

Executive Summary

The Study of Long Term Foster Care in St. Louis County

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This research project was done in collaboration with Ray Critchley from St. Louis County Social Services. The purpose of the research is to better understand components of permanency for children placed by St. Louis County Social Services (SLCSS) into long term foster care. The research uses a cross sectional design to describe placement histories for children in alternative care for at least 720 days. It also describes characteristics such as age, ethnicity, placement location, gender etc. The research project was designed to answer three main questions:

- 1) What are the nature and placement patterns of children in long-term foster care in St. Louis County prior to July 1, 2002? (e.g., average length of time in care, siblings placed together/apart, average number of placement disruptions etc)
- 2) What are the demographics of children in long-term placements? (e.g., gender, age, race, placement type etc).
- 3) What factors are related to stability? (e.g., age, kinship care, siblings etc.)

The population of the study is children in long term foster care. The sample included all children in St. Louis County who were in placement prior to July 1st, 2002 and for at least 720 days of continuous care. This includes 161 children. It is a descriptive research study using secondary data acquired from St. Louis County's computerized social service files. It is a truncated sample meaning it does not reflect the complete case

histories of each individual as some remain in placement beyond the research period ending after July 1, 2002.

The findings indicate that placement patterns of children placed in long term foster care went from the least restrictive setting which is a foster home, to group home setting, residential home to the most restrictive which is a corrections facility. The length of time in out of home placement ranged from two years to almost 18 years with a mean of 7.6 years. This study showed that children spent the majority of their time in a foster home setting. The average length of time for a child in a foster care setting was 7.4 years. Most of the children in the study experienced an average of two spells. A spell is the number of times a child returns home to their parents between other placements. In regards to relative placements, 43 children (27%) spent some time in relative care, with one to five different relatives. The study also shows that 18 children (42%) in relative care were only in one relative placement. The mean number of days spent with a relative was 1505 days. In the entire sample only two Caucasian children (2%) were placed with relatives and 25 (41%) of Native American children were placed with relatives. Forty percent of siblings spent some or all of their time in out of home care with one or more siblings. Twenty- six percent of siblings spent some or all of the time in care away from other siblings in out of home care. The mean number of days (1196) that children were placed apart was about half as many days (2397) as children placed together with siblings.

Demographic characteristics of children in this study included gender, age, ethnic background, and placement setting. There were 92 males (57%) and 69 females (43%) in long term foster care. The mean age at the time of placement was 5.8 years

old. Seventy-five percent of the children entered care either before or during their eighth year. Although Caucasian children make up the largest percentage of long term care placements, there is a significantly higher percentage of Native American children in placement (38%) considering their low percentage (5%) of the population in St. Louis County. Forty-three children (27%) lived with relatives at some time during their stay in out of home care. On average they lived in two different relative care settings. American Indian children spent more time in the care of relatives than did Caucasian youth who were more likely to be placed with non-relative foster homes. All of children in the study spent some or all of their days of care in a foster home. Twenty-five children (16%) resided in a residential setting, nine children (6%) were in a group home, and six children (4%) were in a correctional setting.

When looking at factors related to stability of placement, age was statistically significant. There was an inverse relationship meaning that the younger the child was when entering care, the greater the number of placements he/she experienced. Children who were placed with relatives the majority of time they were in placement also were more likely to achieve placement stability. Gender and race did not have a statistically significant impact on placement stability for the children in our sample.

Several of the practice recommendations include the following: continued attention to placement with siblings to maintain family systems and sibling connections, ongoing funding and program development with focus on preventing removal and facilitating successful reunification, compliance with ICWA standards with an emphasis on more frequent kinship placements (only 41% of Native American children were placed with relatives), recruitment of foster homes able to take intact sibling groups

especially Native American foster homes. The study also identifies several recommendations for further research. It recommended additional research to identify factors related to placement stability and instability, research about why there are so many Native American children in long term foster care, further research concerning family systems, etc.

There are several limitations in using cross section design. It can distort placement patterns, children with the most placements tend to be over represented because there is a positive correlation between the number of placements and the length of time in care. Also, there is a selection bias because the study describes the experiences of groups of children in care at a specific point in time. In cross sectional samples “the probability of being selected to participate in the study... is directly proportional to the length of time the child has been in foster care”.

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