Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare

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RESEARCH BRIEF

Out-of-home Placement Characteristics and Crossover from Foster Care to Juvenile Justice

Purpose of the Study

The aim of the study was to identify potential links between out-of-home placement characteristics and the likelihood and timing of initial contact with the juvenile justice system for Minnesota youth.

Background & Purpose

Children in foster care are at increased risk for a variety of negative developmental outcomes, including increased risk for juvenile delinquency (i.e., "crossover") and later adult criminality (Berlin et al., 2011). Adolescents involved in child welfare begin offending at an earlier age and are more likely to commit more serious crimes than adolescents who are not in the child welfare system (Ryan et al., 2010).

ADOLESCENTS INVOLVED IN CHILD WELFARE BEGIN OFFENDING AT AN EARLIER AGE AND ARE MORE LIKELY TO COMMIT MORE SERIOUS CRIMES THAN ADOLESCENTS WHO ARE NOT IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM.

Previous research findings, however, are nuanced. For instance, placement in kinship care is associated with reduced risk of juvenile delinquency (Farieneau & McWey, 2011), but placement in residential care is associated with increased risk (Gupta & Frederiksen, 2012). Youth who experience repeated out-of-home placements (OHP) and youth who are older at the time of their first removal are at increased risk for juvenile delinquency compared to their counterparts (Williams-Butler, 2018). Although researchers have found that school mobility, a factor associated with OHP, predicts academic performance and emotional adjustment (Pears et al., 2015), researchers have not examined whether school mobility in the context of OHP is associated with juvenile delinquency. Furthermore, given that one of the most robust predictors for ongoing criminal behavior is age at first arrest (Eddy et al., 2002), it is important to understand how placement characteristics might also impact the timing of crossover.

This study aims to identify potential links between OHP characteristics and the likelihood and timing of initial contact with the juvenile justice system. The main research question guiding this study is:

1. ***Which out-of-home placement characteristics are associated with***
    a. ***the likelihood of crossing over from the foster care system into the juvenile justice system for the first time, and***
    b. ***the timing of that crossover?***

College of Education and Human Development
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Methods

Through Minn-LInK, education, child welfare, and juvenile court records were integrated to create a sample of 981 Minnesotan youth born in 2000 or 2001 who were in out-of-home care between ages 9-10; youth were followed administratively from birth to age 18. Data were analyzed using logistic regression and survival analysis.

Through Minn-LInK, data from the Minnesota Departments of Human Services and Education, and the State Court Administrators Office were integrated for youth born 2000-2001. Data were restricted to Minnesotan youth who were in out-of-home care between ages 9-10 (n=981), and followed administratively through age 18. The sample was 47% female, and the average age at first out-of-home placement was 7.38 years (SD = 2.98; see Table 1). Youth, who could identify with multiple racial and ethnic groups, were predominantly white (62%), with the next largest identity being Black (30%), followed by American Indian or Alaskan Native (21%), Hispanic (12%), and Asian or Pacific Islander (3%).

Logistic regression was used to assess predictors of crossing over and survival analysis was used to investigate the timing of crossover. Outcome variables included: crossover from the child welfare to juvenile justice system (yes/no) and age at crossover. Predictor variables included: age at first placement (years), total time in care (days), number of placements, placement type (kinship care, non-relative foster care, residential care), removal reasons (physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, inadequate housing, parent reason, child reason), involvement in an accepted CPS case, number of school moves, race/ethnicity (as previously described), sex (male/female), and special education receipt (ever/never). Youth could have more than one placement type and removal reason.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

	Frequency (%)
Sex	
Female	457 (46.6)
Male	524 (53.4)
Race/ethnicity	
American Indian/Alaska Native	207 (21.1)
Asian/Pacific Islander	33 (3.4)
Hispanic	114 (11.6)
Black	292 (29.8)
White	603 (61.5)
Missing	1 (0.10)
Special education	
Yes	557 (56.8)
No	378 (38.5)
Missing	46 (4.7)
Placement types	
Residential care	420 (42.8)
Kinship care	482 (49.1)
Nonrelative foster care	756 (77.1)
Removal reasons	
Inadequate housing	101 (10.3)
Parent reason	590 (60.1)
Child reason	231 (23.5)
Neglect	531 (54.1)
Physical abuse	240 (24.5)
Sexual abuse	97 (9.9)
Crossover	334 (34.0)
	Mean (SD)
Age at first placement	7.38 (2.98)
Number of placement changes	4.49 (3.99)
Days in care	872.98 (1070.65)
Average number of school moves	
Pre-adolescence	0.72 (0.57)
Adolescence	0.66 (0.72)
Number of accepted CPS cases	8.88 (6.59)

Findings

Several risk factors were found to affect the likelihood and/or timing of crossover, including: placement in residential care, removal for physical abuse, removal for a child reason (e.g., child mental or physical health) or a parent reason (e.g., parent substance use or incarceration), school mobility during adolescence, and child characteristics such as being American Indian/Alaska Native, male, and receiving special education services.

Predictors of Crossover

A total of 334 youth (34.56% of the sample) crossed over from the child welfare to juvenile justice system in the current study. Findings of the logistic regression (Table 2) revealed that youth who were removed from their home for physical abuse had 81% higher odds of entering the juvenile justice system compared to youth who had not been removed for physical abuse. Additionally, the odds of crossing over for youth who were removed from the home for a child-reason (which included removal for child physical or mental health, child behavior, or child alcohol or substance use) were 116% higher than for youth who were not removed for child reasons. The odds of youth crossing over who were removed from the home for a parent-reason (which included parent inability to care for children, parent mental or physical health issue, parent alcohol or substance use issue, parental incarceration, and abandonment) were 73% higher than it was for youth who were not removed for parent reasons. The findings also indicated school mobility, but only during adolescence, was a significant risk factor for crossover. The odds of youth crossing over from the foster care system to the juvenile justice system increased 38% with each school change (on average) during adolescence.

FINDINGS OF THE LOGISTIC REGRESSION REVEALED THAT YOUTH WHO WERE REMOVED FROM THEIR HOME FOR PHYSICAL ABUSE HAD 81% HIGHER ODDS OF ENTERING THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM COMPARED TO YOUTH WHO HAD NOT BEEN REMOVED FOR PHYSICAL ABUSE.

Table 2. Logistic Regression Results Predicting Odds of Crossover

	OR	SE	*p*
Age at first placement	0.97	.03	.40
Days in care	1.00	.00	<.01
Number of placement changes	0.92	.03	.02
Placement type			
Residential care	1.30	.20	.20
Kinship care	1.11	.19	.60
Nonrelative foster care	0.92	.22	.68
Removal reasons			
Neglect	1.16	.18	.42
Physical abuse	1.81	.20	<.01
Sexual abuse	0.93	.29	.81
Inadequate housing	1.09	.27	.76
Child reason	2.14	.21	<.01
Parent reason	1.74	.18	<.01
Average yearly school moves			
Pre-adolescence	1.15	.15	.37
Adolescence	1.46	.12	<.01
Race/ethnicity			
American Indian/Alaska Native	2.80	.22	<.01
Asian/Pacific Islander	0.51	.50	.18
Hispanic	1.12	.26	.67
Black	1.27	.23	.30
White	1.01	.21	.95
Special education receipt	1.03	.18	.86
Male	1.60	.17	.01
CPS involvement	1.02	.01	.07

Note. *Removal for child reason includes removal for child physical or mental health, child behavior, or child alcohol or substance use. Removal for parent reason includes removal for parent mental or physical health issue, parent alcohol or substance use issue, parental incarceration, or abandonment. OR = Odds Ratio, SE = Standard Error*

Furthermore, analyses revealed individual youth characteristics to be associated with risk of crossover. For example, the odds of crossing over for youth who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native were 118% higher than youth who did not identify as American Indian or Alaska Native. Additionally, findings showed that the odds of male youth crossing over were 60% higher than they were for female youth. It is important to note that youth characteristics are themselves not a risk factor but rather a proxy for the different experiences youth often have due to disparities and biases in youth-serving systems.

Timing of Crossover

Results of the survival analysis (Table 3) revealed that youth who were (ever) placed in residential care (a broad category of placements that includes group homes, campus-based homes, staff-secured settings, and youth correctional centers) experienced juvenile delinquency approximately 93 days earlier on average than youth who had never experienced a residential care placement. Furthermore, youth who were removed from the home because of a child reason entered the juvenile justice system on average more than a year (444 days) earlier than youth who had not been removed for this reason. Additionally, youth removed for a parent reason entered the juvenile justice system on average age 124 days earlier than youth who were not removed for a parent reason.

Table 3. Average Age of Crossover (in Years) Based on Group Characteristics

	No Mean (SE)	Yes Mean (SE)	Difference (in days) Between yes/no
Placed in residential care	16.85 (0.09)	16.59 (0.11)	-94.32*
Removed for child reason	17.03 (0.07)	15.80 (0.17)	-448.46*
Removed for parent reason	16.94 (0.10)	16.60 (0.09)	-124.62*
American Indian/Alaska Native	16.85 (0.08)	16.29 (0.16)	-205.20*
Asian/Pacific Islander	16.70 (0.07)	17.63 (0.17)	336.97*
Special education receipt	17.05 (0.09)	16.48 (0.10)	-210.05*
	Female	**Male**	**Difference between male/female**
Male	17.03 (0.09)	16.48 (0.10)	-210.05*

Note. ** p < .05, SE = Standard Error*

Lastly, some group differences in terms of the timing of entry into the juvenile justice system emerged based on child characteristics. For example, youth who were identified as American Indian or Alaska Native tended to enter crossover from the foster care system to the juvenile justice system 205 days earlier on average than youth who did not identify as American Indian or Alaskan Native. Male youth crossed over, on average, 210 days earlier than female youth, and youth identified as receiving special education services crossed over, on average, 210 days earlier than youth who were not identified as receiving special education services. On the other hand, youth who identified as Asian or Pacific Islander crossed over almost a year later (336 days on average) compared to youth who did not identify as Asian or Pacific Islander. Again, these findings must be interpreted with the acknowledgement that youth characteristics are a proxy for the different experiences youth often have because of system-based biases and disparities.

YOUTH WHO WERE REMOVED FROM THE HOME BECAUSE OF A CHILD REASON ENTERED THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM ON AVERAGE MORE THAN A YEAR (444 DAYS) EARLIER THAN YOUTH WHO HAD NOT BEEN REMOVED FOR THIS REASON.

Conclusion

The current study leveraged large, administrative datasets to examine factors associated with the likelihood and timing of crossover. Approximately a third of the total sample crossed over from the foster care system to the juvenile justice system. Risk factors included: placement in residential care, removal for physical abuse, a child reason (e.g., removal for child physical or mental health, child behavior, or child alcohol or substance use), or a parent reason (e.g., parent inability to care for children, parent mental or physical health issue, parent alcohol or substance use issue, parental incarceration, and abandonment), school mobility during adolescence, and child characteristics such as race, sex, and special education status.

Limitations

While administrative data provides valuable information about a vulnerable population that might not otherwise be obtained, these data lack rich context and details which could provide further information about which children are more likely to crossover from the child welfare system to the juvenile justice system. Additionally, the study is limited to Minnesota during the study time period and may not be generalizable to other states or time periods. Lastly, because child maltreatment was only measured by removal reasons, there may have been maltreatment that went undetected by child welfare systems, or that occurred but did not result in a removal.

Child Welfare Implications: It is vital to provide preventive services and supports to children and families to avoid initial home removals whenever possible. It is also important to limit school mobility, particularly for adolescents, who are working to define themselves as individuals. Whenever possible, child welfare workers should choose placements for youth that allow them to remain in their current school setting. Further, though ICWA has been in place since well before the study time period, it is often not properly followed. Implementing ICWA consistently in county agencies, including involving tribes in child placement decisions and prioritizing placing native children in native homes, can alleviate disproportionalities and provide opportunities for community-based connection and supports not available through the county.

Court Implications: As best practice, court systems should inquire about and consider previous trauma histories for adolescents in the court system, and particularly those who are initially entering the system. Judges and county attorneys should incorporate this knowledge into their decision-making. Youth with trauma histories may benefit from receiving treatment services, no matter the adjudication status of their alleged offenses.

School Implications: Particularly for adolescents who have changed placements, and those who have changed schools in accordance with their placement, many times, youth may have problems acclimating to a new school, understanding curriculum, and establishing friendships. As soon as these students matriculate, additional supports would be helpful in promoting their successful adjustment.

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The Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) is a resource for child welfare professionals, students, faculty, policy-makers, and other key stakeholders concerned about child welfare in Minnesota. **Minn-LInK** is a unique collaborative, university-based research environment with the express purpose of studying child and family well being in Minnesota using state administrative data from multiple agencies.

For more information, contact **Kristine Piescher (Editor)** at **612-624-4231** or email at *cascw@umn.edu*

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