Instability in Foster Care: A Comparison of Stable & Unstable Placements

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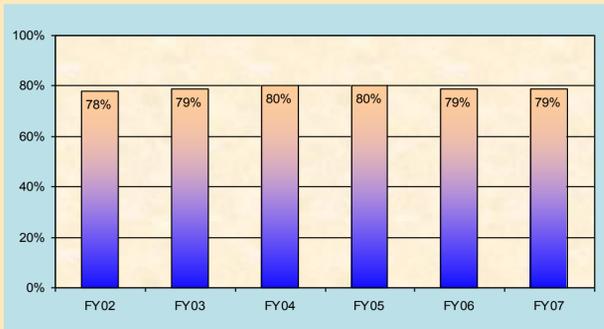
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Purpose

A significant number of children in foster care experience multiple placement disruptions while in care. The present study investigates factors that lead children in foster care to experience multiple placement changes, comparing a matched sample of children who have experienced placement stability vs. instability. The study also explores specific reasons for placement changes within a group of children who have experienced placement instability.

HISTORICAL

Children in substitute care for at least one year who had no more than two placements within a year of removal

Historically, the majority of children that enter foster care are relatively stable. However, for a subset of children, their time in care is not stable. It is also noted that children experience more instability as their time in care gets lengthened.

National data shows that 86% of children are stable within a year of their entry into care while Illinois data shows 83 % of stability.

Research Questions

• **What placement-related characteristics explain placement instability for children in foster care, controlling for pre-existing differences in their demography and child welfare history?**

• **What are the specific reasons for placement changes in a group of children in foster care who have experienced placement instability?**

Study Design

Propensity Score Matching – 122 cases
Study period: 7/1/06 – 12/31/08

UNSTABLE (Mover) SUBJECTS

On 7/1/06, **261** cases in foster family and kinship homes were movers
(3 placements within an 18-month period)

STABLE SUBJECTS

On 7/1/06, 3,223 cases in foster family and kinship homes were stable
(2 or fewer placements within an 18-month period)

MOVER SELECTION = 61 cases

The top **11** cases, plus an additional **50** randomly selected cases

Matching

STABLE SELECTION = 61 cases

61 cases from the stable sample, matched to 61 mover subjects

Sample

Matched on:
- ✓ Age, gender, race, & disability
- ✓ # of previous placements/removals
- ✓ Length of stay
- ✓ Completion of Integrated Assessment

Balanced regionally

***Not* matched for:**
- ✓ Type of placement
- ✓ CAYIT staffings

Variable	Movers (N=61)	Stayers Matched	Stayers Original
< 1 year old	11.5%	13.1%	34.1%
African American	55.7%	54.1%	62.3%
Cook County	27.9%	23.0%	53.4%
5+ prior moves	13.1%	13.1%	5.2%
Integrated Assessment	29.5%	26.2%	21.4%
Opened < 6 months	34.4%	37.7%	16.2%

Case Examples

MARY:

• African American, 16 years old, no known disability, and from Cook County
• Entered care in July 1996 (no previous removals)
• During the 18 months prior to the study period – 1 foster care placement (first & only placement)
• During the study period -- **one** placement

GEORGIA:

• African American, 15 years old, no known disability, and from Cook County
• Entered care in August 1998 (no previous removals)
• During the 18 months prior to the study period – 2 foster care placements
• During the study period-- **five** placements

Findings

Placement-Related Characteristics for Placement Instability

• **The caregiver is critical to placement stability:** Caregivers who are willing to commit to legal permanency for the child in their care improve stability outcomes.

• **Relative caregivers are linked to stability:** A larger proportion of placements were with kin for stable children [67%] than those in the mover population [30%]. However, the percentage of children who were ever placed with kin was similar for both groups (67% and 70% for the unstable and stable children).

• **Children's mental health plays a role:** Children in the mover population were more likely to be newly diagnosed with psychiatric disorders (31%) during the study period than children in the stable population (5%).

• **Permanence is more likely in stable homes:** Children in the stable population were more likely to achieve permanence than children in the mover population [33% vs. 8%].

• **A history of instability does not predict future stability:** A pattern emerged where, after a period of instability, youth attained stability. For these youth, a committed caregiver was essential.

*Reasons for Placement Changes**

• **System- or Policy-Related (26%):**
  – Change in level of care((37%)
  – Change to be with relative caregivers (25%)
  – Change to be with siblings (25%)

• **Foster Family-Related (36%):**
  – Stressors or events in foster parent(s)' life
  – Complaints or maltreatment allegation against foster parent(s)

• **Biological Family-Related (1%)**

• **Child Behavior-Related (34%):**
  – Foster parent(s) requested change due to child's behaviors (83%)
  – Foster parent(s) requested change due to child's behaviors but case workers expressed concern for foster parent(s) (11%)
  – Foster child requested change due to behaviors problems at home (5%)
  – Child/youth went on run(2%)

* Categories of reasons for placement changes were developed based on 'James, S. (2004). Why do foster care placements disrupt? An investigation of reasons for placement change in foster care, Social Services Review, 78. 601-627.'

Recommendations

1. **Foster parents could benefit from ongoing training and support for challenging child behavioral issues**
2. **Provision of individualized services to foster parents needs to be ensured**
3. **The process of foster parent recruitment and support needs to be evaluated to successfully manage needs of current population**
4. **Whenever possible, children need to be involved in placement decision-making**
5. **Training and matching of caregivers to children who are LGBTQ need to be in place**
6. **Impact of previous instability should be clinically considered more closely when making system-related placement changes**