PERMANENCY

Predictors of Foster Care Exits to Permanency: A Competing Risks Analysis of Reunification, Guardianship, and Adoption

Issue

Although foster care is intended to be temporary, and policy explicitly requires permanency outcomes, many children experience lengthy stays and exit foster care without a permanent family. This study sought to identify which child and placement characteristics were important predictors of exit to three types of permanency outcomes: reunification, guardianship, and adoption. Foster care is intended as an intervention of last resort that removes children from their biological parents when necessary to protect children's safety, health, and well-being. Foster care stays are supposed to be temporary and short-lived, lasting only until children can return to their own families or to an alternative family. Although nearly three decades of child welfare policy have stressed permanency, many children continue to experience lengthy foster care stays and do not exit to a permanent family.

Findings

A sample of 3,351 children who entered foster care in 2006 was observed for 30 to 42 months. Permanency outcomes were analyzed using competing risks survival analysis. Children exited foster care to different types of permanency at different rates and frequencies. Reunification occurred most quickly and frequently. Guardianship was second in terms of median duration but third in frequency. Adoption was the second most common exit but had the longest median duration. One in four children remained in foster care or exited without permanency.

While patterns varied by type of permanency, three major categories of important predictors were identified: 1) demographic characteristics of age at entry and race; 2) clinical needs related to children's disabilities and mental health problems; and 3) continuity and connections represented by kin placements, sibling placements, early stability, and absence of runaway events.

EXIT TYPE	NUMBER OF CHILDREN STUDIED	% OF POPULATION STUDIED	AVERAGE DAYS IN CARE
Reunification	1,747	52.1	366
Guardianship	308	9.2	474
Adoption	467	13.9	737
No permanent exit	829	24.7	No data given
Total	**3,351**	**100.0**	

Implications

This study's results showed that reunification, guardianship, and adoption were appropriately examined as distinct permanency outcomes. Children in foster care exited to different types of permanency at different rates. Reunification occurred most quickly, followed by guardianship, and then adoption. Likewise, each type of permanency had its own set of important predictors with both similarities and differences among them.

Across all three permanency outcomes, three key categories of important permanency predictors emerged: demographic characteristics of age at entry and race; clinical needs of disability and mental health problems; and characteristics related to continuity and connections represented by kinship placements, sibling placements, early stability, and absence of runaway events.

This study's findings both corroborated and expanded the existing literature on permanency, offering several important implications for social work practice. Consistent with the majority of other empirical studies, the findings confirmed the significance of the demographic characteristics of age and race as well as children's clinical needs related to disabilities and serious mental health problems. Greater attention is needed to ensure social work practice is age-differentiated and culturally appropriate, and that children's needs related to disabilities and mental health problems are fully addressed. As children enter foster care they should be screened for immediate or urgent medical and mental health needs.

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