



The impact of foster care privatization on multiple placements^{☆,☆☆}

Julie A. Steen^{*}, Lloyd Duran

University of Central Florida School of Social Work, P.O. Box 163358, Orlando, FL 32816, United States



ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 February 2013
Received in revised form 8 June 2013
Accepted 9 June 2013
Available online 17 June 2013

Keywords:

Foster care
Multiple placements
Permanence
Policy impact
Privatization

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of foster care privatization policy on multiple placements in Florida's foster care system. A variant of the interrupted time series design allowed for an assessment of privatization policy within 282 data points (six years of data nested in 47 counties). Results from hierarchical linear analysis models identified a significant effect for privatization while controlling for a major alternative explanation. Specifically, the percent of children in fewer than three placements was significantly lower in the post-privatization years than in the pre-privatization years. This effect varied across counties. Line graphs revealed a variety of trends among providers, which may explain the variation of privatization's effect across counties. These results have implications for policymakers seeking to address the goal of permanence and for child welfare administrators involved in the implementation of privatization policy.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Permanence is one of the most important goals of the foster care system. States are charged with reducing the amount of time that children stay in foster care and increasing the stability of their experience during foster care (Barth, Wulczyn, & Crea, 2005). Hence, one aspect of permanence is the number of placements the foster child experiences. Entry into foster care itself can be disruptive to the child, but this disruption is exacerbated by multiple moves while in foster care. These moves break connections the child has developed with caregivers within foster families or group homes, teachers and classmates within the school, and other children within the neighborhood. This instability is a key threat to permanence for the foster child (Stott & Gustavsson, 2010; Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008). As such, multiple placements are an important subject of study, particularly in foster care systems that are transitioning to new organizational models such as those found in foster care privatization.

As states privatize and choose various models for their foster care systems, research is needed regarding the impact of this shift on multiple placements. This need is evermore great due to the recent wave of foster care privatization within the United States (McCullough &

Schmitt, 2000; United States General Accounting Office, 1998; Westat and Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2002). This manuscript addresses this need through a study of multiple placements in Florida's foster care system, which was fully privatized using the lead agency model.

2. Background

2.1. Foster care privatization

Though the private sector has always played a role in the provision of foster care services, their role is dramatically increasing in scope (McCullough & Schmitt, 2000; United States General Accounting Office, 1998; Westat and Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2002). During the last half of the 20th century, the private sector served as a supplemental support to the public foster care system (e.g., providing residential care and counseling services) (Rosenthal, 2000). As privatization has expanded in the past decade, their role has shifted from supplemental support to core responsibilities. The most extensive representation of this shift is seen in the lead agency model of foster care privatization. This model, adopted in Florida and Kansas, removes the public agency from direct service provision and places the public agency in the near-exclusive role of contract manager. The public agency contracts with a lead agency that is then responsible for all direct service provision or for the management of subcontracts with other private agencies for these services (Kansas Action for Children, 1998; Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, 2006; United States General Accounting Office, 1998; Westat and Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2002).

Privatization is often adopted with the expectation of improved performance and reduced cost (Savas, 2000), though some have expressed doubt that this expectation will be realized in the child

[☆] Portions of this paper were presented at the Annual Conference of the Society for Social Work and Research in January 2013.

^{☆☆} The data utilized in this manuscript were made available by the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY; and have been used by permission. Data from the study were originally collected by the U.S. Children's Bureau. Neither the collector of the original data, the funder, the Archive, Cornell University, nor its agents or employees bear any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here.

^{*} Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 407 823 6452.

E-mail addresses: julie.steen@ucf.edu (J.A. Steen), lloyd.duran@ucf.edu (L. Duran).

welfare field (Crum, 1998; Freeman, 2003). This expectation is usually based on three primary assumptions. The first assumption is that the private organization is superior to the public organization. Those who adopt this assumption typically argue that the private agency is free from the burden of bureaucratic process and structure, enabling for a flexible response to community needs (Corkran, 2006). The second assumption is that the network in which the private agency sits is superior to the network that surrounds the public agency. Advocates using this framework often describe the private agency as being embedded in the community and consequently deserving the role as the primary provider for that community (Corkran, 2006). The third assumption focuses on the influence of the market. Free-market advocates claim that competition and performance-based contracting are the best ways to mold an agency into a more responsive entity (Blackstone, Buck, & Hakim, 2004). Based on these assumptions, policymakers have moved towards a greater reliance on the private sector for foster care services.

2.2. Permanency in privatized foster care systems

Privatization became a favored policy around the time that states were struggling to address “foster care drift,” a situation in which foster children languish in foster care until they age out of the system (Sanders, 2002). The research literature includes several examples of privatized foster care systems that made substantial headway in reducing “foster care drift.” In some states, private agencies have improved permanence through increased reunifications with biological families and increased adoptions (Blackstone et al., 2004; Yampolskaya, Paulson, Armstrong, Jordan, & Vargo, 2004). However, this finding of improved permanence is not consistent across all geographical areas. In fact, lower rates of permanence have been found in samples of children served by private agencies (Emspak, Zullo, & Rose, 1996; Zullo, 2002). Overall, the literature presents mixed results regarding privatization's impact on foster children's permanence from the long-term view.

While the literature includes a multitude of studies regarding privatization's impact on several dimensions of long-term permanence, little attention has been paid to the number of placements that children experience in privatized foster care systems. This important dimension of permanence was the subject of study in only two publications, both of which are described below. The publications focused on the foster care systems in Kansas and Florida, which employed the same privatization model.

In Kansas' foster care system, the problem of multiple placements increased following the initiation of privatization (Petr & Johnson, 1999). Specifically, the average number of moves increased from 1.14 to 2.18. The percent of foster children who were moved fewer than four times decreased from 93% to 77%. However, these findings are limited to one county within Kansas. Further, the time in which the data were collected was limited to brief pre-privatization and post-privatization eras.

Research regarding Florida's foster care system yielded similar findings (Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, 2006). Multiple placements in Florida's system gradually increased as privatization extended to additional counties within the state. The percent of children in more than two placements increased from 8% to 17%. These data represent the entire state's system between Federal Fiscal Year 2000 and Federal Fiscal Year 2004. This publication also included provider-level percentages of children in more than two placements during the final year of the study. Substantial variation was identified across providers, with percentages ranging from 7% to 31%. While these results point to a possible connection between privatization and multiple placements, the county-level percentages were not tracked individually across time to identify change following privatization in the county.

2.3. Complications in the study of privatization's effect on multiple placements

If privatization policy has a negative effect on multiple placements, this effect could take one of two forms. Privatization policy could have a simple effect, whereby the occurrence of multiple placements permanently shifts to a higher level. If this type of effect was charted in a line graph, the problem of multiple placements would rise upon the initiation of privatization and be maintained at this higher plateau. The study authored by Florida's Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability (2006) presented a different type of trend, whereby the problem of multiple placements steadily rose across time. However, the trend they presented was aggregated at the state level and did not distinguish between counties that privatized at different time points during the trend. Therefore, the gradual increase in the problem of multiple placements may have been the result of additional counties privatizing each year rather than a steady deterioration that occurred in each county following the county's initiation of privatization. These possibilities lead us to the first two research questions: *Does the problem of multiple placements significantly vary between the years in which a county's foster care system is privatized and the years in which the system is not privatized? Does the problem of multiple placements steadily deteriorate across time (i.e., the problem progresses with each additional year following privatization)?*

The study of this relationship between privatization policy and multiple placements is further complicated by several alternative explanations. These complications include the possible effects of history, system transition, and provider performance. Each of these issues is explored below.

While history may be a vague threat that often remains unknown and unquantified in policy impact analyses (Mohr, 1995), one aspect of Florida's history poses a clear threat to the validity of study conclusions regarding Florida's privatized foster care system. During the first decade of the latest century, the number of children in Florida's foster care system, as reported to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System, steadily declined by approximately 10,000. When any system substantially reduces the number of clients served, the outcomes, particularly those that are measured on a percentage basis, will often change. Providers might argue that as a system reduces the number of children placed in foster care, the remaining cases are likely to be more complex and challenging. Hence, the percent of children who face multiple placements may increase, simply because the easiest cases are no longer coming into the system. In essence, the dramatic change to the denominator changes the resulting percent even if the numerator remains the same. This consideration leads to the third research question: *Is the problem of multiple placements associated with the rate of children in the foster care system? If so, does the effect of privatization remain while controlling for this history?*

The effect of transition is another major issue that may obscure our understanding of privatization's effect. As any system transitions to a new structure, disruption is a likely occurrence (Cummins, Byers, & Pedrick, 2011). In these instances, short-term deterioration in the system's outcomes would be expected, regardless of the nature of the policy that mandated system change. Therefore, data points that closely follow the transition may identify this short-term deterioration, leading researchers to possibly mischaracterize this change as an effect of privatization policy. If the policy is having a true effect, we would expect this effect to be sustained (either consistently sustained or even progressively sustained) in the years following the initial transition. This consideration leads us to the following research question: *Does the problem of multiple placements significantly vary between the years in which a county's foster care system is transitioning to privatization and the years in which the system is not transitioning?*

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10311614>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10311614>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)