



The relationship of placement experience to school absenteeism and changing schools in young, school-aged children in foster care

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ABSTRACT

Background: Chronic school absenteeism and frequent school changes, particularly among younger children, may be antecedents for the high rates of school failure and subsequent dropout among youth in foster care. However, the relationship of foster care experience to absenteeism and school change has not been well studied.

Objective: This study examined the association of placement experience with absenteeism and changing schools among 209 urban children in foster care enrolled in public elementary schools.

Methods: A cohort of children aged 5 to 8 years who entered non-relative or kinship foster care from 2006–2008 were followed longitudinally for 2 years from entry into foster care. Children residing in foster care were categorized at the end of the study as early stable, late stable, or unstable, if they achieved a permanent placement prior to 45 days, between 45 days and 9 months, or failed to do so within 9 months, respectively. Children who reunified home were classified as a fourth category. Poisson regression, controlling for baseline factors, was used to compare days absent and number of schools attended across categories of placement experience.

Results: Among the 209 children, 51% were male, 79% were African American, and 55% were initially placed with kin. One third of children reunified home; among children who did not reunify, one half was early stable, and a third was unstable. Adjusted rates of school absenteeism increased in stepwise fashion as children's placements became more unstable; children with unstable placements were 37% more likely to be absent than those with early placement stability ($p = 0.029$). Children who reunified during the study demonstrated the highest rates of absenteeism; however, there was no significant difference in absenteeism before or after reunification. Number of schools attended increased as stability worsened, with the standardized rate of schools attended reaching 3.6 schools (95% CI 3.1–4.1) over a two year period among children in unstable placements.

Conclusions: The relationship between placement experience and school absenteeism and school change illustrates the need to better coordinate the educational experience of high-risk children in foster care. The secondary finding of high absenteeism among children in the process of returning home illustrates that educational challenges for youth may be equally if not more concerning among the greater majority of youth in child welfare who remain home with birth parents.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Absenteeism and changing schools as risk factors for school success for children in foster care

One of the largest threats to the wellbeing of children in foster care as they transition toward adulthood is the high risk of poor educational outcomes. Studies among foster care children show higher

levels of grade retention, suspensions, absenteeism, and lower standardized test scores (Smithgall, 2004; Wulczyn, Smithgall, & Chen, 2009). The *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act* (110th United States Congress, 2008) elevated concerns about educational stability for children in foster care. The legislation responded to reports documenting significant instability in schools for children in the child welfare system and rates of high school dropout as high as 75% (Balfanz, Herzog, & Iver, 2007; Ferguson & Wolkow, 2012; Smithgall, 2004; Stone, 2007). *Fostering Connections* placed new requirements on states to improve the educational stability of their child welfare populations.

While the critical outcomes of older youth in care demand attention, the antecedents of dropout can likely be found in earlier school engagement. Two predictors of dropout are absenteeism and school

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stability, which can threaten school engagement and achievement, particularly among young, school-aged children (Balfanz, 2006; Balfanz et al., 2007; Eckenrode, Rowe, Laird, & Brathwaite, 1995; Rumberger, 2003). For example, absenteeism in kindergarten predicts poor reading achievement in first grade, with an even stronger impact for children in poverty; therefore, decreasing absenteeism among young children may be critical for later educational success (Chang & Romero, 2008; Kearney, 2008).

For young children in foster care, who are an important potential population for targeted intervention, research to describe the degree of absenteeism and school stability or their predictors is limited. A recent literature review found only five studies reporting on absenteeism of children in care (Trout, Hagaman, Casey, Reid, & Epstein, 2008). One report of all school-aged children in care in public schools in New York City cited significant absenteeism with improved attendance on entering care for young children and modest negative effect of placement change on attendance (Conger & Rebeck, 2001). Conclusions about absenteeism are limited due to different attendance measures, population ages, placement types, and lack of appropriate controls.

Improving school stability has been a primary focus of *Fostering Connections*. In a national study of foster care alumni, 68% attended three or more elementary schools, and 33% attended five or more (Pecora et al., 2006). Whether younger children in care have similar rates of school change is unclear. Further research to describe how placement experience relates to school change and absenteeism could provide a valuable baseline for child welfare systems as they implement reforms to improve educational stability.

1.2. Foster care placement experience as a contributing factor

Undermining attempts to stabilize children in school, frequent placement changes pose a major challenge for child welfare systems responding to the new educational requirements of *Fostering Connections*. Prior data reveal a high level of placement instability for many children in foster care. Among children in foster care aged 5 to 7, a quarter had one placement move and a third had two or more (Wulczyn, Kogan, & Harden, 2003). Although 50–75% of fostered children may return home after placement (AFCARS, 2011), 20–40% of those returning home will likely recidivate to the foster care system within 10 years (Taussig, Clyman, & Landsverk, 2001; Wulczyn, Hislop, & Goerge, 2000). Despite efforts to improve permanency, over 40% of fostered children will remain in placement beyond 18 months (AFCARS, 2011); for these children, placement instability is common.

To improve educational outcomes for children in foster care, states need to consider both efforts to improve educational stability and attendance as well as reduce overall placement moves. Placement moves worsen overall behavioral problems, which can compound the difficulty of reducing absenteeism, school disruption, and poor achievement (Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, & Localio, 2007). Needed are studies that examine more closely how placement experience impacts educational stability in young children. Despite population data that have quantified the magnitude of educational challenges for children in foster care, there are no studies that characterize the impact of placement experience on school disruption and absenteeism in elementary school children.

1.3. The goals of the study

For the above-mentioned reasons, we performed a longitudinal cohort study seeking to characterize the relationship between placement experience and absenteeism and changing schools for young children in foster care. We also sought to contrast the experiences of children who remained in foster care with the large subset of children who reunified home within the first two years after placement.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The study sample was drawn from a larger, prospective, longitudinal cohort of 409 children between ages 3 and 8 years who were consecutively recruited from a large, Mid-Atlantic city's child welfare system upon a new placement into out-of-home care from 2006–2008. Only non-medically complex children in out-of-home care were enrolled in the longitudinal study (i.e. children with medically complex illness or those whose first placement was to treatment foster care were not enrolled). Children with a history of prior out-of-home placement were included as long as the most recent prior placement had ended at least 6 months prior to the study period. All children were in court-supervised care whether placed in formal kinship or non-kinship foster homes. Children in the cohort were followed longitudinally for an average of 24 months. The primary sources of data for this study were: (1) results of baseline surveys collected prospectively from foster caregivers and caseworkers; (2) attendance and enrollment data from the city's public school district between 2006 and 2010; and (3) child welfare administrative data summarizing maltreatment and child welfare history.

From the larger sample of 409 children enrolled in the longitudinal study, we restricted our analyses to those of school age (at least 5 years of age) and enrolled in the city's school district for at least 90 school days (half a school year) during their observation period. Although attendance is not mandatory in the school district until age 6, younger children were included because local child welfare policy supports early school enrollment. We excluded periods that a child was enrolled in preschool or was not eligible to enroll in kindergarten due to age. Children were identified as enrolled in the school district by matching the cohort of children in foster care to school district records using a sequential probabilistic match that prioritized social security number when available, and then elements of a child's name and date of birth. For children identified by the school district, school attendance and enrollment were collected for 24 months following entry into foster care. Only periods of enrollment within the city's school district were included. If a child moved out of the city for a period of time, that period was not included in subsequent analysis.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. School enrollment and absenteeism

The primary outcomes were the number of days absent from school per year and number of schools attended during the child's observation period. Absences were defined as days not in school (both for recorded absences, excused and unexcused, and gaps in enrollment despite city residence) or days suspended. Regarding the decision to include gaps in enrollment, we made the a priori decision to include all possible days that a child missed school, as any day not in school is a missed opportunity for learning. Lack of prompt enrollment due to challenges in information transfer and other bureaucratic hurdles has been a significant problem, recognized and addressed by federal legislation. We therefore included gaps in enrollment to capture data on this problem.

Each child was also assigned an observation time based on eligible school days within the city's school district during their study period. School enrollment (or number of schools) was aggregated across the study period as the total number of new school enrollments after placement in out-of-home care including any school transition on entering care within an academic year.

2.2.2. Placement experience

The principal exposure was a nested measure of placement experience, which combined a measure of placement stability

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