Children’s Bureau Discretionary Grants Program -- Final Report
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The Role of Individual and Community Characteristics in Child Welfare Placement Decisions

Executive Summary

This research examines both individual and community characteristics that may influence decisions of a local child welfare agency, following a substantiated report of maltreatment, to place children in out-of-home care or leave them in their own home. There is little research to date that integrates characteristics of the child and mother, with characteristics of the local agency and surrounding county, and methodological concerns have precluded analysis of possible cross-level interactions. The study presented here makes use of recent advances in event history analysis, and uses data routinely collected such as vital statistics, child welfare administrative records, and US Census Bureau reports. Support for this research was provided by the CAPTA fellowship grant (2003-2005) from the Children’s Bureau, US DHSS, Administration for Children and Families.

Findings suggest three areas where individual and community characteristics seem to play a role in decisions to place a child. First, it would appear that placement decisions are associated with characteristics that describe very vulnerable children – low birth weight, newborn abnormalities, multiple reports of maltreatment, victim of abuse rather than neglect, or age 0–30 days at substantiation. Second, results suggest that for many children without these vulnerabilities, placement decisions are based on maternal characteristics evaluated differently from one agency to another. The education levels of agency staff, participation in reform, and use of foster home initial placements, seem to moderate the influence of maternal characteristics such as prenatal care, marital status, and prior births. Finally, levels of staff turnover, use of foster care versus in-home services, and social services reform appear to influence placement decisions for African-American children differently than for other children.
However, results address associations not causality, and are exploratory not conclusive. As child welfare research has only begun to include multi-level analyses, and few studies address any of the community contextual variables included here, further research would help determine whether results can be confirmed in other settings. More information about agency and maternal characteristics, and a more focused analysis of race and ethnicity, would also be helpful in exploring the issues illuminated by this analysis.