

Do Durations Matter in APS Cases? An Analysis of Initiation, Investigation, and Case Timeframes

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Purpose	1
Why Durations Matter	1
Overview	2
Methods.....	3
Data Review and Cleaning.....	3
Analyses	3
Data Sources.....	3
Data Analysis Findings.....	5
Case Initiation Duration	5
Investigation Duration.....	7
Post-Disposition Duration	9
Case Duration.....	12
Discussion.....	14
Conclusion	15
Appendix A	16
Appendix B	17

Introduction

Purpose

It is important for adult protective services (APS) programs to understand how much time it takes (referred to as “duration” hereafter) to initiate investigations, conduct investigations, provide services, and close the case. This APS TARC brief uses data from the National Adult Maltreatment Reporting System (NAMRS) and the [National APS Process Evaluation](#) to describe durations in APS cases and analyze the relationship between duration and other variables in an APS case.

Why Durations Matter

The recently promulgated [APS Final Rule](#) highlights the importance of durations in APS casework:

For case initiation, the rule requires “Creation of at least a two-tiered response system for initial contact with the alleged victim based on immediate risk of death, irreparable harm, or significant loss of income, assets, or resources. For immediate risk, the response should occur in person and no later than 24 hours after receiving a report of adult maltreatment and/or self-neglect. For non-immediate risk, response should occur no more than seven calendar days after receiving a report of adult maltreatment and/or self-neglect.” (USC § 1324.402)

For case investigation, the rule requires “Case handling criteria that: (1) Establish timeframes for ongoing review of open cases; (2) Establish a reasonable length of time by which investigations should be completed and findings be made ...” (USC § 1324.403)

Durations in APS cases may matter for numerous reasons:

- **Longer case durations result in higher caseloads.** The recently completed APS TARC workload study and resulting APS Workload [Toolkit](#) explore the relationship between durations and caseload. The toolkit offers programs metrics to monitor all aspects of timeliness, including the durations discussed in this brief and case documentation timeliness, to successfully manage workload.
- **Timely case initiation is crucial to assessing and assuring client safety.** Many APS clients have emergency or urgent safety needs in which a quick response, as required by the APS Final Rule, is critical to their well-being. The states with good workload management programs monitor case initiation time because the earlier the program can begin removing the source of maltreatment and increase client safety, the better the APS response will be.
- **Timely response is an important aspect of protecting client rights.** APS is a government entity intervening in the lives of private citizens, so clients (and alleged perpetrators) are entitled to a

timely resolution of the investigation. APS should be involved in their lives, and cases should remain active, only as long as the client needs intervention.

- **Quick resolution is important to long-term protection.** Quicker case resolution helps protect APS clients from long-term injury, prevents depletion of finances in exploitation cases, and minimizes loss of evidence as memories fade and documents disappear.
- **Shorter case durations may also be more efficient use of limited public resources.** APS programs have limited resources that must be used as efficiently as possible.

While each of these reasons for shorter durations is important, **timeliness should not outweigh other aspects of APS casework.** Overemphasis on short durations may cause caseworkers to rush and miss something, leaving the client at risk. APS program management must find the right balance in encouraging timely casework but not at the expense of thorough and complete investigations.

Overview

The National APS Process Evaluation explored four system outcomes—rate of reporting in the population, percentage of reports accepted, percentage of clients found to be victims, and percentage of victims receiving services. These four system outcomes were based on key decisions in an APS case—whether to report, accept, substantiate, and deliver services. This brief considers four key case durations as system outcomes: how long does it take to initiate an investigation, how long does it take to complete the investigation, how long is the case open after disposition, and how long is the overall case open? Each variable is defined as follows:

- **Case Initiation:** The number of days from the day the agency was notified of the suspected adult maltreatment (Report Date) to the date the investigation is assigned to an investigation worker. If the agency uses another date to indicate the start of an investigation, that date is used (Start Date).
- **Length of Investigation:** The number of days from the Start Date to the date that the agency completed dispositions on the allegations of maltreatment associated with the investigation (disposition date).
- **Length of Case:** The number of days from the Start Date to the date that the agency completed all activities related to the investigation of the case (case closure Date).
- **Length of Time Post-Investigation:** The number of days from the disposition date to case closure date. After a brief discussion of methods, this brief provides summary descriptive data for each of these timeframes averaged across states, and for variations in these timeframes by client and case characteristics. It also examines the association of case timeframes with APS administrative structures, policies, and practices gathered as part of the National APS Process Evaluation.

This brief highlights the key findings from this analysis but does not provide data tables, which are available upon request from the APS TARC.

Methods

Data Review and Cleaning

Prior to conducting the analyses, we reviewed each of the timeframe variables to ensure that missing or erroneous dates in individual case records were not influencing average timeframes in each state. Because the unit of analysis was mean (or average) duration, it was important to remove case records that were outliers. Appendix A provides an overview of the data review and cleaning.

Analyses

We conducted three types of analyses:

- **Descriptive analyses of timeframes:** We provide two exhibits for each timeframe. The first shows the range of state means from lowest to highest, in number of days. The average of all states is highlighted in the graph. The second exhibit shows the frequency distribution of states by incremental category of days.
- **Comparison of timeframes by case characteristics:** We examined how each of these timeframes varied by age of the client, maltreatment type, case closure type, and disposition. There was little difference across age groups, so this analysis was omitted.
- **Comparison of timeframes by state policy and practice:** We explored how each of these timeframes varied between groups of states that share certain administrative characteristics, policies, and practices and calculated the effect size for the differences between groups. Effect size measures the strength and meaningfulness of the difference between groups; it does not necessarily indicate causality.

In the following analysis, we highlighted the notable findings when a moderate or large effect size was evident between groups of states on one of the timeframes, as defined by a particular administrative characteristic, policy, or practice. [Appendix B](#) provides a table that shows which relationships had a moderate or strong relationship based on effect size.

Data Sources

The data sources are:

- Federal fiscal year 2023 National Adult Maltreatment Reporting System (NAMRS)
- National APS Process Evaluation Database, which contains data collected in 2021 either during a qualitative review of state APS policy or in a national survey on key APS program practices

We included all states that submitted case-level data and provided sufficient data quality for the dates needed to calculate the timeframe. The number of state programs varies for each analysis, which is noted in the discussion.

In the analyses of Variation by Case Characteristics and Relationships to Policy and Practice for Case Initiation and Post-Disposition Durations, we excluded states that had an average of zero days. This is because states with an average of zero days are likely to represent state systems that are unable to provide discrete dates for certain NAMRS date fields, resulting in a difference of zero days. Therefore, we conducted this analysis under the assumption that these zero values do not reflect true average durations. However, states with an average duration of zero days remained included in our descriptive analysis, since identifying issues with the state's ability to calculate timeframes is an important aspect of our findings.

Although the states are excluded from the subsequent analyses, they remained included in our descriptive analysis, since identifying the issue in calculating timeframes is an important finding.

We also excluded the three states with bifurcated APS systems from the analyses of Relationships to Policy and Practice. Louisiana, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania each have two APS programs (one for younger adults with a disability and one for older adults), and policy and practice variables from the APS Evaluation were collected separately for each program. However, NAMRS data on timeframes are not available separately for each program, so these three states were excluded from our analyses.

Data Analysis Findings

Case Initiation Duration

As defined above, case initiation duration refers to the number of days from the day the agency was notified of the suspected adult maltreatment (Report Date) to the date the investigation is assigned to an investigation worker. If the agency uses another date to indicate the start of an investigation, that date is used (Start Date).

Descriptive Analyses

Thirty-five states reported sufficient report dates and investigation start dates to calculate average case initiation duration. Among these states, the average time to initiate an investigation was 1.1 days. As shown in Exhibit 1, 14 states exceed the national average for case initiation duration.

Exhibit 1 – Mean Case Initiation Duration, 2023 (N=35 states)

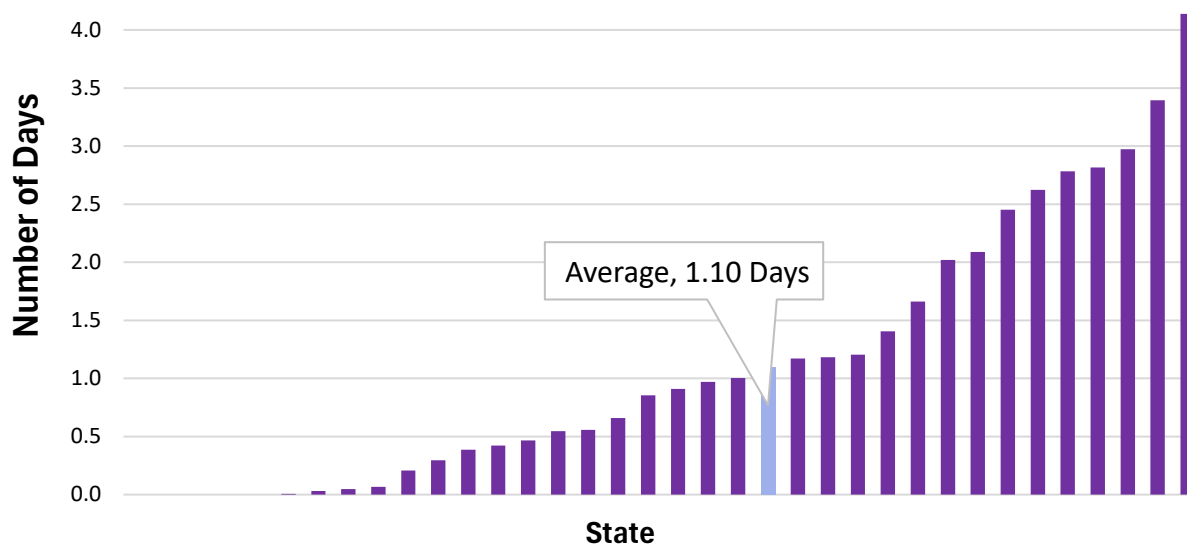
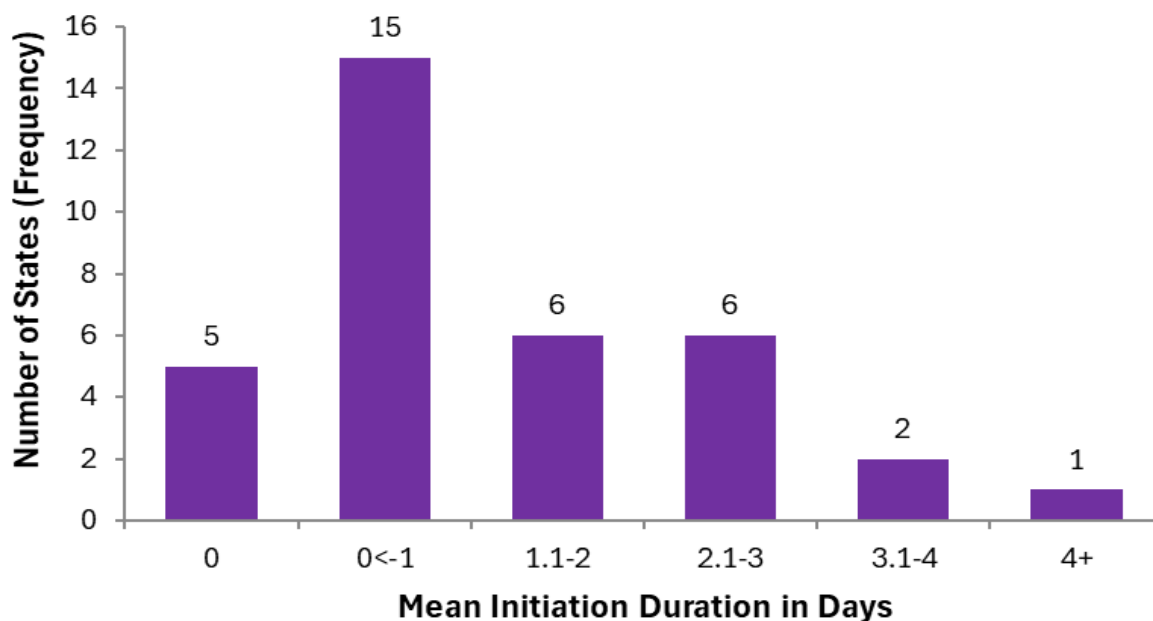


Exhibit 2 shows the distribution of state average case initiation durations. The distribution of mean initiation duration is positively skewed to the right, with 20 states having a mean case initiation duration of less than 1 day, 12 states between 1 and 3 days, and 3 states with a mean initiation duration of more than 3 days.¹

¹ Five states have an average case initiation duration of zero days. Because of the high unlikelihood that investigations for every case in a state could begin on the same day as they were reported, we excluded them from subsequent analyses, as these zero values do not reflect true average case initiation times.

Exhibit 2 – Distribution of Mean Case Initiation Duration, 2023



Variation by Case Characteristics

We examined variations in average case initiation duration by age group and maltreatment type. The average case initiation duration across these 30 states was 1.3 days.

Average case initiation time is consistent across most maltreatment types, between 1.2 and 1.4 days. Case initiation is slightly higher for cases with “other” maltreatment, 1.6 days.

Relationship to Policy and Practice

We compared groups of APS programs, as defined by policies or practices, on their average case initiation duration. For these analyses we included 27 states and indicate the number of state programs (N) in each category.² Based on effect size, the following findings are notable:

- Programs (N=18) that require an older adult to have a disability (or sometimes referred to or defined as “vulnerability”) take longer on average to initiate a case (1.8 days) compared with the average for programs that do not (N=9) require older adults to have a disability (0.6 days).
- Programs that conduct investigations with state employees (N=19) have much shorter average case initiation duration (1.0 day) compared with programs (N=8) that use local/county or non-government employees (2.2 days).

² Louisiana, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania each have two APS programs, and policy and practice variables from the APS Process Evaluation were collected separately for each program; however, NAMRS data on timeframes are not available separately for each program. These three states were excluded from this portion of the analyses.

- Programs (N=22) in which bachelor's degrees are required for all staff have shorter average case initiation times (1.2 days) than the average for programs (N=5) without this requirement (2.2 days).
- Programs (N=21) in which remote work is supported, either through policies permitting staff to work in different settings or through provision of remote work tools, have shorter average case initiation times (1.2 days) than the average for programs (N=6) without support for remote work (2.1 days).
- The average case initiation time for programs (N=5) where intakes are centralized at the local level is 2.4 days. Programs (N=3) where intakes occur at both the state and local level have an average case initiation time of 2.0 days, and the average case initiation time is the lowest for programs (N=19) with intake location centralized at the state level (1.0 day).
- For the type of staff (APS or non-APS) who make intake determinations, the programs (N=3) where this "varies by local office" have longer average case initiation time (more than 2.1 days) than all other categories of staffing for intake determination (APS staff or supervisor (N=10), average of 1.2 days, non APS staff (N=8), average of 1.5 days, combination of APS and non-APS (N=6), average of 1.2 days).
- Average case initiation time is shorter in states (N=22) that have a policy requiring investigations to be completed within 60 days (1.4 days) than in states (N=3) without such a policy (2.1 days).

Investigation Duration

As defined above, investigation duration refers to the number of days from the Start Date to the date that the agency completed dispositions on the allegations of maltreatment associated with the investigation (Disposition Date).

Descriptive Analyses

Thirty-two states reported sufficient investigation start dates and disposition dates to calculate average investigation duration. Among these states, the average time to complete an investigation was 47.7 days. As shown in Exhibit 3, 13 programs exceed the national average, and in two programs, average investigation duration is longer than 90 days. The shortest average investigation time is 15.5 days and the longest is 103.6 days.

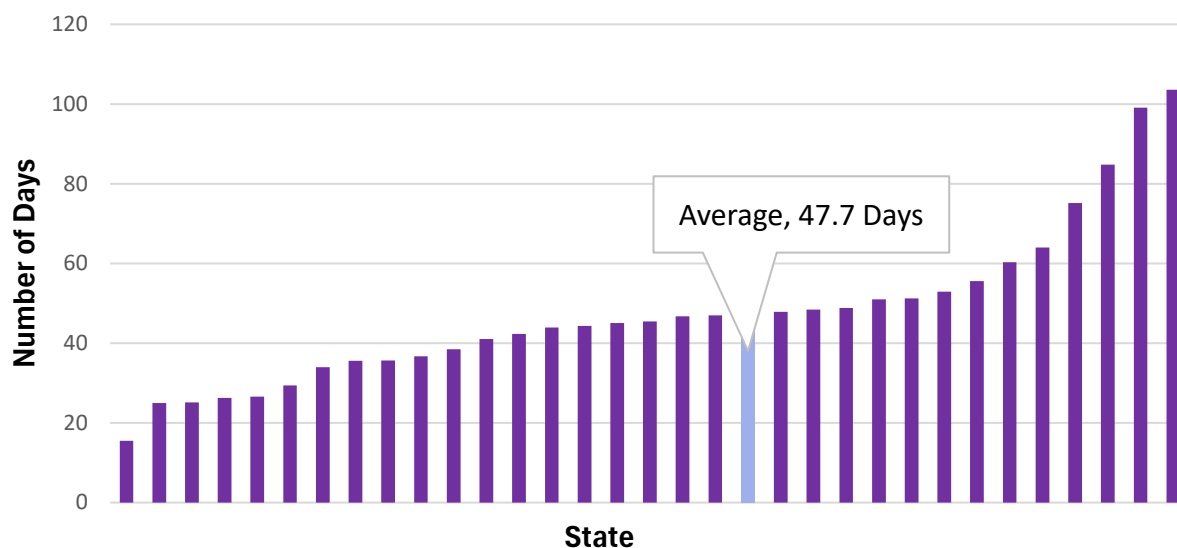
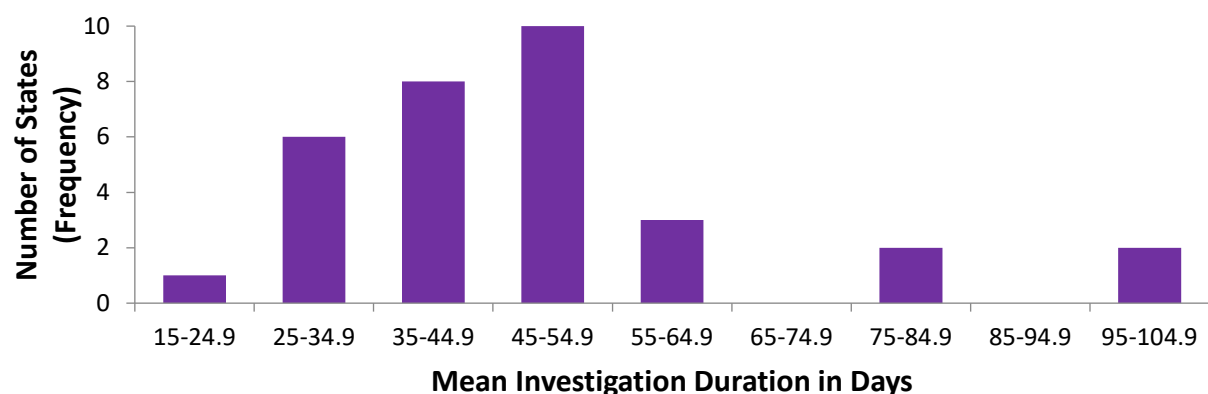
Exhibit 3 – Mean Investigation Duration 2023 (N=32 States)

Exhibit 4 shows that seven states have an average investigation duration of less than 35 days. The largest group of states (10) report an average investigation duration between 45-55 days. On the high end, four states reported a mean investigation duration of more than 75 days.

Exhibit 4 – Distribution of Mean Investigation Duration, 2023 (N=32 states)

Variation by Case Characteristics

We examined variations in average investigation duration by several case characteristics. The average investigation duration across the 32 states was 47.7 days.

Average investigation duration did not vary much—for most maltreatment types it was between 40 and 50 days and was highest for Exploitation (52.7 days).

Average investigation duration is longer for investigations with a substantiated disposition (52.4 days) than an unsubstantiated disposition (47.8 days).

Relationship to Policy and Practice

We analyzed how different policies and practices are associated with mean investigation duration across different APS programs. Based on effect size, the following findings are notable:

- Programs (N=20) that require an older adult have a disability take longer on average to investigate a case (53.7) than programs (N=9) that do not require older adults have a disability (39.8 days).
- Programs (N=21) that use state employees to conduct investigations have a longer average investigation duration (54.9) compared to programs (N=8) that use local/county or non-government employees (35.0 days).
- Programs (N=23) that support remote work have a longer average investigation time (52.2 days) than programs (N=6) that do not support remote work (38.7 days).
- Programs (N=22) with a policy requiring investigation completion within 60 days have a much shorter average investigation duration (44.7 days) than programs (N=4) without this requirement (70.2 days).

Post-Disposition Duration

As defined above, post-disposition duration refers to the number of days from the disposition date to case closure date. A case can be open after disposition for providing or monitoring services, as well as other reasons.

Descriptive Analyses

Thirty-two states reported sufficient disposition dates and case closure dates to calculate average post-investigation duration. Among these states, the average time between disposition and case closure is 7.3 days. As shown in Exhibit 5, 14 states exceed the national average for post-disposition duration, with the highest post-disposition duration being 35.17 days. Eighteen states have lower than average post-disposition durations.

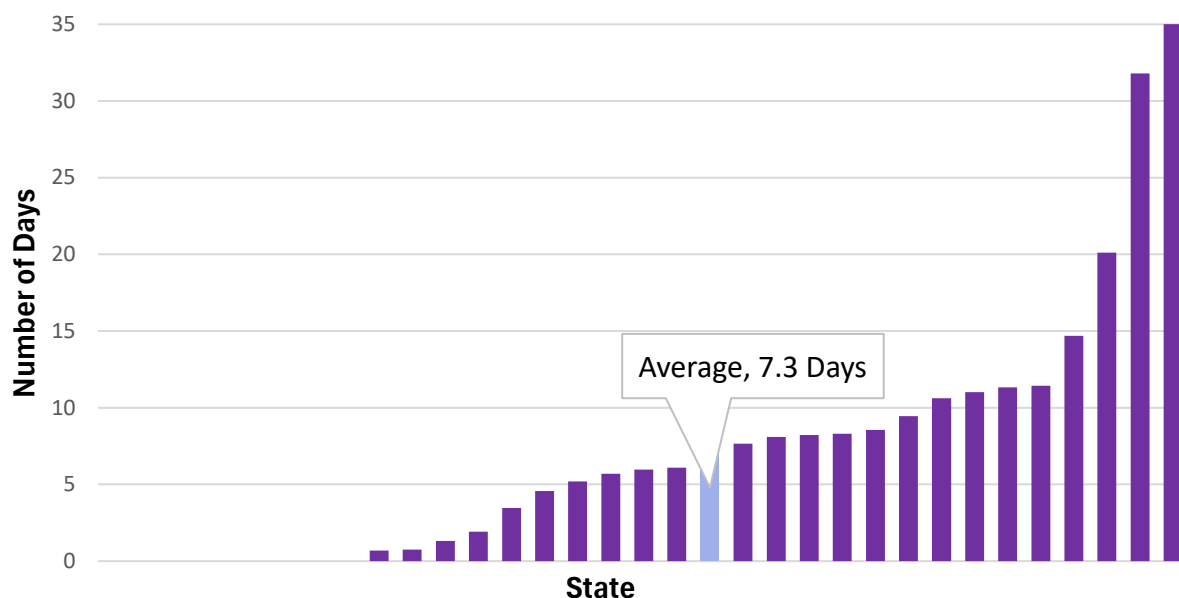
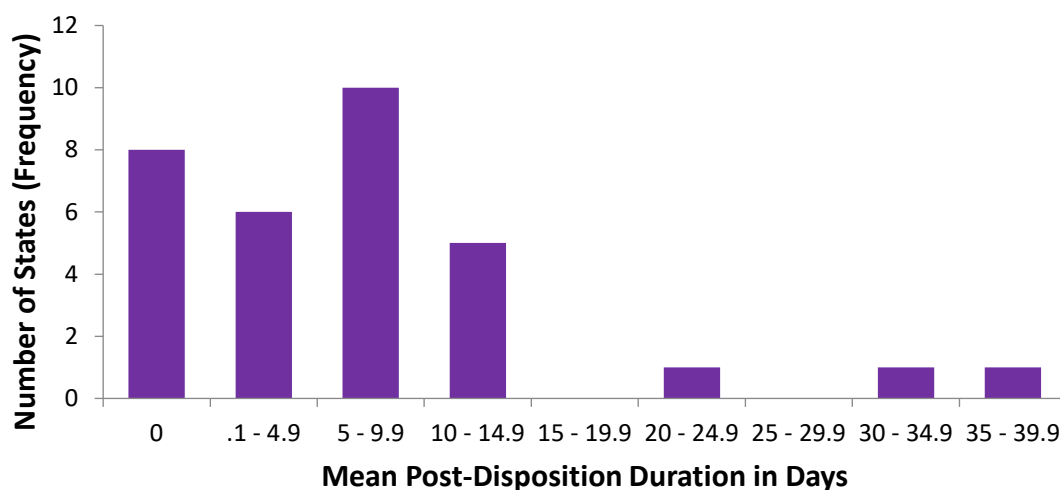
Exhibit 5 – Post-Disposition Mean Duration 2023 (N=32 states)

Exhibit 6 shows the distribution of state average post-disposition durations. This distribution is notably skewed to the right. Eight states have a mean post-disposition duration of zero days³, while six states have a mean post-disposition duration between 0-5 days and 10 have a mean post-disposition duration between five to 10 days. Only eight states have a mean post-disposition duration of more than 10 days, indicating that most APS programs do not keep cases open for long after the disposition.

Exhibit 6 – Distribution of Mean Post-Disposition Duration, 2023

³ Five states have an average duration of zero days. As mentioned previously, we excluded the eight cases with no difference in the disposition and case closure date from subsequent analyses.

Variation by Case Characteristics

We examined variations in average post-disposition duration by several case characteristics. For these analyses we included 24 states. The average post-disposition duration across the 24 states was 9.5 days.

Post-disposition duration is longest for cases with emotional abuse (11.2 days) and sexual abuse (11.0 days), and shortest for cases with abandonment (7.9 days). All other maltreatment times have an average post-disposition duration between nine and 10 days.

Average post-disposition duration is more than twice as long when the investigation reaches a substantiated disposition (17.1 days) than when it reaches an unsubstantiated disposition (8.3 days).

Cases in which services are provided have longer average post-investigation duration (16.8 days) than cases in which there is only an investigation (9.5 days).

Relationship to Policy and Practice

We analyzed how different policies and practices are associated with mean post-disposition duration across different APS programs. Based on effect size, the following findings are notable:

- Programs (N=7) in which local or non-government employees conduct investigations have a longer average post-disposition duration (9.4 days) compared with programs (N=14) where investigations are conducted by state employees (6.4 days).
- Programs (N=17) that support remote work have a shorter average post-investigation duration (6.9 days) than programs (N=4) that do not support remote work (9.7 days).
- There is a large difference in means when it comes to having a policy for investigation completion within 60 days. Programs (N=3) without a 60-day policy have a higher average post-disposition duration (13.1) than programs (N=17) that do have a 60-day completion policy (6.5 days).
- Programs (N=16) that encourage supported decision-making as an alternative to guardianship based on training and/or policy have a shorter post-disposition duration average (6.3 days) compared to programs (N=5) that do not encourage supported decision-making (10.9 days).
- Programs (N=19) that encourage substitute decision-makers as an alternative to guardianship based on training and/or policy have a longer post-disposition duration average (7.7 days), while those that do not (N=2) have a shorter post-disposition duration average (4.7 days).

Case Duration

As defined above, case duration refers to the number of days from the Start Date to the date that the agency completed all activities related to the investigation of the case (Case Closure Date).

Descriptive Analyses

Thirty-five states reported sufficient investigation start dates and case closure dates to calculate average case duration. Among these states, the average duration of a case was 57.7 days. As shown in Exhibit 7, average case duration is longer than the national average in 16 states and shorter in 19 states.

Exhibit 7 – Mean Case Duration, 2023 (N=35 States)

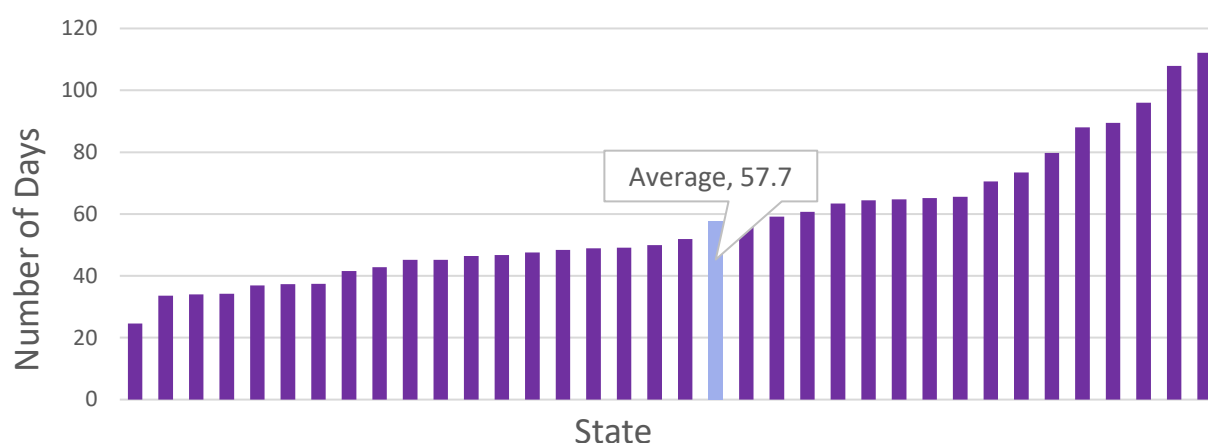
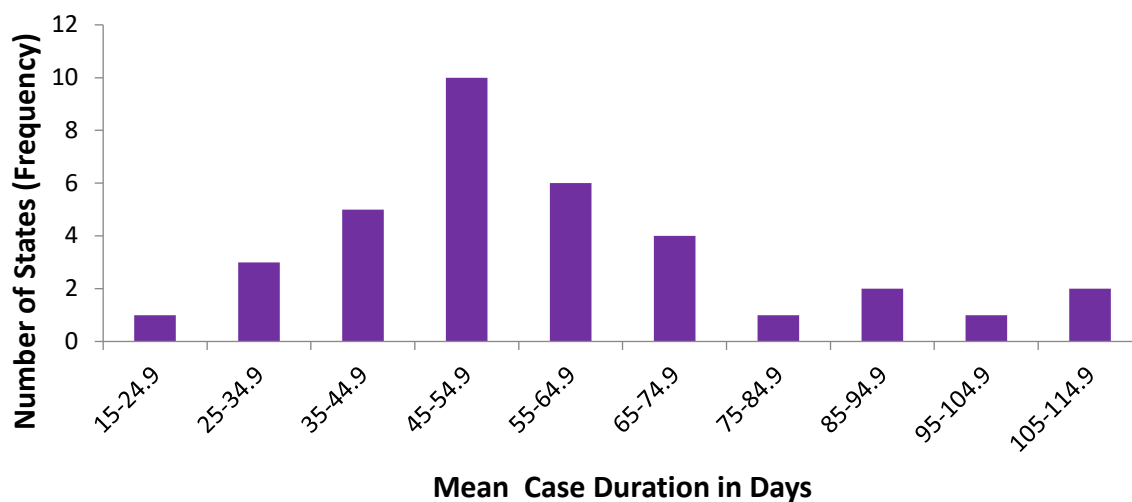


Exhibit 8 shows that four states have an average case duration of less than 35 days. The largest group of states (10) report an average investigation duration between 45-55 days. On the high end, six states reported a mean investigation duration of more than 75 days.

Exhibit 8 – Distribution of Mean Case Duration, 2023



Variation by Case Characteristics

We examined variations in average case duration by several case characteristics.

Average case duration for most maltreatment types was between 50 and 60 days, with Exploitation slightly higher (61.6 days).

Average case duration is longer in cases with a substantiated disposition (72.4 days) than unsubstantiated disposition (56.2 days); inconclusive (58.5 days) was almost the same as the overall average and other was the shortest at 51.4 days.

Cases in which services are provided have longer average case duration (70.4 days) than cases in which there is only an investigation (58.9 days).

Relationship to Policy and Practice

We analyzed how different policies and practices are associated with mean case duration across different APS programs. Based on effect size, the following findings are notable:

- Programs (N=22) that require an older adult to have a disability have a longer average case duration (60.4 days) compared to programs (N=12) that do not require an older adult to have a disability (48.5 days).
- Programs (N=23) that conduct investigations with state employees have a much longer average case duration time (60.5 days) compared to programs (N=9) that use local or non-government employees (47.0 days).
- Programs (N=25) that support remote work have longer average case duration (59 days) than programs (N=7) that do not support remote work (48 days).
- Programs (N=25) with a policy requiring investigation completion within 60 days have a much shorter average case duration (51.6 days) compared to programs (N=4) that do not have the policy (86.4 days).
- Programs (N=11) that do not have formal written service plans have a much longer average case duration (67.5 days) compared to programs (N=21) that do have formal written service plans (51.1 days).

Discussion

This brief posits the question: Do durations matter in APS casework? The introduction to the brief provides several reasons they are important. The Findings section of the brief examines the relationship of durations to various case characteristics and policy and practice variables to better understand how they matter, even if the data does not reveal why they matter.

Some of the key takeaways from this analysis are:

- The process of analyzing this data has raised issues which will contribute to future improvements in validation and analysis of NAMRS data, ultimately improving data quality and usability.
- As with the other system outcomes in the National APS Process Evaluation, there is a wide range of state program performance across the duration variables. There are programs whose performance is considerably outside the norm as measured by the duration means.
- The only demographic characteristic we examined was age, and there was much difference in durations for different age groups. However, the programs that require an older adult to have a disability have longer mean investigation and case durations than those that do not require an older adult to have a disability.
- Key policies related to duration include:
 - Programs with a policy requiring investigations be completed in 60 days have much shorter investigation and case durations.
 - Programs that do not have formal written service plans have a much longer mean case duration compared to programs that do have formal written service plans.
- Key organization characteristics related to duration include:
 - Programs with centralized intakes at the state level have shorter case initiation durations.
 - Programs that conduct investigations with state employees have much shorter case initiation times but, conversely and perhaps surprisingly, much longer investigation and case duration times. Similarly, programs that support remote workers have shorter initiation times but longer investigation and case duration times.
 - Programs with centralized intake systems and that use APS supervisors to make intake decisions initiate cases more quickly.
- Analysis of case characteristics revealed, not surprisingly, that cases with a substantiated disposition and ones in which services are provided have longer investigation and case durations.
- Duration does not vary much by the type of maltreatment.
- Case closure data indicates, not surprisingly, that cases with services are open longer. However, it's hard to know how to interpret the post-disposition durations. In theory, the difference in disposition date and case closure date could represent the amount of time a victim was receiving

services and their case was still open, but the data would seem to indicate this is a practice that varies among states. The overall short duration (7.3 days) and wide range across states suggest some states are keeping cases open to provide/monitor services for an extended time while others have cases open after the disposition date for other procedural reasons.

Conclusion

One of the findings of the recent research on APS workload is that it is not possible to identify a universal standard for caseloads across programs. Individual program policy, practice, and populations vary considerably, indicating programs should set and monitor their own standard. The same logic applies to durations. The means presented in this TA Brief should not be interpreted as a standard but as a reference point for programs to ask questions about their individual performance.

Similarly, the analysis of the relationship between duration and case characteristics and policy and practice variables raises interesting questions but does not necessarily identify best practices or policies. The data helps us to understand what is happening but not necessarily why.

We encourage programs and researchers to continue to work with the APS TARC to better understand and improve APS policy and practice. As the APS TARC often emphasizes regarding the use of APS data, programs and researchers should use the data to ask deeper questions about policy, practice, and program improvement, particularly used in a benchmarking perspective. The findings point to areas of potential further research, discussion, or food for thought among programs.

Appendix A

We implemented several rules to exclude records that included dates suggesting data entry errors. As these were FY2023 NAMRS data, which should include only cases that were closed between October 1, 2022, and September 30, 2023, we excluded records if Report Date, Investigation Start Date, or Disposition Date **was earlier than October 1, 2021**.

NAMRS already includes several validation rules

- Report Date must be less than or equal to the Investigation Start Date
- Report Date must be less than or equal to the Investigation Disposition Date.
- Report Date must be less than or equal to the Case Closure Date.
- Investigation Start Date must be less than or equal to the Investigation Disposition Date.
- Investigation Start Date must be less than or equal to the Case Closure Date.
- Investigation Disposition Date must be less than or equal to the Case Closure Date.

After removing these records with out-of-range dates, we calculated an upper limit for consideration of outliers for each timeframe.

Upper Limit = Mean + 3 x Standard Deviation

If a timeframe for a case was longer than this upper limit, we excluded that case from state averages for that timeframe.

Upper limits were as follows:

- Initiation: 22.4 days (1,605 cases excluded, 0.3% of cases)
- Investigation: 269.3 days (13,608 cases excluded, 2.6% of cases)
- Case: 298.2 days (15,010 cases excluded, 2.9% of cases)
- Post-Disposition: 125.4 days (10,578 cases excluded, 2.0% of cases)

After excluding these cases, we calculated the state averages for each timeframe and used these averages for our analyses.

Appendix B

The following table lists all the policy and practice variables whose relationship was compared with the four duration variables. A blank cell indicates we did not compare the relationship. Cells with yes indicated that there was a medium or large effect size and cells with no indicated there was a low effect size. As noted in the brief, the absence of a meaningful relationship could be interesting.

Variable	Initiation	Investigation	Case	Post-disposition
Eligibility (older adult must have a disability)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
State or locally administered	No	No	No	Yes
Geographic structure (aging, social services, other HHS)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Bachelor's degree required statewide	Yes	No	No	No
APS support for remote work	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Remote policy	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Flexibility for remote work	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Remote tools	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Intake location (state, local, mixed)	Yes			
Intake process oversight	No			
Reports accepted 24/7	No			
Use of assessment tools for intake	No			
Staff affiliation conducting intakes	No			
Staff affiliation intake determination	Yes			
Staff role intake determination	No			

Variable	Initiation	Investigation	Case	Post-disposition
Max response time for initiation within three days	No	No	No	No
Investigation completion policy within 60 days	yes	Yes	Yes	yes
APS develops formal written service plans			Yes	No
To develop service plans, APS uses a structured approach to consider the client's concepts of safety and good outcomes			No	No
To develop service plans, APS uses a structured approach for the client to help identify the factors that influence intervention risk and needs			No	No
APS encourages substitute decision-makers as alternatives to guardianship			No	Yes
APS encourages supported decision-making as alternatives to guardianship			No	Yes

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