



Running away from child welfare placements: Justice system entry risk



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 16 December 2015

Received in revised form 11 June 2016

Accepted 12 June 2016

Available online 13 June 2016

Keywords:

Child welfare

Absconding placements

Justice system

Racial disproportionality

ABSTRACT

A growing body of research indicates that running away from foster care increases the probability of subsequent involvement in the juvenile and/or adult justice system, especially for males. Using administrative data from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, this study examined the characteristics and behavior of a sample of 371 child welfare youth in Wayne County who ran away from foster care with a propensity scored matched sample of youth who did not run away. Youth were followed in administrative records of the MDHHS and justice system for eight years. The correlates of involvement in the juvenile and/or the adult justice systems included age at first child welfare placement, years in placement, number of placements, total length of time in residential care, running away from placement, as well as gender and legal status. Overall, 42% had at least one juvenile and/or adult conviction. Running away from foster care had the largest effect on subsequent justice system contact.

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1. Introduction

Approximately 1.7 million adolescents run away from home each year, and by age eighteen 19.4% of all adolescents have run away at least once. Most run away for a few days and then return to their homes (Pergamit & Ernst, 2011; Slesnick, Guo, Brakenhoff, & Feng, 2013). For youth in the child welfare system, however, the field lacks sufficient information about the lifetime probability of running away from home or a placement or about the consequences thereof. Lin (2012) reported that nationally 2% of those in out-of-home care ran away at least once in 2009, but the majority of children in his sample were younger than age twelve, below which children seldom run away. National concern about running away has risen because many runaways are likely to become involved in crime, substance abuse, prostitution and homelessness (Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Fasulo, Cross, Mosley, & Leavey, 2002; Lin, 2012; Simmel, 2012; Whitbeck & Simons, 1990).

The majority of foster care youth who run away from home or a placement are twelve years old or older (Finkelstein, Wamsley, Currie, & Miranda, 2004). Because large numbers of adolescents have entered the child welfare system or remained in the system in the past two decades, the risk of being absent without leave from a placement, or “AWOL,” is a matter of growing concern because this age group is more likely to run away from placement and is at risk to be involved in the justice system (Finkelstein et al., 2004). In 2013, youth 12–

17 years constituted 38% of the over 402,378 youth in out-of-home care nationally (United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families and Children's Bureau's's, 2014). Many of these adolescents entered the system for the first time, although some may have had previous child welfare experiences. This paper reports on the characteristics and consequences for adolescent youth who ran away from a child welfare placement and subsequently entered the justice system, as compared with the consequences for a matched sample that never ran away from placement. We also sought to determine the correlates of running away from placement and involvement in the justice system.

2. Literature review

The special characteristics and needs of adolescents in care often go unrecognized until a significant negative event occurs (Simmel, 2012). Rather than being identified as abused or neglected, they are often seen as youth with behavioral problems such as substance abuse, mental illness, truancy from home or school or delinquency (Barth, Wildfire, & Green, 2006). Most older children who enter the child welfare system have experienced repeated trauma and instability, and unfortunately their experiences in out-of-home care may add further instability through repeated placement changes, frequent court hearings, and other adverse experiences. Because of the economic recession during the early 21st century, many families in Michigan experienced considerable disruption and suffering that was associated with increased maltreatment (Jargowsky, 2015). Moreover, social agencies faced resource decline, which affected the quality of services that they could provide.

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There is growing evidence that instability and associated adverse events have negative effects on children's development (Adams & Dubay, 2014; Huang & Ryan, 2014).

In this significant developmental period youth make many choices that may have short- and long-term consequences. Their choices may be carefully explored or they may occur as immediate reactions to particular situations. For example, poor school attendance often results in suspension or dropping out. The schools may lack the resources to help high-risk youth, as do their parents, so the youth often see no legitimate opportunities in their community, and they resort to delinquency or other self-destructive behavior (Steinberg, 2010). Developments in neuroscience show that adolescents lack capacity for mature decision making and self-regulation, and they have heightened sensitivity to external influences (Keating, 2014; Scott & Steinberg, 2008). They also have less ability to make judgements and decisions that require a future orientation, and they are likely to engage in risky behavior (Maslowsky, Keating, Monk, & Schulenberg, 2011). Youth in care may be at a particularly high risk, because these youth lack the needed resources in their family or the community to withstand the pressure to engage in deviant behavior or to respond to peer influences.

2.1. Factors associated with running away: juvenile justice, gender, race and family resources

As children age in the child welfare system, many become involved in the juvenile justice system (Marshall & Haight, 2014). Some of these child welfare youth are identified as “crossover youth” or “dual wards” because of their simultaneous or sequential involvement in both child welfare and juvenile justice systems. Many of these youth receive greater attention from courts and juvenile justice service providers than from agencies serving only child welfare (Siegel & Lord, 2004). Moreover, these adolescents in the justice system in their mid-teens have been shown by researchers to be the ones who most frequently run away from placement, making it important to understand their experiences and cultural orientation (Lee & Berrick, 2014).

Females are more likely to run away than are males although they are more likely to be located sooner than males and returned to placement. Females are also more likely to run away from a placement to their home or the home of relatives or neighbors. They are far less likely to get involved in the justice system when they AWOL than males (Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Kempf-Leonard & Johansson, 2007; Lin, 2012). More recently there have been reports of females in foster care being pressured to run away and being trafficked by adults in the sex industry (Jones, Personal Communication, 2014). Gender differences in running away from placement are important to identify because of the more frequent movement into the justice system by males who AWOL and thus receive greater attention because of their justice system involvement. Long-term outcomes for females are less well-documented.

Youth of color are overrepresented in the runaway population, as well as in the overall child welfare population (Padilla & Summers, 2011). African American youth are particularly at risk for entering the justice system from child welfare (Boyd, 2013; Lin, 2012; Williams, Van Dorn, Bright, Jonson-Reid, & Nebbitt, 2010). They are also likely to have multiple maltreatment reports, and their families are likely to experience increased scrutiny from social services and justice agencies. As of 2009, the disproportionate representation index for African Americans in foster care was 2.36 nationally and 2.8 in Michigan (Padilla & Summers, 2011). Similar rates were observed in Michigan for African American youth in the juvenile justice system: 2.05 for arrests and 2.34 for placement in secure detention (State of Michigan Race Equity Coalition, 2012).

Other factors associated with the increased probability of running away from placement include: age of first removal to out-of-home care, neglect as the removal reason, number of placements, caretaker's inability to cope with the child's behavior, presence or diagnosis of a mental disorder, and homelessness (Kort-Butler, Tyler, & Melander,

2011; Lin, 2012; Simmel, 2012). The increase in structural poverty and reductions in public assistance since the 1990's may be factors in the increase of maltreatment reports. Cheng and Lo (2013) observed that receipt of funds from the Temporary Cash Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program was associated with fewer reports of child maltreatment among African American and Hispanic families but not for White youth. Similar results were observed for families in which children received state financial support (Cancian, Yang, & Slack, 2013). Since 2003, the number of single-mother families receiving public assistance sharply declined in Michigan during the period of this research, thus placing more children at risk for placement, particularly in a state experiencing a severe economic decline (Michigan Department of Human Services, 2012).

Considerable disagreement exists about whether youth tend to AWOL early in their child welfare experience or after they have been in placement for extended periods, or whether placement instability is a key factor. There is support for each of the three patterns (Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Nesmith, 2006; Ryan & Testa, 2004). Lin (2012) observed that youth who run away were five years older at first removal than non-runaways. Probably many factors influence the time at which a youth decides to run away, including peer influences, quality of care, relationships with staff and their home situation. Running away is often a means of coping with rules, censures, and problems in the placement, a response to bad news about the family or neighborhood or the result of peer pressures (Courtney & Zinn, 2009; Finkelstein et al., 2004).

3. Data and methods

Using administrative data we identified two samples of adolescents over the age of 12 in the Wayne County Child Welfare system over a period of eight years, from 2003 through 2011, a total of 8082 cases.¹ From these data we identified a sample of 371 youth who had at least one recorded AWOL from placement in 2003 (baseline year) and for whom complete information was available in the juvenile justice, as well as child welfare records. This placement in 2003 need not have been their first or any other during the period of study. Using propensity score matching, we produced a matched sample of 371 youth who had no recorded incidents of running away from child welfare at any time between 2003 and 2011. The following four variables were used to match the samples: gender, race, age at first placement and first placement type. Characteristics of the two samples are presented in Table 1.

We integrated data from several sources, using child identifiers (IDs). First, to identify youth with justice system involvement, we obtained juvenile justice data from the county juvenile justice agency, Wayne County Child and Family Services (WCCFS). That office has an internet-based information system (JAIS), so it was possible to obtain more detailed demographic and social history of the youth who had juvenile justice involvement. Second, data about involvement with the adult justice system were provided by the Wayne County Jail, the Michigan State Police Department, and the Michigan Department of Corrections. Third, we used data from the 2010 American Community Survey to identify structural risk factors in the zip code areas where the youth resided at the time they entered care.

3.1. Analytic methods

We used cross-tabulation, chi-square and t-tests to explore the differences between the justice-involved and non-justice-involved groups. We used event history analysis to examine the influence of individual variables on justice contact. This analytic technique is similar to logistic regression in that it enables one to calculate the odds of a particular

¹ It was necessary to eliminate 58 cases when a critical item of information was missing, including incomplete placement history, justice system data, etc. These cases were eliminated before the samples were identified.

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