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Why Foster Parents Continue and Cease to Foster

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This study addressed the following question: What factors thought likely to influence the license status of foster family homes predict to continuing and what predict to ceasing to foster? This study was conducted in eight urban counties in a large Midwestern state. Using logistic regression, a 13 variable model was developed. The factors with odds ratios that predicted greater likelihood of closed license status were: when the foster mother is white, respondent wanting to adopt but being unable to do so, concern about agency red tape, disagreement with the statement that social workers reached out to foster parents, and respondents not having foster care as an income source. Factors with odds ratios that predicted greater likelihood of active license status were: named in an abuse and neglect allegation, seeing children sent back to a bad situation, not enough money/small clothing allowance, a significant personal loss of a family member, being unclear about what agency social workers expected and having too little time to get other things done.

Introduction

State departments of social services carry out a range of federal child welfare policies, including P.L. 96-272. However, licensing of foster homes and residential facilities remains exclusively a state administrative and fiscal responsibility. State departments typically administer or supervise the operation of county public children's service agencies, private child placing agencies and private non custodial agencies which recommend family foster homes for licensure.

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Some state licensing officials have expressed concern over the issue of maintaining an adequate supply statewide of qualified foster homes and over the issue of possible crowding in foster homes (Biggs, 1992). Biggs questioned whether children are better protected through placement and whether infants should be placed in group care because the supply of suitable foster homes is inadequate as some counties proposed.

Nationally, there has been a crisis in child protection service prompted by a shortage of suitable foster family homes able to provide safe and supportive care when children must be placed away from their own homes. This problem has been documented in national perspective by Kamerman and Kahn (1990) and General Accounting Office reports (USGAO, 1989; USGAO, 1993).

In 1989 the GAO reported there was an increasing need for foster home placements and a decreasing number of foster parents. The GAO consulted foster care professionals and the literature on foster care to identify causes for the nationwide shortage of foster parents. Professionals said that recruiting and retaining foster parents were becoming more difficult. Three factors were seen as causes for a decreased pool of potential parents from which to recruit: 1) lack of support for foster parents in dealing with the more complex emotional, behavioral and physical problems of today's foster children, 2) the poor public image of foster care and 3) changes in society, such as more working women.

Professionals expressed the belief that pre-service training can contribute to retention of foster parents when it helps to select appropriate parents and prepares foster parents for the challenges of caring for foster children. However, a substantial number of licensed homes at any one time may not have children placed in them (Campbell & Downs, 1987; Baring-Gould et al., 1983).

Systematically developed knowledge is needed from the vantage point of foster parents about factors predicting the homes that might be no longer licensed and homes that continue to be licensed. This broadened base of information will confirm or disconfirm the views of professionals and better inform policy makers as they address the challenge of retaining on a statewide basis an increasing percent of those homes that should and can

be retained through interventions by child placing/ licensing agencies.

Empirical Background

Studies of Reasons for Leaving Foster Care

Baring-Gould et al. (1983) identified reasons for foster home closure in Alaska . They found changes in the foster parents' situation (62 percent), inadequate delivery of agency social services (26 percent), and disillusionment about what foster parenting includes (25 percent) were the three most frequently mentioned reasons for closure. About 18 percent of the homes were closed involuntarily. Similarly, Urquhart (1989) assessed how factors concerning the separation and loss experience affected retention. Significant differences between open and closed homes were found on two major dimensions: training and agency services and supports. Downs (1986), using the 1980 Westat Survey of Foster Parents in Eight States, examined characteristics of black foster parents and their relationships with child welfare agencies. She found that black foster parents differ from white foster parents in demographic characteristics, are more likely to care for children of relatives and have more problematic relationships with child welfare and collateral agencies.

Cummins (1994) proposed an interactive model of ceasing to foster. This model was grounded in fifteen in-depth interviews with randomly selected foster parents who had recently ceased to foster. Cummins' argument is that the goals of foster parents and of agencies are only partially shared and as a result, the parties conflict; this condition in turn impacts foster parents' level of trust, consciousness of differential power and how they use training and social service support. Cummins claim is that respondents were motivated to foster out of love and commitment to children. A lack of agency commitment was perceived in the generally low level of involvement of agency staff with the child and family and in negative attitudes of staff toward foster parents. The agency was seen as guided by "monetary" concerns, large caseloads and paperwork. Together, these interacting factors lead to a loss of faith in the agency and to the decision to cease to foster. These

factors were potentiated by precipitating personal stress, illness, frailty and losses through death and divorce.

The GAO survey of professionals' views (1989) reported increasing numbers of foster parents were ceasing to provide foster care because they did not receive support and positive recognition in dealing with difficulties they face in caring for today's children. Such difficulties include violent and sexually precocious behavior, risks that foster families will be exposed to communicable disease and false allegations of abuse against foster parents by birth parents (USGAO, 1989). Examples of lack of support for foster parents included failure of some social service agencies to treat foster parents with respect and to establish working partnerships among foster parents, birth parents, potential adoptive parents, children and agencies. Other issues were low reimbursement rates, little respite for foster families, difficulty obtaining liability protection, inaccessible social agency caseworkers and insufficient foster parent training.

Response to a 1989 national survey (Carbino, 1992) in the United States showed pioneer efforts of a few state foster care agencies and foster parent associations to help foster parents facing child maltreatment allegations. Most agency policies and procedures, however, reflect little awareness or understanding of the issue for foster parents, prescribe abrupt and potentially deleterious action, and may be strongly influenced by considerations of agency legal liability.

Studies of Training and Reimbursement Effects on Retention

Boyd & Remy (1979) did a follow up study of 120 licensed families two years from the time the sample was identified. The researchers reported a substantial positive effect of training on licensing outcomes even after controlling for the foster parents' personal qualities of assertiveness and activism and children's risk characteristics. Chamberlain, Moreland, and Reid (1992) sought to learn if increased support and training of foster parents plus an additional monthly stipend (n=31) had an influence on their perseverance as licensed homes. A control group (n=27) received a stipend of \$25.00. The drop out rate for the treatment group was 9.6 percent and for the control group, 25.9 percent.

Studies Predicting Status

Gidron's prospective study (1984) identified predictors of retention and turnover among service volunteer workers (n=123) in three Israeli community centers. The entire service volunteer population was examined at two points in time within an interval of six months. He sought to identify the personal (social/demographic), organizational (supervision) and attitudinal variables (satisfaction and source of rewards) which would distinguish the "stayers" (n=41) from the "leavers by choice" (n=35). Being prepared for the task, task achievement (the client makes progress), relationship with the other volunteers, and the work itself (challenging, interesting, independence, responsibility) were identified as best discriminators between the two groups.

Campbell & Downs' (1987) analysis of the 1980 Westat Survey of Foster Parents in eight States (n=1074) examined the relation between economic incentives and the supply of foster-care services. They found limited support for the hypothesis that a direct relation exists between level of board rates and the number of children in a home. Respondents in the study who had no child in placement (27 percent) were compared with parents who had a child in placement using a logistic regression model. Four independent variables in the model predicted to having a child in placement: more available time for fostering, no problems with the public agency, and controls for age (41-60) and more than a year of fostering experience (duration). Real board rates were not uniform in their influence on supply across the eight states. Tucker & Hurl (1991) investigated how foster home exit rates vary with age, and whether the age-dependence of exit rates is maintained after taking into account the effects of certain foster home characteristics and environmental conditions extant at the time of entry. The study supports the pattern of exits characterized by initially increasing and subsequently decreasing exit rates. The following control variables had significant and negative effects on exit rates: particular child (status), total number of foster homes in the population (density), an increase in foster care rates (incentives), child rights and foster homes defined as partners (institutional change) and increase in supportive services (program change).

Methodological Issues in Retention Studies

Two of the methodologically strong studies in this group were based on data collected outside the United States (Gidron, 1984; Hurl & Tucker, 1995). Only Boyd and Remy (1979) and Cummins (1994) focused on fostering in urban areas in the U. S. Designs contained serious limitations. Only one of the studies was prospective in design (Gidron, 1984) and one used a control group (Chamberlain et al., 1992). Only two of these obtained large samples (Campbell & Downs, 1987; Tucker & Hurl, 1991).

Dependent variables in these studies have been variously defined. Since the main problem in foster care has typically been perceived by many professionals as a shortage of homes, they have emphasized recruitment. This has resulted in the specification of "supply of homes" and "child in placement or not" as dependent variables of interest. Various factors have emerged as possible predictors of retention. There is need to test these alternative influences on license status in competition with each another and thereby distinguish those that are relatively strong predictors from those that are relatively weak.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to report the results of research that attempted to develop a holistic understanding of the factors that influence the status of licensed foster homes. This objective was achieved through addressing the following question: What factors influence foster parents' decisions to continue or discontinue fostering?

Methodology

Design

The retrospective study design provided for a comparison between two large groups of foster parents from eight urban counties. All respondents were licensed as foster parents at some time during the year long period that defined the sample, though some of the respondents discontinued as licensed foster parents at some time during this same year. Because of the recency of the experience of the closed home respondents, opinions expressed

by this group, while influenced by the recency of their experience as licensed foster parents were probably affected only minimally by their status as discontinued homes at the time of data collection.

Sample

The sample in this study was composed of two groups. The first group consisted of all the foster homes that closed in eight urban counties in the state from November 1, 1991 through December 31, 1992. Enumeration of this group was provided by the State Department of Human Services using its statewide Family and Children Services Information System. The initial sample size was 809.

The second group was composed of 809 active foster homes randomly selected from the population of open homes in the selected counties as of December 31, 1992. The number of cases selected for each county was proportional to the number of closed cases in that county and to the number of foster homes licensed by public and private agencies respectively in each county. All homes selected for inclusion in the study were open homes at some time between November, 1991 and December, 1992 even if the homes that closed were open for a brief period of time.

Approximately 25 percent of the sample consists of foster parents associated with private agencies in the eight participating counties. Nearly 75 percent of the homes were licensed to accept both sexes, whereas 25 percent would accept boys or girls only. About 65 percent of the foster homes had children stay up to two years. Thirty-five percent of the homes had children stay two years and beyond. The sample was closely divided regarding expected length of stay. Fifty-three percent expected children to remain more than one year while 47 percent expected the length of stay to be less than one year. A full range of types of foster homes such as regular, treatment, infant, and relative homes were represented in the sample.

Examination of the social demographic characteristics of the total sample revealed that about half of the foster mothers were African American. The marital status of the total group consists of 60 percent who were married and about 40 percent who were single parents. About 40 percent of the sample mothers were in the

age range 18–40, while another 50 percent were in the 41–60 range. The respondents showed variation in educational level, ranging from less than 8th grade through graduate degrees. Income data revealed a similar range. Twenty-six percent of the respondents had less than \$20,000 per year income while the upper end of the distribution showed that 18 percent had more than \$50,000 a year income. The average length of service of these licensed foster parents was five years.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

A new instrument was developed for this study. Item construction was based on information collected during in-depth interviews with fifteen randomly selected closed foster homes during the summer of 1992. Themes that emerged from inductive analysis of the fifteen interviews defined constructs that guided question construction for the survey instrument. Additional items were derived from a review of studies that used diverse outcome variables such as continuance, dropping out, supply of homes and exit rates. Besides sets of questions that measured the characteristics of the home as a licensed entity and social demographic characteristics of the foster parents, the following sets of variables were measured.

1. Perceptions by foster parents of reasons for becoming licensed. Eight items were included. They were scored on a four point scale ranging from "Not at all" to "A great deal". To what extent was each of the following a reason you became a licensed foster parent? Examples of items used: Wanted to save children from harm. Wanted to increase household income.
2. Perceptions of foster parents that focused on reasons they might cease fostering. Twelve items were included. They were scored on a four point scale ranging from "Not at all" to "A great deal". To what extent do (did) the following conditions affect your willingness to continue as a licensed foster parent? Examples of items used: Conflict with the child's social worker. Dealing with the foster child's difficult behavior.
3. Foster parent's role and relationship with agency representatives. Nineteen items were included. They were scored

on a seven point Likert type scale ranging from "Strongly agree" to "Strongly disagree". Examples of items used: I have been satisfied with the type of children placed with me. My foster children's social workers have treated me like a team member.

4. Opinions about fostering itself and about oneself as a foster parent. Seven items were included. They were scored on a seven point Likert type scale ranging from "Strongly agree" to "Strongly disagree". Examples of items used: I believe that being a foster parent is a calling to do what I do best. If I had to, I would provide foster care without reimbursement of any kind.
5. Training effects. Six items were included. They were scored on a seven point Likert type scale ranging from "Strongly agree" to "Strongly disagree". Examples of items used: I have felt competent to handle the types of children placed in my home. Foster parent training I have received has been based on my real training needs.
6. Items assessing role clarity, workload and four types of social support were derived from those used and reported by Himle et al. (1991). Seven items were included. They were scored on a five point scale ranging from "Never" to "Very often".

Data were collected through a mailed survey. Considerable efforts based on Dillman's Total Design Method (1978) were made to increase return rates. These efforts included: a letter of support from local public children services agencies, a second questionnaire mailing, phone follow-up, and a third mailing. A saturation point was reached when complaints were made by foster families about continuing to receive the instruments and phone calls. The true sample size of active homes was 804. Twenty-six homes were not reachable or did not meet the study's definition of active home. Another twenty-one homes originally enumerated as closed, returned questionnaires and indicated they were active with another agency. These were classified as active respondents. For closed homes, the enumeration was revised downward as follows: ninety respondents could not be found or did not meet the study's definition of a closed home. The true sample size of closed homes was 720.

Five hundred forty-four questionnaires were received from active homes for a 68 percent return rate. Three hundred questionnaires were received from closed homes for a 42 percent return rate. The total return rate was 55 percent. Usable questionnaires totaled 539 for active homes and 265 for closed homes. The percent of unusable instruments returned by closed homes was greater than it was for active homes. This circumstance reflected limitations of respondents attributable to literacy and inability to complete usable questionnaires because of frailty and aging.

Statistical Analysis

The primary objective of this study was to identify factors that predict the status of the foster parents as continuing to be licensed or no longer licensed. The sampling strategy was designed specifically to collect information from two groups of foster parents, those who were closed and those who were active at some time during a single year. This two-group distinction formed the primary dependent variable of interest in the study. The statistical method of choice when modeling a two-group, or dichotomous, dependent variable is logistic regression. Logistic regression has a rich history as a powerful statistical tool with uses primarily in economics and health care (Cox, 1977; Hosmer and Lemeshow, 1989). However, interest is growing in using the approach in social work research (Morrow-Howell and Proctor, 1992; Dattalo, 1994).

The results presented in the next section were obtained from an analysis and model building strategy suggested in Hosmer and Lemeshow (1989). As a first step in analysis, the field of possible predictors was narrowed by a simple examination of distributional properties. Items that were highly skewed or exhibited other distributional problems were dropped, especially when it was believed that appropriate transformations would not correct these problems. Next, each measure in the reduced variable set was examined jointly with license status. Measures related to license status as indicated by the likelihood chi-square ($p < .05$) were used as a basis for logistic regression model building. Finally, a step-wise logistic regression procedure was used to identify a statistically optimized set of measures that predict the status of foster homes.

Results

Table 1 presents the results from the logistic regression procedure. These findings were obtained using a stepwise model identification process. While stepwise approaches need to be constructed and interpreted with caution (Cohen and Cohen, 1983), the exploratory nature of the study and the goal of optimizing the predictive, not explanatory, capacity of the model justified the use of the stepwise approach. Regression coefficients and standard errors are shown for each variable in the columns labeled *B* and *S.E.*, respectively. The Wald statistic and its related significance (*Sig*) are shown in the next two columns. The Wald statistic tests the null hypothesis that a predictor's regression coefficient equals zero. Since this model was statistically optimized through a stepwise procedure, all of the variables retained have high Wald values that are statistically significant. Finally, the last column (Exp B) presents an important measure - the odds ratio.

Predictors of Discontinuance

The odds ratios discussed in this section are linked to variables that predict that a foster home will close. For example, the odds ratio for foster mother's race is 1.62. Because of the way race was scaled, this ratio indicates that the odds of a home closing increases about 1.6 times when the foster mother is white. Similarly, the odds of a home closing increases about 1.8 times when foster care is not a source of income. Two variables had odds ratios over 2.0. They are "Wanted to adopt but was not able to" and "Agency red tape." In the case of the former item, the odds ratio indicates that the odds of a home being closed increases just over two times when a reason for becoming a foster parent is that the respondent wished to adopt but was unable to do so. In the case of the item concerning red tape, the odds of a home being closed increased 2.1 times when there was an increase in the negative perception of agency red tape. Finally, three variables had modest odds ratios predicting closure, namely, received less support from other foster parents, had several workers at the same time and perceived that social workers did not reach out.

Table 1

Logistic Regression of Factors Likely to Influence the License Status of Foster Homes (n=804)

Variable	B	S.E	Wald	Sig.	Exp(B)
Foster mother's race	.4848	.1770	7.5010	.0062	1.6238
Foster care as income source	.5906	.1792	10.8571	.0010	1.8051
Wanted to adopt but was not able to	.6942	.2144	10.4820	.0012	2.0021
Not enough money / small allowance	-.5449	.2433	5.0154	.0251	.5799
Significant personal loss	-.7445	.3683	4.0875	.0432	.4750
Agency red tape	.7452	.1896	15.4519	.0001	2.1068
Child abuse / neglect allegation	-1.0364	.2670	15.0726	.0001	.3547
Child sent back to a bad situation	-.8383	.1776	22.2751	.0000	.4324
Support from other foster parents	.4610	.1901	5.8806	.0153	1.5857
Had several workers at same time	.4723	.1851	6.5084	.0107	1.6036
Workers reached out to me	.5792	.1825	10.0682	.0015	1.7845
Clear re: worker's expectations	-.3781	.1933	4.0099	.0452	.6790
Little time to do other things	-.5250	.2780	3.5658	.0590	.5916
Constant	-1.3138	.9009	2.1412	.1434	

-2*Log Likelihood=1019.305 (constant)

-2*Log Likelihood=855.630 (all variables)

Model chi-square=163.675, df=13, p < .001

Pearson chi-square=781.722, df=790, p=.576

Predictors of Continuance

The remaining set of odds ratios, those with values less than 1.0, correspond to the variables that predict continuation of being licensed. An interpretation of these ratios is that unit increases in each variable predicts an increased likelihood of being in the sampled group of continuing homes rather than in the sampled group of homes no longer licensed. For example, the variable with the lowest odds ratio is "Being named in an allegation of child abuse/ neglect" (.354). This finding can be interpreted as the increase in the odds predicting continuance as a licensed home.

The interpretation of this result must take into account the way questions were framed. Respondents were asked "To what extent do (did) the following conditions affect your willingness to continue as a licensed foster parent?" Although the result may appear counterintuitive, "Named in an allegation of abuse/neglect" predicted to continuing to be licensed. This finding suggests that being named in an allegation operates as a source of stress which affects willingness of those who are licensed to continue to foster. Five of the twelve measured conditions thought likely to affect willingness to continue were significant in the final regression result. However, none of these five variables predicted closure of foster homes.

A similar interpretation can be attributed to other independent variables in this same set. For example, "Not enough money/ small allowance" with an odds ratio of .579, "Having a significant personal loss" with an odds ratio of .475 and "Seeing a child sent back to a bad situation" with an odds ratio of .432 predicted continuance of being licensed.

Two measures that assess the goodness of fit of the final model are also shown in Table 1. The classic statistic that measures fit, the Pearson chi-square, has a value of .576. The Pearson chi-square assesses the fit between the actual status of foster homes and the status, or probability, of foster homes predicted by the model. Mid-level probabilities are desirable for this measure since the retention of the null hypothesis of no difference between actual and predicted probabilities indicates the model fits the data.

The second measure of fit in Table 1 is the model chi-square. This statistic tests the null hypothesis that the regression coeffi-

cients for all the variables in the model, taken together, equal zero. It is equivalent to the omnibus F test in multiple regression. The chi-square value of 163.675 with 13 degrees of freedom is statistically significant and indicates a model that fits the data well. For this statistic a small probability is desirable since we want to reject the null hypothesis of regression coefficients equaling zero.

Implications

The purpose of this research was to develop a holistic understanding of the factors that influence retention and ceasing to foster among licensed foster homes. In pursuit of this objective we addressed the following question: What factors influence foster parents' decisions to continue or discontinue fostering?

Personal Perceptions/characteristics

Results confirm the significance of two variables identified by Cummins (1994) in her qualitative study. Respondents became licensed because they were not able to adopt through other channels and were encouraged to adopt through foster care. This circumstance predicted that foster homes would no longer be licensed. It appears that respondents sought to adopt and when they were successful they left licensed fostering quite satisfied.

Significant personal loss of a family member was the second variable from this set. It predicted to continuing to be licensed. In this case, the implication seems quite straightforward. Agencies should take into account that foster parents while they have children in their care are vulnerable as are all families, to the stresses and losses particular to their stage in the life cycle. Among these are occurrences such as illness, divorce, death and other types of separation. Neither should withdrawal from active fostering be viewed as permanent for all who discontinue since about 20 percent of the foster homes no longer licensed reported they intended to return to fostering. It is noteworthy that other measured motivations for becoming licensed failed to distinguish between the two groups.

Role and relationship with agency representatives

That the presence/absence of problems with their agency and

social workers operates as an influence on license status (Campbell & Downs, 1987; Baring-Gould et al. , 1983; Jones, 1975) was confirmed in the findings of this study. Seven variables contained in the results reflected this set.

Carbino's (1992) concern about how protective agencies deal with allegations of abuse/neglect in foster homes is mirrored in the concerns of the respondents in this study about being named in an abuse/neglect allegation. At a minimum, public agencies should conduct investigations of maltreatment in foster homes through an independent investigative unit separate from the administration of the placing agency. Local agencies should not be put in the position of conducting investigations of their own foster homes lest the main effect communicated be that the agency places its own reputation above that of the well being and continuance of the foster home. States should be alert to the need to establish FAST Programs (Foster Allegations Support Teams) in the interest of maintaining and reclaiming as many foster homes as feasible following an allegation.

The variable "Seeing children sent back to a bad situation" was grounded in qualitative interviews with closed homes (Cummins, 1994). One significant test of foster parents' trust in the decisions of social workers and a reflection of their own view of fostering occurs when a very young foster child is reunited with its own family. This is an area in which partially shared goals can be viewed as grounded in differences in role conception among agencies and foster parents as between rational and natural systems perspectives (Hurl & Tucker, 1995). One pilot interview revealed extended, vivid and painful documentation of a foster family's adverse experience with its agency upon seeing a child sent back to a bad situation. This conflict resulted in a protracted power struggle over the future of a second young child subsequently placed in their home. The potential for foster parents to have differences with their agency over permanency planning philosophy or over the wisdom of its application in specific cases is enduring and meaningful.

The results of this study affirmed that clarity of role definition/role ambiguity and workload (Himle et al., 1991; Biggerstaff & Rodwell, 1993) influenced license status. The variables role clarity and workload, i.e., left with little time to do other things,

are predictors of continuing to be licensed. The former finding highlights the importance of well articulated policy and role definitions presented and reinforced deliberately and accountably by staff with foster parents especially in view of the rates of staff turnover typical of the child welfare field. Often foster parents have to work with more than one social worker at the same time. While the study results affirm the importance of foster parents' being clear about what agency social workers expect of them, the results did not reveal that foster parents perceived that they were viewed as team members by agency staff members.

Consistent interpretation should be made regarding services available to foster parents including respite from the often consuming demands and feelings of responsibility experienced by foster parents when they accept the challenge of caring for the community's children. Getting support from other foster parents confirmed a similar finding of Gidron (1984). Results reinforced Downs' (1986) finding regarding the importance of social workers' reaching out to facilitate foster parents' involvement. These results highlight the importance of agencies' actively using multiple, varied and ongoing approaches to support foster parents.

Agency policy and procedures

Low reimbursement rates and agency red tape were identified as barriers to continuance by the GAO (1989) and Chamberlain et al. (1992). Hurl & Tucker (1995) reported that reimbursement plays a role in explaining the persistence of foster parents. These claims were confirmed by study results. Not enough money, and in particular small clothing allowances, predicted to continuing to be licensed. Where funding limitations are unavoidable in the short run, honest acknowledgment by staff of this circumstance and credible pursuit of alternative resources would be a minimum skilled response to the conscientious concerns of foster parents. Troubling however, is the frustration which arises when foster parents conclude they are getting the "run around" when they seek special allowances or individual attention for the children in their care.

Social demographic factors

Black and white foster parents participated in this study in almost equal numbers. Being white was a predictor of foster home closure. While the point in the life cycle at which black foster parents became licensed is later than for whites, being black was a predictor of continuing to be licensed. Although impressionistic studies of the supply of foster home beds in relation to estimated need have portrayed black participation in foster care in problematic terms, black participation in foster care need not be viewed as problematic from the viewpoint of retention in this sample.

Several variables thought likely to predict to foster home status did not do so. These were: reasons to become licensed, training effects, opinions about fostering itself, entry into paid work (Campbell & Downs, 1987), preparation and sense of achievement (Gidron, 1985) the length of time the home was licensed, separation and loss issues (Urquhart, 1989) and agency affiliation whether public or private.

The absence of findings as reported above suggests that foster parents share non-differentiating reasons for becoming licensed, a non-differentiating experience in training and preparation and in coping with separation and loss and a common experience as affiliates of public or private child caring agencies. The fact that continuing foster parents defined their situation in essentially negative terms should be the occasion for heightened resolve to improve policy and practice in regard, for example, to "agency red tape", "seeing a child sent back to a bad situation" and "named in an allegation of abuse/neglect".

Limitations of the Study

Securing a higher return rate from closed homes was a challenge. The non-responding foster families probably were more geographically mobile, some were frail elderly, some adopted foster children and did not see the study as involving them, while some sampled homes were disaffected. Difficulty in reaching some closed homes for follow-up occurred because a considerable portion of these homes had unlisted telephone numbers. Those foster homes no longer licensed that returned questionnaires may have been more like those continuing to foster and less like the

discontinuing homes which did not respond. In this regard it can be noted that the mean score on an item to measure overall satisfaction with the fostering experience was identical for the two groups. Selection bias in the light of the problematic return rate of closed homes may have had an influence on the results since possible variability may have been truncated in a number of measures. This in turn may have had an impact on the study's ability to detect differences between continuing and discontinuing homes in addition to those reported here.

Future Research

Efforts to test the interactive model argued by Cummins (1994) should start with the assumption that goals are only partially shared by agencies and foster parents and that understanding retention should take the resulting conflict as a starting point. Replication of the study reported here with a broader sample would extend generalizability beyond the eight urban counties in this large Midwestern state. Further attention to clarifying the measurement characteristics of the instrument is also indicated.

Conclusion

The findings of this study are important because they reflect the perspectives of foster parents. They also shed light in a holistic way on the challenges facing professionals and officials responsible for the maintenance of licensed foster homes. Also they reveal the relative strength of factors likely to influence license status.

Jones (1975) concluded his article on foster parents who cease to foster with an observation that is germane to the concerns of licensing officials and to the findings of this study.

The view that higher recruitment is the answer may be incorrect. It may be more fruitful to examine critically the assessment, preparation, and support given to foster parents after recruitment. There is little to be gained from higher recruitment of foster parents if large numbers of recruits cease to foster after only a short period as an active foster parent.

It seems imperative that knowledgeable, deliberate and competent attention be given to work with licensed foster parents after they have been licensed.

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