



Foster children with an incarcerated parent: Predictors of reunification

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Received 4 March 2007; received in revised form 17 April 2007; accepted 2 May 2007
Available online 22 June 2007

Abstract

Compared to other children who need child welfare services, children with incarcerated parents have needs that are not easily met and when placed in foster care may be less likely to achieve permanency through reunification. Prior research has not identified under what circumstances these children are more or less likely to reunify with a family member. Using administrative data from the Adoption and Foster Care Administrative Reporting System (AFCARS) this paper explores whether factors that predict reunification for children in foster care (e.g., child age, race, mental health, disability, family structure, placement history) also predict reunification for children who have at least one incarcerated parent ($n=40,751$). Use of logistic regression suggested that school age children and children with behavioral or substance abuse problems were more likely to reunify. In contrast, controlling for the impact of other variables in the model, the following factors significantly decreased the likelihood of reunification for children with at least one incarcerated parent: kinship foster care placement, African American ethnicity, age under 2, child disability, housing problems, single-parent family structure, and placement history. Practice and policy implications related to children of incarcerated parents in out-of-home care are discussed.

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Keywords: Foster children; Incarcerated parents; Out-of-home care; Reunification

1. Introduction

Children of incarcerated parents are an understudied segment of the foster care population. As incarceration rates reach unprecedented heights in this country, children and families are increasingly affected. The rate of incarceration for women has increased by 110% in the last

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15 years and as many as 80% of incarcerated women are the primary caregivers of children prior to their arrest (Ehrensaft, Khashu, Ross, & Wamsley, 2003). If no other resources to care for these children exist, some children are placed in foster care or in other out-of-home care settings. Although data on parental incarceration and foster care placement is scarce, it is estimated that at least 4.5% of foster children are in out of home placement due to parental incarceration and 10% of incarcerated mothers have a child in foster homes or other state care (Mumola, 2000).

Once placed in out-of-home care the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) emphasizes the importance of attempting to achieve permanency for children through reunification with their families in a timely manner (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2000). Visitation and reunification however may not be pursued and termination of parent rights (TPR) may be pursued faster when one or both parents are incarcerated (Lee, Genty, & Laver, 2005). Research with the general foster care population identifies factors that may impact whether or not children are returned to their families of origin including child age, race, gender, mental health, disability, family structure, substance abuse of parent, housing and economic challenges, placement setting, and length of time in care (Wulczyn, 2004). The current study explores the impact of these variables on children's reunification with primary caregivers in the population of children for whom parental incarceration is identified as one of the reasons for removal from the home.

1.1. Children of incarcerated parents in foster care

Children of incarcerated parents continue to constitute a growing percentage of the foster care population (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002); some estimates indicate that as many as 20–30% of children in foster care have an incarcerated parent (Seymour, 2001) and that 5–10% of children of women prisoners are in foster care following the mother's incarceration (Johnston, 1995a; Mumola, 2000). Children left in the care of relatives or in out-of-home care during parental incarceration are a growing yet understudied population (Seymour, 2001). Children of incarcerated parents both in out-of-home care and in the care of relatives face multiple problems including greater economic disadvantage, stigma, disruption of parent–child attachments, and unstable living arrangements (Johnston, 1995a).

In 2002, Johnson and Waldfogel explored the incidence of parental incarceration by analyzing data from the US Dept of Justice including the Survey of Inmates in State Correctional Facilities, as well as other criminal justice and US census data. Their study explored trends in parental incarceration and noted that the number of children of incarcerated parents in the foster care system had grown tremendously since the mid-1980s. Most children were cared for by relatives during parental incarceration, the vast majority by maternal grandparents (Johnson & Waldfogel, 2002). Because this study relied on information provided by the criminal justice system, Johnson and Waldfogel were not able to capture specific information regarding children's placement and movement through the foster care system or document how many of these children were formally or informally placed with relative caregivers.

Researchers at the Vera Institute of Justice conducted a cohort study of youth in foster care in 1991 and 1996 to establish trends and patterns for maternal incarceration before, during, and after foster care placement (Ehrensaft et al., 2003; Ross, Khashu, & Wamsley, 2004). The Vera Institute study explored the relationship between maternal incarceration and foster and kinship care placements in New York City. Findings revealed that a large percentage of New York City's foster children had mothers that were either incarcerated, or likely to be involved in the criminal justice system at some point during their children's stay in care (Ehrensaft et al., 2003).

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