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A survival analysis of the length of foster parenting duration and implications for recruitment and retention of foster parents

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1. Introduction

In the child welfare system, foster homes play a vital role by providing a resource helping to support a child's safety, well-being and permanency (Geiger, Hayes, & Lietz, 2013). Child welfare agencies are charged with providing adequate foster homes for children placed in their care to ensure access to the appropriate services and skills to meet their needs (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004). The majority of children who enter the foster care system are placed in foster family homes (Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2002; USDHHS, 2016). As of the Federal Fiscal Year (FY) 2015, there were 427,910 children in foster care, with 45% of these children living in non-relative foster family homes, and the demand for foster family homes grew from prior years (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2016).

Because foster parents are a crucial factor in delivering services and care to foster children, a major concern for child welfare agencies is how to recruit and maintain an adequate supply of foster homes (Pasztor, Hollinger, Inkelas, & Halfon, 2006). Due to the intricacy of the foster children's physical, behavioral and emotional needs, many foster parents discontinue their foster care license within the first year (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004). Nationally, there has been a serious decline in foster home availability creating a great need for resource homes that appropriately address the children's needs and safety, permanency and well-being goals (USDHHS, 2002). This need has challenged child welfare agencies to re-examine the reasons why individuals become foster parents, what factors influence the recruitment and retention of foster parents, and the reasons foster parents decide to discontinue fostering (Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004). In addition, assessing the length of time of fostering may lead to implications for recruitment, retention, and supports provided to foster parents. The main objective of this study is to examine factors associated with length of foster parenting. This study will contribute to developing implications for successful recruitment and retention policies and practices for foster parents.

2. Previous literature on foster parents' retention

Foster care plays a crucial role in the child welfare system by providing beneficial, rehabilitative, and developmental experiences to support child safety, well-being, and permanency (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, & Barth, 2000). Previous foster parent retention studies have examined the effects of a variety of factors that were found to be influential in retaining foster parents as placement resources. These factors include specific characteristics of motivation for being a foster parent, the benefits and challenges of foster parent support, and the means to improving foster parent retention (Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999; Geiger et al., 2013; Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007; MacGregor, Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006; Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001; Rhodes, Orme, Cox, & Buehler, 2003; Whenan, Oxlad, & Lushington, 2009). Examining these key elements can assist child welfare agencies in increasing retention rates and improving foster parenting resources (Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007).

2.1. Foster parents' characteristics and length of their services

Previous studies have examined certain demographic characteristics of foster parents and found that on average, foster parents ranged from 41 to 45 years old, were married, had incomes ranging from $30,000 to $50,000, and received at least some high school education or more (Denby et al., 1999; Geiger et al., 2013; MacGregor et al., 2006; Rhodes et al., 2001, 2003; Whenan et al., 2009). A majority of foster parents worked outside the home and had 1–5 years of fostering experience (Denby et al., 1999; Geiger et al., 2013). There were no consistently significant findings in relation to race and marital status (Geiger et al., 2013; Rhodes et al., 2003). Income was the only characteristic that had an independent effect on retention that was statistically significant (Rhodes et al., 2003).

In addition to the income of foster parents, previous literature shows that various intrinsic and extrinsic motivations of a foster parent were likely to influence their retention. A qualitative study by MacGregor et al. (2006) found that foster parents were intrinsically motivated by

altruistic ideas, for example, wanting to make a difference in children's lives. Other qualitative studies also found that a foster parent's motivation to continue to foster was related to overall satisfaction and that assessing this motivation during the early recruitment stage can be effective in predicting later satisfaction, as well as retention (Andersson, 2001; Denby et al., 1999; Isomaki, 2002). This is consistent with the findings of a Geiger et al. (2013) study that explains that intrinsic rewards and motivation were influential to foster parents and that many chose to continue to foster due to their own "internal source of motivation stemming from rewards they received as caregivers" (p. 1361) and from providing for the needs of the children. Another study showed that those foster parents who provided a higher level of care to meet the emotional and behavioral needs of the children had longer lengths of service (Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007). According to this study's findings, influences on the decision to continue to foster included foster parents' interactions with child welfare agencies, their relationships with the foster children, and their personal circumstances (Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007).

2.2. Ways to improve retention

Due to the limited foster parent homes available to meet the child welfare agencies' demands, it is crucial that research offers ways to address foster parent retention issues.

2.2.1. Support of foster parent

A leading reason foster parents discontinue fostering is because they do not receive the support needed to continue to be foster parents (Rhodes et al., 2001). Support is defined not only in terms of needed resources, services and training, but also as emotional support, respect, and recognition received through relationships with agency workers (Denby et al., 1999; Geiger et al., 2013; Gibbs & Wildfire, 2007; MacGregor et al., 2006; Rhodes et al., 2001, 2003). Foster parents valued the emotional support they received through positive relationships, good communication, and having their input respected by the child welfare agency who considered them as part of the child's team (MacGregor et al., 2006). Additionally, the foster parent's relationship with the agency, feeling respected by the agency, worker's accessibility, and increased social/peer support also influenced satisfaction levels and intentions to continue to foster (Denby et al., 1999). Having other foster parents' support, either through networking, mentorships, trainings, or being part of a foster parent association was also an important factor (Denby et al., 1999; Geiger et al., 2013; MacGregor et al., 2006). Moreover, obtaining accurate and timely information about foster children and good overall communication with the caseworkers had a strong influence on a foster parent's intention to continue to foster (Denby et al., 1999; Geiger et al., 2013; MacGregor et al., 2006; Rhodes et al., 2001).

In addition to supports, adequate resources and training were also found to impact foster parents' level of satisfaction. Findings show that there were needed services that were not received, with former parents and those who planned to quit being more likely than ongoing foster parents to say they needed such services as day care, transportation assistance, and financial help with health care costs (Rhodes et al., 2001). By exploring alternative ways to increase the amount of resources and services offered and improve the type of resources provided, foster parents would be given with the support needed to continue to be appropriate providers (Rhodes et al., 2003; 2001). Previous studies have shown that foster parents who felt better prepared through training and those who had been provided with the services needed most, such as respite services, transportation assistance, and medical and psychological services for children, had higher levels of satisfaction and greater well-being consequently were more inclined to continue to foster than those missing such services (Denby et al., 1999; Geiger et al., 2013; Whenan et al., 2009).

Foster parents are required to attend initial and continuous training sessions to understand the responsibilities and resources available for caring for a child. Previous studies have demonstrated that training is seen as a strength for foster parents as it provides them with support (Denby et al., 1999; Geiger et al., 2013; Rhodes et al., 2003; Whenan et al., 2009) but suggested improvements, including an increased focus on foster parents' self-efficacy to increase their confidence in handling a child's behaviors. These studies show that foster parents who are successfully trained and continually supported are more willing to continue to foster children with different levels of needs. Therefore, these resources and training needs are vital to examine when assessing foster parent retention strategies, but there is a lack of research on which child welfare agency factors can impact foster parent retention.

2.2.2. Foster parents' satisfaction

Several studies looked specifically at the level of foster parent satisfaction as a factor in determining whether to continue to foster. Results showed that high levels of foster parent satisfaction were associated with the decision to continue to foster, and the foster parent relationship with workers and amount of support received influenced satisfaction levels among foster parents (Denby et al., 1999; Geiger et al., 2013; Whenan et al., 2009). The foster parents' ability and confidence in handling the difficult behaviors of children in their care was significantly related to foster parent well-being, satisfaction and intent to continue fostering (Denby et al., 1999; Whenan et al., 2009).

Based on the literature, there appears to be multiple factors which can influence retention of a foster parent. These include: demographic characteristics, motivations and rewards of being foster parents, and length of services duration. In addition to these foster parent characteristics, there has also been research on effective strategies to retain foster parents which include: high levels of support of the foster parents, available resources and productive training. Child welfare agencies should consider implementation of effective strategies that will increase foster parents' satisfaction allowing the agency to benefit from their valuable investment of training and supporting foster parents to increase the likelihood of achieving a positive outcome for the children placed in care. Influential factors like length of service duration, child welfare agencies' organizational factors and foster parents' expectations should be evaluated over a longer timeframe and larger sample size in order to examine which practices and strategies are effective for foster parent retention since there is a lack of substantial literature found on these factors.

2.3. Research purpose and questions

The main objective of this study is to examine factors associated with foster parents' length of service duration. This study uniquely provides an in-depth, longitudinal survival analysis of specific characteristics of a large sample of foster parents from a mid-Atlantic state. The characteristics examined include foster parent characteristics and strengths and weaknesses of the agency's support. Since there is a gap in research about the length of time foster parents serve, this study utilizes a survival analysis to examine foster parents over their length of service to gain a further understanding of the level of influence these factors have on both continuing and exiting foster parents. Additionally, this study examines the understanding and knowledge of child welfare agency and organizational factors that may impact foster parent retention in order to provide strategies to increase retention rates and improve foster parenting resources. The findings and implications of this study will contribute to successful recruitment and retention practices of foster parents so that children's placement resources can positively help address their needs and increase their likelihood of achieving desired outcomes.