The Center for
State Child Welfare Data

Reentry to Foster Care:
Identifying Candidates Under The Family First Act

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INTRODUCTION

The Family First Prevention Services Act provides federal funding for evidence-based interventions for children who are at risk of entry into foster care (i.e., "candidates"). Most conversations are focused on services that prevent children from entering out of home care for the first time. However, there's an equally important group of children at risk of placement into foster care: children at risk of returning to care. They, too, may benefit from the services made available through the Family First Act.
This study examines the risk of returning to foster care after reunification or after placement with guardians. It aims to help states understand who is at risk and their status as potential candidates for preventive services.

To address this policy question, we looked at three sets of risk factors with regard to the risk of returning to care: (1) demographic characteristics of children, (2) placement history, and (3) elapsed time since the exit from care (reunification or guardianship). In addition, we examined how contextual factors measured at the county-level influence the risk of reentry. Finally, we considered period effects related to the Great Recession. Essentially, we are interested in whether reentry rates changed during the time of the economic downturn among children specifically at risk of returning to care during that period.

With regard to placement history, based on prior research, we expect that children who moved between placement settings and left placement after short spells in care will be more likely to return to care. In addition, we know that the rate of return changes with the passage of time following discharge. We also know that the risk of return rises with the age of the child. We refer to the risk of reentry linked to age as a developmental risk factor, because we expect the risk of reentry to rise as young people approach adolescence.

METHODOLOGY

Data specification

Data for this study are from the Multistate Foster Care Data Archive. An understanding of developmental effects requires a long follow-up period from the time of discharge. Therefore, our sample for the analysis includes all children who, before age 18, exited their *first* spell to either reunification or placement with guardians between 2003 and 2010 with follow-up through December 31, 2017. This analysis includes a total of 607,289 children from 20 states.

Outcome variable

The dependent (outcome) variable in this study is reentry to foster care following an exit to reunification or guardianship. We measured the time until reentry as the duration between a child's exit from their first spell and their return to care. If a child did not reenter care prior to January 1, 2018, the observation was censored, provided the child had not turned 18. If the child turned 18 before returning to care, they too were dropped from the risk set at the time they reached age 18. We built separate models for each exit type: reunification and guardianship. Children who were adopted were not included. Comparing the model results shows whether the effects of covariates depend on the reason for leaving care.

For the analysis of reentry, we divided the time after the child left care and before they reentered, turned 18, or reached the censor date, into person-periods of 6-month duration. The time from the date of exit through the end of 6 months is the first person-period. The second person-period extends from the 7^{th} through the 12^{th} month of time spent out-of-care post-discharge, and so on. If a child reentered care during a given person-period, that 6-month person-period received a reentry indication. By constructing the data-file this way, we were able to use our models to assess the probability of reentry in a given 6-month person-period. For each person-period, we recorded the child's age at the start of the period (i.e., the person-period age). The distinction between person-period age and age-at-exit is important because person-period age allows us to assess what happens as children grow older. Finally, because we were interested in finding out the effect of the Great Recession on reentry rates, we also added a flag to indicate whether a person-period fell entirely within a recession year (2008 or 2009).

Independent variables

We examined three clusters of variables that can determine a child's risk of reentry after being out of care for a given period of time: child characteristics, placement history, and social context. Social context refers to the county where the child was living at the time he or she entered care. Table 1, below, provides a more detailed overview of these variables, including values and definitions.

The child characteristics and placement history are, for the most part, self-explanatory. Urbanicity captures the urban/rural character of the county. Details of the categorization scheme are found in the Appendix. For socioeconomic disadvantage, we categorize each county relative to their state on four indicators collected by the 2010 U.S. Census: poverty rate, percentage of people with less than a high school education, unemployment rate, and percentage of homes with a single head of household. A one indicates a county with a higher rate of poverty than the state poverty rate. Counties are compared with the state across each indicator. The results are summed to create an index ranging from 0 to 4. A county with a score of 0 would have low rates of socioeconomic disadvantage since it is below the state average

on each of the indicators. Conversely, a county with a score of 4 would have high rates of socioeconomic disadvantage because it is above the state average on each of the indicators.

RESULTS

Exit to reunification

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the children exiting their first spell to reunification or guardianship. Of the 459,835 children who left their first foster care spell to reunification, 49.8% were female and 50.2% male. Most children were white (38%), followed by black children (27%) and Hispanic children (28%). Almost 20% of the children were between 3 and 5 years old when they exited to reunification, followed by 18% who had an exit age of 1 or 2 years old. Of the children who left their first spell to reunification, 40% were from an urban core county (removal county before first spell), 18% from a large fringe county, 29% from a smaller metro county, and 12% from a rural county. Almost 50% of the children were from a higher socioeconomically disadvantaged area as defined. Almost half of the children had their last placement in foster care before they exited to reunification (48%). Most of these children (last placement in foster care) never had any congregate care placements during that same spell (88%). Thirty-eight percent of the children were in kinship care before they exited to reunification. Of the children who were in kinship care before leaving care, 87% never had any placement in congregate care during that same spell. Of children exiting to reunification, 13.4% were in congregate care before they exited. Most children had a length of stay of less than one year (70%) before they left care to reunification. Sixty-five percent of the children did not experience any change in care type (all placements in the spell were the same as the first placement in the spell) and 47% of children did not experience a move during their first spell preceding the exit to reunification.

Table 1. Independent Variables

Domain	Measure	Values	Definition
Child characteristics	Race/ethnicity	White	Non-Hispanic white.
		Black	Non-Hispanic Black alone or in combination with other races.
		Hispanic	Alone or in combination with other races.
		Other	Includes non-Hispanic Asian, Native American, other races/ethnicities not listed separately, and unknown or not identified.
	Gender	Male Female	
	Exit age	0-17 years old	The child's age on the date of discharge to reunification or guardianship.
	Person-period age	0-17 years old	The child's age at the beginning of a person-period.
Placement history	Last placement type	Congregate care Foster Care No congregate care Some congregate care Kinship care No congregate care Some congregate care	This is the last placement type before the young person left care, regardless of why they left care. It also includes whether the child experienced some or no congregate care placements before the last placement in foster care or kinship care.
	Duration of previous spell	Under 6 months 6 months–Under 1 year 1–2 years 3–4 years 5+ years	This is the length in months/years of the spell preceding the exit to reunification or guardianship.
	Level of placement change	No level change Level change	This refers to whether the young person changed the level of care. These changes could be a step up, a step down, or both.
	Great recession	Person-period not in recession Person-period was in recession	Did the person-period fall entirely within a recession year (2008 or 2009)?
Social context	Socioeconomic disadvantage	Soc. disadvantage high Soc. disadvantage 3 Soc. disadvantage 2 Soc. disadvantage 1 Soc. disadvantage low	This is a composite based on child poverty, unemployment, education, and family structure.
	Urbanicity	Urban core Large fringe Smaller metro Rural	Categories are based on the National Center for Health Statistics classification.

Table 3 shows the reentry rate after reunification by child characteristics, placement history, and social context. Of all children who exited their first spell to reunification between 2003 and 2010, 27% (123,944 children) reentered care in a subsequent spell before January 1, 2018. Reentry rates after

leaving care to reunification are similar for females and males and for children of different races and ethnicities. The lower a child's exit age at reunification, the higher their reentry rate. Infants have the highest reentry rate (36%). The reentry rate for children from an urban core or large fringe county was slightly lower (25–26%) than the reentry rate for children from a smaller metro or rural county (28–29%). Reentry rates were similar for counties, regardless of socioeconomic circumstances. Children who were in foster care before exiting to reunification had a higher reentry rate (30%) than children who were in congregate care (26%) or kinship care (24%) before they exited to reunification. Children who experienced congregate care before their last placement in foster or kinship care (before exiting to reunification) had similar reentry rates compared to children who had not experienced congregate care before their last placement in foster or kinship care. Children with a spell that lasted between 1 and 2 years before they were reunified had a slightly higher reentry rate (29%) than children with other spell lengths (reentry rate between 25% and 27%).

Exit to guardianship

Of the 147,454 children who left their first foster care spell to guardianship (see Table 2), 51% were female and 49% male. Most children were white (39%) or black (38%). Seven percent of the children were infants (less than 1 year old) when they left care, 18% were 1 or 2 years old, and 20% were 3 to 5 years old when they exited to guardianship. Of the children who left their first spell to be placed with a guardian, 36% were from an urban core county (removal county before first spell), 19% from a large fringe county, 32% from a smaller metro area, and 14% from a rural area. Twenty-six percent of the children were from a high socioeconomically disadvantaged county. Of the children who left their first foster care spell to guardianship, 72% had been in kinship care before they exited to placement with guardians. Of these children, who had been in kinship care before exit, 86% never had any placement in congregate care during that same spell. Twenty-three percent were in foster care before they exited. Of these children, 88% never had any congregate care placements during that same spell. Only 4.6% of children who exited to guardianship were in congregate care before they were placed with guardians. The most common length of stay of the preceding spell before placement with a guardian was less than 1 year (51%); 30% had a preceding spell that lasted 1–2 years. Only 19% of the children had a spell that lasted 3 years or more before they exited to guardianship. Fifty-nine percent of the children did not experience any change in care type.

Table 2. Characteristics of Children Who Exited Their First Spell between 2003 and 2010 to Guardianship or Reunification

	Number			Percent	
	Total	Reunification	Guardianship	Reunification	Guardianship
Total	607,289	459,835	147,454	100.0%	100.0%
Child Characteristics					
Gender					
Female	303,905	229,141	74,764	49.8%	50.7%
Male	303,359	230,672	72,687	50.2%	49.3%
Race/ethnicity					
White	231,302	173,230	58,072	37.7%	39.4%
Black	179,429	123,882	55,547	26.9%	37.7%
Hispanic	157,345	129,872	27,473	28.2%	18.6%
Other	39,213	32,851	6,362	7.1%	4.3%
Exit age					
0 years old	51,117	40,774	10,343	8.9%	7.0%
1 to 2 years old	110,156	83,105	27,051	18.1%	18.3%
3 to 5 years old	120,917	91,440	29,477	19.9%	20.0%
6 to 8 years old	95,145	72,018	23,127	15.7%	15.7%
9 to 11 years old	79,105	58,907	20,198	12.8%	13.7%
12 to 14 years old	78,641	58,762	19,879	12.8%	13.5%
15 to 17 years old	72,208	54,829	17,379	11.9%	11.8%
Placement History					
Last placement type before exit					
Congregate care	68,578	61,763	6,815	13.4%	4.6%
Foster care	256,297	221,891	34,406	48.3%	23.3%
No congregate care	220,083	189,714	30,369	41.3%	20.6%
Some congregate care	36,214	32,177	4,037	7.0%	2.7%
Kinship care	282,414	176,181	106,233	38.3%	72.0%
No congregate care	245,665	154,000	91,665	33.5%	62.2%
Some congregate care	36,749	22,181	14,568	4.8%	9.9%
Duration of previous spell					
Under 6 months	243,506	206,081	37,425	44.8%	25.4%
6 months to 1 year	152,832	115,640	37,192	25.1%	25.2%
1 to 2 years	146,396	101,868	44,528	22.2%	30.2%
3 to 4 years	47,420	27,789	19,631	6.0%	13.3%
5+ years	17,135	8,457	8,678	1.8%	5.9%
Level of placement change					
No level change	385,927	299,464	86,463	65.1%	58.6%
Level change	221,362	160,371	60,991	34.9%	41.4%
Social context					
Urbanicity					
Urban core	240,596	187,726	52,870	40.8%	35.9%
Large fringe	110,602	82,953	27,649	18.0%	18.8%
Smaller metro	180,674	134,072	46,602	29.2%	31.6%
Rural	75,229	54,965	20,264	12.0%	13.7%
Socioeconomic disadvantage					
High	152,963	114,689	38,274	24.9%	26.0%
3	132,695	104,760	27,935	22.8%	18.9%
2	113,796	82,150	31,646	17.9%	21.5%
1	75,484	54,563	20,921	11.9%	14.2%
Low	132,163	103,554	28,609	22.5%	19.4%

Table 3 shows that of the 147,454 children who their first spell of foster care to live with a guardian, 17% (25,269 children) reentered care before January 1, 2018. Females and males have comparable reentry

rates. Black children have a slightly higher reentry rate (19%) than white, Hispanic, and children of other races and ethnicities (16%). The reentry rate is a little higher for children who exited between the ages of 3 and 11 years old (19–20%) than children aged 0 to 2 years (16–17%). The rate decreases for age 12 and higher. The reentry rate for children from an urban core, large fringe, or smaller metro county was slightly higher than the reentry rate for children from a rural county (14%). Children from moderately disadvantaged areas had the highest reentry rate (20%). Children who spent their last placement in congregate care or foster care had a higher reentry rate (22% and 21%, respectively) than children who were in kinship care (16%) before exiting to a guardian. Children who experienced congregate care before their last placement in foster or kinship care (before exiting to a guardian) had similar reentry rates compared to children who had not experienced congregate care before their last placement in foster or kinship care. When discharged to live with a relative, children with a preceding spell that lasted less than 6 months had a higher reentry rate than children with a preceding spell that lasted more than 6 months.

Table 3. Reentry Rate by Child and County Characteristics of Children who Exited Their First Spell to Guardianship or Reunification between 2003 and 2010

	Reunification				Guardianship			
	Total at risk	Did not reenter*	Reentered	Reentry Rate	Total at risk	Did not reenter*	Reentered	Reentry Rate
Total	459,835	335,891	123,944	27%	147,454	122,185	25,269	17%
Child Characteristics								
Gender								
Female	229,141	167,349	61,792	27%	74,764	61,844	12,920	17%
Male	230,672	168,522	62,150	27%	72,687	60,338	12,349	17%
Race/ethnicity								
White	173,230	125,575	47,655	28%	58,072	48,626	9,446	16%
Black	123,882	90,197	33,685	27%	55,547	45,144	10,403	19%
Hispanic	129,872	96,253	33,619	26%	27,473	23,098	4,375	16%
Other	32,851	23,866	8,985	27%	6,362	5,317	1,045	16%
Exit age								
0 years old	40,774	26,260	14,514	36%	10,343	8,595	1,748	17%
1 to 2 years old	83,105	56,066	27,039	33%	27,051	22,602	4,449	16%
3 to 5 years old	91,440	64,404	27,036	30%	29,477	23,937	5,540	19%
6 to 8 years old	72,018	53,044	18,974	26%	23,127	18,571	4,556	20%
9 to 11 years old	58,907	45,013	13,894	24%	20,198	16,307	3,891	19%
12 to 14 years old	58,762	45,040	13,722	23%	19,879	16,392	3,487	18%
15 to 17 years old	54,829	46,064	8,765	16%	17,379	15,781	1,598	9%
Placement History								
Last placement type before exit								
Congregate care	61,763	45,842	15,921	26%	6,815	5,293	1,522	22%
Foster care	221,891	155,415	66,476	30%	34,406	27,195	7,211	21%
No congregate care	189,714	132,920	56,794	30%	30,369	23,946	6,423	21%
Some congregate care	32,177	22,495	9,682	30%	4,037	3,249	788	20%
Kinship care	176,181	134,634	41,547	24%	106,233	89,697	16,536	16%
No congregate care	154,000	117,414	36,586	24%	91,665	77,329	14,336	16%
Some congregate care	22,181	17,220	4,961	22%	14,568	12,368	2,200	15%
Duration of previous spell								
Under 6 months	206,081	151,948	54,133	26%	37,425	29,877	7,548	20%
6 months to 1 year	115,640	84,966	30,674	27%	37,192	31,401	5,791	16%
1 to 2 years	101,868	72,295	29,573	29%	44,528	37,327	7,201	16%
3 to 4 years	27,789	20,327	7,462	27%	19,631	16,299	3,332	17%
5+ years	8,457	6,355	2,102	25%	8,678	7,281	1,397	16%

	Reunification				Guardianship			
	Total at risk	Did not reenter*	Reentered	Reentry Rate	Total at risk	Did not reenter*	Reentered	Reentry Rate
Level of placement change								
No level change	299,464	218,086	81,378	27%	86,463	70,853	15,610	18%
Level change	160,371	117,805	42,566	27%	60,991	51,332	9,659	16%
Social Context								
Urbanicity								
Urban core	187,726	138,087	49,639	26%	52,870	43,505	9,365	18%
Large fringe	82,953	62,208	20,745	25%	27,649	22,803	4,846	18%
Smaller metro	134,072	96,625	37,447	28%	46,602	38,422	8,180	18%
Rural	54,965	38,872	16,093	29%	20,264	17,393	2,871	14%
Socioeconomic disadvantage								
High	114,689	84,506	30,183	26%	38,274	32,722	5,552	15%
3	104,760	76,205	28,555	27%	27,935	22,984	4,951	18%
2	82,150	60,072	22,078	27%	31,646	25,392	6,254	20%
1	54,563	38,584	15,979	29%	20,921	17,241	3,680	18%
Low	103,554	76,425	27,129	26%	28,609	23,784	4,825	17%

* Did not reenter refers to (1) still-at-risk and observation stopped on 1/1/2018 or (2) child aged out between their exit date and censor date 1/1/2018.

Discrete-time hierarchical model

In this section, we look at the results from 2 discrete-time hierarchical models, one for reunification and one for guardianship (see Table 4). The first models (Models 1 and 2) consider the main effects associated with child demographics, placement history, and social context. In series of subsequent models, we are interested in between group comparisons based on age. We do this two ways. In Figures 1 through 3, we show the baseline hazard rate for reunification and guardianship side-by-side as well as the baseline hazard rates for children belonging to two different age groups: children under 1 at the time of exit and children older than one at the time of exit. We are interested in knowing whether infants have higher rates of reentry; we are also interested in knowing whether teenagers leaving a congregate care placement face an elevated risk of returning to care. Although it is only indirectly true, congregate care placement is a marker for behavioral challenges that may elevate the risk of reentry. By running stratified models, we are better able to detect these subgroup effects. Finally, using the person-period age in the discrete time model provides a general picture of whether teenagers, regardless of their age when they left care, are more likely to return to care, all else being equal. We refer to this effect as a developmental effect associated with the risk of placement related to adolescence.

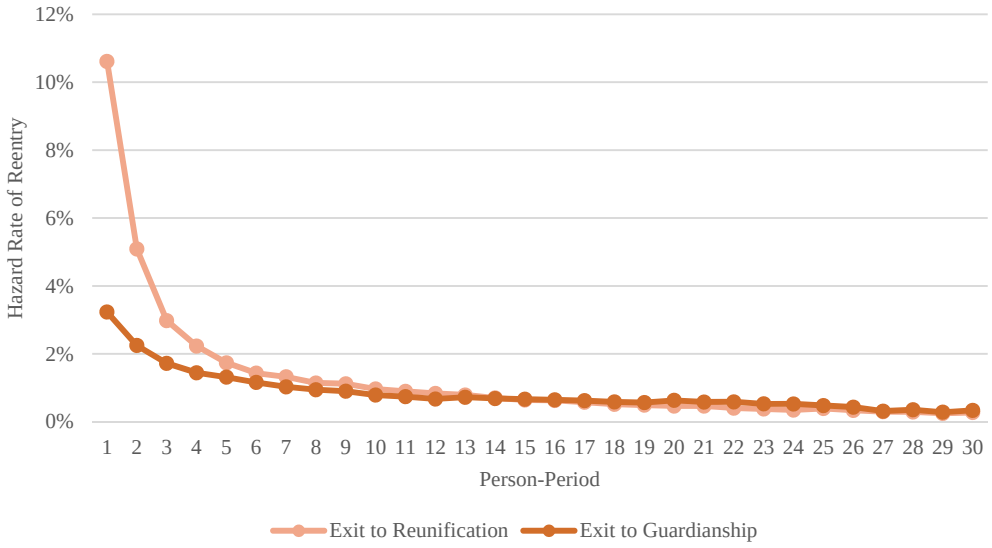
Baseline hazard rate—Reentry

Our first set of findings, shown in Figures 1 through 3, pertain to the basic risk of reentry *without* reference to child characteristics, placement history, or contextual effects (i.e., characteristics of the counties). The results are referred to as the baseline hazard rate. In essence, the baseline hazard rate in a discrete time model shows how risk—in this case the risk of reentry—changes with the passage of time. The interpretation of the baseline hazard is straightforward. For each person-period, given a child enters the person-period still at-risk of returning to care, how likely is reentry? The shape of the baseline hazard suggests whether the risk is more or less steady with the passage of time, rises, or falls. In addition, if the baseline hazard is relatively flat, as it is in Figure 1, then that means the risk of returning to care persists as time passes.

In Figure 1, we present the baseline hazard for guardianship and reunification separately. In both cases, the risk of reentry is highest soon after discharge. After the first person-period, the risk of reentry declines, regardless of why the young person left care. It is also true that, initially, the risk of reentry is greater for children reunified than it is for children who were placed with guardians. However, among children who have been out of care for 4 or more years, the risk is roughly the same whether reunified or placed with guardians. While the risk is low, as shown in Figure 1, the risk of reentry persists long after

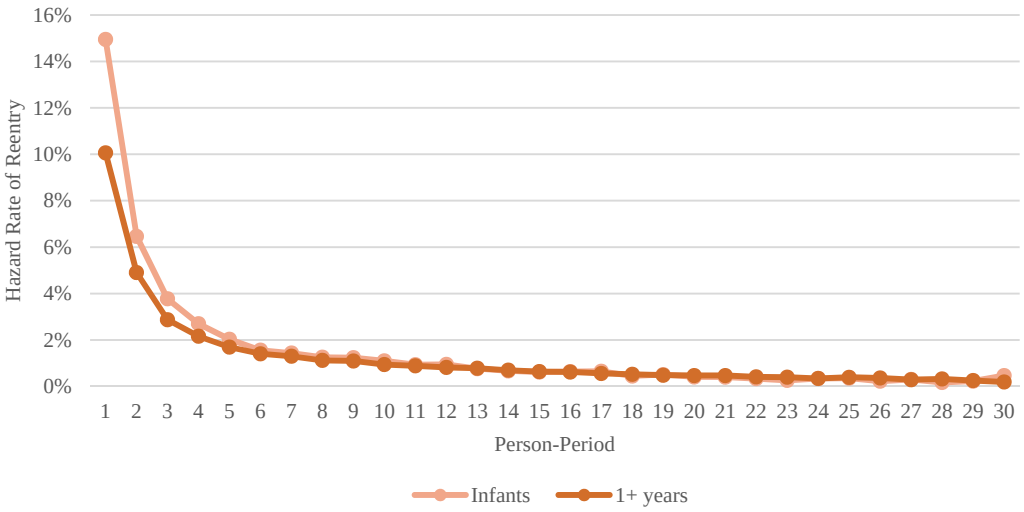
the child first leaves placement. Because the risk persists, we retain a focus on reentry over the course of childhood but pay special attention to the elevated risk close to when the children were first discharged.

Figure 1. Baseline Hazard Rate of Reentry by Time out of Care



In Figure 2, we show the baseline hazard rates for children who return home by time out of care and age. In this instance, we are interested in whether children under 1 return to care after reunification at rates that are different than children older than 1. We are interested in the infant subpopulation because infants make up such a large proportion of children coming into out-of-home care (about 24%).

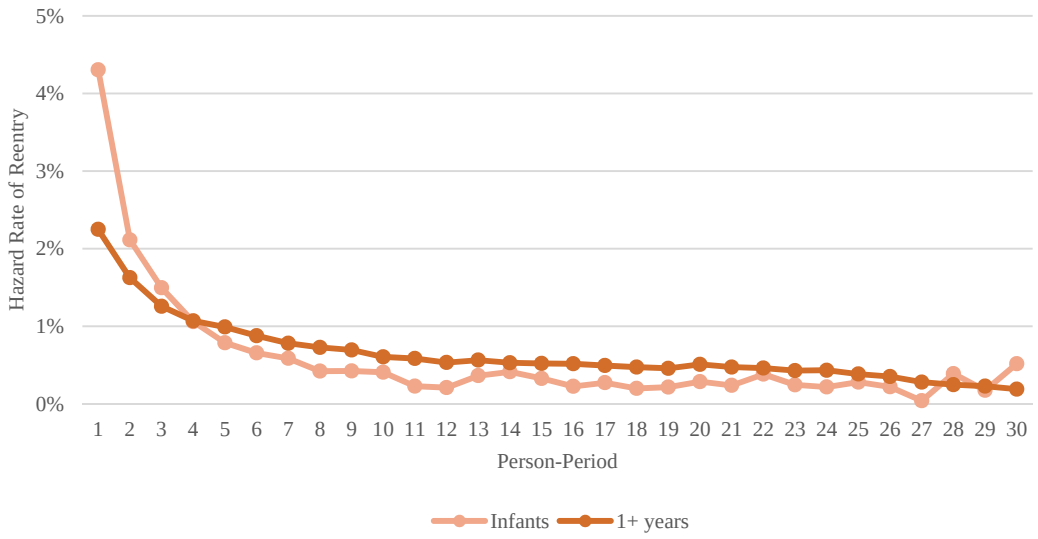
Figure 2. Baseline Hazard Rate of Reentry by Time out of Care after Leaving Care to Reunification



When compared alongside the baseline hazard rate for reunification shown in Figure 1, we see the same basic contour: the risk of reentry is higher initially, tappers off quickly, and then remains persistent but low after the eighth person-period (4 years). That said, the initial period of risk for infants is substantially higher than it is for older children. Moreover, the risk for infants remains elevated for roughly two years after reunification.

Figure 3 shows the baseline hazard for children who leave care to live with guardians. In general, the baseline risk of reentry follows the same pattern, but there are three points worth noting. First, as in Figure 1 the rate of reentry for children living with guardians is lower, as in Figure 1. Second, the baseline risk following an exit to guardianship is greater for infants than it is for older children, which is what Figure 2 also shows. Finally, the baseline hazard crosses at about 2 years (PP 4). What this means is that through two years the risk of reentry is greater for infants than older children and youth. After about 2 years, the relative risk is greater for older children. It remains elevated as time passes though there are times when the differences are somewhat smaller (PP 14 and 22). Knowing what this means more definitively is a matter of further research.

Figure 3. Baseline Hazard Rate of Reentry by Time out of Care after Leaving Care to Guardianship



Reentry following reunification

Table 4 shows the multivariate relationship between discharge reason, child characteristics, placement history, and county context. In this section, we consider the joint influence of those factors on reentry

following reunification. Our aim is to assess the risk of reentry more precisely. The results are found in Model 1 of Table 4.

Child Characteristics

Males discharged to reunification were 4% less likely to return to care than females. Following reunification, compared to other children, black youth were more likely to return to care, a finding that contrasts with the results reported in Table 3. This difference is most likely because of differences in the composition of the black child population relative to children of other races and ethnicities. Relative to children whose person-period age was under 1 (age 0), which means they would have entered care as a baby and left care as a baby (i.e., after a very short-stay in care), the risk of reentry among older children is *substantially* lower. In other words, children who enter care as a baby and then leave foster care soon after admission are the children at greatest risk of returning to care. The same is true for infants who leave care to live with guardians, with one exception. Based on their person-period age, (i.e., not their age at entry or their age at discharge), fourteen- to fifteen-year olds have a higher rate of return than even very young babies if they left foster care to live with guardians.[1]

Placement history

A young person's experience in out-of-home care is also strongly associated with reentry. The risk of reentry is about 4% higher among children who changed levels of care during their time in out-of-home care than among children who did not. If the last placement before reunification involved congregate care, then the risk of reentry was about 20% higher than the risk reported for children who left a traditional foster home. Children reunified following placements with kin were much less likely to return to care. Placements that lasted less than 6 months were more likely to be followed by reentry.

Social and economic context

To understand the potential impact of county context and the shifting economic circumstances during the time when children left care between 2003 and 2010, we considered the level of socio-economic disadvantage, the urban character of the county where the child was living at the time of placement, and whether the person-period crossed into the years of the Great Recession.

[1] Person-period age includes children who were discharged at that age *and* children who were discharged at an earlier age and aged into the group of older children. For example, a child discharged as an eleven-year old would have a person-period age of 15 in four years. As such they are included in the group of children with a person-period age of 15, along with all other children who reach age 15 and are still at risk of returning to care. The person-period age assesses that risk.

Table 4. Risk of Reentry after Leaving Care to Reunification or Guardianship

	Model 1 - Reunification		Model 2 - Guardianship	
Independent variable	Relative risk	Signif.	Relative risk	Signif.
Person-Periods (not shown separately)				
Gender				
Female	Reference		Reference	
Male	0.96	<.0001	0.96	0.002
Race / ethnicity				
Black	Reference		Reference	
White	0.95	<.0001	0.85	<.0001
Hispanic	0.87	<.0001	0.87	<.0001
Other	0.87	<.0001	0.79	<.0001
Person-period age (in years)				
Age 0	Reference		Reference	
Age 1, 2 and 3	0.73	<.0001	0.59	<.0001
Age 4 and 5	0.66	<.0001	0.57	<.0001
Age 6 and 7	0.62	<.0001	0.60	<.0001
Age 8 and 9	0.56	<.0001	0.60	<.0001
Age 10 and 11	0.53	<.0001	0.68	<.0001
Age 12 and 13	0.59	<.0001	0.90	0.02
Age 14 and 15	0.65	<.0001	1.14	0.004
Age 16 and 17	0.43	<.0001	0.80	<.0001
Level of placement change				
No level change	Reference		Reference	
Level change	1.04	<.0001	1.22	<.0001
Last placement type before exit				
Foster care	Reference		Reference	
Congregate care	1.19	<.0001	1.28	<.0001
Kinship care	0.70	<.0001	0.60	<.0001
Duration of previous spell				
Six months and under	Reference		Reference	
Seven months and above	0.87	<.0001	1.29	<.0001
Socioeconomic disadvantage				
High	Reference		Reference	
3	1.04	0.01	1.01	0.60
2	1.07	<.0001	1.04	0.13
1	1.07	<.0001	1.01	0.62
Low	1.07	<.0001	1.01	0.77
Urbanicity				
Urban core	Reference		Reference	
Large fringe	1.01	0.62	0.98	0.40
Smaller metro	1.08	<.0001	0.96	0.11
Rural	1.20	<.0001	0.95	0.07
Great recession (2008-2009)				
Person-period not in recession	Reference		Reference	
Person-period was in recession	0.93	<.0001	1.02	0.37

Shading is used to highlight the statistically significant results (<.05).

Regarding socioeconomic circumstances facing families, we expected that children whose families live in counties with more widespread social disadvantage would have higher reentry rates. We also expected higher rates of reentry in urban areas as opposed to rural areas. As for the Great Recession, we are

looking to see whether the economic disruption tied to the recession had an impact on children returning to care.

Results suggest that socioeconomic standing of the counties affects reentry, although not in the direction expected. In the case of reunification, the more disadvantaged counties had lower reentry rates. With respect to urbanicity, rates of reentry were higher for those living in smaller metro and rural areas than for those living in the urban core. As for the Great Recession, reentry rates were generally lower in 2008 and 2009 among the young people who had been reunified earlier in decade. The addition of the interaction terms did not alter the contextual influences.

Table 5. Risk of Reentry after Leaving Care to Reunification or Guardianship for Infants Compared to Non-infants

	Reunification				Guardianship			
	Infants		1 year and older		Infants		1 year and older	
Independent variable	Relative risk	Signif.	Relative risk	Signif.	Relative risk	Signif.	Relative risk	Signif.
Person-periods (not shown separately)								
Gender								
Female	Reference		Reference		Reference		Reference	
Male	0.98	0.36	0.97	<.0001	1.08	0.12	0.95	0.001
Race / ethnicity								
Black	Reference		Reference		Reference		Reference	
White	1.03	0.27	0.99	0.26	0.91	0.09	0.89	<.0001
Hispanic	0.97	0.25	0.91	<.0001	0.98	0.81	0.86	<.0001
Other	0.96	0.25	0.95	.0001	0.79	0.04	0.82	<.0001
Level of placement change								
No level change	Reference		Reference		Reference		Reference	
Level change	0.90	<.0001	1.04	<.0001	0.68	<.0001	1.12	<.0001
Last placement type before exit								
Foster care	Reference		Reference		Reference		Reference	
Congregate care	0.96	0.38	1.08	<.0001	1.33	0.05	1.39	<.0001
Kinship care	0.76	<.0001	0.72	<.0001	0.88	0.03	0.68	<.0001
Duration of previous spell								
Six months and under	Reference		Reference		Reference		Reference	
Seven months and above	1.06	0.004	0.86	<.0001	1.13	0.05	1.19	<.0001
Socioeconomic disadvantage								
High	Reference		Reference		Reference		Reference	
3	1.05	0.14	1.15	<.0001	1.18	0.09	1.25	<.0001
2	1.07	0.06	1.14	<.0001	1.22	0.02	1.34	<.0001
1	1.16	<.0001	1.22	<.0001	1.06	0.55	1.25	<.0001
Low	1.06	0.07	1.14	<.0001	1.27	0.02	1.17	<.0001
Urbanicity								
Urban core	Reference		Reference		Reference		Reference	
Large fringe	0.86	<.0001	0.91	<.0001	0.86	0.13	0.90	0.0001
Smaller metro	0.99	0.79	1.02	0.05	0.80	0.01	0.90	<.0001
Rural	1.08	0.03	1.12	<.0001	0.69	0.0004	0.73	<.0001
Great recession (2008-2009)								
Person-period not in recession	Reference		Reference		Reference		Reference	
Person-period was in recession	0.97	0.14	0.93	<.0001	1.25	0.0006	1.00	0.89

Shading is used to highlight the statistically significant results (<.05).

Table 6. Risk of Reentry after Leaving Care to Reunification or Guardianship by Person-period Age Category

	Person-period age < 12		Person-period age 12 & 13		Person-period age 14 & 15		Person-period age 16 & 17	
Independent variable	Relative risk	Signif.	Relative risk	Signif.	Relative risk	Signif.	Relative risk	Signif.
Person-periods (not shown separately)								
Gender								
Female	Reference		Reference		Reference		Reference	
Male	1.02	0.002	0.90	<.0001	0.82	<.0001	0.84	<.0001
Race / ethnicity								
Black	Reference		Reference		Reference		Reference	
White	1.08	<.0001	0.89	<.0001	0.84	<.0001	0.81	<.0001
Hispanic	1.00	0.88	0.85	<.0001	0.82	<.0001	0.71	<.0001
Other	1.03	0.04	0.88	0.0004	0.87	<.0001	0.71	<.0001
Level of placement change								
No level change	Reference		Reference		Reference		Reference	
Level change	0.99	0.38	1.08	<.0001	1.14	<.0001	1.19	<.0001
Last placement type before exit								
Foster care	Reference		Reference		Reference		Reference	
Congregate care	0.98	0.11	1.41	<.0001	1.39	<.0001	1.19	<.0001
Kinship care	0.62	<.0001	0.70	<.0001	0.72	<.0001	0.73	<.0001
Duration of previous spell								
Six months and under	Reference		Reference		Reference		Reference	
Seven months and above	1.01	0.26	0.88	<.0001	0.87	<.0001	0.86	<.0001
Socioeconomic disadvantage								
High	Reference		Reference		Reference		Reference	
3	1.15	<.0001	1.25	<.0001	1.15	<.0001	1.14	0.001
2	1.17	<.0001	1.20	<.0001	1.20	<.0001	1.10	0.01
1	1.19	<.0001	1.26	<.0001	1.34	<.0001	1.20	<.0001
Low	1.13	<.0001	1.20	<.0001	1.14	<.0001	1.11	0.003
Urbanicity								
Urban core	Reference		Reference		Reference		Reference	
Large fringe	0.90	<.0001	0.87	<.0001	0.92	0.003	0.94	0.06
Smaller metro	1.00	0.97	0.96	0.14	1.02	0.40	0.93	0.03
Rural	1.03	0.04	1.00	0.96	1.02	0.49	0.93	0.05
Great recession (2008-2009)								
Person-period not in recession	Reference		Reference		Reference		Reference	
Person-period was in recession	0.94	<.0001	0.95	0.06	0.96	0.08	1.05	0.06

Shading is used to highlight the statistically significant results (<.05).

Reentry following guardianship

Child Characteristics

Gender differences in reentry are the same regardless of exit reason. The same is true for race/ethnicity. However, if they were discharged to live with a guardian, the differences between black youth and children of other races and ethnicities are larger. When leaving care to live with guardians, black children and youth are more likely to return to care.

Age differences provide an interesting contrast when compared with the results for reunification. Among all other children under the age of 12, when compared with children 1 year old and under, rates of reentry are significantly lower. For teenagers, the rates of reentry relative to infants are still lower but rising. Because of how the analysis was structured, the risk set includes young people who were teenagers at the time of discharge and young people who became teenagers during the time they were at risk, regardless of how long they had been out of care. For children age 14 and 15, their risk of reentry actually exceeds the rate for infants (see Figure 4).

Placement history

As observed among children and young people who were reunified, children who left care to live with relatives had higher reentry rates if they experienced level-of-care changes or left congregate care at the time of exit. Kinship placements (i.e., within foster care), regardless of the exit reason, were associated with lower reentry rates. Finally, reentry from exits to guardianship was influenced by the length of the placement spell. Spells longer than 7 months were much more likely to end in reentry in both models. This may be an artifact of policy provisions that limit exits to guardianship, especially in states with subsidized guardianships, to those situations where reunification and adoption have been set aside.

Social and economic context

Socioeconomic disadvantage, as measured, and urbanicity were not strongly associated with reentry rates among the young people placed with guardians. Young people living with guardians during the Great Recession were no more or less likely to reenter than children at risk of reentry at other times during the decade.

Reentry Rates within Subgroups

The evidence in Figures 2 and 3 suggests that infants reenter at rates that differ from older children. The evidence also suggests that the magnitude of the differences depends on whether the young person is reunified or placed with guardians. To explore this issue further, we split the study sample into two groups: infants and children above the age of 1. We then replicated the analysis in Table 4. The results

are in Tables 5. We are also interested in the experience of older youth as compared to young children. For this analysis, we split the population in four groups: pre-teens (11 and under) and three groups of teenagers – 12- & 13-year olds, 14- & 15-year olds, and 16- & 17-year olds.

Infants and older children

Table 5 has the results of the stratified model. It shows how the experience for infants differs from older children for both reunification and guardianship. For gender, males are no more likely to reentry than females among infants. Among older children, males are less likely to return to care. The connection between reentry and race/ethnicity is also dependent on age. For infants, differences by race/ethnicity are not statistically large, regardless of why the infant left care. Among older children discharged to live with guardians, white and Hispanic children were *less* likely to reenter. The link between level of care changes and reentry are tied to age. Among infants, a level of care change is associated with a lower reentry risk; among older children, a level of care change is associated with a higher risk. This is likely due to the fact that among infants, level changes more often involve changes between foster and kinship care whereas among older children, level of care changes include moves between family-based care and congregate care. Regarding congregate care, congregate as the last placement setting raises the risk of reentry. Kinship care lowers the risk. In the case of both congregate care and relative care, the lower reentry rates cannot be thought of in causal terms. Instead, it is more likely the case that the children in those situations are somehow different than the children in foster care, the comparison group in these models. In general, short placements before discharge are linked to reentry among older children who were reunified. For other children, longer lengths of stay were associated with reentry. Regarding social context, the subgroup analysis from Table 4 stands up. Reentry rates are mostly lower as one moves away from the urban core, with one exception. In the most rural counties, children were more likely to reenter, regardless of age. Finally, with respect to the Great Recession, the infants who left care to live with relatives did have a higher rate of return during the recession years. It is unclear why the effect of the recession would be isolated within this group.

Older children and congregate care

The second subgroup analysis compares groups of older children for the specific purpose of seeing how placement in congregate care affects reentry. Other differences are of interest too. Starting with congregate care, among children under the age of 12, if congregate care was the last placement type, the rate of reentry was no different than the rate reported for children whose last placement was foster care. For the teenagers, congregate care was strongly associated with reentry. Again, this connection between congregate care and reentry says nothing about whether the placement in congregate care did or did not influence the risk of reentry. We can assume that placement in congregate care is affected by the clinical

profile of the young person. We can further assume that those clinical factors, unmeasured in this case, are also correlated with reentry. In short, congregate placement is a marker for young people who may need additional support when they leave care.

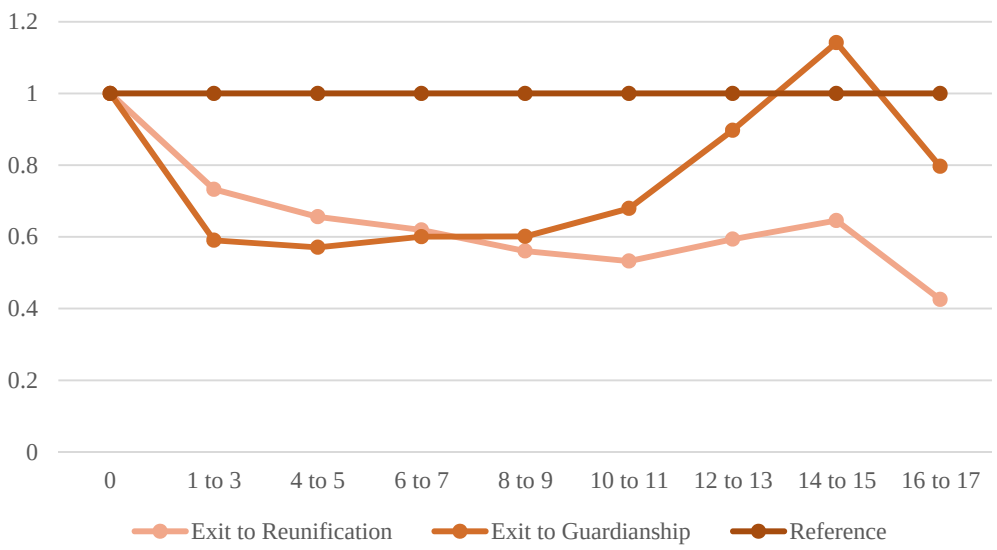
The subgroups in Table 6 differ in other ways. For example, teenage boys generally have lower reentry rates. This may be an artifact of how placements in the juvenile justice system are managed. Boys may be returning to care but they are returning to a different system. In general, among older children, boys make up a smaller proportion of the population entering care for the first time. The results for reentry provide additional insight. Regarding race/ethnicity, under the age of 12, white children have higher reentry rates than black or Hispanic children; among older children, the opposite is true. Black teenagers are more likely to come back to care. Short spells are associated with higher reentry rates for teens but not for children under the age of 12. Reentry rates are uniformly higher in areas with lower levels of socio-economic disadvantage. Urbanicity is not a particularly influential. The Great Recession had a mixed impact.

Age Effects as Development Effects

One goal of the study was to better understand whether the risk of reentry rises as young people at risk of returning to care approach their adolescent years. For the most part, studies examining the basic incidence of foster care placement relative to the general population of children find that incidence rates are highest among the youngest children and teenagers. This pattern fits what we know about the challenges parents face when raising children of different ages. Infants are demanding for obvious reasons; adolescent behavior raises a different, but no less important, set of challenges. To test the hypothesis that risk of placement rises as young people approach adolescence, we wanted to see if we could isolate an increase in the risk level across a population of children at risk of reentry as they moved into their adolescent years.

Figure 4 provides evidence in support of the hypothesis that rates of reentry do rise for teens relative to children of other ages, even after controlling for how long the young person has been out of care (i.e., the person-periods), other characteristics of the child, their placement history, and the county where they were living at the time of their placement.

Figure 4. Relative Rate of Reentry by Person Period Age, with Infants as the Reference Group



In Figure 4, the reference group is children who returned to care before their first birthday (i.e., placed, discharged, and returned to care all within one year of birth). In other words, the risks of reentry for children of other ages are measured in comparison to the youngest age group. For both reunification and guardianship, the rates of reentry for children under the age of 12 are lower than the rate for the youngest children. Among children reunified, the relative risk remains below the risk facing children under 1. However, the risk differential is smaller among teens. The risk pattern for children who left care to be placed with guardians is even more definitive. For the 15-year-old teens, the risk of reentry is actually higher than it is for children under 1. Moreover, each adolescent age group shows a rising relative risk until ages 16 and 17, when the risk of coming back to care wanes. This pattern mirrors the risk of admission to care.

Summary, Implications, and Next Steps

In this study, we examined the risk of returning to foster care after leaving care to reunification or placement with guardians. Our purpose was to understand which children are most at risk of reentering care after leaving care to reunification or guardianship and their status as potential candidates for preventive services. Table 7 summarizes the results.

In our dataset, 123,944 (27%) of the 459,835 children who were discharged to reunification reentered care, and 25,269 (17%) of the 147,454 children who were discharged to guardianship reentered care. Because these reentry rates are effectively lifetime reentry rates—that is, not constrained by a particular period of time, as in the case of the federal Child and Family Service Reviews—the rates of reentry noted here are generally higher than those reported elsewhere.

We expected that children who had unstable placements, returned home, or were discharged to guardianship after short spells in care, would face the highest risk of reentry. Results confirmed our expectations. Children who experienced changes in care type during their preceding spell had a significantly higher risk of reentry than children who did not experience changes in care type. Children who were discharged to reunification after a short spell (less than 6 months) had a significantly higher risk of reentry than children whose prior time in care was more than 6 months. Although the reason why this is true is hard to pinpoint, it may have implications for how the trial discharge status is used. If so, the intersection between trial discharge and eligibility for Family First-funded reentry prevention services may contain an important target population, with implications for how trial discharge is conceptualized and strengthened.

In the case of guardianship, short spells in care correlated with lower rates of reentry, a finding that was somewhat contrary to our expectation. However, in states with policies that limit the use of guardianship because of "rule out" provisions (i.e., reunification and adoption have to be ruled out as discharge options), the states where guardianships are established within 6 months of placement may be unique with regard to who exactly is placed with guardians and the underlying risk of reentry. In other words, there may be policy effects that are unaccounted for in this particular analysis.

The subgroup analysis pointed to groups of children with especially high rates of reentry. Infants regardless of how they leave care are children at greatest risk. For older children leaving congregate care, rates of reentry were also elevated. Across all subgroups, reentry rates were lowest in counties with the greatest levels of socioeconomic strain.

Table 7: Summary of High-risk Prevention Service Candidates

Prevention Services Candidates	Children Reunified	Children Placed with Guardians
Young children	Likely candidates include young children, especially those under the age of 1 at discharge, for a period of up to 1-year post discharge to care if reunified with their parents. Other than teenagers, this group of children is the group most likely to return to care.	Candidates include young children, especially those under the age of 2, whose risk of returning within 6 months of discharge is high.
Short stays in out-of-home care	Likely candidates are older children (1 and above) returned to their parents following a short stay in foster care (under 6 months) are more likely to return to care.	Among older children, potential candidates were more likely to have been in care for 7 months or longer. However, this may be an artifact of guardianship policies.
Elevated risk of reentry soon after discharge.	Likely candidates will come from the pool of children who left care less than 6 months ago.	Though lower than the risk of reentry following reunification, the risk of reentry following guardianship placement is higher in the months right after discharge than it is later on. States might include these young people in their candidate pool.
Teenagers	Candidates include teenagers leaving congregate care to live with their family.	Teenagers, especially 14- and 15-year olds, have the highest risk of reentry if discharged to live with relatives. Young people with a history of prior placement, regardless of how long ago that placement may have been, face a rising risk of placement as they move into adolescence.
Congregate care		Likely candidates include young people who leave congregate care to live with relatives because their rates of reentry are among the highest observed.
Other considerations	Race/ethnicity is an important factor but it depends on the age of the child. Among children 11 and under, white children are more likely to return to care than black or Hispanic children. Among older children (12 and above) reentry rates are highest among black youth. Because children from rural counties have somewhat higher rates of reentry compared to children from other areas, candidates are likely concentrated in rural areas.	

The results of our model also showed a significant developmental effect: the risk of reentry increases when children become teenagers. Reentry rates peak for 14- and 15-year-olds. This increase in risk is most prominent for children who exit to guardianship. From a policy and practice perspective, this is a particularly challenging finding. If a child is discharged as a teenager, the risk of reentry is high. From a prevention perspective, it is relatively easy to target teenagers as they leave care. The more difficult group consists of children who were discharged from care a "long time ago" and are now entering their teenage years. It is unlikely that these children are being monitored on an active, ongoing basis by child

welfare agencies. Thus, when they come to the attention of the local child welfare agency, it may be after a stressful period in the family. Nevertheless, at that point, the risk of placement is elevated. For that reason, teenagers with the history of prior placement who left care to live with guardians warrant attention on the part of child welfare agencies.

Limitations and Next Steps

Although the evidence developed for the paper shows how the risk of reentry varies between populations, we do not have good measures of what might be called clinical acuity as part of the data used for the study. If we knew that status of young people as they were leaving care, we might have a better view of why reentry is as high as it is in some groups. We also want to acknowledge that children who leave the state where they were living when they left care are lost to follow-up. There is no way of knowing how large that issue is and how knowing more about them might affect the conclusions reached. We also excluded adoptions from the analysis. That has two important implications. First, adoption disruption and dissolution are important issues in their own right. It is also the case that the likelihood of adoption differs from one state to the next. It could be that a child who leaves care to be live with a guardian in one state might be adopted if he or she was living in another state. Simply put, certain selection biases that are artifacts of state policy differences may influence the results.

Notwithstanding those limitations, the evidence offered does have salience for policy makers looking for ways to support services designed to prevent reentry to care. Regarding next steps, from a research perspective, the subgroup analysis shows how the risk of reentry varies between groups. We strongly suspect that a deeper look at subgroups would further reveal key target groups. For example, although reentry is higher in counties with lower levels of economic strain (social disadvantage), we might find that the risk in areas with high levels of disadvantage falls on the shoulders of children of color more squarely than the results here reveal. It is also possible that state policy regimes have favorable (or unfavorable) consequences for reentry.

With all of that said, it would be wise for state and local child welfare agencies to pay close attention to very young children, especially infants who enter care, leave, and then return to care before their first birthday. On the whole, their numbers are relatively small, but the risk of reentry is substantial. Given what we know about the importance of safe and stable families, few subgroups offer a more obvious way to have an impact. The same can be said for older youth who have had some prior time in foster care, regardless of how recent. In the end, these two groups plus others waiting to be discovered would benefit substantially from investments in the sort of services Family First offers to states.

APPENDIX

Urbanicity is based on the classification scheme used by the National Center for Health Statistics. The NCHS urban-rural classification scheme classifies all U.S. counties and county equivalents into six levels: four for metropolitan counties and two for nonmetropolitan counties. In our study we reduced these to four levels.

Appendix Table 1. Urbanicity levels

Current study	National Center for Health Statistics categories	National Center for Health Statistics definition
Urban core	Large central metro	Counties in micropolitan statistical areas (MSAs) of populations of 1 million or more that: 1. contain the entire population of the largest principal city of the MSA, or 2. have their entire population contained in the largest principal city of the MSA, or 3. contain at least 250,000 inhabitants of any principal city of the MSA.
Large fringe	Large fringe metro	Counties in MSAs of populations of 1 million or more people, that did not qualify as large central metro counties
Smaller metro	Medium metro	Counties in MSAs of populations of 250,000 to 999,999
	Small metro	Counties in MSAs of populations less than 250,000
Rural	Micropolitan	Counties in MSAs
	Noncore	Nonmetropolitan counties that did not qualify as micropolitan

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