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RESEARCH BRIEF

UNDERSTANDING FOSTER PARENTING: USING ADMINISTRATIVE DATA TO EXPLORE RETENTION

Foster homes are a critical resource within the child welfare system, with more than 260,000 children in non-relative foster care at the end of FY2001. Child welfare agencies are continually challenged to provide adequate numbers of foster homes. However, research on foster parent retention is surprisingly slender, with little known about the length of time served by foster parents and the characteristics associated with varying lengths of service.

This study was designed to extend current understanding of foster parent retention by producing unbiased estimates of length of service and examining factors associated with licensure, provision of care, and length of service. The study used administrative data, applying data management and analytical methods that have been used to describe the length of stay for children in foster care. Principal research questions include

- How have the characteristics of foster parents changed over time?
- How can variations in activity levels be described, and what foster parent characteristics are associated with varying activity levels?
- What is the typical length of service for foster parents?
- What characteristics are associated with variations in length of foster parent careers?

Child welfare agencies in three states – New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Oregon – contributed data for these analyses. Selection of these states was based on data quality and states' willingness to provide ongoing consultation to the study team. States provided three types of data for non-relative foster care: foster parent licensure data, data on individual foster parent characteristics, and placement records for children. Analyses of foster home utilization and length of service were based on the span of time during which children were placed in the foster home, rather than licensing dates.

The study team conducted three types of analyses: (1) characteristics of foster parents over multiple years; (2) utilization of licensed homes; and (3) longitudinal analysis modeling the length of service in foster parenting. These analyses produced measures of time that are less biased than those based on cross-sectional data. In addition to bivariate analyses, the study team tested multivariate models using Cox proportional hazard regression.

Although the three states examined here are diverse in many ways, several consistent patterns in foster parent dynamics, utilization, and length of service were seen in these analyses. Licensing data showed consistently high rates of foster parent turnover; at least one in five foster homes exited the system each year. Regardless of their characteristics, foster homes had, on average, between one and two children in the home at a time. In general, homes with nonwhite foster parents, those in rural or nonmetropolitan counties, and those with two parents cared for more children at a time and had higher rates of placement turnover. Foster parents caring for infants were typically younger, urban, and in two-parent homes, whereas those caring for adolescents were likely to be older, rural, and more often in single-parent homes. Across the three states, one-fifth of the foster parent population provided between 60 and 72 percent of all days of foster care.

Median length of service in foster parenting ranged from 8 to 14 months across the three states. Multivariate models showed that foster parents with greater lengths of service tended to be older and live in a metropolitan area. These longer term foster parents also had higher occupancy rates and more often cared for infants, adolescents, and children with special needs. Whereas earlier research found longer tenure among black foster parents, this study found no significant associations between length of service and race after controlling for other variables.

Key findings from this study address multiple aspects of foster parent utilization and retention:

- Length of service in foster parenting is shorter than many managers recognize. The median length of service of 8 to 14 months estimated with a longitudinal model for these states is a distinct contrast to the mean time in foster parenting of 5 to 8 years reported in earlier studies based on cross sectional samples. In the three states studied, between 47 and 62 percent of foster parents exited foster parenting within a year of the first placement in their home.
- Foster parent “burn-out” cannot be identified as a factor in length of service. A working hypothesis at the outset of this study was that foster parents exit the system after being exhausted by caring for high numbers of children, as well as the demands of the children in their care. This theory was not supported by the data. Instead, higher foster home occupancy and higher levels of care for infants, adolescents, and children with special needs were consistently associated with greater length of service.
- One-fifth of the foster parent population provides 60 to 80 percent of all foster care. Across the three states, a relatively small group carries much of the work of the foster care system. These foster parents may represent a core group of active and experienced foster parents, with whom child welfare workers feel most confident placing children.

Readers should note two important limitations of these analyses. First, the experiences of three states cannot be generalized to other states. Second, these analyses, while describing length of service and associated foster parent characteristics, provide little insight as to why foster parents stay or leave. However, these analyses extend previous research by providing unbiased estimates of length of service for foster parents, as well as a more detailed picture of the characteristics associated with varying length of service.

A copy of the full report is available at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/>

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