Transcript for "The Academic Achievement of Children in Foster Care"

Featuring Lawrence (Lonnie) Berger

Hosted by David Chancellor

Does foster care lead to worse academic achievement for kids? In this podcast, IRP Director Lawrence Berger discusses a Wisconsin study he conducted with other IRP colleagues that explores the relationship between foster care and academic achievement using linked child welfare and Department of Public Instruction data.

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[Chancellor] Hello, you're listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. I'm Dave Chancellor.

For this, our September 2015 podcast, I was able to talk with IRP director Lonnie Berger about a paper that was published in the journal *Pediatrics* earlier this year on "Children's Academic Achievement and Foster Care." Berger coauthored the paper with Maria Cancian, Eunhee Han, Jennifer Noyes, and Vanessa Rios-Salas. We should note that Dr. Cancian's work on the project occurred before she began her appointment as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy at the Administration for Children and Families, United States Department of Health and Human Services.

The main question in the paper, and the one that we're going to look at in this podcast, is whether foster care – also known as out-of-home placement – actually leads to worse academic achievement for kids. On a lot of measures, kids in foster care are doing worse than the average kid in school, but as we turn to Professor Berger, he says that that in itself shouldn't be particularly surprising.

[Berger] One of the places we started from was that there have been recent reports in other states and different documentation showing that foster kids do much worse in school whether it's measured by test scores, whether it's measured by graduation rates, on a lot of other metrics as measured against children in the population. And that's really not surprising, right? So it's not surprising not only given some of the experiences that may have lead them to foster care. But also, the kids that come into foster care aren't like the average kid in school. To begin with, they tend to be from lower income families. We know there's a gap in educational achievement, educational attainment by family socioeconomic status, they're also much more likely to have experienced a host of risk factors. To begin with, child maltreatment, but also parental substance abuse, parental mental health problems, family instability, a range of other risk factors

that in and of themselves would make these kids more vulnerable to adverse outcomes than your average child.

[Chancellor] Yet, the question remains as to whether being in foster care in and of itself is associated with poor educational outcomes. And this question is not simply academic; it has important policy implications of interest to both the Wisconsin Departments of Children and Families and Public Instruction.

[Berger] On the one hand, if children who enter care already have a history of low achievement and then we observe them in care or after care and they still display low achievement, that may imply that the achievement gap is not caused by foster care itself. But, rather that foster care doesn't compensate for a preexisting gap in achievement. And we can think about or argue about whether the foster care system should or should not compensate for that gap but the main implication there is that it's not causing that gap. The flip side is that it's very possible that the disruption associated with foster care placement, with removal from home, with separation from, potentially, siblings, parents, clearly, is really a stressful process and a disruption that potentially compromises school achievement by potentially affecting or causing stress, affecting kids' abilities to concentrate. Often there's a change in school that's associated with foster care placement and so we could think of all of these things as potential ways that foster care placement in and of itself could decrease or be associated with poorer achievement outcomes.

[Chancellor] Berger says while the key reason that a child would be removed from home is for issues of child safety, he says that the system actually has a three part mandate: So it's about safety, but also about promoting permanency, and preserving child well-being. So, if something about foster care is causing kids to have worse academic achievement, that would have big policy implications. Berger and his colleagues had to think about how to measure foster care in and of itself against all of these other risk factors that kids in foster care may have been exposed to.

[Berger] This was a project where it really required linking -- to begin with, child welfare data, so foster care data, with department of public instruction -- what we call it in Wisconsin-- sometimes it's called department of education data in different states, with test score data. And so we also, because these families differ so much, we wanted data from a range of other programs. So you might want to know things like, is the family receiving food stamps, what are the family's earnings? Do they qualify for TANF programs, for cash welfare? So we extract data from a wide range of these programs. Both to get our key variables, but also to get control variables, things like, number of kids in a family, family size, family structure, those kinds of things. So what we're able to end up with is a data set of about 530,000 child-year observations of about a little more than 200,000 children, and we're going to observe these children every year from grades 3 through age 8. Those are the years in the Wisconsin Public Schools where every year you take a standardized reading test and a standardized math test. Our data spanned from the 2005/2006 school year through the 2011/2012 school year. Essentially what we're going to have is test scores, a range of sociodemographic variables, and foster care or child welfare involvement variables for that time period and for kids in that age group.

[Chancellor] For their primary outcomes, the researchers looked at both math and reading scores that were measured every year for children in grades 3 through 8, or about ages 8 to 13. But Berger

says that as they looked at test scores for kids in foster care, that it was really important to think about the groups they were comparing them to.

[Berger] And so what we essentially did was construct five different comparison groups. Six if you count the "average" kid in Wisconsin Public Schools. We can compare mean scores on these math and reading tests between children in foster care with the average score for every kid in Wisconsin Public Schools in grades 3 through 8. And we do that. But, then we want to get to what we think of as closer comparisons, so if our main group of interest is children who are currently in out of home placement, in foster care, we started with a comparison group of children who received SNAP or food stamps in the last 12 months, the 12 months prior to taking the achievement test, but had no experience with child protective services. And so we can think of that as an economically or socioeconomically disadvantaged sample, but have no, at least known, child maltreatment problems. And then also thought that given that we have access to detailed child welfare data, not just on people, kids who are in out of home care, we can also look at kids who are investigated but not placed so we think, ok, so kids who are reported to child welfare in the last 12 months, had an investigation, but were not removed from home. And so, we think about those kids as potentially being a somewhat better comparison group because they've at least some kind of child welfare experience. A third group we could look at is a group of kids who were investigated by child welfare in the year prior to the test, were not removed from home during that time, but were removed from home after the test. So, within six months or so after the test they were removed from home. They had been investigated before the test and were in home at the time, and we might think of this as a really high risk group, so they're going to be removed, but haven't been removed yet. And then we looked at a group of kids who were recently in out of home placement, so were out of home within the last 12 months, but were back at home at the time of the test. So these are kids who had experienced out of home placement but were in home at the time of the test.

[Chancellor] Professor Berger says that just looking at the mean or the average gaps across these groups is really informative. Here we're using reading as an example, but the patterns are largely the same if you looked at math instead.

[Berger] If we look at the difference between the average score for children taking the test while in out of home placement, and the average score for the typical Wisconsin public school student, what we see is that the kids who are taking the test while in out of home placement are performing about 0.6 standard deviations below or worse than the average across the whole population of students. This is a really big effect. Then if you look at how are kids who receive food stamps or receive SNAP do in comparison to the average public school student, what you essentially see is they're doing about 0.4 standard deviations worse. And that's also a really large effect. So, essentially, if you're comparing, thinking about those gaps, the gap between the average public school student and the socioeconomically disadvantaged student who receives food stamps is twice as big as gap between the kid who receives food stamps and the kid who's in out of home placement. And you can kind of think about it as, of that whole gap, assuming that kids in out of home placement are economically disadvantaged, about two thirds of it is probably due to that disadvantage.

[Chancellor] When Berger and his colleagues compared children who were in out of home placement to children that had some other involvement with Child Protective Services, the differences they found were actually pretty small.

[Berger] So we see a relatively small difference between kids taking the test while they're in out of home placement, kids who were investigated before the test and not removed in the year before or the year after the test, kids who were out of home in the year before the test but back at home by the time they took the test, and kids who had been investigated prior to taking the test and were removed from home in the year subsequent to taking the test. And, if anything, the kids whose mean scores were the worst were the kids who were still at home and were going to be removed subsequently. So, the kids who were probably, most likely to be in a chaotic or unstable environment that would eventually get to the point where a child had to be removed.

[Chancellor] What we see here is that you get very different stories depending on whether you compare students who are in foster care to the average student, or to students whose families receive SNAP, or to students who have different levels of child protective services involvement. Given this, Berger and his team set out to find explanations for these stories.

[Berger] We also were concerned that there were a variety of other differences that may explain parts of these gaps, these mean gaps. So, what we really did was we really used three different empirical strategies to try to get at whether these other factors, so how kids are doing before they come into care, differences in the characteristics of kids whose families come into care and those who don't. Changes in kids' own achievement scores over time. And so what we really did was use three different modeling strategies. The first we did was use a pooled ordinary least squares regression which is essentially what we're doing is comparing across groups and we're saying, between these five groups that we focus on, adjusting for differences in income, differences in whether you qualify for school lunch, in family structure, whether your parents have been incarcerated, all these things that might be correlated with both achievement test scores and your probability of being in out of home placement. So, adjusting for those things, how do the kids in each group compare? The second thing we did was add to that model, children's prior test scores. So we say, 'if we also account for how kids were doing in the year before we're observing them, how does that change our results?' And essentially, that's a way of saying, we're going to account for a bunch of unobserved, preexisting characteristics, right, that would affect their current test score essentially in the same way that they affected their prior test score. So, comparing kids at the same prior test score and seeing how they look in different placement statuses, the next wave or the next period. The third thing we do is what's called a fixed effects model, and essentially what we're doing is instead of comparing across kids, so the difference between a child who's in out of home placement and a child whose family is receiving SNAP, what we're going to do is look at within child change.

[Chancellor] For this fixed effects model, the researchers look at a child's test score when they are in out of home placement and see how that score varies relative to his or her test scores in the other periods.

[Berger] Most interestingly, in the child fixed effects model, when we look at how a child's own score varies when they're observed in these different placement statuses, what we essentially see is there's no

difference when we observe a kid moving, say, from only receiving SNAP, to being out of home during a test. Or, when we observe a kid on SNAP versus the same kid being on out of home placement before the test but back at home at the time of the test. We do see a tiny difference when the same kid is observed with their family only on SNAP or having been investigated by CPS but not removed, and they're not removed prior to or subsequent to the test, and it's a very small difference, like 1% of a standard deviation. And then we see still a relatively modest difference, but the children who are screened in, who are investigated and are going to be placed later do about 9% of standard deviation worse than when they're observed in a year where their family was on SNAP, but no child welfare involvement.

[Chancellor] Professor Berger says that the other thing we should note is that when they compare all of these placement statuses to each other, they don't find statistically significant differences.

[Berger] In other words, it doesn't matter whether you're in foster care at the time of the test, you were before the test, you were investigated and removed later, or you were investigated and not removed before or after, your test scores are roughly the same. And so what this leads us to conclude is that it's very clear that on average, children involved in CPS do worse than children in the general population and do worse than children whose families are disadvantaged and qualify for SNAP benefits. On average these gaps tend to be relatively large. Once we compare among disadvantaged children, the gaps get much smaller. And, particularly when we look at within, so comparing just among kids who have different levels of child protective services involvement, we really see very little differences that are not significant and not particularly substantively meaningful.

[Chancellor] Berger says that these very small differences between students with different levels of child protective services involvement suggest that foster care in and of itself doesn't appear to be causing poorer academic achievement.

[Berger] What we're really likely seeing is that all of these other characteristics that are associated with both, really with being involved in the child protective services system to begin with, with being removed and being placed in foster care, are also associated with lower levels of achievement, and those are likely driving this association that we're seeing with foster care and poorer test scores and poorer child achievement. And so the implication there is that we may well want to do interventions to compensate for preexisting deficits or preexisting risk factors that are associated with poorer achievement among foster kids, but I think it is inadvisable to assume that it is the foster care system in and of itself that's leading to poorer achievement.

[Chancellor] Berger says besides what this tells us about the relationship between foster care and academic achievement, this kind of research shows us that we should think carefully about how we compare different groups when we're thinking about policy.

[Berger] I think one of the big takeaways is that when we approach this kind of policy relevant research particularly in these areas where we're thinking about really vulnerable kids, it's super important to try to think very carefully about 'well, we see this big average difference in the population', is it likely to be caused by essentially the grouping variable, in this case whether you're in foster care or not. Or, are there large differences in the types, in the selection of people into that category? And this is crucial for public

policy, thinking about where do you put your resources, and that really depends on what you believe or what you've identified as the cause.

[Chancellor] Berger and his colleagues continue to work on questions about the educational achievement of children in out of home care, in partnership with the Departments of Children and Families and Public Instruction, as part of Wisconsin Educational Collaboration for Youth in Foster Care Project, which is funded by the federal Department of Health and Human Services.

Many thanks to Lonnie Berger for sharing this work with us. You've been listening to a podcast from the Institute for Research on Poverty.

*Closing music from "Test Drive" by Zapac