Trends In Child Welfare: The Emerging Focus on Child Well-Being

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My purpose today

• Describe some of the consequences for children and families of the emphasis on child safety and permanency over well-being

• Examine the reasons for the lack of attention to well-being

• Provide evidence of a growing interest in child well-being by policymakers:
  - Present case studies of research and policy/practice development targeting elements of well-being
Consequences of inattention to child wellbeing

Short term:
• Children are often in care for long periods before their needs are assessed
• Child welfare agencies and courts—the corporate parents—often know little about the well-being of children in their care (education, health, mental health, social relations)

Long term:
• Well-being outcomes for the children of the state are unacceptable
Why doesn’t child welfare *policy* focus more on child well-being?

• Historical evolution of the child welfare system
  – Focused on child protection, not child welfare
  – Interest in permanency developed in recognition of the limits of a child protection focus
  – Interest in well-being evolving in response to the limits of a permanency focus
Why doesn’t child welfare practice focus more on child well-being?

• Ambivalence by administrators and policymakers
  – Challenges posed by short-term nature of care
  – Questions regarding which institutions should be held accountable for children’s well-being
  – Reluctance to take on more responsibility/liability
A cynical student of the system might observe...

- Safety = “stay off of the television and out of the papers”
- Permanency = “get rid of the children as quickly as possible”
- Well-being = “not my job”
Winner of the “it’s not my job award”
Child safety, permanency, and well-being are inextricably linked

Examples from Chapin Hall research:

- Education of foster children
- Youth who run away from care
- Foster youth transitions to adulthood
Foster children in the Chicago Public Schools

- Almost no attention by researchers and little policy/practice focus until late 1990s
- Work in Chicago begun in 2002 as part of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) strategic planning
- Continued as part of broader research program for the Illinois child welfare agency
- Included both quantitative (approx. 5500 foster children in CPS) and qualitative research
Chicago: Falling Behind Early, Never Catching Up

- Twice as likely as other CPS students to be at least a year old for their grade
- Trauma prior to placement >>> to educational delays
- More likely to be retained in school in the year immediately following placement in care
Changes in Placement, Changes in Schools

- School mobility rates highest for those entering care for the first time
- 40% of foster children who moved once and 66% of those who moved twice also switched schools during academic year
- Over 80 percent of children changing schools attended a school within 5 miles of the school they left
Foster children are more mobile both before and after removal.

School Mobility for Elementary Students in Chicago:
Grades 2 through 8: Five Year Average, 1998-2002 School Years

- Enter Out-of-Home Care Before Entering Care: 27%
- Abused or Neglected During the Year: 17%
- Other African American Students: 9%
- Enter Out-of-Home Care After Entering Care: 46%
- Abused or Neglected During the School Year: 21%
- Other African American Students: 8%
Educational Consequences of School Mobility for Children

- Disrupted educational instruction and social relationships
- Delays in transfers of important school records
- Delays in access to important special or supplemental educational services
Mobility contributes to higher grade retention

Percent of Students Retained the Year After They Enter Care in Chicago (Grades 1 through 8): September, 1999, 2000, and 2001

Enter Out-of-Home Care (n=918)
Abused or Neglected During the Year (n=1541)
Other African-American Students (n=376,401)
Special Education: The Most Appropriate Response?

• More likely than other Chicago Public School students to be classified as learning disabled
• More likely to have been placed in special education at least once
• Behavioral problems >>> erroneous labeling of children as emotionally or behaviorally disordered?
• Might remediation of educational deficits be more appropriate, in some cases, than special education?
• Don’t confuse behavior associated with the transition to care with emotional disability
The Challenge for Caseworkers: Identifying Needs

• Finding an appropriate school
• Securing special services
• Motivating youth to stay in school
• Helping prepare for and choose among post-secondary education options
The Challenge for Caseworkers: Knowing the Schools

- Forming sustained, professional relationships between caseworkers and educators
- Building familiarity with school processes and procedures
The Challenge for Caseworkers: Identifying Needs and Knowing the Schools

- 45% of Illinois foster children had 2+ caseworkers (2003)
- Caseloads distributed among many different schools and districts
- High caseworker turnover
• Instability (i.e., lack of permanency) directly influences well-being

• Multiple public institutions play a role in the problem and its solution(s)

• Paying attention to well-being can lead to small steps that can have an immediate impact
  – Identify misconceptions systems have of each other (e.g., special education)
  – Identify where and when movement takes place to identify cross-system strategies for minimizing movement
  – Assess children’s strengths as well as challenges
Youth who run away from care

- Concern growing over past decade about “missing” foster children
- Second most common exit for adolescents in the U.S.!
- Research shows running to be very risky
- Illinois Study of Runaways from Out-of-Home Care:
  - All youth in DCFS care at some point between 7/1/1992 and 12/1/2004
  - Over 14,000 youth ran from care in Illinois during this period
Selected Findings of Multivariate Analyses:

Youth Context

- Placement type matters: group care > foster home > kinship foster home
- Placement with siblings decreases risk
- Returns home decrease risk
- Placement instability increases risk
- Each run increases the risk of a subsequent run
- DCFS region matters, though effects are not large
- Risk of first runs increased somewhat after 1995, but risk of subsequent runs increased by over 50% between the 1995 and 2000 cohorts
Risk of Runaway and Number of Placements

The graph shows the hazard ratio against the number of placements. The lines indicate:
- Black line: first runs
- Light gray line: subsequent runs

The x-axis represents the number of placements ranging from 1 to 9 or more. The y-axis represents the hazard ratio, ranging from 0.10 to 10.00. The graph illustrates how the risk of runaway increases with the number of placements.
Change in Likelihood of Running While in Care

Conditional Probability of a Run

- 1st Run Event
- 2nd Run Event
- 3rd Run Event

Number of Days in Care

- 0%
- 5%
- 10%
- 15%
- 20%
- 25%
- 30%
- 35%
Qualitative Study

- Sought the perspectives of those serving youth and the youth themselves about the reasons why youth run away
- Interviewed 16 key informants including staff from DCFS, law enforcement agencies, and private service-providing organizations working with runaway foster youth
- Interviewed a random sample of 46 youth who had run away from care and returned in the prior six months
Selected Findings

• Many youth do experience harm during runaway episodes
• Youth often reject the label “runaway”
• Recurring themes: the centrality of family; the importance of other adults (caseworkers, caregivers, attorneys, and other professionals); and the struggle for autonomy (i.e., the ability to make choices) and the drive to access “normative” experiences
Implications for Policy and Practice

• Treat first runs as red flags; assess and intervene
• Policies and practices should take very seriously youths’ relationships with their kin
• Continuity of care settings and relationships with non-familial caring adults is central to preventing runaway and reducing its harm
• End social exclusion of foster youth
• Better initial and ongoing assessment and treatment of some mental and behavioral health problems could help
Takeaways

• Failure to attend to well-being can threaten permanency and safety
• Child welfare professionals can have a great impact on well-being
• Data can help target prevention and intervention efforts
Foster youth transitions to adulthood

• Growing recognition of the lengthening of the transition to adulthood for young people generally
• Extensive family support during the transition
• Child welfare policy focus on the transition emphasizes “independent living,” but is shifting to “fostering connections”
• Concern about foster youth in transition raises two important questions:
  – When should the state cease parenting?
  – What is the relationship between safety, permanency and well-being for these adult children of the state?
The Midwest Study

- Midwest Evaluation of the Adult Functioning of Former Foster Youth
- Largest prospective study of foster youth making the transition to adulthood since the Foster Care Independence Act of 1999
- Collaboration between state child welfare agencies and the research team
- Foster youth in Iowa, Wisconsin and Illinois who:
  - Were still in care at age 17
  - Had entered care before their 16th birthday
  - Had been placed in care because they were abused, neglected or dependent
  - Not originally placed because of delinquency
- Data from in-person interviews (structured and in-depth qualitative) and government program administrative data
### Study Design and Sample (continued)

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<td>’10 – ’11</td>
<td>596</td>
<td>83%</td>
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Selected Baseline (17-18) Characteristics

- Most entered care as adolescents
- Vast majority experienced abuse/neglect prior to care
- About 2/3 in kin or nonkin foster homes with remainder in group care or supervised independent living placements
- Poor educational attainment; high special needs
- High rates of affective and substance use disorders
- High rates of delinquency and justice system involvement
- Poor employment history compared to peers

- Most had favorable views of care, high educational aspirations, and were optimistic about the future
- Strong connections to family of origin
Young Women’s Educational Attainment
Young Men’s Educational Attainment

- High school diploma or GED: 14% (Age 17 or 18), 74% (Age 19), 71% (Age 20-21), 77% (Age 23 or 24)
- At least one year of college: 0% (Age 17 or 18), 8% (Age 19), 23% (Age 20-21), 33% (Age 23 or 24)
- College degree: 0% (Age 17 or 18), 0% (Age 19), 2% (Age 20-21), 5% (Age 23 or 24), 5% (Age 26)
Young Women’s Educational Enrollment

- Enrolled in school or training program:
  - Age 17 or 18: 96%
  - Age 19: 49%
  - Age 21: 35%
  - Age 23 or 24: 24%
  - Age 26: 26%

- Enrolled in college:
  - Age 17 or 18: 7%
  - Age 19: 27%
  - Age 21: 25%
  - Age 23 or 24: 15%
  - Age 26: 18%
Young Men’s Educational Enrollment

- Enrolled in school or training program:
  - Age 17 or 18: 94%
  - Age 19: 42%
  - Age 20: 23%
  - Age 21: 20%
  - Age 22 or 23: 21%
  - Age 26: 5%

- Enrolled in college:
  - Age 17 or 18: 19%
  - Age 19: 14%
  - Age 20: 10%
  - Age 21 or 22: 11%
Young Men’s and Young Women’s Employment

72% employed during year; mean earnings among employed = $13,989
Family Formation Among Young Women

19% of women with children have a nonresident child
Family Formation Among Young Men

66% of men with children have a nonresident child
Young Women’s Criminal Justice System Involvement

- Arrested since last interview: 20% (Age 19), 18% (Age 21), 17% (Age 23 or 24), 15% (Age 26)
- Convicted since last interview: 7% (Age 19), 6% (Age 21), 8% (Age 23 or 24), 8% (Age 26)
- Incarcerated since last interview: 11% (Age 19), 16% (Age 21), 17% (Age 23 or 24), 10% (Age 26)
Evidence regarding protective factors for foster youth in transition

• Being on track in school before the transition
• Work experience before the transition
• Sound mental health before the transition
• Avoiding delinquency before the transition
• Educational aspirations before the transition
• Relations with family of origin
• Staying in care past age 18 (i.e., having the state continue its parenting role)
Common themes across the studies

- Improving well-being enhances safety and permanency
- Safety and permanency are ultimately necessary for well-being
- Collecting data on well-being is central to identifying policy and practice innovations needed to improve well-being, and safety and permanency
- Since other institutions are involved in co-parenting the state’s children, the child welfare system needs data from those institutions to do its job well, particularly with respect to child well-being!
Early Lessons from Efforts to Assess Well-Being

• There will be initial reluctance on the part of system managers
• Good to start simple/small and build on successes
• Think broadly in terms of how to collect data (caseworkers; parents; youth; other systems)