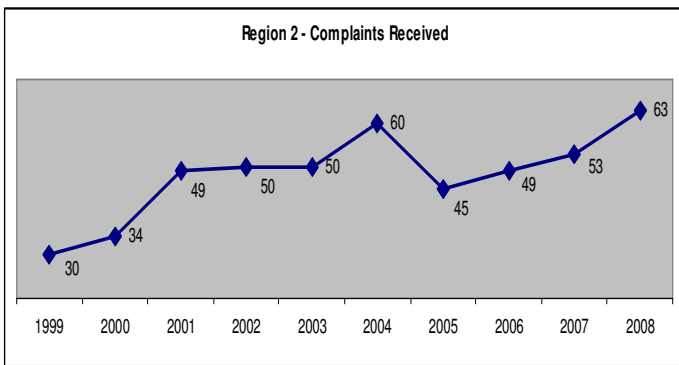
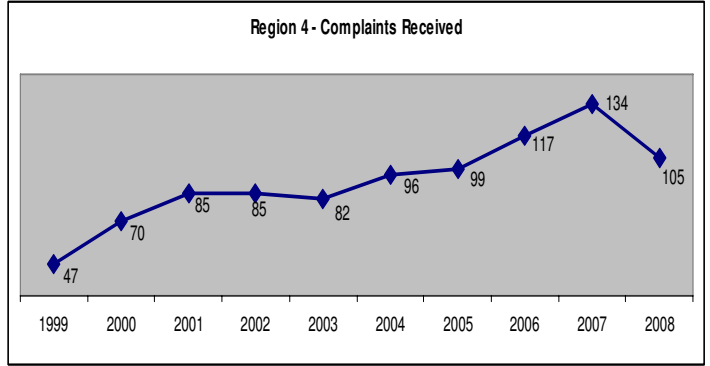
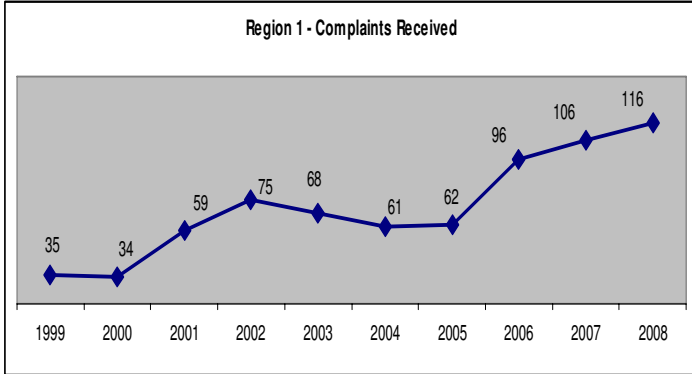
- Region 1 – Spokane
- Region 2 – Yakima
- Region 3 – Everett
- Region 4 – Seattle
- Region 5 – Tacoma
- Region 6 – Vancouver



	2007		2008	
	DCFS	DLR	DCFS	DLR
Region 1 Totals	105	1	115	1
Spokane	61	1	54	1
Colville	15		23	
Moses Lake	10		20	
Wenatchee	4		8	
Colfax	3		4	
Newport	4		3	
Omak	6		1	
Republic	1		1	
Clarkston	1		1	
Region 2 Totals	49	4	62	1
Yakima	14	3	20	1
Richland/Tri-Cities	16		16	
Walla Walla	8		16	
Toppenish	3	1	7	
Ellensburg	5		3	
Sunnyside	1		0	
White Salmon	1		0	
Goldendale	1		0	
Region 3 Totals	112	3	137	4
Everett	29	2	39	3
Bellingham	13		31	
Alderwood / Lynnwood	16	1	20	
Arlington/ Smokey Point	23		16	1
Mount Vernon	12		15	
Monroe / Sky Valley	10		9	
Oak Harbor	9		7	
Friday Harbor	0		0	

	2007		2008	
	DCFS	DLR	DCFS	DLR
Region 4 Totals	123	11	98	7
King South/ Kent	37	10	25	2
Martin Luther King Office	20		18	
King West	26	1	17	1
King East/ Bellevue	19		16	
Office of Indian Child Welfare	13		14	
Seattle Centralized Services	5		3	
White Center			3	
Seattle Central	3		2	4
Region 5 Totals	71	2	93	4
Tacoma	57	2	71	3
Bremerton/Kitsap	14		22	1
Region 6 Totals	90	3	96	4
Vancouver	25	1	33	4
Aberdeen	18		16	
Port Angeles	10		9	
Centralia	14		7	
Tumwater	9		7	
Kelso	4		7	
Shelton	6		6	
Stevenson	2		3	
Lacey/Olympia	2	2	3	
South Bend			3	
Long Beach			1	
Port Townsend			1	
Forks			0	
Statewide	7	0	8	0
Children's Administration Headquarters	2		6	
Central Intake	5		2	

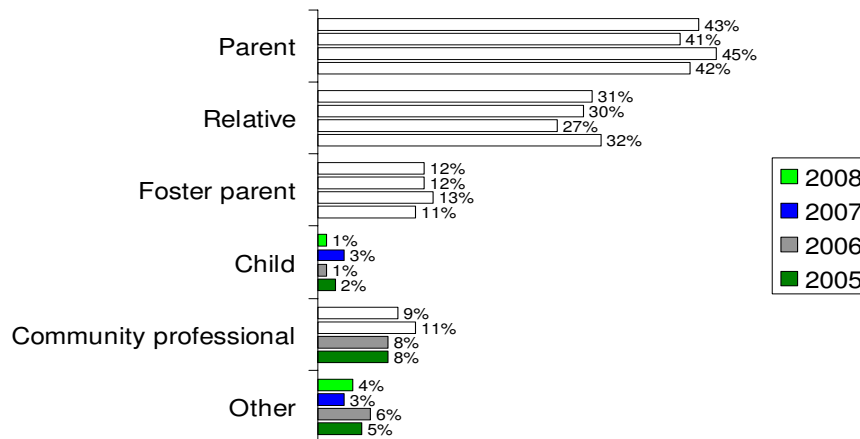
Regional Complaint Trends, 1999-2008



COMPLAINT PROFILES

Relationship of Persons Who Complained

As in previous years, parents, grandparents and other relatives of the child whose family is involved with DSHS filed the majority of the complaints to the Ombudsman. We continue to have very few children contacting the Ombudsman directly on their own behalf. Our outreach to adolescents as part of our 2007 survey of youth in group care (see page 35) resulted in a spike of complaints received from youth. We believe that the newly-developed pamphlet on the rights of youth in foster care (developed and distributed by The Mockingbird Society), which contains contact information for the Ombudsman, will greatly assist in our efforts to increase awareness of OFCO's existence and purpose among youth in out-of-home care, and we aim to broaden our outreach to youth by continuing to visit youth in group care at regular intervals in the future.



Race/Ethnicity of Persons Who Complained

OFCO's complaint form has an optional question asking complainants to identify their race or ethnicity, for the purposes of tracking whether the office is adequately serving and representing all Washington citizens. We include this data here to show which sectors of the community we are reaching and where we need to improve our outreach.

Race/Ethnicity	OFCO 2006*	OFCO 2007*	OFCO 2008*	WA State Census**
Caucasian	80.6%	80.2%	80.1%	85.0%
African American	8.6%	11.5%	9.7%	3.5%
American Indian/Alaska Native	9.0%	8.5%	6.7%	1.7%
Hispanic	3.9%	2.8%	5.0%	8.8%
Asian/Pacific Islander	1.4%	0.8%	1.8%	6.4%
Other	1.8%	0.5%	1.5%	--
Multi-Racial	3.7%	4.4%	5.5%	3.0%
Declined to Answer	2.3%	2.9%	5.6%	--

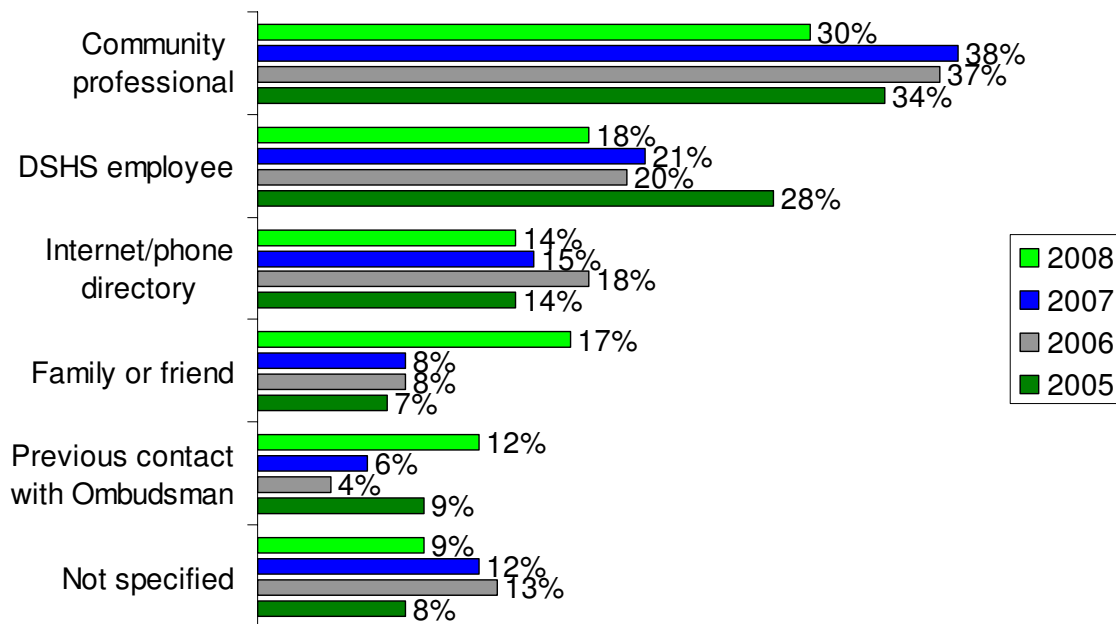
*Annual totals equal over 100% because the OFCO complaint form allows complaint forms to select more than one race/ethnicity.

**Source: US Census 2006 estimates (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/53000.html>)

As the table above shows, African Americans and American Indians are overrepresented in complaints made to OFCO as compared with their representation in state population data, while Hispanic and Asian populations are underrepresented. OFCO may need to strengthen outreach efforts to Hispanic and Asian groups. However, when race/ethnicity data of children who were identified in complaints is compared with the population of children served by the Children’s Administration, complaints to OFCO appear to evenly reflect the population of children in the child welfare system (see page 14).

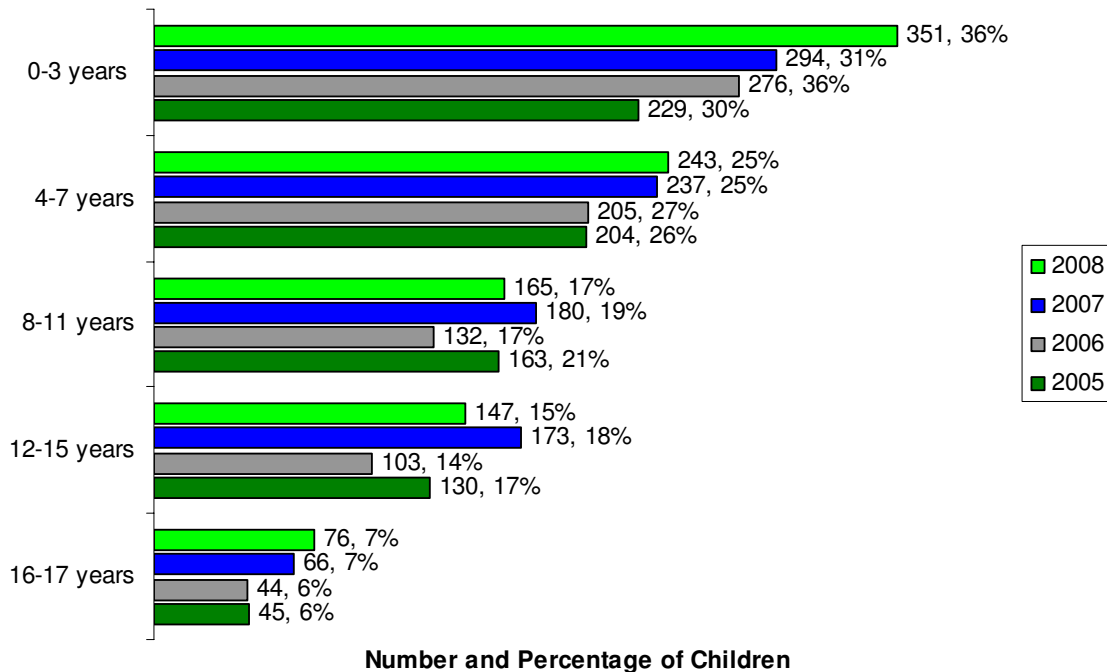
How they Heard about the Ombudsman

The majority of individuals filing complaints with the Ombudsman indicated that they were referred to the office by someone else. Many individuals reported that they were referred by a **community professional/service provider** (e.g., teacher, counselor, child care provider, doctor, private agency social worker, mental health professional, attorney, CASA/GAL, legislator’s office) or **DSHS worker**. A growing number of individuals were referred by a **friend or family member**. Other individuals had **previous contact** with the Ombudsman or stated they found the office via the **Ombudsman web site or telephone directory**. The remaining complainants did not specify how they heard about the Ombudsman.



Age of Children Identified in Complaints

As in previous years, most of the children identified in complaints to the Ombudsman were age seven or younger. Older adolescents continue to be identified in much smaller numbers.⁵



Race/Ethnicity of Children Identified in Complaints

Because children may identify with more than one race, it is difficult to accurately measure whether complaints to OFCO represent children of various races proportionate to the state population and the total number of children in placement (as indicated in the table below). However, it does appear that Caucasian and African American children are overrepresented in complaints to the Ombudsman, while all other groups are fairly evenly represented. When these figures are compared with the state child population, however, both children in placement and children who are the subject of complaints to the Ombudsman are greatly overrepresented in the African American and American Indian population groups.

Race/Ethnicity	OFCO 2006*	OFCO 2007*	OFCO 2008*	Children's Administration**
Caucasian	78.9%	76.8%	80.8%	60.6%
African American	14.7%	20.0%	17.2%	10.1%
American Indian/Alaska Native	11.4%	11.1%	11.3%	12.2%
Hispanic	11.7%	8.7%	12.5%	14.4%
Asian/Pacific Islander	2.2%	1.4%	3.5%	1.5%
Other	1.7%	1.6%	2.7%	3.5%
Multi-Racial	9.3%	11.4%	15.5%	10.7%
Declined to Answer	--	0.5%	0.1%	1.6%

*Data adds up to over 100% because people may self-report more than one race

**Source: Children's Administration Performance Report 2007 (<http://www1.dshs.wa.gov/pdf/ca/07Report2Intro.pdf>)

⁵ Some children were counted more than once because they were identified in more than one complaint.

FREQUENTLY IDENTIFIED COMPLAINT ISSUES^{6 -}

ISSUE	NUMBER OF COMPLAINTS		
	2006	2007	2008
Child Safety	188	211	250
Failure to protect children from parental abuse or neglect	108	122	138
Physical abuse	33	37	48
Sexual abuse	25	22	24
Emotional abuse	9	8	13
Neglect/lack of supervision	35	50	53
Other	6	5	0
Developmentally disabled child in need of protection	4	2	2
Children with no parent willing/capable of providing care	14	18	17
Failure to address safety concerns involving child in foster care or other substitute care	54	58	76
Failure to address safety concerns involving child being returned to parental care	8	11	17
Dependent Child Health, Well-being & Permanency	113	134	165
Inappropriate change of child's placement, inadequate transition to new placement	33	43	45
Failure to provide child with medical, mental health, educational or other services, or inadequate service plan	34	43	52
Inappropriate permanency plan or unreasonable delay in achieving permanency	29	33	47
Failure to provide appropriate adoption support services / other adoption issues	14	7	14
Inappropriate placement / inadequate services to children in institutions and facilities	3	8	7
Family Separation and Reunification	236	224	309
Unnecessary removal of child from parental care	54	40	40
Unnecessary removal of child from relative placement	25	9	28
Failure to place child with relative (including siblings)	43	54	68
Other inappropriate placement of child	19	19	22
Failure to provide appropriate contact between child and family	33	41	43
Failure to reunite family	46	51	86
Inappropriate termination of parental rights	8	6	5
Concerns regarding voluntary placement and/or service agreements for non-dependent children	3	2	10
Other family separation concerns	5	2	7
Complaints about Child Protective Services	--- ⁷	13	19
Inadequate CPS investigation	--	0	7
Failure to screen in CPS referral	--	1	3
Delay in completing CPS investigation	--	0	3
Failure to notify subject of CPS investigation of CPS findings	--	2	3
Heavy-handedness by CPS worker/unreasonable demands on family	--	10	3

⁶ Note that many complaints identified more than one issue.

⁷ Data not reported in 2006.

Other Common Complaint Issues	80	76	100
Foster parent retaliation	1	5	6
Other foster care licensing / foster parent issues	10	16	15
Relative caregiver issues	--	1	4
Breach of confidentiality by agency	7	3	7
Unprofessional conduct, harassment, retaliation or discrimination by agency staff			
Children's legal issues	10	15	9
Violation of parent's rights/failure to provide parent with services	4	9	4
Communication failures	35	22	39
	13	5	16

The above table shows the number of times various issues within these categories were identified in complaints. As in previous years, the **safety of children living at home or in substitute care** (raised in **461** complaints over the two year reporting period, 2007-08), as well as issues involving the **separation and reunification of families** (**533** complaints), were by far the most frequently identified issues in complaints to the Ombudsman. Both *child safety* and *family separation* issues **increased by about one-third** from 2006 to 2008. Concerns about the agency's *failure to protect children from physical and emotional abuse* and *safety of children in out-of-home care* increased significantly since 2006. However, the highest increase in safety-related complaints was seen in **safety concerns involving children being returned home**, slightly more than **doubling** since 2006.

Family separation and reunification issues likewise saw some dramatic increases. Complaints regarding the agency's **failure to reunify** a family increased by 87% since 2006. Concerns about **children not being placed with a relative or sibling** have increased by 58% since 2006. Issues involving **services to parents and parents' rights** decreased by half in 2007 but went back up to 2006 levels in 2008.

Also as in previous years, the **welfare and permanency of dependent children** remained our third-highest category of complaints (**299** over the two-year period). These issues *increased even more sharply (by 46% since 2006)* than child safety and family separation issues. Issues involving **inappropriate permanency plans or delays in permanency** saw the **sharpest increase** in this category (by **62%** since 2006).

Who Complains About What?

Over the years there have been **consistent themes** in complaints made by particular **types of complainants**. These are the top complaint issues by complainant type, from 2005-2008:

- **Parents** typically raised concerns about family separation and reunification.
- **Relatives** raised concerns about both family separation and reunification and child safety.
- **Community professionals** reported concerns about both child safety and the health and well-being of dependent children.
- **Foster parents** typically reported concerns about dependent children's health and well-being.
- The few **children** who have contacted OFCO over the years have reported concerns about their own well-being or safety.