



The Placement History Chart: A tool for understanding the longitudinal pattern of foster children's placements[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing concerns about foster placement instability, little information is available regarding the longitudinal patterns of placement histories among foster children. The purpose of the present study was to develop a charting system using child welfare records to facilitate a better understanding of longitudinal patterns of placement history for 117 foster children. The resulting *Placement History Chart* included all placements that occurred during the observed time period and accounted for various dimensions: number, length, type, and sequence of placements; timing of transitions; and total time in out-of-home care. The Placement History Chart is an effective tool for placing foster care experiences within a broader developmental context. As such, the Placement History Chart can be a valuable research tool for understanding various dimensions and variations of placement transitions among foster children by capturing sequences and cumulative risks over time. Furthermore, this chart can facilitate the development of intervention programs that are developmentally sensitive and effectively address particularly vulnerable subpopulations of foster children.

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1. Introduction

In 2010, approximately one million children received services from child protective service agencies including in-home and foster care services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, & Children's Bureau, 2011), costing more than \$24.3 billion annually (Scarcella, Bess, Zielewski, Warner, & Geen, 2004). Out-of-home care in the U.S. child welfare system includes a variety of arrangements, including foster care, kinship care, and residential treatment (James, Landsverk, & Slymen, 2004). Although the goal is to return children safely to their birth families or to find alternative long-term or permanent placements within a few months, some placements may be very short-term (James et al., 2004). Despite increased efforts to improve placement stability for foster children, many children experience multiple placements, and some children appear to be particularly vulnerable to placement instability (Fisher, Kim, & Pears, 2009; McDonald, Bryson, & Poertner, 2006). Understanding variation in foster

children's longitudinal placement patterns is critical for two reasons: identifying groups at risk for multiple placements and targeting the optimal timing for interventions to improve outcomes. However, there are challenges to characterizing multiple dimensions of each placement (e.g., timing, type, and duration of care). In the present study, the Placement History Chart was developed to account for such dimensions and to visually capture the longitudinal patterns of foster children's placement histories.

1.1. Multiple placement transitions

According to the Northwest Foster Care Alumni Study (Casey Family Programs, 2005), which included 1609 foster children who were served in 23 communities across the United States between 1966 and 1998, only 18% had 3 or fewer placement transitions while in foster care; in contrast, 56% had 7 or more placement transitions, and 3% had 20 or more placement transitions. Placement changes occur for a variety of reasons, including a child's behavioral and emotional problems, unforeseen life events in foster families, or administrative or policy reasons in the child welfare system such as decisions to reunify siblings, closure of a foster home, or lack of funding (Barth et al., 2007; James, 2004; Staff & Fein, 1995). Although many placement change decisions are made with a child's best interests in mind, any disruption in care can be potentially detrimental (James et al., 2004); in particular, greater numbers of transitions have negative cascading effects on children's adjustment (Fisher, Burraston, & Pears, 2005). Evidence has consistently suggested that the experience of multiple placement transitions negatively affects attachment to primary caregivers

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and significantly increases risk for psychopathology and other adjustment problems among foster children (Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000; Stovall & Dozier, 1998; Webster, Barth, & Needell, 2000; Wulczyn, Kogan, & Harden, 2003). For instance, in a study of children in the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, and Localio (2007) found a 36–63% increase in the risk of behavioral problems over the 18 months of the follow-up period in foster children who failed to achieve placement stability compared with those who achieved stability. Several researchers have documented that such negative impacts of multiple placement changes may influence key brain regions involved in self-regulation (Lewis, Dozier, Ackerman, & Sepulveda-Kozakowski, 2007; Pears, Bruce, Fisher, & Kim, 2010). Moreover, increased placement transitions appear to decrease a child's likelihood of successful reunification with biological parents or adoption and to increase the likelihood of subsequent foster placement instability (Fisher et al., 2005; Landsverk, Davis, Ganger, & Newton, 1996; Strijker, Knorth, & Knot-Dickscheit, 2008; Usher, Randolph, & Gogan, 1999). Taken together, these findings raise concerns about children's psychosocial and neurobiological adjustment and about economic costs resulting from placement instability (e.g., Price et al., 2008) and suggest an urgent need to address placement instability among foster children.

1.2. Understanding longitudinal patterns of placement transitions

Although placement instability has long been viewed as a serious concern by researchers and policymakers, little detailed information is available regarding the longitudinal patterns of foster children's placement histories (James et al., 2004; Webster et al., 2000; Wulczyn et al., 2003). Three studies of longitudinal trajectories of placements in which variations in placement trajectories were the main focus of the study are exceptions. Usher et al. (1999) introduced a descriptive method to track placements over time using 3-year longitudinal data on a cohort of 1456 children in out-of-home care. In that study, placement type was represented by a one-letter code (e.g., F = foster home and R = relative home), and pathways between placements were represented by codes with two or more letters. This approach allowed for the assessment of the number and type of placements. Usher et al. found that children initially placed with relatives generally had more stable experiences than children initially placed in foster homes. Although this approach provided a useful tool with which to examine placement histories, it was limited because it represented placements by number and type only and did not include information about other key dimensions.

Wulczyn et al. (2003) also considered multiple dimensions of foster care placements (e.g., number and duration) over time to identify subgroups of children who shared similar placement trajectories. They examined placement trajectories based on the number of placements in consecutive 6-month intervals. Using a mixture modeling approach, they identified four distinctive placement trajectories for foster children. In one trajectory (22% of the children), the likelihood of transitions was high initially, decreased after the first 6-month period, and then remained very low. In two other trajectory groups (15% and 12.6% of the children), the likelihood of transitions were relatively low initially, increased, and then decreased. In the last trajectory group (50.4% of the children), the likelihood of transitions was low initially, declined further, increased, and then decreased again.

Similar heterogeneity in longitudinal patterns of placement history was found by James et al. (2004). They examined patterns of placement histories along two major dimensions (i.e., timing and duration of the longest placement and degree of restrictiveness) using retrospective longitudinal data on 430 children who entered out-of-home care in San Diego County between May 1990 and October 1991 and remained in the care after 18 months (ages 1–16 years). They identified four common patterns: *early stability* (35.6%), *later stability* (28.6%), *variable* (16%), and *unstable* (19.8%). The early stability group included children who achieved placement stability within 45 days of entering out-of-home care, whereas the later stability group included children

who achieved placement stability between 45 days and 9 months of entering out-of-home care. The other two groups were characterized by multiple transitions over time; for example, the unstable pattern group included children who experienced multiple placements, with no placement lasting longer than 9 months.

These three studies are noteworthy because they sought to describe and investigate longitudinal patterns of placement histories in quantitatively and qualitatively meaningful ways. Most of all, findings from these studies provide support for the argument that placement instability represented as an aggregate score of all placements is likely to obscure variability that is significant for subsequent outcomes (James et al., 2004; Webster et al., 2000). In fact, the number of placement transitions reported in many studies is often confined within a single episode in foster care without considering reentries into the foster care system or transitions from or into different systems (e.g., detention center; James et al., 2004; Rubin et al., 2009; Strijker et al., 2008; Usher et al., 1999), despite the fact that reunification with biological parents or attempts of a permanent placement fail in a substantial portion of cases (e.g., Barth, Weigensberg, Fisher, Fetrow, & Green, 2008; Fisher et al., 2005). Thus, in many studies, the number of placements represents episodic aspects of placement instability rather than cumulative placement trajectories over time. Additionally, not all state child welfare systems record all placement transitions during care in part because the field lacks agreement about what constitutes a placement (James et al., 2004; Strijker et al., 2008). Therefore, it is typical to have a gap in children's placement records, resulting in limited knowledge to effectively facilitate the development of intervention programs to promote placement stability and to reduce negative consequences due to placement instability. This suggests that the development of a system to document foster children's placement transitions is urgently needed to better understand longitudinal variation in placement trajectories.

1.3. Goals of the current study

Although researchers have identified certain placement dimensions that can affect outcomes for foster children (e.g., number, length, type, and sequence of placements, timing of transitions, and total time in out-of-home care), there have been few systematic attempts to document detailed longitudinal patterns of foster children's placement histories that account for all of these dimensions. Even in the studies reviewed above, not all of the placements were accounted for in the analyses. Cases with higher frequencies of placement transitions or certain types of placements (e.g., adoption, reunification with siblings, and emergency placements) were often eliminated from the analyses to reduce the number of idiosyncratic patterns and to identify a few common placement trajectories. Furthermore, none of the studies was designed to include children who experienced reunification failures; thus, the results do not detail the trajectories of children who moved in and out of the child welfare system over time.

In the present study, we developed a system to delineate foster children's complete placement histories. The Placement History Chart is designed to include all placements and changes that occur during an observed time period regardless of the length of each stay and to include various placement dimensions, allowing for the most detailed, continuous description of the longitudinal patterns of foster children's placement histories. (The reasons for placement changes were not included in the chart due to the lack of available information.) In the present study, complete placement histories were charted for 117 foster children from a community in the United States. The first goal of the study is to explain the technique. The second goal is to illustrate how the placement charts may be used to better understand patterns of placement in a sample of foster children. To illustrate and highlight the significance of the Placement History Chart, a few exemplary cases are presented in the following section.

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