



Reentry into the foster care system after reunification

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Abstract

Permanency is a key outcome for child welfare services and reunification is the preferred exit when possible. Any analysis of reunification is incomplete without examining children who reenter foster care. This study describes the odds of reentry into foster care for children up to fifteen years old when they first entered the foster care system, who entered foster care for the first time between 1998 and 2002 (137,385 children) and exited to reunification within one year of entry (45,154 children). Instances of reentry into foster care within one year of reunification are identified (6021 children). This study examines the issue of reentry into foster care post-ASFA and expands the literature on reentry through the examination of several factors not previously addressed: the primary language spoken at home, presence of siblings in foster care, and census based demographic factors. Logistic regression is used to model reentry examining demographic and child welfare characteristics while adjusting for non-independence caused by the presence of sibling groups.

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1. Introduction

Over the past two decades the number of children entering foster care has increased dramatically. In June 1984 there were 33,000 children in the California Child Welfare System, in June 1994 the number of children had increased to 90,000 ([State of California, Legislative Analysts Office, 1996](#)). The number of children in foster care continued to increase throughout the 1990s reaching a high of 110,000 children on July 1, 1998 (a 333% increase over the 1984 totals), before decreasing to the current level of 85,000 children on July 1, 2004 (a 257% increase over the 1984 totals) ([Needell et al., 2005](#)). At this same time the total number of children in

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California was increasing at a much slower rate, from 6.9 million in 1984 to 9.2 million in 2000 (State of California, Department of Finance, 2004). As the number of children in foster care increases so does the pressure to move these children into permanent placements. This study examined a cohort of children who were reunified with their families of origin within 12 months of initial placement in the California Child Welfare System to examine which demographic and system level characteristics predict the likelihood of reentry into the California Child Welfare System.

Since 1980 several pieces of legislation have been enacted at the federal level to help limit the number of entries into foster care and to move children out of foster care and into permanent homes. The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (AACWA) of 1980 was designed to limit the number of children entering out-of-home care, reduce the number of children in the child welfare system, ensure that children do not remain in the child welfare system for extended periods of time, and to ensure permanency for children affected by the foster care system either through reunification with the birth family placement with a stable adoptive home, or some other permanency option (P.L. 96-272). In 1997, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) was passed to ensure the safety of children, protect the rights of both children and families, and to promote permanent placements for children, including adoption (P.L. 105-89). ASFA recognized the continuing importance of using reasonable efforts to reunify children with their families of origin as defined in AACWA while also expanding the idea to include other permanency options for children. ASFA set out several principles to guide child welfare services in the United States: (1) the safety of children is the top priority; (2) out-of-home care is not a permanent placement option; (3) finding and/or maintaining permanent homes for children needs to be a priority; (4) the child welfare system must be accountable; (5) there is a need for innovative practices in child welfare (P.L. 105-89). Additionally, ASFA mandated that the state child welfare systems be held accountable for their performance. The Department of Health and Human Services was required to develop measures to examine the outcomes for children in the child welfare system. After a process of development and public input seven child welfare outcomes were identified along with seven systemic factors pertaining to the ability of states to achieve positive outcomes for children and families. Each state has an annual Child and Family Services Review (CFSR) to assess how well the state is doing in achieving the outcomes defined in ASFA. The seven outcome measures fall into three broad categories; (1) safety (children are protected from abuse and neglect, children are safely maintained in their homes when possible), (2) permanency (children have stable living situations, children have stable family relations), and (3) well-being (the family has enhanced capacity to meet the needs of the child, appropriate educational services are available, and physical and mental health services are available) (USDHHS, 2002). Currently, six indicators from the safety and permanency categories are being used to assess states conformity with the federal outcomes (recurrence of maltreatment, incidence of child abuse and/or neglect in foster care, foster care reentries, length of time to achieve reunification, length of time to achieve adoption, and stability of foster care placement). Each of these six measures is based on information submitted to two national reporting systems, the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) and the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS).

Many state officials and child welfare researchers feel that the outcome measures required by ASFA are biased because they rely on yearly cross-sectional snapshots of the foster care system or exit cohorts rather than longitudinal analyses based on entry cohorts (Barth, Courtney, Berrick, & Albert, 1994; Courtney, Needell, & Wulczyn, 2003; Courtney, Needell, & Wulczyn, 2004). The CFSR outcome reports are based on state child welfare agency submissions to two national child

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