



Community perceptions and foster care placement: A multi-level analysis



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ABSTRACT

Signs of physical and social disorder in a community have the potential to influence the perceptions about community, which could, in turn, impact the decision making processes involved in child maltreatment investigations. While extant research has demonstrated a link between community context and child maltreatment rates, there is a dearth of research examining the potential relationship between social conditions in a community and the child welfare system's response to allegations of neglect. This study examined the relationship between child- and community-level characteristics and the decision to place a child in foster care. Two data sets were linked, one containing detailed observations of community conditions (e.g., cigarette and alcohol advertisements) and a second with individual child level information about child welfare investigations. Multilevel models allowed for the simultaneous understanding of child- and community-level characteristics. The results indicated strong associations between individual characteristics and foster care placement. The race or ethnicity of the child was a strong predictor of entry into foster care, and young children were much more likely to be placed in foster care than older children. Furthermore, community factors were also associated with placement into foster care. Specifically, the presence of litter and graffiti and the lack of security signage in a neighborhood appeared to impact the decision making process for foster care.

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1. Introduction

Research has demonstrated links between community conditions and child maltreatment rates. In particular, reports of maltreatment are positively associated with community level factors such as poverty and racial segregation (Fluke, Yuan, Hedderson, & Curtis, 2003; Hill, 2007; Wulczyn, Barth, Yuan, Jones-Harden, & Landsverk, 2005). There is, however, a dearth of research examining the potential relationship between social conditions in a community and the child welfare system's response to allegations of neglect. To address this gap, we examined the relationship between child- and community-level characteristics and the decision to place children in foster care. To this end, we linked two data sets, one containing detailed observations of community conditions (e.g., cigarette and alcohol advertisements) and individual child and case level information about child welfare investigations. Specifically, we related social conditions to the decision to place children in foster care after adjusting for the effect of individual and case level information.

2. Theory

Beginning with Shaw and McKay (1942) and later, Elliott et al. (1996), Sampson (1997) and others, researchers have tested the impact of neighborhood disadvantage and observed community conditions on how individuals and communities function. This has been examined through social disorganization theory which posits that attention should be given to the structural dimensions of the community in which an individual resides; this includes networks, relationships and social institutions that help or hinder interdependence within a community and the perceptions of community problems and cohesion. Networks within communities provide an opportunity to build trust, informal social control, and mutual support (Sampson, 2001). Neighborhood disorder, on the other hand, may hinder positive familial and community functioning, which, in turn may impact how social services are delivered and, our area of interest, child welfare decision making. Disorder can be defined as “visual cues” to indicate urban decay in a neighborhood, e.g., broken windows, abandoned houses, graffiti, and litter (Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004). According to the urban “broken windows” theory (Wilson & Kelling, 1982), disorder is interpreted to mean that residents are indifferent to what goes on in the neighborhood (Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004).

The decision to place a child in foster care is a complicated process, one that is potentially influenced by factors that have little to do with the facts of the case. As suggested by the decision making ecology

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(Baumann, Dagleish, Fluke, & Kern, 2011), the facts of the case may be interpreted or viewed through the prism of other factors such as organizational (e.g., polices, common practices and climate), decision maker (e.g., years of professional experience or other demographic information), and individual child characteristics (e.g., race, age, gender). This study examines observed physical and social conditions in the communities in which the investigations occur as external contextual factors that may impact decision making. Building on the work of Sampson and others (e.g., Sampson, 1997; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004; Shaw & McKay, 1942) who have established a link between neighborhood disorder and community perceptions, and more recent research by Huang and Ryan (2014) that establishes a link between neighborhood characteristics and juvenile delinquency, this study combines social disorganization theory and decision making ecology to examine the impact of community observations of disorder on child welfare decision making. The idea is that signs of physical and social disorder have the potential to influence social welfare professionals' perceptions about community, which could, in turn, impact the decision making processes that follow an investigation of maltreatment.

Faced with making a decision about the safety considerations of a child, child welfare professionals may rely on external factors when making decisions. Rivaux et al. (2008) speculate that the “cracked sidewalks and streets, broken and boarded windows on homes, graffiti, and groups of African American youth standing on corners” (p. 152), observed in the community may influence these decisions. Unfortunately, Rivaux et al. (2008) left the broader role of community conditions untested and focused exclusively on the family context in which child welfare decisions occur.

Using the framework of the decision making ecology (Baumann et al., 2011), this study posits that the relationship between individual child characteristics (race, gender, age) and placement in foster care varies depending on other contextual elements (e.g., observed community conditions). This study tests the hypothesis that community conditions moderate the effect of individual characteristics on decision making in child welfare. The primary research question for this study is: Do community observations impact the decision to place a child in foster care after there has been an allegation of neglect?

3. Background and rationale

Involvement in the child welfare system begins with a report of maltreatment, followed by an assessment by child welfare staff who must determine if the level of harm a child has experienced and risk of future harm warrants intervention. Beyond the formal criteria used to make these decisions, decision making ecology suggests that other factors may influence this decision. These factors may include individual case factors, decision maker factors, and external and organizational factors (Baumann et al., 2011; Shlonsky & Wagner, 2005). The current study focuses on two of these factors: individual case factors and external (community) factors.

This study focuses specifically on the allegation of neglect, omitting an examination of other types of maltreatment. This decision was based on historical associations in the literature between neglect and poverty, including contextual measures of neighborhood poverty that extant research has suggested may influence allegations of neglect (Drake & Pandey, 1996; Mersky, Berger, Reynolds, & Gromoske, 2009; Sedlak et al., 2010; Slack et al., 2011). Neglect differs from other types of maltreatment in important ways: It is often an omission of care, rather than necessarily an active form of maltreatment; it is the most common form of maltreatment and most ambiguously and inconsistently defined; its definition varies based on the developmental phase of the child; it is difficult to disentangle neglect from poverty; and neglect tends to cluster in neighborhoods with high poverty and a higher percentage of single parent homes (Dubowitz, 2007; Janczewski, 2014; McSherry, 2007; Testa & Furstenberg, 2002). For these reasons, the analysis examined only allegations of neglect in understanding the impact of

community observations on the decision to place a child in foster care after an allegation of neglect. However, it should be noted that additional analysis (not included in this manuscript) showed similar results when all allegation types were included in the models.

Research examining the relationship between community context and maltreatment shows that certain community indicators are related to increased rates of maltreatment, poverty, crime (Coulton, Korbin, Su, & Chow, 1995), child care burden (Korbin, Coulton, Chard, Platt-Houston, & Su, 1998), community stability (Fromm, 2004), concentration of alcohol outlets (Freisthler, 2004), vacant housing (Zuravin, 1989), and parent-to-child physical aggression (Molnar, Buka, Brennan, Holton, & Earls, 2003). Furthermore, a large California County study demonstrated that community levels of impoverishment, child care burden, and residential mobility predicted rates of entry into state custody (Lery, 2009). Other research has shown that community density of liquor stores is positively related to foster care removal rates (Freisthler, Gruenewald, Remer, Lery, & Needell, 2007). A study in Illinois found that the level of social organization within a county was correlated with foster care entry, such that decreasing levels of social organization were associated with relatively higher odds of entry to care (Jantz, Rolock, Leathers, Dettlaff, & Gleeson, 2012). Testa and Furstenberg (2002) found that delinquent and neglected children were concentrated geographically and traced their presence to a limited set of Chicago neighborhoods that could be tracked back to the early 1900s. However, the definition of community varied in each of these studies. Some use county-level aggregation to define community, others a more refined level of analysis, such as census tract or block; often the selection of the level of community aggregation is dictated by the availability of data, and this study was no different. Building on prior research that observed physical and social conditions influence community perceptions and additional research on the role of community factors on the decision that child welfare involvement, this study examined how community observations influence the decision to place a child in foster care. We posit that observed evidence of disorder, such as bottles and broken glass on sidewalks and in gutters, graffiti, run down or abandoned buildings, and issues with community security, may impact the decision making process in child welfare.

The motivation for this study is to identify key neighborhood risk and protective factors that may contribute to the decision that a child should enter foster care. Using systematic social observation data about the community in which child maltreatment investigations occur allows an examination of information on the context in which families reside beyond what is available through the child welfare administrative data, the U.S. Census, or other data sources. This study is unique in that it combines community-level observations with child welfare administrative data to simultaneously assess the impact of community perceptions on the decision that a child should enter foster care.

4. Material and methods

4.1. Data

Two data sets were linked for this study, the Chicago Community Adult Health Study 2001–2003 (CCAHS) and administrative data from the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS). Community observation data were linked to the IDCFS data at the Chicago Community Area level.

4.1.1. The Chicago Community Adult Health Study 2001–2003 (CCAHS)

The CCAHS extended the previous work of the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN). The CCAHS collected data on adult health, including physical measurements and biomedical data, respondents' descriptions of the social and economic conditions in their community, and systematic social observations (SSO) of the respondents' neighborhoods (House et al., 2011). In 2003, CCAHS investigators conducted systematic social observations of 1664 Chicago square

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