



PLACEMENT STABILITY AND NUMBER OF CHILDREN IN A FOSTER HOME

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Increasing the number of children placed in a single foster home is an understandable response to a shortage of foster care providers. Foster homes with three, four, or five or more unrelated foster children have been common in the Illinois child welfare system in the past. Increases in the number of unrelated children in a home may place additional demands on caregivers and children alike, leading to stressful family conditions that may heighten the risk that children will need to be moved to a different foster home or will run away. Although increasing the number of siblings in a home may also place extra demands on caregivers, the bonds between the siblings may mitigate the risk of disruption or even increase stability.

In 2004, the parties in the *B.H.* Consent Decree requested that the Children and Family Research Center (CFRC) conduct analyses to determine the association between foster placement stability and the number of foster children in the foster home. Research conducted at that time sampled children placed in foster homes during 1998-2000 and tracked their placement experiences through June 2003. Findings revealed a clear association between the number of children in a foster home and placement instability.

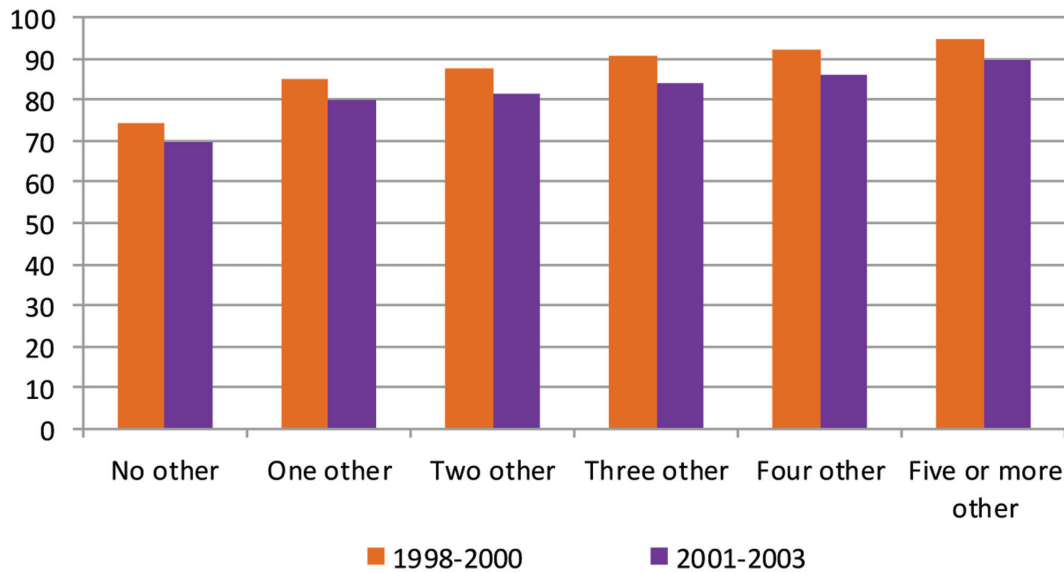
In 2006, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), plaintiff attorney in the *B.H.* case, requested that the CFRC update the analyses and compare the results to those of the earlier cohort. A new sample was drawn of children placed in either traditional or kinship foster homes from 2001-2003 and their placement experiences were tracked through June 2006. The earlier research was also improved in several ways.

First, running away was added as an outcome because it represents another type of placement disruption. Second, the number of siblings was also analyzed because of its potentially different effect on stability. Third, supplementary analyses were conducted that excluded children in care less than one year and that excluded placements lasting less than 31 days, because previous studies suggest that many brief placements in the first year of care are planned stays that reflect child welfare practice and not placement instability. Multi-variable statistical analyses examined the relationship of both the number of unrelated children and the number of siblings to the likelihood of a non-permanent move and of running away, while controlling for other variables that potentially affect these outcomes.

Figure 1 shows the relationship between number of unrelated children in a foster home and likelihood of a non-permanent move from that placement for both the 1998-2000 and 2001-2003 cohorts. Overall the risk of a move was very high, with majorities of children in every category experiencing a non-permanent move. The risk was somewhat lower in the 2001-2003 cohort than in the 1998-2000 cohort. Placements with no other unrelated children had the lowest percentage of children who were moved. The likelihood of being moved increased as the number of unrelated children in the home increased.



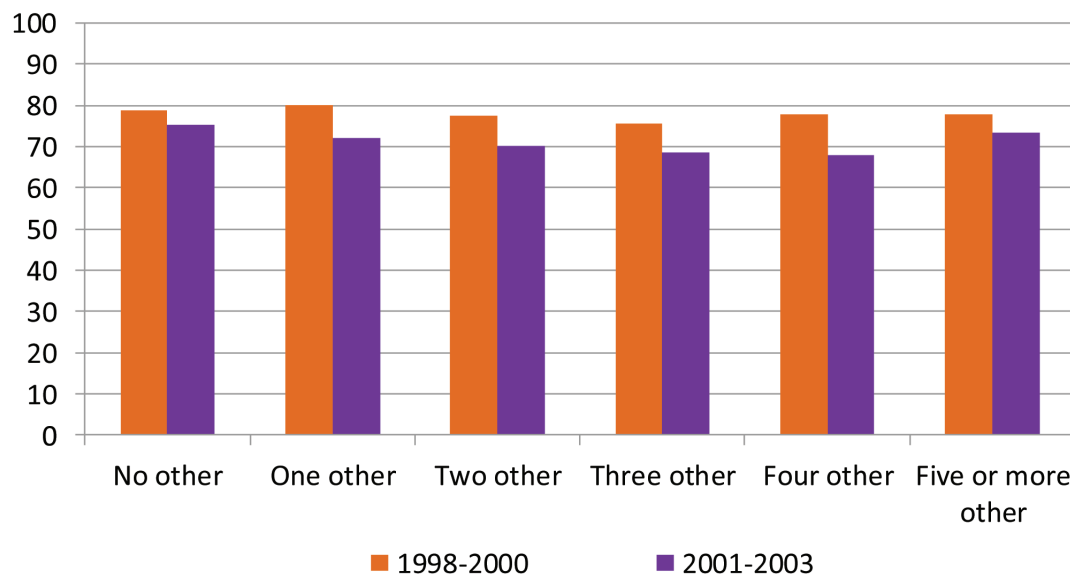
FIGURE 1: Number of Unrelated Children in the Home and the Percentage of Children Who Were Moved



One set of analyses was limited to children who had been in placements longer than 30 days, and statistically controlled for number of siblings in the home, child age, and kinship vs. traditional foster care. In the earlier cohort, children in homes with five or more unrelated children were moved at a rate that was 71% higher than children in homes with no unrelated children. In the later cohort, the risk with five or more unrelated children was 85% higher than the risk with no other unrelated children. Similar results were obtained when children who had been in care less than a year were excluded from the analysis.

On the other hand, as Figure 2 shows, there was no relationship between the number of *siblings* in a placement and likelihood of a non-permanent move from that placement, and this was confirmed by the multi-variable statistical models.

FIGURE 2: Number of Siblings in the Home and the Percentage of Children Who Were Moved





The number of unrelated children in a home was also associated with the risk of running away, although it was not as strong a predictor of running away as child age, with children over the age of 12 at an increased risk. In analyses controlling for child age, number of siblings, and kinship vs. traditional foster care, children in homes with five or more unrelated children ran away at a rate that was 90% higher in the earlier cohort than children in homes with five or more unrelated children and 86% higher in the later cohort. Placement with a sibling actually *decreased* the risk of children running away. The same analyses showed that children placed with one sibling ran away at a rate that was 38% lower in the earlier cohort than children placed without a sibling and 31% lower in the later cohort. Placement with two siblings decreased the risk further in the earlier cohort, but this result was not statistically significant in the later cohort. Comparisons of placement with more than two siblings to placement with no siblings were not statistically significant on running away—sample size was an issue for at least some of these comparisons.

While this analysis of administrative data cannot establish a causal relationship, it appears that having an increased number of unrelated children in foster homes may heighten the probability of children being moved to additional non-permanent placements and running away. However, an increasing number of siblings placed together did not have an effect on the risk of placement instability, and being placed with siblings actually *reduced* the risk of running away.

It should be noted that changes in DCFS practice may be reducing the risk of crowding. The percentage of children placed in homes with three or more unrelated children has declined from 16% in FY1990 to 2.3% in FY2006. Nevertheless, the number of unrelated children in a foster home is still an important consideration when choosing placements.

Recommended Citation:

Children and Family Research Center. (2011). *Placement stability and number of children in a foster home*. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Related Publications

For the full report, see Testa, M., Nieto, M., & Fuller, T. (2007). *Placement stability and number of children in a foster home*. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The report is available on the Center website: cfc.illinois.edu.

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