

# Hennepin County Placement Stability/Instability Study

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## **Summary**

Children who experience multiple placements in foster care suffer from a range of emotional, behavioral, and developmental problems that persist over a lifetime. There are several reasons why multiple placements occur. Frequently, sources of foster placement instability may include the abilities and tolerance of foster parents, the behavior and needs of the child, and the success of the match. In addition, there may be institutional and administrative factors that contribute to instability. This study was designed to find ways to minimize unstable care for children entrusted to Hennepin County's child protection system. The purpose of the study was to determine factors that were associated with the stability and instability of placement experiences.

## **Relationship to Policy & Practice**

Findings from this study may help caseworkers understand the potential sources of disruption and determine where they may influence the stability of children's placements.

## **Background**

The literature review below is adapted from Semanchin Jones' (2007) final report titled: PATH Wisconsin-Bremer Project: Preventing Placement Disruptions in Foster Care.

As previously mentioned, there are a variety of reasons why children in the foster care system experience placement instability. Sources of instability can be divided into five categories: characteristics of the child, characteristics of the foster parents, characteristics of the biological parents, characteristics of the caseworker, and characteristics of placement, agency and/or system (Semanchin Jones, 2007).

## **Characteristics of the Child**

One half to two-thirds of children entering foster care display behavioral and emotional issues that require mental health services (Landsverk & Garland, 1998). The presence of and occurrence of mental health diagnoses is a predictor of placement instability (Bradley, 2004). Additionally, children with emotional and behavioral issues are more likely to experience multiple placements (Pardeck, 1984).

In an extensive literature review, Proch & Taber (1985) found that problem behavior was one of the most predictive factors for placement instability. In particular, externalizing behavioral problems characterized as disruptive, aggressive, or dangerous lead to foster care placement disruption (Newton et al., 2000). Similarly, if a child enters placement as a result of delinquency, he or she is more likely to experience placement instability (Fanshel & Shinn as cited in Proch & Taber, 1985).

There are conflicting findings regarding age and placement stability. The Children & Family Research Center (2004) describes several studies where older age was a predictor of placement instability. Similarly, Bradley (2004) found that older children are at an increased risk for placement disruption, but prior research conducted by Pardeck (1984) determined age to be a factor only if the child was in foster care longer than three years while Newton et al. (2000) did not find age to be a predictor of disruption.

A study that looked at the interaction of age and behavioral issues found that children younger than 4 years and 2 months who exhibited externalizing behaviors did not have an increased risk of placement instability (Strijker et al., 2002). Children who were older than four years and two months, however, did have an increased risk of disruption.

In addition to behavioral issues, length of stay in the foster care system is a predictor of placement disruption. Bradley (2004) found that the longer a child is in the foster care system, the higher the likelihood of placement instability. The first six months of placement may be the most important (Smith et al., 2001; Bradley, 2004).

## **Characteristics of the Foster Parents**

The characteristics of the child are not the only predictors of placement disruption; the characteristics of the foster parents are an additional source of placement instability. For example, prior research has revealed that foster parents' motivation and competence were predictors of stable placement (Stone & Stone, 1983). Children placed with foster parents who were able to deal with behavioral issues were less likely to experience placement disruption (Walsh & Walsh, 1990). Recent research conducted by Chamberlain et al. (2006) suggests that six problem behaviors serves as the threshold number of behaviors a foster parent is able and willing to handle.

In several studies, a "good fit" is described as a predictor of placement stability (oelling et al., 1990; Smith et al., 2001). Research indicates that foster parents' support network also plays a role in the stability of the placement (Semanchin Jones, 2007). For example, a

research review conducted by Redding et al. (2000) revealed that successful foster parents have strong social support networks. Additionally, placement stability was more likely when the foster family had a positive relationship with their extended family (Walsh & Walsh, 1990).

Another foster parent characteristic that may have an effect on placement stability is life changes within the life of the foster parent. Gibbs (2005) found that marital changes and adoption were reasons cited for no longer providing foster care.

### **Characteristics of the Biological Parents**

Factors associated with the characteristics of the biological parents also affect placement stability. The Children and Family Research Center (2004) found that when parents prepared the child for the placement there was less chance that a placement disruption would occur.

Research also indicates that the parents' presenting issues are factors associated with stability. For example, there was a correlation between the criminal record of a child's biological father and the number of placements; that is, children with a father who had a criminal record experienced more placements (Walsh & Walsh, 1990). Children of parents for whom substance abuse was an issue also experienced more frequent placements (Ardeck, 1984).

### **Characteristics of the Caseworker**

In a case record review, Stone & Stone (1983) discovered that the level of caseworker contact and rapport with the family was correlated with placement stability. Along those lines, there was a correlation between caseworker turnover and the number of disruptions (Pardeck as cited in Children and Family Research Center, 2004). Less caseworker turnover was correlated with a lower number of placement disruptions.

### **Characteristics of Placement, Agency, and/or System**

The final category of characteristics discussed in Semanchin Jones' (2007) literature review is characteristics of the placement, agency, and/or system. Not only is kinship care associated with more placement stability, but also children, who had behavioral issues, placed with kin were less likely to experience a disruption in placement (Webster et al., 2000; Chamberlain et al., 2006).

Many children have positive experiences in kinship care; however, there are several factors associated with kinship placement disruption (Terling-Watt, 2001). Familial stressors that affect the stability of a kinship placement include troubled contacts with biological parents, adolescents' rejection of structured environments, special needs children, and health limitations of relatives.

Not surprisingly, a child with a history of placement disruption was at a higher risk of experiencing future placement disruption (Staff & Fein, 1995). Sometimes multiple placements result from the system itself. Hartnett et al., (1999) found placement instability can, in part, be explained by emergency placements and policies that promote sibling reunification.

Several studies have found a correlation between the number of children in a placement and placement stability (Smith et al., 2000; Proch & Taber, 1985). A higher number of children in a foster care placement was associated with a higher risk of disruption.

Finally, Doran & Berliner (2001) found that the closeness of the biological family to the placement served as a protective factor against placement disruption.

## **Description & Results Summary**

The Hennepin County Stability/Instability study was a case-control study of children who had more than four living situations in their placement versus those who had two or fewer living situations. The research question was: What are the risk factors for multiple placements? Research staff first created a case record reading instrument based on the research question; the instrument was then field tested and revised. For the sample, the researchers drew the cases to be read randomly from each of the populations. The final sample consisted of 30 cases identified as having four or more living situations and 30 cases with two or fewer living situations.

This study was conducted as part of the Hennepin County Visiting Scholar Program and was a joint program of the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare, Hennepin County Children, Family and Adult Services, and the Gamble-Skogmo Land Grant Chair in Child Welfare and Youth Studies.

### **Risk Factors**

Only 48 % of children in the study who had four or more living situations had a high initial risk assessment. Eighty percent of all of the children with four or more placements lived in a shelter as first living situation following removal. In addition, 80 % had a police hold for 72 hours. Sixty percent of children with four or more living situations had neglecting parents and 52 % had a special needs problem prior to placement. Along those lines, 48 % were assigned a Difficulty of Care (DOC) code. Only 17 % of children with four or more living arrangements had weekly face-to-face contacts with a worker. And, only 10 % of the foster care providers for children in this group had weekly face-to-face contacts with a worker.

Eighty-two percent of children who experienced two or fewer living arrangements had a high initial risk assessment. Only four percent of these children had a shelter as his or her first living situation. Forty-eight percent of children in this group had a police hold for 72 hours. Only 29.6 % had neglecting parents and 11% had a special needs problem prior to

placement. A mere three percent of these children had a DOC code. In stark contrast to the four or more group, forty-two percent of children who had two or fewer living arrangements had weekly face-to-face contacts with a worker. The foster care providers of 32 % of these children had weekly face-to-face contacts with a worker.

Using logistic regression, factors that emerged as predictive of two or fewer living situations during continuous placement included: foster home as the first placement setting, chemical abuse and at least one other removal condition was the source of the removal, and younger age of the child.

More specifically, if a child had a foster home placement as his or her first placement he or she was 7.7 times more likely to have two or fewer living situations when controlling for other variables such as age, chemical abuse, and other removal conditions. If a child was removed due to a caregivers' chemical abuse issue and at least one other removal condition, he or she was 2.3 times more likely to have two or fewer living situations. Finally, for every year older a child was, he or she was less likely to have two or fewer placements.

Factors predicting four or more living situations during continuous placement included: American Indian racial identity; removal condition was due to physical abuse and neglect; an overlapping history of abuse, neglect or multiple placements (more than one of these); the child had behavioral problems; removal conditions were multiple; there were special cultural or religious needs; the child had a sibling group; and the child was older.

An American Indian child was 2.3 times more likely to have four or more living situations when controlling for other variables. When physical abuse and neglect was the removal condition, the child was twice as likely to have had four or more living situations. Children with an overlapping history of abuse, neglect, or multiple placements were 1.8 times more likely to have had four or more living situations. Children with behavioral problems were 1.8 times more likely to have had four or more living situations. When the removal conditions were multiple, the child had a 1.7 greater chance of having four or more living situations. Children who had special cultural or religious needs were 1.6 times more likely to have experienced four or more living situations. When a child had a sibling group, there was a 1.4 greater chance that he or she had four or more living situations. Finally, for every year older a child was, there was a 1.1 greater likelihood that he or she had experienced four or more living situations.

## **Conclusion & Recommendations**

When examining the data, the risk factors identified above, and the findings of the qualitative analysis of the reading of case records, several conclusions and recommendations were made. These conclusions and recommendations focused largely on the qualitative analysis.

## **Sources of Disruption**

Disruptions in placements may find their origins in foster parents, the child, or the system. In the qualitative analysis several types of situations became apparent. In every age group, there was evidence that the foster parents could be a source of disruption. In some cases, the foster parent asked that the child be removed for reasons unrelated to the child. In other cases, foster parents physically abused the child, or evidence of poor level of care was brought to the attention of the child protection worker. Sometimes, the child's behavior was also a source of disruption. A child's aggressive behavior that was dangerous to other children in the foster home was also a reason for removal. Mental health problems such as suicidal threats and pre-delinquent behavior were deemed unmanageable by some foster parents. The system itself may be a disruptive factor. Removing a child in order to place him or her with siblings posed serious dilemmas. Factors to be considered in this circumstance might include the age of the child, the intensity of the attachment to the foster parent, the relationships among the siblings, and the consequences of the disruption. In these instances, the best interest of the child was sometimes a vague and elusive standard.

### **Factors Requiring Special Attention**

Children typically experienced disrupted living situations before coming into care such as family chaos, marginal care, and drifting among caretakers before coming to the attention of child protection. These experiences may make it difficult for children to adapt to a structured environment in a family foster home. Not surprisingly, children arrived in the system with serious behavioral, physical, and emotional problems evident from the number of accumulated maltreatment reports and child protection assessments.

### **Relative Care**

Multiple living situations while under care of kin were inconsistently reported. The stability of kin placement may actually mask unstable arrangements for the child (handed around to relatives, left in care of friends, returned to parents despite court orders). Some of the cases were extremely complicated (mixing and melding of three generations with children drifting in and out of several living situations with half-siblings and fathers that enter and exit the family). Relatives' failure to follow through on licensing was usually an alert that the placement was sub-standard.

### **Practice Factors**

In very complicated cases with multiple placements, the child services worker was the only consistent support for the young child. The rapport between caseworkers and foster parents appeared to be a factor in avoiding disruption although case notes on this relationship are sparse.

### **Infants and Toddlers**

The urgency of stable placements for very young infants and toddlers was apparent. These young children were more often associated with higher risk situations than their counterparts in the four or more living situations. It appears that 0-3 year olds, with fewer

living situations, were children in urgent conditions requiring concerted attention, and they were moved quickly to permanency. In contrast, for eight cases of 0-3 year olds with four or more living arrangements, reunification and re-entry was the pattern.

### **Selected Recommendations**

Foster parents clearly need more support, particularly with children who have had very disrupted backgrounds. In addition, they could benefit from more training and education regarding the intense needs and likely behaviors of children entering foster care. Finally, more face-to-face contact between the worker and the foster care provider should occur to ensure children placed in foster care are not maltreated.

As previously mentioned, the child's behavior may be a source of disruption. Children who enter the foster care system need more access to interventions that address and mitigate problematic behavior. More collaboration between child mental health services and foster care services could facilitate this access.

Since the system may also have an impact on disruption, it is an additional area that could benefit from improvement. For example, when a worker is considering removing a child in order to re-place him or her with siblings, expert consultation may be required; in this situation, the best interest of the child is difficult to assess--especially if the child has established an attachment with the current foster parent. Also, as already discussed, sometimes the child services worker is the only consistent support for the child. Consequently, it is important that child services workers have adequate time to increase the number of face-to-face contacts with both the child and the foster care provider.

### **Discussion Questions**

- What are the child and family socio-demographics characteristics (e.g., age, sex, race, marital status of caregiver, diagnosed disabilities, siblings, household composition, income, intergenerational contact with Child Protective Services, geographic location of family home) that affect the number of placements?
- What are the case profile characteristics that are associated with multiple placements (e.g. prior reports, prior placements, permanency plan, previous involvement with CPS and sibling placement)?
- Are there workers' practices that contribute to placement disruption and/or stability?
- What characteristics of the family's interaction with foster home, worker or child are associated with placement stability?

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## Resource List

- Esther Wattenberg
- Hennepin County Human Services and Public Health Department
- Full Report:  
[http://www.co.hennepin.mn.us/vgn/images/portal/cit\\_100003616/35/19/103304457fostercarestability-instability.pdf](http://www.co.hennepin.mn.us/vgn/images/portal/cit_100003616/35/19/103304457fostercarestability-instability.pdf)

## Potential Guest Speakers

- Esther Wattenberg