



Length of service for foster parents: Using administrative data to understand retention

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Received 1 September 2006; received in revised form 2 November 2006; accepted 14 November 2006

Available online 8 February 2007

Abstract

Although adoptions from foster care have increased dramatically in recent years, foster homes remain a critical resource within the child welfare system. Research has explored the factors associated with foster parents' decision to continue or cease providing foster care. However, we know little about the length of time for which foster parents provide service, nor about the foster parent characteristics and foster care provision associated with varying length of service. This study used administrative data from three states to conduct longitudinal analyses of foster parenting careers. It builds on previous research by producing the first unbiased estimates of length of service and examining variations in length of service in terms of foster parent characteristics and the amount and type of care provided. Median length of service was between 8 and 14 months. Foster parents with greater length of service are likely to be older; live in urban areas; care for more children at a given time; and care for more infants, adolescents, or children with special needs. In each state, a relatively small group of foster parents provided the majority of caregiving. These findings can guide development of strategies to increase retention and make better use of foster parenting resources. © 2007 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Keywords: Foster parenting; Length of service; Retention

1. Introduction

Foster homes serve as an essential resource for the more than 500,000 children currently in out-of-home care, nearly half of whom are placed in nonrelative foster family homes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) 2005) The critical shortages of foster homes

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¹ RTI International is a trade name of Research Triangle Institute.

noted in the late 1980s (Child Welfare League of America (CWLA), 1997; U.S. House of Representatives 2004) appear to have been alleviated by increasing rates of adoption (CWLA, 2005; DHHS, 2005) and use of relative foster-care providers (Geen, 2003). Nevertheless, strategies to enhance retention of qualified foster parents continue to generate considerable discussion (Casey Family Programs, 2005; CWLA, 1995; Christian, 2002; DHHS, Office of the Inspector General [OIG], 2002).

Foster parent retention affects the well-being of both child welfare agencies and the children they serve. Turnover among foster parents, reported to range from 30 to 50% in some agencies (Christian, 2002), creates ongoing demands for agency staff to recruit, train and license additional foster parents. Maintaining an adequate supply of foster parents enables agencies to minimize placements in congregate care or with marginally qualified foster families, and to choose placements based on proximity to birth families and the ability to meet foster children's needs (Annie E. Casey Foundation, n.d.). Although no research links child outcomes to foster parent experience, there exists an implicit assumption that experienced foster parents are better equipped to respond to the complex needs of the foster children in their care.

Research on foster parenting has identified characteristics and experiences that differentiate foster parents who continue or cease foster parenting. However, few of these studies describe the length of service among the foster parents studied, or the correlates of varying length of service. In addition, estimates of length of service are based on cross-sectional data that over-represent those foster parents who have remained in service. This article uses longitudinal analysis methods to produce the first unbiased estimates of length of service among foster parents in three states, examining the extent to which foster parent characteristics and the amount and type of care provided are associated with varying length of service. Better understanding of foster parents' length of service can inform our understanding of retention and strategies to make better use of foster parenting resources.

2. Background

Three comprehensive studies represent the bulk of research on foster parent retention. Foremost is the National Survey of Current and Former Foster Parents (hereafter the National Survey), conducted in 1991, which used a nationally representative sample to select more than 1000 current and foster parents for interviews (DHHS, 1989; Rhodes, Orme, & Buehler, 2001). In a second major study, researchers at Ohio State University collected data from 539 current and 265 former foster parents who served during 1991 and 1992 to (a) identify factors that distinguish ongoing from former foster parents (Rindfleisch, Bean, & Denby, 1998) and (b) predict intent to continue foster parenting (Denby, Rindfleisch, & Bean, 1999). The third study, conducted by the Office of the Inspector General in the Department of Health and Human Services, assessed issues affecting foster parents through interviews with child welfare managers and focus groups with foster parents (DHHS-OIG, 2002).

These three studies, and other smaller ones, yield fairly consistent findings on factors that influence foster parent retention. These factors can be categorized in terms of foster parents' experiences and their demographic and socioeconomic characteristics.

Interactions with the child welfare agency are the most commonly cited factors affecting foster parents' decision to cease foster parenting. These include unsatisfactory interactions with workers, agency insensitivity, and lack of services (DHHS, 1989; Rhodes et al., 2001; Triseliotis, Borland, & Hill, 1998), the agencies' response to allegations of abuse or neglect and general "red tape" (Rindfleisch et al., 1998). Foster parents who intended to exit were more likely than

continuing foster parents to report that caseworkers did not communicate expectations clearly and treated foster parents in a condescending manner (Denby et al., 1999; Rindfleisch et al., 1998).

Child-related problems were associated with both lower satisfaction and intent to cease foster parenting (Denby et al., 1999; DHHS, 1989). Stress factors include the difficulty of seeing children returned to birth parents, interactions with birth parents, and having no voice in the child's future (DHHS, 1989; Hornby, 1985; Martin, Altemeier, Hickson, Davis, & Glascoe 1992; Rhodes et al., 2001). Reduced retention has also been associated with dissatisfaction with training (Boyd & Remy, 1979; Fees et al., 1998; Rhodes et al., 2001) and low levels of financial support (Rhodes et al., 2001). Increased financial support has been shown to reduce exits from foster parenting, particularly when combined with enhanced training and support (Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992). Foster parents may also cease foster parenting because they planned to adopt (Rhodes et al., 2001; Rindfleisch et al., 1998), or because of personal circumstances such as age, or marital crises (DHHS, 1989).

Research on the relationship between foster parent demographics and retention is somewhat mixed. Older foster parents were significantly more likely than younger ones to continue foster parenting (Campbell & Downs, 1987; Rhodes et al., 2001), and to intend to continue foster parenting (Denby et al., 1999). Foster parent race is not consistently associated with satisfaction with foster parenting (Denby et al., 1999; Fees et al., 1998). Although white foster mothers were reported to have a significantly higher probability of exiting foster parenting than African American ones (Rindfleisch et al., 1998), other studies have found no effect of race after controlling for income (Rhodes, Orme, Cox, & Buehler, 2003).

Studies that examine socioeconomic characteristics in relation to retention have found mixed results. Some analyses have found that families with higher incomes were more likely to exit and that foster parents for whom foster parenting is a source of income (i.e., those with lower income) were more likely to continue (Campbell & Downs, 1987; Rindfleisch et al., 1998), suggesting that foster care maintenance payments may buttress family income. By contrast, Rhodes et al. (2003) found that families with higher income were more likely to complete training and continue fostering, suggesting that these families are more able to provide housing and to cover the out-of-pocket expenses required to care for children. The impact of socioeconomic characteristics on retention may vary among states, given the wide range of foster care maintenance payments (U.S. House of Representatives 2004).

Many children in foster care present behavioral, emotional or medical needs that may make their care more demanding. In Canada, foster parents who did not limit the types of children for whom they would provide care were less likely to leave foster parenting (Tucker, Hurl, & Ford, 1994). Willingness to foster special needs children was associated with actual provision of care by licensed foster parents (Cox, Orme, Kathryn, & Rhodes, 2002; Cox, Orme, Kathryn, & Rhodes, 2003). Consistent with these findings, broadly-focused foster parent recruitment campaigns have been criticized for yielding homes that were unwilling or unable to care for the children who were most likely to be in care (DHHS-OIG, 2002).

Some foster homes discontinue foster parenting without formally exiting the program. The National Survey found that 35% of licensed foster homes surveyed had no children in the home at the time of the survey; these homes were more likely to be nonurban and white (DHHS, 1989). By contrast, Martin et al. (1992) found that 23% of the foster parents sampled cared for half of the children in care in the participating foster homes.

Many of these studies share methodological limitations including a reliance on self-reported data from foster parents and low response rates from former foster parents. In addition,

information on how long foster parents serve is notably absent among continuation or exit studies. Respondents' mean time in foster parenting was reported as 8.6 years in one study (Martin & associates, 1992) and 5 years in another (Rindfleisch et al., 1998). However, these estimates are based on cross-sectional samples, which overstate length of stay (Usher, 1995; Wulczyn, 1996). A study of 629 foster family homes in Ontario addressed this shortcoming by using longitudinal analyses to examine patterns of exit from foster parenting (Tucker et al., 1994), but the authors did not produce estimates of length of time in foster parenting.

To close this gap in the knowledge base about length of service, we used administrative data and longitudinal analysis methods to produce estimates of length of service in foster parenting. Variations in length of service were examined in terms of foster parent characteristics and the amount and type of foster care provided. Findings suggest the potential usefulness of such analyses in better understanding foster parent retention.

3. Methods

3.1. Data

Child welfare agencies in three states—New Mexico, Oklahoma and Oregon—contributed data for these analyses. We selected these states because of their willingness to provide both data and ongoing consultation and the quality of their data. States provided three types of data for nonrelative foster care: placement records for children, foster parent licensure, and individual foster parent characteristics.

Placement data included all nonrelative foster care placements during the years in which foster parent data were available, representing 4 years of placements for New Mexico (1998–2001), 6 years for Oklahoma (1996–2001) and 13 years for Oregon (1990–2002). Data on children include the foster home identification number for each foster care placement, date of birth, race, and indications of special needs such as mental, physical, or emotional disabilities (New Mexico and Oklahoma only). We used the foster home identifier to link each child placement to the foster home in which it occurred.

Foster parent licensing records identify the types of placements that the home can accept. Because many homes are licensed for multiple types of care, a cascading classification scheme was used to identify homes in terms of their most restrictive license type: foster-adopt homes (New Mexico and Oregon only), therapeutic foster care (New Mexico only), restricted nonrelative placements (Oklahoma and Oregon only), and regular foster care (all states). We excluded homes licensed for relative care only and placements of relative children regardless of the foster parents' license type because the length of service for relative caregivers is likely to be influenced by factors other than those that affect nonrelative foster care.

Data on foster parents' characteristics, selected based on previous research and availability within administrative data, included location, foster parent age, and race. States coded location in different ways. New Mexico characterized foster homes as urban or rural. For Oklahoma and Oregon, records included the foster parents' county of residence, which we coded as metropolitan or nonmetropolitan based on U.S. Census coding of counties (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). To facilitate analysis at the foster home level, we created home-level variables for foster parent characteristics such as age (at least one foster parent between 18 and 30 years of age, all foster parents between 30 and 55 years of age, at least one foster parent over age 55) and race (at least one foster parent Native American, at least one foster parent black, all foster parents white). Foster parent age is calculated at the time that the home is first licensed. High levels of missing data

precluded analysis of data on race for New Mexico and data on ethnicity for all three states. After linking child placement data to foster parent data, homes were categorized according to the proportion of placements that were infants, adolescents, or children with special needs. Foster parent employment and income at time of licensure were available for analysis for Oregon only.

All analyses were based on the period of time during which foster parents provided care to children, rather than on licensing dates. We defined episodes of active foster parenting as the number of days between the beginning of the first child placement in the home and either the last exit date for any child placed in the home or the end of the study period. A gap of more than 90 days without a placement in the home signals the start of a second episode of active foster parenting. Examination of the data revealed that after 90 days without a placement, the likelihood of additional placements decreased sharply. Between 74 and 87% of homes had only one episode of active foster parenting during the years studied. To exclude periods (months or years) in which no foster care was provided, we based our length of service analyses on only the first episode. Episodes of active foster parenting represent a more valid measure of length of actual service than do licensing dates, because foster parents may be licensed for extended periods without providing foster care.

We also limited our analyses to homes in which the date of the initial license occurred after the date for which child placement records were available. This restriction was necessary create entry cohorts of foster parents whose entire foster parenting careers (up to the point when analysis files were created) could be examined. Thus, these analyses represent those cohorts of foster parents who began foster parenting during the years studied for the each state.

3.2. *Analyses*

Preliminary descriptive analyses examined the distribution of foster parent characteristics and the proportion of care provided to infants, adolescents and children with special needs. The average number of children cared for in the home on a typical night (occupancy rate) was calculated by dividing the total placement days for all children cared for in the home during the first episode of foster parenting by the length of the first episode in days. Because episodes of foster parenting may include periods of up to 90 days with no child placements in the home, these occupancy rates are lower than those based on the number of children in homes currently providing foster care.

Variations in both occupancy rate and length of service suggested an extremely broad range of total days of care provided by different homes. We examined this distribution by comparing the number of days of foster care provided by each foster home (during all episodes of foster care) with the total days of foster care provided during the years studied. This figure represents the days of care provided to all children, rather than the length of service (i.e., 90 days of care might consist of three children placed in the home for 30 days each, or one child for 90 days). This calculation intentionally does not adjust for the length of time in foster parenting because foster parents with shorter lengths of service will generally provide fewer total days of care than the others.

Analyses of length of service use longitudinal analysis, also known as survival analysis, to model the length of the first episode of active foster parenting. Longitudinal methods have been used extensively to analyze the experiences of children in foster care (Goerge, 1990; Usher, Wildfire, & Gibbs, 1999; Webster, Barth, & Needell, 2000). These analyses produce less biased estimates of length of time than cross-sectional methods, which tend to over-represent children who remain in care (Usher, 1995; Wulczyn, 1996), and would similarly over-represent adults who remain in foster parenting for extended periods of time.

We applied several longitudinal methods to the foster parenting data, making as much use as possible of cases that were censored because the foster parent was still providing care at the time data were drawn for analysis. Life table analyses were used to estimate the cumulative probability that a foster parent continued active fostering during specified time periods after the first child was placed in the home. Kaplan–Meier analyses provided estimates of median length of service for foster parents. In addition to bivariate analyses of the relationship between foster parent characteristics and length of service, the study team tested multivariate models using Cox proportional hazard regression (Allison, 1995). These models yield comparative hazard rates, which can be conceptualized as the likelihood of an event—in this case, exit from foster parenting—on any given day.

Because New Mexico data did not have an adequate number of foster parent records to support Cox models, multivariate models used data from Oklahoma and Oregon only. Multivariate models used all available independent variables for each state, including, for example, income and employment status in Oregon. Continuous variables such as occupancy rate and percent of placements that were infants, adolescents or children with special needs were categorized to create groups as nearly equal as possible, so categories are not necessarily consistent across states.

4. Findings

4.1. Distribution of care

Mean occupancy rates were similar in all states, between 1.5 and 1.6, as shown in Table 1. This indicates that the average home has between one and two foster children on a typical day, although homes may have had no children for part of the year and several children at other times. Median occupancy rates were lower than the mean, ranging from 1.0 to 1.3, suggesting that a relatively small group of foster parents have much higher occupancy rates. In fact, only 10% of homes in each state had a daily average of four or more children in the home during their first episode of foster parenting. Some variations in occupancy rates were seen for different characteristics of foster parents or foster homes, although the differences were neither large nor consistent across states.

The provision of foster care was distributed quite unevenly across the population of foster parents. Table 1 shows that among foster homes with at least one placement, many provided very little foster care, as measured in days of care. Across the three states, between 13% and 21% of homes provided fewer than 90 days of foster care during their entire foster parenting career. Age,

Table 1
Distribution of foster parenting by state

	New Mexico(<i>n</i> =662)	Oklahoma(<i>n</i> =2,833)	Oregon(<i>n</i> =11,947)
Occupancy rate			
Mean	1.6	1.6	1.5
25th percentile	1.0	1.0	1.0
Median	1.3	1.2	1.0
75th percentile	2.0	2.0	2.0
95th percentile	4.1	4.2	4.2
Percent of homes providing ≤90 days of care	21%	13%	19%
Percent of placement days provided by			
Most active 5% of homes	26	27	36
Most active 20% of homes	60	61	72

race, and location are not different for homes providing fewer than 90 days of care, compared to other homes. However, homes providing fewer than 90 days of care were more likely than others to have only one foster parent. At the opposite end of the spectrum, a small percentage of foster parents provided a large part of all foster care. The most active 20% of foster parents provided between 60 and 72% of all foster care days. Within this group, the most active 5% of homes provided more than one-quarter of all days of foster parenting.

4.2. Length of service

Across the three states studied, the typical length of service in foster parenting was less than many children's stay in foster care. Median length of service was approximately 8 months in both New Mexico and Oregon, and approximately 14 months in Oklahoma. By comparison, the median length of stay for a child entering foster care in Oregon in recent years was 5 months (D. Webster, pers. comm.). Although children's episodes of care may include planned placement changes, children whose stay in foster care is greater than the median length of foster parenting service are at risk of disruptions due to foster parent exits. As shown in Table 2, fewer than three-quarters (72%) of Oklahoma foster parents provided care for more than 6 months, with only one-third of foster parents (32%) remaining in service more than 2 years. New Mexico and Oregon show even shorter lengths of service, with only 19% of foster parents in service more than 2 years.

We used Cox regression models to examine the relationship between length of service and foster parents' characteristics and children's characteristics in Oklahoma (Table 3) and Oregon (Table 4). The models estimate the comparative risk of exiting foster parenting for different groups of foster parents. For most variables, the largest stratum is used as the reference group against which the relative likelihood of exiting foster parenting is estimated for other groups. The key statistic, as shown in these tables, is the hazard ratio. Hazard ratios of less than 1 indicate reduced likelihood of leaving foster parenting, or greater length of service. Hazard ratios greater than 1 indicate increased likelihood of exit, or shorter length of service.

In Oregon, foster parents with restricted foster care licenses were 14% more likely to exit foster parenting at any given time than foster parents with regular foster care licenses; however, license type was not associated with length of service in Oklahoma. In both states, younger foster parents were significantly more likely to exit foster parenting than were foster parents between 30 and 55 years of age. Homes in Oklahoma in which at least one foster parent was black are 15% more likely to exit foster parenting than those in which all foster parents were white; no differences by

Table 2
Summary of foster parent length of service by state

	New Mexico(<i>n</i> =662)	Oklahoma(<i>n</i> =2,833)	Oregon(<i>n</i> =11,947)
Median length of service (days)	251	410	237
Percent remaining after			
30 days	86%	95%	89%
180 days	59	72	58
360 days	40	53	38
720 days	20	32	19
1,440 days	^a	14	8

^aUnable to estimate due to inadequate follow-up time.

Table 3
Cox proportional hazards model of length of service in Oklahoma ($n=2,765$)

Variable	β	S.E	Hazard ratio	p
License type (vs. regular foster care)				
Restricted foster care	-0.0922	0.05865	0.912	0.1161
Age (vs. all foster parents between 30 and 55 years)				
At least one foster parent aged ≥ 18 and <30 years	0.2232	0.0632	1.2500 **	0.0004
At least one foster parent over age 55	-0.0759	0.0737	0.9270	0.3030
Race (vs. all foster parents white)				
At least one foster parent Native American	0.0570	0.0943	1.0590	0.5453
At least one foster parent black	0.1414	0.0678	1.1520 *	0.0371
Location (vs. metropolitan)				
Nonmetropolitan	0.1464	0.0506	1.1580 **	0.0038
Foster home composition (vs. two parents)				
Single parent	-0.0121	0.0582	0.9880	0.8358
Occupancy (vs. lowest quartile)				
2nd quartile	-0.2306	0.0994	0.7940 *	0.0203
3rd quartile	-0.2877	0.0704	0.7500 **	<0.0001
4th quartile	-0.7651	0.0883	0.4650 **	<0.0001
Percent of placements that were infants (vs. none)				
Between 0 and 100	-0.6778	0.0696	0.5080 **	<0.0001
100	-0.3781	0.1220	0.6850 **	0.0019
Percent of placements that were adolescents (vs. none)				
Between 0 and 100	-0.3501	0.0711	0.7050 **	<0.0001
100	-0.2014	0.0679	0.8180 **	0.0030
Percent of placements that had special needs				
Between 0 and 100	-0.2259	0.0687	0.7980 **	0.0010
100	0.1319	0.0715	1.1410	0.0651

Model Chi-Square (Wald) 503.4187 with 16 DF ($p<.0001$).

* $p<.05$.

** $p<.01$.

race are seen in Oregon. In both states, foster parents in non-metropolitan areas exited foster parenting more quickly than those in metropolitan areas. In Oregon, higher income is associated with longer length of service, but length of service did not vary by employment status.

Perhaps the most striking finding related to length of service is that higher occupancy rates were associated with increased length of service, in both Oklahoma and Oregon. In addition, care for children who might be considered more demanding, such as infants, adolescents, and children with special needs, was also associated with longer length of service, as indicated by hazard ratios less than 1.

5. Discussion

These analyses build on recent research applying longitudinal analyses to examine children's length of stay in foster care. They extend previous research on foster parenting by providing unbiased estimates of length of service and a more detailed picture of the characteristics associated with varying length of service. Further analyses in other states might build on these analyses to incorporate data elements such as foster parent training and foster care board rates.

Readers should note some important limitations of these analyses. First, the experiences of three states cannot be generalized to other groups of foster parents. Our analyses identified similar

Table 4
Cox proportional hazards model of length of service in Oregon ($n=7,908$)

Variable	β	S.E	Hazard ratio	p
License type (vs. regular foster care)				
Restricted foster care	0.13141	0.02867	1.14 **	<0.0001
Foster-adopt	0.07454	0.04129	1.077	0.071
Age (vs. all foster parents between 30 and 55 years)	0.1244	0.03017	1.132 **	<0.0001
At least one foster parent aged ≥ 18 and <30 years	-0.01764	0.04217	0.983	0.6758
At least one foster parent over age 55				
Race (vs. all foster parents white)				
At least one foster parent Native American	-0.01306	0.06043	0.987	0.8289
At least one foster parent black	-0.03668	0.04667	0.964	0.432
Location (vs. metropolitan)				
Nonmetropolitan	0.25489	0.02642	1.29 **	<0.0001
Foster home composition (vs. two parents)				
Single parent	-0.02839	0.03307	0.972	0.3906
Income (vs. less than or equal to median)				
Greater than median	-0.05915	0.02637	0.943 *	0.0249
Employment (vs. one at-home foster parent)				
All foster parents at work full time	-0.02133	0.02642	0.979	0.4194
All foster parents at home	-0.0358	0.04993	0.965	0.4734
Occupancy rate (vs. <1)				
Occupancy rate >1 and <2	-0.425	0.03027	0.654 **	<0.0001
Occupancy rate >2	-0.86162	0.04252	0.422 **	<0.0001
Percent of placements that were infants (vs. none)				
Between 0 and 100	-0.57879	0.03683	0.561 **	<0.0001
100	-0.16414	0.05556	0.849 **	0.0031
Percent of placements that were adolescents (vs. none)				
Between 0 and 100	-0.75801	0.03696	0.469 **	<0.0001
100	-0.06861	0.03126	0.934 *	0.0282

Model Chi-Square (Wald) 2250.9879 with 19 DF ($p < .0001$).

* $p < .05$.

** $p < .01$.

relationships across states in some areas, such as the uneven distribution of the foster parenting workload and increased length of service among foster parents who are over age 30, located in a metropolitan area, and caring for more children at a time. However, findings varied sharply among states for many key measures, such as the median length of service. It is not possible, based on analyses with three states, to speculate about which patterns may be more typical of foster parents in general.

A second limitation is that these analyses, while describing length of service and associated foster parent characteristics, provide little insight regarding why foster parents stay or leave. Rather, they offer a useful counterpoint to earlier research on how foster parents' perceptions and experiences influence their decision to continue foster parenting. Finally, these analyses focus on associations between foster parent characteristics and the number and types of children in their care. However, child placements ultimately rest on child welfare workers' decisions and foster parent preferences. These dynamics are likely to be far more subtle than can be revealed by examination of administrative data.

Although the three states examined here are diverse in many ways, several consistent patterns were illuminated by these analyses. Regardless of their characteristics, foster homes have, on average, between one and two non-related children in the home at a time. Across the three states,

one-fifth of the foster parent population provides a range of 60% to 72% of all days of foster care. Median length of service in foster parenting ranges from 8 to 14 months across the three states, less than many children's foster care experiences. Multivariate models indicate that foster parents with greater length of service are likely to be older, live in a metropolitan area, and be engaged in more intense foster parenting activity, as indicated by higher occupancy rates and care for infants, adolescents, and children with special needs. In contrast to earlier research, higher income was associated with longer length of service among Oregon foster parents; it is not possible to tell whether this is a distinct pattern for that state or a result of different methodologies. Whereas earlier research found longer tenure among black foster parents, this study found no significant associations between length of service and race after controlling for other variables.

Key findings from this study address multiple aspects of the dynamics of foster parent utilization and retention. As with analyses of children's length of stay in foster care, longitudinal analyses produce estimated length of service that are shorter than those based on cross-sectional samples. The latter are likely to overrepresent the long-term foster parent, who is disproportionately likely to be present when a survey is mailed, a focus group convened, or statistics compiled from rosters. Estimated with a longitudinal model, the median length of service of 8 to 14 months for these states is a distinct contrast to the mean time in foster parenting of 5 to 8 years reported in the comprehensive studies previously described in this report (Martin et al., 1992; Rindfleisch et al., 1998). In the three states studied, a range of 47% to 62% of foster parents exit foster parenting within a year of the first placement in their home.

Second, higher foster home occupancy and increased proportions of care for infants, adolescents, and children with special needs are consistently associated with greater lengths of service. These two findings suggest that those who are most engaged in foster parenting are most likely to continue doing so. Similar to recent analyses of willingness to care for children with special needs (Cox et al., 2002, 2003), this finding suggests that homes in which foster parents are flexible are most likely to continue being utilized.

Finally, a relatively small group of foster parents carries out much of the work of the foster care system. Across the three states, one-fifth of the foster parent population provides 60% to 80% of all foster care. These foster parents are similar to those described by Martin and associates (1992), who found that 23% of foster parents interviewed cared for half the children in care at the time. These foster parents may represent a core group of active and experienced foster parents, who are willing to accept a variety of placements. Because their long tenure equips them with practical expertise in caring for the children in need of placements, child welfare workers are likely to feel confident placing children in these homes, and therefore these homes carry a major portion of the workload.

For individual foster parents, the decision to continue or exit foster parenting is no doubt influenced by experiences with child welfare agencies and foster children and personal circumstances. Though longevity is not the only goal for foster parents, preventing the unnecessary loss of qualified foster parents would significantly enhance child welfare systems' ability to enhance the safety, permanency, and well-being for children in their care. Better understanding of foster parent length of service and service dynamics is an essential first step toward achievement of this goal.

Acknowledgments

This report was developed by RTI International for the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This

work was supported through a task order under contract number HHS-100-99-0006, Delivery Order No. 5. Laura Radel served as the ASPE project monitor. The authors would like to acknowledge the cooperation of state child welfare agencies in New Mexico, Oklahoma and Oregon, which contributed data used for these analyses. Staff from these agencies, including Dick Young in New Mexico, Bill Hindman and Johnna Lynch in Oklahoma, and Daniel Webster and Anna Cox in Oregon provided extensive expert advice on the correct use of state datasets. Jeff Laufenberg and Ruby Johnson of RTI provided programming and analysis support.

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