



Maltreatment following reunification: Predictors of subsequent Child Protective Services contact after children return home[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This study examined risk of maltreatment among children exiting foster care using a statewide sample of children reunified between 2001 and 2004 in Rhode Island. The objectives were: (1) to compare rates of maltreatment following parental reunification for youth in care as a result of maltreatment with those in care for other reasons; and (2) to assess the effects of child, family, and case characteristics on rates of re-maltreatment among children placed in foster care due to maltreatment.

Method: A longitudinal dataset of all reunified cases was matched with state records of substantiated Child Protective Service (CPS) investigations. Two Cox proportional hazards models were tested. The first model compared rates of subsequent maltreatment for two groups: children in foster care as a result of maltreatment, and those in care for other reasons. The second model investigated the effects of child, family, and case characteristics on re-maltreatment rates for those in care as a result of maltreatment.

Results: Children in foster care due to maltreatment were significantly more likely to be maltreated following reunification. Among children in foster care due to maltreatment, factors that raised risk for re-maltreatment included a previous foster care placement, exiting care from a non-relative foster home, and removal due to neglect. Older adolescents had lower rates of re-maltreatment than infants. Child neglect was the primary type of recurrent maltreatment that occurred following reunification.

Conclusions: Supports are needed for families about to be reunified, particularly when the removal was prompted by incidents of abuse or neglect. Incidents of neglect are particularly likely and appropriate services should specifically target factors contributing to neglect. Cases involving youth with a history of repeated foster care placement or in which non-relative placements are utilized may need additional supports.

Practice implications: This study suggests that services should be developed to minimize the risk for recurrent maltreatment following reunification. Services would be most useful for high-risk cases prior to reunification and during the first year following reunification. Understanding the risks associated with maltreatment will help guide development of appropriate interventions.

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Child Protective Service (CPS) agencies have a primary mandate to protect children from, and prevent further occurrences of, maltreatment (i.e., abuse and neglect). Placement of children in foster care settings following instances of substantiated maltreatment is often an essential action in fulfilling that mandate—though such placements are intended to be time limited. United States Federal policy, such as the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 and the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, establish guidelines for state CPS agencies that prioritize reunification of removed children to their biological parents, and if that is not possible or safe, the timely pursuit of other permanency options (e.g., adoption; [Wulczyn, 2004](#)). Consequently, the majority of removed children are reunified with a parent, relative, or guardian—many within 1 year of removal ([Connell, Katz, Saunders, & Tebes, 2006](#); [Courtney, 1994](#); [Courtney & Wong, 1996](#); [Wells & Guo, 1999](#); [Wulczyn, 2004](#)).

To date, few studies have examined the risk of subsequent maltreatment among children placed in foster care and later reunified with a parent. Significantly more research examines factors associated with re-maltreatment among children remaining in parental custody, or on placement experiences for youth entering foster care. In fact, we know of only three studies that address maltreatment following reunification ([Fuller, 2005](#); [Jones, 1998](#); [Jonson-Reid, 2003](#)). Of these studies, both [Fuller \(2005\)](#) and [Jones \(1998\)](#) employed relatively small samples and limited longitudinal follow-up periods (174 cases followed for 60 days and 445 cases followed for 9 months, respectively). An additional study by [Drake](#) and colleagues examined rates of re-maltreatment among a CPS population, some of whom had been placed in foster care services and subsequently reunified, but this subgroup represented less than 5% of the study sample ([Drake, Jonson-Reid, & Sapokaite, 2006](#)). The lack of longer term follow-up with larger samples is a significant gap in the literature, since maltreatment represents a significant pathway into the foster care system ([Courtney & Wong, 1996](#); [Wulczyn, Barth, Yuan, Harden, & Landsverk, 2005](#)) and reunification is the primary outcome for children leaving foster care ([Connell et al., 2006](#); [Courtney & Wong, 1996](#)). Maltreatment occurrence (or recurrence) following reunification suggests a critical failure of the CPS and foster care structures to ensure child safety. By identifying the risk factors associated with this phenomenon, agencies can better target prevention services toward the children and families that are at greatest risk, promoting enhanced child safety and more stable permanency outcomes for children exiting foster care.

Because so few studies have directly addressed this issue, we turn to two related areas of research that may serve as guides—research on re-maltreatment among children remaining in the custody of their parents following a CPS investigation, and research on risk of re-entry to foster care among children reunified with the parents after a foster care placement. The literature on recurrent maltreatment provides an indication of high-risk cases, albeit those determined by an investigation to be safe enough to remain in parental custody. The literature on re-entry to foster care provides additional indication of risk factors following reunification, since maltreatment represents a significant pathway to re-entry. However, many cases re-enter care for reasons other than maltreatment (e.g., child behavior problems, parental inability to cope with the child), so factors associated with these outcomes may differ.

Rates of re-maltreatment among Child Protective Service (CPS) cases

Estimates of recurrent maltreatment among children remaining in parental custody range from 17% to 35% within a 5-year period, depending on whether recurrence is specified at the child or family level ([DePanfilis & Zuravin, 1999](#); [Fluke, Shusterman, Hollinshead, & Yuan, 2005](#)). [Drake et al. \(2006\)](#) reported that nearly half (48%) of children were re-maltreated within 3 years, and that rates were higher among youth that experienced foster care placement—though the effects associated with placement were off-set when interactions with substantiation and length of stay were factored into the model. [Jonson-Reid \(2003\)](#) reported that 14% of children reunified from foster care experienced a substantiated maltreatment episode within 4 1/2 years of exiting foster care.

Predictors of re-maltreatment

Studies have identified a range of child, family, and case characteristics associated with re-maltreatment among children known to CPS.

Child demographic characteristics

Younger children, particularly infants and preschool age children, are at greater risk of recurrent maltreatment ([English, Marshall, Brummel, & Orme, 1999](#); [Fluke, Yuan, & Edwards, 1999](#); [Lipien & Forthofer, 2004](#)). Younger children also appear to be at greater risk of maltreatment after reunification from foster care ([Fuller, 2005](#); [Jonson-Reid, 2003](#)). With respect to research on foster care re-entry, however, it appears that both infants and older children are at greatest risk ([Courtney, 1995](#); [Shaw, 2006](#); [Wells & Guo, 1999](#)). It is possible that re-entries to foster care may occur for reasons other than maltreatment (e.g., behavioral placements), and that such placements may be more likely for older children, so the comparability of age effects across these two lines of research is unclear.

Findings with respect to other child demographic characteristics are more equivocal. A number of studies report that Caucasian children are at greater risk of recurrent maltreatment than African American children ([Fluke et al., 2005](#); [Lipien & Forthofer, 2004](#)). Other studies report no relation of race/ethnicity to re-maltreatment ([Wolock, Sherman, Feldman, & Metzger, 2001](#)). African American youth appear to be at greater risk of foster care re-entry following reunification ([Courtney,](#)

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