

The Safety of Children in DCFS Care: Findings from 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study

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Child safety is the primary purpose of out-of-home placement, and children are safer in foster care or congregate care than they are in homes in which they are abused and neglected. But children in out-of-home care may still face threats to their safety in their placement, school, or neighborhood. This research brief reports findings on the safety of Illinois children in out-of-home care who are being served by the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and its private agency partners. The brief is one in a series that presents capsule summaries of results from the 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study in different domains of well-being.

Examining maltreatment reports in out-of-home care is outside the scope of this brief. However, the Children and Family Research Center's (CFRC) annual B.H. monitoring report, *Conditions of Children in or at Risk of Foster Care in Illinois*, examines the rate of substantiated maltreatment among Illinois children in out-of-home care. Both the *2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study Final Report* and the B.H. monitoring report are available on the CFRC website.¹

2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study

The 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study provides a snapshot of the well-being of children and youth in out-of-home care in Illinois in 2017. The Children and Family Research Center (CFRC) drew a stratified random sample of 700 children and youth from the population of children and youth in DCFS care in October 2017. Older youth and youth in care for more than two years were oversampled to provide large enough subsamples of these groups to analyze, and statistical weights were used to compensate for the effects of oversampling. The Survey Research Laboratory of the University of Illinois at Chicago conducted the interviews with caseworkers, foster care providers, and children age seven and older between December 2017 and July 2018.

Among many other components of the child and youth interview, interviewers administered the Violence Exposure Scale for Children—Revised (VEX-R) to children and youth age 5 and

¹ Cross, T.P., Tran, S., Hernandez, A., & Rhodes, E. (2019). *The 2017 Illinois Child Well-Being Study: Final Report*. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Fuller, T., Nieto, M., Wakita, S., Wang, S., Adams, K., Tran, S., Chiu, Y., Braun, M. (2018). *Conditions of Children in or at Risk of Foster Care in Illinois: FY2018 Monitoring report of the B.H. Consent Decree*. Urbana, IL: Children and Family Research Center, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

older. The interviewer showed children cards with pictures of 23 different violent and criminal acts and asks children whether they witnessed those acts committed by adult. For most of these acts, they are also asked if they experienced these acts themselves from an adult. Parallel question asked about their lifetime exposure and their recent exposure to violence. Youth were also asked a series of questions about whether someone had deliberately hurt them physically in the previous 12 months.

Lifetime Experience of Violence

The first part of the VEX-R asked about children's lifetime exposure to violence. Majorities of children had witnessed adults yelling at someone (68.5%) and had experienced being yelled at (70.4%). Over half of children (54.9%) had witnessed spanking. The percentages of children witnessing each of the following forms of violence were greater than 20%: someone being slapped hard, stealing, someone being beaten, and drug dealing. Close to half (44.9%) had witnessed someone being arrested. A few children had witnessed shooting (7.4%) or stabbing (2.2%). Just over one fifth (21.8%) had personally experienced being slapped hard by an adult at home and 14.5% being beaten up by an adult at home.

Youth in group homes and residential treatment had especially high rates of experiencing violence, though the sample size was small. Majorities of these youths had witnessed people throwing things at someone (57.9%) and stealing (63.2); 42.1% reported witnessing a weapon being pointed at someone, 26.3% witnessed someone being shot; 21.1% witnessed someone being stabbed, and 14.5% reported having been beat up by an adult. Among 13 LGBTQ+ youth, 5 (38.5%) report having been beaten up by an adult at home in their life, significantly more than heterosexual youth (13.0%).

Current Exposure to Violence

Compared to their previous life experience, most children were safer in their current placement. Though a number of children witnessed and/or experienced yelling (27.5% and 31.6% respectively), the percentages of children witnessing or experiencing different forms of violence in their current home were generally low (though some percentages are arguably high compared to what average children experience). The percentages were below 2% for having something thrown at them, being pushed and being beat up. Children did report someone stealing in their placement in 8.0% of cases and someone being arrested in 8.9% of cases, and 5.6% of children had been slapped in their current home. One youth reported witnessing a shooting in his or her current placement.

Overall, 14.7% of children reported witnessing spanking in their current home, and 8.6% of children reported being spanked themselves. When we look at children aged 9 to 11, an age range at which caregivers would be more likely to use spanking, 20.0% had been spanked in their current home. Boys were more likely to be spanked than girls (13.6% vs. 4.1%). Children in kinship care were at higher risk (15.6%) than children in traditional foster care (2.2%), and 2 out of 12 children in specialized foster care reported being spanked (16.7%).

Someone Physically Hurting the Child

Youth were asked a series of questions about whether someone had deliberately hurt them in the last 12 months. About a third of youth (32.6%) reported that someone had physically hurt them in the previous 12 months at least once, and 10% reported being physically hurt four times or more. Most of those who were hurt (74.9%) knew their assailant. Over 10% of the sample reported experiencing a physical attack in the last year that caused physical injury, but only 5.5% experienced a physical attack for which they got medical treatment. Small percentages of the sample experienced physical attacks that changed their feelings (e.g., led to depression and anxiety) or changed what they did (e.g., where they went or how they acted). Only 3 children (4.3%) reported being physically hurt by someone who was responsible for taking care of him or her.

Over half (53.3%) of youth age 15 to 17 reported being physically hurt by someone in the past year, compared to 37.5% of children age 9 to 11 and 13.9% of youth aged 12 to 14. The rate also differed by placement setting, though some group sample sizes were small: 10 out of 15 youth in group homes or residential treatment (66.7%) reported being physically hurt by someone in the previous year compared to 26.9% of those in kinship care and 33.3% in traditional foster care.

Discussion

Substantial proportions of children in out-of-home care have witnessed and/or experienced violence in their life. This speaks to the difficult environments they came from. It was common in their life for children to witness slapping, weapons being brandished, arrests being made, stealing, spanking, and people being beaten up. Almost half of children had been spanked (47.0%), and 14.5% had experienced being beaten up by an adult. Though the sample size was small, LGBTQ+ youth were more likely to report a history of having been beaten by an adult; they may have been at higher risk because of negative reactions to their sexual orientation.

Children and youth were much less likely to experience threats to their safety in their current placement, compared to their previous life experience. Nevertheless, children's reports suggest that some still experience threats to their safety. The percentages of children who witnessed people being arrested or stealing in their current homes are small in one sense, but it is hard to imagine most children experiencing this at anything close to that frequency. Over half of older adolescents had been physically hurt by someone in the past year, and two-thirds of those in group homes and residential treatment.

The finding that 20.0% of children age 9 to 11 reported being spanked in their current placement deserves special attention. A large majority of these children were in kinship care.

DCFS licensing standards for foster family homes prohibit corporal punishment,² though we do not know how often spanking occurred in licensed versus unlicensed homes. The use of spanking by caregivers needs to be explored more, as considerable research indicates that corporal punishment is harmful to children’s well-being and development.³ It is arguably more grievous when used with children who have already been traumatized because of maltreatment.

Overall, these findings suggest that placement in out-of-home care leads to greater safety. But continued vigilance about children’s safety is still needed, particularly for older adolescents and youth in group homes and residential treatment. Focused studies of violence are needed with groups of children who are at greater risk. The use of spanking also needs more study.

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² Illinois Department of Children and Families Services (2012) *Part 402 Licensing standards for foster family homes*. Retrieved from https://www2.illinois.gov/dcf/aboutus/notices/Documents/rules_402.pdf

³ Gershoff, E.T. (2010). More harm than good: A summary of scientific research on the intended and unintended effects of corporal punishment on children. *Law and Contemporary Problems*, 73, 31-56.