



The relationship between re-incarceration and their own childhood foster care experience of women[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Using matched state administrative records of women in the Illinois state prison system, we investigate whether incarcerated women with foster care experience during their early (aged 10 to 14) and late (aged 15 to 18) teens do better or worse in re-incarceration rates compared to female counterparts who went to prison but had no foster care experience. We find that women with the early-teen foster care experience have higher rates of re-incarceration than women without foster care, regardless of whether they were reunited with their parents. The adverse association between the first foster care placement during early-teens and re-incarceration is particularly stronger among former female inmates with low education or history of drug addiction than others. We conclude that incarcerated women with foster care experiences, especially in their early teens, need more attention and extra support from the appropriate institutions upon their release. In addition, it seems that foster care can work as a strong signal of possible re-incarceration among women with low education and history of drug addiction.

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1. Introduction

Incarceration rates in recent decades affect both men and women; however, there has been less attention given to female offenders. Since female offenders are more likely to be caregivers of children before and after incarceration than male offenders, they also deserve suitable attention from researchers and policy makers (Glaze & Maruschak, 2010; Mumola, 2000). There have been some studies that examined the reentry and recidivism of previously incarcerated women. However, because of data limitations, it has been hard to study how adverse events during the childhood or adolescence of incarcerated women are associated with their reentry and recidivism. Particularly, although the foster care experience should be one of the major indicators of a disadvantaged childhood or adolescence (Perez, O'Neil, & Gesiriech, 2003; Phillips, Burns, Wagner, & Barth, 2004), there has been no attempt to

link the foster care experience of previously incarcerated women and their re-incarceration.

Our interest in this study is to understand the relationship between formerly incarcerated women's first foster care experience during their early (aged 10 to 14) or late (aged 15 to 18) teens and their re-incarceration. Our study aims to add richer understanding to research on previously incarcerated women. We document the characteristics of women in the Illinois state prison system who also spent time in the state's child welfare system as teenagers. Further, we investigate whether previously incarcerated women with foster care experience during their early and late teens have better or worse re-incarceration rates compared to female counterparts who went to prison but had no foster care experience.

Rather than relying on survey data to address these questions, we use state administrative data from Illinois. One goal of this project is to demonstrate the utility of these available data for examining the linkages between state criminal justice and child welfare systems. In this study, individual records from two state agencies were matched. The first source was the admission and exit records from the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC). The second source is out-of-home placements from the Illinois Department Children and Family Services (DCFS). These DCFS foster care records date back to spells in progress as of January 1, 1976. The matched data cover the period from January 1, 1995 (first quarter of 1995) through June 30, 2003 (second quarter of 2003). As we will explain below, we cannot study the complete foster care history of all former female inmates because most women in our sample were born prior to 1976. In other words, some women were

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already children or adolescents in 1976 so that we cannot observe their foster care placements during younger ages. Therefore, we focus on the incidence of foster care during their early and late teens.

Our study finds that women with early-teen foster care experience are generally less educated than their peers without a similar experience. In addition, early-teen foster care experience is associated with higher re-incarceration rates regardless of whether their foster care was resolved by reuniting with their parents. It seems that they have fewer marketable skills and fewer family resources for their reentry than other incarcerated women. Therefore, incarcerated women with foster care experience, especially in their early teens, may need more attention and extra support from authorities at their release. We also find that the adverse association between foster care placement and re-incarceration is stronger among women with less education and women with self-reported drug addictions than other formerly incarcerated women. Additionally, our descriptive analysis suggests that women with their first foster care experience during their early teens went through frequent foster care entries up to age 18, which reflected unstable and disadvantaged family circumstances for them. This partly explains why the early-teen (aged 10 to 14) foster care experience is more adversely associated with women's re-incarceration than the late-teen (aged 15 to 18) foster care experience.

We have organized this paper in the following manner. In the second section, we summarize the foster care in the U.S. and the previous studies related to our research. In the third section, we describe the analysis samples of previously incarcerated women that we construct from the matched administrative data. In this section, we also document the demographic characteristics of incarcerated women with childhood foster care experiences. In section four, we introduce the probit regression model to examine whether foster care experience is associated with higher re-incarceration among women. The regression results are presented and interpreted in this section, too. Discussion and concluding remarks follow in section five.

2. Previous studies

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates that 402,378 children lived in foster care in 2013 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Of the 238,280 children who left foster care in 2013, 23,090 children aged out. Given the large number of children in the foster care system, many previous studies have paid attention to the association between a foster care stay in childhood and adult outcomes.

2.1. Foster care youth

There are many factors predicting incarceration, such as poverty, parental drug use, domestic violence, and parental incarceration. Prior to foster care placements, foster youth experience many of these in their homes (Taussig, 2002). These experiences increase the probability that foster youth will engage in high risk behaviors such as unsafe sex and significant drug abuse later in life (Berzin, 2008; Kortenkamp & Ehrle, 2002). It is even more alarming that minors placed in foster care have a higher risk in delinquent behaviors than those with similar backgrounds (Berzin, 2008; Kortenkamp & Ehrle, 2002). If a foster youth has low levels of education, repeated interruptions of social ties, and substance abuse issues, he or she will have difficulty developing the human capital that is necessary to move into independent life after their time in foster care.

Over one third of foster care youth do not have a high school diploma or GED by the time they are 19 (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). Merely being enrolled in school decreases the probability of criminal activity (Ryan, Hernandez, & Herz, 2007). Based on in-depth interviews with foster youth, Samuels (2008) found that many youths identify the instability and insecurity of the foster care system as a major barrier to building meaningful relationships. Foster youth have lower employment rates and lower earnings than their peers (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). In a

study of over 8000 former foster care youth of Wisconsin, Dworsky (2005) found that most former foster care youth were employed in at least one of the first eight quarters after their discharge from Wisconsin's out-of-home care system. Hardly any of the former foster care youth were employed in all eight quarters and the earnings for each remained below the poverty threshold, even eight years after discharge (Dworsky, 2005).

Using developmental theory, Dozier, Albus, Fisher, and Sepulveda (2002) examined the foster care experience on children and youth at different developmental stages, such as infancy, preschool period, middle childhood, and adolescence. In particular, their study on the middle childhood and adolescence is relevant for our study on the formerly incarcerated women's first foster care spells during their early (aged 10 to 14) and late (aged 15 to 18) teens. They pointed out that children during middle childhood (overlapping with the early teens in our study) are school-aged children whose key task is the development of the capacity for behavioral control. Foster care experience during this time may adversely affect their behavioral development and disrupt their academic performance and relationship with peers at school. Dozier et al. (2002) also stated that adolescents (overlapping with the late teens in our study) in foster care face different challenges. Foster care experience brings instability in their family lives and makes it difficult for those adolescents to successfully negotiate the transition to a period of greater autonomy. Developing a constructive peer relationship is especially challenging for adolescents in foster care, because of frequent changes in caregiving and in physical circumstances.

2.2. Incarceration of foster care youth

Risk factors only tell part of a story. Does increased risk lead to increased incarceration levels of foster children? Foster care youth are more likely to be involved with the criminal justice system, such as conviction and incarceration, than their peers without foster care experience (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). In their study of foster care adults in Midwest, Courtney et al. (2005) shows that within one- to two-year window at the late-teens and early-twenties, 28% of young adults reported being arrested, 12% reported being convicted of a crime, and nearly one-fifth reported being incarcerated. Even prior to aging out of the program, foster youth are 10 percentage points more likely to be detained than non-foster youth (Conger & Ross, 2001). Young adults who had aged out of the system are more likely to report being arrested or incarcerated than their peers (Courtney & Dworsky, 2006). In a more recent study of young people aged 16 to 17 in the California foster care system, Courtney, Charles, Okypch, Napolitano, and Halsted (2014) finds that about 40% of young people with foster care experience had been arrested at least once, about 21% had been convicted of a crime, and about 25% had been confined in a criminal justice institution, such as jail, prison, or other correctional facility, at some point before age 21.

In a study of almost 300 men aging out of a Midwestern foster care, three categories of foster youth were identified: non-offenders, early onset desisters (often one-time offenders), and chronic offenders (Ryan et al., 2007). The two most important predictors of chronic offending were foster care placement instability and school dropouts (Ryan et al., 2007). In the current literature, the lack of school enrollment, foster care placement instability, and substance abuse are three of the most common predictors of offending behaviors (Wiesner & Silbereisen, 2003; Johnson-Reid & Barth, 2000).

2.3. Re-incarceration or recidivism of women

There have been several studies on women's re-incarceration or recidivism in general.¹ Andrews et al. (2012); Holtfreter and Cupp (2007), and Reisig, Holtfreter, and Morash (2006) found that women and men

¹ Re-incarceration means that women are imprisoned in state or local correctional facilities. Recidivism on the other hand indicates that women committed new crimes or violated parole rules, which may not lead to re-imprisonment.

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