

"A Study of Placement Instability in Illinois," by Andrew Zinn, Jan DeCoursey, Robert George and Mark Courtney, Chapin Hall Working Paper, 2006.

This report summarizes findings from the first stage of a study of placement instability in the Illinois child welfare system. This study consists of an in - depth analysis of administrative data related to out of home care and a web based survey of approximately 1200 public agency and private agency caseworkers in which caseworkers were queried regarding specific children and foster homes and their views regarding reasons for children's most recent placement change. Caseworkers were also asked for their recommendations regarding services to children and foster parents which might reduce placement disruptions. The study also includes a multivariate statistical analysis of factors related to placement disruptions.

The study finds that placement instability has been increasing in Illinois, primarily because of an increased number of moves within the first year of children's care. This trend, in turn, is connected to a decrease in the placement of children in relative foster homes at entry into care. "... the percentage of children placed in relative foster homes at entry decreased (in Illinois) by almost half between 1995 -2003, while the percentage of children placed in traditional and treatment foster homes increased by two - thirds." In addition, a larger percentage of children in Illinois were placed in shelter care or residential care at entry into care during this time period. The authors state that "Thus, it is arguable that, as the percentage of first placements in non - relative foster homes and residential and shelter facilities increased, so too did the movement of children out of those first placements -- either to relative placements and / or to more permanent family - like placements."

This analysis describes a picture of a child welfare system increasingly dependent initially on brief, specialized, non - permanent placements and then moving children into permanent homes. However, in the web survey, caseworkers stated that over three quarters (75.9%) of recent moves were due, in part, to "foster parents' inability or unwillingness to continue fostering." Foster parents' "inability to tolerate children's behavioral or emotional problems" and /or "the occurrence of one or more changes in foster parents' circumstances" such as divorce, change in employment or illness were frequently cited reasons for moving children. This finding suggests a child welfare system which has a great deal of difficulty in stabilizing the placements of children / youth with certain types of externalizing behavioral problems. It is the combination of moves motivated by permanency goals with moves required by foster parents' unwillingness to continue caring for children due to behavior problems or changes in their life circumstances which accounts for the extent of placement instability found in this study.

By the end of the first year in care, a quarter of all entrants into care experienced three or more moves (or four or more placement settings), according to the authors of this study. Regrettably, this study does not describe the number of placements experienced by children in care for 2, 3, or 4 years or more. Only 10% of children entering care in Illinois had experienced only one placement after a year, the authors state. According to the authors, this is an exceedingly high rate of placement instability, the highest among the 11 states in the Multistate Foster Care Data Archive.

The multivariate statistical analysis of factors associated with placement changes found that "with each additional year of age at placement, the likelihood that a child would experience a placement change increased by a factor of 1.04, or 4 percent." Children with diagnoses of conduct disorder or attention deficit disorder were about 12 % more likely to change placements, a pattern which surprisingly did not hold for children with most other mental health diagnoses. Children's race / ethnicity did not have a strong consistent effect on placement changes, though African American children in White foster homes experienced an elevated rate of placement changes. Children placed in relatives' homes were about half as likely to be moved as children placed in non - treatment foster care after controlling for other factors; kinship care had the largest impact of any single factor in reducing placement instability in this study.

The age of foster parents had an influence on placement change in the multivariate analysis with children placed with older foster parents less likely to be moved than children placed with younger foster parents, especially foster parents 18 -29. "Children in treatment foster homes were found to be a third less likely to move to another placement than children in regular non - relative foster homes." " .. the number of children in the (foster) home not related to the child in question was associated with an increased likelihood that a child would experience a placement change (16% higher with one unrelated child and 19% with higher with two or more unrelated children). However, children placed with more experienced foster parents were more likely to be moved, with a 28% increase in the likelihood of placement change for every decade of service, suggesting the possibility that experienced foster parents have less tolerance for children's behavior problems than their inexperienced counterparts.

Placement with siblings reduced placement instability and "The stabilizing effect that placement with siblings was particularly strong with respect to moves to higher levels of care, reducing the likelihood of such moves by over 25 percent." Placement of children close to home reduced placement instability by 10%. The authors claim that "Taken together, the effect of family and community on placement stability appears to be powerful. Take, for example, two children, each with one sibling in care. The child who is placed with a non - relative, without her sibling, in a LAN (local area network) other than the one of her home of record is 2.2 times more likely to experience a move than the child who is placed with her sibling, in a home of a relative, located in the LAN of her home of record."

Caseworker characteristics such as gender, work experience and education were not statistically related to the likelihood of placement change.

Caseworkers identified improved children's mental health services and various support services to foster families, e.g. respite care, transportation assistance, along with after - school and recreational programs for youth as services which could reduce placement instability. However, it was common for caseworkers to state that foster parents and / or children were not currently receiving these services for a variety of reasons.

One of the most interesting inconsistencies cited by the authors was caseworkers' broadly positive view of foster parents despite their view that foster parents' unwillingness to continue fostering is, at least in part, a factor in three quarters of placement changes. "... Most workers (93.9%) reported general satisfaction with children's current foster homes and there was broad agreement that foster families were meeting children's needs across a number of different domains." The authors' interpretation of caseworkers' attitudes toward foster parents is very discerning. According to the authors, caseworkers understand that foster parents "lead busy lives". Almost half of foster parents in Illinois are headed by single adults and over half have one or more of their minor children living with them. Foster parents, caseworkers realize, are overburdened and often poorly resourced. "When we consider these findings in light of workers' reports that a large percentage of children suffer from mental health or behavior problems, and that foster parents' inability to manage these problems contributed to a large percentage of placement moves, a picture emerges of foster families operating at the limit of their capacity."

"It is possible that workers ... do not perceive placement movement that is precipitated by foster parents as extraordinary or as evidence of any deficiency. In other words, it appears that caseworkers are accurately identifying the locus of control for placement instability, which in many cases appears to be foster parents, but given the exigencies of fostering, perceive instability as normative and /or as unavoidable." If so, reducing caseworkers' tolerance for unplanned placement changes may well exacerbate conflicts with foster parents, a group of persons whom child welfare systems are having great difficulty recruiting and retaining.

Readers interested in obtaining this study can find it at the following web site:
http://www.chapinhall.org/article_abstract.aspx?ar=1423