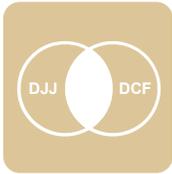


DUALY
SERVED YOUTH

Foster Care, Geographic Neighborhood Change, and the Risk of Delinquency

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Issue

Victims of child maltreatment show a higher risk of juvenile delinquency than their non-maltreated peers (English, Widom & Brandford, 2002; Ryan & Testa, 2005; Smith & Thornberry, 1995; Widom, 1989; Zingraff, Leiter, Myers, & Johnsen, 1993). The increased delinquency risk is especially true for maltreated youth placed in substitute care settings (Doyle, 2007; Ryan & Testa, 2005). Yet to date, no study has examined how the geographic changes associated with foster placement may contribute to juvenile delinquency among foster youth. The current study addresses this critical gap in the literature.

Three mechanisms have been identified in the literature to explain the relationship between neighborhood conditions and juvenile delinquency: institutional resources, social disorganization, and social norms. "Institutional resources" refers to schools, recreation centers, daily routines, learning activities, and places of employment opportunities. Social disorganization theory emphasizes the inability of a community structure to embody the common values of its residents and maintain effective social controls. Accordingly, neighborhoods characterized by high poverty, residential instability, and ethnic heterogeneity have limited social control over the behaviors of the residents, and therefore, experience high crime rates. Social norm theory was proposed in Anderson's (1999) ethnographic study of neighborhoods in Philadelphia. Anderson found that the high rates of male joblessness, poverty, substance abuse, and the lack of institutional resources in poor inner-city black neighborhoods fostered the violence prevalent "code of street," a set of informal rules governing public behavior of youth. So far, no child welfare study has examined the impacts of neighborhood change on delinquency.

To address the knowledge gap on how neighborhood changes resulting from foster placement is associated with delinquency, the current study addresses the following research questions:

- 1) Does placement result in moving into better neighborhoods?
- 2) Does the neighborhood change associated with foster care placement affect the risk of delinquent offending?
- 3) Does gender moderate the relationship between neighborhood change and delinquent offending?
- 4) Does age at first placement moderate the relationship between neighborhood change and delinquent offending?

Findings

Our results showed that, as foster youth are placed out of home, they move into neighborhoods with higher levels of poverty, higher concentration of African American individuals, and greater residential stability. Our findings indicate that, as foster youth are placed out of home, moving into neighborhoods of higher residential stability is associated with a lower risk of juvenile delinquency, as compared to moving into neighborhoods of lower residential stability. Our descriptive analysis showed that the relationship between residential stability and delinquency is more obvious among males than among females, and more obvious among foster youth who entered care before age 12 than the ones who entered later.

Descriptive analysis of neighborhood census variables (n = 145)

NEIGHBORHOOD CENSUS VARIABLES	ORIGINAL NEIGHBORHOOD	PLACEMENT NEIGHBORHOOD	DIFFERENCE
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Below poverty line**	25% (18%)	32% (17%)	7% (26%)
On public assistance***	19% (17%)	27% (15%)	8% (23%)
Female-headed families***	24% (16%)	32% (13%)	9% (22%)
Unemployed***	15% (11%)	20% (9%)	5% (15%)
Less than age 18***	27% (10%)	31% (8%)	4% (13%)
Black***	46% (44%)	77% (35%)	31% (59%)
Hispanic**	17% (22%)	10% (19%)	- 6% (28%)
Foreign-born***	16% (16%)	7% (11%)	- 9% (20%)
Same house as in 1985***	53% (14%)	58% (10%)	5% (17%)
Owner-occupied house*	36% (23%)	36% (19%)	0% (31%)

Findings (continued)

Cox regression modeling time to juvenile arrest ($n = 145$)

MODEL 2	B	SE	Exp (B)
Age at initial placement	- 0.48	0.36	0.62
Male	1.74*	0.21	0.06
Race (reference: African American)			
Hispanic	- 1.82	1.21	0.16
Caucasian	- 14.40	619.62	0.00
Neglect	2.52*	0.24	0.58
Physical	1.17	12.47	- 0.20
Placement count (reference: one)			
Two	0.30	0.84	1.35
Three	0.98	0.72	2.66
Four or more	1.84	0.98	6.29
Neighborhood difference factors			
Concentrated disadvantage	0.03	0.29	1.03
Residential stability	- 0.97***	- 0.30	0.38
Model fit			
- 2 Log likelihood		124.896	
df		11	
p		0.032	

* $p \leq 0.05$. ** $p \leq 0.01$. *** $p \leq 0.001$.

Implications

This study helps to strengthen evidence-based practice in placement decision-making. Traditionally, placement decision-making emphasizes optimal placement type, and placing children in their neighborhoods of origin may minimize academic disruptions, encourage cultural continuity, and encourage parents' visits to their children in placement, all of which increase the likelihood of family reunification (Berrick, 2006). This study offers a new perspective on neighborhood consideration.

This study suggests that caseworkers consider neighborhood characteristics in placement decision-making. In particular, the authors' findings show that, when foster youth are placed out of the home, moving into neighborhoods with higher levels of residential stability is associated with a lower risk of juvenile delinquency. This is especially true for foster youth placed in care prior to age 12 and to males of any age. Such findings suggest that caseworkers should take neighborhood residential stability into consideration as they choose where to place children in their care. They can find information on neighborhood residential stability by reviewing census data, which is public. Suggesting caseworkers consider neighborhood characteristics is tied to the findings of the current study and findings from the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) effort to improve youth outcomes by relocating families out of public housing. Being aware of the effects of neighborhood change is consistent with the social work tradition of "person-in-environment."

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