

F F T A



Foster Family-based Treatment Association

Annotations of Research in Treatment Foster Care

Citation

Larson, A. M. (2010). Cross system comparisons of children in treatment foster care: Using agency data to study cross-system child outcomes. *Children and Youth Services Review, 32*, 89–97.

Keywords

Children, treatment, foster care, child protection, therapeutic, specialized, treatment foster care

Research Questions

- What improvements in data quality might be employed at the agency level to enhance the ability to facilitate similar cross-system matches in the future?
- What is the school attendance status of children in treatment foster care (TFC) and does attendance vary by age?
- Would an examination of the degree to which typical agency data is used to conduct studies on foster care children lead to an expansion of literature on treatment foster care?

The author examined the degree to which typical agency data used to conduct foster care studies can be joined successfully to other statewide data systems. She also reviewed how this information can create a dynamic understanding of each child and his or her circumstances in regard to education and child welfare status.

Method

Subjects: The study group comprised 673 children who utilized the services of PATH Alliance (a social services agency that specializes in treatment foster care) in the calendar year 2006.

Procedures: Identified program data (which included name, date of birth, and social security number) of children receiving services from PATH Alliance were utilized. These data were matched to state-recorded child welfare and educational data, which were made available through the Minn-LinK project. This matching was done to determine educational outcomes as well as to affirm child attributes and to examine statewide child welfare involvement.

Results/Findings

All findings are in regard to children placed in treatment foster care.

Demographics: The ages of children in treatment foster care were generally consistent with children in foster care statewide; however, there were greater numbers of very young children

(e.g., infants). The children whose data were provided for the study were slightly more likely to be female, much less likely to be African American, slightly less likely to be Hispanic, and much more likely to be of unknown race than those in foster care statewide during the same period.

Education: Half of all children who were able to be matched did not have a disability on record and thus were not involved in special education, despite having a diagnosis through the PATH program. This was particularly true for children diagnosed with an Adjustment Disorder. Over half of the children examined had attendance at 90% or better during the two academic years studied. Those who did not meet 90% attendance were more likely to be older, female students who participated in treatment foster care and shelter services rather than in other services (e.g., Visitation, Independent Living Services).

Gender: The mean school attendance ratio was nearly the same for females and males.

Diagnosis: Only slight variations in school attendance rates were determined between diagnostic groups. Children with ADHD or Adjustment disorders had more child welfare reports than did those with other disorders.

Type of treatment foster care service: Children who used the Independent Living Services and/or Adoption services were less likely to meet the 90% standard of attendance at school.

Race: Native American children and children who had more than one identified race did not meet the 90% attendance rate.

Limitations

This exploratory study was limited by inability to obtain or process data in the following ways:

- There might have been human error in the inputting of information by state workers as well as PATH workers, especially for those children who had hyphenated or multiple last names.
- Cross-sectional limitations were created in matching data from 2006 only, as selecting a 2007 or 2008 sample would limit information of school-aged children, and pre- and post-TFC settings data were needed for child welfare comparison.
- Educational data for the 2007–2008 school year were not available in time for inclusion in this study.

This study would be less limited if agencies would streamline their data or begin keeping data in ways that pertained to development of studies. In addition, more information could be used to match children, which would create the ability to compare across more categories (e.g., legal records, history of foster care involvement, school mobility).

Application to Practice

This study is useful to treatment foster care in that it points out a problem in the collection of data to determine the effectiveness of treatment foster care. The author had significant difficulty obtaining and matching data due to the limitations listed above. These limitations would be alleviated if there were a streamlined way to collect and record data of children, including their utilization of social services agencies, their involvement in child welfare, and their educational

status. Greater precision could also be achieved by creating a unique identifier for each child. In addition, the study is helpful for further TFC research in that it highlights the ability to make significant cross-agency analyses of children in TFC. This ability gives researchers an opportunity to use already-recorded material instead of conducting time- and money-consuming studies to collect the data.

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