Why Should the Child Welfare Field Focus on Minimizing Placement Change as Part of Permanency Planning for Children?

Introduction

In the U.S. nationally, many infants and adolescents are placed in foster care as a refuge for a few months while their birth parents improve their functioning or their living situation. However, about 50% of youth leaving foster care in the United States have spent one year or more in care (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). Wilson (2000) found that 63% of youth in Washington state foster care had one or two placements, while 77% of the youth in James's (2004) California study had three or more placements. These variations illustrate the need to account for the amount of time spent in care when comparing the number of placements across samples.

Similarly, the number of placements varies widely across alumni and across agency sub-samples. For example, in one study of three child welfare agencies (two states and one voluntary agency), about one-third (31.9%) of the alumni experienced three or fewer placements, but an equal percentage (32.3%) experienced 8 or more placements throughout their child welfare career.[1] While over one-half of the sample had 5 or fewer placements (including one-fifth with only one or two placements), slightly more than one-fifth had 10 or more placements. The cumulative percent line in Figure 1 indicates that approximately 95% of the sample had 15 or fewer placements, while the remaining 5% had as many as 31 placements (Pecora, Kessler, Williams et al. forthcoming).[2]

The experiences of these children while in care have important ramifications for their development and for identifying ways to improve permanency planning. This handout will provide five reasons why a focus on minimizing placement change should be a vital aspect of permanency planning.

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[1] For more information about the methods and outcomes of this study, see Pecora, Kessler, Williams et al. (2005, 2006).

[2] Because Casey alumni spent more time in foster care, they had significantly more placements than the state alumni (an average of 7 for Casey versus 6 for the State). Some placements for the Casey alumni occurred while in State care, as the time between the first out-of-home placement and entry into Casey averaged 3.5 years (median=2.3 years). Almost one-third of Casey alumni (32.9%) were in placement for 4 years or more before entering Casey. Over the child's entire time in foster care, youth in the Casey system had more stability as measured by placements per year. Alumni averaged 1.2 placements per year, with the Casey alumni having a rate one third lower than that of the State alumni. Accordingly, when placement change rate was trichotomized, a smaller percentage of Casey alumni were in the group with a high rate (defined here as 1.23 or more placement changes per year. This means that, within a system designed to provide stability, nearly half of the State sample and one-quarter of the Casey sample experienced an average of nearly five placements every four years (Pecora, Kessler, Williams et al. forthcoming).

Figure 1. Distribution of the Number of Placements Experienced by the Northwest Foster Care Alumni, With Cumulative Percent and Range Groupings.
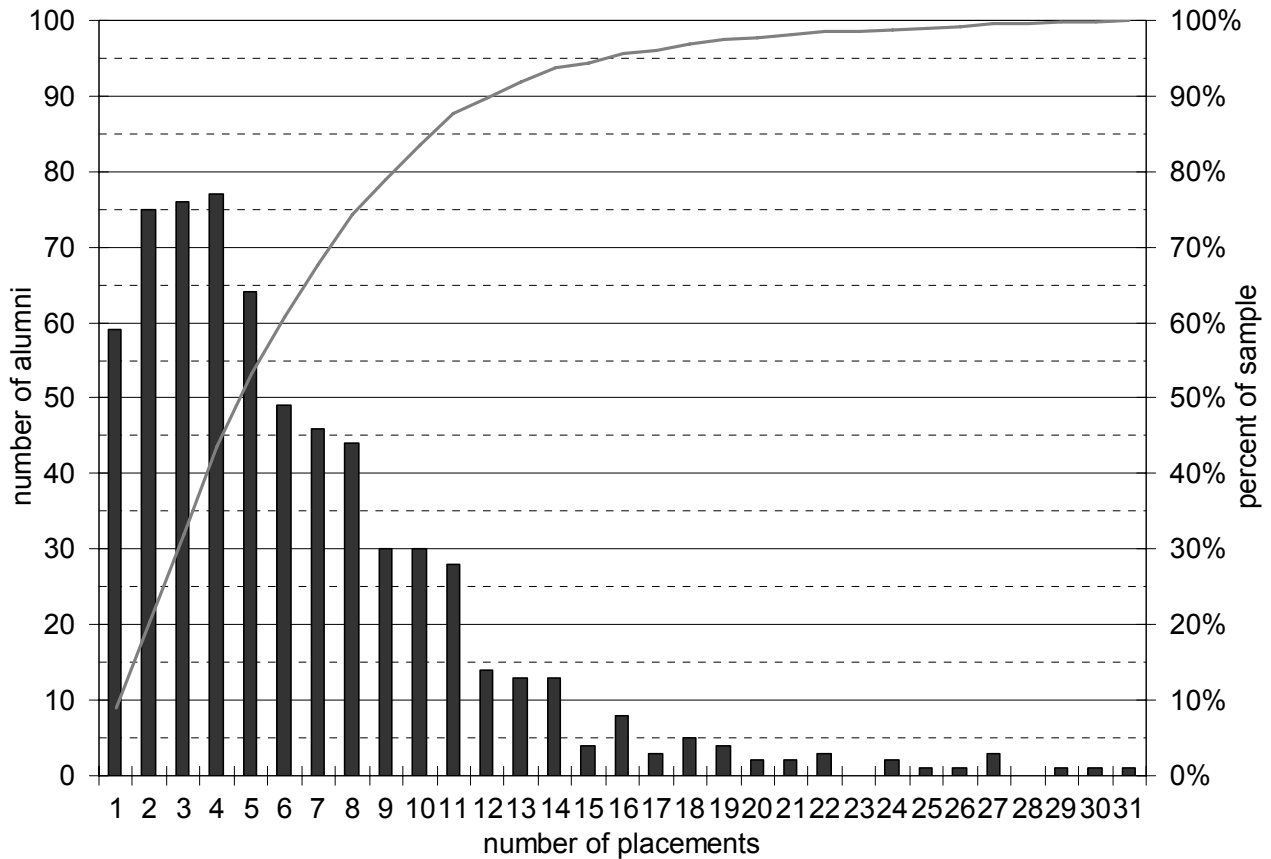
Source: Pecora, P. J., Kessler, R. C., Williams, J., Downs, A. C., English, D., & White, J. & O'Brien, K. (Forthcoming). *What works in foster care?* Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

1. Minimize Child Pain and Trauma

First, children entering out-of-home care undergo enormous changes. Apart from being separated from their family, many of these children are not able to maintain relationships with friends and community members (Johnson, Yoken, & Voss, 1995). Changing homes because of placement disruption compounds the immeasurable sense of loss these children must face by leaving behind relationships again and again. Festinger's (1983) landmark study of 277 alumni of care, entitled *No One Ever Asked Us*, revealed that most alumni experienced placement changes as unsettling and confusing. When rating their perception of foster care, the alumni's satisfaction was inversely correlated with the number of placements they had experienced. More research is needed that builds on the personal perspectives of the youth in care (Unrau, 2007).

2. Lessen Child Attachment, Behavior and Mental Health Disorders

Wulczyn and Cogan (2002, p. 2) cited an important child development-related reason: "Multiple placements are thought to have a pernicious impact on the development of attachment to primary caregivers, an early developmental milestone thought to be essential for the achievement of later developmental tasks (e.g. Lieberman, 1987; Provence, 1989; Fahlberg, 1991)." While the concept of child and adolescent attachment to adults is not an exact science and we have much to learn about helping children build new positive attachments, many youth and foster care alumni have commented on how important it is to minimize placement change and to be placed with siblings as a placement stabilizing strategy (Leathers, 2005, Herrick & Piccus, 2005).

In addition, various researchers have found that multiple placements may lead to child behavior problems (Newton, Litrownik & Landsverk, 2000), and mental health problems (Rutter & Sroufe, 2000).[3] Indeed, Ryan & Testa (2004) found that these changes were linked with decreased school performance and delinquent behavior of males, and Pecora, Williams, Kessler et al. (2003) found that lower placement change was associated with foster care alumni success in a sample of 20-51 year old alumni.

3. Decrease School Mobility and Increase Academic Achievement

While many child welfare staff and some new state laws try to minimize school change when a placement changes, in too many situations the child is forced to change schools. School mobility has been implicated as a clear risk factor for dropout (Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Rumberger, 2003). David Kerbow's (1996) longitudinal study of school mobility in Chicago found that it acted as both an individual and school level risk factor for low achievement. Highly mobile students fell almost a year behind in achievement by sixth grade. Non-mobile students in schools with high mobility rates were half a year behind by sixth grade. While the highest

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[3] Barber and Defrabbrio (2004) in a study in Australia found that most children in foster care display improvements in their psychological adjustment while in care. Surprisingly, these improvements can occur despite frequent placement disruption during the first eight months in care. Beyond the eight-month point, however, placement disruption is associated with psychological deterioration. The basic explanation for this finding concerns change in the *reasons* for placement move up to and beyond the eight-month point. Many children change placement in the first eight months for positive reasons, such as to get closer to their families or to go to a better school. Beyond the eight month point, however, those children who continue moving tend to do so because their foster placements break down. In other words, the concentration of difficult or distressed children is greater among those who move around for more than eight months than among those who move around for eight months or less (Knott, & Barber, 2004).

mobility rates (31%) were among children of single parent families, it is notable that the second highest rate (25%) was observed for children in households with no biological parent present (Stone, 2007). But the relationship among these variables is complex:

> Given the deleterious impacts of school mobility, many have questioned to what extent this may be a particular problem with foster children (Conger & Finkelstein, 2003). The relationship between placement transfers and several academic outcomes has been discussed above. Two recent studies control for both placement and school transfers on selected academic outcomes. Conger and Rebeck's (2001) study actually found increases in attendance after school transfers. School transfers were unrelated to reading achievement, but had a small negative effect on mathematics achievement. A stronger predictor of school achievement was school attendance. Burley and Halpern (2001) found that school transfers were negatively related to test scores for third and sixth grade students, but not ninth graders (not controlling for prior school performance and attendance) and high school completion. These results suggest that nature and quality of school transfers matters, that school transfers may have different relationships with different academic outcomes and, not surprisingly, that attendance loss may at least partially explain negative effects of school transfers among foster youth (Stone, 2007, p. 154).

4. Maximize Continuity in Services, Decrease Foster Parent Stress, and Lower Program Costs

Placement changes disrupt services provision, stress foster parents (thereby lowering retention rates), take up precious worker time, and create administrative-related disruptions. Because we know so little about what causes placement change, the field is less able to predict and therefore prevent them. And yet the dynamics of these changes are important for other reasons. For example, adolescents who were placed alone after a history of joint sibling placements were at greater risk for placement disruption than those who were placed with a consistent number of siblings while in foster care. This association was mediated by a weaker sense of integration and belonging in the foster home among youth placed alone with a history of sibling placements (Leathers, 2005).

5. Increase the Likelihood that a Child Will Establish an Enduring Positive Relationship with a Caring Adult

Clearly, the more stability a child has, the more likely it is that the child will be able to establish a stronger and more varied network of social support and enduring relationships with adults who care about him or her.

To Increase Permanency Planning Success We Must Understand Placement Change Dynamics

James (2004) made a major contribution to this area by finding that child behavior problems, while significant, constituted the reason for a placement change in only 19.7% of the situations, as contrasted with "system or policy-related" reasons (70%) such as a move to a short-term or long-term care facility, move to be placed with a sibling or relative, group home closure, move to be closer to a relative or certain school (p. 612). Note that even some of these "system or policy-related" reasons actually stem from what might be thought of as sound practice decisions to help a child reach a more permanent or developmentally enhancing living situation.

A recent study of "frequent movers" in Kentucky foster care, found that those who were at higher risk of four or more moves were females between the ages of 12-15, young black males, children coming into car because of sexual abuse and child behavior problems, prior psychiatric hospitalization, and those who moved quickly from their first placement (especially for behavior reasons or need for special services (Huebner, 2007). Some of these factors were also identified in a meta-analysis of placement disruption research by Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens & Doreleijers (2007): (a) older age at placement, (b) behavior problems, (c) prior placement in residential treatment, and (d) number of previous placements. Protective factors that would lower the risk of placement change include:

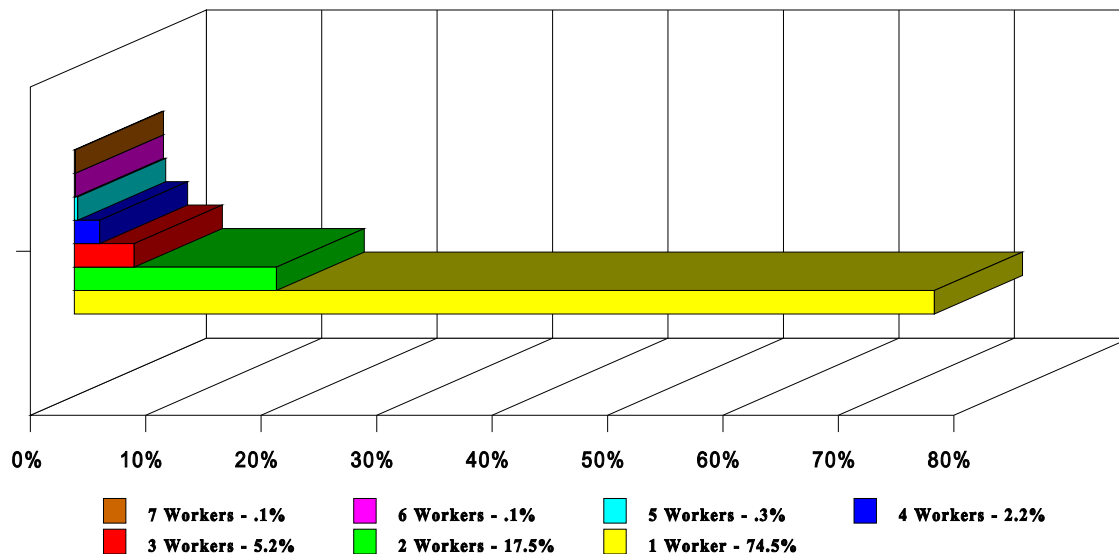|	
☐ Quality of foster parent caregiving ☐ Foster parent motivation	☐ Ability of foster parents to address the behavioral and emotional needs of the children
☐ Family resources	☐ Foster parents who welcome and accept the child in times of distress, which encourages more secure child attachment
☐ Support from relatives	☐ Support from caseworkers

Worker Change is an Important Factor

Worker change may be one of the factors that also drives placement instability because of disruptions in foster parent and child support. Most importantly, we have growing evidence that it significantly hurts a child's ability to find a permanent home. There are many examples of where poor worker retention has an impact on program effectiveness. Some dramatic data were recently released from some private agencies in Milwaukee county that showcase how turnover of ongoing case managers does impact permanency for children. For 659 children who entered care in from January 1, 2003 through September of 2004 in Milwaukee County, and exited to permanency within the same time period, increases in the number of worker changes lessened

the chance of permanency achievement. Children entering care during the time period who had only one worker achieved permanency in 74.5% of the cases. As the number of case managers increased the percentage of children achieving permanency substantially dropped, ranging from 17.5% for children who had two case managers to a low of 0.1% for those children who had six or seven case managers. [4] (See Figure 2). Potter and Klein-Rothschild (2002) also showed that the fewer workers a child has, the more likely he/she is to be reunified. Staff turnover remains a real problem, and it has major consequences for children and parents in child welfare.

Conclusion

While the effect of multiple placements on child and adult functioning has not been established definitively because some studies have found negative effects while others have not (e.g., Proch & Tabor, 1985), the more recent research in this area is documenting serious negative effects. As this review has illustrated, there are many reasons why child welfare practitioners have been concerned with placement change in out-of-home care for decades, including a long history of research in Great Britain (e.g., Schofield, Thoburn, Howell & Dickens, 2005). The challenge today is implementing proven strategies for increasing placement stability at the same time that we help children achieve permanency in a culturally appropriate way, and which meets their unique developmental needs.

Figure 2. Fewer Changes in Caseworkers Increases the Chances of Permanency for Children[a]

Legend:
- 7 Workers - .1%
- 6 Workers - .1%
- 5 Workers - .3%
- 4 Workers - 2.2%
- 3 Workers - 5.2%
- 2 Workers - 17.5%
- 1 Worker - 74.5%

[a]Data reported represents 679 children who entered care in calendar year 2003 through September 2004 and exited within the same time period. Data reported to review staff by the Bureau of Milwaukee Child Welfare. *Source:* Flower, C. McDonald, J. & Sumski, M. (2005). *Review of turnover in Milwaukee county private agency child*

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[4] One study design limitation was that the researchers did not control for length of stay in foster care.

welfare ongoing case management staff. Milwaukee, WI: Milwaukee County Department of Social Services (Mimeograph), p. 27.

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