What happens after foster care? A new investigation

The more foster care is used—and its use is increasing rapidly in every state—the more questions are raised about it. The average estimated monthly number of children in AFDC foster care almost doubled between 1982 and 1992, from 262,000 to 442,600.[1] In 1992 federal foster care expenditures amounted to over $2 billion.[2]

Alarm over the belief that a disproportionate number of former foster children suffered from homelessness, unemployment, and psychiatric problems resulted, in 1986, in the establishment of an Independent Living program, providing federal money to states to assist youth who would eventually be emancipated from the foster care system. Although first indications suggest that the Independent Living program improves the life chances of the over 20,000 foster youth who age out of the system every year, and the program has been made a permanent part of Title IV-E, no long-term studies are available.

A recent review of research on the adult functioning of former foster children (see box) revealed that there has been a dearth of research on the outcomes of foster care over the past thirty years, and that what has been done is for the most part of poor quality. On the other hand, the authors concluded that even the "meager corpus" of research to date provides convincing evidence of the high risk of "rotten outcomes" for former recipients of foster care, including "a failure to meet minimum levels of self-sufficiency (homelessness, welfare dependency, etc.) and acceptable behaviors (criminal activity, drug use, etc.)."[3] The studies reviewed did not provide sufficient data, however, to demonstrate a cause/effect relationship between foster care and poor outcomes. The same factors that precipitate children into foster care may also determine outcomes. Nevertheless, the possibility exists that had they not experienced foster care, the former recipients would be even worse off. What is certain is that foster care is not doing enough to provide satisfactory futures for the children passing through the system.

ASSESSING THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF FOSTER CARE: A RESEARCH SYNTHESIS

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Even if they were not methodologically flawed,[4] most studies of foster care would be of little value today owing to changes in the foster care system that have occurred over the last twenty years. Among the changes are (1) the passage of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (Public Law 93–247) in 1974, which increased dramatically the reported prevalence of child abuse and neglect and thereby put enormous demands on all child welfare services, including foster care; (2) the focus on "permanency planning" in the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (Public Law 96–272), which resulted in efforts at prompt and decisive action to maintain children in their own homes or place them in permanent homes with adoptive parents; and (3) the recent development of paid foster care by relatives—kinship care.

Kinship care has resulted in a drastic and rapid change in the types of settings foster children are likely to grow up in. Although little information is available about kinship care providers, a recent survey comparing them with foster care providers who are not related to the children for which they care found that the kin were more likely to be single parents, to work outside the home, to be older, in worse health, and to move more frequently than nonkin providers. Additionally, kin

sought assistance less often from social service providers and continued care longer. On the other hand, they had higher expectations for their foster children's success as adults than did nonrelatives providing foster care.[5] For better or worse, such placements have increased at a rapid rate. Whereas in the early 1980s placements with kin accounted for fewer than 10 percent of foster care placements in such large states as California, Illinois, and New York, by the end of the decade they accounted for about half of all placements.[6]

Improving our knowledge of the post–foster care experiences of young adults who age out of foster care is a necessary first step to improving services for foster children both during and following their stays in care. A project to do just this, "A Longitudinal Study of the Post-Discharge Functioning of Former Foster Children," is now in the planning stages. It is to be carried out by IRP affiliates Mark Courtney and Irving Piliavin. They expect to obtain a sample of approximately 1500 former foster care recipients in several geographic areas and to follow them over a three-year period. The adult experiences to be studied include educational achievements, labor market activities, mental health, criminal activities, marital histories, and living arrangements. Effects of selected attributes and experiences prior to foster care, while in care, and at exit from care will be sorted out.

Data will come from agency records, caseworkers, and series of interviews with sample members. Procedures will be put in place to minimize sample attrition (e.g., financial incentives, informants). Attrition that does occur will be dealt with by analytic techniques.

The results should not only document the adult circumstances of former foster children but also provide insight into the points in their lives when they are likely to fall behind the general population. Are they, owing to their characteristics and experiences (in or prior to foster care), less prepared for the vicissitudes of adult life? Or do they simply suffer from the lack of a stable family to whom they can turn in time of need?

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[1]Toshio Tatara, "U.S. Child Substitute Care Flow Data for FY '92 and Current Trends in the State Child Substitute Care Populations," *VCIS Research Notes* (Voluntary Cooperative Information System), Vol. 9 (1993).

[2]The AFDC foster care program under Title IV-E of the Social Security Act is a permanently authorized entitlement program that provides open-ended matching funds to states for the maintenance payments made for children otherwise eligible for AFDC who receive care in foster care family homes, private nonprofit child care facilities, or public child care institutions housing up to 25 people. States may also claim open-ended federal matching for their child placement services and administrative costs of the program (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Ways and Means, *1993 Green Book: Background Material and Data on Programs within the Jurisdiction of the Committee on Ways and Means* [Washington, D.C.: U.S. GPO, 1993], pp. 891, 892, 894).

[3]Thomas P. McDonald, Reva I. Allen, Alex Westerfelt, and Irving Piliavin, *Assessing the Long-Term Effects of Foster Care: A Research Synthesis*, IRP Special Report no. 57 (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin, 1993), p. 129.

[4]Ibid., pp. 19–36.

[5]*1993 Green Book*, p. 936.

[6]Mark E. Courtney, "Factors Associated with the Reunification of Foster Children with Their Families," *Social Service Review*, in press; Robert M. Goerge, "The Reunification Process in Substitute Care," *Social Service Review*, 64 (1990), 422–457; and Fred H. Wulczyn and Robert M. Goerge, "Foster Care in New York and Illinois: The Challenge of Rapid Change," *Social Service Review*, 66 (1992), 278–294.