



## 24-month update on the impact of roundtables on permanency for youth in foster care



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### ABSTRACT

Although the number of children in foster care has decreased in recent years (U.S. DHHS, 2012), additional strategies are needed to help youth achieve legal permanency before they age out of foster care. One such strategy is the permanency roundtable, which convenes a team of professionals to facilitate the permanency planning process by identifying realistic solutions to permanency obstacles for youth. Nearly 500 youth went through the initial permanency roundtable process in Georgia in 2009. Just over half were male (57%) and over nine in ten (92%) were African American. At the start of the roundtables, the median age was 13, and the median length of stay in foster care was 52 months. Two years after their roundtable, 50% of the nearly 500 children had achieved legal permanency. Analyses, presented separately for three age groups (0–6, 7–12, and 13–18), examine outcomes and predictors of legal permanency. Recommendations, limitations, and areas for future research are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

As of September 30, 2011, an estimated 400,540 children were in foster care nationwide, including 7591 in Georgia (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, & Children's Bureau, 2012). Despite a slight increase (10%) from 2010, the number of children in care in Georgia reflected a reduction of nearly half (46%) compared to September 30, 2005. While in foster care, children live in relative or non-relative foster homes, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, or pre-adoptive homes. Although foster care addresses safety for children by removing them from unstable or dangerous environments, children in foster care, who have already experienced trauma from abuse and removal, may face instability, often moving from one setting to another, which can have a negative impact on their health and development in the social, emotional, and cognitive areas (Pecora, 2010; Rubin, Alessandrini, Feudtner, Localio, & Hadley, 2004; Ryan & Testa, 2005).

Studies on outcomes for children in foster care show that they have poorer educational outcomes (National Working Group on Foster Care & Education, 2006; Pecora et al., 2005). They are at risk for mental health challenges and economic struggles, and females are more likely to have had a pregnancy by age 23 or 24 compared to youth in the general population (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010). In addition, rates of criminal involvement among foster care alumni are disturbingly high

(White et al., 2012). Because permanent relationships with caring adults may help alleviate these problems, there is a major focus nationally on providing children in foster care with legal permanency with a caregiver upon whom the child can rely to provide a lifelong, loving relationship and a nurturing living environment. Legal permanency includes reunification, or adoption or guardianship with a relative or non-relative prior to turning 18.

A relatively recent strategy developed to address these challenges is permanency roundtables (Rogg, Davis, & O'Brien, 2009), which were designed to facilitate the permanency planning process by identifying realistic solutions to permanency obstacles for youth. A team of professionals, including an external permanency consultant, a master casework practitioner, the youth's case manager, the case manager's supervisor, and others who may be familiar with the case meet for approximately 2 h to discuss the youth's case. Most youth in this study received one roundtable, but youth may have received a follow-up roundtable.

During the permanency roundtable, the team discusses the barriers to permanency for the child, brainstorms ideas to achieve permanency, and creates an action plan that can be realistically implemented in six months and that can be discussed with the child. The permanency roundtables are meant to be professional case consultations; therefore, the children and their family members are typically excluded. This distinguishes permanency roundtables from strategies such as family team meetings and family group decision-making, which are often included as part of a permanency roundtable action plan. Other unique features of permanency roundtables are discussed in more detail elsewhere (O'Brien, Davis, Morgan, Rogg, & Houston, 2012).

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Previous studies have examined factors affecting length of stay and achievement of legal permanency for children in foster care, including such factors as child demographics and characteristics, maltreatment history, and placement history. Some studies examined foster care exits or specific types of exits; others examined permanency, sometimes including emancipation as a type of permanency. Following is a brief review of research literature on these factors.

### 1.1. Gender

Studies examining gender as a predictor of permanency and length of time in foster care have had mixed results. Some studies have found no gender differences (Becker, Jordan, & Larsen, 2003; Connell, Katz, Saunders, & Tebes, 2006, for example), and others have found some gender-based differences (Avery, 1999b; Kemp & Bodonyi, 2002; Larsen-Rife & Brooks, 2009; Maza, 2009, for example). The 12-month evaluation of the Georgia permanency roundtables project (O'Brien, Davis, Morgan, Rogg, & Houston, 2012; Rogg, Davis, & O'Brien, 2011) found that gender was a significant predictor of permanency for youth aged 13–18, with males nearly twice as likely as females to achieve legal permanency within 12 months of their permanency roundtable.

### 1.2. Age

Age has been clearly established as a factor affecting the length of time in foster care and the probability of achieving permanency (Avery, 1999a; Becker et al., 2003; Connell et al., 2006; Larsen-Rife & Brooks, 2009, for example). This was confirmed in the 12-month outcomes analysis for the Georgia permanency roundtables project as well (O'Brien, Davis, Morgan, Rogg, & Houston, 2012; Rogg, Davis, & O'Brien, 2011).

### 1.3. Race/ethnicity

Studies have typically found that African American and other ethnic minority children have lower rates of permanency or longer times to permanency than White children (Avery, 1999a; Becker et al., 2003; Connell et al., 2006; Wulczyn, Chen, & Hislop, 2007, for example). In contrast, and more recently, Bartholet, Wulczyn, Barth, and Lederman (2011) reported that, in some communities, African American children left foster care faster than White children. In the Georgia roundtable project, race/ethnicity was not examined as a factor due to the homogeneity of the group included in the project.

### 1.4. Siblings

Many children in foster care also have siblings in care, which may affect permanency (Avery, 1999a; Webster, Shlonsky, Shaw, & Brookhart, 2005, for example). The Georgia roundtable project found that children aged 0–6 with no siblings in care were two times as likely to achieve legal permanency within 12 months of the roundtable compared to children with two or more siblings in care (O'Brien, Davis, Morgan, Rogg, & Houston, 2012; Rogg, Davis, & O'Brien, 2011).

### 1.5. Physical/psychological special needs

Many of the children who enter foster care and stay the longest have one or more disabilities that make it more challenging to achieve permanency (Avery, 1999b; Becker et al., 2003; Connell et al., 2006; Townsend, Hignight, & Rubovits, 2008, for example). This was confirmed in the [state] roundtable 12-month results as well (O'Brien, Davis, Morgan, Rogg, & Houston, 2012; Rogg, Davis, & O'Brien, 2011).

### 1.6. Child welfare history

Findings on the impact of maltreatment type or reason for removal on length of stay and permanency are mixed (see, for example, Avery,

1999b; Becker et al., 2003; Connell et al., 2006). The Georgia roundtable project found that children aged 7–12 with a maltreatment history of abandonment were three times as likely to achieve legal permanency within 12 months of the roundtable compared to children with no such history; length of stay was not a significant predictor (O'Brien, Davis, Morgan, Rogg, & Houston, 2012; Rogg, Davis, & O'Brien, 2011).

Specific program interventions may also affect length of stay in care. Pine, Spath, Maguda, Werrbach, and Jenson (2007) found that voluntary participation in a family reunification program reduced the length of stay for children in foster care. Comparison data from the Georgia roundtable project suggest that this intervention reduced time to permanency as well (Rogg, Davis and O'Brien, 2011).

The primary purpose of this paper is to update, using 24-month data, previously published 12-month findings regarding which youth achieved legal permanency after permanency roundtables (O'Brien, Davis, Morgan, Rogg, & Houston, 2012). Because of differences in achievement of permanency by age identified by previous studies and in analyses conducted for this study, time to permanency is examined separately by specific age groups. Factors that predicted legal permanency are examined, including variables discussed previously and strategies and action steps identified during the permanency roundtable.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Of the 496 children who were initially roundtabled in [this state], 57% were male and 43% were female. At the time of the roundtables, their median age was 13 and their median length of time in care was 52 months. Most of the children were African American (92%); 7% were White, and less than 4% were of Hispanic origin (any race). More than half of the children (52%) had at least one sibling in care. Ninety-one percent were from Fulton and DeKalb counties in the metro Atlanta area; the remaining 9% were from other parts of the state. The children from Fulton and DeKalb counties were part of a class action lawsuit brought forth because of the length of time youth in those counties had spent in care. Children from other counties were included because of similar difficulties in achieving permanency for them and to provide workers in all of the state's 17 service delivery regions experience in conducting permanency roundtables.

### 2.2. Measures

Measures included in the evaluation came from administrative data and from measures completed by caseworkers as part of the PRT process (i.e., case summary sheet, action plan, and monthly follow-up). Detailed information about the measures can be found in Rogg, Davis, & O'Brien (2009). The predictors of legal permanency examined included child characteristics, family information, child welfare experience, and permanency roundtable factors. The outcome was achievement of legal permanency by 24 months following the roundtable, defined as reunification, guardianship, or adoption prior to the child reaching age 18. If a child did not achieve legal permanency, they either remained in care, emancipated, or had custody terminated (due to extended elopement or transfer to the juvenile justice or adult correction system).

Child characteristics included demographics (gender, age, county, number of siblings); impact of child needs (mental health, behavioral, medical, learning, developmental delay, or other) on child functioning; and child criminal history (race was collected but not used as a predictor due to the homogeneity of the group, which was 92% African American).

Family information included maltreatment history (abandonment, deprivation, parental substance abuse, parent incarceration, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and/or neglect) and birth family issues (mother/father mental health issues, substance abuse, or criminal problems).

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