

"Using International Comparisons to Reflect on Permanence Options for Children in Out - Home - Care in the UK," by June Thoburn, presented at the recent 'Durable Solutions' Conference for child welfare policymakers and judges in England. Available on request from NICF.

June Thoburn is a Professor in the School of Social Work and Psychosocial Studies, University of East Anglia. This paper summarizes findings from research comparing out of home care practices in Italy, Sweden, Australia, Canada, the United States, New Zealand and England. Thoburn comments that in all these countries providing children with stable living situations and family membership is a major child welfare goal. However, according to Thoburn, "Most European states and Australia and New Zealand emphasize the family of origin as the main route to permanence," while the UK, Canada and the United States "have been more willing than other countries to sever legal links and allow birth family relationships to wither, and therefore have given a greater role to substitute families in achieving stability and family life for children who are unable to go safely home." "It comes as no surprise, therefore that the US and UK have a long history of using adoption as a route out of care, and make greater use of it than other countries," Thoburn states.

Thoburn discusses a renewed emphasis in the UK on "improving the success of long - term foster care as a permanence option" because about half the children in out of home care in England are not considered good candidates for adoption. Recent English research (Lowe and Murch, 2002) has "found that foster care was more likely than adoption to be the eventual outcome for children who were: over the age of four; of minority ethnicity; had emotional or behavioral problems; had been physically and / or sexually abused; had experienced a failed return to the birth parents and were attached to their current foster caregivers." Another recent English study (Selwyn, 2003) found that only 60% of 130 children, ages 3 -11, whose best interest was determined to be adoption were living with adoptive families 7 years after the 'best interest' decision. Most of the remaining children were in long term foster care or in unstable living situations. Thoburn notes that 92% of children adopted in England in 2004 were 0 - 4 years of age at entry into care. However, only a third of children entering out of home care in the UK in 2004 were under the age of 5 at time of placement. Thoburn believes that the meaning of these statistics is that "the full range of permanence options should be sought out and then supported for the full range of children needing long - term family placements."

Thoburn comments that the concentration on adoption in child welfare policy came about in the UK because "prevention and reunification policies were under - resourced or unsuccessful (and almost certainly both), resulting in too many children exposed to the damaging impact of unstable and unplanned placements." The renewed interest in

long term foster care, she thinks, is due to the same reasons, i.e., because "the heavy emphasis on adoption has done little to meet the needs of children entering care past infancy."

Thoburn provides statistics indicating that the US rate of children entering out of home care (per 10,000) is about double the English and Australian rates and about a third higher than the Swedish rate. Both the US and the UK place far higher percentages of children in out of home care in adoptive homes than other countries in western Europe; Thoburn states that most western European nations place less than 1% of children entering out of home care in adoptive homes while the UK and US placed 6 -9% of children in out of home care in adoptive homes in 2002-3. According to Thoburn, in most European countries if children cannot safely live at home their only chance for stability and family membership may be through long term foster care. The UK and US model of termination of parental rights, legal adoption and post - adoption financial support does "not fit with public perception of adoption in most countries" in Western Europe, she believes.

Thoburn indicates that these differences in attitudes toward adoption may be the result of differences in the ages of children entering out of home care in various countries. In the UK, like the US, a sizeable percentage of children entering care are infants (20% in the US) whereas in Sweden almost half of children placed out of the home are 15 or older. For the most part, Thoburn claims that the task of child welfare in Sweden is providing placement stability and family membership for children and youth 10 and older, most of whom have no interest in adoption. In Australia, adoption has a bad reputation because of its past use with aboriginal children who have been and are over - represented among children in foster care in that country.

Thoburn carefully examines evidence regarding child well being outcomes for children and youth with different permanent plans, i.e., adoption, long term foster care. She states that "Using disruption rates as a measure, studies that have followed up large enough cohorts of children placed from care when past infancy for adoption or with permanent foster families not previously known to them, conclude that around one in five will experience placement breakdown before they reach adulthood." However, placement disruption rates vary greatly depending on the age at which children are adopted with school aged children having much higher rates of placement failure than younger children. Around 80% of adoptive parents and adoptive children express satisfaction with adoption, according to Thoburn.

Unfortunately, "Being emotionally or behaviorally disturbed at the time of placement and having a history of maltreatment prior to placement are associated with poor wellbeing and placement breakdown," Thoburn states. "In summary, the children we might most want to 'rescue' from traumatic and neglectful birth families are the ones we have the most difficulty in placing successfully with permanent substitute families."

English research, like its American counterpart, has found that "Return home after more than a few weeks in care is the least stable option." Much more work needs to be done,

Thoburn says, in supporting vulnerable families and children post reunification and more efforts made to improve decision making around initial placement and return home.

Thoburn claims that "The broad conclusion across countries is that, irrespective of the age at placement, the longer a child remains with a foster family, the better the outcome on a range of welfare indicators." Thoburn also insists that "there is no significant difference in breakdown rates between those placed for adoption and those placed in foster families with the intention that they will become long - term members of the foster family." Sinclair (2005) concludes that "the core studies leave no doubt" that (a) foster care can provide long - term stable care in which foster children remain in contact with foster parents after they become adults and (b) "for most children the care system did not provide this long term stable alternative to care at home." Thoburn's view of the relevant research is that "... for some children (probably the majority of those past infancy, and including some under fives for whom it is important to be placed with their siblings) the legal status is less important than finding a family with the skills and empathy to meet any special needs and where they can put down roots knowing that they are not going to be moved on."

Thoburn believes that the UK child welfare system deserves more credit than it usually receives for insuring stability and family membership for children in out of home care who cannot return to birth families. "However, too many children have too many placements ... and too many children are cut off from birth relatives and previous caregivers who are important to them." "I end (she says) with stressing the importance of making, and then achieving, care plans that are based on the needs and wishes of the child and not being diverted by pragmatics or performance targets." Thoburn again calls for using all of the available permanency options instead of a having a narrow focus on adoption as the preferred permanency solution for children not able to grow up with birth parents.