



Foster home licensing and risk of reentry to out-of-home care following family reunification☆



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ABSTRACT

Family reunification without subsequent reentry is the primary permanency goal for children placed in foster care. While a number of placement-level factors have been examined for their effect on subsequent reentry to care, no study to date has considered foster care licensing. The current study uses statewide administrative data to construct a cohort of foster care youth who entered care between 2009 and 2012 and were reunified by the start of 2013 ($N = 7752$) to investigate the association between types of foster care and the probability of reentry to foster care up to two years following reunification. We focus specifically on the licensing status of foster homes, and employ propensity score analysis to address selection bias in placement type. A propensity-weighted cox proportional hazard model revealed that youth placed in licensed relative care (LRC) homes and licensed non-relative care (LNC) homes were more likely to reenter foster care than those youth placed in unlicensed relative care (URC) homes during their first spell of foster care.

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1. Introduction

The reunification of children with their biological families remains a top priority for the child welfare system as mandated by the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) which requires states to make reasonable efforts to return children to their homes following removal (U.S. Congress, 1997). However, even in those cases where children are reunified with their parents, there remains a significant risk of re-maltreatment and reentry to foster care (Connell et al., 2009; Fuller, 2005; Wulczyn, 2004). This permanency objective must therefore be assessed by both the rate and stability of reunifications of children with their biological families. This necessitates post-reunification monitoring to identify risk and protective factors associated with reentry.

Previous studies have examined associations between the type of substitute care a child receives during placement and the risk of reentry to out of home care following family reunification. Of central interest has been differential outcomes for those placed in relative versus non-relative foster homes (Connell, Katz, Saunders, & Tebes, 2006; Koh & Testa, 2011). While a number of studies have shown relative care to be associated with a reduced risk of reentry to foster care following

reunification (Frame, Berrick, & Brodowski, 2000; Wells & Guo, 1999), a more recent study questions the strength of these effects given selection biases around which children are placed in a given care setting (Koh & Testa, 2011).

The current study examines the issue of foster home licensing which to date has been absent from these investigations of reentry to the child welfare system. While all non-relative foster caregivers are required to be licensed, this is not the case for relative caregivers and therefore represents a distinction in the form of relative care a child receives. Indeed, licensing is an important dimension of substitute foster care to consider as it represents the efforts of the state to establish standards of safety and care for children in the child welfare system (Beltran & Epstein, 2013).

States expend significant resources to license foster family homes. The underlying argument is that the licensing process helps to screen in appropriate foster parents in an effort to standardize the quality of care throughout the child welfare system and ultimately meet the safety, permanency, and subsequently long-term developmental needs of abused and neglected children. In addition to the physical characteristics of the home (e.g. number of bedrooms), licensing staff work with potential foster parents to understand the social relationships/dynamics in the house, the commitment parents have to foster care, their ability to support the developmental gains of foster children and their willingness to work cooperatively with the child's individual case treatment plan. Thus, the licensing process is not only limited to ensuring the immediate physical safety of children in care. There is an assumption that licensed foster homes are simply better – both in terms of proximal and distal

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outcomes – than unlicensed foster homes. Unfortunately there are no studies that investigate long-term outcomes associated with foster care. The current study addresses this critical gap in the literature.

It is important to note that studies do exist that focus on more immediate outcomes associated with licensed and unlicensed homes. A recent study by Ryan, Perron, Moore, Victor, and Evangelist (2016) found important outcome differences between licensed and unlicensed relative foster homes. More specifically, youth placed in licensed foster homes were significantly less likely to achieve exit to reunification two years after initial entry to substitute care. The current study builds on this finding and makes a unique contribution to the literature by investigating the more distal effect of licensing status on subsequent reentry to foster care.

1.1. Reentry following reunification

Estimates of reentry rates have typically been calculated at twelve months post-reunification in keeping with federal reporting standards, but reentry rates depend largely on the lengths of observation period. For example, while 13%–14% of reunified youth had reentered out of home care one year later (Shaw, 2006; Wells & Guo, 1999), an extended 24-month observation period showed reentry rates up to 17% (Shaw & Webster, 2011).

1.1.1. Individual factors

Findings related to individual factors associated with post-reunification reentry have been mixed. Samples of statewide child welfare cases found that among infants, entry into out of home care within 30 days after birth were significantly more likely to reenter care compared with those who were initially placed at ages 2–12 months (Frame et al., 2000). However, smaller community samples have found older age at time of exit from foster care to be associated with higher rates of post-reunification reentry (Koh & Testa, 2011; Wells & Guo, 1999).

While some studies report an increased likelihood of reentry for African American youth (Courtney, 1995; Shaw, 2006; Shaw & Webster, 2011), others have not shown similar results (Koh & Testa, 2011; Yampolskaya, Armstrong, & King-Miller, 2011). Wells and Guo (1999) observed an interaction between race and age in which African American youth were more likely to reenter care up until age 13 at which point their risk for reentry was not distinguishable from youth of other races. Gender has not been found to have an effect on later reentry (Kimberlin, Anthony, & Austin, 2009; Koh & Testa, 2011).

1.1.2. Placement factors

Placement-level factors have been of particular interest given the potential for states to identify and promote those foster care practices that advance permanency goals. Placement stability during a youth's initial spell of foster care has consistently predicted reentry following reunification, with a higher number of placements increasing later risk of reentry (Courtney, 1995; Koh & Testa, 2011; Wells & Guo, 1999).

A number of studies have shown kinship care to be associated with a reduced risk of reentry to foster care following reunification (Connell et al., 2006; Frame et al., 2000; Shaw & Webster, 2011; Wells & Guo, 1999), but a more recent study that used propensity score matching, suggests that children placed in kinship foster homes are no more likely to experience reentry to foster care than children in non-kinship foster homes, once individual factors such as disability status, age, and racial/ethnic background are accounted for to address possible selection bias in where children are placed (Koh & Testa, 2011). However, it is likely that there are other critical differences between kinship and non-kinship foster care settings that are beyond individual factors previously examined. One such factor includes the licensing status of foster homes.

1.2. Foster care licensing

Licensing is a core feature in the provision of substitute care within child welfare systems. To obtain a foster care license, current or prospective caregivers must undergo a process of verification as to the suitability of a home for a child as well as a sequence of trainings on the provision optimal care for foster youth. The objective of licensing is therefore twofold. First, to ensure the safety of all youth under the supervision of the state, and second, to provide quality care that promotes adaptive child development. A range of supports including a caseworker and financial stipends are provided to licensed caregivers in an effort to help them attain these goals.

Statutory regulations require that both relative and non-relative caregivers seek state licensing, albeit under different conditions. While all non-relative caregivers must be licensed at the time of placement, relative caregivers generally have a grace period in which to obtain a foster care license. Youth in foster homes might therefore be initially placed with unlicensed relative caregivers. The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 included specific language (amending section 471(a)(10) of the Social Security Act, "Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008," U.S. Congress, 2008) granting permission for states to waive non-safety licensing standards on a case-by-case basis for potential relative foster homes. The argument in favor of a waiver for certain foster homes was based on a concern that children were denied timely placements for reasons that were unrelated to child safety.

The State of focus in this study has a clear set of regulations that inform who can receive a foster care license and under what conditions. Individuals are eligible for foster care licensure in the state if they are at least 18 years of age, of good moral character, reside legally in the United States, understand the care that must be provided to a foster child, are willing to work with the foster child's family and have a defined legal source of income. Prior to the receipt of a foster care license, a thorough home inspection is conducted to ensure suitable living conditions and a background check is performed on those living in the home. Those with prior convictions of child abuse and/or neglect are not eligible to seek a license.

Foster care licensure is required for all non-relative caregivers in the State at the time of placement into the home, but this is not the case for relative caregivers. In cases where youth are placed with kin, the relative caregivers are required to either initiate the foster care licensing process within 45 days of placement or seek a waiver from the youth's child welfare worker to permit continued substitute care in the absence of a license. On average, foster care licenses are issued to relative caregivers approximately six months after placement in the home. This means that a youth placed into a relative foster home without a license must generally remain in care with that relative for over a year before spending 50% of their time in licensed relative care, and nearly two and a half years in foster care before spending 80% of their time in licensed relative care if the relative caregiver receives their license in the average amount of time (6 months).

1.3. Research on licensing and child welfare outcomes

While the intent of these regulations is to improve child welfare outcomes, limited research has examined whether licensing status has an effect. In a study of child maltreatment while in substitute care, Nieto, Fuller, and Testa (2009) report that unlicensed relative caregivers were 14% more likely to harm a child in their care compared to licensed non-relative caregivers, whereas licensed relative caregivers were 33% less likely to harm children they were caring for in comparison to their licensed non-relative counterparts. However, the impact of licensing status on permanency objectives was not assessed.

Ryan et al. (2016) carried out the only known study to examine the association of licensing status with family reunification. Using state-level administrative data from 2009 through 2014, the authors

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