



Factors associated with two types of child custody loss among a sample of African American mothers: A novel approach



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ABSTRACT

African American families are overrepresented in the Child Welfare System; however, extant research on this phenomenon has (1) focused mostly on Caucasian or mixed-race samples and (2) has not examined informal custody arrangements alongside official child custody loss. This research addresses these gaps in the literature by examining factors associated with both official and informal child custody loss among a sample of African American mothers. Multinomial regression results show that having ever been incarcerated following a conviction increases the odds of experiencing both types of custody loss relative to no loss. Additionally, mother's experiences of childhood victimization increase the likelihood of informal custody loss relative to no loss, while being older, past year homelessness, number of minor children, being lesbian or bisexual, crack/cocaine use, and more family social support increase the odds of official loss versus no loss. Finally, increases in social support from friends decrease the odds of official loss. Implications are discussed.

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1. Introduction

African American women and their children have long been overrepresented in the child welfare system (CWS). Dorothy Roberts (2008) has referred to the CWS as having a "racial geography." While African American children represent 15% of the nation's children, they account for 45% of the foster care population and are four times as likely as white children to be in foster care (Child Welfare League of America, 2000; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). Although research has examined factors contributing to CWS involvement with multi-race samples, the disproportionate involvement of African American women merits a closer look at this population. Our current knowledge regarding precursors to child custody loss is limited to mothers who lost custody via an official court/CWS mandate. Very little, however, is known about factors associated with custody loss that occurs outside official channels, despite research showing these types of informal arrangements are quite common, particularly among African Americans (The Urban Institute, 2003).

Researchers have established that the overrepresentation of African American women and children in the CWS is due in part to structural inequalities (Hill, 2001, 2007; Roberts, 2002), prejudices within the system itself (Ards et al., 1998; Barth, 2005; Morton, 1999; see Derezotes and Poertner, 2005; for a review), and policy wording that lends itself to differential enforcement based on class and race (Vesneski, 2011). It is, however, necessary to look at specific life events and behaviors

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that put economically disadvantaged African American women at risk of losing custody of their children in order to design and implement pragmatic interventions that address the needs of these women, children, and families. To address these gaps, the aims of this study are to (1) compare the sociodemographic and other characteristics of predominantly low-income African American mothers who experienced no custody loss, informal custody loss, or official custody loss in the past year, and (2) examine correlates of both official and informal custody loss among this sample.

2. Literature review

An important first step is reviewing the general prevalence of child maltreatment in the U.S. and examining the characteristics of mothers involved with the CWS. While this study concerns itself with not only mothers who have lost official custody, but also those who have lost custody via informal channels, there is no other available data on the background characteristics of this latter group of women. Further, nearly all of the existing studies sampled white women or women from a variety of racial categories. While race has been examined as an independent variable, researchers have yet to look at within-group differences among African American mothers despite calls for more within-group research (Knight et al., 2009). For these reasons, this section draws from the available research on mostly white samples of women with official CWS involvement.

2.1. Child maltreatment in the U.S.

In their review of the prevalence of maltreatment in high income countries, Gilbert et al. (2009) found 4.78% of children in the U.S. had been investigated for a maltreatment claim in 2006 and only 1.21% of those claims were substantiated. Official reports, however, seldom demonstrate actual prevalence and in their Adverse Childhood Experiences study of over 17,000 children, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that 28.3% of children had experienced physical abuse, 20.7% sexual abuse, 10.6% emotional abuse, 9.9% physical neglect, and 14.8% emotional neglect (CDC, 2014). Additionally, 26.9% reported living in a household where substance abuse occurred (CDC, 2014). Concerning risk of foster care placement, up to 5.91% of U.S. children are ever placed in foster care between birth and age 18. However, it is noteworthy that rates are much higher for African American children at 11.53% (Wildeman and Emanuel, 2014) even though research has established rates of child maltreatment are the same across races (Sedlak and Schultz, 2005).

2.2. Established precursors to child welfare system involvement

One common precursor to child welfare system involvement is low socioeconomic status, as this system is disproportionately comprised of poor families (Grella et al., 2006; Lindsey, 1994; Pelton, 1989; Shireman, 2003). Specifically, housing problems caused by poverty place these families at an increased risk of CWS involvement (Culhane et al., 2003; Park, Metraux, Brodbar and Culhane, 2004; Pelton, 2008; Roberts and Nuru-Jeter, 2012; Slack et al., 2004; Steinbock, 1995). In one study of substance-using parents involved with the CWS, 81% reported experiencing housing difficulties (Marsh et al., 2006). Another study of (mostly white) CWS-involved female primary caregivers found more than half of those whose children had been placed out of home had annual household earnings of less than \$10,000 and 38% of them had been homeless (Marcenko et al., 2011). African Americans are four times more likely to live in poverty than other Americans, with a poverty rate of 25.8% (second only to American Indians and Alaska Natives) (Macartney et al., 2013). The rate of poverty among single mothers, at 47% (Legal Momentum, 2010), is higher than the general population at 14.5% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). Given 73% of African American children are born to unmarried mothers (Wildsmith et al., 2011), there is reason to expect that economic disadvantage may be an even more salient precursor to CWS involvement among this population.

A second correlate of CWS involvement and custody loss is mental health problems. Research indicates the incidence of prior and/or current mental health problems/psychiatric disorders among CWS-involved mothers ranges from 40 to 72% (Burns et al., 2010; Famularo et al., 1992; Larrieu et al., 2008; Marcenko et al., 2011; Marsh et al., 2006; National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, 2007; for a review, see Wells and Marcenko, 2011). These may be conservative estimates, given the lack of data on mothers who have informally lost custody. Women with a diagnosis of severe mental illness are at increased risk of losing custody and even having their parental rights permanently terminated (Ackerson, 2003; Jacobsen and Miller, 1998; Nicholson et al., 2001) as maternal mental illness may affect parenting ability and often acts as one of many catalysts to child custody issues (Hollingsworth, 2004; Kohl et al., 2011).

Substance use is also associated with CWS involvement and has been extensively examined in prior research. While 5.5% of all women living with a minor child have a history of alcohol or drug abuse (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2003), this rate jumps to between 50 and 80% among parents involved in the CWS (Curtis and McCullough, 1993; Larrieu et al., 2008; Semidei et al., 2001). In fact, the Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse has declared substance use the “chief culprit” in child welfare spending (1999). Substance-using, CWS-involved parents suffer from more severe, and a greater number of, social problems than similarly situated non-using parents and are perhaps the most in need of comprehensive assistance to address these issues. A study of African American children in CWS care found that families with a substance-using parent were significantly more likely to experience poverty, welfare dependence, single parent status, and housing difficulties, and to experience several of these concomitantly (Walker et al., 1991).

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