

Achieving Permanence in Foster Care for Young Children: A Comparison of Kinship and Non-Kinship Placements

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ABSTRACT. A number of child welfare policies have reinforced the use of kinship care as the most preferred placement for foster children, reflecting the philosophy that maintaining children within their own extended family system contributes to their stability and well-being. Given the growing utilization and legislative emphasis on kinship care along with the push for an immediate implementation of permanency plans for children in foster care, this study examines how the permanency goal under the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) is being implemented and achieved. The reunification and permanency placement (adoption or legal guardianship) outcomes of children in relative and non-relative care are analyzed, focusing on the experiences of young children. Based on public child welfare agency data from 2000 to 2003, child, case, and placement variables are explored to identify which set of factors best explains case outcomes. The present study identifies the total length of foster placement (kinship and non-kinship), the length of family maintenance services, and the number of placement changes as the most important variables in determining family reunification and permanent placement (legal guardianship and adoption) outcomes for young children. doi:10.1300/J051v16n01_03 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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INTRODUCTION

A primary goal of child welfare services is to safely keep families together or to find permanent homes for children in foster care through adoption or legal guardianship if family reunification is not possible (United States Department of Health & Human Services [US DHHS], 2004). More recently, lawmakers have pushed to increase the requirements on public child welfare agencies to ensure children are safe and well while in the foster care system. In addition, shorter reunification timelines are imposed to expedite legal permanent status for children (Public Laws 96-272 and 105-89; James, Landsverk, & Slymen, 2004). Along with permanency goals, legislative reforms have supported placing children in the least restrictive placement since the 1970s, establishing preference for kinship care over non-relative, institutional, or group care settings. Increased reliance on the extended family system to care for children in foster care has grown nationally (Berrick, Needell, & Barth, 1999) and is most evident in New York and California, two of the states with the largest kinship foster placements (US DHHS, 2000).

Although clear philosophical and practice shifts emphasizing the role of kin as substitute caretakers are occurring, empirical studies and policy evaluations just began to explore this area of public child welfare in the early 1990s (Iglehart, 2004). Overall, child welfare kinship care research is characterized as being in its “infancy,” lacking consistent definition of “kinship” care, comparison groups, representative sample size, standardized measures, and equivalent comparative groups (Terling-Watt, 2001; US DHSS, 2000; Altshuler, 1998; Pecora, LeProhn, & Nasuti, 1999; Starr, Dubowitz, Harrington, & Feigeman, 1999; Brooks & Barth, 1998; Urban Institute, 1998; Scannapieco, 1999; Iglehart, 1995). Research methods vary widely, thereby presenting difficulties for generalizing and comparing results or for supporting the observations of others.

Despite the generally positive characterization of relative caregivers, concerns continue to be raised over empirical findings that point to potential deficiencies in child welfare practices and inadequate support for relative caregivers (Pecora et al., 1999; Brooks & Barth, 1998). Research findings on the permanency outcomes of children in kinship care are limited, mixed and inconclusive, unable to clearly identify what contributes to its success or failure (Cuddeback, 2004; Iglehart, 2004;

Terling-Watt, 2001). These practice concerns and research limitations, along with the legislative emphasis on permanent and kinship placement, clearly illustrate the need to gain further understanding of how relative caregivers impact children in foster care.

The present study analyzed the extent to which placement factors, along with child and case characteristics, influenced the likelihood of young children's return home to their parents as opposed to being permanently placed in out-of-home care. Based on kinship theory, the premise of this study rested on the strong altruistic nature of the caregiving relationship among close family members that serves as a type of protective factor for children and acts as a major facilitator of family reunification. Therefore, it was predicted that while child and case characteristics would influence case outcomes, placement factors—particularly kinship placement—would contribute the most explanatory power for whether children were successfully reunified with their parents.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section first provides an overview of legislative and court actions leading to the growth of kinship care. Next, kinship and altruistic theories are summarized, followed by a description of the needs and experiences of young children entering foster care. The final part of the literature review focuses on permanency as a child welfare goal, the kinship-nonkinship differences, and the relationships among variables that are of interest in this study.

Kinship Foster Care Placement

National statutes have explicitly introduced philosophical changes that emphasize the roles and responsibilities of parents and extended family members. Regulatory changes have impacted local policies, programs, and best practice standards that require family participation in the decision-making process and the care of foster children. If children cannot safely return home, legislative reform mandates foster placement in the “least restrictive and home-like environment” along with the immediate implementation of a permanent plan of adoption or legal guardianship. The emergence of major federal laws in the last century has contributed significantly to the shift toward greater reliance on relative placements with an assumption that maintaining children within their

own extended family system contributes to their well-being (US DHHS, 2000; Geen & Berrick, 2002; Berrick et al., 1999).

The court system strengthened the kinship care movement when the ninth Circuit Court ruling on *Lipscomb vs. Simmons* in 1989 ruled the failure to use kin as foster parents a violation of children's constitutional right to associate with relatives (U.S. DHHS, 2000). Legislation also introduced a hierarchy of child welfare placement interventions, reflecting the philosophy that children were best served at home with their parents or by relatives when substitute care was needed (Gleeson, 1999). These include the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Reform Act of 1980 (Public Law #96-272); the Family Preservation Services and Support Act of 1993 (PL 103-66); the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PL 104-193); and the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (Geen & Berrick, 2002; Smith, Rudolph, & Swords, 2002; Berrick et al., 1999).

Although government data on kinship foster care are incomplete, varying based on how states define "kin," there is evidence of the growing implementation of kinship care as the preferred placement alternative for foster children (Ehrle & Geen, 2002; Geen & Berrick, 2002; Smith et al., 2002; US DHHS, 2000). While the traditional non-relative foster home remains the predominant placement throughout the country, placement with relatives has shown an overall increase over the last two decades. Between 1986 and 1991, the US General Accounting Office (United States General Accounting Office [US GAO], 1995) estimated that relative placements increased by 379%. In comparison, non-relative foster placements increased by 54% during the same period. By 2000, a survey of state agencies estimated that one-third of all foster placements were with relatives (Urban Institute, 2000).

Theoretical Model: Kinship as Interpersonal Relationships and Altruistic Interactions

It is essential to discuss what constitute and sustain kinship relationships in order to understand how the child welfare system's reliance on relative caregivers can promote its goals of family reunification and legal permanency. The traditional anthropological paradigm defines kinship on the basis of physical and biological factors (Barnes, 1980; Schneider, 1964), considering blood ties as the most fundamental and important, followed by ties of marriage (Marshall, 1977). On the other hand, a cultural perspective redefines kinship as "the way in which a people grouped and classified themselves" (Schneider, 1964, p. 34),

emphasizing intensive interpersonal relationships, commitment, and solidarity demonstrated through recurrent acts of sharing and nurturance (Marshall, 1977). Current legislation and social work practice in some states related to kinship care reflect both the biological and cultural models of kinship. In California, primary preference is given to nuclear (i.e., non-custodial parent or adult siblings) or immediate relatives (i.e., grandparents or aunts/uncles), and secondary consideration for extended kinship groups (i.e., child's teachers, medical professionals, clergy, neighbors, and family friends) (California Welfare and Institution Codes, Section 362.7).

Theories of Altruism

Biological (kinship theory), economic (game theory), and sociological perspectives (social interaction theory and gift theory) provide a continuum of explanation for kinship altruism that may motivate foster caregiving by relatives and better facilitate child welfare outcome goals. Kinship theory defines altruism as behavior performed by an individual that incurs cost or risk to oneself for the benefit of another individual within his immediate kin group. Altruistic behavior is expected to occur based on three major assumptions: self-sacrifices are more likely to occur among relatives who are more closely related; the greater the benefit from the aid, the more likely it is to be given; the more costly an altruistic act, the less likely it is to occur (Allison, 1992; Wade, 1979; Eberhard, 1975).

Game theorists hypothesize other factors that can sustain altruistic behavior in the absence of reciprocity between exchange parties: empathic solution, dutiful solution, and payment solution (Mansbridge, 1990). First, the empathic solution parallels kinship theory in which acts of altruism are performed toward close relatives. Based on game theory, kin may act cooperatively and against their own self-interest to the extent that they share a "we-feeling" with the other person. Thus, altruism is expected to occur among kin members due to an innate sense of connection with persons who have inherited common characteristics or common ancestry. Second, dutiful solution can induce kin to continue unreciprocated altruism when further reinforced by religious beliefs and social norms that promote self-sacrifice (Mansbridge, 1990). Obligation or the "reciprocity-responsibility norm" among persons who share social bonds or contact is expected to motivate and sustain a helping relationship (Adams, 1967). Third, payment solution accounts for the financial gain or payoffs associated with reciprocity and altruism (Mansbridge, 1990).

Thus, if the foster care reimbursement or “income” is sufficient to bring financial benefit to the entire family, the caregiving arrangement is expected to continue.

Systematic reviews of empirical studies by Scannapieco (1999) and Cuddeback (2004) illustrate the predictions made by altruism and game theories. Their reviews have consistently identified relative caregivers as being older women (typically grandmothers experiencing poorer health) who assume caregiving duties despite fewer economic and family/social resources compared to traditional non-kin foster caregivers. Immediate relative members continue to parent an increasing number of foster children even when faced with minimal financial support, services and training from the child protection services (CPS) agency (Harden, Clyman, Kriebel, & Lyons, 2004; Ehrle & Geen, 2002; Kelley, Whitley, Sipe, & Yorker, 2000).

Kinship foster care has also been conceptualized as a type of “gift relationship” based on theories that have de-emphasized the economic and social exchange perspectives. Proposing that reciprocity may become irrelevant in light of the altruistic nature of some giving (Belk & Coon, 1993), studies have found that emotions (i.e., love, happiness and delight, anger, pride, gratitude, fear and uneasiness, and embarrassment and guilt) are key aspects of giver and/or recipient experiences, (Ruth, Otnes, & Brunel, 1999). A survey of 395 randomly selected non-kin foster families supports this premise, revealing that rather than self-oriented motivation, wanting to love and help a child toward the betterment of society primarily motivated caregivers to parent children in foster care (Seaberg & Harrigan, 1999).

Testa and Slack’s (2002) study supported a number of predictions according to the game and exchange theories when they examined kinship foster care as a gift relationship dually sustained by acts of altruism and reciprocity. The study analyzed effects of reciprocity, payment, empathy, and duty on the stability and duration of kinship foster care. A review of administrative data and a survey of 983 relative caregivers revealed that the likelihood of family reunification increased and the likelihood of re-placing children decreased given these conditions: when the caregiver perceived the parents to be cooperative with the visitation and service plan; when the caregiver perceived having a good to excellent relationship with the child; and if the parent or an older child negotiated the placement with the caregiver beforehand. Meanwhile, a poor relationship with the child, a reduction in foster payment amount, and providing care for older children were found to contribute to a higher risk of placement disruption (Testa & Slack, 2002).

Studies that focus on role perceptions of foster parents identify significant differences in terms of how related and non-related foster parents view their caregiving responsibilities. Consistent with this study's prediction that relative placement provides a supportive environment likely to result in successful family reunification, interviews with foster parents reveal that relatives have a more positive regard for the parents and children in their care than non-kin foster parents (Pecora et al., 1999). A number of empirical studies show that relatives express stronger feelings than non-relative caregivers over their responsibility and willingness to do the following: (1) facilitate the child's relationship with birth family; (2) assist with children's social/emotional development; (3) help children deal with issues of separation and loss; (4) parent the children; (5) partner with the child welfare agency; (6) discuss the children's behavior and adjustment in the home with parents; and (7) teach children to deal with future relationships with family members (Pecora et al., 1999; Brooks & Barth, 2000; Berrick, 1997; LeProhn, 1994; Gebel, 1996). Moreover, other research findings conclude that children in kinship care are more likely than those placed in non-kin care to preserve and continue their family relationships, culture, and connections based on the caregiver's commitment to maintaining family and sibling contact, children's ability to stay within their own community and attend the same school, and the caregiver's willingness to adopt (US GAO, 1999; Brook & Barth, 1998; Pecora et al., 1999).

Needs of Young Children

This study's focus on the reunification and permanency outcomes of children ages 4 to 11 years old attempts to provide new insights on kinship foster care as review of literature found scant research specifically examining this age group. Understanding the needs of these young children is critical, because they are one of the largest groups in foster care and are more likely to be re-abused than other age groups (Wulczyn et al., 2000).

Experiences of Young Children in Foster Care: Following the 0-3 age group (with a 16.4 incidence rate per 1000 children in the national population), children in middle childhood have the second highest victimization rate. The national incidence rate of maltreatment for children ages 4 to 7 is 13.9 and 1.7 for children ages 8 to 11 years old (US House Committee on Ways and Means, 2004). Over the last decade (1997 to 2003), nearly 2 in every 4 children entering foster care were between 4 to 11 years old, ranging from 47 percent to 50 percent (US DHHS, 2001).

This age group is identified as most vulnerable in re-entering the child welfare system due to repeated abuse incidents (Wulczyn et al., 2000). A majority of children who return into protective custody after one year of exiting foster care are 6 years old or older. In 2003, 32 percent of re-abused children were between ages 6 and 10; another 17% were between the ages of 3 and 5 (US House Committee on Ways and Means, 2004).

Developmental Needs in Middle Childhood: Typically characterized as a period of general emotional calmness, middle childhood is a stage also marked by dramatic biological, psychological, and social changes that contribute to children's sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Eccles, 1999). Erikson's third and fourth stages of the human lifespan describe the critical tasks for middle childhood as developing "initiative" (for children 3 to 6 years old) and "industry" (for children 7 to 11 years old) in order to succeed both socially and academically outside of the home (Bowen, 2005). Thus, children's interactions with their social and physical environments can either support or impede their middle childhood development, which is crucial for progressing toward a generally successful life course (Feinsten & Bynner, 2004). Successful mastery of key developmental tasks at this age period are expected to raise a trusting, autonomous and industrious person, while failure to do so is expected to produce feelings of incompetence, pessimism, and withdrawal from activities that are deemed difficult (Berger, 1988).

Given the biological and psychological advances gained in middle childhood, caregiving demands for young children are very different from other age groups. Erikson highlights the importance of this stage, marked by the gaining of a wider social context outside of their home that strongly influences their development (Eccles, 1999). Parents spend less time supervising young children as they enter elementary school, and children also begin to participate in other formal organizations and programs outside of the family. While parents continue to play a significant role in their children's development, teachers and peers increasingly influence their personal identity, self-concept, and an orientation toward achievement that will play a significant role in shaping their success in school, work, and life (Eccles, 1999). Friends become an important source of companionship, stimulation, physical support, social comparison and intimacy/affection, allowing children to become more socially competent (Hartup & Stevens, 1997). Also, through peer relationships, children begin to master social skills and values of citizenship (Eccles, 1999; Feinstein & Bynner, 2004).

Predictors and Correlates of Permanency Outcomes

Placement Goal as Permanency: Permanency is a major outcome goal required of CPS by the federal government to avoid fiscal sanctions. The U.S. Department of Human and Health Services (US DHHS, 2000) defines permanency as stable living situations for children and the preservation and continuity of their family relationships, culture, and connections. Federal standards identify five performance measures to evaluate how well states comply with child welfare mandates to provide permanency outcomes for children entering foster care: (1) increased permanency for children in foster care; (2) reduction of time in foster care to reunification (no more than 12-months from entry) without increasing re-entry; (3) reduction of time in foster care to adoption; (4) increase in placement stability and reduction in placement (no more than two placements); (5) reduction of placements of young children in group homes or institutions.

Placement Factors: Placement type has been associated with the number of times children move while in foster care, with a number of studies highlighting the results of kinship care that are similar to federally established permanency outcomes. Studies comparing children in kin and non-kin care have found that children in kinship care had fewer placement changes and were more likely to stay in the same foster home if placed with relatives at the initial point of removal from parents (Webster et al., 2000; Beeman, Kim, & Bullerdick, 2000). The Report to the Congress on Kinship Care (US DHHS, 2000) concludes that kinship foster care benefits children by being less disruptive, facilitating more frequent parent-child and sibling contact. According to this report, kinship care is more stable as defined by fewer subsequent removals or “failed” placements, with children being less likely to re-enter foster care after reunifying with parents. However, other studies present contradictory results related to kinship placement. For example, through in-depth case reviews of children permanently placed with relatives (n = 875) during 1993-1996, Terling-Watt (2001) found that children in kinship care had a high rate of placement disruption. This was particularly true in the first six months of placement, when many relatives were unsuccessful in providing permanent homes to foster children.

Child Factors: A systematic review of literature conducted by Scannapieco (1999) and Cuddeback (2004) cite evidence related to the significant differences in the characteristics of children in kinship and non-kinship care, including age, race/ethnicity, and behavioral problems. Foster care research findings persistently point to the differential

rate of entry, length of stay in foster care, and case closure reason for children from various race and ethnic groups (Lu et al., 2004; Wulczyn, 2003). In California, African American children not only have higher rates of maltreatment referrals and substantiated allegations than other race/ethnic groups, but they are also more likely to be placed in foster care (Needell et al., 2003). After one year of entry into child welfare, African American children represent the largest group who remained in foster care (45%), followed by White (31%) and Hispanic (17%) children (Wulczyn et al., 2000). Hispanic children are the largest group to reunify with their parents, while African American children are the largest group awaiting adoption. Along with adoption, African American children are more likely to exit foster care by being placed permanently with relatives (Wulczyn et al., 2000; U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Means and Ways, 2004).

Similarly, Lu et al. (2004) found significant differences among the race/ethnic groups with respect to cases that resulted in court adjudication, length of stay in the foster care, and length of time for family reunification. African American families were consistently observed in each outcome category at higher proportions than all other racial/ethnic groups. Meanwhile, other studies identified strong association between placement type (kin versus non-kin foster care) and children's racial/ethnic background. White non-Hispanic children were more prevalent in non-kinship care, while African American children made up the larger proportion in kinship foster care (Smith & Devore, 2004; Keller et al., 2001; Shore, Sim, Le Prohn, and Keller, 2002; Wulczyn et al., 2000; Beeman et al., 2000; Rittner, 1995).

Overall child welfare trends show that the child's age is inversely related to the rates of maltreatment, foster care placement duration, and adoption (US DHHS, 2002). In other words, infants are most likely to be victims of abuse, to have a shorter stay in foster care, and to be adopted (Wulczyn et al., 2000). While a number of researchers characterize children placed with relatives as being more likely to be older than those in traditional foster homes (Cuddeback, 2004), Webster et al. (2000) found evidence that regardless of age, children in kinship care had fewer placement moves than those in non-kinship care.

Although race/ethnicity is consistently found to be significantly related to placement type and/or case outcome, there is minimal empirical evidence that children's gender is related to foster placement type and permanency status (Lu et al., 2004; Shore et al., 2002; Wulczyn, Hislop, & Goerge, 2000; Keller et al., 2000; Berrick & Barth, 1994). Finally, since analysis of child's primary language is generally absent in kinship foster

care research, it will be introduced in this study to explore how it may impact case outcomes.

Case Factors: Overall, parental neglect remains the most common reason (60.5%) for children entering foster care (Needell, Brookhart, & Lee, 2003), followed by maltreatment such as physical abuse (18.6%), sexual abuse (9.9%), and psychological abuse (6.5%) (US DHHS, 2002). Children who have been neglected or experienced multiple forms of maltreatment are more likely to be re-abused (Wulczyn et al., 2000), while victims of other forms of maltreatment (i.e., physical abuse, sexual abuse) have a higher likelihood of experiencing placement instability or multiple foster home placements (Webster, Barth, & Needell, 2000). Neglect is also the typical cause of CPS involvement for children in kinship foster care; maltreatment for those in non-kin foster care (Beeman et al., 2000; Gleeson, Bonecutter, & Altschuler, 1995; Grogan-Kaylor, 1996). Additionally, Beeman et al. (2000) have found evidence that children of parents who abused substances were placed in kinship care at a higher rate.

Few studies have examined the relationship between the length of in-home services received by parents and permanency outcomes for children. This study explores how the length of family maintenance services (FMS) and case outcomes are related to assess how time-limited service duration (12 months) as restricted by recent legal and funding reforms impacts families after they reunified. A prior study that analyzed receipt of services before the child entered foster placement found that families who received such services and subsequently lost custody of their children had a harder time in achieving reunification, with the children staying over four months longer in foster care than those children who did not (Vogel, 1999). Analyzing administrative data from the Philadelphia public child welfare, Vogel (1999) found that receiving in-home services along with the child's age, gender, type of placement were significant predictors of length of stay in foster care.

METHODS

Research Design

This study examined how permanency planning goals under the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) were being implemented and achieved. Effects of child, placement, and case characteristics were also analyzed to determine how they contributed to child welfare outcomes

related to family reunification and permanent placement. Four primary research questions were addressed: (1) Are children's placements stable and reunification timely according to federally mandated standards? (2) Do young children spend more or less time in kinship care than in non-kinship care? (3) For children ages 4-11 years, is kinship care more likely than traditional foster care to result in family reunification? (4) Which placement, child, and case variables best predict permanency for the children?

Administrative data from a state-mandated case management information system were analyzed involving cases from a county child welfare agency in a medium-size county. This county has a high rate of kinship placement that surpassed the state and national average (California Department of Social Services [CDSS], 2005a). Although examination of a county-level dataset may provide limited generalizability, it remains a critical level of analysis in that it added to the current understanding of kinship care by identifying unique local practices potentially related to permanency outcomes of young children entering foster homes (US DHHS, 2004). The study also highlighted the usefulness of available CPS databases to measure public child welfare agencies' progress toward achieving their legal mandates.

Definition of Variables

The dependent variable, case outcome, included two types of CPS case closure reasons. First, family reunification (coded as 0) was defined as cases in which children were returned to their parents. Second, permanent placement (coded as 1) was defined as cases in which children were either legally adopted or permanently placed under legal guardianship.

In exploring which set of variables best explained whether children returned home or were placed permanently in foster homes, a total of ten independent variables were examined, grouped in three categories: (1) child factors which included gender (male or female), race/ethnicity (White, African American, Hispanic, Other), language (English or non-English), age at start of case; (2) placement factors which included number of placements, length of stay in non-kinship foster placement, and length of stay in kinship foster placement; and (3) case factors which included maltreatment type, number of substantiated abuse allegations, and length of time of family maintenance services (FMS).

Kinship care was defined as the placement of children by a child protection services (CPS) agency in the homes of their relatives characterized by family lineage, marriage, or adoption. Additionally, reflecting

California's expanded definition of "kinship" caregivers to include non-related extended family members, this group of foster placements was also included in the present study as kinship care (i.e., child's teachers, medical professionals, clergy, neighbors, and family friends) (California Welfare and Institution Codes, Section 362.7). Non-kinship care was defined as placement of foster children in state-licensed, non-treatment settings called Foster Family Homes. The sample excluded children identified as needing higher levels of care that required placement in facilities providing specialized and therapeutic services (such as state-licensed facilities called Group Homes, Small Family Homes, and Foster Family Agency).

The "length of stay" by foster placement type was calculated by the number of months the child stayed in kinship foster care versus non-kinship foster care. "Placement count" was the total number of both kinship and non-kinship homes in which the child resided while in foster care. The "length of FMS" was the total number of months that a case remained open for family maintenance services once the children returned to their parents while still under the court and child welfare supervision.

The variable "primary maltreatment type" was the type of abuse suffered by the child and included five categories: (1) neglect only; (2) physical abuse only; (3) other maltreatment only; (4) neglect and other maltreatment; (5) physical abuse and other maltreatment. "Other" included sexual abuse, child exploitation, sibling abuse, and emotional abuse. Maltreatment types were also coded as three separate dichotomous variables (yes or no), indicating the presence of a specified maltreatment type, whether as the sole reason or part of multiple reasons for removal without duplicating the case count. Finally, the "number of substantiated abuse allegations" counted the total number of maltreatment types that the child experienced.

Sample

The sampling frame included 23.7% (N = 1,215) of the total cohort (N = 5,120) of cases that were open between January 2000 through December 2002 and closed by June 2003. Data on young children were examined, targeting those who were four to eleven years of age. The sample included children who have been involved in CPS for more than one (1) month, thus eliminating 1,394 children (27%) from the cohort. Additionally, only cases that had at least one placement in out-of-home care beyond thirty-days were selected, further reducing the sample frame

by 2,169 children. These groups were eliminated to minimize potential effects from two local policy and practices. First, CPS completes a child abuse investigation within 30 days to decide whether to open a case or close the referral without CPS and/or court intervention. Second, the county in this study relies on a network of specialized foster family homes called “30-day emergency shelters” to temporarily place children upon initial removal from their parents. This investigation was limited to court-adjudicated cases beyond the referral investigation stage.

The research also focused on children whose placement history only included residence with county-approved (not licensed) relative homes and/or with traditional non-kin foster parents operating state-licensed Foster Family Homes. Therefore, children who stayed in a therapeutic or treatment placement such as state-licensed facilities called Group Homes (N = 30), Foster Family Agency home (N = 299), or Small Family Homes (N = 11), were excluded from the analysis. Finally, two cases were dropped because of missing placement information. The final sample size was 1,215 children.

The three and one-half year study period (January 2000 to June 2003) was selected in consideration of newly implemented child welfare legislation emphasizing shorter reunification and permanency timelines, as well as other service reforms. For example, the timeframe included cases eligible for the statewide subsidized relative legal guardianship (Senate Bill 1901 in 1998 and Assembly Bill 2876 in 2000). These cases were also subject to a six-month reunification timeframe for families with children three years old or under, with a greater emphasis for adoption. Also, once children returned to their parents, federal funding for family maintenance services was limited to a maximum of twelve months rather than eighteen-months. With the average length of foster care in California being 3-years (U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Way and Means, 2000), the duration of the study period maximized the number of cases included in the sample that had adequate time to fully complete the court dependency process.

Data Analyses

Bivariate and multivariate analyses examined how the independent variables individually and as part of a group or model contributed to influencing the dependent variable, case outcome. Bivariate chi-square analyses tested the association between case outcome and several categorical variables, indicating whether or not the variables were

independent of each other. To identify the exact nature of these relationships, binary logistic regression was selected, because the outcome was a dichotomous/categorical variable (returning to parents or adoption/legal guardianship). To address the first two questions, descriptive data reported mean and median scores as well as percentage distribution from continuous variables that were recoded as categorical data. This allowed for a comparison of the results with the county's overall CPS client data and with federal standard measures, both of which are published in percentages.

Odds ratios measured the individual impact of each dependent variable, while the conservative Cox and Snell pseudo R^2 statistics reported how the grouped variables entered in the logistic model together account for case outcome. In addition, the likelihood-ratio chi-square test determined if the addition of each covariate within a model significantly increased the model's ability to predict whether children returned home or stayed in permanent placement. Finally, goodness of fit was also measured based on the specificity (percentage of non-occurrences of reunification correctly predicted by the model) and sensitivity (percentage of reunification occurrences correctly predicted by the model) levels of the prediction using the cutoff value of .50 (cases with probabilities of $\geq .50$ are predicted as having the event, other cases are predicted as not having the event) (Long, 1997; Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000).

As the first step in the logit analysis, Models 1-3 separately entered child, case, and placement factors, respectively. Next, Model 4 simultaneously included all ten independent variables to identify covariates with significant effects on case outcomes. Based on the result of the final model, the last step verified the main effects of variables: first, a simple bivariate logit analysis tested single predictors (entered as separate model) followed by another multivariate logit analysis that entered individual covariates as separate blocks within a model. These analyses indicated if the various models' predictive values were significantly different from each other.

FINDINGS

Sample Characteristics

The final sample included 1,215 children's cases, of whom 49% were male and 51% were female. In terms of race/ethnicity, 44% were White, 38% Hispanic, 14% African American, and 4% Other. The average age

at time of entry into foster care was 7.5 years old (Md. = 90 months, SD = 24.05), and 8.5 years old upon exit from foster care (Md. = 103 months; SD = 25.23). A majority of the children (93%) spoke English as their primary language. In comparison to the county's overall population, a higher rate of young foster children in this sample were of African American descent (14% compared to 6%) and predominantly English-speaking (93% compared to 67%) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). With an average total of 1.5 substantiated allegations (Md. = 1.0, SD = .63), general neglect was involved in most cases (72%), followed by other maltreatment type that included sexual abuse, severe abuse, substantial risk of abuse and other, totaling 35% of all cases. Physical abuse was less prevalent, present in only 12% of all cases.

A great majority of children in the sample returned home (83%). Once reunified with their parents, families received an average of 14-months of family maintenance services (FMS) (Md. = 14 months, SD = 7.88) prior to case closure. More specifically, half of all the children (52%) received FMS for six months or less while still under child welfare and court supervision; one-third (34%), for seven to twelve months, and the rest (15%), for more than one year (see Table 1).

Research Questions

Are Children's Placements Stable and Reunification Timely According to Federally Mandated Standards?

In terms of placement stability, children in this sample had an average of 1.5 placements (Md. = 1.0, SD = .75). After being removed from their parents, more than half (62%) of all the children lived in one foster home, while one-third (29%) lived in two. Few (8.5%) stayed in three foster homes before returning to their parents or achieving adoption or legal guardianship. Based on the ASFA federal outcome measures, these results indicated that a majority of young children ages 4 to 11 were stable while in foster care by having no more than two placements (91%). The percentage of children with low rates of placement disruption exceeded not only the federal standard (86.7%), but also the overall percentage for California's child welfare population between 2001 and 2004 (84.2%) (US DHHS, 2001; CDSS, 2005a).

Measuring timely reunification, the data showed that children remained in out-of-home care on an average of 7.5 months (Md. = 4.0, SD = 7.56), with a maximum time of thirty-six months (3-years). For family reunification, the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) required a

TABLE 1. Characteristics of Sample

Variable	Total	Percentage
Gender		
Male	587	48.8
Female	617	51.2
Race/Ethnicity		
White	522	43.9
African American	171	14.4
Hispanic/Latino	447	37.6
Other Race	49	4.1
Language		
English	1080	92.8
Other	83	0.7
Age		
Age at Entry (yrs)	M = 7.5	Md. = 7.5
Age at Exit (yrs)	M = 8.6	Md. = 8.6
Maltreatment Type		
Neglect	616	54.1
Physical Abuse	59	5.2
Other Maltreatment	198	17.4
Physical and Other	84	7.4
Neglect and Other	181	15.9
Case involves neglect		
Yes	868	72.1
No	336	27.9
Case involves physical abuse		
Yes	143	11.9
No	1061	88.1
Case involves other abuse		
Yes	415	34.5
No	789	65.5
Length of Case (Months)	M = 14.0	Md. = 14.0
Placement Count	M = 1.5	Md. = 1.0
Months in FC	M = 7.5	Md. = 4.0
Months in Kin	M = 10.0	Md. = 8.0
Months in Non-Kin	M = 2.2	Md. = 1.0

minimum of 76% of all children returning home within twelve months (US DHHS, 2004). In comparison, slightly more than half of the children (56%) in the sample stayed in foster placement for a total of six months or less; nearly one in every five (17%), for seven to twelve months; and one in every four (26%), for more than one year. Those children who did not return home were placed permanently with substitute caregivers through adoption or legal guardianship (17%), with few exiting from the child welfare system for other reasons (3%). Using the federal outcome standard of returning home within 12-months, most children in this sample (73%) experienced a timely reunification. However, this was slightly below the ASFA requirement of 76%.

Do Children, Ages 4-11 Years, Spend More Time in Kinship Care than in Non-Kinship Care?

The overall average length of stay in foster care was seven months. Nearly all the children (93%) placed in non-kinship homes stayed for an average duration of two months (Md. = 1.0 month, SD = 3.43). In contrast, the average length of stay in kinship placement was ten months (Md. = 8.0 months, SD = 7.38): one-third (38%) of children stayed with relatives for up to six months, while another one-third (36%) stayed for more than a year. The bivariate analysis provided two significant findings supporting this pattern. First, case outcome (reunification or permanent placement) was significantly associated with the *total* length of foster placement ($\chi^2 = 297.30$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$) including both kin and non-kinship foster homes. Second, however, when the length of kinship and non-kinship placement was analyzed separately, only kinship placement duration ($\chi^2 = 153.75$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$) was significantly associated with whether children returned home or not (see Table 2).

For Young Children, Is Kinship Care More Likely than Traditional Foster Care to Result in Family Reunification?

Most children who were in foster care (kin and non-kin) for 12-months or less successfully reunified with their parents (94%). A majority of children living with relatives for twelve months or less returned home (89%), while only half (53%) of those who stayed with relatives for more than twelve months successfully reunified with parents. Along with the finding that the children who had longer kinship placements were less likely to be returned home, the bivariate analysis indicated that case outcome and the placement count were related ($\chi^2 = 13.29$, $df = 1$, $p < .001$).

TABLE 2. Bivariate Contingency Table

Variable	Reunified		Permanent Placement		χ^2	df
1. Gender					.086	1
Male	472	48.4%	99	49.5%		
Female	504	51.6%	101	50.5%		
2. Race/Ethnicity					8.23*	3
White	422	43.8%	91	45.7%		
African American	149	15.5%	19	9.5%		
Hispanic/Latino	350	36.3%	85	42.7%		
Other	42	4.4%	4	2.0%		
3. Language					4.74*	1
English	888	92.1%	192	96.5%		
Other	76	7.9%	7	3.5%		
4. Maltreatment Type						
Neglect	470	51.1%	137	71.4%		
Physical Abuse	55	6.0%	1	0.5%	40.11***	4
Other Abuse	171	18.6%	18	9.4%		
Neglect and Other Abuse	145	15.8%	33	17.2%		
Physical and Other Abuse	79	8.6%	3	1.6%		
5. Case involves neglect					23.35***	1
No	295	30.2%	27	13.5%		
Yes	681	69.8%	173	86.5%		
6. Case involves physical abuse					22.04***	1
No	842	86.3%	196	98.0%		
Yes	134	13.7%	4	2.0%		
7. Case involves other abuse					7.17**	1
No	626	64.1%	148	74.0%		
Yes	350	35.9%	52	26.0%		

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

*Which Placement, Child, and Case Variables
Best Predict Permanency for Children, Ages 5-11?*

Placement Factor: The final binary logistic model indicated that length of non-kin placement (OR = 1.25, p = .030), length of kin-placement (OR = 1.26, p < .001), and placement count (OR = .431, p = .048) contributed the most explanatory power for whether children returned

home or not. When controlling for differences in child, case, and placement characteristics, the likelihood of being permanently placed with a substitute caregiver under legal guardianship or adoption increased by 25 to 26% for every month that a child stayed in non-kinship and kinship placement, respectively. To the contrary, the odds of going into permanent placement were reduced by 43% for every placement move the child made while in foster care, producing the largest effect in the model (see Table 3).

Child Factors: None of the child factors provided a significant contribution to the final logistic model. Similarly, chi-square test of independence did not indicate any significant association between gender, age group, and case outcome. While bivariate analysis showed evidence that race/ethnicity ($\chi^2 = 8.23$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$) as well as speaking English ($\chi^2 = 4.74$, $df = 1$, $p < .05$) were significantly associated with case outcome, effects of these variables were not significant in the final logit model.

Case Factors: The final model included a significant effect and a negative coefficient score related to the variable, length of family maintenance services (FMS) (OR = .694, $p < .001$). In other words, for every additional month of FMS, the likelihood of permanent placement decreased by 69%. This result was supported by the bivariate chi-square test of independence indicating a significant relationship between the length of FMS and case outcomes ($\chi^2 = 110.43$, $df = 2$, $p < .001$). On the other hand, neither analysis showed evidence that substantiated abuse allegation were associated with children's case outcome. While maltreatment type ($\chi^2 = 40.11$, $df = 4$, $p < .001$) was shown to be associated with case outcome, it did not have a significant effect in the final logit model. In summary, children who were more likely to successfully reunify with their parents were those who stayed in foster care for a shorter amount of time, received longer supportive (family maintenance) services upon returning home, and those who experienced multiple placement while in foster care.

Final Model: Based on the likelihood-ratio test statistics, the final (or full) model appeared superior to the partial models for overall model fit. The likelihood-ratio chi-square statistic was significant ($\chi^2 = 173.893$, $df = 15$, $p < .001$), predicting 90% of the responses correctly. Compared to the partial models, Model 4 (90.1%) produced a fairly large increase in its overall prediction success rate over Models 1-3 (77 to 82%). In other words, the final model had a higher level of sensitivity and specificity by accurately predicting cases that would end up in family reunification and those that would not.

TABLE 3. Logistic Regression Analysis of the Foster Children’s Permanent Status–Child, Case, Placement and All Factors

Variables	Logit Model 1 Child Factor		Logit Model 2 Case Factors		Logit Model 3 Placement Factors		Logit Model 4 All Factors	
	Odds Ratio	95% CI	Odds Ratio	95% CI	Odds Ratio	95% CI	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Gender¹								
Female	1.059	.778 1.440					1.256	.545 2.893
Ethnicity²								
African Amer.	2.286	.800 6.536					.289	.025 3.276
Hispanic	1.334	.430 4.135					.168	.010 2.750
Other	2.950*	1.026 8.486					.484	.042 5.573
Language³								
Non-English	3.019**	1.341 6.796					.338	.052 2.206
Age (1-year interval)	.999	.993 1.006					.999	.982 1.017
Primary Abuse Type⁴								
Physical Abuse			1.671	.933 2.993			3.437	.784 15.070
Other Abuse			.142	.018 1.154			.003	.000 5.13 ^(E14)
Physical Abuse and Other			.882	.398 1.957			.906	.132 6.195
Neglect and Other			.164**	.047 .576			.313	.028 3.450
Length of FMS (month)			.738***	.695 .783			.694***	.593 .813
Number of Allegation Placement Count			1.410	.976 2.036			1.669	.649 4.291
					.446	.238 .837	.431*	.188 .992

TABLE 3 (continued)

Variables	Logit Model 1 Child Factor		Logit Model 2 Case Factors		Logit Model 3 Placement Factors		Logit Model 4 All Factors	
	Odds Ratio	95% CI	Odds Ratio	95% CI	Odds Ratio	95% CI	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Months in Kin-FC					1.290***	1.216 1.369	1.263***	1.170 1.363
Months in Non-Kin-FC					1.284**	1.092 1.510	1.259*	1.023 1.551
Model X² (df) =	18.501 (6)**		219.409 (6)***		118.547 (3)***		173.893 (15)***	
HL X² (df) =	16.145 (8)*		83.870 (8)***		29.002 (8)***		30.032 (8)***	
Cox & Snell R²(df) =	.106		.179		.308		.436	

*p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001

The reference groups for categorical variables are: ¹Gender: male; ²Ethnicity: White; ³Language = English; ⁴Abuse Type = Neglect

Model 4 also resulted in the highest pseudo R-squared score (R-Square = .436), indicating that it had the strongest predictive value out of all the models tested, explaining 43.6% of the case outcomes. In comparison, Models 1-3, resulted in a much lower R-square scores, accounting for 1.6 to 30.8% of the outcome. Testing separately the unique contribution of each predictor entered into the last model, the resulting Wald chi-square statistics were at acceptable significance level of $p < .05$. The length of kin and non-kin placement, the number of placement count, and the duration of family maintenance services (FMS) each produced significant partial effects when all other variables in the model were held constant. These results were consistent with significant effects produced by other logit models tested as singular predictors in a simple logit model or as separate blocks in a multiple predictor model.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study identifies the total length of foster placement (kinship and non-kinship), the length of family maintenance services, and the number of placement changes as the most important variables in determining family reunification and permanent placement (legal guardianship and adoption) outcomes for young children. Contrary to the negative public perception of public child welfare associated with “foster drift” (the indefinite stay of children in foster care), it appeared that 4-11 year old children in this county who were placed in either kinship or non-kinship foster family homes tended to experience placement stability while in foster care. Moreover, a majority of these children could expect to return to their parents close to timelines set forth in the law. Despite improvement in child welfare outcomes, future research and service delivery need to continue to focus on identifying services that can assist parents in reunifying with their children as quickly as possible; selecting (or matching) and preparing substitute caregivers to enable them to support the needs of young children in partnership with parents and service providers; and identifying time-limited services effective in supporting families when children are returned home.

Placement Stability and Permanence

The data suggest that young children placed with kin and non-kin caregivers are stable in foster care. They generally experience one to two moves while awaiting family reunification, legal guardianship or

adoption, meeting federal outcome standards established by the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA). In terms of family reunification, the average length of stay in foster placement is just slightly over half a year (7.5 months), far less than the 1-year timeline provided by state and federal child welfare laws for this age group. With a great majority of young children in this sample eventually returning home, the rate of reunification within 12-months is just below federal standard (73% vs. 76%) and the county's overall reunification rate for children of all ages. While the percentage difference would likely not be clinically or statistically significant, this suggests that young children may need more attention than other age groups to decrease the time of reunification and meet federal standards.

While administrative data are limited in explaining other key reasons influencing the case outcomes, the county self-assessment conducted in 2004 provides good insight on what delays or prevents the reunification process (CDSS, 2005b). Multiple internal and external agency stakeholders from the county identify the "top barriers" to family reunification as lack of available and accessible client services and high caseloads that limit social worker's ability to provide adequate client support. Other sources of delays cited in the report include administrative-related court continuances and lack of knowledge by many new and inexperienced CPS social workers in writing court reports to effectively influence reunification decisions. If these reported barriers to reunification are addressed, it may be possible to further reduce the time in foster for young children.

Differences in the Length of Kinship versus Non-Kinship Placement

Descriptive data indicate that a high majority of children placed with traditional foster caregivers remained in out-of-home care for an average of six months. However, over half of those placed with relatives stayed in care twice as long, lasting twelve months or longer (62%). The bivariate analyses confirm the association between length of stay in kinship care and case outcome, while the final logit model shows kin and non-kin placement duration produce nearly the same odds for reunification. Contrary to the study's prediction that relative placement will lead to more children returning home, the length of *both* placement types inversely affects children's likelihood of going home. That is, an additional month with relatives reduces the odds of reunification by one percent more than an additional month with a non-relative foster parent.

Since the length of placement in kinship care averages longer than placement in non-kinship, this small difference may be more indicative of the overall effect of placement duration on case outcome rather than a result of placement type.

The present findings cannot and should not be interpreted as evidence that children in kinship foster care are faring worse than those in non-kinship foster care in terms of permanency outcomes. Further analyses need to confirm whether the difference between kin and non-kin placement duration truly exists, what contributes to it, and if the relationship suggests placement stability or foster drift. The next potential research inquiry related to this study's findings is to compare the disruption rate between kin and non-kinship placement prior to achieving reunification/permanency status, further distinguishing the impact of placement type as an initial (first placement) or subsequent home (last placement) for children.

As other studies suggest, the identified difference between kin and non-kin placement duration may be attributed to local policies and practices that are producing differential outcomes. A longer kinship placement may be related to the different needs and resources experienced by family members—children, parents, and relative caregivers—that the child welfare system must begin to recognize and address. Indeed, empirical findings have found that while kinship caregivers need more support, they receive less contact and supervision as well as fewer services from child welfare social workers than non-kin foster parents (Pecora et al., 1999; Brooks & Barth, 1998). In addition, unlike licensed non-kin caregivers, kinship caregivers typically have no prior warning, preparation, training, or experience dealing with the child welfare system. This is further exacerbated by the complexities of navigating multiple systems of care that involve the courts, schools, mental health, and health care systems to name a few. For grandparents who are the typical care providers for foster children, being a second-time parent presents unique challenges that must be addressed so they can adequately provide care for children for an extended period of time.

Another possible explanation for the difference between kin and non-kin placement duration may be linked with the county's use of 30-day emergency "shelter homes" (licensed foster homes) as the initial foster placement. A second, more long-term residence may then follow this for children in kinship care. As described in the county's System Improvement Plan (CDSS, 2005b), the agency's centralized placement unit is responsible for finding licensed foster homes for children who are removed from their parents, ensuring that the selected placement is the

least restrictive and most permanent. After children enter emergency or licensed foster homes, case social workers are mandated to identify relatives who are interested in becoming children's caregivers and willing to go through an assessment process. Based on this practice, licensed foster homes may generally function as short-term homes for children waiting for an approved relative placement.

A shorter non-kinship placement may also suggest court officials and/or CPS agency staff's attitude that favor keeping children with family members. Therefore, if children cannot be placed with relatives, there may be more push to immediately return children to their parents to protect familial bond as well as lessen the trauma to children having to live with strangers. Indeed, the county's self-assessment report cited "pressure from the Department or court as contributing to "early" reunification" of many families while cases were still under investigation or have incomplete case plan activities (CDSS, 2005b). As other studies have found, shorter stay in non-kin home may be attributed to social workers monitoring non-kin homes more faithfully, therefore, paying more attention to placement length and working harder at reunification with these homes.

Other Variables Affecting Case Outcomes

Number of Placements: Continued testing and analyses need to validate and explain the predictive value of multiple foster placements identified in this study, particularly to confirm the current finding that an increase in number of foster placements increases the likelihood of reunification. As legislation and agency policies currently mandate, the successful return of children to their families of origin is the most desirable outcome that must be achieved with minimal disruption in children's care while in foster care. Therefore, social workers are not only required to work with parents to reunify with their children, they concomitantly need to support substitute caregivers for the purpose of stabilizing and strengthening children's temporary placements that tend to last for an extended period of time.

The relationship between number of placement and case outcome may be indicative of underlying dynamics found in other empirical studies showing that children who display more behavioral difficulties tend to have more placement disruption. In turn, they are harder to match with permanent adoptive caregivers. Such circumstances may make family reunification a more viable option for CPS social workers to implement. That is, in pursuit of their legal mandate to establish permanency for

children, CPS staff may be more driven to reunify children with their parents when stable and permanent substitute caregivers are not available. The courts, as described earlier, may also be inclined to return children home to their parents to avoid the potential of foster drift when an adoptive or legal guardian home appears difficult to find. In addition, placement instability may also serve to increase parental motivation to regain custody of their children to prevent additional disruption and trauma. In combination, these could build pressure to reunify families, but in turn result in parenting problems for those who are not prepared to address the special needs and behavior difficulties of these children.

With legislated national standards limiting children's foster placement to a maximum of two homes, CPS needs to examine its practices related to the traditional use of 30-days emergency shelters (or receiving homes) that inevitably results in a placement change or disruption. While the use of readily available shelter homes provide convenience and immediate access to foster homes at all hours, CPS must weigh that with the known benefits of placing children with relatives immediately after they are removed from their parents. This consideration is of particular importance given the body of empirical literature supporting the positive nature of kinship placement and its potential to decrease the risk of behavior problems related to placement changes (James, 2004). As practice shifts are typically rife with resistance, CPS must be ready to deal with the numerous challenges resulting from new imposition of unfamiliar activities and additional duties to an already overburdened workforce. Major barriers that need to be addressed include those associated with the immediate identification, location, and approval of interested relatives without compromising children's safety.

Length of Family Maintenance Services (FMS): The current finding that in-home services (number of months families received FMS) significantly increased the likelihood that families remained intact highlighted the importance of continuing supportive services *after* children returned home. Families appeared to require ongoing court and CPS supervision and assistance to successfully care for children with minimal risk of maltreatment. Through continued participation in the child welfare service system, sustained change could be expected from parents who previously abused or neglected their children. This finding, therefore, served to underscore the challenge faced by child welfare professionals given that recent legislation reforms reduced the length of family reunification and maintenance service timelines.

Since child welfare regulations have shortened the timeline and funding for providing services to children once reunified with their parents,

CPS agencies must develop family-focused and home-based interventions that can be provided effectively in a time-limited manner. Implementing regulations that limit service duration to support reunified families must be carefully weighed with the consequences of premature case closures that could result in further child maltreatment and additional economic costs when children re-enter foster care due to inadequate or limited services. Also, given the federal requirement that mandates expedient family reunification without increasing the rate of re-entry into foster care, CPS needs to emphasize assessment of safety and family readiness as the primary basis for case recommendations. Toward this purpose, the county examined here along with others has recently (2004) implemented a standardized assessment tool that must be completed by social workers prior to returning children home and prior to terminating services after reunification takes place. Therefore, rather than funding eligibility, the focus of social workers' recommendations is the identified family strengths, needs, safety, and risk factors.

LIMITATIONS

This study highlights the usefulness of CPS administrative data in assessing individual county's progress towards achieving federally mandated goals. Analysis of county-level data contributes to a better understanding of kinship care as impacted by unique local practices. However, a number of limitations to this study need to be noted and kept in mind when drawing conclusions from the outcomes.

Although variables in this study are readily available from the CWS/CMS database and provide the most complete administrative data, other important information that could explain case outcomes are excluded (i.e., information on parents and caregivers, type and amount of services received by children and families, child's needs and quality, and frequency of family visits). Having a narrow range of covariates in the regression analyses, therefore, requires caution when interpreting results of this study based on the fact that other factors previously associated with exit from foster care have not been accounted for or examined.

The data's generalizability is also limited to young children in the 4-11 age group whose level of needs and severity of maltreatment may differ from the general child welfare population whether within or outside of this particular county. Another consequence to this study's dependence on CPS data is the use of a narrow definition for permanence as simply

case status reflecting child welfare agency regulations and policies (Gleeson, 1999). It cannot represent the true impact and full scope of foster care experiences and permanency outcomes as felt and lived by children, their families, and substitute caregivers. In other words, achievement of “permanency” as measured in this study does not mean that children have felt that their legal status under the child welfare system resulted in a sense of belonging or being part of a family.

Another major limitation related to the primary use of administrative data is its level of reliability that is highly dependent on the quality and consistency of data entry. The most susceptible variables subject to data entry error include the outcome variable and maltreatment types, because the CWS/CMS database provides multiple and sometimes overlapping choices to record these items. Moreover, data entry practices in county may differ from other jurisdictions, presenting further difficulties in comparing the result with another child welfare system, even among the population who share very similar characteristics found in the sample group.

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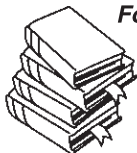
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