Family Reunification in Washington State: Which Children Go Home and How Long Does it Take?

by Maureen Marcenko, Maureen Newby and Joseph Mienko, Partners for Our Children at the University of Washington, and Mark Courtney, Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago

When child welfare intervention results in out-of-home placement, the primary goal of services is family reunification whenever safely possible. In keeping with its importance as a child welfare outcome, research into the factors that facilitate or impede reunification is extensive. Studies on the rate and time to reunification have examined child, parent, family, and community characteristics, as well placement, organizational, service, and court factors. Across the range of studies examining reunification, it is difficult to identify a core set of variables that consistently predict which children will go home and how long it will take. Reunification rates, and the factors that predict them, can vary widely. Even in the state of Washington, where the child welfare system is state-administered, there is considerable regional variation in the time to reunification.

An alternative way to think about the factors affecting reunification might be from a capital or asset perspective. For instance, a parent's personal assets such as education, employment, and being clean and sober have predicted reunification in some studies, while social assets, including social support and positive paternal involvement, have also been associated with reunification. Resource assets such as housing and income, and child assets, including positive mental health and development, have also been shown to predict reunification. In other words, there may be a number of combinations of assets that predict reunification, and these can differ across studies. Beyond this asset framework, it should be noted that other child welfare and demographic factors such as kinship care, child age, and child race also have been associated with reunification, but not in all studies.

The underlying reasons for what appear to be contradictory findings in the literature might be at least partially accounted for by the following factors:

- Methodological differences such as sampling, data sources, measurement of key variables, and analytic strategies can differ across studies, making comparisons challenging.

- Reunification occurs in a context. The courts, community services, the organization of the child welfare system, and policies in related systems such as welfare and criminal justice can potentially affect reunification and are difficult to account for in the research.

- The child welfare system is changing and evolving. The reunification literature spans two decades and in that time there have been a number of changes in practice and policy such as reunification time limits, the growth in kinship care, greater attention to cultural competence, and an emerging emphasis on engaging fathers and empowering parents.

Thus, research, conducted at regular intervals, is needed to detect changes in patterns of reunification and to contextualize findings within a specific child welfare system, community or state for the purpose of informing policy and practice. Studies that incorporate data from a variety of sources provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the factors associated with reunification and are therefore most useful for planning purposes. For instance, readily available administrative data, when combined with survey data from workers and parents, result in a more complete picture of practice and of families' assets and needs relative to child welfare outcomes than any single data source.

Partners for Our Children (POC), in cooperation with Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS)/Children's Administration (CA), conducted a survey of parents with children receiving in-home or out-of-home services in 2008. The purpose of the larger study was to

evaluate CA's new practice model, Solution Based Casework. A novel aspect of this research is the inclusion of a parent engagement measure, which is a central goal of the practice model. The research question is: What child, parent, and placement related factors predict family reunification?

Description of the Study

This study is based on in-person interviews with parents whose children were placed out-of-home, linked with their administrative data from CA.

Interviews with Parents

In-person interviews were conducted with a statewide sample of 809 parents, 18 years and older, with a child welfare case opened for in-home or out-of-home services for at least one child in the past 30 to 120 [1] days (response rate=82%). For this analysis only those parents of children with an out-of-home stay were selected (n=464). A structured questionnaire was used to collect demographic data, along with standardized measures of domestic violence, mental health, substance abuse, trauma, parenting stress, and parental engagement. Additionally, the survey asked parents about their financial circumstances and services received and needed.

Administrative Data

Survey data were linked to Washington State administrative data, which provided reason(s) for removal of child, placement and exit dates, outcomes, and so forth. After matching survey and administrative data, there were 408 parents, with 696 children, in the sample. Children were followed from October 29, 2007 to August 31, 2010 (2 years, 10 months). At the end of the observation period, 47% of the children had been reunified with their parents, 19% had other resolutions, and 34% remained in out-of-home care (see Table 1). Children who reunify return home within 231 days, on average, compared to an average of 665 days for all other exits (i.e., adoption, guardianship, turning 18).

Measures

The study's outcome variable was exit to reunification. Eleven (independent) variables were grouped as child and parent characteristics. As Table 2 indicates, child age was divided into five categories, with children aged 12 and older as the comparison category. Caucasian was the reference category for race, with African and Native American combined into one category and all other races into another. African American and Native American chil-

Table 1: Children's Permanency Outcomes

	N	%
All children in out-of-home care	696	100
Children exiting from out-of-home care		
Reunification	**329**	**47.3**
Adoption	64	9.2
Guardianship	40	5.7
Reached Majority (turned 18)	25	3.6
Children with exits from out-of-home care (as of August 31, 2010)*	458	65.8
Children still in out-of-home care (as of August 31, 2010)	238	34.2
Exit dates ranged from February 4, 2008 to August 31, 2010		

dren were grouped because their numbers were small and they tend to have similar experiences in the child welfare system (disproportionately represented and slower to reunify). Neglect, physical abuse, and all other removal reasons (besides physical abuse or neglect) were chosen as three removal reasons; each was compared to all other removal reasons.[2]

Three variables examined parental characteristics related to economic and educational circumstance: housing hardships (defined as having been homeless or evicted, or having lived with friends or family, in the past 12 months); annual income greater than $10,000/year; and educational attainment beyond a high school degree. Parents' level of engagement with the child welfare system was also examined using a 19-item instrument measured on a five-point scale that measured the parents': "buy-in" to working with child welfare; receptivity to help from child welfare; working relationship with social worker; and level of mistrust of child welfare.[3]

Four variables related to parents' risk of maltreatment were also included in the model. Mental health and substance abuse problems were measured using the MINI, a psychiatric structured diagnostic interview. Parents whose diagnosis included the presence of one or more mental health problems (e.g., depression, anxiety) were compared with parents who did not meet diagnostic criteria for a mental health problem. Parents who reported abuse or dependence upon alcohol or drugs were compared to parents who did not report substance abuse. Parents with an early trauma (measured by sexual abuse prior to the age of 18) were compared with parents with no child-

[1]Note that POC's previous analysis of children in care in Washington State shows that 37% of children reunite within the first 30 days; therefore this sample will consist of children who are likely to have longer stays in out-of-home care.

[2]Note that children can be removed for multiple reasons, thus the removal reasons are not mutually exclusive.

[3]Yatchmenoff, D.K. (2005). Measuring client engagement from the client's perspective in non-voluntary child protective services. Research on Social Work Practice, 15, 84-96.

hood (sexual) trauma. Using the partner violence section of the Conflict Tactic Scale[4], parents who experienced any domestic violence were compared with parents who reported no domestic conflict.

Finally, the analysis included the following CA regions: Region 1, headquartered in Spokane, Region 2 in Yakima, Region 3 in Everett, Region 4 in Seattle, Region 5 in Tacoma, and Region 6 in Vancouver. Note that the CA regions have recently been consolidated, but the six regions existed when the data for this analysis were collected.

Data Analysis

Data were initially analyzed to describe the study population and to observe relations between the potential predictors of reunification and whether or not reunification had occurred. The extent to which the remaining 11 predictor variables were associated with a child's likelihood of reunification was analyzed using a Cox Proportional-Hazards[5] model. Those children experiencing an exit from out-of-home care for a reason other than reunification (adoption, court guardianship, and turning 18) were treated as right censored[6] as of the date of the event. Additionally, the model accounted for the fact that some parents have more than one child in out-of-home care.[7]

What We Learned

Who are the Families?

Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of the children. The majority of children were Caucasian (67%) with an average age of five years at the time of placement (although almost half were three years old or less at placement). Social workers can record multiple reasons for a child's removal from his/her home; therefore, there were a total of 1170 removal reasons for the 696 children. Neglect was the most common removal reason (76%), followed by parents' substance abuse (33%), physical abuse (22%), parent unable/disabled (9%), parent incarceration (7%), and sexual abuse (5%). Forty-six percent of the children who were removed were placed in foster care, while 38% were placed in relative care and 6% in group homes.

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[4]Strauss, M.A. (1979). Measuring intra family conflict and violence: The Conflict Tactics Scales. Journal of Marriage and the Family, 41, 75-81.

[5]A Cox Proportional-Hazards Model is a type of survival model that relates the length of time (i.e., length of stay in out-of-home care) to an event (i.e., exit/reunification) with one or more covariates (e.g., child's age, reason for removal). In a proportional hazards model, it is assumed that an increase in a covariate (the "hazard" rate) is multiplicative (that is, the rate applies to each unit of change).

[6]Right censored means that while information about these individual cases is used to build the model, these cases are treated as though there were no "event", or in this study, no exit from out-of-home care.

[7]Covariance in the model was estimated using the parent as the grouping or clustered variable; otherwise the characteristics of a parent with more than one child in out-of-home care would be given greater weight.

Most parents were female (92%), single (72%), unemployed (72%), and Caucasian (63%). Parents' average age was 32 years. As seen in Table 3, 39% of parents had post-high school education and 45% had an annual income of greater than $10,000. Sixty-three percent of the parents were living in a house or an apartment, although nearly one-quarter were currently staying with family or friends or were homeless. Over one-half of the parents (53%) had experienced a housing hardship in the past 12 months. Parents' level of engagement with the child welfare system averaged three on a scale of one to five. Additionally, Table 3 shows the frequency of parents' risk factors (mental health problems, childhood trauma/sexual abuse, domestic violence, and substance abuse/dependence) and the geographic distribution of families across the six CA regions.

Which Children Return Home and at What Rate?

The results in Table 4 show that child age at placement, parent housing, parent educational level, and the extent to which parents were engaged with the child welfare system predicted reunification. Here is how each variable affected the rate of reunification.

- Compared to adolescents (children 12 and over), each other age grouping is associated with a 114- to a 160-percent increase in the rate of reunification.

- Parents with greater than a high school education reunified with their children over 60 percent faster than parents with a high school education or less.

- Children of parents with housing problems reunify 66% more slowly than children of parents with no reported housing problems in the past year.

- A one unit increase in the Yatchmenoff engagement scale is associated with a 47% increase in the rate of reunification.

Discussion

Our analysis shows that parents who had greater resource assets in the form of housing and personal assets in the form of education reunified with their children significantly faster than parents who did not have these assets. Furthermore, parents who reported greater engagement with the child welfare system – meaning they were more likely to endorse the need for child welfare involvement, see its potential benefit, and trust their social workers – were also more likely to experience faster rates of reunification.

These findings suggest opportunities for child welfare intervention that could improve a family's likelihood of reunification. Housing is critical to the safe and healthy functioning of a family but can be difficult to obtain for

families involved in the child welfare system. Innovative collaborations between housing programs and child welfare are needed to help families overcome obstacles to housing. Sustained and focused efforts are needed to address this longstanding issue in child welfare.

Parent engagement in child welfare services is an area that has received significant attention in Washington State. The practice model, Solution Based Casework, is designed to engage parents by prioritizing their most pressing needs. Parent mentoring and parent-to-parent programs are operating in several Washington communities. There is also a vibrant statewide network of veteran parents (parents who have been reunified with their children) engaged in advocacy and education.

Helping parents meet their educational goals is not squarely within the purview of child welfare services.

However, social workers who are aware of the potential benefits of education to families can assist parents in pursuing their educational goals.

Our analysis also shows that adolescents were slower to reunify than other age groups. This finding is counter to other studies that generally show infants reunify more slowly than older children. The sample in our study, however, is biased toward children and youth with longer stays in care. By selecting a sample with a stay of 30 to 120 days, we have excluded children and youth who have a short stay and return home.

This study revealed several significant assets that promote family reunification. These findings can be used to inform practice and policy efforts in Washington State. Building parents' resource and personal assets and engaging them in child welfare services improve their rate of reunification with their children and potentially benefit families into the future.

Table 2. Children's Characteristics

	All Children (n=696) 100%		Children Reunified (n=329) 47.3%		Other Outcomes* (n=129) 18.5%		Children Still in Out-of-Home Care (n=238) 32.4%	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
CHILD								
Age at Placement (mean= 5.3 yrs, SD 5.1 yrs)								
Infant (less than 1)	168	24.1	76	23.1	43	33.3	49	20.6
1-3 years	158	22.7	76	23.1	25	19.4	57	23.9
4-6 years	118	17.0	62	18.8	14	10.9	42	17.6
7-11 years	145	20.8	79	24.0	15	11.6	51	21.4
12 years or older	107	15.4	36	10.9	32	24.8	39	16.6
TOTAL	696	100	329	100	129	100	238	100
Race								
Caucasian	469	67.4	231	70.2	84	65.1	154	64.7
African American/Native American	98	14.1	40	12.2	17	13.2	41	17.2
Asian/PI/Hispanic/Mixed/Multiple/All other	129	18.5	58	17.6	28	21.7	43	18.1
TOTAL	696	100	329	100	129	100	238	100
All Reasons for Removal (not mutually exclusive)								
Neglect	527	75.7	247	75.1	87	67.4	193	81.1
Physical abuse	154	22.1	91	27.7	24	18.6	39	16.4
All reasons other than neglect or physical abuse	98	14.1	40	5.7	30	4.3	28	4.0
*Known outcomes other than reunification; i.e., adoption, guardianship, and aging-out (turning 18 years of age).								

Table 3: Parent Characteristics

	n (Total=408)	%
PARENT		
Demographic Factors		
Greater than high school education	160	39.3
Income greater than $10,000	175	44.8
Housing hardship(s)	215	52.8
Yatchmenoff Engagement Scale		
Engagement Scale: 1=low, 5= high. Mean 3.0, Median 2.9, SD 1.0	408	100
Parent Risk Factors		
Mental health problems	221	55.5
Sexual trauma as a child	223	54.8
Domestic violence	153	37.6
Substance abuse/dependence	147	36.0
CA Regions		
Region 1	99	24.3
Region 2	41	10.0
Region 3	79	19.4
Region 4	55	13.5
Region 5	62	15.2
Region 6	72	17.6

Table 4: Cox Proportional-Hazards Model for Exits to Reunification

	Coefficient	Percent Change	p
CHILD			
Age at Placement (compared to 12 years and older)			
Infant (less than 1)	0.956	160.0	**
1-3 years	0.761	114.1	**
4-6 years	0.773	116.6	**
7-11 years	0.850	134.0	**
Race (compared to Caucasian)			
African American/Native American	0.092	9.6	
Asian/PI/Hispanic/Mixed/Multiple/All other	0.152	16.4	
All Reasons for Removal (not mutually exclusive)			
Neglect	0.040	4.1	
Physical abuse	0.420	52.2	
All reasons for removal (besides neglect or physical abuse)	0.160	17.4	
PARENT			
Demographic Factors			
Greater than high school education	0.479	61.5	**
Income greater than $10,000	0.058	5.9	
Housing hardship(s)	-1.081	-66.1	**
Yatchmenoff Engagement Scale	0.387	47.2	**
Parent Risk Factors			
Mental health problems	0.019	1.9	
Sexual trauma as a child	-0.274	-24.0	
Domestic violence	0.072	7.4	
Substance abuse/dependence	0.035	3.6	
Children's Administration Regions (compared to Region 4)			
Region 1	0.431	53.9	
Region 2	-0.239	-21.3	
Region 3	0.206	22.9	
Region 5	-0.322	-27.5	
Region 6	-0.469	-37.4	
** Significance p<.01			