

PLACEMENT DECISIONS IMPACT ON YOUTH WELL-BEING IN THE FOSTER CARE SETTING

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Purpose: Kinship/relative placements for youth in foster care have been on the rise over the past decade partly due to the 2012 Title IV-E Waiver program, where states were able to move more youth to home and relative placements through flexible funding. Little is known how those placement moves impact youths' well-being. This study aims to investigate whether placement types impact youth well-being.

Methods: Data were collected between 2007 and 2017 from five iterations of quality assurance reviews administered by a state child welfare agency in the Midwest. The peer-review process of a random-like sample of child welfare cases was aimed at improving services to children in each region of the state. This study included the adolescent cases aged 10-19 (N=889). The youth's current placement was divided into relative home, custodial home, and foster home (referent category). ANOVA and chi-square were used in bivariate analyses. A multivariable stepwise linear regression was used to examine the placements' impact on youth well-being ($\alpha=.700$), defined as a mean score of five indicators rating the youth's living arrangement, physical health, emotional status, learning development, and pathway to independence. Predictor variables were practice performance domains defined as core practice functions in this child welfare setting including engaging (4 items $\alpha=.536$; role of the family members), teaming (2 items, $\alpha=.833$; formation and functioning), assessing (2 items, $\alpha=.734$; assessing and understanding the child and family), planning (4 items, $\alpha=.906$, long-term view, planning process, transitions/adjustments), and resource availability. Well-being and practice performance measures were rated on a 6 point Likert-type scale from 'adverse/worsening' to 'optimal.' Control variables included age, race, case length, number of agencies involved with the case, and time of review.

Results: In bivariate analysis, the (41.3%) placed in their own home and the (14.5%) placed with relatives had a significantly higher well-being scores (4.79 and 4.94 respectively) than those (44.1%) placed in a foster home (4.60) ($p<.001$). Only 10.9% were placed with relatives during the first round of reviews and increased to 30.2% by the end of the fifth iteration ($p<.001$). In the

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multivariable linear regression, younger youth ($\beta=-.187$, $p<.001$), relative placements compared to foster placements ($\beta=-.067$, $p<.05$), higher scores in assessing ($\beta=-.238$, $p<.001$), planning ($\beta=-.134$, $p<.001$), and resource availability ($\beta=-.066$, $p<.05$) significantly contributed to higher well-being scores. Cases in the later iterations also had higher well-being ($\beta=-.205$, $p<.001$).

Conclusions: Youth placement can impact well-being along with practice performance. Keeping youth at relative or kinship placements supports the goals of the IV-E Waiver to increase well-being. Careful attention should be taken by case workers when assessing and understanding needs of the youth and family along with having a clear, written plan with specific goals and requirements to meet goals to address identified needs. From the executive level, the support and service array should be frequently evaluated. Time played a role suggesting that the Title IV-E Waiver was successful in its goal. The IV-E Waiver allowed flexible funding to expand the service array and increase relative/kinship placements over time, which were all important factors in youths' well-being.

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