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Time well spent: The duration of foster care and early adult labor market, educational, and health outcomes

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A B S T R A C T

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Individuals who spent time in foster care as children fare on average worse than non-placed peers in early adult life. Recent research on the effect of foster care placement on early adult life outcomes provides mixed evidence. Some studies suggest negative effects of foster care placement on early adult outcomes, others find null effects. This study shows that differences in the average duration of foster care stays explain parts of these discordant findings and then test how foster care duration shapes later life outcomes using administrative data on 7220 children. The children experienced different average durations of foster care because of differences in exposure to a reform. Later born cohorts spent on average 3 months longer in foster care than earlier born cohorts. Isolating exogenous variation in duration of foster care, the study finds positive effects of increased duration of foster care on income and labor market participation.

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One of the main questions of interest for foster care researchers is how foster care experiences affect children. The question has become more relevant over the last 25 years, as the foster care population in the US, for example, has increased dramatically (Swann & Sylvester, 2006). Children enter foster care because their parents have failed to provide adequate child care; the parents have failed to provide a satisfactory environment wherein the child can grow up. Social services place such children in foster care, because social services expect the foster care system to provide a better environment for upbringing.

Yet, a foster care placement is a rather drastic change to living conditions and situation. Even if the foster care environment provides better living conditions for vulnerable children, a foster care placement may also provide an initial negative transition or culture shock. It will take time for the child to overcome such a shock. A foster care placement consists of two parts: whether or not a child is placed in foster care (the extensive part), and the time spent in foster care (the intensive part). Recent research on the effect of foster care has focused on the extensive effect (Berger, Bruch, Johnson, James, & Rubin, 2009; Doyle, 2007, 2008; Warburton, Warburton, Sweetman, & Hertzman, 2011) and report inconclusive results. The intensive effect of duration of foster care may have a greater negative or positive effect on psychological outcomes than the extensive transition or cultural shock of being placed in foster care. Criminological research indicates that the intensive dimension may matter more than the extensive in adverse situations (Agnew, 1992; Cummings & El-Sheikh, 1991; Mark & Folger, 1984; Massoglia, Remster, & King, 2011). Previous research on the effect of foster care has not taken the duration of foster care into account. Differences in the average duration of foster care may explain some of the discordant findings in previous studies.

This paper analyzes the effect of time spent in foster care on life outcomes in early adulthood. It makes three contributions to the existing literature. First, the paper examines whether more versus less time spent in foster care during childhood

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affects former foster care children's early adult life. Earlier studies have focused on whether or not children entered foster care. This study focuses on the children who entered foster care. Second, the empirical strategy controls for selection into how long children spent in foster care. Third, the paper uses high quality administrative population data on all Danish children born between 1982 and 1987 who entered the foster care system before turning 13 years of age. The data are without attrition, sample selection bias due to non-response, and with no measurements error due to self-reporting. Overall, the paper provides knowledge on an aspect of foster care not previously addressed in the literature.

The duration of foster care likely correlates with unobserved characteristics of foster care children (for example, personality, aggression, prior maltreatment, etc.). The correlation implies selection of children into different durations of foster care based on unobserved characteristics. The characteristics may also affect early adult outcomes. To address the selection issue the paper exploits a policy reform that provides credible exogenous variation in the duration of foster care. The Danish parliament introduced a social service reform in 1993 (enacted in 1992). The reform gave caseworkers increased power to prolong ongoing foster care placements. The reform also provided new guidelines on the necessity of foster children's experiences of continuity in foster care placements. Both aspects caused foster children born in the late 1980s to experience longer duration of foster care compared to children born earlier in the 1980s. The reform did not change (a) the age of entry into care across cohorts; (b) the average number of placements a child experienced; (c) the number of children who enter foster care; nor (d) the composition of the group of children entering foster care. Hence, only duration of foster care appear to have changed across birth cohorts. There is a significant positive effect of longer duration of foster care on gross income and a significant negative effect on unemployment – both measured at age 21. The results indicate that duration of foster care is an important aspect when evaluating the effect of foster care on later life outcomes. The effect of duration on income and unemployment shows that an increase in time spent in foster care has positive influence on gainful activities for former foster care children.

Background

Family quality matters for later life. Well-functioning families provide stable childhood environments that aid children in forming human capital and a stable and realistic sense of self and abilities. Together, human capital and sense of self and abilities make up core parts of a child's identity formation. Stable identity formation is paramount for successful later life outcomes (Côté, 1996, 2002). Life outcomes in early adulthood proxy as measures for a successful and stable upbringing and identity formation. Children with stable upbringings transition to adulthood with more success and a better skill set than children, whose upbringings were not as stable. Time spent in foster care may or may not provide children with a more stable experience of childhood.

There are three competing hypotheses about the effect of foster care duration on later life outcomes. An increase in the duration of foster care either helps disadvantaged children by providing a good childhood environment, replaces exposure to one adverse environment with exposure to one that is worse, or has no effect. No one has studied the effect of duration of foster care prior to this paper. Yet, it is possible to take a point of departure from earlier empirical findings on the effect on early adult life outcomes of being placed in foster care. Berger et al. (2009) found that children in care did not exhibit more behavioral problems than they would have done had the children stayed at home. Doyle (2007, 2008) and Warburton et al. (2011) used idiosyncratic differences in caseworkers propensity to place children in foster care (which can be viewed as a natural experiment) to obtain the causal effects of entering foster care on early outcomes. Doyle found that children on the margin of being placed in foster care fared worse as adults on social and health outcomes if they entered foster care. Warburton et al. used the same type of experiment as Doyle (2007) as well as a policy reform that increased intake into foster care of older children. Warburton et al. found that effects differed significantly depending on the identification-strategy used. Warburton et al. argued that future research should focus on who is taken into care and what happens in care, because effects appeared to be heterogeneous. Duration of foster care represents one such underexposed aspect of what happens in foster care.

Several theories on child development support the hypothesis that the duration of foster care matters. Kools (1997) described how children in foster care experienced impersonal and negative treatment that stigmatized and devalued them. This leads to low self-esteem. Self-esteem serves as a buffer for negative emotions and help create stable identity formations that in return provides increased self-esteem (Cast & Burke, 2002; Stets & Cast, 2007). If foster care is an adverse experience we should see increased negative effects on early adult outcomes as the duration of foster care increases.

Data and theory from the strain, stress, and equity literatures indicate that the duration of an stressful or straining event can have greater impact on negative psychological outcomes than the event itself (Agnew, 1992; Cummings & El-Sheikh, 1991; Mark & Folger, 1984; Massoglia et al., 2011). The question is whether the home of the biological parents or foster care is the most adverse childhood environment. If the foster care environment is less stressful than the home environment, an increase in the duration of foster care gives children a longer break from an unstable home environment. Several studies found that children self-reported that their lives would have been worse if they had stayed at home compared to being placed in foster care (Dunn, Culhane, & Taussig, 2010; Luke & Coyne, 2008; Wilson & Conroy, 1999). Even if foster care is a devaluing environment as argued by Kools (1997), children may nevertheless have faced worse childhood circumstances had the children stayed longer with their biological parents.

Entering foster care may cause a negative cultural or transitory shock to children. Yet, increased time spent in care could offset the initial negative impact if the care-setting provides a better environment than the home. The tipping point is whether foster care offers children a childhood environment that is more stable than the home. If foster care is more stable,

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