



---

10-2010

## Defining a Foster Care Placement Move: The Perspective of Adults Who Formerly Lived in Multiple Out-of-Home Placements

Yvonne Unrau

Western Michigan University, [yvonne.unrau@wmich.edu](mailto:yvonne.unrau@wmich.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/socialwork\\_pubs](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/socialwork_pubs)



Part of the Social Work Commons

---

### WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Unrau, Yvonne, "Defining a Foster Care Placement Move: The Perspective of Adults Who Formerly Lived in Multiple Out-of-Home Placements" (2010). *Social Work Faculty Publications*. 6.

[https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/socialwork\\_pubs/6](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/socialwork_pubs/6)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Social Work Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



# Defining a Foster Care Placement Move: The Perspective of Adults Who Formerly Lived in Multiple Out-of-Home Placements

Yvonne A. Unrau, Ruth Chambers, John R. Seita, & Kristin S. Putney

## ABSTRACT

Several studies have demonstrated that children who experience multiple placements are more likely to experience behavioral problems and are less likely to achieve reunification. However, little is known about how move transitions—from one foster home to another, from foster care to birth family home, or between family placements and group care facilities—are perceived or experienced by children in foster care, or those formerly in foster care. This qualitative study examines the definition of foster care placement moves from the perspective of adults formerly in foster care. Participants identify both physical and psychological shifts as key dimensions of the placement change experience. Some study participants viewed returning home as “just” another placement. Implications for child welfare policy, research, and practice are briefly discussed.

## Implications for Practice

- Practitioners, researchers, and policy makers should consider the views and experiences of foster youth when addressing issues of placement moves.
- Practitioners should understand that a return home “move” may be perceived as another placement by foster youth.

There is general agreement among policymakers, researchers, and practitioners that multiple foster care placements are not good for children, and therefore should be avoided. However, in research studies that investigate placement stability, there is much variation in how the “foster care placement move” is defined. Moreover, to date, efforts to construct such a definition have neither considered nor addressed the perspective of individuals who have experienced multiple placement moves. Without this perspective, any definition of placement moves—or shifts in placement—is incomplete, which leaves policymakers, researchers, practitioners, and caregivers wanting in their efforts to help children in foster care. Defining a placement move involves specifying the parameters of the event that will, in turn, shape how others view, comprehend, and respond to children in foster care and others affected by the transition. This article presents the findings of a qualitative research study that investigated the perspective and experiences of placement moves from the viewpoint of adults who lived in multiple foster care placements during childhood.

## Literature Review

The number and patterns of placement moves in foster care has been of

interest to researchers since Maas and Engler conducted the first comprehensive study of foster care in the United States in 1959. Concerns about children in foster care moving from one placement to another and not reaching permanency peaked in the 1970s. *Foster care drift* was the term widely used to communicate the problem that children in foster care were languishing in a system that was supposed to protect and care for them temporarily (e.g., Jones, 1978). Some credited the problem of foster care drift as a precursor to the family preservation movement, which involved an intervention approach that was designed to prevent children from entering foster care altogether (Fraser, Pecora, & Haapala, 1991). Research conducted near the end of the 20th century that used longitudinal samples effectively dispelled the myth that foster care drift was a pervasive system problem by reporting statistics showing that the majority of children placed in foster care experience only one placement during a single spell in foster care (Usher, Randolph, & Gogan, 1999; Wulczyn, Kogan, & Harden, 2003). In turn, this research showed that the problem of placement moves is a concern but for only about one quarter of all children in care.

There is much variation in both the conceptual and operational definitions of placement moves in the body of research investigating these critical events in the lives of foster children. Indeed, research studies are replete with various terms used to document the frequency of foster children moving from one placement setting to another. In a comprehensive literature review, Unrau (2007) explored the question of how placement moves were conceptualized and operationalized in research studies. After reviewing 43 studies on placement stability from 9 different countries, she identified nearly two dozen terms used by researchers to refer to a placement move. Terms identified included move, disruption, breakdown, obvious breakdown, successful placement, placement success, placement pattern, transfer, shifts in placement, stability, instability, placement pathways, spell, placement change, change

in placement, move event, patterns of movement, number of placements, status of placement, stability-within-placement, quality of placement, and placement failure (p. 129). Furthermore, her results indicated that nearly half of the studies constructed a definition of placement move from case record information, and most studies used delimiting criteria to arrive at a count of placement moves with the child as the unit of analysis. The review concluded that definitions for placement moves vary widely across research studies and researchers use different criteria for determining which of the moves experienced by foster children would count as such in a given study. Research criteria varied on several dimensions, including but not limited to time frames (e.g., length of child's stay in placement) and conditions (e.g., home of a relative or not).

Defining placement moves also has presented challenges in the policy arena, particularly between the federal government and state child welfare agencies. The U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS) mandates each child welfare agency to document children's placement moves in the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) database. The federal definition of a placement move contained within the AFCARS Foster Care Element #24 is as follows: "the number of places the child has lived, including the current setting, during the current removal episode. Do not include trial home visits as a placement setting" (USDHHS, 2003, p. 54). Additional criteria are given to determine which relocation events can be counted or not counted. Specifically, states are permitted to count placements that are longer than 24 hours, shelter care, treatment center, juvenile justice facility, placements into a previous foster care setting under certain conditions, and placement after a trial home visit or runaway episode. States are not permitted to count "temporary living conditions that are not placements, but rather represent a temporary absence from the child's ongoing foster care placement" (USDHHS, 2003, p. 26). These include visitations (preplacement visits, sibling, or relative), medical or psychiatric hospitalizations, respite care, trial home visits, and runaway episodes.

Despite the parameters provided by the federal government, significant variation exists in how states count the number of placements for each child. In 2002, the National Working Group (NWG) to Improve

Child Welfare Data conducted a state-level survey on placement change calculations and related populations during a six-month period. All 50 states and the District of Columbia responded to the survey. Results indicated that the majority of states counted placement moves in accordance with most federal guidelines. For example, 69% did not count respite, 82% excluded trial home visits, and 73% did not count runaway episodes. However, there was considerable variation (59% to 76%) in how states counted medical hospitalizations, psychiatric hospital stays, and detention. It was also found that while the majority of states (84%) counted placement moves by observing actual movement of children, some states counted the number of unique care providers per child. This particular emphasis of calculation generates very different results. For example, if a child physically relocates four times, but does so by moving back and forth between two different care providers, the count of actual moves is double the count of care providers.

In 2005, the NWG conducted a similar study on reunification rates with 41 States. The results showed that 56% of the states did not have a workable definition of reunification but had specific policies and procedures in place. The researchers also found some consistency in how the states reported reunification, discharge dates, length of trial home visits, and protective custody. However, all the states had considerable variation in these areas. Due to the significant variation in how states document placement moves, NWG developed and produced a set of specific recommendations on how the placement move definitions could be improved and modified (2006). In sum, there is not a common definition of a placement move in research studies and similar results are found in child welfare practice; states are not consistent in criteria used to document a placement move. Moreover, to date, the efforts to develop a definition of placement moves seem to emphasize measuring quantity over quality of the move experience.

The perspective of persons who have lived the experience of foster care placement moves—foster children past and present—is largely absent from efforts to understand placement moves as experienced by foster children. Two studies have targeted this focus. Barber and Delfabbro (2003) interviewed 13 foster youth between 10 and 15 years old who experienced

at least one move because the foster parent objected to the child's behavior. Findings showed that some youth disliked their placements and welcomed the move, while others said they had liked the placement and regretted the breakdown. In some instances, youth reported being deliberate about their negative behaviors in order to force a move. In a companion paper to the present study, Unrau, Seita, and Putney (2008) report that foster care placement moves are remembered in adulthood as past events associated with profound loss, as well as periods of shutting down emotional connections with others. These studies provide insight into the experience of the move transition as separate from the matter of monitoring quantity or frequency of placement moves.

If researchers and policy makers hope to base their work efforts on a definition of placement moves that is steeped in the human experience of such events, then the perspective of individuals who have experienced moves is critical. The aim of

**TABLE 1.** Sample Demographic Characteristics Compared to Other Alumni Research Studies

CHARACTERISTICS	PRESENT STUDY (N = 22)	CASEY NATIONAL ALUMNI STUDY (N = 1609)	NORTHWEST ALUMNI STUDY (N = 659)	MIDWEST EVALUATION STUDY (WAVE 3) (N = 590)
% Female	68	55	61	53
% White	59	65	46	33
% African American	18 <sup>a</sup>	11	—	56
% Other race	23	24	54 <sup>b</sup>	10
Current age (median, range)	31 (18–65)	30 (21–51)	24 (20–33)	21 (21–22)
Age in years at entry to care	10.0	9.0	11.0	—
Age at exit out of care	18.0	19.0	19.5	—
Average number years in care	7.0	7.2	6.1	—
% with x number of moves				
3 or less	9	18	32	—
4 to 7	45	—	35	—
8 or more	45	56 <sup>c</sup>	32	—
20 or more moves	9	3	—	—
% High-school graduate (or GED)	82	88	84	77
% Employed or at school	68	88	74	52, 24 <sup>d</sup>
% Without health insurance	18	29	33	49

<sup>a</sup> Includes participants who identified as biracial with one part African American; <sup>b</sup> this study used ethnicity and other race—includes Hispanic and non-Hispanic (White and other); <sup>c</sup> % count of 7 or more moves; <sup>d</sup> 52% were employed and 24% were currently enrolled in school.

this article is to fill this gap in the literature by exploring how adults who were formerly foster children lived through multiple placement experiences, thus working toward a more comprehensive definition of the foster care placement move.

## Methodology

### Sample

As part of this study, we interviewed a purposive sample of 22 adults who had experienced multiple foster care placements during childhood. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling procedures, which generated a series of chain referrals that stemmed from a network of recruitment sources known to the researchers (foster care parents and workers, academics and students in schools of social work, personal contacts known to the authors, and individuals who publicly identify as foster care “alumni”). Three inclusion criteria were used to determine sample eligibility: 18 years or older, emancipated from foster care, and self-reported having lived in two or more placements while in care. Most participants were living in the Midwest United States at the time of the study.

Recruitment efforts took place during a 3-month period in the spring of 2006. The demographic characteristics of the study sample are featured in Table 1 alongside national and regional foster care alumni studies. We present our sample demographics in contrast to other studies that investigated the perspectives of former foster youth for the purposes of context only. Since many of the sample demographics of the present study are similar to those of larger foster care alumni studies, it is useful to reflect on the findings in the context of the larger emerging body of research that is investigating foster care experiences and consequences from the perspective of individuals formerly fostered.

### Study Procedures

We presented structured interview questions to all 22 study participants by telephone interview ( $n = 15$ ), by face-to-face interview ( $n = 4$ ), or by e-mail ( $n = 3$ ). Face-to-face interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed, while telephone responses were typed out during the interview. Three trained interviewers were used, and all interview procedures were approved by a university institutional review board. Appendix A details the portion of the structured interview schedule that applies to this article.

Development of study procedures were guided by criteria for evaluating qualitative research studies developed by Shek, Tang, and Han (2005). A detailed account of how the study met each criterion is described elsewhere (Unrau, 2007). We analyzed the data by first identifying “meaning units” by reading line-by-line for emerging concepts, and then using constant comparison methods to develop first- and second-level coding schemes, as well as the final themes (Coleman & Unrau, 2008). Efforts to increase trustworthiness and authenticity of findings included testing inter-rater reliability across multiple analyzers on a segment of transcripts, reading the data across participants by each interview question and within complete interview (i.e., all questions per participant). Additionally, interviewers and analysts kept journal notes, and consulted two experts who were identified as such, based on the fact that both had formerly lived in multiple foster care placements and their professional work involved foster care.

## Findings

The study findings address the research question of how adults who

experienced multiple foster care placements in their childhood or youth define a placement move. In an effort to balance participants’ privacy with respect to the presentation of their quotes and to give readers select detail about the person supplying the quote, we have tagged featured quotes with three key characteristics: number of moves (including number of returns home), age grouping, and race. The purpose of tagging the quotes was to show the commonness of responses, despite differences, in frequency of moves, participant’s present age group (i.e., 18 to 19, 21 to 22, 26 to 31, 37 to 40, 43 to 53, and 60+ years old), and race (i.e., African American, Biracial, White, Hispanic, and Native American). Race is a variable of particular interest not only because children of color are overrepresented in the foster care system (USDHHS, 2008), but also because being part of a minority racial group is positively correlated with length or stay, number of placements, and not being reunified (Harris & Hackett, 2007; Hill, 2006; Wells & Guo, 1999). At the request of our experts, we used age groupings and omitted gender as an identifier to give added protection of privacy for participants. With respect to gender, it is important to note at least one and no more than two males were represented in each age category. The findings are presented below in two parts: (a) toward a two-dimensional definition of placement moves, and (b) viewing return home as another placement.

### Two Dimensions of Defining Placement Moves

We asked participants their opinions about how a placement move should be defined by responding to the issue of “length of stay,” as well as giving a general definition of a move (see Appendix A). Two major themes emerged from the responses: (a) the physical shift of placement moves, and (b) the psychological shift of placement moves.

**Physical shifts during placement moves.** When asked whether particular moves should “count” based on length of stay, the majority of participants voiced strongly that “every move counts.” Moreover, in response to being directly asked about length of stay, many participants rejected the idea that short stays (e.g., one week, one day) should be omitted from total move counts. Instead, they stressed the significance of physical shifts that children go through as part of the move transition. The responses of 15 participants led to this theme. Some examples follow:

I think that if a child goes for an hour, and if they stay there for an hour, that move, that change, or that placement can affect them within that hour...because within that placement, if that foster family says something mean or abusive towards them, that could change the outlook on life or how they act or their behavior. So, you know, as soon as they walk in and get introduced, and then the first thing that is said, that should be when the placement starts. (3 moves with 0 returns home, 26 to 31 years old, White)

Every move should count. It is still a move. You are leaving your family that you probably are used to. Even if it was for a little while, you move with a family and then you move back, even if it was a short stay. You move in with your family or a foster home, it should still be considered a move. I think it should. (13 moves with 3 returns home, 18 to 19 years old, biracial)

Every move counts to me, be it one day or two. A move is a move. Your life changes. You walk home from school wondering if this is going to be the day I move again. There is no certainty. (28+ moves with “many” returns home, 26 to 31 years old, Native American)

Every move is a move. You are trying to adjust right away, meeting new people. Every move is a move.... The FBI would count it. Once you relocate, it is a move. Back and forth. It is a move. (33+ moves with 0 returns home, 60+ years old, White)

A tangible activity identified by participants as marking the physical experience of relocating from one placement to another was the event of packing up one's personal belongings. Many participants who talked about packing up their belongings were referring to the idea of moving all of their possessions, and often without much planning or notice. Moreover, participants communicated their perceptions that they felt no guarantee that any belongings they forgot would later be retrieved or that someone would see to it that items left behind would be returned. Ten participants specifically commented on "packing things" as a tangible marker of a placement move. The following quotes represent the perspective of the larger group.

I think that every time you need to pack the children's belongings up and leave, that is a move. (4 moves with 0 returns home, 37 to 40 years old, White)

Packing up everything and moving again. A move is a move when you take all your belongings that you can carry, if in a hurry or not, and you know once you leave you are never coming back. (5 moves with 0 returns home, 21 to 22 years old, Native American)

Think about how hard it is to pack up all your stuff and move. You have to pack everything....I never really wanted to move either, but they would say pack up and you had to, you know it was frustrating. No one likes to move. (9+ moves with 0 returns home, 18 to 19 years old, African American)

Everything got left behind. You end up only with the clothes on your back when you go from place to place....It was losing everything you had....Your stuff was all you had. It is tough being a teenager when you don't have clothes. (4 moves with 1 return home, 26 to 31 years old, White)

I usually lost everything I owned. There was never any packing involved (laugh). You never had to take anything, you just went. (6 moves with 0 returns home, 37 to 40 years old, White)

**Psychological shifts during placement moves.** Even more than the physical aspect of a placement move (i.e., relocating one's person and possessions from the location of one care provider's home or facility to another), participants stressed the cognitive and emotional shifts that were central to the transition experience. Cognitive processes most frequently discussed were related to feelings of uncertainty about the move, owing to lack of planning or information given to the foster youth at the time of the move. As participants recalled their past placement moves, "not knowing who, what, when, where, and why" generated high levels of distress. Emotions involved in the move experience included being afraid or scared, as well as struggling with loss and turmoil associated with interpersonal relationships that in most cases were negatively affected by the move (see Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008). The psychological shift associated with a move, it seems, may or may not happen concurrently with the physical transition, and is therefore considered a separate but related dimension of defining the move experience. While we did not specifically ask about respite care, 3 participants specifically commented that respite "placement" is different because one has knowledge about the temporary nature of the move.

Overall, participants did not recollect experiencing planned

interventions, such as preplacement visits, trial home visits, or participation in meetings to plan the move. Interventions to facilitate a successful transition were not mentioned by participants. It is possible that placement preparation activities took place but were not remembered, because foster care happened during childhood; however, other research suggests that placement preparation activity does not commonly occur in foster care (Johnson, Yoken, & Voss, 1995; Palmer, 1996). Responses by 13 participants led to this finding. A sample of interview excerpts follows.

I'd have to say that it would be a placement with the expectation that I was going to be there a while. That was really hard for me, not knowing how long I was going to be somewhere. Back then the social workers were not forthcoming with information. They didn't expect you to understand things. Um...I think it depends on the child. For me if I was told it was going to be temporary, then I did not feel that was a place I was going to stay. It was not too hard to move from there. I didn't allow myself to get too comfortable, or expect to stay there too long. (6 moves with 0 returns home, 37 to 40 years old, Native American)

But if they already moved out of the home that they were in, then their emotions are still there, and it still feels like a move. Even with my 2-week stay, I was upset. It was supposed to be a 2-week trial that turned into 3 weeks. I moved all my things there, and it felt like it was my home. Emotions are still there even in 1 day. An exception is when the worker says that it is temporary; then you don't get your hopes up. Every move you get your hopes up, and you think this the move where I am going to stay. (9+ moves with 0 returns home, 21 to 22 years old, White)

Any experience, any environment, any word, any gesture, anything that is done from one human being to another counts, especially if it is a young person.... All of it ultimately makes an impact on the youth. So, since it makes an impact, it counts because I guarantee you one thing—that it counts to that young person. (13+ moves with 1 return home, 37 to 40 years old, African American)

Once the information has been conveyed, the psychological process begins. The wariness, self talk, and protectionist behavior comes in place. ... you already have the adaptive mechanisms in place. Protectionist strategies. You have already prepared yourself for the experience. If (the placement) ends quickly, it doesn't matter. (20+ moves with 0 returns home, 43 to 53 years old, White)

### **Viewing Return Home as Another Placement**

Study participants were asked to contrast return home moves with moves from one foster placement to another. For some study participants, the idea of moving in and out of one's birth family was viewed the same as moving through other foster care placements. Examples of responses that led to this theme are as follows:

When you are moved out of your home and you move back, everyone is watching you. Your family becomes your placement. When you are put back, it is temporary, you have to go to meetings...until you are no longer a part of the court, it is a placement because you can be moved at any time. (4 moves with 1 return home, 26 to 31 years old, White)

If you are moving, you are still moving back and forth. If your birth family can't take care of you, it still counts as a move. It is like

bouncing from foster home to foster home. (7 moves with 0 returns home, 21 to 22 years old, White)

Other participants acknowledged that a return home, whether it was viewed as a placement or not, was a different type of move experience owing to the psychological impact of emotions and expectations related to the anticipation of living with or being reunited with their birth families. Some participant responses that highlight this difference are as follows:

Compared to a totally new situation because with moving back to... birth home or the original home, adoptive home, however you want to describe it... it is that those parents supposedly went through counseling or some other thing, and passed whatever program that was. Which would hopefully change the parent—birth, adoptive, whatever—...but you can never know for sure. So you can't tell for sure if it'll do anything. (3 moves with 0 returns home, 26 to 31 years old, White)

I think it can be damaging to a child to be going from their home base to foster care. That kind of move could be traumatic if done over and over again. (5 moves with 0 returns home, 21 to 22 years old, Native American)

Finally, 1 respondent spoke to the idea that children in foster care are likely to experience many more moves and transitions beyond any official count documented by child welfare authorities. From the perspective of the foster child, these should count too. Indeed, other research has observed such instability prior to foster care (Festinger, 1983; Taber & Proch, 1987).

I mean I would expand it more, like I know right now the current definition is it has to be formally documented, you know, for it to be counted as a placement, but there are some, many kids that end up with a, you know, grandparent or *fictive* kin, you know... a parent will put them there even before a removal happens, and I think those should count too. I think it needs to be any time a child is, for any length of time, being cared for by anyone other than a biological parent, that placement should be identified as a placement. (6 moves with 2 returns home, 26 to 31 years old, White)

The observation that foster children have experienced moves prior to entering foster care has been recorded by others (Festinger, 1983; Taber & Proch, 1987; McAuley & Trew, 2000). This view is a reminder that any instability experienced in foster care may well be a continuation of a pattern of moves and transitions. Additionally, any official count of foster care placements should be set in the context of instability, uncertainty, and a framework sensitive to emotional trauma. For example, within that context, while a 1-hour “placement” might seem inconsequential to an outsider, it may be viewed as traumatic to a young person moving within the foster care system. The meaning given to a particular move experience and the meaning given to the number of moves should both be considered in efforts to understand and respond to children experiencing placement moves in foster care.

## Discussion and Implications

By investigating how the foster care placement move is defined from the perspective of individuals who have experienced multiple out-of-home placements, this study makes it evident that there are several considerations for policy, research, or practice efforts that address the events of children in foster care moving from one placement to another.

The study findings raise important questions about the completeness of federal guidelines for monitoring the quantity of placement moves, especially if such data are expected to promote better understanding and practice for the well-being of children who change placements while in foster care.

The qualitative nature of the study, with its modest sample size, limits the generalizability of its findings. However, the information provided by the 22 study participants suggests that work efforts—research, policy, or practice—related to placement moves in foster care should minimally consider both the physical and psychological dimensions of such move events. Specifically, administrators, practitioners, and foster parents involved in decisions and interactions with foster children moving from one placement to another should apply this two-dimensional perspective in ways that promote physical safety and psychological security during times of placement change, specifically, and throughout the foster care stay generally.

The voices of participants in this study suggest the following definition for the event of a placement move: a placement move of a child in foster care is defined as any shift in the child's living situation that physically changes a child's living location and fully and completely transfers day-to-day caretaking responsibility to another adult; the move is arranged by a caseworker or agency representative, with or without the child's involvement and none, some, or all of the child's possessions are transferred as part of the move experience. Furthermore, a physical move event occurs regardless of the length of stay, intent of the move, expected outcome of the move, or perceived impact upon the child. This definition is more inclusive than any other in the literature. It excludes runaway episodes because, by definition, they do not meet all the criteria (e.g., caseworker did not arrange for the shift). By counting all shifts affecting a child's living arrangement that involved transfer of caregiving responsibility, we separate the measurement problem of trying to give meaning to different types, amounts, and durations of move events.

While the counts of physical shifts in placement are relatively easily tabulated, such indicators alone are insufficient to measure or monitor the impact of moves on child well-being. The psychological or emotional shift experienced by foster children who are about to move, or think they are, is perhaps a more important element of the move event to consider from the perspective of child well-being, but it is one that is more difficult to measure objectively. Further research is needed to fully develop measures of move quality. Responses by participants in this study provide a beginning point for such discussion. For example, how much advance notice did the child have about the move? In what ways did the child participate in planning the move? What is the length of stay going to be? Does the child want to move? Does the child welcome or regret the move? Questions of move quality set in a developmental framework would add far greater information and insight to understanding the dynamics of moves experienced by children versus the quantity alone. In absence of uniform measures of move quality, researchers and practitioners are encouraged to observe carefully and record how children respond to or participate in move events. Individual and interpersonal experiences should also be documented.

The findings also revealed that some participants did not know when they were going to move; they did not recall being included in the decision-making process. There may be many reasons why social workers or foster parents do not tell a foster child about an imminent move. For example, it may be that communication failures within the system prevent this information from reaching foster children in a timely manner, or that caseworkers or foster parents withhold such

information for fear that children may act out in challenging ways. Significantly, the absence of information to prepare for a move was remembered as a negative event by study participants many years after having left foster care. Further research is needed to investigate the relationship between informed and involved (versus uninformed and uninvolved) placement moves to emotional adjustment and well-being for foster children.

It seems important to note that physical and cognitive shifts in the move experience may be only loosely connected to each other. For example, a foster child may believe that a move is imminent and so begins the psychological process of shifting thoughts and emotions, but the move does not happen. Or alternatively, a child is initially told she will be placed in a temporary placement for a weekend and does not engage in the psychological process of thinking or feeling the goodbyes of her current placement; but, then the stay extends into several months or longer.

One notable perspective provided by some study participants is that returning home was perceived as another placement. This was particularly so when case files remained open, which seemed to indicate that a move out of one's biological home was still probable. Other participants also viewed a return home as a placement but noted that different psychological factors were at play. Indeed, repeated moves into and out of the biological home may be more traumatic as children in foster care are faced with many questions, emotions, and fears about the capacity of their parents to love or reject them. It seems especially important that children being removed from or returned to their biological families be provided with therapeutic opportunities to talk about their anxieties and fears and to address how such transitions fit in the larger context of placement moves within the foster care experience. Further research is needed to explore the intimate differences and challenges associated with moving home versus moving in with strangers or relatives. However, the findings of this study question the logic of federal legislation that separates "trial home visits or pre-placement visits" from move counts. For individuals who have experienced multiple foster care placements, a move from a foster care placement to return home is a significant transition, especially if there is continued risk of being removed from home again.

Overall, the findings challenge the federal guidelines for counting only certain placement moves (e.g., trial home visits, short moves). Information provided by study participants suggests that any shift or change in placement, regardless of length of stay, has an impact on children in foster care during any transition from one home to another and therefore should constitute a placement move. Study participants voiced strongly that "every move is a move." It does not matter how long a child stays in one placement; in the end, the child still must cope with the emotional and physical aspects of having to relocate, pack up his or her belongings, adjust to new caregivers, and so on. From this perspective, the federal guidelines need further development of measures to assist states in monitoring the well-being of children during foster care placement transitions.

This research gives professionals, policy makers, and administrators a deeper understanding of how placement moves are viewed by individuals who experienced multiple foster care placements. The findings contribute to efforts to create a more comprehensive definition of a placement move event. Expanding the definition of foster care placement moves to include both physical and psychological dimensions, and taking care to include returns home and preplacement visits as moves, may better equip policymakers, foster care practitioners and foster parents to look at the move experience through a more complete lens that clearly has the well-being of children in foster care in plain view.

While the counts of physical shifts in placement are easily tabulated, such indicators alone are insufficient to measure or monitor the impact of moves on child well-being. Our study indicates that movement within the foster care system has meaning, creates lasting memories, and may even shape present day views among individuals who experienced such moves. The very nature of entering foster care is typically filled with fear, uncertainly, pain, loneliness, and perhaps most of all, mistrust. Responses generated by study participants suggest that quality of the move experience is equally if not more important than the quantity of move experiences.

## References

- Barber, J. G., & Delfabbro, P. H. (2003). The views of disruptive children and their carers. In J. G. Barber & P. H. Delfabbro (Eds.), *Children in foster care* (pp. 184–195). New York: Routledge.
- Coleman, H., & Unrau, Y. A. (2008). Qualitative data analysis. In R. M. Grinnell, Jr. & Y. A. Unrau (Eds.), *Social work research and evaluation: Foundations for evidence-based practice* (8th ed.; pp. 370–386). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Festinger, T. (1983). *No one ever asked us—A postscript to foster care*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Fraser, M. W., Pecora, P. J., & Haapala, D. A. (1991). *Families in crisis: The impact of intensive family preservation services*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Harris, M. S., & Hackett, W. (2007). Decision points in child welfare: An action research model to address disproportionality. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30, 199–215.
- Hill, R. G. (2006). *Synthesis of research on disproportionality in the child welfare system: An update*. Washington, DC: Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity in the Child Welfare System.
- Johnson, P. R., Yoken, C., & Voss, R. (1995). Family foster care placement: The child's perspective. *Child Welfare*, 74(5), 959–975.
- Jones, M. (1978). Stopping foster care drift: A review of legislation and special programs. *Child Welfare*, 57, 571–580.
- Maas, H. S., & Engler, R. E. (1959). *Children in need of parents*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- McAuley, C., & Trew, K. (2000). Children's adjustment over time in foster care: Cross-informant agreement, stability and placement disruption. *British Journal of Social Work*, 30(1), 81–107.
- Palmer, S. E. (1996). Placement stability and inclusive practice in foster care: An empirical study. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 18(7), 589–601.
- Shek, D. T. L., Tang, V. M. Y., & Han, X. Y. (2005). Evaluation of evaluation studies using qualitative research methods in social work literature (1990–2003): Evidence that constitutes a wake-up call. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 15, 180–194.
- Taber, M. A., & Proch, K. (1987). Placement stability for adolescents in foster care: Finding from a program experiment. *Child Welfare*, 66(5), 433–445.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2003). *AFCARS user guide*. Retrieved March 2, 2008, from [http://www.nrcswd.org/resources/afcars/notebook/docs/tt\\_afcars\\_ug\\_tab4b.pdf](http://www.nrcswd.org/resources/afcars/notebook/docs/tt_afcars_ug_tab4b.pdf)
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families. (2008). *Child Maltreatment 2006*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Unrau, Y. A. (2007). Research on placement moves: Seeking the perspective of foster children. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 29, 122–137.
- Unrau, Y. A., Seita, J. R., & Putney, K. S. (2008). Former foster youth remember multiple placement moves: A journey of loss and hope. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 30(11), 1256–1266
- Usher, C. L., Randolph, K. A., & Gogan, H. C. (1999). Placement patterns in foster care. *Social Services Review*, 73(1), 22–36.
- Wells, K., & Guo, S. (1999). Reunification and reentry of foster children. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 21, 273–294.
- Wulczyn, F., Kogan, J., & Harden, B. J. (2003). Placement stability and movement trajectories. *Social Services Review*, 77(2), 212–236.

## Appendix. Interview Schedule

### PART III: RESEARCHER DEFINITIONS OF MOVING PLACEMENTS IN FOSTER CARE

- 1) Researchers who study foster care do not agree on a definition of a move or placement change. For example, some researchers say

that if a child lives in a placement for less than one week, then that placement should not count as a move for that child.

- a) What do you think? How many days should a child stay in a placement for it to count?
  - b) If you were able to give researchers a definition of a move (or placement change) what would it be?
- 2) Researchers believe that moving back and forth between a foster care placement and a birth family is different from moving back and forth between different foster care placements. Do you agree? If so, how would you describe the difference? [Note: some former foster youth may come to think of an alternate family (e.g., foster, adoptive, relatives) as their own. Keep question focused on the difference between a foster care placement and a birth family.]
- 3) If you move from a foster home to your family and then back to the same foster home, then the agency may not count it as a move. Do you agree? Should every move count?

---

**Yvonne A. Unrau**, PhD, is professor, School of Social Work, Western Michigan University. **Ruth Chambers**, PhD, is assistant professor, Department of Social Work, California State University, Long Beach. **John R. Seita**, EdD, is associate professor, School of Social Work, Michigan State University. **Kristin S. Putney**, MSW, is president, Michigan Association for Foster, Adoptive and Kinship Parents. Correspondence regarding this article can be sent to the first author at yvonne.unrau@wmich.edu or School of Social Work, Western Michigan University, 1903 Michigan Ave, Kalamazoo, MI 49008-5354.

*Authors' note.* We would like to thank Anita Lacy for assistance with the development of the research questions and interpretation of findings and the Western Michigan University Graduate Assistant Program and School of Social Work for project funds and support.

Manuscript received: May 23, 2008

Revised: January 13, 2009

Accepted: January 28, 2009

## FAMILIES IN SOCIETY

*The Art, Science, and Practice of Social Work*

Want to be ahead of the curve? E-Alerts highlight newly-published articles and preview upcoming items of interest to social and human service professionals and educators. Convenient links for abstracts, tables of content, editorials, and other content are also provided at no cost. Register for free on [FamiliesInSociety.org](http://FamiliesInSociety.org).



*Families in Society* is published by the Alliance for Children and Families, a national member association of child- and family- serving organizations. [alliance1.org](http://alliance1.org)



# eAlerts