

Twenty years of foster care in Spain: Profiles, patterns and outcomes[☆]

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ABSTRACT

This article presents data from the first nationwide study in this area, with the aim of analyzing its level of establishment and in order to make comparisons with the situation in other countries. We analyzed a sample of 649 cases, covering both kinship and non-kinship foster care. With the help of child welfare staff we analyzed the cases and considered variables in relation to the profiles of the children, their birth families and the foster caregivers, as well as some basic data on processes and outcomes. In general, the results indicate substantial differences with respect to other countries, especially in view of the high levels of stability and permanence of children in foster care. However, non-kinship care is scarcely established (15%, compared to 85% for kinship care), and the article analyzes some of the possible reasons for this. Kinship care differs from non-kinship care in many aspects, including some as important as greater rates of family reunification and a lower rate of placement disruptions. Due to the fact that non-kinship care frequently becomes a long-term placement, and even in many cases ending with adoption by caregivers, they tend to take on no more than a single experience of foster care.

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1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a substantial increase in research on foster care, with some general reviews (Sinclair, 2005) and others more focused on kinship care in view of its increasing importance, such as those carried out in the USA (Cuddeback, 2004; Geen & Berrick, 2002), the UK (Farmer & Moyers, 2008; Sinclair, 2005) or the Netherlands (Strijker, Zandberg, & Van der Meulen, 2003).

The type of foster care developed in each country, and especially the relationship between kinship and non-kinship care, is the product of highly complex historical and cultural factors that give rise to wide differences. Unfortunately, the possibilities of making international comparisons are limited by the lack of data in many countries. The aim of this article is to contribute an appraisal of the practice of foster care in Spain, where research in this field has been very scarce up to now, as reflected in a recent review (Palacios & Amorós, 2006) that found just four studies on foster care in our country.

This article presents a study, the first at a national level, that includes both kinship and non-kinship care, with the aim of drawing up a profile of the characteristics of fostered children, their birth families and the foster caregivers, as well as providing essential data about the process and some assessment of outcomes.

1.1. The context of child welfare in Spain

Until the 1980s the Spanish child welfare system was based on a charity model in which large residential care institutions were the only response when it was necessary to separate children from their families (Del Valle, 2008; Del Valle & Casas, 2002). The Constitution of 1978 restored democracy in Spain and laid the basis for a welfare state model founded on a system of social services characterized by territorial decentralization and the community paradigm, the opposite approach to that represented by large institutions. As a result of this decentralization Spain was divided administratively into 17 autonomous regions (*Comunidades Autónomas*), each with its own government, its parliament and a range of administrative powers, including personal social services.

As far as child welfare is concerned, 1987 saw the passing of the reformed Civil Code, which gave the regions responsibility for child protection, at the same time as establishing a community approach to intervention with families, with the goal of prevention, and advocating a highly restricted use of residential care. Thirdly, it officially created the concept of foster care, which had never been defined in Spain's Civil Code, and established adoption processes (also previously very difficult to apply) as a protective measure. Although foster care was indeed present in Spanish society as an informal social practice, this legislation facilitated and recommended its use as a preferential protective measure for cases of out-of-home care.

Thus, with foster care just having celebrated its 20th anniversary in Spain, it appears to be a good time to take stock of its situation. This article attempts to fill a gap with regard to basic data on foster care in

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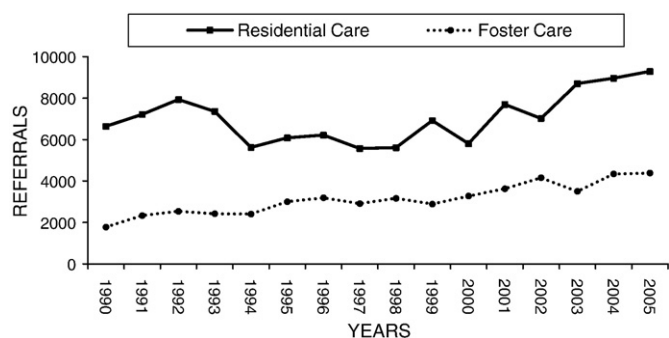


Fig. 1. Evolution of new residential care and foster care cases in the last 15 years. Graph drawn up from Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs data (Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales, 2005).

Spain, which national and international researchers have up to now been unable to collate. There is only one national database (Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales, 2005), and which provides information only on very general aspects, as we shall see below.

1.2. Foster care in Spain

The most specific data that can be obtained from national statistics (Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales, 1999, 2005) are those provided in Fig. 1, which shows our own representation of the series of annual data with the number of new cases (those coming into care) in foster and residential care. It can be seen that at the outset there is a great predominance of residential care, with almost four times more admissions than cases of foster care. Subsequently, the trend was toward growth of the new alternative of foster care and an initial reduction in residential care up to 1999, when it began a tendency for growth which is still maintained. The doubling of foster care cases in 15 years represents a very low rate of growth; furthermore, this data covers both kinship care and non-kinship care, without the possibility of its being broken down, so that we do not know which type of care was responsible for this growth.

The study by Del Valle and Bravo (2003) was the first to provide national data on the number of cases of the different out-of-home care alternatives. In December 31st 2002 there were 14,211 cases of residential care (45.3%), 14,670 (46.8%) of kinship care and 2487 (7.9%) of non-kinship care. The proportions for foster care were 85.5% of kinship care and just 14.5% for non-kinship care. That study also showed that kinship caregivers lack the necessary support, as reflected in the remuneration they receive, which was 150 € per month on average, compared to the 240 € received by non-kinship caregivers; indeed, some autonomous regions do not pay foster parents at all if they are relatives of the child. This lack of resources and the negative conditions in which kinship care takes place have been reported in the scarce research carried out in Spain (Del Valle, Alvarez-Baz, & Bravo, 2002; Montserrat, 2007).

The research presented in this article sets out to improve knowledge of the practice of foster care in Spain, analyzing much more specific aspects, including the characteristics of children and families, basic information about the foster episode and outcomes, at least in terms of outputs or final situation.

2. Method

2.1. Sample

Sampling of the regions was carried out so that it was as representative as possible of foster care practice in Spain. To this end, we chose six of the 17 autonomous regions, including the four with the largest populations and the highest rates of fostering (Madrid, Catalonia, Valencia and Andalusia), to which we added two with lower fostering rates, smaller populations and more rural characteristics (Galicia and

Castilla-León), to compensate for the urban bias resulting from the presence of large cities in the other regions. These six regions can be considered reasonably representative of the whole country, since they account for 72% of all kinship care and 78% of all non-kinship care, and there are no regional variables suggesting any substantial biases.

We finally obtained a sample of 649 cases (292 in kinship care and 357 in non-kinship care). The sample was stratified, so that the number of cases in each region was proportional to the number of foster cases they processed. Such a sample was expected to be sufficiently large for describing the profiles of children and families and the processes involved.

In order to assess the results we included the criterion that approximately half of the cases selected were closed in recent years (up to 5 years previously). Thus, the total sample was 649 cases, 321 of which were closed cases (179 in non-kinship care and 142 in kinship care).

2.2. Data-collection method and variables

A data-collection sheet was drawn up, divided into categories referring to the following variables: birth families, children, foster families, foster episode or process and, for the closed cases, information relating to the duration of the fostering, the reasons for its termination and the final situation.

This sheet was filled out by five specially-trained researchers who went out to the respective regions to collect the data via interviews with the professionals responsible for the case and the professionals in charge of the foster care programmes. Cases were selected at random from lists of open and closed cases (the latter having been closed within the previous 5 years; equal numbers were chosen for each year). With the help of the professionals it was possible to collect these data anonymously, without the need for the research team to access files. In this way, personal data protection rights were respected, and consent could be granted by regional authorities, according to the Spanish Personal Data Protection Law. In addition, approval by the ethical board of our university was given.

The data obtained, and presented in this article, are as follows: (a) children: gender, age at fostering, age at opening the protective care case, diagnosed disability, serious illness, national or ethnic origin; (b) birth families: marital status, psychosocial problems in father and mother; (c) foster caregivers: age, single/couple, relationship to child, educational level, income, own children, previous fostering, multiple fostering; (d) episode: previous situation, short or long-term, judicial intervention, visits, place of visits, mother's and father's attitude prior to

Table 1

Children's characteristics in kinship and non-kinship care ($n = 649$).

Characteristics	Kinship care ($n = 292$)	Foster care ($n = 357$)
Gender		
Female	53.1%	49.9%
Age at placement		
M	6.94 (SD = 5.18)	6.95 (SD = 4.56)
Distribution by stage*		
0–3	38.3%	31.2%
4–8	26.6%	35.4%
9–12	18.3%	22.4%
+ 13	16.9%	11%
Age at opening of case		
M*	6.29 (SD = 5.04)	4.57 (SD = 3.97)
Distribution by stage*		
0–3	43.1%	51.4%
4–8	24.5%	33.1%
9–12	18.6%	12%
+ 13	13.8%	3.4%
Disability*	3.1%	8.1%
Serious illnesses	5.5%	9.2%
Origin		
Other nationality	7.8%	6.8%
Gypsy	5.5%	5.9%

* $p \leq .05$ (t / χ^2).

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