



Relationship between out-of-home care placement history characteristics and educational achievement: A population level linked data study

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ABSTRACT

Studies generally show children who have entered out-of-home care have worse educational outcomes than the general population, although recent research suggests maltreatment and other adversities are major contributing factors. Children's out-of-home care experiences vary and may affect their outcomes. This study examined the influence of placement stability, reunification, type of care, time in care and age at entry to care on children's educational outcomes. We conducted a population-based record-linkage study of children born in Western Australia between 1990 and 2010 who sat State or national Year 3 reading achievement tests ($N = 235,045$ children, including 2160 children with a history of out-of-home care). Children's educational outcomes varied with many aspects of their care experience. Children placed in residential care were particularly likely to have low scores, with an unadjusted OR 6.81, 95% CI [4.94, 9.39] for low reading scores, which was partially attenuated after adjusting for background risk factors but remained significant (OR = 1.50, 95% CIs [1.08, 2.08]). Reading scores were also lower for children who had experienced changes in care arrangements in the year of the test. A dose-response effect for multiple placements was expected but not found. Older age at entering care was also associated with worse reading scores. Different characteristics of a child's care history were interwoven with each other as well as child, family and neighbourhood characteristics, highlighting a need for caution in attributing causality. Although the level of educational difficulties varied, the findings suggest a widespread need for additional educational support for children who have entered care, including after reunification.

1. Introduction

The educational outcomes of children in care is a topic of strong international interest. In recent years reports on educational outcomes and out-of-home care were published in Australia (AIHW, 2015), the United States (Wiegmann, Putnam Hornstein, Barrat, Magruder, & Needell, 2014), the United Kingdom (Sebba et al., 2015), and Canada (Brownell et al., 2015). All showed that children who have entered care have an 'achievement gap', performing well below the general population, and similar or worse compared to other at-risk groups. Recent research suggests that overall, being in care is not the reason for these adverse outcomes, with a range of background adversities responsible for these outcomes (Berger, Cancian, Han, Noyes, & Rios-Salas, 2015; Maclean, Taylor, & O'Donnell, 2016). Maclean et al. (2016) found that reading scores for children who were maltreated and entered out-of-home care were comparable to the general population after controlling for a range of other risk factors (including socio-economic

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disadvantage, ethnicity, and parental factors), whereas maltreated children who remained at home had increased likelihood of poor reading performance. Children's experiences of out-of-home care, however, can vary greatly according to factors such as placement stability and type of care. Understanding the aspects of children's out-of-home care experiences associated with better or worse educational outcomes may help policymakers to improve academic achievement for children who enter care (Wiegmann et al., 2014).

One of the largest studies to-date was a population linked-data study of children enrolled California's public schools, which found educational outcomes were correlated with placement stability, reunification/in-care status, type of care, and time in care (Wiegmann et al., 2014). The main limitation of the study was the use of cross-sectional data. The authors pointed out that this creates a bias towards children with longer stays in foster care and also limits the examination of the relationship between care characteristics and education outcomes to care experiences occurring during a single year. Similar limitations were described by Sebba et al. (2015) and the AIHW (2015). The current study builds upon the existing research by using longitudinal data on children's entire out-of-home care history from birth to Year 3 of school. The entire population of children who entered out-of-home care was included. Older age at entry to care has also been linked to worse outcomes (Brownell et al., 2015), so is also examined.

These aspects of care are relevant as they reflect the way out-of-home care is used, and the current policy context. For instance, in Australia, kinship care is increasingly being used, especially for Aboriginal children as part of the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle (Monohan, 2002). Within Western Australia, the cumulative incidence of entry to care has increased over the past 20 years, and there is a shift towards more children entering care aged 3 and under (O'Donnell et al., 2016). Children entering care at an early age also spent more days in care than older children (O'Donnell et al., 2016). Furthermore, identifying aspects of care related to better or worse outcomes is an important step on the pathway towards understanding the mechanisms affecting outcomes for children in care, and strengthening the knowledge base regarding optimal strategies and intervention timing to improve the academic success of children who have entered care.

2. What is known about OOHC characteristics and educational outcomes

2.1. Placement stability

One of the most common measures of placement stability is the number of different placements a child experiences. Evidence has been mixed regarding educational outcomes. An 18% increased odds of academic skills delay with each additional placement was found in one study (Zima et al., 2000), and a higher percentage of students scoring below basic performance in English language arts among students with three or more placements in the study year than those with fewer placements was found in another (Wiegmann et al., 2014). Likewise, a Swedish study found worse educational outcomes among children with long term but unstable out-of-home care histories compared to those with long term stable care, or short-intermediate term care (Vinnerljung, Öman, & Gunnarson, 2005). Conversely, there was no difference in school failure rates associated with the number of placements children in care had experienced in research by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2015).

In a series of analyses that accounted for multiple background risk factors, Brownell et al. (2015) found the number of placements children who had entered care had experienced was only associated with two of their educational outcomes: Kindergarten school readiness, and credits earned in Grade 9. Few studies have accounted for variation in background demographic and risk factors in examining OOHC characteristics. As these risk factors are common, there is a need to further clarify the relationship between placement stability and educational outcomes after accounting for a range of demographic and social risk factors (AIHW, 2007).

Placement stability can also be examined by looking at the duration of placements. Time in current placement and time in a continuous period of care (which could include multiple placements) were each only significantly associated with educational achievement in one of four analyses (AIHW, 2015). Furthermore, some studies have suggested that educational improvements are likely to happen in the early period after placement, and then either be maintained (Barber & Delfabbro, 2005) or prove to be short-lived (Font & Maguire-Jack, 2013).

2.2. Reunification

Although a great deal of research focusses on children in care, and Australian policy supports reunification, there is relatively little research on outcomes for children who have been reunified with their families. Some research suggests reunified children may be a particularly vulnerable group. Compared to children remaining in care, reunified children were found to be more likely to have low grades, have dropped out of school, and have more behaviour problems and self-destructive behaviour in adolescence (Tausig, Clyman, & Landsverk, 2001). Other studies however have not found worse achievement outcomes for reunified children than children still in care (Brownell et al., 2015; Wiegmann et al., 2014). Further research is required to clarify the relationship between reunification and academic achievement. In addition, the effects of time since reunification on outcomes have not been specifically examined. Longer duration of time since reunification may mean greater exposure to other risks in the home such as parental mental health issues which may have a negative effect (Bellamy, 2008), or may result in increased stability with a positive effect on reading.

2.3. Type of care

Foster care and kinship care are the most commonly used forms of out-of-home care in Western Australia, with 7.3% in residential care including family group homes which are homes provided by the Department of Child Protection and Family Support or the community sector with a live-in carer (AIHW, 2015). Internationally, there has been particular interest in kinship care, which is being

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