



Center for Advanced Studies
in Child Welfare

Minn-LInK Issue Brief
No. 6, Spring, 2009

***Children in Treatment Foster Care:
Using agency data to study cross-system
child outcomes***

Treatment Foster Care (TFC)

Treatment foster care (TFC), also known as intensive, therapeutic, or specialized foster care, began in the 1970s as a way of caring for children who need to be removed from their biological homes and who have intensive mental, emotional, behavioral, or medical needs. In 2007 there were an estimated 70,000 children in TFC nationwide. TFC is intended to provide a normal home-based setting that meets the unique needs of children, avoiding more structured institutional settings which are also expensive. TFC foster parents require specialized training and supports meet the needs of these children.

To a large extent, TFC research is limited and rests heavily upon regular (non-specialized) foster care research (Heflinger et al., 2000). Meta analyses of small TFC-specific studies conducted during the 1990s and early 2000s indicated that TFC was cost-effective, as it was less expensive and outcomes were better or no worse than for children in institutional care (Hussey, et al, 2005; Craven & Lee, 2006). To accurately reflect their work and the unique needs of their population, the TFC profession seeks data that not only describes how children are faring but also allows for more refined cost-benefit analyses. There is a need for more research that specifically explores the outcomes and unique needs of TFC children in care.

Study Purpose

Using statewide data from the Minn-LInK Project and administrative data from one TFC agency in Minnesota, a number of cross-system child outcomes were explored. This study was intended to begin to form a broader picture of the status of TFC children and to help fill gaps in the TFC literature by linking TFC program records across other systems. This

exploration led to concrete recommendations for TFC agency data systems and data collection practices.

Study Data

PATH Minnesota provided agency program data for calendar year 2006 (n=673) which was linked with statewide public education and child welfare records for 2006 and surrounding years. The intent was to examine the degree to which agency records could be successfully matched to these other systems and the extent to which children could be described in relation to a variety of TFC attributes. Some highlights of those findings are provided here.

Findings

Match Rates & Demographics

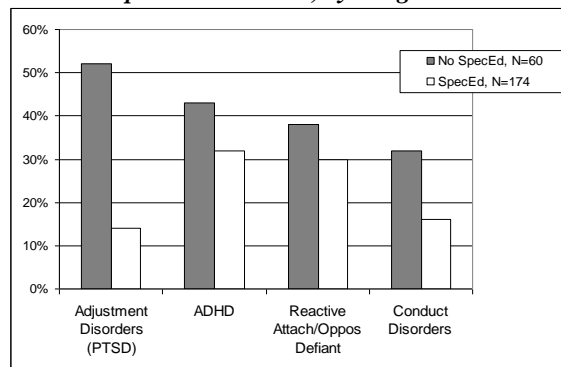
Nearly three-quarters of PATH children were school-age and among them, 373, or 78.5% of the education records could be located. Thirty-one percent of all children had records that matched to the child welfare system

Compared to statewide foster care data for the same year, TFC children served by PATH were more likely to be female (48% versus 46%) and much less likely to be African American (8% versus 21%). Among school-age children, the majority were in grade 10, or approximately age 15.

Special Education

In this review, 53% of TFC children served by PATH in 2006 were not participating in special education. Among students who were participating, 25% had emotional or behavioral types of disabilities. When examined by type of PATH diagnosis, children with adjustment disorders were much less likely to be participating in special education in the school system.

Figure 1. Proportion of PATH Children with and without Special Education, by Diagnosis



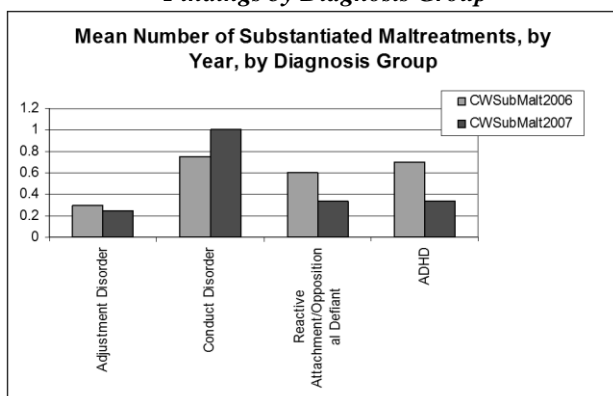
School Attendance

Most students served by PATH had relatively stable school attendance but there were variations by diagnosis type, race, and service type. Students with conduct disorder had mean attendance below 90%, as did Native American students and those who were involved in adoption or independent living services.

Child Welfare Involvement

Children in TFC experienced increasing rates of child welfare reports, substantiated maltreatment findings, and out-of-home placements up to the year of their TFC placement with PATH in 2006. Children with conduct disorders were more likely than other children to have higher rates of substantiated maltreatment findings.

Figure 2. Mean Number of Substantiated Maltreatment Findings by Diagnosis Group



These data prompted a number of observations from PATH staff. In particular, while they anticipated that children who were not participating in special education would be younger students (and thus less likely to have obtained a thorough assessment) it was in fact older students who were less likely to receive special education. PATH was similarly intrigued by the fact that children with some types of diagnoses were less likely than others to have adequate school attendance rates or be identified with a disability by the schools.

Limitations

This analysis revealed many data challenges that are typically encountered when using agency data to conduct descriptive research. Name and birth date inaccuracies (e.g. spelling, typos) reduced the match rate for other systems and analyses in relation to race were inhibited because of high rates of unknown race from agency records.

Discussion Points

In spite of typical imperfections in agency records, it was possible to learn a considerable amount about children served by this TFC agency in particular,

- Ongoing examination child welfare involvement of children who eventually require TFC could reveal patterns that would facilitate earlier assessments and service provision.
- Given the considerable variation in the school attendance rates of children in TFC and that educational outcomes of all children in child welfare require ongoing attention by states, closer monitoring of these outcomes for TFC children makes policy sense. Greater collaboration with local schools and foster parents may enhance multiple educational outcomes.
- Special education eligibility was unexpectedly low. The degree to which special education is appropriate for most, if not all, school-age TFC children should be explored – including improving our understanding of why so many are not participating.
- Direct services agencies can employ a number of cost-free or low-cost methods of improving data accuracy including address validation, periodic record clean-up, and clear data entry conventions for all staff. Improved data quality can not only facilitate cross-system analyses such as that attempted here, but can allow agencies to provide better reporting to funders and stakeholders.

References

- Craven, P.A., & Lee, R. E. (2006). Therapeutic interventions for foster children: A systematic research synthesis. *Research on Social Work Practice, 16*(3), 287-304.
- Heflinger, C.A., Simpkins, C.G., & Combs-Orme, T. (2000). Using the CBCL to determine the clinical status of children in state custody. *Children and Youth Services Review, 22*, 55-73.
- Hussey, D. L., & Guo, S. (2005). Characteristics and trajectories of treatment foster care youth. *Child Welfare, 84*(4), 485-506.

The Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) is a resource for child welfare professionals, students, faculty, policy-makers, and other key stakeholders concerned about child welfare in Minnesota. **Minn-LInK** is a unique collaborative, university-based research environment with the express purpose of studying child and family well being in Minnesota using state administrative data from multiple agencies. For more information, contact Anita Larson at 612-625-8169 or email at amlarson@umn.edu.