



ASPE

RESEARCH SUMMARY

UNDERSTANDING FOSTER PARENTING: USING ADMINISTRATIVE DATA TO EXPLORE RETENTION

BACKGROUND

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 that are stable, can accommodate sibling groups, and are located in proximity to family members. 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 length of service.

RESEARCH TOPICS

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 previously been used by researchers 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?

METHODOLOGY

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. Data from New Mexico spanned the years 1998 to 2001; Oklahoma provided data for 1996 through 2001, and Oregon's information included foster home data for the years 1983 through 2002 and child placement data for 1990 through 2003.

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 characteristics and experiences, the study team tested multivariate models using Cox proportional hazard regression.

Analysts created two measures to describe the intensity of foster care provision: occupancy rate and new placement rate. The occupancy rate was defined as the number of placement days for all children in the home, divided by the number of days of foster parenting. It is equivalent to the average number of children in the home on a typical day. To describe variations in the extent to which foster parents dealt with different children over time, the new placement rate was calculated as the number of new placements in a home, divided by the number of days in the first episode of foster parenting, and multiplied by 365 to produce an annual rate. A foster parenting episode was a period during which the home housed at least one foster child, ended by a break in foster child placements of 90 days or more.

FINDINGS

Number of Foster Homes. Both Oklahoma and Oregon experienced net growth in foster home resources over the years studied. Oklahoma experienced a 27 percent net growth over 6 years and Oregon more than doubled the number of foster parent licenses over the 20 years reported. However, this growth occurred in the context of substantial turnover. The average number of licenses ending during the year, as a proportion of active licenses, was 26 percent for Oklahoma and 21 percent for Oregon. Trends in licensed homes were not examined in New Mexico due to limited years of data available.

Inactive Foster Homes. Researchers also examined the phenomenon of inactive homes, i.e. those that were licensed but never had a foster child placed in the household. New Mexico had a substantial number of homes which had no placements during the entire period of licensure (24% of 866 homes licensed between 1998 and 2001). Oklahoma, by contrast, had very few inactive homes (4%). The structure of the Oregon data files did not allow for an analysis of this issue.

Foster Home Utilization: Occupancy Rates. The mean occupancy rates were similar across the three states, between 1.5 and 1.6. This rate suggests that the average home has between one and two foster children on a hypothetical day, although such homes may have no children for part of the year and several children at other times. In all states, the mean occupancy rate was substantially higher than the median. This distribution suggests that a relatively small number of foster parents have much higher occupancy rates. In each of the three states, the 10 percent of homes with the highest occupancy rates averaged more than 4 children placed in the home on a typical day.

Table 1. Occupancy Rate Distribution Across States			
	New Mexico (n=662)	Oklahoma (n=2,833)	Oregon (n=11,947)
25 th percentile	1.0	1.0	1.0
Median	1.3	1.2	1.0
75 th percentile	2.0	2.0	2.0
90 th percentile	4.1	4.2	4.2

Foster Home Utilization: New Placement Rates. New placement rates, representing the number of different children placed in the home, varied considerably across states. Because foster homes with very short foster parenting careers which will appear to have very high new placement rates, homes with foster parenting careers shorter than 90 days are excluded from these analyses. Regular foster homes care for many more different children over time than do foster-adopt homes, restricted foster homes, or therapeutic foster homes.

Table 2. New Placement Rates Across States by License Type			
	New Mexico (n=525)	Oklahoma (n=2,425)	Oregon (n=9,623)
Foster-adoptive	7.2	---	6.8
Regular foster care	29.5	9.9	14.0
Restricted foster care	---	2.6	4.3
Therapeutic foster care	10.8	---	---

Note: excludes homes where length of service was less than 90 days.

Distribution of Foster Parenting Workload. Although mean occupancy rates provide a useful measure for comparing groups of foster parents, the provision of foster care is in fact distributed quite unevenly across the population of foster parents. Table 3 shows that among foster parents who had at least one placement, many provided very little foster care. Across the three states, between 13 and 21 percent of homes provided less than 90 days of foster care during their time in foster parenting. At the opposite end of the spectrum, a small proportion of foster parents provided a large part of all foster care. The most active 20 percent of foster parents provided between 60 and 72 percent of all foster care days. Within this group, the most active 5 percent of homes provided more than one-quarter of all days of foster parenting.

Table 3. Distribution of Foster Parenting by State			
	New Mexico (n=662)	Oklahoma (n=2,833)	Oregon (n=11,947)
Percent of homes providing \leq 90 days of care	21%	13%	19%
Percent of all foster care placement days provided by:			
Most active 5% of homes	26%	27%	36%
Most active 20% of homes	60%	61%	72%

Length of Service Among Foster Parents. Across the three states studied, the typical length of service in foster parenting was less than many children's stay in foster care. Median length of service was approximately 8 months in both New Mexico and Oregon, and approximately 14 month in Oklahoma. Table 4 shows that more than one-quarter of Oklahoma foster parents care for children for less than six months, with only one-third remaining in service more than 2 years. New Mexico and Oregon show even shorter lengths of service, with only one-fifth of homes remaining in service more than 2 years.

Table 4. Summary of Foster Parent Length of Service by State			
	New Mexico (n=662)	Oklahoma (n=2,833)	Oregon (n=11,947)
Median length of service (days)	251	410	237
Percent remaining after:			
30 days	86%	95%	89%
180 days	59%	72%	58%
360 days	40%	53%	38%
720 days	20%	32%	19%
1440 days	Not available	14%	8%

Bivariate Relationships Between Length of Service and Characteristics of Foster Parents and the Children They Care For. For all three states, foster parents in urban or metropolitan areas had longer lengths of service than those in rural or nonmetropolitan areas, and two-parent homes had longer lengths of service than single-parent homes. For New Mexico and Oregon, higher occupancy rates were associated with longer lengths of service. Foster parents who provided care for some infants, adolescents, or children with special needs on average had longer lengths of service than those who cared for no such children or those who cared exclusively for such children.

Multivariate Models of Length of Service. For Oklahoma and Oregon, Cox regression models were used to examine the relationship between length of service and foster parents' characteristics and activity levels. Limitations with data from New Mexico prevented similar analyses for that state. The most striking finding in these analyses, is that higher occupancy rates were consistently associated with increased length of service, as was care for children who might be considered more demanding – infants, adolescents, and children with special needs. These analyses also found that in both states, younger foster parents had relatively shorter lengths of service while foster parents in metropolitan areas had relatively longer lengths of service. Other factors were either not statistically significant or were inconsistent across states.

CONCLUSIONS

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 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, suggesting that many children's placements in foster care are longer than the typical foster parent career. Multivariate models showed that foster parents with greater length of service are likely to be older, live in a metropolitan area, and be engaged in more intense foster parenting activity, as indicated by higher occupancy rates and care for infants, adolescents, and children with special needs. Few homes resumed foster parenting after a break in child placements of at least 90 days.

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 the dynamics of foster parent utilization and retention:

- Length of service in foster parenting is shorter than many managers would expect. As with analyses of children's length of stay in foster care, estimates of foster parents' length of service based on longitudinal methods may be surprisingly short. 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. 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 high levels of placements in their homes and the demands of 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 some important limitations of these analyses. First, the experiences of three states cannot be generalized to other states. The analyses identified some consistencies among states, such as the uneven distribution of the foster parenting workload and increased length of service among foster parents who are over age 30, located in a metropolitan area, and caring for more children at a time. However findings varied sharply among states for many key features, such as the median length of service. It is not possible, based on analyses of three states, to speculate about which patterns may be more typical of foster parents in general.

Second, these analyses, while describing length of service and associated foster parent characteristics, provide little insight as to why foster parents stay or leave. Finally, these analyses focus on associations between foster parent characteristics and the number and types of children cared for. However, child placements ultimately rest on child welfare caseworkers' decisions, as well as foster parent preferences. These dynamics are likely to be far more subtle than can be revealed by an examination of administrative data.

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 lengths of service. Further analyses in other states might build on these analyses to incorporate data elements such as foster parent training and foster care board rates.

For individual foster parents, the decision to continue or leave foster parenting is no doubt influenced by experiences with child welfare agencies and foster children and personal circumstances. Though longevity is of course not the only goal for foster parents, preventing the unnecessary loss of qualified foster parents would significantly enhance child welfare systems' ability to ensure the safety permanency, and well-being for children in their care. Better understanding of foster parent length of service and service dynamics is an essential first step toward achieving this goal.

A full copy of the report can be accessed at: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/>

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