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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAMILY STRUCTURE  
AND REMOVAL RATES

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A Project  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Social Work

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by  
Kathrene L. Dumas

June 1995

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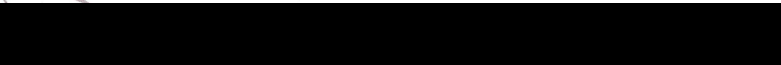
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## ABSTRACT

The focus of this study was to identify the relationship between family structure (two partner and single parent families) and the removal rate of a child after experiencing a temporary or permanent removal from child abuse or neglect. The sample consisted of two partner families (two biological parents or one biological parent and one step parent) and single parent families. The size of the sample allowed this study to adequately look at family structure, removal rates and relinquishment rates within both family structures.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
LIST OF TABLES.....	v
PROBLEM STATEMENT.....	1
PROBLEM FOCUS.....	4
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	5
RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS.....	8
RESULTS.....	12
DISCUSSION.....	20
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	24

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Type Of Care Provider Children Were  
Removed From.....13

Table 2. Father's Location At The Time Of Removal.....14

Table 3. Relatives In The Home At The Time Children  
Were Removed.....15

Table 4. Non-Relatives Living In The Home At The  
Time of Removal.....15

Table 5. Number Of Parental Relinquishments Per Year.....16

Table 6. Number Of Parents Who Relinquished Parental  
Rights.....17

Table 7. Relinquishments Of Fathers Over A Six Year  
Period.....19

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Families that severely abuse their children usually come to the attention of Child Protective Services, possibly resulting in an out-of home placement for the child(ren). The removal of children from their home creates detrimental long term psychological damage (Donnelly, 1993; Poland & Groze, 1993; Schatz & Bane, 1991). A child who is being victimized by his/her biological parents may prefer to remain with the abuser rather than experience separation (Donnelly, 1993). In 1991 the California Department of Social Services documented 571,000 reported child abuse cases (Child Abuse Prevention Handbook, 1993). The nature of abuses that tend to occur are physical abuse, physical neglect, sexual abuse and emotional maltreatment. Child abuse is defined as any act of inflicting injury or the failure to prevent injuries from occurring (Child Abuse Prevention Handbook, 1993). Severe abuse can be defined as life threatening injuries, hospitalization, and extreme malnutrition (Powell & Hett, 1992; Rose, 1993). Physical injuries, severe neglect and malnutrition are more readily detectable than the subtle and less visible injuries which result from emotional maltreatment or sexual abuse (Tower, 1993). All categories of abuse endangers or impairs a child's physical or emotional development and demands attention. Without intensive services and reunification programs directed at the family structure the reoccurrence

of abuse may continue. Minimal at-risk families are more likely to benefit from intervention programs than families that have already severely neglected or abused their children (Hamlin, 1991; Schatz & Bane, 1991; Whittaker, Tracy & Booth, 1990).

The emphasis and philosophy of the Child Welfare Services in San Bernardino, California is to promote reunification with biological parents whenever possible. Family reunification programs (FRP) attempt to assist biological parents to reunify with their children through a structured service plan in order to eliminate out-of-home permanent placements. The FRP service plan allows sufficient time for the parent to address needs that focuses on family and parenting issues. Family reunification services have found to be effective in preventing the placement of children outside of their homes (Scannapieco, 1993). Programs empowering and training parents, whose children are already experiencing out-of-home care, attempt to build upon the strengths within the family structure for reunification (Schatz & Bane, 1991).

There is a lack of literature which focuses on the composition of the family structure. Literature addresses issues surrounding the family: traditional (two biological parents living together), single parent families, blended families (one biological parent and one step-parent) and other variations (two same sex parents, multi-generational,



relatives, etc.). The literature addresses issues within these structures but is limited on information which impacts the family composition. Winkler (1993), reports that in 1986, 72% of single parents lived independently in a one-family household, while 28% of single parents lived in households comprised of two families. Single parents are reported to live with unrelated males, other single parents or with relatives (Winkler, 1993). The definition of the family has grown considerably which encompasses a wide range of living arrangements. The family structure can become enmeshed with other relatives and non relatives and can skew the dynamics of family development and natural processes.

Social work practice is essential in all aspects of family reunification services. Social Workers have influenced policy and advocated for the family reunification programs currently in existence. Social Workers and other "helping" professionals are responsible for reporting at-risk families, investigation of suspected abuse and assisting in referrals to family programs. Social Workers then aid families to maintain themselves as a functioning unit after a crisis has passed. Social work practice is also influential on a community level through the linkage of resources and through social action. Many of the families going through intensive family service plans (goals established by the Social Worker for family reunification) will be required to join community groups or use community

services (Hamlin, 1991). Social Workers and other "helping" professionals are responsible for assessing the family and evaluating the strengths within the family structure to begin the reunification process. The Social Worker must have knowledge of community resources and programs available to the parents to meet reunification requirements (Simms & Bolden, 1991; Mica & Vosler, 1990; Powell & Hett, 1992). Studies have found that few parents receive direct rehabilitative services and most communities lack services that teach basic skills to seriously impaired parents (Simms & Bolden, 1991).

#### PROBLEM FOCUS

The focus of this study was the family structure and the correlation with successful reunion. The hypothesis is that families with two partners (primary caretakers) will have a lower removal and permanent placement rate than single parent families. A second hypothesis relates to the voluntary relinquishment rate of single parent families. Single parent families will have a higher removal rate due to voluntary relinquishment of parental rights than two partner families.

The results of this study can assist Social Work Practitioners who are directly working with families for reunification. The information obtained will allow the professional to view the strengths and weaknesses of a

particular family structure. Literature supports extensive family support services for all families who have had reported incidents of abuse. The correlational study identifies those family structures who are in the greatest need of services and community support systems for reunification. The results of this study will assist Social Work Practitioners who are working with a particular family structure (two partner or single parent families) to identify the possibility of success for reunification.

#### LITERATURE REVIEW

Child abuse has been documented throughout time. Writings in ancient eras have told about child exploitation and incestuous acts, as well as written poems and produced paintings which have depicted children in an abusive manner (Tower, 1993). Abuse has not lessened, in fact, child abuse continues to increase (Tower, 1993). The largest single category of child maltreatment continues to be in the area of neglect (Jones & McCurdy, 1992; Rose & Meezan, 1993; Walsh, 1989). Parental behavior is an indicator that abuse may be present; however, the evidence of abuse may not be highly visible. Several authors have noted that although the incidence of neglect is more prevalent in areas of extreme poverty, not all children living in such conditions are neglected. There is other criterion that must also be taken into account as recognized impediments: mental

illness, missed opportunities, unfulfilled promises, failed social responsibility, social isolation and substance abuse problems. Families with fewer resources are more likely to be reported for neglecting their children and those families are more likely to have their children removed from their homes (Albers, Reilly, & Rittner, 1993; DiLeonardi, 1993; Gelles, 1989).

As part of the child welfare system, family-based services have been developed to prevent unnecessary out-of-home placement by intensively working with families of children at imminent risk of placement. These programs are designed to reunify intact families. The main focus is to alleviate the stress of crisis and provide additional resources to correct the imbalance in order to keep families together (Whitaker, Tracy & Booth, 1990; Ronnau & Marlow, 1993; DiLeonardi, 1993). For the most part, these programs work intensively and briefly (up to 18 months), with families in crisis and the goal being to maintain the family members in the home.

The responsibility for monitoring and attempting to ensure the safety of children is often times demanding upon the social workers and agencies overseeing the programs. According to literature, assessing the child's protection from further abuse involves a close evaluation of the parent's mental status (Powell & Hett, 1992). Factors influencing continued abuse are: 1) cultural and personal

beliefs; 2) alcohol or drug addictions; or 3) a parent who has a mental or personality disorder (Powell & Hett, 1992; Scannapieco, 1993).

Single parent family structures are highly represented in children's protective service system (Albers, Reilly & Rittner, 1993; Gelles, 1989). There are many stresses associated with single parent families that place added strain on the children. Some of the stresses include: economic disadvantages, inadequate child care services, divorce, death and lack of out-side family support (Albers, Reilly & Rittner, 1993; Gelles, 1989). Few discussions of child abuse in single parent families have dealt with gender of the single parent. The greatest proportion of single parent homes are female-headed, of the single parent households in 1989, 88% were headed by women (Gelles, 1989). Abuse and neglect is not limited to females in single parent homes, instead the literature indicates that both males and females in single parent homes abuse their children (Gelles, 1989; Winkler, 1993).

In the literature, rates and statistics of relinquishment are limited. Most of the information concerning relinquished adoptions appears outdated. The term "relinquishment" refers to a legal document, signed by a parent and acknowledged before a representative of the adoption agency which has agreed to accept the child for an adoptive placement (California Health and Welfare Agency,

1977). Relinquishment trends have declined in the 1980's, single women have chosen to give birth, obtain abortions or marry prior to giving birth (Bachrach, Stolley & London, 1992). Research has reported that women who place their children for adoption wait until later in their pregnancies, than women who keep their babies, to contact or enter into assistance programs (Bachrach, Stolley & London, 1992).

#### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This research project utilized data from a data set already created by the Department of Social Services (DPSS), San Bernardino, California. There were two advantages to this design: 1) the information was readily available, and 2) the data collection was unobtrusive.

When the children were removed from their home, the Department of Social Services identified certain family characteristics, they were: the care provider the child was living with at the time of removal; the reason for the removal; ethnicity of the child; and the removal and petition dates. All cases were participating in family reunification services ordered at the time of the Jurisdictional Disposition (Court Hearing).

The data this study collected was the information generated by the Social Worker at the time the children were removed. The information that was missing (i.e., care provider, reason for removal) was given by the Social Worker

monitoring the case. The focus of this study was to identify the relationship between the family structure and the reunification rate of the child(ren) who had experienced abuse or neglect. The hypothesis of this study was that families with two partners would have a significantly lower removal and permanent placement rate than single parent families.

The information obtained from DPSS determined how "type of family structure" (two partner or single parent that the children were removed from) was coded and analyzed. The second hypothesis to this research question was: Single parent families in this study would have a higher removal rate due to voluntarily relinquishing parental rights of their children. The second hypothesis was necessary to determine the relinquishment rate (voluntarily giving up parental rights). The second hypothesis focused on the relationship between family structure and the relinquishment rate.

The use of the positivist paradigm was utilized in this study in order to build upon existing information from case records and provide statistical information in determining if more information should be obtained for future studies concerning relationships between the family structure (two partners or single parents) and the removal rates which may lead to voluntarily relinquishing parental rights of their children.

The target population for this research project was two partner and single parent families who have experienced a temporary removal of a child from their family. The families may have been reported because of physical abuse, severe neglect, or sexual abuse. The sample population included 30 families with open cases currently within the DPSS, Child Welfare system. The open case status were those cases in the process of receiving reunification services.

A computerized list of all families who received reunification services was provided by the Department of Social Services, San Bernardino. The computer generated list reported all cases in the family reunification (FR) program, child's ethnicity, last name, first name, identification number, the date the program began, the date the petition was filed, the date the child was removed, the reason the child was removed and the relationship of the caretaker from whom the child(ren) were removed. The Child Welfare System (CWS) screen was accessed to determine what families were in the Western Region out of the Rancho Cucamonga office.

The data that was collected to answer both research questions came from two separate bodies of information. The information on relinquishment did not exist in the Child Welfare System and therefore was collected from the Adoption Department, which included all relinquishments throughout the San Bernardino County. The data collected identified



the mother, father, and the date of relinquishment for each parent.

This study utilized a systematic random sampling method to obtain the sample population. This probability sampling was accomplished by determining the total number of open cases currently receiving family reunification services which had experienced the removal of a child from the family. The total number of open cases were then divided by the population size of 30 cases being studied to determine that one in every 19 cases was included in the data collection. This study utilized the entire population in San Bernardino County of parents who have relinquished parental rights during 1989 to 1994 in the data collection to identify relinquishment rates.

The information obtained will only be instrumental to the DPSS, San Bernardino, California and cannot be used to generalize to the greater population. The information obtained will only apply to the criteria used by this agency to determine the risk assessment in the removal of a child from their home. The information collected will not apply to different agencies or counties that use difference guidelines or risk assessments to determine the removal of a child.

The concern of this research was to determine what family structure was more likely to receive reunification

services and what family structure is more likely to have children removed permanently from the home.

The following data was collected in order to answer the research question: Families with two partners will have a lower removal and permanent placement rate than single parent families.

## RESULTS

There were 577 families monitored through the Rancho Cucamonga office who were receiving reunification services in the Western Region. One out of every 19 cases was randomly selected, totaling 30 cases. Of the sampled population, 41 children were removed from two parents, there were seven sibling sets totaling 31 children. The average family size consisted of four children in the home. The largest number of children in one home was nine. There were 33 children removed from their fathers. There were six sibling sets totaling 18 children, the average family size was three children in the home and the largest family size reported was four children. There were four children removed from an identified grandmother. The data did not provide information concerning whether the grandmother was a maternal or paternal grandmother. One family was a sibling set of two children. Three unrelated children were identified as being removed from a legal guardian. Two unrelated cases were identified as being removed from an

aunt. There was no indication if this was a maternal or paternal aunt. There were 34 children removed from homes in which the primary caretaker was not identified. The remainder of the children (460) were identified as being removed from their mother, there were 122 sibling sets, totaling 303 children. The largest family size identified as being removed from the mother was seven and the average family size was three.

Out of the 30 cases randomly sampled, there were 19 cases in which the child(ren) were removed from their mother. There were three cases in which the child(ren) were removed from their fathers. There were five cases where the child(ren) were removed from both parents. There were three cases in which the child(ren) were removed from other care providers (see Table 1).

Table 1

Type of Care Provider Children Were Removed From

	Number of Cases	Percentage
Mother	19	63.3%
Father	3	10.0%
Mother & Father	5	16.7%
Other	3	10.0%
	30	100.0%

The father's location was known in 18 of the 30 cases (60%). In five cases the father was incarcerated and in two cases the fathers were deceased. In 12 cases the father's locality was unknown (see Table 2).

Table 2

Father's Location At The Time Children Were Removed

	Number of Cases	Percentage
Known	11	36.7%
Incarcerated	5	16.6%
Deceased	2	6.7%
Unknown	12	40.0%
	30	100.0%

There were nine cases in which relatives were living in the home at the time the child(ren) were removed from their home. There were 21 cases in which no relatives were living at the home (see Table 3 for the number of cases and the percentages).

Table 3

Relatives In The Home At The Time Children Were Removed

	Number of Cases	Percentage
Yes	9	30.0%
No	21	70.0%
	30	100.0%

At the time the child(ren) were removed from the home there were seven cases that reported non-relatives living in the home (23.3%). In 23 cases (76.7%) only relatives were reported living in the home. The 23 cases included mother only, both biological caretakers and other related family members. In two cases the children were removed from their grandparents and in one case the children were removed from an aunt (see Table 4 for the number of cases and the percentages).

Table 4

Non-Relatives Living In The Home At The Time Of Removal

	Number of Cases	Percentage
Yes	7	23.3%
No	23	76.7%
	30	100.0%

Correlations were run to determine positive or negative relationships between the variables, to determine possible variables for control. "Type of care provider" the child was removed from was correlated with whether or not there was a "relative in the home". A negative relationship (-.6435) was found between these two variables (a significance value of .000).

The following data was collected in order to answer the research question: Single parent families will have a higher removal rate due to voluntary relinquishment of parental rights than two partner families. The percentage of relinquishments per year are shown in Table 5.

Table 5

Number Of Relinquishment Per Year

	Number of Cases	Percentage
1989	24	21.6%
1990	25	22.5%
1991	15	13.5%
1992	14	12.6%
1993	18	16.2%
1994	15	13.5%
	111	100.0%

In 86 cases (77.5%), the identity and the knowledge of the location of the fathers were known at the time of the mother's relinquishment of parental rights. The identity and whereabouts of the fathers were unknown in 25 cases (22.5%).

There were 23 married mothers (20.7%) who relinquished parental rights. There were 88 unmarried mothers (79.3%) who relinquished parental rights.

There were 61 cases in which only one parent relinquished parental rights. There were 46 cases where two parents relinquished parental rights. There were four cases in which two biological parents relinquished and one legal father (married to the biological mother) relinquished parental rights (see Table 6).

Table 6

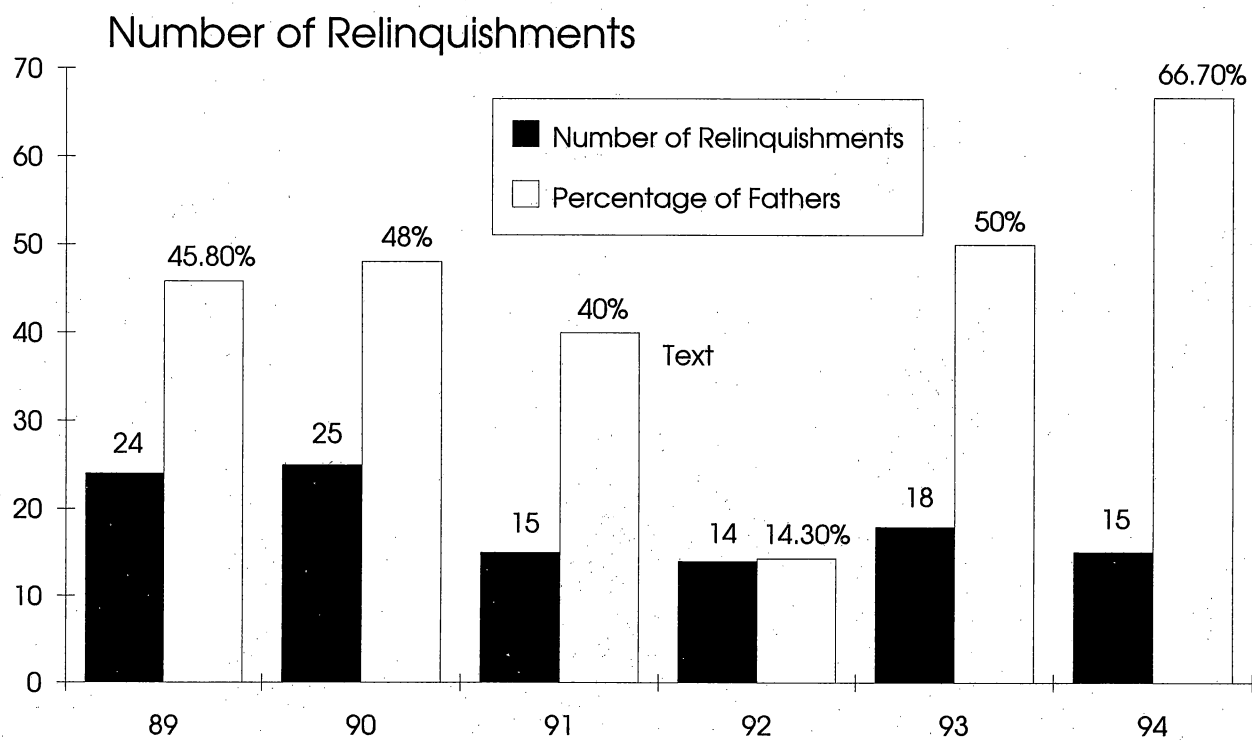
Number Of Parents Who Relinquished Parental Rights

	Number of Cases	Percentage
One	61	55.0%
Two	46	41.4%
Three	4	3.6%
	111	100.0%

Over the five year period from 1989 to 1994, there has been an average of 44.1% of fathers who have relinquished parental rights. In 1993, there was an increase of 12.9% of fathers (50%) who relinquished parental rights. In 1994, the amount of fathers who relinquished (66.7%) increased to 29.7%. This was an increase over the average of the previous four year period (1989 to 1992), in which 37% of fathers relinquished. The greatest increase of fathers who relinquished has been in 1994 (66.7%) (see bar chart Table 7). In 1994, there were four cases reported in which two fathers (biological and legal) relinquished parental rights on one child. The bar chart percentages reflects these four cases as representing one father who relinquished.



Table 7  
 Relinquishments of Fathers over a Six Year Period



## DISCUSSION

The available data could not fully answer the original question proposed: Are families with two partners more likely to have a lower removal and permanent placement rate than single parent families?

Although there was sufficient data to suggest that children were removed from the home regardless of the family structure. In the majority of cases (63.3%), children were removed from their mothers. The percentage of relatives (30%) and non-relatives (23.3%) did not have a significant impact on the removal of a child.

The quantitative analysis of the data collected on 30 cases correlated multivariabiles to determine the strength between relationships. There was a negative relationship between relatives in the home at the time the child was removed. Findings also revealed that single parents represent a large portion of the population in which children suffer neglect and abuse. To support the findings on the negative relationship between the "relatives in the home", a correlation was done on the "non-relatives in the home" at the time of removal. The correlation proved to be a positive relationship (.1582), however, it was not statistically significant at .05 level. This would conclude that there is a greater impact on the removal of children when a relative lives in the home, than when there are non relatives living in the home.

The descriptive data collected, supports the research question: Do single parent families have a higher removal rate due to voluntary relinquishment of parental rights than two partner families?

The data collected over a five year period reflects that single mothers have relinquished parental rights (55%), whereas two parentts relinquished parental rights 41.4% of the time. When both parents relinquished, there were only 23 cases in which a marriage was intact (20.7%). In 1994, there were four cases in which the biological father and the legal father (married to the biological mother) relinquished parental rights. The trend seems to be changing, in 1994 66.7% of the relinquishments were by two parents. In addition, four cases had two fathers who relinquished their parental rights. The bar chart (see Table 7) indicates the increase in fathers who have relinquished parental rights. This study supports the literature, that the number of relinquishments have decreased due to women who have chosen to give birth, abort or marry (Bachrach, Stolley & London, 1992). In 1989, there were 24 children voluntarily relinquished and in 1990 there were 25 children voluntarily relinquished. Although the numbers are not staggering, in 1991, only 15 children were voluntarily relinquished and the trend has continued to report fewer voluntary relinquishments.

The biological father has become more involved with the woman's decision of voluntarily relinquishing their parental rights. The literature appears to be limited in the current trends of father's involvement in the decision making process of relinquishment. Fathers appear to be an increased importance on the mother's decision to voluntarily relinquish parental rights. Future research should include the father's impact in the decision of relinquishment.

Single parents continue to have children removed from their care. Winkler (1986) reported that 72% of children were removed from female headed households. This study reveals that only 63.3% of the population sampled were removed from single mothers. These findings indicate that trends are slowly declining and less single women are having children removed. Although the decrease is not staggering (8.7% decline), this study reports that change is occurring.

Social Workers should be aware that these trends exist and regardless of the family structure more intact families and relatives living in the home are falling into abusive cycles. Social Workers should continue to look at the impact of child abuse within the family structure and the impact of other family members who are living in the home.

Further research should be conducted in the area of family structure and the impact of child abuse. It appears in more recent years that the family has broadened and now encompasses relatives or non relatives living in the home.

This study has identified some of the correlations and changing trends that more family members (biological and legal fathers) are involved with the removal and the relinquishment of children. In future research, the linear relationships should be looked at to identify potential patterns and influences. This study has reported on the voluntary relinquishments of children, however, this study did not encompass court ordered parental relinquishments of adoptable children. Further research should be established to look at the percentage of parents whose parental rights were involuntarily terminated.

This study concludes that children were continued to be removed from single parent homes, however, the percentages are declining. Families in which the primary care taker was reported as the mother, had other relatives living in the home, which significantly impacts the removal of children. In addition, single mothers continue to have a higher rate of voluntary relinquishment, however, there has been an increase in the father's involvement to relinquish parental rights.

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