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Foster Parents' Reasons for Fostering and Foster Family Utilization

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Better utilization of foster families might be linked to parents' reasons for fostering. This study used data from the National Survey of Current and Former Foster Parents to examine relationships between reasons for fostering and types of services and length of service foster parents provide. Top reasons for fostering were child-centered. The least endorsed reasons were self-oriented. Those who fostered to help children with special problems were more likely to have a child placed, had more children, and had fostered more types of special needs children. Parents who fostered because their children were grown were more likely to have a child placed, had more children, and were more likely to intend to continue fostering. Conversely, parents who wanted to be loved or who wanted companionship fostered fewer children. Implications for improving foster family utilization are discussed.

Key words: *foster parent, motivation, utilization*

Foster families have a critical role in child welfare as resources for children who need temporary out-of-home care and as resources for adoptive children. Approximately 70 percent of the estimated 532,000 U. S. children in foster care live with foster families (U. S. Department of Health and

Human Services [DHHS], 2004). Even with the rise in kinship care, 65 percent of foster home placements are with non-relative foster families. Foster parents adopt the majority of children adopted through foster care (DHHS, 2004) and 20 percent of adopted children live in family foster homes (Barth, Gibbs, & Siebenaler, 2001).

Child welfare agencies face continual challenges to maintain adequate numbers of family foster homes (DHHS, 2002a, 2002b). Underutilization of licensed foster homes creates additional demands on systems already straining to recruit families. One-fifth of foster families provide 60 to 80 percent of placements (Gibbs, 2004). Approximately one-third of homes do not have placements at any one given time (DHHS, 1993; Gibbs, 2004; Kriener & Kazmerzak, 1995; Maine Foster Parent Association, 1994). Many foster parents never accept placements because they are unwilling to care for children with special needs or teens (Cox, Orme, & Rhodes, 2002; DHHS, 2002a). Twenty to 25 percent of foster parents quit each year (Casey Family Programs, 2000; Gibbs, 2004) and another quarter express uncertainty about continuing (Iowa Foster Recruitment and Retention Project, 2002; Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999; Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001; Rhodes, Orme, Cox, & Buehler, 2003). Almost half of foster parents quit within a year of their first placement (Gibbs, 2004).

Part of the problem is engaging and encouraging foster parents to stay as long-term partners with agencies and to care for the types of children who need foster care placements (DHHS, 1993; DHHS, 2002b). However, little is known about how foster parents' reasons for fostering relate to foster home utilization. That is the purpose of this study.

Foster Family Utilization

The National Survey of Current and Former Foster Parents (NSC&FFP) (DHHS, 1993) provides the most extensive data on foster families from a national probability sample. The NSC&FFP (DHHS, 1993) estimated that there were approximately 131,100 licensed family foster homes in 1991 when the survey was conducted. The average family was licensed to care for 3.1 foster children, and so theoretically there were place-

ments available for 406,400 children. At approximately the same time there were 404,000 foster children (Tatara, 1997).

While these estimates suggest an adequate number of family foster homes, closer examination of utilization patterns tells a different story. At the time of the survey, 35 percent of foster families did not have any children placed. Foster families who did have children placed had an average of 2.2 foster children, although the average licensed capacity was 3.1 foster children. Sixty-three percent of foster families were operating below licensed capacity, 25 percent at capacity, and 11 percent above capacity. Twenty percent of families indicated that they planned to quit fostering within three years.

Initial analysis of the NSC&FFP data indicated some patterns in foster home utilization (DHHS, 1993). Location of the foster home was one factor. More families living in urban areas indicated that they were at licensing capacity than families in non-urban communities. Only 27 percent of urban families had no children as compared to 42 percent of rural and 39 percent of suburban families. Also, 23 percent of urban families had three or more children placed compared to 21 percent of suburban families and 17 percent of rural families. Race also was a factor. Only 30 percent of European-American foster families were operating at or above their licensing capacity, compared to 40 percent of African-American families and 45 percent of Hispanic families. Further, only 22 percent of African-American foster families did not have foster children as compared to 39 percent of European-American families. Finally, anecdotal evidence suggested that to some unknown extent under utilization might be due to the fact that agencies sometimes license, but do not place children with families about who they have concerns.

In her secondary analysis of the NSC&FFP data, Cox (Cox, Orme, & Rhodes, 2002) found that families more willing to foster special-needs children and teenagers had fostered more children and more types of special-needs children, had more children in the homes, were licensed to care for more children, had fostered longer, and were less likely to consider quitting. Specifically, utilization was predicted by willingness to foster children with physical handicaps or serious illness, children with serious behavioral or emotional problems, or children

who were sexually abused. Similarly, in a survey of 142 foster parent applicants, Cox et al. (2003) found that families willing to foster children with emotional or behavioral problems were more likely to have children placed within fourteen months after pre-service training.

Reasons for Fostering

Authors of the NSC&FFP survey (1993) developed a comprehensive list comprised of 28 stated reasons for becoming a foster parent derived from previous research on motivation for fostering. The survey asked foster parents to endorse reasons for fostering by indicating "yes" or "no" if a reason described why they wanted to foster.

Initial analysis of the NSC&FFP data (DHHS, 1993) reported that parents had multiple reasons for being foster parents. Most respondents wanted to provide a child with love and with a good home. Two-thirds of parents indicated that they wanted to provide a home for a child who would otherwise be in an institution and because they wanted to help children with special problems. Over half of parents believed fostering was a way to do something for their communities. Approximately one-fourth of parents gave one or more reasons related to parenting a child, such as being unable to have children, wanting a larger family, wanting to adopt, or wanting to parent after their children were grown. Parents licensed after 1985 were more likely to foster because they knew a child and because they were interested in adoption, than those approved earlier, reflecting increased emphasis on kinship care and permanency planning.

The NSC&FFP survey and other studies yielded fairly consistent descriptions about reasons for fostering (Anderson, 2001; Baum, Crase, & Crase, 2001; Kirton, 2001). Several studies examined how reasons for fostering related to placement outcomes for children. Kraus (1971) and Hampson and Tavormina (1980) found positive relationships between child-centered reasons for fostering and placement duration. Placement disruptions were more frequent in families motivated by wanting companionship for their children (Kraus, 1971). Foster parents motivated by altruism, being childless, and

identifying with the child received high performance ratings from foster care workers while those motivated by wanting to look after children were rated as barely adequate (Dando & Minty, 1987).

Two studies considered how reasons for fostering related to retention. Triseliotis, Borland, and Hill (1998) found no differences between reasons for fostering and continuation, except for families who started fostering as an avenue to adoption. Rindfleisch, Denby, and Bean's (1998) study of closed and open foster homes found that wanting to adopt and not being able to do so increased the likelihood that a foster home closed.

None of the aforementioned studies address how reasons for fostering relate to foster parents' activity levels as service providers. The present study uses data from the NSC&FFP to extend understanding of utilization by examining how reasons for fostering are associated with foster family utilization. It limits the analysis to non-kinship foster families because nationally this is the most prevalent type of foster care, because the vast majority of caregivers sampled by the NSC&FFP were non-kinship foster families, and because kin and non-kin families have different reasons for fostering (Le Prohn, 1994). Also, it will use both inferential and descriptive statistics. Principal research questions include what reasons for fostering are associated with:

- the total number of the number of children fostered, whether or not any foster children were placed in the home at the time of the survey, and the number of children in the foster home at the time of the survey?
- licensing capacity?
- the number of types of special needs children fostered and if parents foster children from more than one racial group?
- whether or not respondents adopted children and adopted foster children?
- retention as evidenced by the number of years fostered and the intention to continue fostering?

Methods

The NSC&FFP was conducted in 1991, and it is the only study of current and former foster families based on a national probability sample (DHHS, 1993). The purpose of the NSC&FFP was to collect extensive information potentially useful in agency and public policy planning regarding recruitment and retention of foster parents. This rich data set provides an opportunity to examine these and other important issues concerning family foster care.

The NSC&FFP used a multistage stratified sampling design with probability sampling at each stage so that the findings generalize to the 1991 U. S. population of approved, licensed, or certified foster families. States were stratified by level of foster care payment. Counties were stratified by residence and by level of unemployment. Foster parents were stratified by their current and former status. Current foster parents were stratified by their length of service. Ultimately, data were collected from foster parents living in 27 counties in 9 states. The unweighted sample contains 1048 current (116,964 weighted) and 265 former foster families (63,823 weighted).

Only data from current foster families were used in the present study because the full range of foster home utilization measures used in this study were collected only from current foster families. Also, families approved to provide kinship care, group care, or unspecified "other" types of foster care were excluded. Of the total sample of 1048 current foster families, 876 families (108,592 weighted) met these criteria.

The population-weighted sample was used in order to obtain representative national estimates. Estimates were computed using the Jackknife (JK1) replication approach. The replicate and full sample weights were used in the analyses. Data were analyzed using WesVar (Version 4.0, SPSS 2001). WesVar PC is used to analyze data collected using complex sampling designs such as the NSC&FFP (Johnson & Elliott, 1998).

For descriptive purposes, family-level characteristics include income, marital status, number of children, whether they adopted children, geographic location, and number of years fostering. Individual-level characteristics include race, age, educational level, and employment status.

Respondents were asked to indicate why they wanted to be foster parents by checking "yes" or "no" to a list of 28 reasons. In addition, a count variable was created for the total number

of endorsed reasons for fostering, and this variable has a potential range of values from 0 through 28.

Respondents were asked whether they had fostered the following types of special needs children: (1) developmentally disabled/mentally retarded child, (2) physically handicapped or seriously ill child, (3) drug-exposed infant or newborn, (4) child born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome or other alcohol-related disorders, (5) child born with AIDS virus, (6) mentally ill or emotionally or behaviorally disturbed child, or (7) sexually abused child. A variable for each type of special needs child was coded 0 for "have not fostered" and 1 for "have fostered." A count variable was created for the total number of the types of special needs children respondents had fostered, and this variable has a potential range of values from 0 through 7.

Another measure of foster family utilization used was whether a family fostered children from multiple racial groups. Respondents to the NSC&FFP also were asked if they had fostered children with the following identified racial backgrounds: (1) American Indian or Alaskan Native; (2) Asian or Pacific Islander; (3) Black, not of Hispanic origin; (4) Hispanic (including Mexican American); (5) White, not of Hispanic origin; and (6) "Other." A dichotomous variable was coded 0 for "fostered from one race group" and 1 for "fostered from multiple racial groups."

Retention was considered as a utilization variable because foster parents have to remain licensed in order to provide placements for children. Indicators of retention included the number of years as a foster parent and if they planned to continue fostering. Respondents were asked what year they were approved to foster. Because data were collected in 1991, number of years fostered was calculated by subtracting the year of approval from 1991. An expressed intention to continue fostering was used as an indicator of foster home utilization since foster families who discontinue fostering can no longer accept foster care placements. Respondents were asked if over the next three years they intended to continue to foster. A response of "yes" was coded 1 and "no" was coded 0.

Results

Descriptive statistics appropriate to the level of measurement and distributional characteristics of the variables are reported (e.g., medians are reported for skewed distributions). Bivariate linear regression was used to analyze quantitative dependent variables, and R^2 is reported to quantify the strength of these relationships. Bivariate binary logistic regression was used to analyze dichotomous dependent variables, and odds ratios (*OR*) are reported to quantify the strength of these relationships. In all analyses two-tailed tests were used with a .05 level of statistical significance.

The majority of information in the present study was provided by foster mothers (65%) or jointly by foster mothers and foster fathers (28%). Foster fathers (7%) provided a small percentage.

As shown in Table 1, three-fourths of families included married couples or couples living as married couples. Income levels were fairly diverse, with 42% of families with incomes less than \$25,000, 32% with incomes from \$25,000 to \$39,999, and 26% with incomes of \$40,000 or greater. Seventy-seven percent of families had at least one birth child. Thirty percent of families had adopted children and 22% of families adopted foster children. Approximately 40% of families lived in suburban areas, 36% in urban areas, and 24% in rural areas. Foster families on average had 6.6 years of fostering experience ($SD = 6.4$) with a median of 4 years.

Table 2 shows the demographic characteristics of foster mothers and fathers. Racial diversity was found, with 29% of foster mothers and 22% of foster fathers being minorities. Specifically, 22% of mothers and 13% of fathers were African-American. In terms of education, 84% of mothers and 86% of fathers had at least a high school education. Seventeen percent of mothers and 23% of fathers had a bachelor's degree or higher. Most (83%) fathers were employed full-time, whereas only 35% of mothers were employed full-time. Forty-eight percent of foster mothers were not employed outside of the home. The mean age of mothers was 44.2 years ($SD = 10.6$) and the mean age of fathers was 45.1 years ($SD = 11.0$).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Foster Families

Characteristics	Total families (<i>n</i> =108,592) %
Marital Status	
Married or living as married	75.1
Divorced	10.7
Separated	2.6
Widow/Widower	6.5
Never married	5.1
Number of Birth Children	
0	23.3
1	14.5
2	22.0
3	18.1
4	11.1
5 or more	11.1
Adoptive Children	
Adopted children	30.3
Adopted foster children	21.8
Annual Family Income	
< 15,000	15.7
15,000-19,999	12.8
20,000-24,999	13.4
25,000-29,999	12.8
30,000-34,999	10.4
35,000-39,999	9.2
40,000-49,000	8.2
> 50,000	17.5
Geographical Location	
Urban	36.4
Suburban	39.8
Rural	23.8
Number of Years Fostering	
M = 6.6, Md = 4, SD=6.4	
< 2 years	14.1
2 - 3 years	28.3
4 - 5 years	17.1
6 - 10 years	20.5
>10 years	20.0

Note. The percentage of missing data ranged from .9 to 5.2%.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Foster Parents

Characteristics	Total families (<i>n</i> =108,592)	
	Mothers (<i>n</i> =107,033)	Fathers (<i>n</i> =83,541)
	%	%
Race		
European-American	69.8	77.9
African-American	22.0	12.9
Other	8.2	9.2
Highest Degree		
<HS	16.0	13.6
HS/GED	24.2	25.9
College, No Degree	32.8	27.4
Two-Year Degree	9.6	10.1
Bachelor's Degree	6.1	10.6
Grad work, no grad degree	5.6	5.1
Graduate degree	5.7	7.3
Employment status		
Full-Time	35.3	82.9
Part-Time	16.6	2.5
Not employed outside home	48.1	14.6
	M (<i>SD</i>)	M (<i>SD</i>)
Age	44.2 (10.6)	45.1 (11.0)

Note. The percentage of missing data for mothers ranged from 2.3% to 3.6% and for fathers ranged from 3.1% to 4.9%.

Reasons for Fostering

Table 3 shows foster families' reasons for fostering in order of endorsement from most endorsed to least endorsed. Top reasons for fostering tended to be child-centered, such as: "to provide a child with love" (89.9% of families); "to provide a good home for a child" (89.4%); "to provide a home for children who otherwise would be in an institution" (62.3%); and "to help a child with special problems" (58.9%). In addition a majority of families (52.4%) "wanted to do something for the community / society." Among the least endorsed Table 3. Reasons for Fostering and Percent Endorsement

<i>Reason for fostering</i>	<i>% endorsement</i>
Wanted to provide a child with love	89.9
Wanted to provide a good home for a child	89.4
Wanted to provide a home for children who would otherwise be in an institution	62.3
Wanted to help a child with special problems	58.9
Wanted to do something for the community/society	52.4
Wanted to be loved by a child	39.6
Wanted a larger family	29.9
Thought about adopting and thought foster parenting was a good way to start	26.1
Could not have any, or any more, children of my own	25.0
My own children were grown and I wanted children in the house	23.3
Wanted companionship for my own child	14.8
Wanted to care for a child but did not want permanent responsibility	14.5
Wanted to adopt but couldn't get a child	12.5
Wanted a certain kind of child (<i>e.g., a girl or a five-year old</i>)	12.3
Wanted companionship for myself	11.5
Wanted to fill time	11.3
Religious beliefs	11.2
Knew the foster child of the child's family and wanted to help	11.1
Was abused or neglected myself	6.9
Wanted to increase family income	6.6
Did not want to care for an infant	5.7
Was single and wanted a child	5.0
Had a child who died	4.2
Am related to child	2.1
Was a foster child myself	1.9
Thought a child might help my marriage	.8
Wanted a child to help with chores or work in family business	.6

Note. The percentage of missing data ranged from 4.3 to 6.7%.

Families endorsed a mean of 6.6 ($SD = 2.8$) and a median of 7 reasons for fostering.

Reasons for fostering were approximately normally distributed.

Table 4. Number of Children Fostered, Licensed Capacity, and Racial Diversity of Children Fostered

	% of families
Number of children fostered	
0	2.3
1-2	22.3
3-5	19.4
6-10	19.3
11-20	16.6
> 20	20.1
<i>M = 19.1, Md = 7, SD = 42.1</i>	
Number of foster children in the home	
0	33.5
1	20.5
2	25.3
3	10.8
4 or more	9.9
<i>M = 2.2, Md = 2, SD = 1.2</i> <i>(for families with at least 1 child in the home)</i>	
Number of children family licensed to foster at one time	
1	11.6
2	32.9
3	22.4
4	18.1
5	5.9
6	7.9
7 or more	1.1
<i>M = 3.0, Md = 3.0, SD = 1.5</i>	
Number of types of special needs children fostered	
0	12.6
1	20.8
2	26.8
3	18.8
4	10.1
5	6.5
6 or 7	4.4
<i>M = 2.3, Md = 2.0, SD = 1.6</i>	
Number of different racial groups fostered	(n=106,592)
0	.6
1	56.0
2	22.9
3	12.1
4	5.9
5 or 6	2.6
<i>M = 1.7, Md = 1, SD = 1.05</i>	

Note 1. Data were missing for number of children (9.3% of families), number of foster children in the home (.3% of families), licensed capacity (4.2% of families), and number of types of special needs children (3.8% of families).

Note 2. Data were missing for 2.5% (of all families) for the number of different racial groups children fostered belonged.

Note 3. Families were considered "European-American" if both parents were European-American, otherwise families were coded as non-European-American.

motives were more self-centered reasons such as: "wanted to increase family income" (6.6% of families), "was single

and wanted a child" (5.0%); "had a child who died" (4.2%), "thought a child might help my marriage" (.8%), and "wanted a child to help with chores or work in family business" (.6%).

Foster Family Utilization

The number of children fostered was positively skewed and the median number of children fostered was 7 (see Table 4). Ninety-eight percent of families had fostered at least one child, and approximately 75% had fostered at least three children. However, at the time of the survey 34% of families did not have foster children in their homes. The median number of foster children in the home at the time of the survey was 2 for families with at least one child in the home. Forty percent of families had fostered at least three types of special needs children and the median number of types of special needs children fostered was 2.

The median number of children families were licensed to care for at one time was 3 (see Table 4). Only 28.4% of foster homes were filled to capacity at the time of the survey.

The median number of different identified racial backgrounds fostered was 1 (see Table 4). A majority of families (56%) had only fostered children from one racial group. Almost one quarter of families (23%) had fostered children from two racial groups. The remaining 21% of the families had foster children from three or more racial groups.

Families had fostered for a median of 4 years (see Table 1). Fourteen percent had fostered for less than 2 years and 41% of families had fostered for 6 years or longer. Seventy-two percent of foster families reported an intention to continue fostering over the next three years.

Thirty three percent of families had adopted children and 22% of families adopted foster children (see Table 1).

Table 5. Reasons for Fostering and Foster Family Utilization

	<i>t</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>R</i> ²
<i>Total Number of Children Fostered</i>				
Wanted to be loved by a child	-2.36	-5.00	.031	
.003				
Wanted companionship for my own child	-2.52	-6.14	.023	
.003				
Wanted companionship for myself	-2.34	-6.14	.033	
.002				
Was single and wanted a child	-2.95	-9.08	.009	
.002				
<i>Number of Foster Children in the Home at Time of Survey</i>				
Wanted to help a child with special problems	2.84	.31	.012	.011
Thought about adopting and thought foster parenting was a good way to start	-2.25	-.37	.039	
.014				
My own children were grown and I wanted children in the house	3.28	.53	.005	
.026				
<i>Number of Children Licensed to Foster at One Time</i>				
Wanted to provide a home for children who would otherwise be in an institution	2.12	.20	.050	
.004				
My own children were grown and I wanted children in the house	2.22	.42	.041	
.015				
Wanted to fill time	2.75	.42	.014	
.009				
<i>Number of Types of Special-Needs Children Fostered</i>				
Wanted to help a child with special problems	2.82	.61	.012	
.035				
Wanted a larger family	2.40	.49	.029	
.021				
Was abused or neglected myself	2.35	.73	.032	
.015				
Wanted to increase family income	3.09	.62	.007	
.010				
Had a child who died	2.46	.85	.026	.011
Was a foster child myself	2.46	.74	.026	
.005				
Wanted a child to help with chores or work in family business	-2.24	-1.11	.040	
.003				
<i>Number of Years Fostered</i>				
Wanted to provide a home for children who would otherwise be in an institution	2.53	.92	.022	
.005				
<i>One or More Foster Children in the Home at Time of Survey</i>				
Wanted to help a child with special problems	2.17	.046	1.40	
Wanted to fill time	2.41	.028	1.63	
<i>Foster Children from Multiple Racial Groups</i>				
Wanted to be loved by a child	-2.95	.009	.56	
Wanted a larger family	2.31	.035	1.64	
Was abused or neglected myself	2.41	.028	3.65	
<i>Intention to Continue Fostering</i>				

<i>Reasons for Fostering</i>			119
My own children were grown and I wanted children in the house	2.50	.024	2.68
Knew the foster child of the child's family and wanted to help	-2.52	.023	.46
<i>Adopting a Child</i>			
Wanted to provide a good home for a child	-2.37	.031	.58
Wanted a larger family	3.90	.001	1.76
Thought about adopting and thought foster parenting was a good way to start	2.25	.039	1.68
Could not have any, or any more, children of my own	2.56	.021	2.15

Endorsed Reasons for Fostering and Foster Home Utilization

Table 5 summarizes endorsed reasons for fostering and foster home utilization. Reasons endorsed associated with utilization in the following ways:

- Families who endorsed “wanted to be loved by a child,” “wanted companionship for my own child,” “wanted companionship for myself”, or “was single and wanted a child” fostered fewer children than families who did not endorse any of these reasons.
- Families who endorsed “wanted to help a child with special problems” or “my own children were grown and I wanted children in the house” had more foster children in their home at the time of the survey than families who did not endorse either one of these reasons.
- Those families who endorsed “thought about adopting and thought foster parenting was a good way to start” had fewer foster children in their home at the time of the survey than families who did not endorse this reason.
- Families who endorsed “wanted to help a child with special problems” or “wanted to fill time” were more likely to have one or more foster children placed at the time of the survey than families who did not endorse either one of these reasons.
- Those who endorsed “wanted to provide a home for children who would otherwise be in an institution,” “my own children were grown and I wanted children in the house,” or “wanted to fill time” were licensed to care for more children than families who did not endorse any of these reasons.

- Families who endorsed “wanted to help a child with special problems,” “wanted a larger family,” “was abused or neglected myself,” “wanted to increase family income,” “had a child who died,” or “was a foster child myself” fostered more types of special-needs children than families who did not endorse any of these reasons. Conversely, families who endorsed “wanted a child to help with chores or work in family business” fostered fewer types of special-needs children than families who did not endorse this reason
- Families who endorsed “wanted a larger family” or “was abused or neglected myself” were more likely to foster children from multiple racial groups than families who did not endorse either of these reasons. Conversely, families who endorsed “wanted to be loved by a child” were less likely to foster children from multiple racial groups than families who did not endorse this reason
- Families who endorsed “wanted to provide a home for children who would otherwise be in an institution” had fostered longer than families who did not endorse this reason.
- Families who endorsed “my own children were grown and I wanted children in the house” were more likely to report an intention to continue fostering than families who did not endorse this reason. Conversely, families who endorsed “knew the foster child of the child’s family and wanted to help” were less likely to report an intention to continue fostering than families who did not endorse this reason
- Families who endorsed “could not have any, or any more, children of my own,” “thought about adopting and thought foster parenting was a good way to start,” or “wanted a larger family” were more likely to adopt children than families who did not endorse any of these reasons. Conversely, families who endorsed “wanted to provide a good home for a child” were less likely to adopt children than families who did not endorse this reason

Discussion

The chronic shortage of family foster homes is exacerbated by underutilization of existing foster families. Better utilization might be linked to the reasons that parents foster. This study used data from the National Survey of Current and Former Foster Parents to examine this question.

Agencies routinely include questions related to interest and reasons for fostering as part of the foster home study interview. Questions such as what families anticipate and count on from their experiences as foster parents help to make expectations clear and to assure that applicants have realistic views about fostering. Yet, some families may not be able to articulate fully their reasons to foster, as this is a complicated and complex issue. Agencies may miss important information needed to plan training and support of foster parents. Findings from this study suggest that agencies would benefit from information obtained through systematic standardized assessment of reasons for fostering.

The study's results supported that people foster for many different reasons. Most foster parents want to provide a child with love and a good home. Yet, the most frequently endorsed reasons did not predict higher utilization. Families averaged six reasons for fostering. Even families with reasons for fostering that were incompatible with the goals of child welfare were likely to have other, more compatible, reasons for fostering as well. In addition to having a comprehensive list of reasons, it would be beneficial to expand the measurement of reasons for fostering from a nominal to an ordinal scale to indicate the extent of a particular reason.

Key findings from this study suggest that careful assessment of reasons for fostering might help agencies identify parents with potential to be high level caregivers. In particular, foster parents interested in helping children with special problems provided more placements and were more likely to have a child placed at the time of the survey. Those wanting to provide family-based care had longer tenure as foster parents and were licensed to care for more children. Parents who wanted to continue to care for children after their children were grown provided more placements and were more likely to plan to continue as foster parents. Parents fostering because they wanted a larger family provided for children with a variety of

special needs and from children diverse racial backgrounds. These reasons for fostering might be indicative of the core group of active, committed foster parents who provide over half of foster care placements (Gibbs, 2004; Martin, Altemeier, Hickson, Davis, & Glascoe, 1992).

Other reasons co-related negatively with utilization. Foster parents motivated by wanting companionship, wanting to be loved by a child, or because they are single and want a child were likely to provide fewer placements than parents fostering for other reasons. Those fostering as a way to adopt were less likely to have a placement at any given time. Parents fostering to provide a home for a specific child might only accept one placement. On an individual basis, placements with families fostering for these reasons might have positive outcomes for the child in care. However, agencies with large numbers of such families might have a less experienced pool of foster parents resulting from shorter lengths of service and higher turnover rates. Systematically collected information about reasons for fostering might give agencies a clearer picture of its family foster homes. Agencies can use this information to assess and to plan strategies for recruitment, training, and retention.

Utilization depends on foster care workers' decisions and on children's needs as well as on foster parent interests and motivations. The relationship between reasons for fostering and utilization is not a simple one. Reasons for fostering do not indicate if a family has the skills, abilities, and resources to care for a child. Families who care for children with special needs might take fewer children because of the time and resources involved in caring for one child. Foster families who experience high numbers of placement disruptions may report caring for more children. In that case, the number of children fostered is not an adequate measure of foster home utilization. Regarding the special needs children fostered, only data on the number of different types of special need children fostered were collected in this study. Future studies of utilization that measure family resources, placement disruptions, and the total number of special needs children fostered will add to understanding the relationships between reasons for fostering and foster parent activities.

The present study is based on a large, national probabil-

ity sample of licensed foster families, and it provides the best estimates to date of reasons for fostering and foster home utilization. However, this sample has limitations that should be considered when drawing implications and in planning future research in this area. In particular, it did not include kinship foster families. Consequently, the findings are not necessarily applicable to the increasing number of kinship foster families. The sample was limited to current licensed foster families who were relatively experienced in terms of length of service and number of children fostered. If this is the case, the present study might overestimate endorsement for a specific reason for fostering. It also might underestimate the strength of the relationship between reasons to foster and foster family utilization.

Finally, the sample in the present study was collected in 1991. It might be that over the last decade reasons for fostering and patterns of utilization might have changed. In particular, families might be fostering in response to increased awareness of the need for families for children of their cultural and racial heritage and the need for permanency planning for children in care. The average licensed capacity of foster homes has decreased over time due to smaller dwellings and stricter agency requirements (DHHS, 1993). The Adoption and Safe Families Act emphasizes concurrent planning for reunification and an alternative permanent situation that encourages foster families to adopt (GAO, 1997). In an effort to achieve permanency goals, many States recruit and train foster and adoptive families jointly (GAO, 2002). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that new foster parents will have different patterns of utilization. Consequently, the relationship between reasons for fostering and foster family utilization might also have changed.

Future research should collect reasons for fostering from foster family applicants, and follow these families prospectively. Such a design would make it possible to examine the stability of reasons for fostering over time and explore the relationship between reasons for fostering and various fostering measures such as foster parent willingness to foster children with special needs and teenagers, foster parent satisfaction, number of placement disruptions, reasons for placement disruptions, retention, reasons for discontinuing fostering (when applicable), and foster child well-being and safety.

This survey relied primarily on reports of foster mothers. Although foster mothers form the foundation of functioning for many foster families, mothers and fathers in two-parent families may differ in their reasons for fostering. Such differences might influence the length of service and the types of services provided.

Conclusion

The present study extends previous research by providing a more detailed picture of how reasons for being a foster parent relate to foster home utilization. Results of the present study do suggest that better utilization is linked to reasons for fostering, but clearly a methodologically rigorous program of research is needed to better understand and ameliorate this problem.

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