Understanding the Reasons for Placement Instability: Lessons from Case Data
Authors

Ted Cross
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Eun Koh
University of Arkansas

Nancy Rolock
University of Illinois at Chicago

Jennifer Eblen-Manning
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
Placement stability is a problem for a significant minority of children in foster care

• Between one-fourth and one-half of children in foster care have 3 or more placement changes during their first year (Connell et al., 2006)

• 32% of foster care alumni had 8 or more moves while in care (Pecora et al., 2005)
Instability has negative impacts on children

- Mood difficulties
- Behavior problems
- Additional placement disruption
- Difficulty finding permanent homes
- Poorer adult outcomes

Frequency of instability and its negative effects

Need to understand why it happens
Illinois Multiple Move Study

• Research question: What factors explain placement instability?

• Stable and unstable cases sampled from Illinois Department of Children and Family Services
  – Comparison of matched samples of stable and unstable cases on case characteristics
  – Unstable group included 11 most unstable cases in state
  – In-depth content analysis of reasons for moves in unstable sample
Matched Samples

**Study Design**

**Study period:** 7/1/06 – 12/31/07

**MOVER SUBJECTS**
On 7/1/06, 261 cases in foster family and kinship homes which met the mover definition (3 or more placements within an 18-month period)

**STABLE SUBJECTS**
On 7/1/06, 3,223 cases in foster family and kinship homes which were stable (less than 3 placements in 18 months)

**MOVER SELECTION = 61 cases**
The top 11 cases selected, plus an additional 50 randomly selected

**STABLE SELECTION = 61 cases**
61 cases selected from the stable sample, matched

Propensity Score Matching – 122 cases

Data Source: Illinois Department of Children and Family Services
# Matched Samples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Movers (N = 61)</th>
<th>Matched (N = 61)</th>
<th>Original (N = 3,233)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 1 year old</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>55.7%</td>
<td>54.1%</td>
<td>62.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>57.4%</td>
<td>50.8%</td>
<td>48.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cook County</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
<td>53.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6+ prior moves</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>13.1%</td>
<td>5.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child disability noted</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opened &lt;6 mos.</td>
<td>34.4%</td>
<td>37.7%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Most children experienced moves from each of 3 sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of Instability</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caregivers</td>
<td>Moves initiated by caregivers or by DCFS because of caregivers’ inability or unwillingness to maintain foster child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child behavior</td>
<td>Moves initiated by caregivers or DCFS because of children’s behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System or policy</td>
<td>Moves initiated by DCFS because of system limitations or DCFS policy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Caregivers and instability

- 93% of caregivers in stable group were committed to permanence vs. 42% in the multiple move group
- 67% of placements in the stable group were with kin vs. 26% for the multiple move group
- Caregiver-related moves
  - 36% of moves among unstable group
  - Occurred in 81% of unstable cases
  - Most frequent reason in 34% of unstable cases
Disruption because of caregiver changes

- Any move because of caregiver changes
- Conflict with bio parents
- Expected reunification
- Overwhelmed by care
Disruption because of problematic parenting

- Any problematic parenting
- Caregiver's noncompliance
- Too many children
- Did not meet care requirements
- Harsh parenting/corporal punishment

% of unstable cases vs. Problematic parenting
More on kin care results

- Children in stable group were more likely than multiple move group to be in kin care vs. traditional foster care
- Kin care stabilizes children?
- Or more stable children tend to be placed in kin care?
- Unclear – could be both
Unstable kin placements

• Some of the children in the unstable group had very unstable kin placements
• 16 children in the unstable group were moved at least once to be with kin – all had subsequent placements after their first kin placement
• One child was placed with 7 different kin
• One issue was licensing:
  – Kin caregivers in the stable group were more likely to be licensed (56%) than kin caregivers in the unstable group (19%).
### Issues with kin placements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Licensing</th>
<th>Kin caregivers in stable cases were more likely to be licensed (56%) than kin caregivers in mover cases (19%).</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disrupted Permanency Placements</td>
<td>13% of children in the unstable group had permanency placements with kin that disrupted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall risk of disruption contributes to instability

- Some children had multiple unrelated caregivers who ended foster care placements.
- No connection between the disruptions.
- Given 33% to 66% risk of disruption for any one placement in first two years, some cases unstable just by chance.
Child behavior and instability

• 16% of children in the stable group had a clinical diagnosis vs. 51% in the multiple move group

• 31% of children in the multiple move group first received a clinical diagnosis during the review period
  – Could represent an emerging mental health problem
  – Could represent a reaction to instability
Disruption because of child behavior problems

- Moved at least once because of child's behavior problems
- Moved at least 3x because of child's behavior problems
- Residential treatment at least 3x
- Expectable behavior problems for child's developmental level
What came first? Behavior problems or instability?

- 36%: Children in unstable group not moved because of behavior problems
- 32%: Children's behavior problems emerged only after initial placement disruption
- 32%: Children's behavior was the reason for their initial placement change
More on timing of behavior problems

• In several cases, considerable time span between early instability and later behavior problems:
  – Preschool, early elementary years ↔ Foster care disruption
  – Behavior problem in later elementary years or adolescence
• Several studies show that behavior problems are both a cause and an effect of instability
Expectable (?!?) behavior problems led to moves

• 1 child had an “attitude” when asked to clean the bathroom
• 1 child did not help out around the house enough
• 2 siblings went out without permission, did not follow house rules, do chores or bathe enough
Expectable behavior problems?! (cont.)

One boy was placed in foster care at age 1 because of neglect, but removed from two homes within two years because of his temper tantrums, biting, kicking, screaming and fighting with other children. He then was placed with a kin family and settled down without subsequent placement disruptions.
Sexual orientation

For one girl, caregivers’ objections to her sexual orientation was a factor in two of her moves
System or policy issues and instability

• 26% of all moves in unstable group
• Occurred in 64% of unstable cases
• A planned move can contribute to instability in itself and contributes even more if it falls through
Disruption because system or policy issues

- Moved at least 3x because of system or policy reasons
- Temporary placements
- Failed Reunification
- Moved to kin caregivers
- Moved to be with siblings

% of unstable cases

System or policy issues
Temporary placements

- Often occurred when children first entered care to facilitate matching
- Also occurred often after disruptions
- Sometimes for respite care or preparing a permanent placement
- Usually less than 3 weeks
- Several longer – one for 20 months
- Automatically add 2 units to move counts
Moves to kin care as policy

- Several of the moves to kin caregivers were planned moves, either to enhance connections to family or to achieve permanence
- A number of these moves fell through in the unstable group, increasing overall instability
Unstable placements with siblings

• Children are placed with siblings to connection with family, promote well-being and increase stability
• In some cases, however, principle of keeping siblings together contributed to instability
• 15% of children in unstable group were moved to remain with a child who was moved because of a behavior problem; a third of these children eventually were placed separately
  – Children’s attitudes about these moves varied
Movements to be with siblings (cont.)

One girl went through five placements in less than seven years due to her brother’s defiant behaviors; she continued to be moved even though she had wanted to stay in previous placements.
Case example #1: 6 month old girl

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Caregiver</th>
<th>Number of Days in Placement</th>
<th>Reason for Leaving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foster 1</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Children moved to be with kin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kin 1</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>Kin caregiver allowed children contact with bio mother who had broken older sibling’s collarbone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster 2</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>Temporary placement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster 3</td>
<td>567</td>
<td>Foster parent subject of maltreatment investigation on another foster child that was later unfounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster 4</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Temporary placement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster 3</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>Foster parent physically abused another child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster 5</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>Moved to be with siblings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster 6</td>
<td>500+ days</td>
<td>Current setting – child had not been moved at end of review period</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Case example #2: 9 year old girl

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Caregiver</th>
<th>Number of Days in Placement</th>
<th>Reason for Leaving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kin</td>
<td>583</td>
<td>Kin caregiver is going through some life changes and thinks her sister in a city in the western United States would be a better caregiver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kin</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>Child wanted to return to Illinois to be near relatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kin</td>
<td>367</td>
<td>Child having behavior problems and caregiver was reported putting a rag in her mouth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kin</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Temporary placement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kin</td>
<td>583</td>
<td>Girl was unable to apologize for recent behavior problems and wanted to be moved even if it meant residential treatment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kin</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Foster parent received threatening calls from biological family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kin</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kin</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>Child behavior problems and running away. Caregiver: “I want this bitch out of my house”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kin</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Child incarcerated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Case example #3: 2 year old girl**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Caregiver</th>
<th>Number of Days in Placement</th>
<th>Reason for Leaving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foster</td>
<td>1270</td>
<td>Foster parents could not commit to adopt child &amp; sibling because of sibling’s behavior problems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster</td>
<td>826</td>
<td>Child moved with sibling because of sibling’s defiant behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>Child moved with sibling because of sibling’s behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>Child moved with sibling because of sibling’s behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>Child moved with sibling because of sibling’s behaviors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Temporary placement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster</td>
<td>455+</td>
<td>Current placement—child had not been moved by end of review period</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Case example #4: 5 year old boy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Caregiver</th>
<th>Number of Days in Placement</th>
<th>Reason for Leaving</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foster 1</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Child is aggressive with foster parent, sibling, neighbor children, and animals in home. Threatens to kill foster parent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster 2</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Temporary placement?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster 3</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>Indicated report of physical abuse by caregiver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster 4</td>
<td>126</td>
<td>Child aggression toward other children in home &amp; school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster 5</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Caregiver did not have adequate space in car to accommodate all the car seats she needed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster 4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>There was only enough room for child to sleep on couch—violated licensing standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster 6</td>
<td>83+</td>
<td>Current placement at end of review period – this was punctuated by child having 27 day psych hospitalization</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

• Most children in unstable cases have been moved for several different reasons
  – caregiver reasons
  – child behavior and
  – system and policy reasons

• Child behavior is only one source of instability
  – Important not to blame the victim

• Skill and commitment of foster parents plays a role
  – Increased licensing of kin caregivers should be considered
Conclusion (cont.)

• Child behavior problems are both a cause and effect of instability
  – Caregivers need resources, training and support
  – Sometimes behavior problems are expectable for child’s developmental level

• Moves made by child welfare to improve children’s lives carry some risk of instability
  – Planned moves should be made carefully, taking into account past instability as one factor
For more information contact:

Ted Cross, Ph.D.
tpcross@illinois.edu
781-640-4532