Use of parental disability as a removal reason for children in foster care in the U.S.

Sharyn DeZelar*, Elizabeth Lightfoot

University of Minnesota, School of Social Work, 105 Peters Hall, 1404 Gortner Avenue, Saint Paul, MN 55108, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study uses a large administrative dataset, the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), to explore how public child welfare agencies in the United States use parental disability in their data collection efforts through examining the use of parental disability as a removal reason. Using data from the 2012 AFCARS foster care file, this study explores how the parental disability removal reason is used and how this removal reason relates to parent and child demographics. The study found that 19% of foster children had parental disability as a removal reason. Children with disabilities and children of certain races had higher odds of having parental disability as a removal reason, as did both younger and older parents. The study also found great variation amongst states in the use of parental disability as a removal. Recommendations for more appropriate collection of parental disability related data are suggested, as basing child welfare decisions on diagnoses versus behavior contradicts guidance jointly put forth by the Departments of Justice and Health and Human Services.

1. Introduction

While there has been much attention in the last several years to the involvement of parents with disabilities in the public child welfare system (Lightfoot, Hill, & LaLiberte, 2010; National Council on Disability, 2012), we currently have limited knowledge on the prevalence of parents with disabilities involved in child protection in the United States, or even parents with disabilities overall. According to the 2014 American Community Survey data provided by the U.S. Census Bureau, an estimated 31.7% of United States households have at least one child under the age of 18. It is also estimated that 10.5% of the population in the United States between the ages of 18 and 64 has a disability and are living in the community (United States Census Bureau, 2015). The best estimate of the prevalence of parents with disabilities comes from Anderson, Byun, Larson, and Lakin (2005), which they estimated 1.5 million mothers with disabilities in the United States.

We know even less about parents with disabilities involvement in the child welfare system, and there is currently only one national study in the U.S. examining their experiences in the child welfare system (Lightfoot & DeZelar, 2016). In fact, until recently, most of the studies internationally of parents with disabilities in general, or parents with disabilities in child welfare, have relied on very small samples or samples of parents with disabilities without a comparison group, rather than using larger datasets that allow for comparisons of parents with disabilities and their families with others (Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2015). The use of a big administrative dataset, such as the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) foster care file, has the potential to help us gain a better understanding of how parents with disabilities are involved in the child welfare system as it collects information on all foster children in the United States. While the AFCARS dataset does not allow for capturing demographic information of parents with disabilities whose children have been removed from the home, as it currently only reports parental disability as one of the removal reasons for foster children, mining this large dataset does allow for the exploration of how parental disability is being used as a removal reason. This study will make use of the AFCARS dataset for examining how states are using parental disability as a removal reason, and the demographics of foster children who are removed from their home with parental disability provided as a removal reason. This exploration will not only provide the first snapshot of how parental disability is associated with the removal of children into foster care in the U.S. using a large administrative dataset, but will also allow us to explore ethical issues surrounding the use of parental disability as a removal reason in the AFCARS dataset. Additionally, the study results will provide insight to make recommendations for improving administrative data collection related to parental disability that is necessary for transformative change in public child welfare.

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2. Literature review

Our knowledge of the involvement of parents with disabilities in public child welfare in the U.S. relies primarily on court studies. For example, Taylor et al. (1991) reviewed the court records of 206 maltreated children in Boston in 1985/1986 and found that a parent had an intellectual or mental health disability in over half (51%) of the cases. A more recent court study in Boston conducted by Bishop et al. (2000), found that 18% of cases that were brought to the court in Boston involved a parent that had either a psychiatric or intellectual disability.

Court studies have also been employed in Australia and the United Kingdom, where researchers have been more active in studying the intersection of child welfare and parental disability. In a review of 285 court files in two Children's Courts in New South Wales, Australia, Llewellyn, McConnell, and Ferronato (2003) found that 29.5% of cases involved a parent with a disability. Likewise, Booth, Booth, and McConnell's (2005) review of 437 care applications from four courts in England found that in 15.1% of the cases a parent had an intellectual disability, which is roughly 15 times more than the general prevalence of adults with intellectual disabilities in England. Furthermore, Glaun and Brown's (1999) Australian court study of twelve mothers with intellectual disability involved in child welfare is often cited when discussing the characteristics of parents with disabilities in child welfare. While these US, Australian and British court studies provide excellent exploratory information about parents with disabilities' involvement in child welfare, they are all localized studies and cannot be generalized to the broader population (Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2015).

There has recently been a call to make better use of large administrative datasets internationally to better capture the rates of parents with disabilities involved in the child welfare system, the demographics of such families, and their child welfare experiences and outcomes (Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2015). This call mirrors the broader call for the effective use of public sector "big data" to improve the quality and efficiency of public services overall (Manyika et al., 2011), and in child welfare (Cordero, 2004; Kum, Stewart, Rose, & Duncan, 2015; Russell, 2015). The best example of a large dataset that includes parental disability as a demographic factor is in Canada, where the Canadian Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (CIS-2003) captures parental disability for cases opened for child maltreatment. This dataset meets the high-volume characteristic of big datasets, as it included administrative reports on nearly 16,000 children. Exploring this dataset, McConnell, Feldman, Aunos, and Prasad (2011) found that 10.1% of cases opened for child maltreatment investigations had a parent with an intellectual disability, and 27.3% of cases that had an application to the court for supervision or guardianship. This study also found that in open cases of child maltreatment, children were more likely to be male, younger, and aboriginal if the caregiver had an intellectual disability than if the parent did not have an intellectual disability.

While parental disability data is not captured similarly in national administrative data in the United States as it is in Canada, the AFCARS dataset does provide an excellent opportunity to use a larger scale administrative dataset to begin to explore how public child welfare agencies in the United States use parental disability in their data collection efforts. The particular research questions for this paper are:

1) How do states differ in their use of the parental disability removal reason variable in the AFCARS dataset?
2) How does the use of the parental disability removal reason variable relate to parental and child demographic information in the AFCARS dataset?

3. Methods

3.1. AFCARS administrative dataset

This study used the AFCARS data from the year 2012 to determine

the percentages of states usage of the parental disability removal reason, both in combination with other removal reasons and when it is used alone. A related study used this data to explore children's outcomes (Lightfoot & DeZelar, 2016). By federal mandate, all states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico must submit foster care and adoption data semiannually to the Children's Bureau (National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN), 2013a). Data collected includes demographic information for the child, more minimal demographic information on the biological and foster parents, removal reasons, removal type (voluntary, involuntary), dates of removal, days in care, type of placement (relative, non-relative, residential), case plan status, termination of parental rights, service goals, availability for adoption, and funding sources. This consolidation of state information is delineated into the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis Report System (AFCARS) foster care and adoption files, and child and administrative files. While there is limited data on parents collected by AFCARS, AFCARS does touch on parental disability by one of its removal reasons that's abbreviated title is "No Cope." According to the AFCARS foster care code book, the variable title "No Cope" is defined as follows: "Inability to cope: Physical or emotional illness or disabling condition adversely affecting the caretaker's ability to care for the child" (NDACAN, 2013b). For the purposes of this paper, we will call this variable, "parental disability," understanding that it refers to both parents and caretakers, and that this removal reason does not mean that parental disability is a removal reason for parents who were able to cope with their own disability appropriately. Rather, as the definition suggests, this variable refers to the parents' inability to for care for their children, due to the parents' illness or disabling condition. Other removal reasons include: physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, parental drug or alcohol abuse, child drug or alcohol abuse, child disability, child behavior problem, parent death, parent incarceration, abandonment, relinquishment and inadequate housing. The instruction manual for data entries states that all removal reasons that apply to a given case should be entered, therefore each case could theoretically have between one and 15 removal reasons.

3.2. Predictor variables

3.2.1. Parental disability as at least one removal reason

The variable titled "Removal Reason-Caretaker Inability Cope," is binary, and cases are either listed as "yes," indicating that at least one of the removal reasons was due to the caretaker's inability to cope as a result of their "emotional illness or disabling condition" (NDACAN, 2013b, p. 22), or "no" indicating that this was not coded as one of the removal reasons.

3.2.2. Parental disability as sole removal reason

In order to determine cases where parental disability was the only removal reason indicated, a new variable was created that included cases in which "yes" was selected for the "Removal Reason-Caretaker Inability Cope" variable, and 'no' was selected for all of the remaining removal reasons. This new variable classified responses as either yes or no.

3.3. Response variables

3.3.1. Child characteristics

There were four child demographic characteristic variables: gender, race, age, and disability status. Gender was defined as either male or female. Of the sample, 47.9% of the children were female, and 52.1% were male. In the AFCARS system, child race is reported as a series of binary categories, American Indian, Asian, Black, White, Hawaiian, and unable to determine (NDACAN, 2013b). For each race/ethnicity category, there is a yes or no option, so children may have more than one race code noted. In addition, children can be labeled as Hispanic or not, and can have one or more additional race categories chosen. For this