



Kinship foster care and the risk of juvenile delinquency

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ABSTRACT

Formal kinship care represents the placement of a maltreated or otherwise vulnerable youth in the care and protection of a known relative or adult with a recognized kin bond. The practice of identifying and utilizing kin placements in child welfare has significantly increased over the last two decades. In part, the increased use of kinship care reflects the priorities, preferences, and mechanisms specified in federal legislation. A fairly broad literature demonstrates the value of kin homes in child welfare. Yet significant gaps in the understanding of kin homes remain, especially with regard to youth outcomes across allied service systems. In the current study we use administrative records from a large urban county and propensity score matching to investigate the relationship between kinship care placements in child welfare and the risk of delinquency. The sample ($n = 13,396$) is diverse and our design is longitudinal in that we follow youth through child welfare and juvenile systems for several years. The results indicate that the relative risk of delinquency is significantly greater for African American and white male adolescents served in kin homes. For Hispanic males and Hispanic females, kin homes are associated with a decreased likelihood of delinquency. There is no kin placement effect associated with African American or white females.

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1. Introduction

The focus of the current study is on formal kinship care placements in child welfare. Our definition does not include the more common and informal practice of private kinship care arrangements made between parents and relatives without assistance from child welfare agencies. Kin homes are an increasingly critical resource to public child welfare systems. The critical nature of these placements and the preference afforded to kin networks is seen in the enactment of public policy and the actual placing of children with relatives. With regard to public policy, the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act and the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act specifically directs child welfare caseworkers and administrators to give preference to the placement of abused and neglected children with relatives. To facilitate preference, this federal legislation includes provisions for states to waive non safety related licensing standards. With regard to trends in the field, data indicate that kin placements are the “growth sector” of foster care (Harden, Clark & Maquire, 1997). In California, the geographic location for the current study, kin placements nearly doubled between 1988 and 2000, while non kin foster placements remained relatively stable. Given the preference for

kin placements and the critical role that kin play in child welfare systems, it is imperative that child welfare systems understand how such placements relate to key domains of child well being. A primary objective of the current study is to help advance this understanding by investigating how kin and non kin placements may vary with regard to the likelihood of juvenile delinquency.

Identify the settings that are associated with juvenile delinquency is important from both a developmental and economic perspective. Developmentally, juvenile delinquency is associated with a wide range of negative life course outcomes including adult substance abuse, adult crime, family dysfunction, lower levels of academic achievement, and an increased likelihood of unnatural death (e.g. homicide, suicide, and alcoholism) (Laub & Vaillant, 2000; Romanov et al., 1994; Andreasson, Allebeck & Romelsjo, 1998). From an economic perspective, juvenile justice programming is expensive. At the more restrictive end of the juvenile justice system, approximately 93,000 adolescents are held in facilities, at an average cost of \$241.00 per day. In California, the State pays approximately \$605,000 every day to serve delinquent youth in residential settings (American Correctional Association, 2008). Both the developmental and economic perspectives are relevant to the study of delinquency in child welfare because adolescents involved with child protection begin offending at an earlier age and are more likely to receive dispositions that expose them to deeper ends of the juvenile justice system (Ryan, Herz, Hernandez & Marshall, 2007). Thus it is critical that scholars, practitioners, and policy makers are knowledgeable with regard to the various protective and risk factors that affect delinquency rates in

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child welfare so that innovative strategies to prevent delinquency can be appropriately targeted.

With regard to protective factors, kin placements can provide continuity and connectedness for children removed from their parents, which may help to support positive child outcomes (Geen, 2003; Harris, 2004; Grant, 2000). Le Prohn (1994) examined the role of kin providers from a stratified random sample drawn from the Casey Family Program, consisting of 82 relative and 98 non relative foster families. The author reports that kin providers were significantly more likely than non kin providers to help ensure contact between the foster child and the biological parent. Children who are separated from their biological parents frequently deal with emotional trauma, regardless of whether or not they experience maltreatment (Jantz, Bess, Andrews and Russell (2002)). One argument for kinship care as it relates to connectedness is that living with a known relative, and the family support afforded in this relationship can help alleviate the trauma associated with placement (Dubowitz and Sawyer, 1994; Freundlich, Morris and Hernandez, 2003).

Perhaps as a result of reduced trauma and the known familial context, the evidence clearly indicates that children in kinship settings are significantly less likely to experience disruptions in placement (Koh, 2009; Koh & Testa, 2008; Winokur, Holtan & Valentine, 2009; Chamberlain et al., 2006). In a recent study utilizing a sample from the National Study of Child and Adolescent Well Being (NSCAW), 58% of children placed immediately in a kin setting achieved early stability by 36 months, as compared to 32% of children placed immediately in a non kin setting (Rubin et al., 2008). Similarly, in a study of 5557 children placed in the California child welfare system, 30% of children in kinship settings experienced at least three changes in placement after the first year in care, as compared with 52% of children in non kin settings (Webster, Barth & Needell, 2000). The finding of increased stability is important as residential stability (both in terms of physical location and within nurturing family systems) can bolster resiliency and help ameliorate negative impacts on child development (Harden, 2004). Consequently, and possibly as a result of increased stability, youth in kin settings may have a more positive perception of foster care.

Recent findings from an NSCAW sample confirm that youth in kin settings do in fact report more positive feelings about their substitute care setting. Compared with children in non kin and group care settings, children placed with relatives are significantly more likely to report liking those with whom they live, significantly more likely to report wanting their current placement to be their permanent home, significantly less likely to run away, and significantly more likely to report they “always felt loved” in placement (Administration for Children and Families, 2003; Chapman, Wall & Barth, 2004).

More specific to the current study, youth in kin settings are also reported to have fewer behavioral problems compared with youth in non kin settings. In a recent study of 1309 children between the ages of 2 and 10, Rubin et al. (2008) investigated reports of behavioral well being for children in kin and non kin settings. Using caregiver reports from the Child Behavioral Checklist, the authors conclude that controlling for a wide variety of important covariates (e.g. baseline risk, placement stability, and reunification status), children placed immediately in kin homes were perceived to have significantly lower levels of behavioral problems as compared with children placed immediately in non kin homes (32% vs. 46%). Although questions remain about how kin and non kin foster parents may vary with regard to self reporting problematic behaviors (Barth, 2008), and why behavioral differences are not observed in school settings (Shore, Sim, Le Prohn, & Keller, 2002; Iglehart, 1994), the potential benefits of kin placements in the behavioral domain are important. In the current study, we build on the Rubin et al. (2008) findings in two specific areas (1) by investigating whether behavioral differences emerged for older youth in kin and non kin settings, and (2) by investigating if

differences emerge when focusing on a specific category of problematic behavior, juvenile delinquency.

As with any social intervention, limitations exist. Such limitations are important to consider as children in kin placements are significantly less likely to achieve permanency in the child welfare system—at least in some states (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006; Koh, 2009). Within the child welfare literature there are two general areas of concern related kinship care placements (1) differences in caregiver characteristics, and (2) differences in neighborhood characteristics. In a review of foster care, Ehrle and Geen (2002) utilize a sample from the 1997 National Survey of America's Families (NSAF) to compare kin and non kin settings across a variety of individual and neighborhood characteristics. Regarding caregiver characteristics, Ehrle and Geen (2002) report that kin caregivers are significantly older, experience greater food insecurity, are more likely to be single, and are less likely to have completed high school. Some, but not all of these differences are reported in studies from California (Berrick, Barth & Needell, 1994) and in more recent studies using NSCAW samples. In a report on caregivers and caregiver environments, estimates indicate differences in age, in that kin providers are more likely found on either end of the distribution (both younger and older). The NSCAW studies also report very few differences with regard to marital or employment status. Yet there is consistency with regard to income. The NSCAW data indicate that kin providers are more likely to report a household income below \$25,000 and less likely to report a household income above \$50,000 (Administration for Children and Families, 2003).

With regard to neighborhoods, NSCAW utilizes an abridged version of the community environment scale that was developed as part of the National Evaluation of Family Support Programs (Furstenberg, 1990). The abridged scale includes items that focus on current neighborhood problems including assaults, muggings, delinquent gangs, open drug use, and drug distribution. In response to this survey, kinship caregivers report significantly fewer neighborhood strengths as compared with non kinship caregivers (Administration for Children and Families, 2003).

The findings related to poverty and neighborhood strengths are important to the current study because there is a broad literature that connects poverty, neighborhood characteristics, and juvenile delinquency. Jarjoura, Triplett & Brinkler (2002) analyzed fourteen waves of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. The youth were between 10 and 15 years of age. The authors conclude that poverty is significantly related to delinquent involvement the longer the youth is exposed to poverty over the course of their childhood. Moreover, the effects are larger for children experiencing more persistent poverty. Similar results are reported when examining individual family income, in that family economic levels have a significant negative direct effect on officially recorded delinquency (Simcha-Fagan & Schwatz, 1986). With regard to neighborhood effects, the effects are more indirect. Chung and Steinberg (2006) report that neighborhood context is indirectly related to juvenile offending via ineffective parenting and deviant peer associations. Recent studies also indicate that neighborhoods not only help explain the initiation of offending, but also the continuation of offending (Kubrin & Stewart, 2006).

In summary, the literature on kinship care is mixed. Across many domains, such as stability, satisfaction with placement, and familiarity with providers, children placed in kin settings do just as well if not better than children in non kin settings. Yet, limitations, such as economic resources available in the home and the conditions of the neighborhood also exist. These are important limitations in relation to the current study because such risk factors are identified throughout the criminological and sociological literatures as potential risks for juvenile offending. In the current study, we seek to build on these literatures and make a unique contribution by investigating the likelihood of juvenile delinquency for youth served in kin and non kin settings.

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