

F F T A



Foster Family-based Treatment Association

Annotations of Research in Treatment Foster Care

Citation

Connell, C. M., Katz, K. H., Saunders, L., & Tebes, J. K. (2006). Leaving foster care—The influence of child and case characteristics on foster care exit rates. *Children and Youth Services Review, 28*, 780–798.

Keywords

Foster care, reunification, adoption, AWOL

Research Questions

This study examines the influence of child and case characteristics on exits from foster care.

Based on a review of the existing research, the authors hypothesized that certain child and case characteristics will be significantly related to the likelihood that a child will exit the foster care system successfully (through reunification or adoption) or through an unplanned exit (AWOL—running away from placement).

Child Characteristics

H1: Age of the child at the time of removal will predict type of exit. Older children are more likely to reunify or go AWOL, and younger children are more likely to exit due to adoption.

H2: Children with known mental or physical disabilities are expected to have reduced rates of reunification and adoption.

Due to equivocal findings, hypotheses about gender and race were not included.

Case Characteristics

H3: A history of prior removals will increase time to reunification.

H4: Removal due to neglect will increase time to reunification.

H5: Removal due to physical abuse or child behavior problems is likely to be associated with lower rates of adoption.

H6: Children placed with kin (foster care with a relative) are expected to have lower rates of reunification and adoption.

H7: Children placed in a group home or shelter are expected to have higher rates of exit to reunification and AWOL status and lower rates of exit to adoption.

Method

Subjects: Placement data were extracted for a total of 6,723 children. Of that total, 2% were eliminated due to data problems and an additional 10% were eliminated because they were involved in an inpatient program, leaving a final sample of 5,909 children who entered care over the 5-year observational period.

Design: This study used administrative data from the Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth, and Families for a 5-year period from January 1, 1998 to December 31, 2002. A foster care placement is the period in which a child in state custody resides in a given foster care setting. Placements were grouped into episodes of care beginning with a removal and continuing to exit. Therefore, an “episode” in foster care would involve one or more placements in foster care settings beginning at removal and tracking the child through any transitional placements until either a discharge from care *or* the end of the data collection period. Therefore, although children may have experienced multiple episodes of foster care during the time period of investigation (1/1/98 to 12/31/02), only the first episode of care beginning during the window of observation was selected.

Materials/Measures: A multivariate framework was used in order to investigate the likelihood of event occurrence using Cox proportional hazards modeling.

Procedures: An index event for each child entering foster care was selected using the first episode beginning during the observational period, and time to exit was defined as the amount of time in care prior to a recorded discharge. Because children experience a range of placements while in care, placement setting was treated as a time-varying covariate. This approach allows for parameter estimates for setting effects that reflect the risk for exiting care, based on the settings that occur throughout the episode.

Results/Findings

H 1: Age of the child at the time of removal will predict type of exit

Age played a significant role in the likelihood of reunification.

- Reunification was lowest for infants and highest for children who entered care between ages 2 and 15.
- Young age was the overriding child characteristic for adoption. The likelihood of adoption was greatest for infants and decreased with increasing age of the child.
- Children who entered care between ages 2 and 5 were more likely to exit to reunification than were younger children.
- Rates for exiting to AWOL status were nonexistent for younger children relative to older children—older children were more likely to go AWOL.

H2: Mental or physical disabilities will predict type of exit.

Children with known emotional or physical disabilities were less likely to reunify or to be adopted.

Although race and gender effects were not hypothesized, the researchers found that rates of reunification were lower for African American children than for Caucasian children.

H3: A history of prior removals will increase time to reunification.

Removals prior to the study period did impact exit. A history of two or more prior removals was associated with significantly lower rates of reunification and higher rates of going AWOL.

H4: Removal due to neglect will increase time to reunification.

Children removed due to child behavior problems compared to children removed due to neglect had higher rates of reunification. In other words, children placed in care due to neglect had a lower likelihood of being reunified.

H5: Removal due to physical abuse or child behavior problems is likely to be associated with lower rates of adoption.

Children who experienced sexual abuse were less likely to be reunified or adopted.

H6: Children placed with kin (foster care with a relative) are expected to have lower rates of reunification and adoption.

Children placed in a relative foster care home were more likely to not be reunified or not adopted. In other words, children in a kinship foster care arrangement were more likely to remain in care and not be adopted or reunified.

H7: Children placed in a group home or shelter are expected to have higher rates of exit to reunification and AWOL status and lower rates of exit to adoption.

A gender, race, and age effect was found for AWOL exits, with adolescent girls having the highest AWOL risk. In addition, minority status increases risk of AWOL exit.

Placement in a group home or shelter was a risk. Children in group home settings are more than twice as likely to exit via AWOL; children in a shelter, almost 9 times more likely to exit via AWOL.

Limitations

Use of administrative data (Federal AFCARS [Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System] submissions) as the primary data source is a limitation as the sets are limited in scope, emphasize categorical data, and may be incomplete.

Another problem is that age and placement setting tend to be intercorrelated in child welfare populations: older youth are more likely to be in group settings whereas younger children are likely to be in foster care settings. The challenge in separating child characteristics from placement effects in foster care research is an issue that requires additional methodological attention in the field.

A final limitation is the generalizability of the study to other settings. Rhode Island is a small state, although it does include rural and urban areas and has ethnic and racial diversity.

Application to Practice

The findings with respect to disability status and emotional/behavioral problems suggest that it is more difficult to move children with these risk factors to permanency through reunification and adoption, and therefore require longer lengths of stay in care. This pattern suggests a need to emphasize finding stable and therapeutic treatment homes that will keep children in a stable setting so that their problems are not compounded by frequent placement changes while in care. Similarly, the finding that children who have been sexually abused are likely to experience lower rates of exit to adoption and reunification suggests that such children are also more challenging

to place through either of the preferred permanency routes and are likely to remain in placements longer than children removed for other reasons. Helping treatment parents to manage the problems associated with caring for a child who has experienced complex trauma then becomes an important aspect of a TFC program.

Application to Policy

Education must be mandated for potential foster parents who will care for children that may have increased risk factors, including past sexual abuse, emotional/behavioral problems and age of entry into care. If foster parents understand what to expect from children with higher risk factors, placement disruptions can be minimized. In addition, adoption or reunification for older foster children, may be more likely to occur and at a higher rate. Concurrent plans must also be in place in case the most ideal plans fall through.

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