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Foster Parent Demographics: A Research Note

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Data were collected on a random sample of 218 foster parents in Michigan during Fall, 1991 regarding socioeconomic characteristics, licensure arrangement with placement agencies, foster parenting experiences, life experiences, reasons for entering, and satisfaction with foster parenting. Respondents are predominately female (77%), White (78%), educated beyond high school (63%), with an annual family income (excluding foster care payments) over \$26,000. Most are Protestant (78%), currently married (79%), and married once (71%). The average foster home cares for 3 children with 1.5 foster children currently placed. Median number of placements is 8 with families typically fostering numerous categories of children. Replacement of foster children occurred in 21% of the sample with less than 24 hours notice.

Foster care is one of the major social services directed to the needs of children in the United States. Two-thirds of children placed outside their natural homes are in foster homes and at least 200,000 children are in foster care on any given day (Saluter, 1993). Direct federal expenditures for foster care are estimated at \$3.4 billion annually (United States Senate, 1990). State and local direct and indirect costs are unknown.

The literature on foster care contains few studies about foster parents (Eastman, 1985). Much of that literature examines psychodynamic factors such as motivation to foster (Hampson & Tavormina, 1980) and coping with loss (Urquhart, 1989). Fewer studies provide a systematic account of demographic characteristics and fostering experiences of providers. Several such studies are dated, limited in breadth of reported data, contain small numbers of respondents, and report characteristics from small geographic areas (Child Welfare League of America, 1991; Fanshel, 1960; Kraus, 1971; Peterson & Pierce, 1974). The need for

current and systematic data is manifold. Answers to fundamental questions about foster parent recruitment, retention and service provision require complete and continually updated information starting with basic socioeconomic, background, and experiential data. This is particularly important since today's foster parents are more likely to care for medically fragile, emotionally disturbed and mentally deficient children previously institutionalized. Federal mandates have shortened the average length of placement. The continuing change and evolution of foster parenting programs further heighten the need for comprehensive data.

This paper reports selected demographic and social characteristics of a random sample of 500 foster parent licenses in the State of Michigan. While licenses are issued to households, gender and age data are respondent based. Two hundred and eighteen responses (48%) were received during the Fall, 1991. The anonymous survey methodology did not permit assessment of response bias.

Results

Socioeconomic Characteristics

Respondents were predominately female (77%), had an average age of 44, and most were White (78%) or African American (17%) (Table 1). Relatively few households (8%) contained interracial couples. Compared with Michigan residents, survey respondents over-represented African Americans and under-represented other minorities (U.S. Census, 1991).

Most respondents (79%) were currently married. Seventy-one percent of those ever married had been married only once. The average length of most recent marriage was 18 years. The average years of education completed was 13.4. Educational attainment among respondents was higher than the average education of all adult residents in the state.

The median family income, exclusive of foster parenting income, was \$27,145 which was slightly lower than all households in the state (median \$31,020). Notably, one in ten respondents reported an annual family income below \$5,000, and 1 in 3 reported income in excess of \$35,000. Respondents significantly over-represented families at income level extremes.

Table 1.

Percent of Foster Parents and Michigan Adults or Households by Various Socioeconomic Characteristics.

SOCIOECONOMIC CHARACTERISTIC		Foster Parents	Michigan Adults/ Households
GENDER	Females	77	52
	Males	23	48
ETHNICITY*	African-American	17	14
	White	78	83
	Other	5	3
EDUCATION	< H.S.	10	23
	H.S.	27	32
	Some College	43	27
	College Graduate	9	11
	Post-Graduate	11	6
HOUSEHOLD INCOME	< 5,000	10	6
	5,000 to 14,999	15	18
	15,000 to 24,999	20	16
	25,000 to 34,999	18	34
	> 35,000	37	26
	Household Median	27,145	31,020
MARITAL STATUS	Currently Married	79	56
	Not Currently Married	21	44

* Present study classifies respondents among categories of Black, White, Native American, Hispanic, Oriental/Asian and Other. U.S. Census classifies persons by race and Hispanic-Origin separately such that persons of Hispanic-Origin may belong to any racial group. The impact of methodological differences is slight since the majority of foster parents identifying themselves as of Hispanic-Origin are probably also White.

Most respondents indicated a Protestant religious preference (60%). The remaining individuals were divided between Catholic (17%), Other (15% including Jehovah Witness, Islamic, and New Age religions), and None (4%). Notably, no respondents indicated a Jewish religious preference. Seventeen percent of those with a

religious preference did not attend church services. The majority (59%) of churchgoers estimated their church congregation size as 150 or more members. No other studies delineated religious preference.

Foster Parenting Experiences

Table 2 summarizes selected foster parenting experiences. The cumulative number of children fostered ranged from 1 to 603 (mean= 31). With a median value of eight children fostered, this distribution was highly skewed. Ten percent of respondents had fostered more than 75 children while 8% of respondents had fostered only one child. At the time of response, fostering households had an average of .8 male foster children and .7 female foster children. Including natural children, an average of 2.8 children were currently in the home. Average length of placements was ascertained in two ways. The estimated length of stay for the majority of placements was between 22 and 24 months. The average length of placement for the last foster child was slightly more than thirteen months with a range of 2 days to 11 $\frac{2}{3}$ years.

Licenseses (65%) had fostered children of elementary school age more than any other age. Among respondents with at least 2 foster child placements, only 14% reported fostering children solely in one age group.

The typical foster family cares for children with a wide variety of problems. Neglected children had been fostered by 86% of respondents; 75% reported fostering physically abused children; 66% had fostered sexually abused children; and 61% had fostered emotionally disturbed children. Less frequent placements included mentally impaired children, children adjudicated delinquent, medically fragile children, and children with physical handicaps. Of foster parents with at least two placements, 63% reported fostering children in four or more of the above groups and 9% reported caring for children in only one category.

All respondents were asked about the circumstances surrounding the last foster child to leave their home. Equal percentages (21%) received less than one day's notice or between one day and two weeks notice. Twenty-nine percent received two weeks to one month notice. Twelve percent were notified of removal prior to placement. Six percent of foster parents requested that

Table 2.

Characteristics of Children Fostered.

CHILD CHARACTERISTIC		Percent	Frequency
Age Ranges:	0 to 12 Months	50	106
	1 to 4 Years	56	119
	5 to 11 Years	65	137
	12to 14 Years	56	118
	15 to 18 Years	50	107
Special Needs Children:	Physically Abused	75	155
	Neglected	86	177
	Sexually Abused	66	136
	Emotionally Disturbed	61	126
	Handicapped	22	45
	Medically Fragile	25	52
	Mentally Impaired	36	74
	Adjudicated	27	56

their last child fostered be removed from the home. Older foster parents rated foster children more positively than younger foster parents.

Discussion

The foster parents were better educated, less affluent, and as racially diverse as the general population. The over-representation of African American licensees appears to be related to the disproportionate presence of African American children in foster care. Fanshel (1960), Jaffe (1970), Petersen and Pierce (1974) and Moore, Grandpre and Scoll (1988) found similar over-representations of African-Americans as compared to the general area population (U.S. Senate, 1990). Nonetheless, a significant shortage of African American licensees continues to plague foster care systems. Initiative within the African American community, e.g., "One Church One Child," are attempts to ameliorate the imbalance in foster care and adoption. However, anecdotal information suggests continued difficulties for African Americans

to become licensed providers and adoptive parents. Authorities may wish to revisit strict licensing standards, particularly with respect to past, minor criminal records.

State policy allowed individuals who were employed outside of the home to be licensed as foster parents. This practice, as well as changing societal values and mores, may have contributed to the present difference in foster parent educational and income level as compared with findings of Fanshel (1960), Jaffe (1970), and Petersen and Pierce (1974). Fostering households at the low income extreme may disproportionately represent kinship fostering, e.g., grandparents fostering grandchildren. Unfortunately, the present study did not capture kinship ties. To the extent that kinship placements are adequately vetted and feature ongoing monitoring, such placements are extremely beneficial in maintaining social and extended family relationships for children.

As assessed by the variety of children placed, special needs and age groupings, little placement specialization appears to occur. Conventional wisdom apparently favors the adage of foster parents being "a jack of all trades—a master of none." The viewpoint of interchangeability of providers appears strengthened by the seemingly cavalier removal of children from homes with little or no notice. Such practices appear to objectify foster children and fostering parents and may lead to disrespect of individual strengths and needs. At a minimum, the lack of notification fails to afford the opportunity to adequately transition children. This is an important area of inquiry.

Areas of further research include: examining aids and barriers to entering fostering, exploring the nature and efficacy of training as it relates to foster parenting and placements of children with special needs, and investigating and ameliorating barriers to the continuing provision of foster care particularly regarding issues of bonding and separation between foster parents and children.

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