



Relationship of risk assessment to placement characteristics in a statewide child welfare population



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ABSTRACT

Risk assessments allow child and youth services to identify children who are at risk for maltreatment (e.g., abuse, neglect) and help determine the restrictiveness of placements or need for services among youth entering a child welfare system. Despite the use of instruments by many agencies within the U.S. to determine the appropriate placements for youth, research has shown that placement decisions are often influenced by factors such as gender, age, and severity of social-emotional and behavior problems. This study examined ratings of risk across multiple domains using a structured assessment tool used by caseworkers in the Rhode Island child welfare system. The relationship between ratings of risk and placement restrictiveness was also examined. Risk levels varied across placement settings. Multivariate analyses revealed that lower caseworker ratings of parent risk and higher ratings of youth risk were associated with more restrictive placements for youth. Implications for the child welfare system are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Children and youth involved in the child welfare system have increased exposure to risk across multiple domains. These include parent and family related risks such as parent substance use, domestic violence, neglect, and poverty (Lau et al., 2005; Litrownik et al., 2005; Lynch & Cicchetti, 1998), and child related risks such as depression, substance use, and delinquent behaviors (Grogan-Kaylor, Ruffolo, Ortega, & Clarke, 2008; Guibord, Bell, Romano, & Rouillard, 2011). These types of child and family risks are associated with negative outcomes related to placement instability and permanency (Connell, Katz, Saunders, & Tebes, 2006; Connell et al., 2006; Courtney & Wong, 1996; James, 2004). In addition, they place youth at an elevated likelihood of behavioral and mental health problems (Burns et al., 2004), and increase their need for services and new placements (Raviv, Taussig, Culhane, & Garrido, 2010).

Existing research suggests that youth risk levels are associated with child welfare placement characteristics (e.g., setting or restrictiveness). For instance, youth who are involved in the juvenile justice system display higher levels of community, family, and individual risk factors than

other child welfare youth not involved in this system (Williams, Ayers, Van Dorn, & Arthur, 2004). Further, parental factors (e.g., substance use, mental health status), severe histories of maltreatment, or family violence exposure are often associated with out-of-home placements (Zuravin & DePanfilis, 1997).

Researchers continue to explore the relationship between youth risk and protective factors in placement decisions made by workers in child welfare systems. While placement decisions are ideally informed by service needs (e.g., behavioral/mental health difficulties), studies have found that youth are often placed in restrictive placements based on other factors such as child background characteristics (e.g., age, socioeconomic status) and safety concerns (Barth, Wildfire, & Green, 2010; Breland-Noble, Farmer, Dubs, Potter, & Burns, 2005; Zuravin & DePanfilis, 1997). Data from a national sample of youth in child welfare revealed that a significant proportion of children entering more restrictive and intensive settings (e.g., treatment foster care, group homes, inpatient treatment facilities) did so as an initial placement following removal from their home (James et al., 2006). Specifically, older age, being male, and having an extensive placement or service use history placed youth at greatest risk for entering more restrictive placements (James et al., 2006). These patterns are problematic, as they suggest that placement decisions may be influenced by factors such as demographic characteristics. Since the goal in child welfare systems is shifting to place youth in the least restrictive setting as possible, placement decisions need to be driven by a complete assessment of youth and family needs rather than demographic characteristics and safety concerns.

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Given the significant impact of child demographics, maltreatment, and previous child welfare involvement in determining placements, it is essential to better understand the role of each of these factors in placement decisions for youth in child welfare. In particular, caseworker ratings of these risks, and their relationship to placement type and restrictiveness, are especially critical since they are responsible for making placement decisions. The present study examined caseworker ratings of youth, family, and caregiver risk for youth involved in the Rhode Island child welfare system (including both in-home and out-of-home placements) in order to determine the relationship of these characteristics to placement type and overall placement restrictiveness. We hypothesized that placement setting and placement restrictiveness would be strongly associated with levels of risk across multiple contextual domains.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Youth ages 5 to 21 years who were in an active child welfare episode and had a risk assessment completed by a caseworker during the study sample period (January to August 2011) were eligible for inclusion in the study sample. Active child welfare episodes were based on placement in one of the following child welfare placements at the time of the risk assessment: in-home child welfare, kinship foster care, non-relative foster care, congregate care (i.e., group home), and institutional settings (e.g., psychiatric hospitalization). Youth who were opened to an adoption or guardianship subsidy placement were excluded because youth in these placements did not routinely have a caseworker assigned and were not likely to be referred to services within the state's system of care. These criteria resulted in a final statewide cohort of 1735 youth.

Table 1 provides a summary of youth demographic and case-related characteristics. This sample is 56% male and 51% Caucasian. The largest ethnic minority groups are Hispanic and African American. The mean age of this sample was 12.98 years. More than 40% of youth were in in-home child welfare placements, followed by youth in congregate care and non-kinship foster care. While the majority of youth in this sample had a history of maltreatment, approximately one-third of youth did not. Youth may be in contact with the child welfare system due to family/caregiver factors, such as parental substance use, or individual factors such as behavioral or mental health problems, and therefore would not have a substantiated case of maltreatment (usually defined by neglect, physical, or sexual abuse).

Table 1
Participant demographics (N = 1735).

Characteristic	N	%
Age ($M = 12.98$, $SD = 4.08$)		
Gender		
Male	968	55.79
Female	767	44.21
Race/ethnicity		
African American	236	13.60
Caucasian	878	50.60
Hispanic	324	18.70
Other	198	11.41
Unknown/missing	99	5.70
Child placement		
In-home/child welfare	733	42.25
Kinship foster care	207	11.93
Non-relative foster care	322	18.56
Congregate care	446	25.70
Institution	27	1.56
ROLES score ($M = 3.93$, $SD = 1.83$)		
History of child maltreatment	1090	62.82

2.2. Measures

This study was conducted in collaboration with Rhode Island Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) using administrative data from the child welfare management information system (Rhode Island Children's Information System, or RICHIST). Study variables included demographic and case-related data (e.g., child age, gender, race/ethnicity, history of maltreatment) as well as indicators of risk exposure, and placement restrictiveness (described below).

2.2.1. Risk assessment

Risk was measured using a child and family risk assessment tool, which identified child, parent, and family risk levels across multiple domains. This assessment tool was used to inform the development of more effective service plans to address risks to child safety, permanency, and well-being, with higher scores indicating more risk. This measure consisted of 17 domains across three subscale areas: Parenting (e.g., Parent Mental Health Risk, Parent Substance Use Risk), Youth (e.g., Youth Mental Health Risk, Youth Education Risk), and Family (e.g., Family Violence Risk). Youth are classified as having no risk (0), low risk (1), moderate risk (2), and high risk (3) on each of the domains. Subscale scores were created by summing items within each domain. The Parenting subscale had a possible risk range of 0 to 24; the Youth subscale had a range of 0–18; and the Family subscale ranged from 0 to 9. Risk was assessed by caseworkers within 60 days of case opening and then re-assessed every six months while a child remains in care. For the present study, the risk assessment data was extracted to represent the most recently completed assessment for the child during the study period. The average time from current placement start date to risk assessment was 5.19 months ($S.D. = 12.29$ months), though this rate was skewed as some children had been in their current placement for some time prior to the study window.

2.2.2. Placement restrictiveness

Placement restrictiveness scores were created based on the youth's current living arrangement or placement using an adaptation of the information on the Restrictiveness of Living Environments Scale (ROLES; Hawkins, Almeida, Fabry, & Reitz, 1992). A placement restrictiveness score was calculated for each youth based on their setting, with higher scores given to more restrictive settings. Settings are associated with a particular weight to reflect level of restrictiveness, with "jail" indicated as the most restrictive (weighted score of 10) and "independent living by self" as the least restrictive (weighted score of 0.5). The weighted scores were similar to those used by the ROLES, with the exception of kinship foster care, in which restrictiveness weighting scores were reduced for relative foster care placements (weighted score = 3.75) compared to a non-relative foster care placement (weighted score = 4.0) to reflect that relative foster placements, though still an out-of-home foster care placement, are potentially less restrictive than those with a non-related individual.

2.2.3. Maltreatment history

Maltreatment history was based on Child Protective Services records indicating whether the child had ever been the victim of a substantiated maltreatment incident involving neglect, physical, or sexual abuse. The majority of the youth in this study had a history of maltreatment (see Table 1). This variable was included in the analyses to control for its effects on placement restrictiveness.

2.2.4. Demographic characteristics

Youth age, gender, and race/ethnicity were included as control variables in all study analyses.

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