

## **Instability in Foster Care**

**S**tability of family, school, and neighborhood is important to children's successful development. While Illinois has made progress in preventing the unnecessary removal of children from their parents and finding other permanent families through adoption and private guardianship for children unable to return home, placement instability remains a significant problem for thousands of foster children who are left behind in public foster care.

The Children and Family Research Center (CFRC) at the University of Illinois has been monitoring the stability of children's foster care in Illinois since 1996. Administrative data processed by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (IDCFS) show that the cumulative number of moves per child has increased in just three years from 3.3 placement changes in 2000 to 3.9 placement changes in 2002. These counts include changes in caregivers and runaways and exclude disruptions in living arrangements due to hospitalization or detention. Any movement of a child from home to home is troubling to families and traumatic to the child. But when a child is moved three, four or more times, the consequences are terribly damaging to the child's psychological well-being and healthy development.

CFRC researchers have been studying the causes of placement instability and the consequences for child well-being. As part of a 6-year, federally approved experiment in family permanence, CFRC has been tracking the experiences of over 1,500 children aged seven and older as part of Illinois' 6-year federal experiment in subsidized guardianship and family permanence:

- At the time of the first interview, 21 percent of the children had experienced four or more different homes. These frequently-moved children were significantly more likely to convey depressive attitudes, express less happiness with their current home, and feel a weaker sense of belonging than children with fewer movements.
- Frequently-moved children were more likely to have their current placement disrupt and were less likely to be adopted or taken into private guardianship. With each move, the odds of finding permanence decline 25 percent.
- A child who closes out his or her first year in foster care having lived in four separate homes (10% of newly placed youth) is only 60 percent as likely to be adopted or taken into guardianship as a child with only one placement. After eight separate homes, the chances fall to less than a third.

Other CFRC research confirms the association of placement instability with poorer outcomes. A current study of placement instability and juvenile delinquency in Cook County shows that the odds of delinquency are 1.5 times greater for males with three placements and 2.1 times greater for males with four or more placements as compared with males with only one placement<sup>1</sup>. Another study shows that the odds of high school dropout increases significantly with multiple disruptions in foster care.

The seriousness of the problem of placement instability must not be underestimated. But the fact that IDCFS is dealing with an increasingly vulnerable population of children and youth should not be mistaken for worsening



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performance of the system as a whole. Point-in-time statistics on foster children still in care are often misleading indicators of system performance because the data capture only the cumulative experiences of the residual population of older youth who remain stuck in foster care. Point-in-time data exclude children who have made timely exits to permanence through reunification or have found alternative sanctuary through adoption or guardianship. When the experiences of all children entering state custody are tracked prospectively using the federal definition of two or fewer placements during the first 12 months of care, the data show that stability has improved slightly from 75% in 2000 to 77% in 2002. In terms of the number of movements during the first year of care, the average remains approximately unchanged at one move per child. This consistency, however, should not obscure the fact that placement instability remains a serious problem for a ever increasing proportion of Illinois children who remain in state custody. On the first day of fiscal 2002, approximately 6,700 children out of Illinois's population of 23,000 foster children had been moved five or more times since coming into state protective custody.

Research into the causes of placement instability suggests several promising avenues for breaking the spiral of instability.

- CFRC's program of research on kinship foster care shows that placement with kin, after appropriate safety checks, is the safest and most stable form of substitute care that we can make available to children who are removed from parental custody.<sup>2,3</sup> Placement with grandparents, aunts and uncles helps reduce the trauma of separation that accompanies child removal and preserves important connections to siblings, family, and local community.
- For children who are not connected to extended family, a study of placement stability that the CFRC funded a few years ago found that unmet child behavioral need was the most important reason for placement changes in unrelated foster homes.<sup>4</sup> Forty-five percent of foster parents and nearly forty percent of caseworkers reported that the foster home's inability to deal with the child's behavioral problems, such as physical aggression, property destruction, disobedience, and police involvement, was among the top two reasons for a placement ending. A comparison of stable with disrupted placements suggested that specialized foster care, receipt of therapy, and foster parent empathy and tolerance were important predictors of stability in unrelated foster homes.

To address the problem of instability, IDCFS is creating a structured system of needs-assessment to develop individualized care plans and target the recruiting of willing kin or training of foster parents for high-needs children. In addition, the system should engage in routine monitoring and experimental interventions to minimize placement instability. To develop such a system, the State might consider the model it established for Illinois' successful child endangerment risk assessment protocol. This would involve the appointment of a multi-disciplinary advisory committee to advise the Department and its related contractors in the development and implementation of a structured protocol of individualized needs-assessment and service planning for preventing placement disruption. The oversight of the committee could also extend to related training in the application of the protocol, a method for assessing proficiency in the use of the protocol, and evaluation of the reliability and validity of the protocol in minimizing placement instability. An annual report should be submitted to the Court and General Assembly on the multiple movements of foster children and evaluation of the reliability and validity of the protocol in reducing placement instability.

Every child deserves a stable and lasting family life and should not be deprived of it except for urgent and compelling reasons. This principle of family stability was first espoused almost one-hundred years ago at the 1909 White House Conference on Dependent Children. Far too many foster children continue to be denied this advantage. The time is now to deliver on the promise of stability that our predecessors made a century ago.

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### References:

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- <sup>2</sup> Garnier, P.C. & Poertner, J. (2000). Using administrative data to assess child safety in out-of-home care. *Child Welfare*, 79 (5), 597-613.
- <sup>3</sup> Testa, M. (2002). Kinship care and permanency. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 28 (1), 25-43.
- <sup>4</sup> Hartnett, M.A., Leathers, S., Falcoonnier, L., & Testa, M. (1999). *Placement stability study*. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center.

**Table 1.—Distribution of Children by Number of Moves and Average Moves Per Child During the First Year for All Children Entering Foster Care: Fiscal Years 2000- 2002**

Number of Moves	2000		2001		2002	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Zero	2,553	46.2%	2,563	48.3%	2,562	49.3%
1 - 2 moves	2,328	42.2%	2,152	40.5%	2,073	39.9%
3 - 4 moves	460	8.3%	414	7.8%	393	7.6%
5 or more moves	182	3.3%	182	3.4%	169	3.3%
Total	5,523	100.00%	5,311	100.00%	5,197	100.00%
Moves per child	1.1		1.0		1.0	

**Table 2.— Distribution of Children by Number of Moves and Average Moves Per Child for Children Still in Care on the First Day of the Fiscal Year: 2000- 2002**

Number of Moves	2000		2001		2002	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Zero	8,065	26.6%	6,554	25.9%	5,745	24.4%
1 - 2 moves	10,049	33.1%	8,179	32.3%	7,570	32.2%
3 - 4 moves	4,860	16.0%	3,887	15.4%	3,508	14.9%
5 or more moves	7,350	24.2%	6,695	26.4%	6,713	28.5%
Total	30,324	100.00%	25,315	100.00%	23,536	100.00%
Moves per child	3.3		3.6		3.9	