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Research article

Child strengths and placement stability among racial/ethnic minority youth in the child welfare system

Faith Summersett-Ringgold*, Neil Jordan, Cassandra Kisiel, Rachel M. Sax, Gary McClelland

Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences, Mental Health Services and Policy Program, 710 N Lake Shore Drive, Chicago, IL 60611, USA

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ABSTRACT

While all children deserve a stable living environment, national data illustrate that many states struggle to achieve placement stability for youth in the child welfare system as a significant number of children in foster care continue to experience multiple placements while in state custody. Prior research has not considered the impact of youth protective factors or strengths on the frequency of placement changes that youth experience while in the child welfare system. This study examined the association between strengths measured at multiple levels (i.e., individual, family, and community) and placement stability among 4022 minority youth (aged 10–18) using administrative and clinical data from the Illinois child welfare system. Negative binomial regressions at the family level revealed that youth with at least one loving and supportive family member experienced 16% fewer placement changes than youth without family strengths. At the community level, youth attending schools that work to create an environment that meets its students' needs experienced 13% fewer placement changes than youth without educational supports. These findings can inform the quality of treatment and services provided to minority youth in the child welfare system.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine the association between strengths and placement stability among Black and Latino youth in the child welfare system. Below we describe these terms, delineate existing literature, and highlight the knowledge gap that this paper addresses.

1.1. Placement stability

More than 25% of children experience a traumatic event before adulthood, with childhood trauma often contributing to childhood psychopathology (Costello, Erkanli, Fairbank, & Angold, 2002; Copeland, Keeler, Angold, & Costello, 2007). Trauma affects development and life functioning across several areas (Cook et al., 2005; Kisiel, Fehrenbach, Small, & Lyons, 2009; Van der Kolk, 2005) leaving youth vulnerable to negative consequences. These negative consequences may lead to involvement with child welfare, mental health, special education, and juvenile justice systems. Involvement in the child welfare system and placement instability can

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: FaithSummersettRinggold2013@u.northwestern.edu, summersettfaith@gmail.com (F. Summersett-Ringgold), neil-jordan@northwestern.edu (N. Jordan), c-kisiel@northwestern.edu (C. Kisiel), rachel.sax@northwestern.edu (R.M. Sax), gmac3255@gmail.com (G. McClelland).

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serve as additional traumas (Greeson et al., 2011; Kiesel, Conradi, Fehrenbach, Torgersen, & Briggs, 2014; Ko et al., 2008). *Placement instability* is defined as frequent (generally three or more) moves within the child welfare and other child-serving systems, including moves to more restrictive placements such as psychiatric hospitals, group homes, residential treatment facilities, or juvenile detention centers, all of which are associated with poorer outcomes (Hartnett, Falconnier, Leathers, & Testa, 1999; James, Landsverk, & Slymen, 2004; Palmer, 1996; Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, & Localio, 2007; Smith, Stormshak, Chamberlain, & Whaley, 2001).

Legislators, policy makers, and practitioners promote placement stability for children in the child welfare system who are removed from the custody of their primary caretaker and placed into out-of-home care. Placement stability is often described as achieving stable and continuous placement that fosters healthy relationships promoting positive development and functioning for youth (University of California Davis Extension, Center for Human Services, 2008). Child welfare and mental health research attests to the importance of placement stability for optimal behavioral, mental, and physical health outcomes (Rubin et al., 2007). Placement stability allows children to establish secure bonds with caregivers, and it reduces the impact of stressors such as separation from their siblings and from their extended family networks (Leathers, 2002).

Placement stability also has positive effects on caregivers. Foster parents have cited stress levels as cause for considering quitting foster parenting (Brown & Calder, 1999). Foster parents may experience fatigue as a result of children being removed from their care (Jones & Morrisette, 1999). The risk of foster parents discontinuing their role in the system may contribute to even more potential placement changes for children in the system. Stable placements therefore have system level effects, maximizing continuity in care and decreasing foster parent stress. In addition, placement stability lowers program costs because the administrative expense of moving youth to different placements is minimized.

While all children deserve a stable living environment, national data illustrate that many states struggle to achieve placement stability for youth in the child welfare system, as a significant number of children in foster care continue to experience multiple placements while in care (Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). In 2013, over 122,000 children in Illinois received an investigation or alternative response compared to the three million cases that were investigated nationally during that year (Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). Furthermore, in 2010, the percentage of children in foster care for less than a year with three or more placement changes was 14.9% (Children's Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). In addition, 25–50% percent of youth experience more than two placements during their time in child welfare, and fewer than 40% of youth are not adopted or reunited with their families (Pardeck, 1984; Usher, Randolph, & Gogan, 1999; Webster, Barth, & Needell, 2000). In Illinois youth in child welfare experience an average of 2.1 placement changes during their first year in care (Zinn, DeCoursey, George, & Courtney, 2006).

1.2. Placement instability and youth outcomes

Children's experiences in the child welfare system have been found to explain some of the difficulties among children involved in foster care. The child welfare system was established to provide services to families who need assistance with the care and supervision of their children. The child welfare system often arranges for children to live with relative or non-relative foster families when they are not being adequately cared for at home to help remediate the effects of traumatic experiences. However, involvement in the system can also have inadvertent negative outcomes. This can be especially pronounced when children experience multiple placement moves or placement instability while in the system (Barth, Weigensberg, Fisher, Fetrow, & Green, 2008; Miller, Fisher, Fetrow, & Jordan, 2006). These multiple moves cause children to constantly adjust to a new home environment while dealing with the attachment disruption or loss from their prior caregiver.

Placement instability has negative effects on youth development, quality of life, functioning, and opportunities for permanency. Multiple placements can exacerbate preexisting behavioral and emotional problems, learning difficulties, and delinquency (Barber, Delfabbro, & Cooper, 2001; Smith et al., 2001). Moreover, the experience of multiple placement changes contributes to distress, low self-confidence, and an absence of belonging, which may lead to youth's distrust and fear of establishing secure attachments with other caregivers or adults. Sadly, the more youth experience placement disruptions the less likely they are to achieve either reunification with their family of origin or adoption (Fisher, Kim, & Pears, 2009).

Children placed in foster care are separated from their primary caregivers, which often results in emotional and behavioral reactions because of disruptions in attachment with their caregivers (Stovall & Dozier, 2000). Feelings of grief, distress, and anger often result after temporary or permanent loss of access to attachment figures (Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens, & Doreleijers, 2007). These strong emotional and behavioral responses can be alleviated if children are able to develop attachment relationships with their alternative caregivers; however, many children in foster care are not able to establish bonds with their foster parents because many of these children's planned stays with foster families end early. Many studies have identified emotional and behavioral problems as significant predictors of placement instability in foster care (Hartnett et al., 1999; Herrenkohl, Herrenkohl, & Egolf, 2003; Leathers, 2006; Lawrence, Carlson, & Egeland, 2006; Oosterman et al., 2007; Ryan & Testa, 2005). In addition, children in the child welfare system are at an increased risk for health problems and academic delays; thus, additional risks such as separations resulting from placement disruptions, should be avoided and other elements such as child protective factors or strengths should be explored as they relate to placement stability (Minty, 1999; Takayama, Wolfe, & Coulter, 1998; Zima et al., 2000).

1.3. Protective factors and resilience

Early intervention and the development of protective factors and resilience can help to prevent these negative outcomes.

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