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

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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.

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/youth went on run (2%)
- Foster child requested change due to behaviors problems at home (5%)
- Foster parent(s) (11%)
- Change to be with siblings (25%)
- Foster child requested change due to behaviors problems at home (5%)
- Child/youth went on run (2%)

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

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?

Sample
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.

Sample

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

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Funding for this project was from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), at the request of the ACLU of Illinois.