

Drop-Out: Are children in state's custody failing at adoption?

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ABSTRACT

While it may be true, that for all children, race and behavioral problems are barriers in education, these same factors may also contribute to other issues in the development of children in state's custody; namely, adoption. This study looks at children in state's foster care programs, with an emphasis on race and negative adjudication reasons (delinquent and unruly), to examine a correlation between these variables and adoption success. It is expected, that by looking through a strengths perspective combined with an ecological systems theory lens, that a lack of positive reinforcement and an abundance of negative feedback from the child's support system will be at the root of this calamity. Richard Wertheimer, PhD., in his research brief, *Youth who "Age Out" of Foster Care: Troubled Lives, Troubling Prospects*, echo's Farruggia and team's findings, by suggesting that children leaving foster care as a result of aging out, "...are less well prepared educationally, have a harder time embarking on a productive career, are more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, and are more likely to be involved with the legal system (2002). This finding is mirrored by Rachel H. Sherman, in which she suggests that the ill preparedness of foster children who age out of care, leave many to the plights of the unemployed, including homelessness, unwanted pregnancies, and inadequate health care (2004).

PURPOSE/RATIONALE

Children who enter foster care often bring with them a myriad of problems relating to the assorted reasons for their entry. Such problems range from various types of abuse to death of the primary caregiver. These problems often present themselves as behavioral and/or emotional issues, to which the foster carer must deal.

In addition, this baggage is often carried into all aspects of the child's life, including the possibility of adoption.

While literature is plentiful referencing behavioral problems in foster children, a significant gap is noted in the literature when combined with adoption success or failure.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Does race negatively influence adoption rates for children in state's custody?
Research will find that race other than Caucasian is more likely to have negative implications in adoption rates for children in state run foster care.
2. Do behavioral and/or emotional issues indicated by negative adjudication reason negatively influence adoption rates for children in state's custody?
Research will find that behavioral and/or emotional issues indicated by negative adjudication reasons (delinquent and/or unruly), are more likely to have a negative impact on adoption rates for children in state's custody, than children in state's custody without behavioral and/or emotional issues or living with their birth families.

DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLING FRAME

Investigator will apply stratified purposeful sampling technique to collect statistical data from Tennessee's Department of Children's Services, Foster Care Program's Annual Report, for years 2001 through 2006. Statewide population totals range from 10,765 at the end of fiscal year 2000 to 9,271 at the end of fiscal year 2006. The population for this data includes children in Tennessee's foster care system for years 2000 through 2005. Sampling will not be random. Collected data will target children in state's custody by subgroups; gender, race, adjudication reason (Delinquent and Unruly only), discharge reason, and age group, for children in state's custody throughout the state of Tennessee.

DESCRIPTION OF METHODS TO SELECT STUDY SAMPLE

Aggregate data received from the Tennessee Department of Children's Services Website for years 2001 through 2006, will be used for obtaining critical information pertaining to race, gender, adjudication reason, discharge reason, and age group, in effort to establish that race and adjudication reasons are detrimental to adoption. Relevant data will be identified and labeled according to variable as indicated on analysis plan (attached). Non-relevant information will be cleaned. This data contains no personally identifying data.

Utilizing the dependent variable adoption, independent variables will be used to include or exclude potential participants. These independent variables will include gender; race; discharge reason; adjudication reason; and age group.

STUDY PROCEDURES FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND DATA ANALYSIS STEPS

Investigator will review downloaded DCS Annual Reports from DCS website for relevant quantitative structured data, for years 2001 - 2006, cleaning for irrelevant data. Investigator will then compile this information according to analysis plan labels and as a final stage of data collection; investigator will enter data into Excel program using nominal method of measurement.

The study will be accomplished by utilizing a non-probability purposeful sampling, Quasi-Experimental post-test only design method. Descriptive statistics will be run and entered into Excel to check for data distribution and skewness. Utilizing nominal method of measurement, frequencies will be run to determine range of scores, mean of scores, and standard deviations for each group. T- tests will be run to look for differences between the groups. For the first research question, a simple regression analysis will be run to predict whether race has an adverse effect on adoption rates. To answer the second question, a simple regression analysis will be run to predict whether adjudication reason delinquent, or unruly, has a higher probability of adoption failure.



http://panen.psu.edu/Newsletter/summer06/fft_summerfall06.htm

RESULTS

Including all individuals who have either emancipated or have runaway from state's custody (N= 5343), for years 2001 through 2006, the amount of youth who emancipated (n=4841) left custody at nearly ten times the rate as those who ran away (n=502).

For the total youth who emancipated (N=4841) from state's custody during the period of 2001 through 2006, the mean was 806.83 ($SD=56.831$). For youth who ran away during the years 2001 through 2006, the mean was 83.67 ($SD=18.162$). Children in age group 0 - 4 show practically irrelevant data when looking at adjudication. A slight increase in the amount of children listed as delinquent begins to occur around the age of five. When children listed as delinquent enter age group 13 - 18 a significant increase of over 98.73% is indication for the six year period. Males listed as delinquent nearly four and one half times the frequency of females' labeled When looking at the unruly variable (N=2797), again increases begin around the age of five and a significant increase in this category is seen with age group 13 - 18. Females (n=1419) tend to be labeled unruly more often than males (n=1378). Black children (n=20,719) are more often listed as Unruly or Delinquent than any other race group, although the difference between black children and white children is insignificant.

To address question number one, it would appear that race is likely to have negative affects on adoption rates, however without access to specific data for race and discharge reason, it can only be speculated at this time, and further research is necessary to answer this question with more definite results. To address question number two, it would appear as though negative adjudication reasons delinquent or unruly are cause for children in states custody to remain until they age out of the system.

DISCUSSION

The fact that data in other than aggregate form was not available on a timely basis prevented concrete statistical significance, thus the need for further in-depth research is needed in order to accurately determine whether race and/or adjudication reasons negatively influence adoption success. The inability to obtain data from such large agencies is likely to thwart preventative measures that may assist in achieving a more successful exit from state's custody for children labeled delinquent or unruly. It is quite possible, that further research will find solutions for the state to assist these children in becoming productive citizens of their local communities, and prevent them from a life long circle of unemployment, incarceration, and issues of antisocial behavior.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK

- 1.) Social workers should advocate for a fourth "label" to identify children who have moved out of the delinquent or unruly adjudication reason, as these terms alone indicate continued behavior problems, thus the potential for the child to establish and maintain a negative self-image is great.
- 2.) Social workers should advocate for policies, which allow the child to obtain every tool necessary to prevent failure, thus changing the policy to wait before the tool becomes a vital need to stop failure.
- 3.) Social workers should implement educational seminars at local schools, indicating issues foster children bring with them, and work with educational officials to assist in preventing self-fulfilling prophecies negative adjudication reasons may initialize.
- 4.) Social workers should advocate for the timely availability of research information concerning the future of the foster child.
- 5.) Social workers should continue to advocate for the welfare of the child.