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Children in Foster Care: Possible Factors Affecting Permanency Planning

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ABSTRACT: This is a study of Children in Foster Care to determine possible factors affecting permanency planning. Several issues were determined to be of importance, cultural diversity, economics, and family support services. Areas needing additional study were determined to be the different treatment given to African-American and poor children, and the influence of economic and social problems on placement needs and planning.

Introduction

Despite differing definitions of what constitutes foster care, estimates of the number of children in foster care have increased over the last several years. This follows a decline in rates of substitute care usage between 1977 and 1982, when the estimated number of children in foster care decreased from 503,000 to 243,000 (Pelton, 1989). By 1991, the estimated number of children in foster care had increased to 428,000 (Pelton; Tatara, 1992). It has been suggested that growth in use of substitute care can be traced to a marked decline in the rate of exits from care (Tatara). It is projected that by 1995 the foster care population will have increased to 550,000 children, effectively negating the gains brought about by the enactment of P.L. 96-272 in 1980.

The characteristics of children in substitute care, based on national 1988 demographic data, has changed over the past several years (Tatara, 1992). A child entering care today is likely to be younger than

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his or her 1983 counterpart (8.2 compared to 10.2 years); is more likely to be poor, homeless, and ill; is likely to be a minority, especially African-American (36.5% of foster care placements); and is more likely to have multiple placements in the system (increasing from 19% in 1982 to 25.4% in 1988).

Ethnicity and Duration of Service

The presence of greater numbers of minority children in the child welfare system has been an ongoing concern (Close, 1983; English, 1990). As noted in the Final Report of the National Commission on Children (APWA, 1991), ethnically diverse children comprise 49% of those in foster care; and minority children represent a substantially higher percentage of foster care children than Anglo children in relation to their numbers in the total population (Tatara, 1992). Seaberg and Tolley (1986), reporting on a national probability sample of children receiving public assistance, found that these children were likely to spend more time in foster care, particularly when adoption services were provided, or when they had been abandoned. Further, their study indicated that length of service increases for males, older children, African-Americans, and for physically and mentally impaired children. These findings were consistent with a large agency sample study by Jenkins, Flanzraich, Gibson, Hendricks, and Marshood (1983), who found that ethnic differences affected the length of time children remain in foster care. They concluded that minority children, particularly African-American children, remained in foster care significantly longer than Anglo children. Likewise, Testa's (1985) study reported, in a longitudinal study of foster care children, that the median length of stay for African-Americans was significantly longer than for Anglos in the more urban Chicago area, a finding not necessarily consistent with findings from other parts of the state.

While ethnically diverse children are more likely to come into the system (Close, 1983; English, 1990; Korbin, 1980; Payne, 1989), they are also less likely to be discharged (Pelton, 1989; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1988). Even in situations indicative of higher levels of risk for physical harm, minority children appear more likely to be placed with relatives (regardless of risk) than their Anglo counterparts. African-American children are more likely to be placed in foster care if relatives cannot be located (English, 1990).

Ethnicity also appears to be a factor in placement for adoption, and may influence the rate that children leave the foster care system (Pelton, 1989). Westat, Inc. (1986) studied minority and non-minority children waiting for adoption and found ethnicity emerging as the strongest predictor of adoptive placements, a finding subsequently replicated by Rosenthal, Groze, and Curiel (1990). Unlike Olsen's (1982) earlier study, Westat, Inc. found gender and category of abuse were not factors in the length of time a child was in the system.

Not all findings point to ethnicity as having a major influence on the length of time children spend in foster care. In contrast, Benedict and White (1991) and Benedict, White and Stallings (1987), found no differences in length of stay between African-American and Anglo children in a large sample study in Maryland. In both of these studies, the average stay in foster care between the groups was approximately the same. Likewise, Lauder, Poulin, and Andrews (1986) in a longitudinal study of 165 foster children, were not able to establish a link between either age or ethnicity and length of stay in foster care.

Economic Status and Duration of Service

Research on the effect that poverty has on the growing number of foster care children clearly has an ongoing significance (Close, 1983; DeLeonardi, 1980; English, 1991; Hutchison, 1993). Recent studies have demonstrated that more lower income children come into the system, and that once in the system, they are more likely to be placed in foster care (English). Not clear in the research is whether neglect and abuse are more prevalent in poor neighborhoods, or whether the measures used to determine the existence of neglect and abuse are more likely to be evident in poor households (Wells, Stein, Fluke, & Downing, 1989). However, several studies show that poverty is closely aligned with child maltreatment and foster placement (National Center for Children in Poverty, 1991; Pelton, 1991; Sedlak, 1991). According to the Final Report of the National Commission on Children (APWA, 1991), "a recent analysis of the factors that place children at risk of maltreatment suggests that only family income is consistently related to all categories of abuse and neglect" (p. 284).

As the system strains under the steadily increasing volume of reports, concern has surfaced about the screening process and its emphasis on which cases to exclude rather than which cases to include

(Wells, Stein, Fluke, & Downing, 1989). Recent nationwide studies report that screeners eliminate anonymous complaints, complaints from an estranged spouse or an absent spouse, and cases in which there is missing data on a critical variable (name of child, age of child, etc.), but proceed with complaints on minority and low income families, children with previous abuse reports, and children living in non-traditional families (Hutchison, 1993; Kamerman & Kahn, 1990; Wells, Anderson, & Fluke, 1990; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 1988).

There does appear to be some support for linking social and economic factors to higher abuse rates among minorities, a linkage either representing actual prevalence or reflecting social biases. In recent years, greater attention has been given to the "feminization of poverty" and the concomitant increase in childhood poverty, often as a factor in neglect (Pearce, 1978; Segal, 1991). Predictably, a negative relationship exists between family income and levels of neglect, with the most at risk families subsisting below the poverty level, regardless of family size. The size of the community (rural versus urban) does not appear to be a contributing factor (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1988). Single parents, parents who are socially isolated and who suffer from a major mental illness, parents who have a substance abuse problem, and parents who are living below the poverty levels are the most heavily represented in children's protective services system and have been for many years (Hansen, Conaway, & Christopher, 1990; Murphy, Jellinek, Quinn, Smith, Poitras, & Goshko, 1991; Rosenthal, 1988, Stuart, Rutman, & Jones, 1979).

The Reunification v. Adoption

Despite the current emphasis on reunification services, for many dependent children adoption becomes the necessary means of providing these children with permanent homes when parents fail to assume responsibility for their children. The Family Welfare Research Group (1992) compiled and analyzed data from a variety of sources in the California child welfare system, finding that economically disadvantaged children whose families were eligible for AFDC were reunified at a slower rate than those children from families not eligible for AFDC. African-American children were reunified with their families at a slower rate than Latino, Caucasian, or Asian-American children.

African-American children were also less likely to be adopted. In addition, it was found that multiple home placements were a good predictor of prolonged stay in foster care. Further, children over the age of one year at time of entry into foster care, were less likely to be adopted. However, they did find that as the age of children entering foster care increased, the probability of reunification also increased, with the exception of older adolescents.

In 1989, the Child Welfare League of American (CWLA), in a survey of private and public adoption agencies throughout the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico on the current state of adoption in the nation, identified those factors most to likely prevent children from being adopted. Four major factors were reported as barriers in achieving timely placements: lack of minority parents for the number of minority children awaiting adoption; lack of adoptive parents willing to take children with special needs; delay in termination of birth parents' rights; and lack of agency staff and resources.

Criticism has been leveled against many public child welfare agencies for their poor performance in recruiting minority adoptive families and for failing to approve such families once they have been found (Rosenthal, Groze, & Curiel, 1990). There have been charges that many public child welfare systems are culturally biased and use white middle class values which cause problems for black-on-black adoptions (Chestang, 1972; Gil & Jackson, 1983; NASW News, 1986; Rosenthal, Groze, & Curiel). These criticisms cannot be separated from concerns about the training and educational levels of the workers hired to make decisions on behalf of families with a myriad of very complex problems with the potential for dire consequences to the children residing in those families. Grossman and Clark (1991) reported that workers who made serious errors in case decisions were generally found to be poorly trained in the knowledge and skills needed to work with families at both the legal and practice levels.

Methodology

This study explored the characteristics of children under the age of 10 years in foster care to determine which characteristics were associated with longer length of stay in foster care. For the purposes of this research, foster care is defined as children living in non-relative, out of home placements that do not include residential treatment. Two groups were compared: children with less than 3 years of continuous

foster care and children with more than 3 years of continuous foster care. In particular, this study explored family economics and ethnicity to determine if poor, minority children were more likely to remain in the system longer than their non-minority counterparts, and if they experience higher placement rates, and were more likely to be considered for termination of parental rights and adoption rather than replacement with parents. Also examined was the relationship between the educational background of the worker and the duration of services of the child.

This study was conducted in Clark County, Nevada. Las Vegas and the surrounding communities of Clark County have an estimated population of approximately 850,000. It is the most populated area in the state and the area with the greatest cultural diversity. According to the May 1992, statistics maintained by the Nevada Division of Child and Family Services, over 50% of the children in the Clark County child welfare system were ethnic minorities, with 40% identified as African-American. The general population of Clark County has an estimated ethnic minority population of 18.72% according to the 1990 census, with 9.54% identified as African-American (U.S. Census, 1990).

Sample

The sample was drawn from child welfare cases in Clark County using a state computerized client information system, which registers and tracks all dependent children from entry to discharge. A total of 404 records of children in foster care in Clark County were identified. Of these 404 children, 161 had 3 or more years of consecutive years of service in foster care placement and 243 had less than 3 years.

Data were collected on a wide variety of variables associated with the children's entry into the system using a pre-tested instrument. For the purposes of this study, data on child and family demographics, the date of entry into the system, duration of service, reasons for placement in foster care, current location of the child, the number of previous placements, the permanent placement plan for the child, and worker educational levels were collected.

Findings

Demographics

Gender. Among the children with more than 3 years of service, 99 (61.5%) were male and 62 (38.5%) were female. Of those with less

TABLE 1
Age by Length of Service

Freq Age in Years	< 3 Yrs Service	> 3 Years Service	Total
1	41	N/A	41
2	36	N/A	36
3	31	2	33
4	35	19	54
5	19	26	45
6	19	25	44
7	20	29	49
8	19	25	44
9	15	21	36
10	8	14	22
Total	243	161	404

than three years service, 132 (54.3%) were male and 111 (45.6%) were female. Gender differences did not appear to be significant in the duration of placements ($X^2 = 2.03$; $df = 1$, $p > .10$).

Age. All of the children were under the age of 10 years. Table 1 describes the distribution of children by age by length of service. The differences are significant ($X^2 = 101.79$, $df = 9$, $p < .0001$), reflecting the increasing number of older children in foster care for more than 3 years. The age of the child at the point of intake appeared to be related to length of services. The mean age at entry for children in foster care less than 3 years was 3.0 years, compared to 2.1 years for children in foster care over three years.

Ethnicity. Like findings in previous studies, the majority of the children under supervision were African-American. Of the total 404 cases examined, 194 (48.0%) were African-American, while 164

(40.6%) were Anglos. Hispanics represented only 6.9% ($n=28$). The differences in distribution between the ethnic groups was significant ($X^2 = 15.64$, $df=6$, $p=.015$).

When the distribution by the two service groups were examined using only African-Americans and Anglos, the differences were significant ($X^2 = 6.83$, $df=1$, $p=.01$) (see Table 2). A total of 151 of these children remained in foster care more than 3 years. Fewer Anglo children were still in care after three years ($n=57$, 37.6%) than African Americans ($n=94$, 62.2%). Among those children with less than 3 years of service, Anglo children were more highly represented ($n=107$, 51.6%) than African-American children ($n=100$, 48.3%) (see Table 1). African-American children under the age of 10 were significantly more likely to remain in foster care three years or longer ($X^2 = 6.83$; $df=1$, $p<.01$) than Anglo children.

Economic Status. Payment status regarding the child's eligibility for Title IV-E payments was used to measure whether the child's family was destitute at the time the child was placed in foster care. It was found that children from families who were on AFDC were significantly less likely to be reunified with family members or placed in a permanent adoptive home compared to those children whose families were not on AFDC. Further, children whose families were on AFDC were more likely to be in foster care three years or longer than those

TABLE 2
Ethnicity by Length of Service

Freq Row PCT Col PCT	< 3 Yrs Service	> 3 Years Service	Total
African-Amer	100 51.5 48.3	94 48.5 59.1	194
Anglo	107 65.2 51.6	57 34.8 37.7	164
Total	207	151	358

children whose families who were not on AFDC and in foster care three years or less ($X^2 = 5.34$; $df = 1$, $p < .05$).

Among children who received services for more than 3 years, economic status appeared to be important. At intake, 145 of these children (86.8%) came into care because of neglect, reflecting an inability of parents to provide for their physical well-being. Only 7.2% ($n = 12$) came in because of abuse related complaints (including physical, sexual, and abuse/neglect complaints).

Placement Histories

Children in foster care for more than three years had significantly more placements than children in foster care under three years ($t = -8.28$; $df = 402$; $p = .001$). Children in foster care for more than three years had a mean of 3.8 placements compared to a mean of 1.9 for children in care less than three years. When age at entry into foster care was examined, it was evident that older children were more likely than younger children to be reunified with family members or placed in an adoptive home within three years or less ($t = 3.41$; $df = 402$, $p < .001$).

Permanency Planning

The permanency plans for the 161 children in care over 3 years were examined. Of those children, 48.4% ($n = 78$) were targeted for adoption with a non-relative family. In addition, 51 (31.6%) were designated for foster parent adoption. These two groups of children, accounted for a total of 129 (80.2%) of the children in care over 3 years. Only 22 (13.6%) of the children were expected to be reunified with the parent, and another 6.8% ($n = 11$) were expected to remain in long-term foster care.

Educational Levels of Case Managers

Data were collected on the educational background of the case managers ($N = 62$) and the relationship between the educational level of workers and the duration of services. A total of 24 (38.7%) workers had training as professional social workers, 5 (8.0%) with an M.S.W. degree, and 19 (36.5%) with a B.S.W. A total of 38 (61.3%) had other degrees. Workers with a degree in social work were more likely to effect a permanent plan within three years than those without a social work degree ($X^2 = 3.91$, $df = 1$, $p = < .05$).

Conclusions

Cultural Diversity Issues

These data support recurrent concerns about the presence of cultural biases in the treatment of African-American children. African-American children in this study were more likely to be placed out-of-home than Anglo children and more likely to remain longer in the Nevada Child Welfare system than Anglo children. These findings are consistent with earlier findings of Stehno (1982) and English (1991), among others. Questions must be raised whether these findings manifest generalized problems with effective multi-cultural handling of children in care and whether greater competency in cultural diversity are a priority need. Concerns should not be confined only to the training of child welfare case managers, but should be expanded to include administrators and those responsible for shaping the laws and policies that govern child welfare programs (CASSP, 1989). This position is supported by Harris (1990) who reported from findings of the National Child Welfare Leadership Center that cultural competence must occur at multi-system levels, including policy-makers, agency administrators, professional/staff, and in the general delivery of services to culturally diverse families.

This study demonstrates the interlocking role of the educational background of case managers and the placement histories of children in foster care. Data suggest that case managers with training in social work, at both the bachelors and masters levels, are more successful in moving children through the system and into a permanent placement. Among the reasons that case managers trained as social workers are more effective, may be the social work curriculum's rich tradition of preparing students to work effectively in culturally diverse settings. That knowledge and value base can be expected to enhance workers' abilities to address the problems and needs of these families in ways encumbered by biases and stereotypes.

Economic Issues

This study suggests that children from families on AFDC are treated differently and are significantly less likely to be reunited with their families or placed in permanent adoptive homes compared to children whose families are not on AFDC. This is consistent with the findings of Tataro (1992) who found that more children are entering care because of economic factors, including homelessness. As Kamerman and Kahn (1990) observed in their national study, "a replicated theme in

state after state, county after county, is that the social service system has become so restricted that children can gain access to help only if they have been abused or severely neglected . . ." (p. 47).

For children in this study with more than three years of foster care, neglect was the most common reason for entry ($n=145$, 86.8%). The duration of services to these children strongly suggests that case managers without social work degrees are less familiar with and effective in coordination multi-system service delivery to help families develop the resources needed in order to care for these children.

Many of the children in this study came into care because of poverty related factors, despite concerns that children should not be removed solely for economic reasons (Pelton, 1989). These recommendations are also consistent with the *Guidelines For a Model System of Protective Services for Abused and Neglected Children and Their Families* developed by the National Association of Public Child Welfare Administrators (NAPCWA, 1988). Yet, children are continually removed because their caretakers lack the financial means to support them, which in turn is a reflection of the lack of larger social service systems designed to serve poor families. Families should be able to gain access to an array of services through culturally competent neighborhood centers. Poverty, homelessness, unemployment, and a lack of decent affordable housing cannot be addressed by the child welfare system alone and must become the coordinated focus of policy-makers, agency administrators that serve children and their families, and the professional staff of appropriate community organizations.

Family Support Services

Foster care children often present their caretakers with a profusion of behavioral and medical problems. These problems may well exacerbate the number of placements seen in this population. As expected in these findings, the longer a child is in the system, the more likely the child is to be moved. A number of factors may account for the number of placements children in the system over three years experienced: a poor match between the child and the skills of the foster family; the degree and extent of foster family training, including crisis and behavioral management; the available resources and services to foster families for support and care of foster children; and the accessibility of respite care for foster parents. Interestingly enough, the results of this study suggest that the older the child is at intake the more likely that child is to be permanently reunified with family or placed in an

adoptive home. Case managers identified the lack of families trained to care for special needs children as an important barrier to permanency planning for some of the younger children.

Recommendations

This study suggests some fruitful areas of future research and study. Immediate attention must address the different treatment given to African-American and poor children. The role of cultural competence in case planning is central. It is important that cultural competence be viewed as a multi-system, multi-level issue. It is not sufficient to have case managers who are able to work effectively with culturally diverse populations if the policies and laws they operate under continue to reflect cultural biases and stereotypes.

In addition, the number of children entering the system because of the negative effects of poverty on the family strongly suggest that attention is needed to solve the economic and social problems of these families rather than to continue the current pattern of using foster care systems as a substitute for effective economic programs. Finally, this study strongly suggests that professionally trained social workers may be more effective case managers and that their training and orientation make them particularly effective in intervening in families with multiple problems.

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