



Research article

Is higher placement stability in kinship foster care by virtue or design?[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Prior research has repeatedly documented higher placement stability for children who enter kinship care rather than non-relative foster care. However, little is known about why, and under what circumstances, kinship care is more stable. This study uses longitudinal state administrative data to explore possible explanations. Results suggest that, while children in non-relative foster care are indeed at higher risk of any placement move than their peers in kinship care, this appears to be partly driven by child selection factors and policy preferences for kinship care. That is, the gap is not explained primarily by different rates of caregiver-requested moves. However, the gap was sizably smaller among select high-risk subgroups of foster children, suggesting that higher stability in kinship care may be partly explained by differences in the characteristics of children entering kinship care (versus non-relative foster care). Moreover, a large portion of the gap is explained by children in non-relative care being moved into kinship care; a move that is likely the result of policy preferences for kinship care rather than a defect in the initial placement. In sum, these results suggest that kinship care provides only a limited stability advantage, and the reasons for that advantage are not well understood.

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The United States child welfare system cares for nearly half a million foster children each year. The system is tasked with providing children with a safe and stable environment until a permanent arrangement is achieved. The stability of foster care arrangements has been a focal point of foster care practice and policy reforms given evidence that instability is associated with negative impacts on foster children's immediate and long term well-being (Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000; Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008). Since the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act, the federal government, in their Child and Family Service Reviews, has assessed states on the placement stability of children in their foster care systems. In the most recently released findings, no states met the high performance target for stability across all reviewed cases.¹ According to states, an insufficient number of foster care placements, lack of foster parent training, and limited resources to support foster parents present challenges to placement stability (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). However,

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¹ Despite states failing to meet the high federal standards for stability, it remains the case that the majority of foster children do not experience frequent moves (Wulczyn et al., 2003). The majority of children exit care before two years (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2013), and frequent moves only become the typical foster care experience for children who remain in care past that time. Forty percent of children in care for 12 to 24 months, and 66% of those in care for more than 24 months, experienced more than 2 placements (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011).

the review concluded that kinship care was a viable approach for improving stability outcomes. If true, this would appear to be a less expensive approach than allocating funds for improving recruitment, training, and support services.

Notably, stability and permanency are often considered together, but this study focuses only on stability, which refers to the movements of children during their time in foster care, irrespective of where they ultimately end up – returned home, adopted, long term foster care, or some other outcome. On the other hand, permanency is about whether children ultimately achieve a permanent living arrangement, and how long it has taken to achieve that outcome.

This study uses a statewide administrative database to explore differences in placement change experiences by placement type, focusing specifically on non-relative foster care (NRFC) and formal (court-ordered) kinship care (KC). Although there have been many studies on this topic, this study is able to address some limitations of prior work. Specifically, past research has been limited, to varying degrees, by non-representative samples, interval censored data, small lengths of observation, and an atheoretical approach to analysis. This study includes 8 years of data from an entire state, and includes exact dates of placement entries and exits rather than interval censored data. This permits for more generalizable and precise estimates. Secondly, the data used here explore additional questions to address not simply whether kinship care placements are more stable than non-relative foster care (as prior research broadly concludes), but also *why* that seems to be the case. That is, there are at least three reasons children in kinship care would have a lower risk of disruption than children in non-relative foster care. First, it may be an issue of selection bias. That is, the children who enter NRFC are less advantaged on a number of factors relative to children in KC – they are more likely to have a disability or health problem, and exhibit more behavior problems and cognitive deficits when entering care (Beeman, Kim, & Bullerdick, 2000; Font, 2014; Grogan-Kaylor, 2000). Thus, children who enter NRFC may be at higher risk of disruption, irrespective of the placement type. If true, then given similar children, NRFC and KC placements should be at similar risk of disruption. Second, it is often implicitly assumed that higher stability in kinship care is attributable to differences in foster parents. Specifically, it is believed that kinship foster parents may be more attached, or more committed to, a child in their care because of their shared lineage. If this explanation were true, then the gap in stability should be explained primarily by lower rates of foster parent-requested moves among children in KC. And third, it may be the case that children in NRFC move more often because of differences in how KC and NRFC placements are valued. That is, children may be intentionally moved from NRFC to KC because KC is a more preferred placement setting – to the contrary, there would be no reason to move children from KC to NRFC absent a deficit with the KC placement. If this explanation were true, then it should be observed that children in NRFC are more likely to experience moves to more-preferred placements, but equally likely to experience moves to less or equally preferred placements.

To examine these possible explanations, I examine 3 questions: (1) Among high-risk subgroups of children, are NRFC placements more likely to disrupt than KC placements? (2) Is higher stability in KC driven by lower rates of foster-parent requested moves? and (3) When children move from NRFC or KC, what are the respective probabilities of moving to more, equally, or less preferred placements? All of these questions have important implications for how to best use kinship care, and for efforts to expand KC.

Background

Most children do not experience frequent moves while in foster care, although the risk of multiple moves increases the longer a child remains in care (Wulczyn, Kogan, & Harden, 2003). James, Landsverk and Slymen (2004) suggest that foster children who spend at least 18 months in foster care experience an average of 4.4 placements, and whereas the majority of foster children are in a stable placement within 9 months, a third of children do not achieve long term stability.

Several studies have examined the association between placement type and placement stability; particularly examining whether children in formal kinship care (KC) have higher placement stability than children in non-relative foster care (NRFC). Studies differ in their generalizability, rigor in accounting for social selection, and length of observation. These differences in measurement and study methods lead to somewhat different conclusions, though nearly all studies suggest greater stability in kinship care, at least in the short term (Chamberlain et al., 2006; Koh & Testa, 2008; Koh, 2010; Koh, Rolock, Cross, & Eblen-Manning, 2014; Strijker, Knorth, & Knot-Dickscheit, 2008; Usher, Randolph, & Gogan, 1999; Webster, Barth, & Needell, 2000; Winokur, Holtan, & Valentine, 2009).

Other studies add nuance to these conclusions. The difference in the risk of placement disruption between kinship and non-relative foster care is generally highest for the first placement, and smaller for all subsequent placements (Koh, 2010; Koh & Testa, 2008), perhaps because most placement moves occur within 6 months of entering foster care (Wulczyn et al., 2003). However, children who remain in care longer are more likely to experience multiple placements, irrespective of the type of placement in which they were first placed (Usher et al., 1999). It is unclear whether children who stay in care longer are more likely to have multiple placements simply because they remain at risk of placement disruption for a longer period of time, or because the characteristics associated with long stays in foster care are also associated with placement instability. Nevertheless, studies that only consider the first placement change or follow children for a shorter period of time tend to find larger effects of kinship care, with some estimates suggesting that children's risk of any placement change or having a higher number of placement changes is exponentially higher in NRFC as compared with KC (Chamberlain et al., 2006; Koh et al., 2014; Webster et al., 2000).²

² This finding did not hold for treatment foster care (Fisher, Stoolmiller, Mannering, Takahashi, & Chamberlain, 2011).

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