



## Are children safer with kin? A comparison of maltreatment risk in out-of-home care

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 11 November 2014

Received in revised form 20 April 2015

Accepted 20 April 2015

Available online 5 May 2015

#### Keywords:

Foster care

Kinship care

Maltreatment investigation

Substantiation

### ABSTRACT

Safety, or the absence of maltreatment, is the primary mandate of the child protection services (CPS) system, both for children living at home and those living away from home. Yet, few research studies have examined maltreatment in out-of-home care due to the low incidence rate and data limitations. This study used statewide administrative data to estimate the association between placement type and experiencing a maltreatment investigation or substantiation in out-of-home care. Over 6% of informal TANF-funded kinship placements experienced an investigation alleging maltreatment by an out-of-home caregiver, compared with just over 3% for formal kinship care and non-relative foster care. However, the monthly risk of maltreatment was lowest in informal kinship care because these placements tended to endure longer before maltreatment occurred. Substantiated maltreatment during an out-of-home placement was rare across all placement types. For both investigated and substantiated maltreatment, risk was highest in the first 3 months.

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### 1. Introduction

In a given year, nearly 5% of U.S. children will reside away from their families of origin. Of these, nearly half a million reside in out-of-home care (OHC) under the supervision of a state or local child protection agency; the plurality are placed with non-relative foster parents, and a quarter are placed with kinship caregivers (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). In addition to children in formal foster care placements, there are also over 2 million children in informal kinship care (IKC). These children may or may not be known to the child welfare system, though some evidence suggests that children enter IKC for some of the same reasons as children enter the formal foster care system: parent substance abuse, abandonment, instability, lack of resources, mental illness, and incarceration, though they may also enter for dissimilar reasons such as parental death or illness (Gleeson et al., 2009; Goodman, Potts, Pasztor, & Scorzo, 2004). Informal kinship caregivers may agree to care for children specifically to avoid involvement with the child protection system, or as a result of inaction by the child protection system (Gleeson et al., 2009). Thus, child welfare systems should be concerned about children in informal arrangements as well, given their potential vulnerability.

The extent to which children are safe in these different care arrangements is an important consideration for child welfare policy. The primary goal of placement in state-supervised OHC is to prevent further harm to children who were maltreated in their familial homes. Consequently, maltreatment experienced in OHC is a key safety metric

that states are required to track and report each year. The federal performance standard mandates that the rate of substantiated maltreatment among children in OHC be less than half of 1% of all foster children in a given year, though many states do not meet this standard (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Moreover, the rate of substantiation for complaints of maltreatment in OHC is far lower than for familial complaints (Benedict, Zuravin, Brandt, & Abbey, 1994), and some scholars suggest that cases with sufficient evidence of maltreatment are left unsubstantiated due to decision-making processes that were faulty or affected by work factors unrelated to the alleged maltreatment (DePanfilis & Girvin, 2005). Consequently, the true rate of maltreatment in OHC may be substantially higher than state estimates. In addition, these rates do not capture informal kin placements, and there are no estimates available on the prevalence of maltreatment in IKC. Overall, maltreatment in OHC remains a problem for child welfare systems, and research can help states identify which factors place children in OHC at higher risk. Placement type is a particularly important consideration in maltreatment risk because the type of placement a child enters is within the control of the child protection system, whereas the characteristics of children entering placements are not.

This study seeks to address two questions: (1) What are the risks of maltreatment in three placement types: non-relative foster care (NRFC), formal kinship care (FKC), and informal kinship care (IKC)? and (2) How do these risks vary over time? These analyses contribute to current knowledge on safety in OHC placements in several ways. Generally speaking, very little research exists on maltreatment in OHC, partly because it is a very difficult outcome to capture in survey data. As the incidence rate is quite low, an empirical investigation of this

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issue requires a very large sample of children to be observed over a substantial time frame. Prior estimates of maltreatment across OHC arrangements have been limited by small, non-representative samples and a lack of longitudinal data, and thus have relied on bivariate, cross-sectional estimates of group differences. This study uses a state-wide administrative database containing over 50,000 children across an 8 year span to estimate risk of maltreatment across placement types. This allows for a more robust estimate of risk, in that some potentially confounding factors can be controlled, and there is sufficient length of observation to assess changes in risk over time. Second, there are no known studies on maltreatment in informal kinship care, and thus, this study extends our understanding to that population. Notably, this study excludes children in congregate (group-based) care. This is done for two primary reasons: (1) the characteristics of children in congregate care differ in ways that make them incomparable to children in other settings (e.g., young children are very rarely placed in congregate care); (2) congregate care staff differ from foster parents and relative caregivers in their expected role (e.g. staff members are more comparable to child care providers than to surrogate parents) and are subject to different government regulations and monitoring.

## 2. Conceptual framework

Several perspectives are relevant to the consideration of whether the risk of maltreatment would differ across placement types. I first discuss perspectives on why placement settings may present differential risks of maltreatment; I then discuss alternative explanations that would suggest a spurious association between placement type and maltreatment risk.

### 2.1. Caregiver socioeconomic conditions

Placements may differ in risk of maltreatment because the average characteristics of kinship and non-relative foster caregivers differ. In FKC, caregivers are, on average, far more socioeconomically disadvantaged than are caregivers in NRFC (Berrick, 1997; Dolan, Casanueva, Smith, & Bradley, 2009; Ehrle & Geen, 2002; Harden, Clyman, Kriebel, & Lyons, 2004; Stacks & Partridge, 2011). In part this may occur because income requirements to which non-relative foster parents are held may be waived for formal kin caregivers (U.S. Children's Bureau, 2011). Informal kinship caregivers are estimated to be even more socioeconomically disadvantaged than are formal kinship caregivers (Strozier & Krisman, 2007). Socioeconomic disadvantage is consistently linked to increased risk of maltreatment and substandard parenting (Berger, 2004, 2007; Slack, Holl, McDaniel, Yoo, & Bolger, 2004; Slack et al., 2011), potentially through increased risk of material deprivation, and through the effects of poverty on the stress level of the caregiver (Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994).

Similarly, other issues of socioeconomic status and social capital have been linked to maltreatment reports or risk of maltreatment, including education, social support, and neighborhood poverty (Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 1999; Kotch, Browne, Dufort, Winsor, & Catellier, 1999), all of which suggest higher risk among kinship placements. Specifically, kinship caregivers are more likely to have less support for parenting—specifically, they are more likely to be single caregivers and report lower amounts of social support, and tend to live in more impoverished communities (Ehrle & Geen, 2002; Harden et al., 2004). Thus, one may hypothesize that children in either formal or informal kinship placements would be at higher risk of maltreatment than children in NRFC, given consistent evidence that maltreatment risk is impacted by socioeconomic conditions.

### 2.2. Caregiver attachment

Potential resource disadvantages for kin caregivers may be overcome purported benefits of kinship care. Most relevant to maltreatment

risk may be blood lineage and possible pre-existing attachments. Animal studies have suggested that humans are innately driven to protect and nurture persons with shared blood lineage (Lawler, 2008). If true, this would suggest a lower propensity to maltreat a related child than a non-related child. Moreover, kin may have already invested some amount of resources, personal or financial, in their relative children, and caregivers are less likely to maltreat children in whom they have already invested (Malkin & Lamb, 1994). While a blood relation is not a requisite for bonding (Dozier, Stoval, Albus, & Bates, 2001), non-relative foster parents require some amount of time to forge a bond with the foster child, whereas some kinship caregivers will have a pre-existing relationship with the foster care. A caregiver who is bonded with a child may be less likely to elicit, and more likely to tolerate, abhorrent or distressing temperaments and behaviors. Thus, all else equal, kin may be less likely to perpetrate maltreatment early on in the placement.

### 2.3. Interfamilial patterns of maltreatment

However, familial or biological ties could also disadvantage children in both formal and informal kinship care. It is suggested that familial patterns of maltreatment, parenting styles, substance abuse, and mental health problems are a product of both environmental and genetic traits that are shared across generations (Dixon, Browne, & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2009; Kendler, Davis, & Kessler, 1997; Kim, 2009; McCloskey & Bailey, 2000; Pears & Capaldi, 2001; Van Ijzendoorn, 1992). Thus, grandparents, who are the most common kinship caregivers, may share some of the maladaptive traits of the maltreating parent. Although this is, by no means a perfect correlation, many parents involved with the child welfare system were victims of maltreatment in their own childhoods (Dixon, Browne, & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2005). This is relevant for foster care placements because a history of suspected or confirmed maltreatment is not an automatic disqualification for placement in all states, and states are more likely to waive licensure requirements to facilitate kin placements (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2011). Moreover, as a substantial portion of maltreatment goes unreported, it is likely that children are sometimes placed with persons who have maltreated other children. Given that kinship caregivers, on average, have more risk factors for maltreatment, including but not limited to potential interfamilial patterns, the risk of being placed with a maltreating caregiver may be higher among kinship caregivers.

### 2.4. Alternative explanations

#### 2.4.1. Selection into caregiving

Lastly, it is important to understand that non-relative foster parents and kinship caregivers select into their roles for different reasons. Kinship caregivers are brought into the child welfare system due to the placement needs of a specific and known child, and thus their primary motivation may be to fulfill family obligations. Moreover, kinship caregivers may be sought out by the child welfare system (Berrick, Barth, & Needell, 1994). To contrast, non-relative foster parents have had time to carefully consider the decision to foster. At the same time, because they are not motivated by the needs of a specific child, their desire to be a foster parent may not be actualized through a commitment to a given child in their care. Whether, and in what ways, these different motivations are likely to affect maltreatment risk is unclear.

#### 2.4.2. Child selection into placement type

Not only does maltreatment affect children's development, children's cognitive and behavioral traits also influence their risk of being maltreated (Font & Berger, 2015). On the whole, known differences in the average characteristics of children in non-relative and kinship care would suggest that children in non-relative foster care are likely to be at higher risk of maltreatment. As compared with children

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