

Children *and* Family
Research Center

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK



Understanding the Reasons
for Placement Instability:
Lessons from Case Data



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Placement stability is a problem for a significant minority of children in foster care

- Between one-fourth and one-half of children in foster care have 3 or more placement changes during their first year (Connell et al., 2006)
- 32% of foster care alumni had 8 or more moves while in care (Pecora et al., 2005)

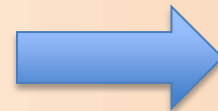


Instability has negative impacts on children

- Mood difficulties
- Behavior problems
- Additional placement disruption
- Difficulty finding permanent homes
- Poorer adult outcomes



Frequency of instability and its negative effects



Need to understand why it happens



Illinois Multiple Move Study

- Research question: What factors explain placement instability?
- Stable and unstable cases sampled from Illinois Department of Children and Family Services
 - Comparison of matched samples of stable and unstable cases on case characteristics
 - Unstable group included 11 most unstable cases in state
 - In-depth content analysis of reasons for moves in unstable sample



Matched Samples

Study Design

Study period: 7/1/06 – 12/31/07

MOVER SUBJECTS

On 7/1/06, **261** cases in foster family and kinship homes which met the mover definition (*3 or more placements within an 18-month period*)

STABLE SUBJECTS

On 7/1/06, **3,223** cases in foster family and kinship homes which were stable (*less than 3 placements in 18 months*)

MOVER SELECTION = 61 cases

The top **11** cases selected, plus an additional **50** randomly selected

Matching

STABLE SELECTION = 61 cases

61 cases selected from the stable sample, matched

Propensity Score Matching – 122 cases



Matched Samples

Variable	Movers	Stable	
	(N = 61)	Matched (N = 61)	Original (N =3,233)
< 1 year old	11.5%	13.1%	34.1%
African-American	55.7%	54.1%	62.3%
Female	57.4%	50.8%	48.2%
Cook County	27.9%	23.0%	53.4%
6+ prior moves	13.1%	13.1%	5.2%
Child disability noted	11.5%	16.4%	7.1%
Opened <6 mos.	34.4%	37.7%	16.2%



Most children experienced moves from each of 3 sources

Source of Instability	Explanation
Caregivers	Moves initiated by caregivers or by DCFS because of caregivers' inability or unwillingness to maintain foster child
Child behavior	Moves initiated by caregivers or DCFS because of children's behavior
System or policy	Moves initiated by DCFS because of system limitations or DCFS policy

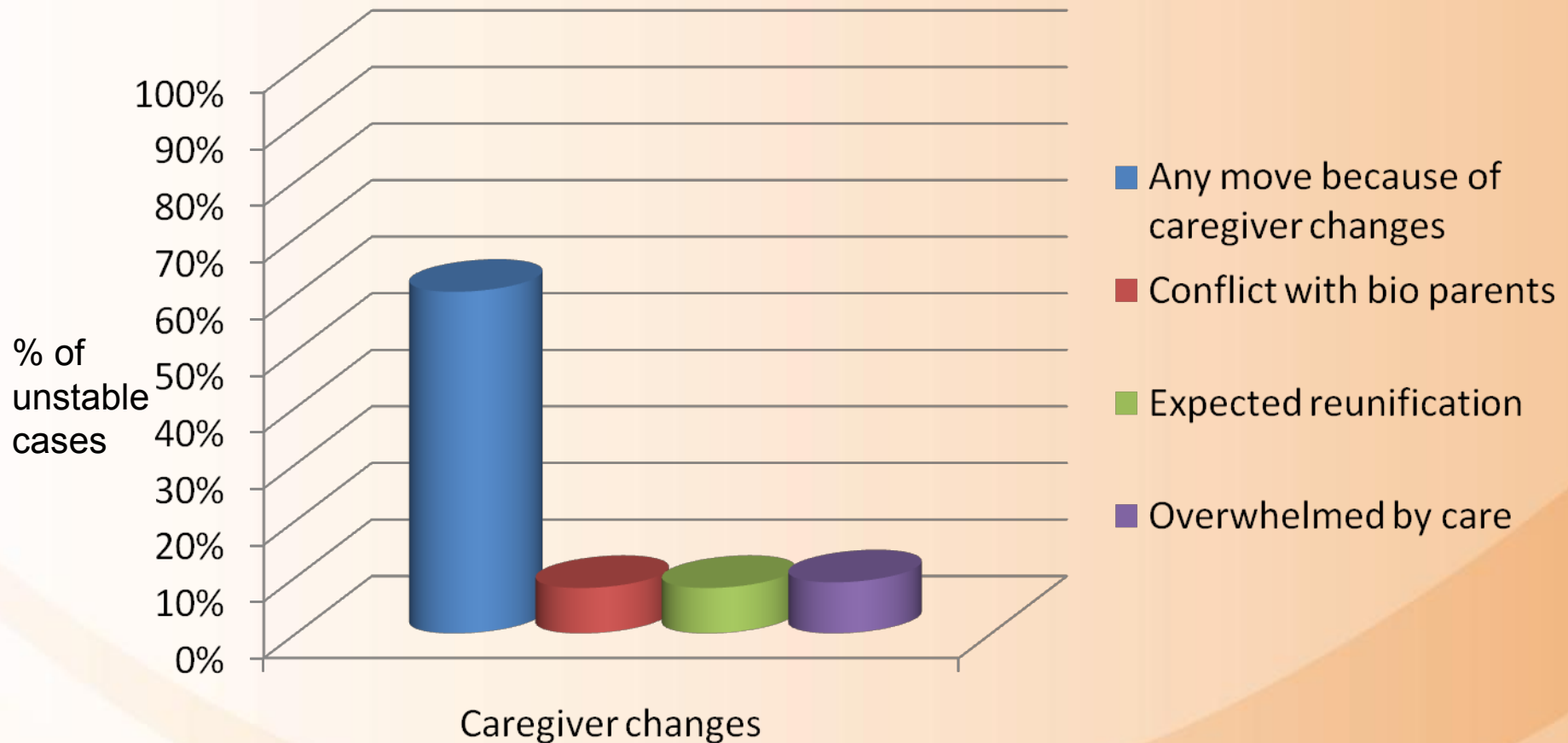


Caregivers and instability

- 93% of caregivers in stable group were committed to permanence vs. 42% in the multiple move group
- 67% of placements in the stable group were with kin vs. 26% for the multiple move group
- Caregiver-related moves
 - 36% of moves among unstable group
 - Occurred in 81% of unstable cases
 - Most frequent reason in 34% of unstable cases

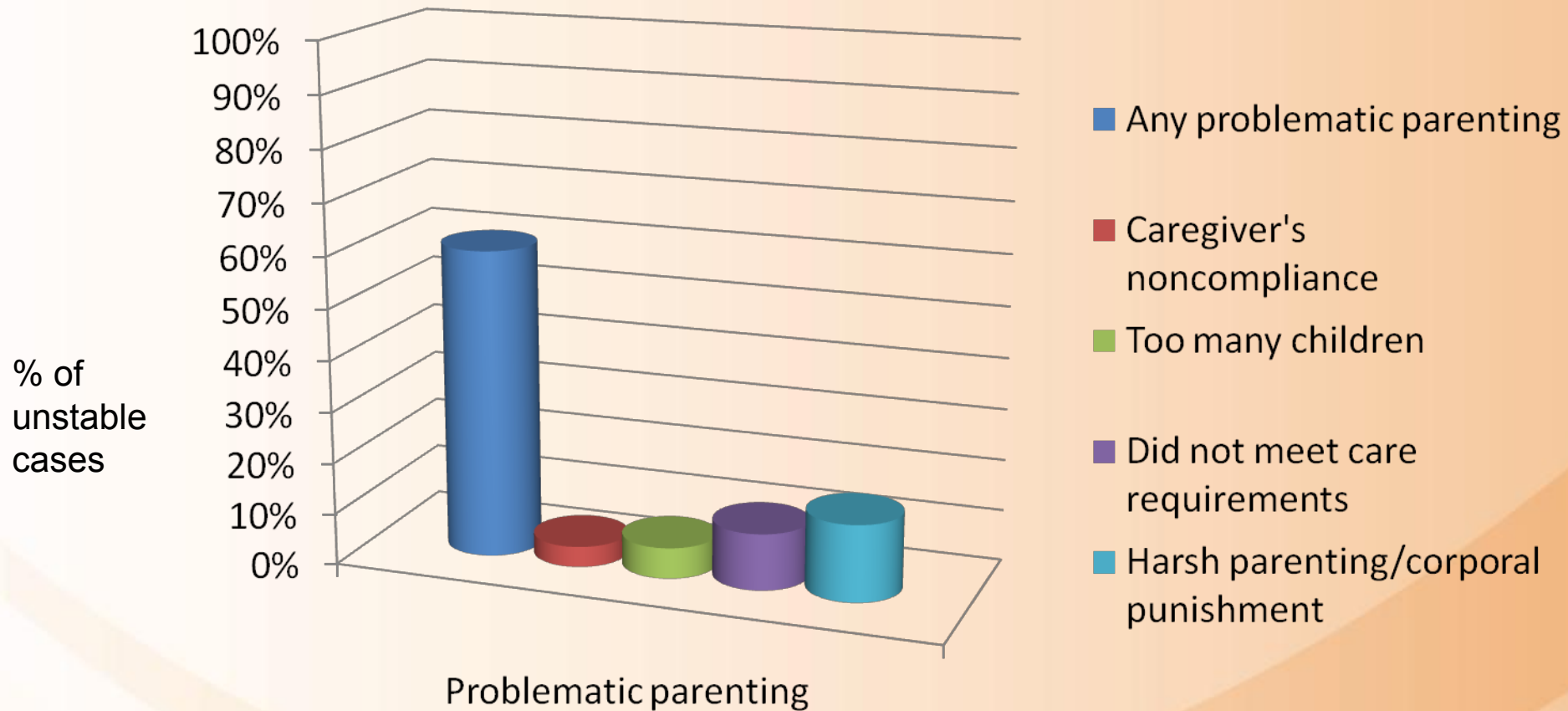


Disruption because of caregiver changes





Disruption because of problematic parenting





More on kin care results



- Children in stable group were more likely than multiple move group to be in kin care vs. traditional foster care
- Kin care stabilizes children?
- Or more stable children tend to be placed in kin care?
- Unclear – could be both



Unstable kin placements

- Some of the children in the unstable group had very unstable kin placements
- 16 children in the unstable group were moved at least once to be with kin – all had subsequent placements after their first kin placement
- One child was placed with 7 different kin
- One issue was licensing:
 - Kin caregivers in the stable group were more likely to be licensed (56%) than kin caregivers in the unstable group (19%).



Issues with kin placements

Licensing	Kin caregivers in stable cases were more likely to be licensed (56%) than kin caregivers in mover cases (19%).
Disrupted Permanency Placements	13% of children in the unstable group had permanency placements with kin that disrupted



Overall risk of disruption contributes to instability

- Some children had multiple unrelated caregivers who ended foster care placements.
- No connection between the disruptions
- Given 33% to 66% risk of disruption for any one placement in first two years, some cases unstable just by chance



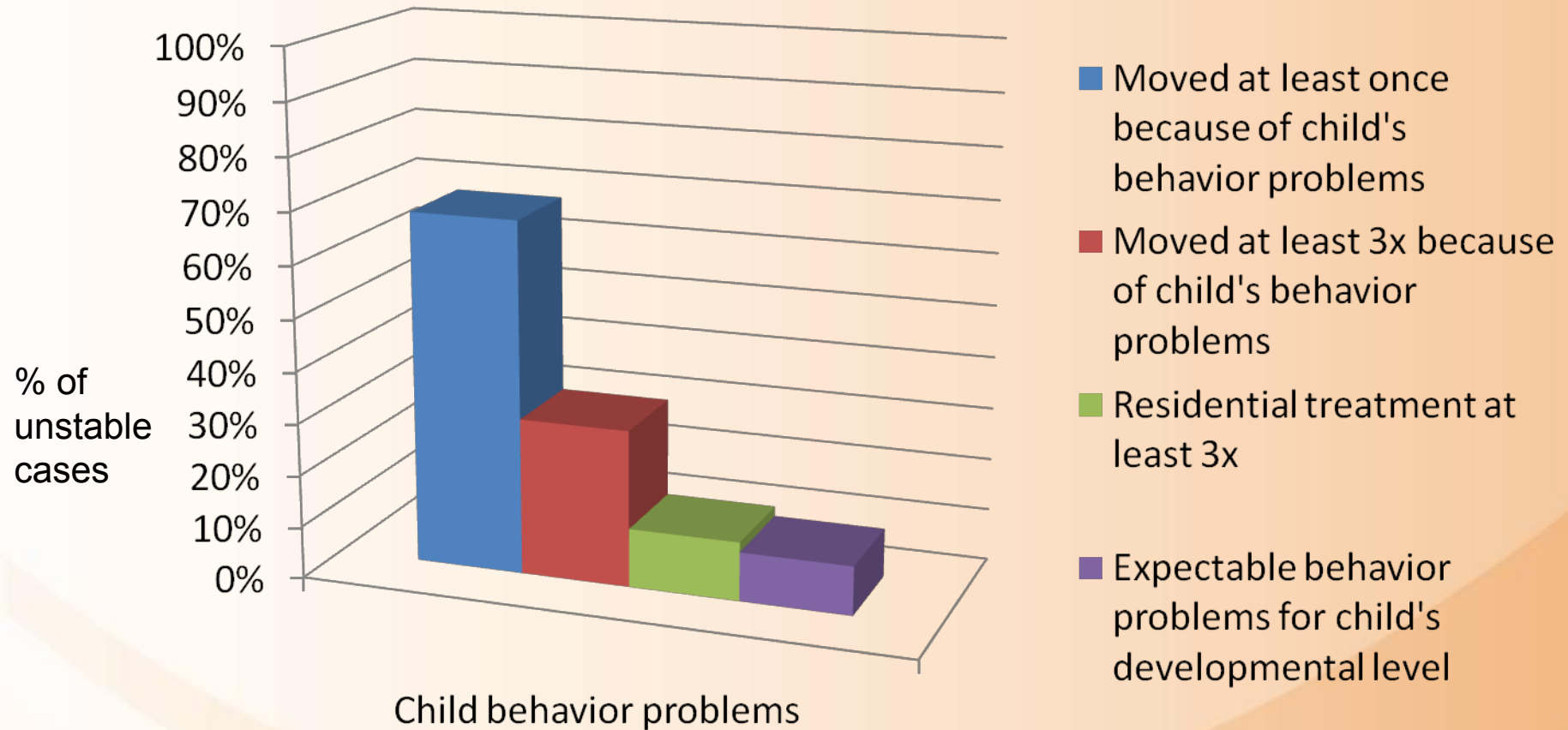


Child behavior and instability

- 16% of children in the stable group had a clinical diagnosis vs. 51% in the multiple move group
- 31% of children in the multiple move group first received a clinical diagnosis **during the review period**
 - Could represent an emerging mental health problem
 - Could represent a **reaction** to instability

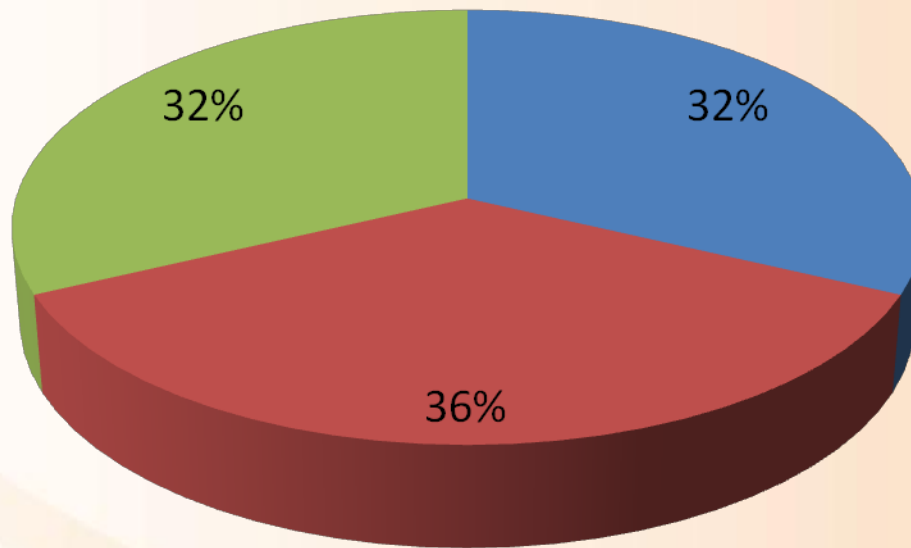


Disruption because of child behavior problems






What came first? Behavior problems or instability?



- Children's behavior was the reason for their initial placement change
- Children's behavior problems emerged only after initial placement disruption
- Children in unstable group not moved because of behavior problems



More on timing of behavior problems

- In several cases, considerable time span between early instability and later behavior problems:
 - Preschool, early elementary years ↔ Foster care disruption
- 
- Behavior problem in later elementary years or adolescence
- Several studies show that behavior problems are both a cause and an effect of instability



Expectable (?!) behavior problems led to moves



- 1 child had an “attitude” when asked to clean the bathroom
- 1 child did not help out around the house enough
- 2 siblings went out without permission, did not follow house rules, do chores or bathe enough



Expectable behavior problems?! (cont.)

One boy was placed in foster care at age 1 because of neglect, but removed from two homes within two years because of his temper tantrums, biting, kicking, screaming and fighting with other children. He then was placed with a kin family and settled down without subsequent placement disruptions.



Sexual orientation

For one girl, caregivers' objections to her sexual orientation was a factor in two of her moves



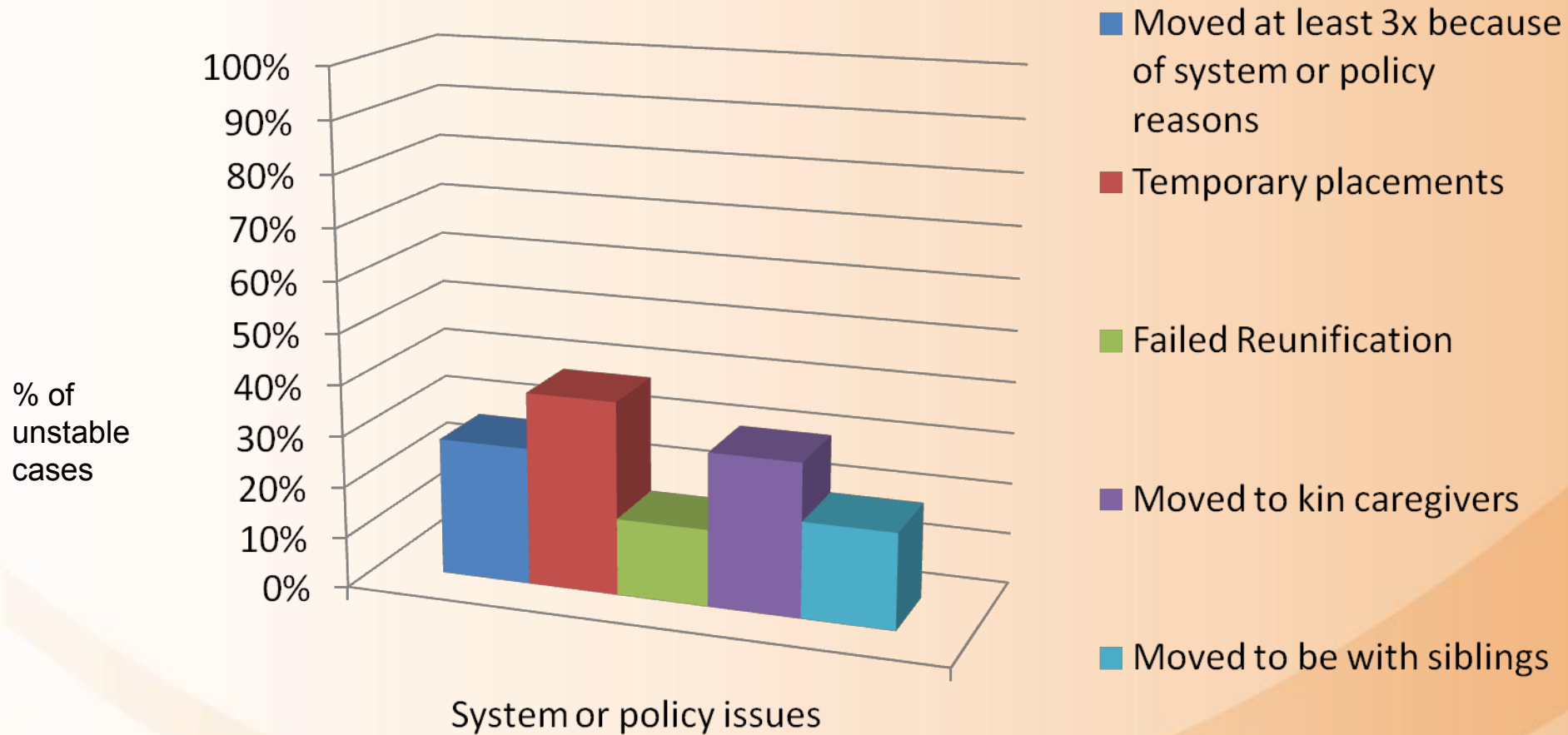
System or policy issues and instability

- 26% of all moves in unstable group
- Occurred in 64% of unstable cases
- A planned move can contribute to instability in itself and contributes even more if it falls through





Disruption because system or policy issues





Temporary placements

- Often occurred when children first entered care to facilitate matching
Also occurred often after disruptions
Sometimes for respite care or preparing a permanent placement
Usually less than 3 weeks
Several longer – one for 20 months
- Automatically add 2 units to move counts





Moves to kin care as policy

- Several of the moves to kin caregivers were planned moves, either to enhance connections to family or to achieve permanence
- A number of these moves fell through in the unstable group, increasing overall instability



Unstable placements with siblings

- Children are placed with siblings to connection with family, promote well-being and increase stability
- In some cases, however, principle of keeping siblings together contributed to instability
- 15% of children in unstable group were moved to remain with a child who was moved because of a behavior problem; a third of these children eventually were placed separately
 - Children's attitudes about these moves varied



Movements to be with siblings (cont.)

One girl went through five placements in less than seven years due to her brother's defiant behaviors; she continued to be moved even though she had wanted to stay in previous placements.





Case example #1: 6 month old girl

Type of Caregiver	Number of Days in Placement	Reason for Leaving
Foster 1	40	Children moved to be with kin
Kin 1	287	Kin caregiver allowed children contact with bio mother who had broken older sibling's collarbone
Foster 2	140	Temporary placement
Foster 3	567	Foster parent subject of maltreatment investigation on another foster child that was later unfounded
Foster 4	13	Temporary placement
Foster 3	139	Foster parent physically abused another child
Foster 5	110	Moved to be with siblings
Foster 6	500+ days	Current setting – child had not been moved at end of review period



Case example #2: 9 year old girl

Type of Caregiver	Number of Days in Placement	Reason for Leaving
Kin	583	Kin caregiver is going through some life changes and thinks her sister in a city in the western United States would be a better caregiver
Kin	115	Child wanted to return to Illinois to be near relatives
Kin	367	Child having behavior problems and caregiver was reported putting a rag in her mouth
Kin	29	Temporary placement
Kin	583	Girl was unable to apologize for recent behavior problems and wanted to be moved even if it meant residential treatment
Kin	187	?
Foster	24	Foster parent received threatening calls from biological family
Kin	35	?
Kin	115	Child behavior problems and running away. Caregiver: "I want this bitch out of my house"
Kin	44	Child incarcerated



Case example #3: 2 year old girl

Type of Caregiver	Number of Days in Placement	Reason for Leaving
Foster	1270	Foster parents could not commit to adopt child & sibling because of sibling's behavior problems
Foster	826	Child moved with sibling because of sibling's defiant behaviors
Foster	130	Child moved with sibling because of sibling's behaviors
Foster	186	Child moved with sibling because of sibling's behaviors
Foster	101	Child moved with sibling because of sibling's behaviors
Foster	7	Temporary placement
Foster	455+	Current placement—child had not been moved by end of review period



Case example #4: 5 year old boy

Type of Caregiver	Number of Days in Placement	Reason for Leaving
Foster 1	26	Child is aggressive with foster parent, sibling, neighbor children, and animals in home. Threatens to kill foster parent
Foster 2	35	Temporary placement?
Foster 3	358	Indicated report of physical abuse by caregiver
Foster 4	126	Child aggression toward other children in home & school
Foster 5	40	Caregiver did not have adequate space in car to accommodate all the car seats she needed
Foster 4	7	There was only enough room for child to sleep on couch—violated licensing standards
Foster 6	83+	Current placement at end of review period – this was punctuated by child having 27 day psych hospitalization



Conclusion

- Most children in unstable cases have been moved for several different reasons
 - caregiver reasons
 - child behavior *and*
 - system and policy reasons
- Child behavior is only one source of instability
 - Important not to blame the victim
- Skill and commitment of foster parents plays a role
 - Increased licensing of kin caregivers should be considered



Conclusion (cont.)

- Child behavior problems are both a cause and effect of instability
 - Caregivers need resources, training and support
 - Sometimes behavior problems are expectable for child's developmental level
- Moves made by child welfare to improve children's lives carry some risk of instability
 - Planned moves should be made carefully, taking into account past instability as one factor



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