



Child welfare outcomes for youth in care as a result of parental death or parental incarceration



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ABSTRACT

Every day, in the United States, children are removed from their homes and placed into state supervised out-of-home care because of concerns around their safety. These children enter care as a result of child abuse, child neglect, abandonment or some other reasons. Lost in most discussions of out-of-home care is the role that parental incarceration and parental death have on the trajectory of children through the child welfare system. In order to address this gap in the literature, the present study aims to compare youth in foster care as a result of parental death or youth in foster care as a result of parental incarceration with youth in care because of child maltreatment in terms of the length of time to achieve permanency. Holding all other variables constant, entering care as a result of parental death more than doubled the average time to exit (HR = 2.32, SE = 0.22), and these youth were significantly less likely to exit to permanency when compared to children entering care for other maltreatment reasons (OR = 0.35, SE = 0.24). Entering care as a result of parental incarceration led to a 24% longer time to exit (HR = 1.24, SE = 0.09) compared to children entering care for other maltreatment reasons. Findings suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach to policy and practice may not be useful to identifying permanent placements for children entering care as a result of parental death or incarceration.

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Introduction

Foster Care: Policy and Outcomes

Every day, in the United States, 681 children are removed from their homes and placed into state supervised out-of-home care because of concerns around their safety (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). These children enter care because of child abuse, child neglect, abandonment or other reasons, including parental incarceration or the death of a parent (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). The United States child welfare system as codified in the 1997 Adoptions and Safe Families Act (ASFA) (P.L. 105-89) is designed to ensure that child safety is the paramount concern in the provision of temporary care for children until permanent living arrangements can be found. Permanency is exiting out-of-home care into a permanent family setting outside of the foster care system through reunification (reuniting with the child's biological family), adoption (the permanent placement of the child with another family), relative adoption (the permanent placement of the child with their own extended family) or guardianship (the permanent placement of the child with a family who is willing to assume long term responsibility for the child while being

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unwilling or unable to adopt) (ASFA, [Public Law 105-89](#)). However, the reality of the US child welfare system is not always congruent with this conceptualization of permanency.

According to the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis System (AFCARS), a mandated national data repository for out-of-home care episodes in the United States, 15% of exits from foster care are because of emancipation or other exits such as running away, child fatality, or administrative transfer ([Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013](#)). It is incumbent upon the child welfare system to understand clearly what characteristics lead to successful permanency. Since the passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act in 1997, the federal government, state agencies and child welfare researchers have enhanced their capacity to examine the paths of children through the child welfare system in order to understand trajectories and improve child welfare practice and outcomes for children and families impacted by the child welfare system (ASFA, [Public Law 105-89](#)).

Over the past two decades a number of studies using administrative data have provided a sense of the characteristics at the individual or case level that can lead to permanency ([Connell, Katz, Sauders, & Kraemer Tebes, 2006](#); [Courtney, 1994](#); [Goerge, 1990](#); [McMurtry & Lie, 1990](#); [Shaw, 2010](#); [Snowden, Leon, & Sieracki, 2008](#); [Wells & Guo, 1999](#); [Westat & Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2001](#)). Ethnicity was found to be a significant factor affecting permanency in most studies. Black and/or Hispanic children are less likely to reunify and have a lower likelihood of adoption than other children ([Connell et al., 2006](#); [Courtney, 1994](#); [McMurtry & Lie, 1990](#); [Shaw, 2010](#); [Snowden et al., 2008](#); [Wells & Guo, 1999](#); [Westat & Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2001](#)). Age has a complicated relationship to permanency. A number of studies suggest that infants have a lower rate of reunification than other children ([Courtney, 1994](#); [Goerge, 1990](#); [Westat & Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2001](#)), but at the same time infants have a higher likelihood of adoption ([Connell et al., 2006](#)). The predominant placement type and the first placement type have been linked to the movement toward permanency. Children placed in relative foster care exit care to permanency at a significantly slower rate than children in other placements ([Connell et al., 2006](#); [Courtney, 1994](#); [Goerge, 1990](#); [Westat & Chapin Hall Center for Children, 2001](#)). The effect of the type of removal on permanency outcomes is less consistent. A number of studies suggest that children removed for neglect exit foster care to permanency at a slower rate than other children ([Courtney, 1994](#); [Wells & Guo, 1999](#)). However, even if these children exit at a slower rate, the children removed for neglect appear to have higher rates of permanency (specifically reunification) than children removed for abuse ([Goerge, 1990](#)).

Parental Incarceration and Foster Care Utilization

Lost in most of these discussions is the role that parental incarceration and parental death have on the trajectory of children through the child welfare system. According to the United States Government Accounting Office (GAO), in 2009 there were over 14,000 children entering out-of-home care as a result of parental incarceration ([US GAO, 2011](#)). National statistics for children entering care as a result of parental death are not reported. These children are likely entering the child welfare system for reasons other than abuse or neglect and as such do not fit neatly into current child welfare policies and procedures.

Children with incarcerated parents are more likely than other youth to experience various problematic outcomes, including delinquent behavior ([Aaron & Dallaire, 2010](#); [Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012](#)), cognitive challenges ([Poehlmann, 2005a](#)) and insecure attachment ([Poehlmann, 2005b](#)). Boys whose mothers are incarcerated when they are young adolescents may be at increased risk of school drop-out ([Cho, 2010](#)). Children of incarcerated parents also experience family difficulties, such as maltreatment and conflict within the home ([Aaron & Dallaire, 2010](#); [Dannerbeck, 2005](#)). As young adults, these youth are at greater risk of homelessness ([Foster & Hagan, 2007](#)).

Research relevant to the common occurrence of mental health challenges and antisocial behavior for children of incarcerated parents is inconclusive. For every study that indicates an increased likelihood in children's adverse outcomes ([Huebner & Gustafson, 2007](#); [Murray, 2010](#); [Murray & Farrington, 2008](#)) there are other studies whose findings suggest that the risk for antisocial behavior and mental health problems for children of one or more incarcerated parents is minimal ([Bocknek, Sanderson, & Britner, 2009](#); [Eddy & Reid, 2003](#); [Kinner, Alati, Najman, & Williams, 2007](#); [Murray, Janson, & Farrington, 2007](#)). While some research suggests that mental health problems such as post-traumatic stress and internalizing symptoms, are common among youth with an incarcerated parent ([Bocknek et al., 2009](#)), others disagree. [Murray et al. \(2012\)](#) is the only meta-analysis for which 40 studies about the association between parental incarceration and children's adverse outcomes were examined. The most rigorous studies showed that parental incarceration is associated with higher risk for children's antisocial behavior, but not for mental health problems (emphasis added), drug use, or poor educational performance ([Murray et al., 2012](#)). These findings suggest that several factors should be included in the examination of adverse outcomes for children of incarcerated parents: (1) circumstance in which the parent is incarcerated; (2) duration and type of placement should be included in the examinations; (3) previous trauma history; and (4) more longitudinal studies designed to track behavioral outcomes over an extended period of time.

The lack of stability and likelihood of disruption of home and school placements have been identified in the literature on children with incarcerated parents ([Dallaire, 2007](#); [Hairston, 2003](#)). Research has documented low incidences of reunification ([George, Holst, Jung, LaLonde, & Varghese, 2007](#)) and challenges to incarcerated parents in joining the case planning process and completing court requirements within required timelines ([D'Andrade & Valdez, 2012](#); [Halperin & Harris, 2004](#)). Reunification may be particularly difficult when children experience kinship foster care, are children of single parents, have special needs, are African American, or are younger than two years old ([Hayward & DePanfilis, 2007](#)). Despite the evidence

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