



Youth with disabilities in the United States Child Welfare System



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ABSTRACT

Existing literature suggests that youth with disabilities are known to be at increased risk of maltreatment in the form of abuse and/or neglect. Little is known, however, about the experiences of youth with disabilities who are living in foster care or who are supervised by child protection authorities. This study establishes a baseline estimate of the prevalence of youth with disabilities living in foster care, documents reasons for child protection system involvement, identifies placement types while youth are in care and explores case outcomes. This cross-sectional, exploratory study draws on data from the 2012 Adoption and Foster Care Reporting System (AFCARS) for foster youth in 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. A sample of youth with disabilities ($N = 36,492$) and a comparison group without disabilities ($N = 601,539$) were identified. Findings about demographics, reasons for child removal, foster care placements, permanency planning goals and case outcomes are presented. Findings have implications for the prevention the removal of youth from caregivers, the need for family supports to prevent foster care involvement, the promotion of community inclusion of foster youth while in foster care and the need for inter-system collaboration at the transitional age stage.

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1. Introduction

Youth with various disabilities are known to be at increased risk of maltreatment in the form of abuse or neglect (Hughes & Rycus, 1998; Jonson-Reid, Drake, Kim, Porterfield, & Han, 2004; Smith, 2002; Sobsey, 1994; Sullivan & Knutson, 2000; Vig & Kaminer, 2002; Westat, Inc., 1993). Once maltreatment is substantiated by child welfare officials, youth may be placed in the child welfare system or may remain with their families under child welfare supervision.

National data reporting on the reasons why youth with disabilities have come to the attention of child welfare authorities are also limited (Lightfoot, Hill, LaLiberte, 2011; Slayter & Springer, 2011). Existing research suggests that youth with disabilities are most likely to experience neglect (Sullivan & Knutson, 2000), physical neglect, medical neglect, with one study identifying a twofold increase in the likelihood of experiencing emotional neglect (Crosse, Kaye, & Ratnofsky, 1992). Further, Crosse, et al. found that youth with disabilities were more likely to experience physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional abuse than their counterparts without disabilities. This finding was supported by Sullivan and Knutson's (2000) work on a sample of youth from the BoysTown program, which suggested higher likelihoods of physical abuse, sexual abuse and emotional abuse.

Despite this knowledge, national population-based estimates do not exist for youth with disabilities who are involved with the child welfare system — nor does the field have information about these youths' child

welfare placements, permanency planning goals or case outcomes (Weaver, Keller & Loyek, 2006). A series of localized studies have examined the prevalence of youth with disabilities in the child welfare system, using different disability definitions.

In 1990, a study of thirty-three state child welfare agencies reported that 20% of youth in foster care had a range of disabilities as identified by the agency (Hill, Hayden, Lakin, Menke, & Amado, 1990). In 1991, Westat produced an evaluation of Title IV-E Foster Care Independent Living and found that 47% of youth aging out of care was “handicapped.” In 1992, an Illinois-based study reported identifying 29% of the school-aged population in foster care receiving special education services (Goerge, Voorhis, Grant, Casey, & Robinson, 1992). Also in 1992, Crosse et al. (1992) conducted research with 35 child welfare agencies and determined that 14% of foster youth had a suspected or diagnosed disability as defined by the agency. In 2000, a population-based study of students in one city revealed that 22% of all maltreated youth had a disability (Sullivan & Knutson, 2000). In a study of 13 to 21 year old foster children in a large urban school district in Oregon, 44% were found to receive special education services (Geenen & Powers, 2006). In 2007, a meta-analysis found that youth in foster care were disproportionately represented in the special education rolls (Scherr, 2007) at a rate of between 27 and 35%. Finally, in a Minnesota-based study, the prevalence of disability (measured as receipt of special education services) among child welfare-involved youth suggested that 22% of youth aged 0–18 had a disability, and when considering only those aged 5 through 18, 28% were found to have a disability (Lightfoot, Hill & LaLiberte, 2011). Taken together, these data suggest that the prevalence of disability among child welfare-involved youth ranges from 14 to 47% of the population.

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2. Experience in the child welfare system

Data on the experience of youth with disabilities in the child welfare system are also limited with respect to information about the nature of permanency goals (Bonner, Crow, & Hensley, 1997; Slayter & Springer, 2011). Every youth involved in the child welfare system has a permanency planning goal per the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997. When a youth first becomes known to child welfare workers, the first focus is on “supporting and stabilizing a family to prevent an initial placement” if at all possible (Children’s Bureau, 2015). Ideally, family reunification is a preferred outcome for those in foster care. In situations in which youth are removed from their families for safety reasons, permanency planning efforts focus on the ideal of sending them home or placing them with another permanent family such as relatives, adoptive families who have obtained legal custody, or guardians. According to the Children’s Bureau, “permanency planning involves decisive, time-limited, goal-oriented activities to maintain children within their families of origin or place them with other permanent families” (Children’s Bureau, 2015). Several studies have explored permanency-related data, finding that youth with disabilities are less likely to achieve family reunification (Snowden, Leon, & Sieracki, 2008; Courtney & Wong, 1996; Akin, 2011) and more likely to be adopted (Akin, 2011). Existing research suggests there is a higher likelihood of out-of-home placement for youth with disabilities (between OR = 1.87–2.16 depending on age range (Lightfoot, Hill & LaLiberte, 2011)). The present study will report on permanency-related data elements for a national sample of youth with disabilities in the child welfare system.

Very little information is available about patterns of child welfare placements or case outcomes for youth with disabilities (Bonner et al., 1997; Slayter & Springer, 2011). The National Council on Disability (2008) found that youth with disabilities are more likely to experience placement in congregate care settings versus family foster care settings. In a study focused on the nature of placements for older foster youth with disabilities, data suggest that this population was more likely to be placed in specialized settings and less likely to be placed in kinship care or non-relative foster placements — with the same findings heightened for youth with developmental disabilities (Schmidt et al., 2013). Further, these youths’ characterizations of the restrictiveness of their placements suggested that youth with disabilities reported higher rates of restrictiveness of communication, movement restrictiveness and access to the community. Another statewide study focused on youth aged 17+ found that youth with disabilities experienced “higher rates of placement instability and longer stays in placement,” suggesting that they are “at higher risk for emotional, educational, mental health, and behavioral problems” (Hill, 2012, 1422). In order to build on these data, the present study will report on placement and outcome data elements among a national sample of youth with disabilities in the child welfare system.

3. Implications of child welfare involvement

Understanding more about how maltreatment and child welfare involvement may impact the lives of youth with disabilities in a national sample is vital given the trauma youth may have experienced due to maltreatment, investigation of that maltreatment and/or their removal from families. These potential traumas, coupled with the impact of living as a foster youth, can be detrimental in both the short and long-term (Strickler, 2001; Weaver, Keller & Loyek, 2006). A lack of a sense of belonging, disrupted family identity, attachment disorders, emotional distress and the stigma of being a foster youth are all documented risk factors for foster youth in general (Barahal, Waterman, & Martin, 1981; Mallon & McCartt Hess, 2006). Research also suggests that youth who grow up in or spend extended periods of time living in foster care are less likely to establish the personal and lifelong connections that will guide them into adulthood upon “aging out” of foster care at circa age eighteen (Renne & Mallon, 2005). These negative experiences

may work together to create cumulative risk for negative outcomes including mental illness, lower levels of education and limited employment (Pecora, O’Brien, & Hiripi, 2007).

Given that youth with disabilities are at risk for all of the same types of risk factors for child abuse and neglect that youth without disabilities may face. It is possible that foster youth with disabilities are especially vulnerable to the potential socioeconomic and psychological stressors associated with foster care and that these stressors may impede community inclusion. Foster placement instability (i.e. a situation in which foster youth are moved from foster home to foster home for clinical or administrative reasons), a noted concern for all foster youth, is an especially important factor to consider as it relates to the quality of life of foster youth with disabilities. Placement instability can negatively impact the receipt of school-based services under an Individual Education Plan (D’Andrade, 2005; Schormans, Coniega, & Renwick, 2006; Geenen & Powers, 2006).

4. Federal policies addressing disability and child protection

A series of Federal legislative efforts have addressed youth with disabilities who are either at risk of child welfare involvement or who are living in foster care (Slayter & Springer, 2011). The passage of Children’s Justice and Assistance Act of 1986 had ramifications for youth with disabilities. In general, this act was focused on addressing the handling of child abuse cases so as to limit additional trauma to the child victim; the investigation and prosecution of child abuse cases. For states to qualify for financial assistance under this act, they needed to establish interdisciplinary task force on children’s justice and adopt the recommendations of that task force in three programmatic areas, one of which led to supports for youth with disabilities. Specifically, they needed to consider recommendations related to experimental, model, and demonstration programs for testing innovative approaches and techniques for enhancing the effectiveness of judicial or administrative action in child abuse cases. Also in 1986, the passage of the Temporary Child Care for Handicapped Children and Crisis Nurseries Act led to the availability of financial support for targeted respite services for the families of youth with intellectual disabilities.

In 1988, the passage of the Child Abuse Prevention, Adoption and Family Services Act of 1988 focused attention on foster youth with ‘special needs’ (Rosenthal, Groze, & Aguilar, 1991). In this act, ‘special needs’ were defined in the context of situations in which it was reasonable to conclude that a youth could be placed with adoptive parents without financial assistance in the form of adoption subsidies and/or medical assistance. Specifically, special needs could include ethnic background, age and membership in a sibling group. Additionally, the term could also apply to a youth with a medical condition or a physical, mental or emotional disability. While this act was not specific to youth with disabilities, it did include the provision for services that could support this specific population of foster youth.

5. Study aims

Despite the aforementioned Federal-level policy attention given to foster youth with disabilities and existing knowledge about increased risk factors for child abuse and neglect, a study of national data on the topic is warranted (Lightfoot, Hill & LaLiberte, 2011; Lightfoot, 2014). This purpose of this exploratory, cross-sectional study is to establish baseline national information about the prevalence and experiences of youth with disabilities involved in the child welfare system in 2012. The present study will build on the existing research through the use of the Adoption and Foster Care Reporting System (AFCARS) which has been strengthened by the guidance provided in the 2010 re-authorization of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA, P.L. 111–320). Given that no national population-based studies on the larger community of youth with and without disabilities in the child welfare system exist, seven exploratory research questions guide

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