



The location of placement and juvenile delinquency: Do neighborhoods matter in child welfare?



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ABSTRACT

This study aims to advance the knowledge base by investigating where foster youth are placed in terms of neighborhood characteristics and whether specific neighborhood characteristics were associated with delinquency for adolescents in the child welfare system. This study followed the placement experiences of 2360 foster youth in Chicago from birth to 16 years of age. The study used State administrative data, census data, and the community survey of the Project of Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods. The results indicated that foster care placements cluster in neighborhoods characterized by high concentrated disadvantage, low ethnic heterogeneity, low collective efficacy, prevalent neighborhood disorder and violent culture. The results indicated that neighborhood ethnic heterogeneity is positively associated with delinquent offending. The implications for policy and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

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). English et al. (2002) reported that abused and neglected children were 11 times more likely to be arrested for a violent crime as a juvenile, as compared to the matched control group. In addition to first time offending, victims of child maltreatment show a higher risk of recidivism (Halemba, Siegel, Lord, & Zawacki, 2004; Huang, Ryan, & Herz, 2012; Ryan, 2006). The increased delinquency rate is especially true for the child welfare youth placed in substitute care settings (Doyle, 2007; Ryan & Testa, 2005). Yet, to date, no study has examined the neighborhood effects associated with such placements. The current study addresses this critical gap in the literature.

1.1. Child welfare placement and juvenile delinquency

According to national statistics, 61.2% of maltreated youth received post-response child welfare services and 36% received out of home placement services (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Regarding the impacts of placement on juvenile crime, findings are often mixed, which might be due to the diverse measurements of delinquency (e.g. formal arrest records, self-reports). Widom (1991)

reported that out-of-home placement was not associated with delinquency rates. The author reported that delinquency arrests occurred among 15.1% of maltreated children never placed, 17.8% of maltreated children whose placement was related only to maltreatment, and 92.7% of children placed due to both delinquent behavior and maltreatment. It appeared that maltreated children never placed and those whose placement was related only to maltreatment had similar risks of arrest, and that these youth had much lower risks as compared with children placed due to both delinquent behavior and maltreatment.

With regard to mixed findings, some authors (Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2000; Lemmon, 2006) reported that child welfare placements might actually help reduce the risk of juvenile justice involvement. Jonson-Reid and Barth (2000a) analyzed administrative data of 159,549 maltreated children in ten counties in California. The authors reported that the provision of child welfare services, including in-home and foster placement, did not change the risk of incarceration for European American children. However, for African American and Latino children, the receipt of child welfare services significantly decreased the risk of incarceration. Similarly, studying a cohort (N = 632) receiving financial supports or other services from the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare's Office of Income Maintenance, Lemmon (2006) reported that having a child welfare placement reduced the odds of a delinquency referral. Moreover, the author also found that placement reduced the continuation and severity of delinquency.

In contrast, others (Runyan & Gould, 1985; Ryan & Testa, 2005) reported the deleterious effects of placement experiences. Using administrative data from Cook County, Illinois, Ryan and Testa (2005) investigated the relationship between placement, placement instability, and juvenile delinquency. Their findings indicated that children in

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placement were at an increased risk of delinquency as compared with children not entering placement.

The type of placement might also matter in child welfare, in particular group care and kinship care. Findings from criminal justice studies (Dishion, McCord, & Poulin, 1999) indicate that that congregate care, such as group homes, increased the risk of delinquency (Jonson-Reid & Barth, 2003; Ryan, Marshall, Herz, & Hernandez, 2008). Using a sample of 20,309 children with at least one placement episode from Los Angeles County Ryan et al. (2008) compared the delinquency outcome between group home and foster care children. To reduce selection bias, the authors used propensity score matching. The authors included the variables race, gender, maltreatment type, reason for placement change (i.e. runaway and behavior problems), age at first placement, length of stay in placement, and total changes in placement in the matching. After the matching, the results from Cox regression showed that the odds ratio of delinquency outcome for children with at least one group home episode was 2.40 times greater than for children in foster care. The authors suggested that peer contagion and group home policies pertaining to contacting law enforcement might contribute to the higher risk of delinquency.

The kinship care literature is less conclusive (Rubin et al., 2008; Ryan, Hong, Herz, & Hernandez, 2010). Using a national sample of 1309 children placed in out-of-home care from NSCAW, Rubin et al. (2008) found that kinship care reduced the risk of behavioral problems. Depending on the timing of entering kinship care, the authors grouped children into three types of placement, early kinship care (kinship care within 1 month), late kinship care (kinship care beyond 1 month), and general foster care (never in kinship care). The authors reported abnormal behavioral outcomes among 32% of early kinship care, 39% of late kinship care, and 46% of general foster care children after 36 months. However, Barth (2008) suggested that the relationship between kinship care and better behavioral outcomes may be limited by measuring behavioral problems reported by caregivers, since relatives may be less likely to report problematic behaviors than foster parents. More recently, Ryan et al. (2010) studied the relationship between kinship care and juvenile delinquency. Their finding was that among males, kinship care was associated with higher likelihood of delinquency for African Americans, European Americans, and Asians, while it was associated with lower likelihood of delinquency for Hispanics. Among females, kinship care was associated with lower likelihood of delinquency for Hispanics, while it was not associated with delinquency for other race groups. Their findings highlighted that kinship care effects varied with race/ethnicity and gender.

1.2. Neighborhoods and juvenile delinquency

Child welfare systems are required to consider the location of foster placements, but not necessarily specific to neighborhood characteristics. As stated in the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (U.S. Public Law 96-272), agencies should find “the least restrictive (most family-like setting) and most appropriate setting available and in close proximity to the parents’ home, consistent with the best interest and special needs of the child”. In practice, placing children in their neighborhoods of origin is the placement priority. Yet this practice is not absent in debate. Berrick (2006) acknowledged that placing children in their neighborhoods of origin may minimize academic disruptions, encourage cultural continuity, and encourage parents’ visits to their children in care, which increases the likelihood of reunification. However, Berrick also argued that placing children in their neighborhoods of origin extended their exposure to distressed neighborhoods, which compromised their potential for achievement in various aspects of life, such as academic performance, health and mental health, and delinquent behavior. In contrast, Crampton (2007) argued that placing children in their neighborhoods of origin facilitated the ability of child welfare agencies to change neighborhoods. Child welfare agencies could develop partnerships with concerned citizens in those neighborhoods,

such as asking them to become foster parents, and provide mentoring or respite for struggling families. Crampton believed that these efforts could strengthen social integration and community support for families, which, in turn, could reduce child maltreatment and the need for foster care.

Both Berrick (2006) and Crampton (2007) agree that more research is needed to better understand how neighborhoods may influence children and youth’s well-being. One of the important indicators of well-being is behavior outcomes like delinquency. To date, no study has examined how neighborhoods associated with foster homes might influence delinquency. The current study addresses this critical gap in the literature.

Juvenile justice scholars have a long tradition of studying neighborhood impacts. Numerous studies have found that neighborhood conditions were associated with delinquency (Abrams & Freisthler, 2010; De Coster, Heimer, & Wittrock, 2006; Grunwald, Lockwood, Harris, & Mennis, 2010; Mennis & Harris, 2011; Mennis et al., 2011; Sampson, Morenoff, & Raudenbush, 2005; Shaw & McKay, 1942). As early as 1942, Shaw and McKay published their empirical study on several big cities. The authors reported that juvenile delinquency was concentrated in the neighborhoods characterized by social disorganization.

Social disorganization theory and social norm theory are used to explain the neighborhood-delinquency relationships. Social disorganization theory emphasizes the inability of a community structure to realize 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. Collective efficacy is an important concept in the theory and is defined as social cohesion among neighbors, combined with their willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997).

Shaw and McKay (1942) first proposed social disorganization theory. Since the 1980s, researchers have started to directly measure social disorganization and test its mediation effect (Elliott et al., 1996; Sampson, 1997; Sampson & Groves, 1989; Sampson et al., 1997). There have been two types of studies, neighborhood-level and multi-level studies. The first group of empirical studies used neighborhood level data. Researchers demonstrated that social disorganization mediated the effect of neighborhood conditions on neighborhood delinquency rates at the neighborhood level (Sampson & Groves, 1989).

The second group of empirical studies used both neighborhood-level and individual-level data. These studies benefited from the development of the hierarchical linear model (HLM), which takes into account the dependence between individuals nested in the same neighborhoods (Raudenbush & Bryk, 1992). HLM separates the effect of neighborhoods from the effect of individuals and families, and therefore, reduces selection bias. Using HLM, Elliott et al. (1996) reported that the organizational and cultural characteristics of neighborhoods mediated the effect of neighborhood disadvantages on problem behavior, which included delinquent behavior, drug use, and arrest. The authors analyzed data from Chicago and Denver and reported that informal control accounted for 60% of the variance in problem behavior between neighborhoods in Chicago, and informal networks accounted for 26% of the variance in problem behavior between neighborhoods in Denver. Sampson et al. (1997) also reported that collective efficacy mediated the effects of concentrated disadvantages and residential stability on violence.

Social norm theory emphasizes the effect of subculture on delinquency. Social norm theory was proposed in Anderson’s (1999) ethnographic study of neighborhoods in Philadelphia. Anderson found that neighborhood subculture mediated the association between neighborhood conditions and violent delinquency. The high rates of male joblessness, poverty, substance abuse, and the lack of institutional resources among poor inner-city black neighborhoods fostered the violence-prevalent “code of street”, i.e. a set of informal rules governing interpersonal public behavior. As the poor inner-city black neighborhoods

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