

Long-term Foster Care as a Permanency Goal: A Multi-Level Exploration of Child, Population, and Agency Predictors

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Study Objectives

Using data from the Adoption and Foster Care Reporting System (AFCARS) and the American Community Survey (ACS) in 2009, we examine the relationship between long-term foster care placement and child- and county-level factors in a multilevel framework.

Specifically, we asked:

Q1. How different are counties' rates of Long Term Foster Care (LTFC) designations among children in care?

Q2a. Are there child level factors that predict variability in LTFC? **Q2b.** Are there county and agency factors that predict variability of LTFC, after controlling for child-level factors?

Q3. Are some child factors stronger influencers on LTFC designations in some counties than in others?

Q4. Do county-level factors moderate the variability of child-level effects on LTFC among counties?

Background

Goals for children in foster care focus on finding a permanent caregiving arrangement that is safe and supports well-being. Long-term foster care (LTFC) is typically not viewed as a permanent outcome, but many children have LTFC case goals despite ASFA regulations that attempt to limit its use.

Prior research indicates that children who are non-White, older, have developmental disabilities, and come from poor families are more likely to have non-permanent foster care outcomes (Becker, Jordan, & Larsen, 2007; Schmidt-Tieszen & McDonald, 1998). Little has been done to explore community and agency factors related to non-permanent outcomes despite theoretical suggestions to explore all levels of human ecology.

The current study aims to explore factors related to LTFC case goals in a multilevel framework.

Methods

Data & Sample

We used data from the AFCARS 2009 report, the ACS 2009, and the Child Maltreatment 2009 report. The sample included only children who were in family foster care and from a county with more than 1,000 children in care (N=137,703). There were 118 counties with more than 1,000 children in foster care.

Measures

Level 1

- *LTFC*: child has a case goal of long-term foster care (dichotomous)
- *Child in Kinship*: child is placed with relative or kin (dichotomous)
- *Single Mother*: child's family of origin is a single-mother household (dichotomous)
- *Child Age*: child is 13 years or older (dichotomous)
- *Child Disability Status*: child has a diagnosed disability (dichotomous)
- *Child Minority Status*: child is not non-Hispanic White (dichotomous)

Level 2

- *County Poverty Rate*: proportion of residents under 200% of poverty line
- *County White Resident Rate*: proportion of residents who are non-Hispanic White
- *Agency Differential Response Program*: county has a policy of differential response
- *Agency Disproportionality Rate*: proportion of % children in care who are African American versus % of African American county residents .
- *Agency Kinship Rate*: % of children in family foster care, placed in kinship care

Analysis

We built and tested the fit of a series of multilevel logistic regressions in SAS (using Laplace estimation and -2 Log Likelihood tests for fit indices). Our final model was constructed by testing the following models:

- (1) An unconditional random intercept model;
- (2a) Random intercept models with Level 1 predictors and then (2b) Level 2 predictors;
- (3) Random coefficients models, testing the fit of each level 1 predictor;
- (4) Random coefficients models that included interaction terms.

We tested several covariance structures and model fit indices suggested constraining the covariances to zero. We removed single mother status and all non-significant interaction effects for the final analysis. Although child minority status was not found to have a significant effect on LTFC designations, we thought it was theoretically important, and kept it in our final model.

Findings

Q1. We found a large amount of variance at the county-level: Nearly 50% of the variation of LTFC designations was explained by county clustering effects (ICC=.496).

Q2a. In the final model (M4), older children, children with disabilities, and children not in kinship placements were more likely to have LTFC designations (across all agencies). Single mother status and child minority status did not significantly influence the likelihood of LTFC designations.

Q2b. Controlling for child level predictors, children living in counties with more non-Whites, and who were served by agencies with high rates of children in kinship care and high rates of racial disproportionality were more likely to have LTFC designations.

Q3. We found significant differences among counties in how strong the effects of kinship, age, and disability status were on LTFC designations. The effect of child minority status on LTFC designations did not vary across counties.

Q4. County-level predictors moderated the effect of some child-level predictors. Specifically, in counties with differential response policies, the effect of age on LTFC was reduced. In counties with high rates of racial disproportionality, the effect of disability status on LTFC was greater.

Multilevel Results for Models of the Predictors of the Likelihood of LTFC Designations				
Fixed Effects: Estimates (SE)				
	M1: Unconditional	M2: Random Intercept L1 & L2 Predictors	M3: Random Coefficient Model	M4: Interaction Terms Added
Intercept	-3.739 (.1747)***	-4.513 (1.633)**	-4.574 (1.672)**	-4.916 (1.611)**
Child in kinship		-1.687 (.039)***	-1.738 (.136)***	-1.813 (.149)***
Child age (13 or older)		2.140 (.029)***	2.397 (.168)***	2.727 (.197)***
Child disability status		.705 (.031)***	.687 (.068)***	.284 (.116)**
Child minority status		-.016 (.033)	.020 (.033)	.020 (.033)
County poverty rate		.017 (.029)	.010 (.029)	.016 (.014)
County White Resident Rate		-.033 (.015)*	-.041 (.015)**	-.038 (.014)**
Agency differential response program		-.039 (.376)	.417 (.378)	.641 (.369)
Agency disproportionality rate		.252 (.087)**	.255 (.085)**	.224 (.084)**
Agency kinship rate		.022 (.013)	.028 (.013)*	.279 (.013)**
Age * differential response				-.936 (.311)**
Disability * disproportionality				.101 (.025)***
Random Parameters: Estimates (SE)				
Intercept	3.235 (.539)	3.420 (.601)	3.055 (.581)	2.940 (.541)
Child in kinship			1.122 (.250)	1.302 (.326)
Child age (13 or older)			2.515 (.446)	1.878 (.366)
Child disability status			.216 (.066)	.154 (.055)
*** = <.001; ** <.01; * = <.05				
ICC = .496 CICC = .168				

Implications

High variability among counties for child LTFC designations demonstrates both the utility of using national datasets to identify divergent practices across agencies, and the importance of using multi-level models (MLMs) to account for clustering effects. Even after controlling for child and community predictors, factors such as rates of disproportionality in the agency influence the likelihood of LTFC designation.

Additionally, MLMs help uncover the nuances inherent in national datasets. For instance, although differential response was not a significant predictor of LTFC alone, it moderated age's effect on LTFC, suggesting that agencies with differential response may differ in other characteristics about their practices or foster care population from those agencies without differential response options.

Most importantly, analytical methods such as MLMs inform effective policies and practices by uncovering the interactions between agency policies, community context, and the children we serve.