

MANY STUDIES DOCUMENT THAT, ON AVERAGE, YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE PERFORM WORSE IN SCHOOL THAN OTHER CHILDREN, which raises concerns about the effectiveness of child welfare and educational policy for this vulnerable group.

HOWEVER, A NEW STUDY PUBLISHED IN THE JOURNAL *PEDIATRICS* COMES TO A FUNDAMENTALLY DIFFERENT CONCLUSION. The researchers employed a more focused and relevant set of comparisons than most previous studies, using linked administrative data for a sample of more than 222,000 children who had either experienced out-of-home placement or were in various comparison groups.*

The New Study Finds:

Out-of-home placement (OHP) itself does not appear to be causally related to school achievement; however, children involved with Child Protective Services (CPS) were shown to have consistently low average math and reading standardized test scores.

The difference in Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examinations (WKCE) scores between children in OHP and those receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) assistance, who are more similar to children in foster care than are children in the general population, is considerably smaller than that between children experiencing OHP and all other children.

There are relatively few differences in achievement test scores between children in foster care and other children involved with CPS but not placed out of home.

No differences in achievement by level of CPS involvement were found. That all children involved with CPS performed similarly suggests that OHP is not especially salient concerning academic achievement among children involved with CPS.

*Berger, L., M. Cancian, E. Han, J. Noyes, and V. Rios-Salas, "Children's Academic Achievement and Foster Care," *Pediatrics* 135, No. 1 (2015): e109–e116.

6.3 million children were reported to CPS in the United States in 2012.

460,000+ children reside in some form of out-of-home placement as a result of CPS involvement.

6% of all U.S. children and 12% of all U.S. black children will experience OHP by the time they are 18 years old.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 makes CPS agencies accountable not only for ensuring that children are safe, but also for promoting children's educational, physical, and mental health needs.

Lawrence Berger, Maria Cancian, Jennifer Noyes, and Vanessa Rios-Salas

The Researchers Recommend:

In light of the new research evidence, study researchers argue that practice and policy would be well served by focusing on *all* socioeconomically vulnerable children's school achievement, including that of child protective services-involved children, rather than focusing specifically on the consequences of OHP on academic achievement.

Why Data Matter:

The study's longitudinal data allow researchers to observe children before, during, and after OHP. The data set also allows for comparison of outcomes for children in an OHP with those of the general population and with several subsamples that are likely to be more similar: children who were the subject of a screened-in CPS call but were not removed to an OHP, and children from economically disadvantaged families, as indicated by receipt of SNAP benefits.

“A substantial portion of the negative association between OHP and test scores is accounted for by factors other than placement itself.”

—Lawrence Berger, Maria Cancian, Eunhee Han, Jennifer Noyes, and Vanessa Rios-Salas

How OHP Might Affect School Outcomes:

Emotional and social stress that may be caused by the disruption associated with OHP, including a child’s separation from primary caregivers and often siblings and other family members, may reduce school performance.

If a child is removed from a chaotic or abusive home and placed in a high-quality foster care setting, school achievement may be improved, especially after an initial adjustment period.

Changing schools as a result of placement may have further implications for achievement. For example, a new school may be of higher or lower quality; the setting may be a better or worse match for the student, both academically and socially; and effects may vary over time if a new school presents benefits or challenges realized only after a period of transition and stabilization.

Think About It:

The fundamental challenge to identifying OHP’s effect on educational achievement is that a child’s removal from the home occurs in a context of other individual and environmental factors that may also affect school outcomes.

Many earlier studies that associated OHP with poor school achievement did not adequately account for the fact that children in OHP face many other risk factors that are also associated with educational outcomes.

For example, children in foster care are much more likely than other children to experience child maltreatment, poverty, parental substance abuse, and mental health problems, all of which threaten healthy development in and of themselves, independent of OHP.

In addition, most earlier studies were unable to observe children before, during, and after OHP and frequently relied on relatively small samples that were selected based on child protective services involvement.

Study Details:

Data

Longitudinal linked administrative data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction and the Institute for Research on Poverty’s 2011 Multi-Sample Person File database were used.

Study Sample

The study sample comprised 529,597 child-year observations for 222,049 children who either experienced OHP or were in a comparison group.

Measures

Children’s math and reading scores on the Wisconsin Knowledge and Concepts Examination in grades 3–8, standardized by grade and year, were the measures used.

Placement Status

There were five indicators: (1) child was in OHP at time of the test; (2) child was in OHP at some point in the 12 months before the test but in-home at the time of the test; (3) child had been investigated by CPS between 1 and 12 months before the test and was not removed from the home before the test, but was removed after the test and within 12 months of the investigation; (4) child was investigated by CPS in the 12 months before the test but was not removed from the home before the test or within 12 months of the investigation; and (5) child received SNAP in the 12 months before the test but did not experience a CPS investigation or OHP.

Controls

The researchers controlled for the following factors: child female; child race/ethnicity (white, Asian, black, Hispanic, Native American); child was a member of a household that met the income eligibility guidelines for free school lunch in the month before the test; child grade retention during the previous school year; days the child was suspended in the year before the test; child’s English language proficiency; mother’s age; family structure in the year of the test; number of children in the household in the year of the test; total family wages reported to the unemployment insurance system in the year before the test; parental incarceration in the past 15 years; parental incarceration in the year before the test; an indicator representing the school accountable for the student at the time of the test; an indicator for year of observation; and age of the student.

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