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Lives in Motion: A Review of Former Foster Youth in the Context of their Experiences in the Child Welfare System

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Abstract

In light of the poor prospects facing many former foster youth during the transition to adulthood, it is surprising that so little attention has been given to substitute care contexts during child welfare system involvement. A review of child welfare research finds that many former foster youth go through an alarming number of placement changes and report a high rate of placement into congregate care settings and other unplanned events. Future research should take explicit account of substitute care contexts in designing and carrying out studies examining the adult outcomes of aging out foster care populations. Interventions intended to circumvent high rates of movement in foster care should also be broadened to target multiple aspects of substitute care contexts.

Keywords

aging out foster youth; former foster youth; youth who reach the age of majority in foster care; substitute care contexts; place; timing; duration; and sequence of placements

During the past three decades, foster youth who reach the age of majority during child welfare system involvement have attracted considerable attention from policymakers. The poor prospects facing foster youth during the transition to adulthood, along with obligations state child welfare agencies assume when foster youth are removed from their biological families, have led policy makers to ask what steps can be taken to maximize the life chances of former foster youth? Extending the safety net provided to foster youth during the transition to adulthood reflects one important part of an intervention aimed at improving prospects. That the transition to adulthood is increasingly being viewed as less of an isolated period in the life course and as more connected to earlier experiences and later outcomes (Shanahan, 2000) underscores the need for greater understanding of substitute care contexts and the services that prepare foster youth for adulthood.

One aspect of the substitute care context provided to foster youth is the stability of placements leading up to the transition to adulthood. Emerging research, seeking to incorporate the voices of foster youth into research, reveals some of the lingering ways in which placement disruptions cast a dark shadow over future possibilities. With each move, foster youth recall experiencing a loss of control over the direction of their lives (Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008) and a growing disconnection from peers, families, and social institutions (Hyde & Kammerer, 2008; Hines, Merdinger, & Wyatt, 2005). The cascading effects of placement instability occurring during a developmental period that is characterized by rapid physical changes, cognitive and emotional maturation, and heightened sensitivity to

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peer and romantic relationships (Newman & Newman, 2009) remains poorly understood. The tendency to view substitute care contexts as a static and neutral backdrop for the unfolding of foster youths lives may be preventing greater understanding of functional changes, vulnerabilities, and opportunities that play a supporting role in shaping prospects during adulthood.

This article widens the view that is typically given to foster youth who reach the age of majority in foster care, and focuses attention broadly on the substitute care contexts leading up to the transition to adulthood. Surprisingly little research has viewed former foster youth in the context of their experiences in the child welfare system (Wulczyn, 2009). Questions about former foster youth typically begin at the point of the transition or just beyond. Far less attention is given to understanding the transition experience and related outcomes within a longer developmental time frame. In altering the vantage point from which former foster youth are typically studied, temporality and context are set forth as being key elements of a more fully developed understanding of prospects in adulthood.

Neither theory nor research currently provides compelling information concerning the variations in substitute care contexts over time or their potential implications for subsequent outcomes (James, Landsverk, & Slymen, 2004). Developing a fuller picture of foster youth raises new empirical concerns. First, what is known about the placement experiences of foster youth who reach the age of majority during foster care? Second, how do placement events shape the prospects of foster youth making the transition to adulthood, if at all? Third, what factors are associated with one aspect of substitute care – the stability of placements – for all children?

These questions stem from perspectives in the life course (Elder, 1998), ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977), and the growing consensus in child welfare for the need to capture the everyday environments of foster children in more realistic ways (James et al., 2004; Kemp, 2008; Wulczyn, Kogan, & Harden, 2003). These perspectives reflect a critical awareness of the diverse and complex relationships between persons and ‘place’, and draw attention to the ways in which individuals shape and are shaped by the contexts in which they are embedded. Studies find many former foster youth to be among the most socially excluded group of young adults in society (Stein, 2006). More rigorous evaluation of the processes underlying the relationships between adolescent entry into the child welfare system¹, puberty/developmental changes, and substitute care contexts, without reducing the complex nature of these relationships, may make it possible to design more strategic interventions to deliberately mobilize positive forces for transformation (Dahl, 2004).

To synthesize knowledge in these areas, three literature searches were conducted between September 2008 and December 2010. These searches were undertaken in MEDLINE, CINAHL, Social Work Abstracts, SocIndex, and PsychINFO. Key search terms included those related to transitioning foster youth (aging out* OR “adolescents aging out*” OR “young people leaving care” OR “older youth exiting care” OR “former foster youth*” OR “emancipated youth*”) AND those related to placement stability (“placement stability or change” OR “placement stability” OR “movement in foster care” OR “placement disruption*” OR “patterns of movement” OR “residential mobility” OR “count of placement change*” OR “number of placement*”). Citations of identified articles were additionally reviewed for references to other studies. Peer reviewed articles and unpublished research reports were included. Preference was placed on studies in the U.S. that sample foster youth who reach the age of majority in foster care. Table A1 lists the studies identified in this

¹The overwhelming majority of children placed into the child welfare system do not spent their childhoods growing up in foster care. Youth who reach the age of majority in foster care are not an exception (Wulczyn, 2009).

review chronologically.^{2, 3} Among the 22 studies of former foster youth that are reviewed in this article, 15 studies provide descriptive information on placement events during child welfare system involvement.

Substitute Care Context Provided to Foster Youth Who Reach the Age of Majority in Foster care

Youth who age out of the child welfare system have long been of concern to child welfare policymakers, researchers, and practitioners. In 1986, the federal government amended Title IV-E of the Social Security Act to create the Independent Living Program, which provided states with the concrete resources to prepare youth for independent living. This support was supplemented in 1999 with the creation of the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program. The available funding provided to states was doubled. Beginning in fiscal year 2003, Education and Training Vouchers were additionally made available to provide foster youth with up to \$5000 for post-secondary education and vocational training. In September 2008, the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (H.R. 6893) extended Title IV-E federal reimbursement to states providing support to youth who remain in foster care to age 21. That this legislation represents a fundamental shift towards increasing the opportunities and connections needed to make a successful transition to adulthood supports the need to examine experiences in the child welfare system and the contexts that build and protect growth-fostering resources during adulthood.

One cluster of risk factors potentially compromising the connections of older foster youth who reach the age of majority during foster care may be related to placement changes and instability (Courtney & Hughes-Heuring, 2005; D Andrade, 2005; Fanshel, 1992). Studies of former foster youth making the transition to adulthood suggest that many go through a high number of placement changes during foster care.⁴ Table one provides a summary of the studies reporting on the substitute care experiences of former foster youth.⁵ As can be seen, perhaps the greatest concern facing foster youth who reach the age of majority in care is the general lack of stability experienced in foster care. Although the number of placements varies depending on the length of time in care, studies suggest that on average, at the time of the observation, typically at discharge or as youth approach the transition to adulthood, the number of placement changes ranges from a low of 2.4 placements (Dworsky, 2005; Festinger, 1983) to a high of 9.5 placements (Mech & Fung, 1999). Given that youth who age out of foster care tend to enter the child welfare system as adolescents (Courtney & Barth, 1996; Fowler et al., 2009; Needell et al., 2002; Wulczyn, Brunner, & Goerge, 2001; Wulczyn, 2009), the portrait that emerges may be one of mobility leading up to the transition when youth are expected to function independently. It may be that the later the instability, the greater the risk to reaching developmental tasks during the transition to adulthood. Few studies have explored the timing of placement disruptions, the type of placement setting, or the duration of placements and their potential for cascading effects on developmental and psychosocial outcomes in adulthood.

The second finding from this collection of studies suggests that foster youth experience a high rate of placement into institutional, congregate care, group care, and residential care settings. Although variation exists in the type, quality of services, and level of restriction

²This list of studies is in no way exhaustive or comprehensive. For an expansive review of studies of former foster youth please see McDonald, Allen, Westerfelt, & Piliavin, 1996.

³This table is adapted from a review by Dworsky (2008).

⁴Existing studies surveying former foster youth have suffered from serious methodological problems, including purposive sampling, sample attrition, and the lack of an adequate comparison group, which has limited our ability to confidently understand the experiences of this population of foster children (McDonald et al., 1996).

⁵Among the survey studies of former foster youth, there has been wide variation in the foster care experiences that are reported.

provided to youth across these placement settings, these settings typically represent placement in a facility that provides 24-hour care to a group of children who are supervised by unrelated adults in shifts (Barth, 2002). As can be seen, studies differ in whether these placements are reported at any time during child welfare system involvement or as the transition to adulthood approaches. High rates appear to be prevalent throughout child welfare system involvement. For instance, placement into a group care setting at any time ranges from a low of 21 percent (Festinger, 1983; Merdinger et al., 2005) to a high of 60 percent (Courtney et al., 2004) whereas group care placement at discharge ranges from a low of 15 percent (Needell et al., 2002) to a high of 42 percent (McMillen et al., 2004). A high rate of placement into congregate care settings leading up to the transition to adulthood reflects an important risk factor for independence due to the increased level of supervision that is required for youth to function in these settings independently, and the lack of opportunities that are provided for gaining real world experiences before the transition to adulthood (Barth, 2002). Additional reasons for concern include study findings that suggest transitions from congregate care to less structured settings tend to happen quickly once youth reach the age of majority (McCoy, McMillen, & Spitznagel, 2008). A lack of clear programmatic differences across these settings may also present significant obstacles to achieving stability when the stakes for reaching developmental milestones is greatest (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009) and the time given to receiving assistance is limited.

These studies also suggest a high rate of running away, psychiatric hospitalizations, juvenile detention, and other adverse events. Although these events are not necessarily counted as formal placements by all state child welfare systems (Schuerman & Needell, 2010), the few studies reporting on these events suggest that they may be a frequent occurrence. For instance, rates of running away from foster care at any time range from a low of 19 percent (Wulczyn & Bruener, 2001) to a high of 56 percent (Barth, 1990). Rates of in-patient psychiatric placement in the past year range from a low of 7 percent (Courtney et al., 2004) to a high of 14 percent (Courtney et al., 2001). These events present serious concerns for independence. They may be additionally suggestive of red flags for subsequent disruptions to placements, possibly pointing to problems in placement settings, a lack of attention to mental health needs, and/or inconsistent visitation with biological family members (Courtney, Skyles, Samuels, Zinn, Howard, & Goerge, 2005).

When placed into a context of unstable foster care experiences, placement into congregate care settings, and the occurrence of other adverse events, the complex nature of substitute care experiences leading up to the transition to adulthood is made clearer. Pathways through foster care that are marked by adversity may be a more of common experience for foster youth who reach the age of majority in foster care rather than an exception. How these experiences both stem from other unobserved characteristics and/or interact with other vulnerabilities and shape prospects during the transition to adulthood remains to a large extent unknown.

Multivariate Studies Examining Self-Sufficiency of Former Foster Youth

Over time, federal policy has increasingly enabled states to better address the needs of foster youth who reach the age of majority in foster care. Regardless of whether examinations describe outcomes before the Independent Living Program was created or after the Foster Care Independence Act became law, many of the same vexing issues continue to pose challenges to self-sufficiency (Dworsky, 2008). Perhaps nowhere are the challenges facing former foster youth made clearer than in the latest findings from the largest nationally representative panel study following foster youth into adulthood (Courtney et al., 2004). Forty-two percent of male former foster youth between the ages 23 and 24 are found to experience a new contact with the criminal justice system, and three quarters of females

report receiving benefits from at least one need-based government program (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Rapp, 2010). That poor prospects persist in spite of concerted efforts to extend supports to foster youth during the transition to adulthood calls for the need to take a closer look at the collection of studies attempting to explain the persistence of social exclusion in adulthood.

The bulk of studies examining former foster youth draw from administrative and/or survey data to examine labor market outcomes (Dworsky & Courtney, 2001; Dworsky, 2005; Goerge et al., 2002; Needell, Cuccaro-Alamin, Brookhart, Jackman, & Shlonsky, 2002; Macomber, Cuccaro-Alamin, Duncan, Kuehn, McDaniel, Vericker, Pergamit, Needell, Kum, Stewart, Lee, & Barth, 2008; McMillen & Tucker, 1999; Nacarato et al., 2010). More recent studies also look at psychosocial risks facing foster youth in adulthood including the risk for arrest and mental health service use (Needell, et al., 2002; Ryan, Hernandez, & Herz, 2007). Appendix A2 lists the studies reviewed in this article chronologically.⁶ Table A2 highlights several important features of this research including the author(s), aspects of the substitute care context included in models, a description of the sample, the dependent variable, and the significance of study findings.

McMillen & Tucker (1999) analyze administrative data and case records to assess discharge status for 252 randomly selected foster youth in Missouri who were at least 17 years of age when their cases were closed between 1992 and 1993. Prior to leaving the child welfare system, nearly two thirds of foster youth were employed, whereas just over one third were employed at exit from the child welfare system. The odds of being employed were higher for foster youth with fewer changes in placements and for those who completed high school, even after controlling for other socio-demographic and risk factors. Those with fewer placements were less likely to have an unplanned discharge from the child welfare system.

Dworsky & Courtney (2001) examine the labor market outcomes of 1,819 former foster youth who were at least 17 years old and discharged from the Wisconsin child welfare system between 1995 and 1997. Although 80 percent of foster youth were employed in at least one of eight quarters following discharge, their earnings were low. For every additional placement former foster youth experienced, total earnings are estimated to decrease by \$175.

Building on earlier work, Dworsky (2005) examines the self-sufficiency of 8,511 former foster youth who were discharged from the Wisconsin child welfare system at a minimum of age 16 between 1992 and 1998. Seventeen percent of foster youth were found to be recipients of AFDC/TANF, with one third receiving food stamps in the 8 quarters following discharge. Experiencing more placements was associated with an increase in the duration of food stamp receipt.

Macomber, Cuccaro-Alamin, Duncan et al., (2008) compare the labor market outcomes of former foster youth up to age 24 in three states and make comparisons to youth from low income families. Results find that foster youth experience lower rates of employment and lower earnings than those youth from low income families who are not placed into the child welfare system. In contrast to findings reviewed above, the number of placements, length of time in care and number of re-entries into foster care were not significantly related to employment outcomes in any of the states.

In addition to examining the labor market outcomes and receipt of public assistance among foster youth making the transition to adulthood, several other studies have examined contact with adult systems of care such as mental health services and criminal justice systems.

⁶This table does not provide an exhaustive list of all studies examining outcomes of former foster youth.

Needell, Brookhart, Jackman, et al., (2002) examine the characteristics of substitute care and receipt of mental health services, state prison enrollment, births, public assistance, and educational attainment among 10,228 foster youth who reached the age of majority in the state of California. Although just under two thirds (64.5 percent) entered the child welfare system as adolescents, over one third (36.7) of the sample experienced five or more placement changes. Results suggest that former foster youth who experienced five or more placement changes have the worst outcomes during the transition to adulthood related to increased AFDC receipt, poor educational achievement, and likelihood of single parenting (Needell, Brookhart, Jackman, et al., 2002). In addition, foster youth with five or more placements were estimated to be 6 times more likely than those with just one placement to receive a mental health service in adulthood.

Ryan, Hernandez, & Herz (2007) link child welfare data with official arrest records of 294 adolescents in one Midwestern state to identify offending trajectories in adulthood, and the factors that differentiate groups of offending. Although the average length of stay in foster care is 11.5 years, just under one-quarter of the foster youth experience 3 or more placement changes. Findings suggest that those adolescents with three or more placement changes were significantly more likely to be arrested both at the onset and during the transition to adulthood (Ryan, et al., 2007).

The above findings should be interpreted with caution due to methodological limitations, such as the failure to set forth theoretical reasons for the proposed relationships between the dimensions of substitute care and the outcome of interest, and inattention to selection bias. Placement instability may be a proxy for unobserved or unmeasured variables that act as underlying causes of placement events and negative outcomes in adulthood. For instance, prolonged exposure to multiple risks before child welfare system involvement may be related to the pathways taken through foster care and shape prospects during the transition to adulthood. The majority of studies that examine the outcomes of former foster youth have not carefully unpacked the relationship between childhood adversities, the pathways taken through care, and long-term problems in living. As a result, it is unclear whether the relationship between variations in substitute care experiences and adolescent adaptation and/or adult outcomes is independent of or mediated and/or moderated by exposure to other socio-demographic risk factors.

These studies also illustrate many of the methodological limitations that obscure understanding of substitute care contexts in child welfare (James et al., 2004). As can be seen, substitute care experiences are typically measured in ways that fail to systematically capture particular moments that are located in a temporal sequence of events. The studies reviewed typically rely on last placement to characterize an entire sequence of placement events over time and isolate the number of moves from the temporal context in which they occur. Specifying the variation in substitute care experiences and the mechanisms that link the relationships between temporal and contextual dimensions of placements and outcomes would strengthen understanding of the distinct aspects of events that constrain and/or transform possibilities.

In sum, these studies draw attention to the need to differentiate common processes that unfold over time, identify the situations under which such processes are likely to occur, and highlight the salience of temporal dimensions for understanding outcomes. Increasing the attention given to time and 'place' may serve to highlight the unique aspects of experiences that may otherwise not be as apparent from a static point of view. In the absence of systematic examination of the processes unfolding over time, detecting the conjunction of factors associated with one aspect of substitute care may help to develop understanding of

the common pathways taken through the child welfare system and guide future practice and decision-making (Wells & Guo, 1999).

Factors Associated with Placement Stability

Studies consistently find that certain groups of children are at an increased risk of experiencing placement instability. More recent studies point to dynamics within the child welfare system that may also be contributing factors to high rates of movement (James, 2006; Zinn, 2009). Our understanding of the factors that contribute to movement in foster care, however, is limited because few of these studies have used prospective study designs, standardized measures, and multivariate analyses to test specific hypotheses concerning risks for placement changes (Leathers, 2006). In addition, explanations of stability and change in placements have tended to focus on individual level factors rather than the places in which children are embedded.

Individual-level factors

Nearly a dozen studies have shown age to be a consistent predictor of placement moves. The older the age of the child at placement into foster care, the more likely the child is to experience placement instability (Park & Ryan, 2009; James et al., 2004; Webster, Barth, & Needell, 2000; Wulczyn et al., 2003; Zinn et al., 2006). This raises significant concerns given that the second largest population entering the child welfare system behind infants is older youth (Wulczyn, et al., 2005).

Findings related to the role of gender and placement movement have been mixed. Although it is commonly assumed that male children are more at risk of experiencing placement instability than female children due to a higher rate of disruptive behaviors that is observed in boys (Palmer, 1996; Park & Ryan, 2008; Webster et al., 2000), studies also suggests that female children experience higher rates of movement in foster care (Smith, Stormshak, Chamberlain, & Whaley, 2001; Havlicek, 2010).

The findings concerning the association between child maltreatment and placement stability have also been mixed. Studies suggest that children who experience neglect move more frequently (Webster et al., 2000) and children who are sexually abused experience greater stability (Connell et al., 2006). However, it is important to use caution when interpreting these findings due to growing consensus among child maltreatment investigators for the need to characterize maltreatment experiences in greater depth (Cicchetti & Valentino, 2006). Rather than using single indicators to characterize complex experiences, investigators are calling for the use of multiple dimensions of maltreatment to fully capture the effects of maltreatment on growth and development (English, Upadhyaya, Litwornik, Marshall, Runyun, Graham, & Dubowitz, 2005). These dimensions include the type and severity, timing, pattern of maltreatment experiences across the life course, and the co-occurrence of maltreatment types.

A number of studies find an association exists between disruptive behaviors or child behavior problems and placement instability, though the causal ordering of this relationship varies across studies. Newton, Litrownik, and Landsverk (2000) find that externalizing behavior problems are the strongest predictor of placement changes for a sample of foster children in California. Similarly, in a study drawing a large sample from state administrative data in Illinois, Park & Ryan (2008) find children who enter foster care for reasons having to do with child behavior problems or a challenging parent-child relationship are more likely to experience placement instability. Conversely, Rubin & colleagues (2007) find that placement instability doubled the likelihood that children would exhibit later behavioral problems (Rubin, et al., 2007).

Although behavioral problems are often the most frequently cited explanation for placement disruption (Zinn et al, 2006), this relationship is complex. As described above, there is evidence to suggest that behavioral problems are both a cause and a consequence of placement changes (Newton et al., 2000; Rubin et al., 2007). In a recent study examining reasons for placement changes, James (2004) finds that less than one quarter of all placement changes are prompted by behavioral problems. The remainder is attributed to agency policies and practice that use temporary homes, move children into less restrictive settings, placed children with siblings, and moved children closer to their families. The high rate of moves stemming from agency policies supports findings from several studies (Budde et al., 2004; Zinn et al., 2006).

Family-level factors

Studies examining placement stability in relation to biological parents and family characteristics have looked at highly diverse characteristics, including parenting problems, visitation, and emotional closeness to substitute families, family composition, and geographic proximity to families. Several older studies suggest that parental substance abuse is related to placement instability (Cooper, Petersen, and Meier, 1987; Pardeck, 1984) while more recent studies suggest that children placed closer to their families of origin, no matter what the source of the parental problem may be, are less likely to experience placement instability (Zinn et al, 2006). Another examination finds that visitation with parents may become a strain on foster parents of adolescents (Farmer, Lipscombe, & Moyers, 2005).

Substitute care factors

Several factors related to placement settings have also been found to be associated with placement instability, including the age and the presence of other children in the home, and the training and the support provided to substitute caregivers (Fisher, Burraston, & Pears, 2005; Price, Chamberlain, Landsverk, Reid, Leve, & Laurent, 2008; Zinn et al., 2006). For instance, although children's behaviors present challenges to caregivers (Farmer et al., 2005), there is evidence to suggest that the precarious nature of some placements contribute to their disruption. In one study, for instance, foster parents caring for children were found to be operating at the limits of their capacity and few preventative services were provided to stabilize these placements before they disrupted (Zinn et al., 2006). Almost half of foster children were being cared for by single foster caregivers, and the vast majority of caregivers care for their own children. Other studies point to the lack of evidence supporting the effectiveness of training provided to foster parents to address the emotional and behavioral needs of children who have been maltreated and removed from their families of origin (Dorsey, Farmer, Barth, Greene, Reid, & Landsverk, 2008).

Several dimensions of placement events are found to have a relationship with the stability of placements, including the timing of moves, duration and type of placement, and sequence of placement changes over time. Webster et al. (2000) find that placement changes occurring during the first year of care place children on a trajectory toward further instability. In addition, Smith, Stormshak, Chamberlain, & Whaley (2001) find that the likelihood of disruption in treatment foster care for a sample of emotionally and behaviorally disordered youth is two times higher during the first six-months compared to the second six-months. This research suggests that there is a high risk of placement disruption following foster care entry and this risk declines over time (Connell et al., 2006; Wulczyn et al., 2003).

The type of placement is also a strong predictor of stability. Compared to children placed in a foster home, research suggests that children who are placed into kinship care experience fewer changes in placements (Courtney & Needell, 1997; Rubin et al., 2008; Zinn et al., 2006); are less likely to be placed into congregate care settings (Courtney, 1994); and are

less likely to re-enter foster care (Courtney, 1995). These findings should be interpreted with caution. Evidence suggests that children who are placed into kinship care may have fewer problems than children who are placed into foster care settings (Berrick, Barth, & Needell, 1994; Inglehart, 1994). For instance, children placed into kinship care are less likely to have health problems, less likely to be infants, and less likely to have entered foster care due to physical or sexual abuse (Grogan-Kaylor, 2000). Emerging research also finds significant heterogeneity exists in the placement experiences of children in kinship care (Leslie et al., 2000; Terling-Watt, 2001; Zinn, 2009).

There is evidence to suggest that children placed into congregate care settings may also be at risk for on-going movement (Budde et al., 2004; Zinn et al., 2006). However, many of the findings related to placement instability of youth placed in congregate care settings have been mixed. In some studies, children who are placed into these settings experience fewer moves than children in regular foster care (Wulczyn et al., 2003) whereas in other investigations placement into congregate care settings has been found to result in subsequent changes in placements and shifts in the level of care provided to youth (Budde et al., 2004). Part of the explanation for these differences may be related to the availability of congregate care settings and/or gate keeping procedures that use these settings as a last resort (Usher et al., 1999; Schuerman & Needell, 2009). In some jurisdictions, children must disrupt from multiple placements before gaining entry into more intensive placement settings (Budde et al., 2004).

There is a growing body of research suggesting that treatment foster homes may help to stabilize children who are at high risk of placement instability, by decreasing disruptive behavior problems (Chamberlain, 2002). In particular, there is evidence for the effectiveness of the Oregon Multidimensional Treatment Foster Care (MTFC) model in reducing instability and behavioral problems of children and adolescents (Chamberlain, Moreland, & Reid, 1992; Fisher et al., 2005; Price et al., 2008). As a parent-mediated intervention model delivering Parent Management Training (PMT), the basic MTFC model involves placing one foster child into a well-trained, supported, and supervised foster home. However, very little empirical attention has been given to the requirements of treatment foster care caregivers and/or the variations in the training provided by child welfare systems (Dorsey et al., 2008; Farmer et al., 2002).

Policy-level factors and other system dynamics

Federal agency policies and state differences in laws, regulations, and practices may also be associated with differential patterns of movement in foster care. A good example can be seen in state agency policies that step children down from restrictive placement settings once they have been stabilized (Budde et al., 2004). Qualitative research studies portray the lack of clear programmatic differences between types of programs. Moving from a highly structured setting to a setting that is loosely supervised may instigate placement failure and subsequent movement in foster care (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009). There is also anecdotal evidence to suggest that funding structures may promote significant movement in foster care, particularly when children have stabilized in costly “career” homes and there is a need to step children down to less costly homes in spite of the emotional and physical attachments to substitute caregivers and community.

Placement stability may also be related to larger system dynamics, such as the number of children who enter and exit the system at any given time, and the resources that are available to meet their needs (Wulczyn, 1996). From this perspective, the probability of movement is a function of the larger system and may not necessarily be determined by the child (Taber & Poertner, 1981).

Placement stability is also affected by strong urban and regional effects that are associated with the number of children in need of services and the number and the quality of homes available to care for children (Wulczyn et al., 2010; Zinn et al., 2006). In many cases, children are placed into homes that are available to them rather than homes that are matched to meet their needs (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006). The long term impact of disruptions occurring because of mismatches between foster youth and their foster guardians has not been widely examined. Yet, poor fit between foster children and their substitute caregivers has the potential to leave lasting marks on children's ability to develop and maintain the growth-fostering connections during the transition to adulthood (Samuels, 2009; Hyde & Kammerer, 2009).

In sum, it is difficult to arrive at a list of the factors associated with placement stability largely because placement stability represents a dynamic process reflecting the interplay of the individual characteristics of children and the multi-level contexts in which they are embedded. As can be seen, placement stability is neither entirely the result of individual factors nor the sole consequence of constraints in the environment. This suggests a need to move beyond the isolation of factors associated with movement in foster care to delineating the underlying multilevel processes leading to movement of children in the child welfare system.

Future Directions: Implications for Research and Practice

This article widens the view that is typically given to foster youth who reach the age of majority in the child welfare system and focuses attention on substitute care contexts leading up to the transition to adulthood. The studies in this review suggest that the common experiences of former foster youth may include high rates of placement instability, placement into congregate care settings, and the occurrence of other costly and adverse events. Each placement change places an enormous burden on child welfare systems, not to mention the emotional toll placement disruptions take on the lives of foster children and their caregivers (Hyde & Kammerer, 2009; Unrau, et al., 2008). Developmentally unprepared and with few guaranteed supports, many foster youth will go on to present enormous challenges to their communities (Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, & Raap, 2010).

One conclusion from this review is that the vantage point from which former foster youth are typically studied should be shifted to include the substitute care contexts leading up to the transition to adulthood and the services that prepare youth for adulthood. The findings of this review suggest that missed opportunities may exist for effectively supporting youth to make the transition before reaching adulthood. Because real social processes have distinctly temporal aspects, systematically documenting and reporting the timing, duration, and sequence of placement events that occur over time may be instrumental in identifying the common pathways taken through foster care. It is only when explicit attention is given to temporally oriented mechanisms that interventions aimed at preventing and/or circumventing adverse pathways can be strategically developed and tested.

The findings from this review also suggest that substitute care contexts should be better incorporated into future child welfare research examining outcomes of foster youth making the transition to adulthood. Much of what is known about foster youth comes from survey studies of foster youth making the transition to adulthood. Although identifying outcomes in adulthood, limited attention has been given to the processes shaping adult prospects. The limited acknowledgement of the relationships between substitute care contexts and outcomes may only serve to invite uninformed speculation about the reasons for these relationships (Berzin, 2009; Doyle, 2007). Whenever methodologically possible, study designs should include multiple dimensions of substitute care contexts as explanatory

factors, and set forth theoretical justification for testing proposed relationships. Greater efforts should also be given to not only controlling for selection bias, but to developing understanding of the mechanisms through which selection effects operate (Caspi, 2004). Increased attention to how these effects arise has important implications for child and family policy, and the existing gaps in the safety nets provided to underserved and socially isolated children, families, and communities before they come to the attention of child protective agencies.

Although this review set out to place youth who reach the age of majority into greater context, the paucity of attention given to ‘place’ in this child welfare literature is striking. In addition to informing identity and shaping interests, ‘place’ represents an important source of power and inequality (Kemp, 2008; Kemp, Whittaker, and Tracy, 1997). Studies show that children and youth entering foster care are highly vulnerable to a variety of problems, including disproportionate rates of mental health and related psychosocial and adjustment problems (Landsverk & Garland, 1999; Rubin, Downes, O Reilly, Mckonnen, Luan, & Localio, 2008). Although child welfare systems have long been described as gateways to mental health services (Halfon, Berkowitz, & Klee, 1992; Leslie, Hurlburt, James, Landsverk, Slymen, & Zhang, 2004), the relationship between child mental health and child welfare cannot be easily separated from the relationship between poverty and psychopathology (Costello, Compton, Keeler & Angold, 2003; Stiffman, Eitzman, Silmere, Osbourne, & Brown, 2007). Attempts to unpack these relationships are confounded by the relationship between race, class, and gender, making it virtually impossible to consider the impact of each of these factors from the larger spatial and socio-political structures that produce them.

That these relationships are not independent may reinforce the tendency in child welfare to look past high rates of movement and exclusionary practices of older foster youth who present child welfare systems with complex needs. This is somewhat understandable given that adolescents in these cases may represent deeply troubled children, who as active agents in the construction of their lives, contribute to their experiences in the child welfare system. In looking past placement instability or the tendency to congregate older foster youth with other troubled teenagers, the operating assumption may be that troubled youths won’t make much out of their lives or that it may be too late to make a difference. How these underlying assumptions shape the capacity of foster youth to make it on their own remains largely unknown. Research is needed to evaluate the contribution of bias and stigma to child welfare service provision of foster youth who reach the age of majority in foster care.

Within the context of substitute care, placement stability and placement into least restrictive settings remain benchmarks for child welfare agencies in many states across the country. The knowledge needed to reform large systems of care is currently limited (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2006). Although the conceptual and methodological challenges associated with capturing lives in motion may seem daunting, a focus on timing and ‘place’ may offer the unifying framework needed for understanding the connections between foster youth, their social histories, and social structure in the unfolding of their lives. Studies that use multi-level models to examine whether individual-level risk factors are equally significant in all settings or whether they are more important at different times or places may provide important insights (Cummins, Curtis, Diez-Roux, & Macintyre, 2007). Similarly, qualitative studies seeking to incorporate the diverse perspectives of a wide range of stakeholders (e.g. foster youth, caregivers, relatives, caseworkers, and service providers) may also help to develop more nuanced hypotheses to be tested in quantitative studies. When asked, former foster youth identify physical and relational shifts as important dimensions of moving in foster care (Unrau, Chambers, Seita, & Putney, 2010). Although interpersonal attachment theory is frequently evoked to explain the consequences of

placement disruptions, it may also be that disruptions in 'place' leave a lasting impression (Kemp, 2008). Viewing who youth become through a lens of the contexts in which they are embedded and basing these examinations on a priori theory may help the field to grapple more seriously with the conceptual frameworks and methods used to illuminate risks, possibilities, and places of leverage.

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Appendix

Table A1

Studies Examining Outcomes of Aging Out Foster Youth

<u>Study</u>		<u>Sample Size</u>	<u>Response rate</u>	<u>Geographic Region</u>	<u>Data Collection Method</u>	<u>Age in Years at Follow up</u>
1	Meier (1965)	66	80.5	Minnesota	In person interviews & questionnaires	28–32
2	Zimmerman (1982)	61	57.0	New Orleans	In-person interviews & case record review	19–29
3	Festinger (1983)	277	76.1	New York City	In-person, telephone, & questionnaires	22–25
4	Jones & Moses (1984)	328	52.1	West Virginia	In-person, telephone, & questionnaires	19–28
5	Fanshel, Finch & Grundy (1988)	106	51.4	Seattle & Yakima Washington	In person interviews & questionnaires	Not reported
6	Barth (1990)	55	64.7	San Francisco Bay and Sacramento	In-person & phone interviews	Mean = 21
7	Cook et al., (1991)	Wave 1: 1,644 Wave 2: 810	Wave 1: 100.0 Wave 2: 49.3	Arizona, California, Illinois, and Missouri	Wave 1: case record data Wave 2: In person interviews and telephone interviews	Wave 1: 16+ Wave 2: 18–24
8	Courtney & Barth (1996)	2,653	-	California	Administrative data	18.0
9	McMillen & Tucker (1999)	252	-	Missouri	Administrative data and case record reviews	18.0
10	Mech & Fung (1999)	Wave 1: 214 Wave 2: 171	Wave 1: - Wave 2: 79.9	Illinois	Case record reviews and in-person interviews	Wave 1: 18 Wave 2: 21
11	Courtney et al., (2001)	Wave 1: 141 Wave 2: 113 Wave 3: 102	Wave 1: - Wave 2: 80.0 Wave 3: 72.0	Wisconsin	In-Person Interviews	Wave 1: 17/18 Wave 2: 18–19 Wave 3: 20–21
12	Dworsky & Courtney (2001)	1,819	-	Wisconsin	Administrative data	19–20
13	Wulczyn & Bruner (2001)	119,011	-	12 states	Administrative data	-
14	Goerge et al., (2002)	CA: 2,824 IL: 1,084 SC: 205	-	California, Illinois, & South Carolina	Administrative data	17–20

<u>Study</u>	<u>Sample Size</u>	<u>Response rate</u>	<u>Geographic Region</u>	<u>Data Collection Method</u>	<u>Age in Years at Follow up</u>
15 Needell et al., (2002)	10,228	-	California	Administrative data	Age at emancipation
16 Reilly (2003)	100	41.8	Nevada	In-person interviews	20.1
17 Courtney et al., (2004; 2005; 2007; 2010)	Wave 1: 732 Wave 2: 603 Wave 3: 591 Wave 4:	Wave 2: 82.0 Wave 3: 81.0 Wave 4:	Illinois, Wisconsin, & Iowa	In-person interviews	Wave 1: 17–18 Wave 2: 19 Wave 3: 21 Wave 4: 23–24
18 McMillen et al. (2004)	Wave 1: 406 Wave 2: 325	Wave 1: 90 percent Wave 2: 80 percent	Missouri	1 st & last interview: In person 2–8: Phone interview	Wave 1: 17 Wave 2: 19
Merdinger, Hines, Lemon, & Wyatt (2005)	216	-	California	Mailed surveys	18–58
19 Dworsky (2005)	8,511	-	Wisconsin	Administrative data	18–20
20 Pecora et al., (2005)	659	76.0	Oregon & Washington	Case record review and in-person interviews	20–33
Macomber et al. (2008)	CA: 2,697 MN: 320 NC: 284	-	California, Minnesota, and North Carolina	Administrative data	18–24
21 Fowler et al., (2006)	264	30.0	Michigan (3-counties)	Telephone interviews	Mean = 20.6

Table A2

Summary of Investigations of the Effects of Placement Experiences on Outcomes in Adulthood

<u>Author(s)</u>	<u>Substitute Care Context</u>	<u>Sample N</u>	<u>Dates</u>	<u>Dependent Variable(s)</u>	<u>Results</u>
McMillen & Tucker (1999)	1. #placements; 2. Psych placement	252 foster youth in Missouri at least age 17 when case closed	1992-1993	Employment at exit Education at exit Planned exit	# placements & employment (-) # placements & planned exit (-) Psychiatric place & education (-)
Dworsky & Courtney (2001)	1. # placements 2. Last placement 3. # re-entries 4. Months in care	1,819 former foster youth in WI at least 17 when case closed	1995–1997	Employment (2-years) Earnings Receipt of public assistance benefits	Foster home & employment (+) Group home & employment (ns) # re-entries & employment (ns) # placements & employment (ns) Months in care & employment (-) Foster home & earnings (+) Group home & earnings (ns) # re-entries & earnings (ns) # of placements & earnings (ns) Months in care & earnings (ns) Foster home & public assistance (ns)

Author(s)	Substitute Care Context	Sample N	Dates	Dependent Variable(s)	Results
					Group home & public assistance (ns) # re-entries & public assistance (ns) # of placements & public assistance (ns) Months in care & public assistance (ns)
Gerge et al. (2002)	1.Last placement 2.Years in care	1,084 Illinois youth 305 South Carolina youth 2,824 California youth	IL: 1996–97 SC: 1996–97 CA: 1995–96	Employment (2-years) Earnings	IL: Kin & Employment (+); SC (ns); CA: (ns) IL: Foster & Employment(ns); SC(ns); CA(ns) IL: Other & Employment (ns); SC(ns); CA(ns) IL: kin & Earnings (ns); SC(ns); CA(+) IL: Foster & Earnings (ns); SC(ns); CA (ns) IL: Other & Earnings (–); SC(ns); CA (ns)
Needell et al. (2002)	1.# of placements 2.Last placement	10,228 California youth	1991–1997	Mental Health Service Use Pregnancy Medicaid Public Assistance Employment	# placements & mental health service (+) Foster & mental health Service (+) FFA & mental health service (+) Group & mental health service (+) # placements & pregnancy (+) Foster & pregnancy (ns) FFA & pregnancy (ns) Group & pregnancy (–) # placements & public assistance (+) Foster & public assistance (–) FFA Group & public assistance (–) # of placements & Medicaid (ns) Foster & Medicaid FFA & Medicaid (+) Group & Medicaid (+)
Dworsky (2005)	1.# of placements 2.Last placement 3.Months in care	8,511 former foster youth in WI between 1992 – 1998	1992–1998	Employment Earnings Public assistance	# placements & employment (ns)

Author(s)	Substitute Care Context	Sample N	Dates	Dependent Variable(s)	Results
	4. # re-entries				Foster & employment (ns) Group & employment (ns) # entries & employment (ns) Months in care & employment (ns) # of placements & earnings (ns) Foster & earnings (ns) Group & earnings (ns) # re-entries & earnings (ns) Months in care & earnings (ns) # of placements & AFDC/TANF (ns) Foster & AFDC/TANF (+) Group & AFDC/TANF (+) # re-entries & AFDC/TANF (ns) Months in care & AFDC/TANF (-) # of placements & Food stamps (+) Foster & Food stamps (+) Group & Food stamps (ns) # re-entries & Food stamps (ns) Months in care & Food stamps (-)
Macomber et al. (2008)	1. # of placements 2. Last placement 3. Months in care # re-entries	17 years old and in foster care on 12/31/1998	1998–2004	Employment Earnings Stability	# placements & employment: CA (ns); MN (-); NC (ns) Relative & employment: CA (ns); MN (ns); NC (ns) Group & employment: CA (-); MN (ns); NC (ns) ILO & employment: CA (ns); MN(ns); NC(ns) Other & employment: CA (ns); MN (ns); NC (ns) # re-entries & employment: CA (ns); MN (ns); NC (ns) Months in care & employment: CA (ns); MN (ns); NC (ns)

Author(s)	Substitute Care Context	Sample N	Dates	Dependent Variable(s)	Results
					# placements & earnings: CA (ns); MN (ns); NC (ns) Relative & earnings: CA (ns); MN (ns); NC (ns) Group & earnings: CA (-); MN (ns); NC (ns) ILO & earnings: CA (ns); MN (ns); NC (ns) Other & earnings: CA (-); MN (-); NC (ns) # re-entries & earnings: CA (ns); MN (+); NC (ns) Months in care & earnings: CA (ns); MN (ns); NC (ns) # placements & stability: CA (-); MN (ns); NC (ns) Relative & stability: CA (-); MN (ns); NC (ns) Group & stability: CA (ns); MN (ns); NC (ns) ILO & stability: CA (ns); MN (ns); NC (ns) Other & stability: CA (ns); MN (ns); NC (ns) # re-entries & stability: CA (ns); MN (ns); NC (ns) Months in care & stability: CA (ns); MN (ns); NC (ns)
Ryan & Testa (2008)	1. Placement instability (3+ placements) 2. Last placement	294 youth in one Midwestern state	NR	Offending trajectories (desisting, chronic offending and non offenders)	Placement instability & desisting trajectory (+) Relative & desisting trajectory (+) Independent living & desisting trajectory (ns) Relative & desisting trajectory (+) Unknown & desisting trajectory (+) Placement instability &

Author(s)	Substitute Care Context	Sample N	Dates	Dependent Variable(s)	Results
					chronic trajectory (+) Relative & chronic trajectory (ns) Independent living & chronic trajectory (ns) Relative & chronic trajectory (ns) Unknown & chronic trajectory (ns)

Table 1

texts Provided to Former Foster Youth

Method	Characteristics of Substitute Care										
	Time in Care		Type of Placement ⁷				Other Events				% Re-Entry
	Mean Years	Mean Entry Age	Foster Care	Kinship Care	Congregate Care	Independent Living	In-Patient Hospital ⁸	Detention ⁹	Run /0	Mean # Placements	
Interviews & questionnaires	11.7	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	5.6	-
Interviews	12.8	3.1	72.6	-	21.4	-	-	-	-	2.4	12.0
Interviews	3.0	12.0	-	-	65.5	-	-	-	56.0	-	-
Administrative data	5.6	12.5	38.3 *	25.2*	24.5*	-	-	-	-	-	35.4
Administrative data & case record review	7.6	12.8	85.0	-	50.0	44.0	44.0	-	-	7.6	37.0
Interview & case record review	7.1	11.9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	9.5	-
Interviews 12–18 months after discharge	5.5	-	92.0	27.0	36.0	-	14.0*	-	37.0	4.6	-
Administrative data	-	15.0	-	12.0	42.0	-	-	-	19.0	-	-
Administrative data	-	-	45.0*	29.5*	14.9*	-	-	-	-	-	>25.0

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Method	Characteristics of Substitute Care									
	Time in Care		Type of Placement ⁷				Other Events			% Re-Entry
	Mean Years	Mean Entry Age	Foster Care	Kinship Care	Congregate Care	Independent Living	In-Patient Hospital ⁸	Detention ⁹	Run ¹⁰	
Interviews	7.8	10.7	35.7*	30.6*	18.0*/59.8	8.6	7.1*	33.5	46.0	22.0
Interviews	-	10.9	28.0*	18.0*	42.0*	3.0*	15.0*/42.0	15.0*/38.0	-	-
Administrative data following youth 2-8 years post-discharge	1.4	14.7	52.5*	-	27.0*	-	-	-	-	49.0
Mailed survey	7.0	10.4 ¹²	56.9	51.4	21.3	3.7	-	-	23.5	-
Interviews	6.1	11.1	-	-	-	-	-	-	39.3	30.5
Phone interviews & case record review	-	13.3	-	38.2*	41.2*	21.0*	-	-	-	-

one of the observation as opposed to rates reported at any point in foster care (no asterisk).

- ⁸ In the case of in-patient psychiatric hospitalizations, as asterisk denotes rates in the past year as opposed to at any point in foster care (no asterisk).
- ⁹ In the case of juvenile detention/corrections, as asterisk denotes rates in the past year as opposed to at any point in foster care (no asterisk).
- ¹⁰ Table 1 report the rates of running away at any point in foster care as opposed to running away at the time of the observation.
- ¹¹ Dworsky (2005) reports out of home care experiences at first and last entry. Table 1 reports the rates at first entry.
- ¹² Merdinger et al. (2005) report the age at first entry.