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KINSHIP FOSTER PARENTS AND THE
SAFETY OF CHILDREN IN THEIR CARE

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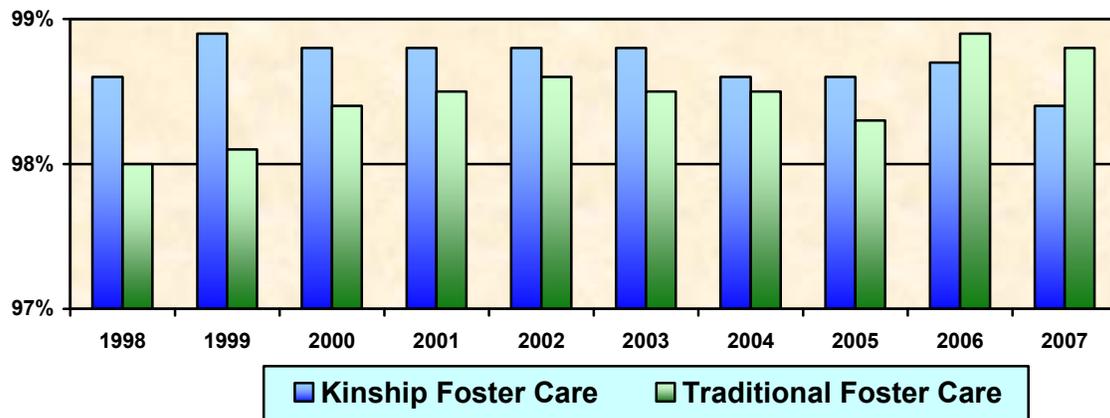
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Background

In July 2008, the Children and Family Research Center (CFRC, the Center) published its annual report entitled *Conditions of Children in or at Risk of Foster Care in Illinois: An Assessment of their Safety, Stability, Continuity, and Well-Being*, which monitors the child welfare outcomes of the Illinois Department of Children and Family (DCFS, the Department). Among the child safety findings was a “warning sign” that in recent years, children in kinship foster care had become more likely to experience maltreatment recurrence while in care compared to those in traditional foster care, which was a reversal of a previous trend (see Figure 1, reproduced from this report). In October 2008, staff from the DCFS Office of the Inspector General (OIG) contacted the Center to obtain more information about the factors that were driving this outcome. They were interested in particular in the influence of two factors: caregiver age¹ and foster home license status.

Figure 1: Percentage of children in care that did not have a substantiated report during placement: Kin versus non-kin placements



¹ The data necessary to compute the age of care providers was not available for the overwhelming majority of unlicensed relative care providers. Thus, it was not possible to examine the role of provider’s age during the present analysis.

At this same time, passage of the *Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008* (Public Law 110-351) into law on October 7, 2008, increased the Department's interest in the licensing of relative foster homes. Section 104 of the law specifies that states may waive non-safety licensing standards on a case-by-case basis in order to eliminate barriers to placing children safely with relatives in licensed homes. It requires the Department of Health and Human Services to submit a report to Congress within two years that examines state licensing standards, the number and percentage of children in licensed and unlicensed relative homes, states' use of case-by-case waivers, the effect of waivers on the safety, permanency, and well-being of children in foster care, reviews of the reasons relative foster family homes may not be able to be licensed, and recommendations for administrative or legislative actions that may increase the percentage of relative foster homes that are licensed. An internal DCFS workgroup focusing on kinship licensing expressed an interest in learning more about the safety of children in licensed and unlicensed kinship foster homes.

In response to these requests, the Center conducted a series of analyses to examine the following questions:

1. Are licensed kinship foster homes safer than unlicensed kinship foster homes? How does each of these compare to licensed traditional foster homes?
2. Is the relationship between placement type (kin or non-kin), license status, and safety accounted for by differences in demographic or case characteristics such as child's age, child's race, number of other children in the home, or regional location?

Method

Sample/population

The sample was comprised of children entering substitute care *for the first time* from FY1998 through FY2007. The sample was then limited to children who spent time in a kinship placement or non-kinship family foster homes at some point during their stay in substitute care (excluding children who spent the entirety of their substitute care stay in non-family settings, such as group homes or institutions). The final sample consisted of 46,012 children.

Measures

Dependent variable/Outcome measure: The outcome measure was the rate of indicated reports of abuse/neglect during placement, excluding reports of sexual abuse allegations during the designated period of time. Only the first indicated report was counted within a given license status spell.

License status and placement type: The license status for a given provider-child pair was determined by the administrative service codes used by the Department, which are used to determine the reimbursement rate received for each ward in placement. These codes are also used to identify kinship providers from regular foster care providers.

The license status (licensed versus unlicensed) of a single provider can change during a child's placement in care. For instance, a child may be placed with a relative that was initially unlicensed who later becomes licensed, resulting in multiple administrative service codes for the same provider-child pair. The change in license status may come in weeks, months, or possibly years. It was necessary to consider each of these periods separately for the purpose of assessing the level of risk of maltreatment in relation to the license status. Therefore, "license status spells" (LSS) were determined for each provider-child pair using the dates attached to the "service type" codes for each change in license status/placement type. The start of the first LSS for each provider-child pair was marked by the date of their first service type code (license status + placement type). The end of a LSS, if it occurred, was marked by the date of the following license/placement type service code, which could indicate a different provider or a different license status for the same provider. If the last "service type" code came before the end of placement, the placement end date would mark the end of the license status spell. Using this definition, some children would have a single LSS for their entire stay in substitute care, while others would have many, if they either changed providers or if their providers changed license status.

The current sample of 46,012 children had a total of 108,490 license status periods or spells (LSS) during the years observed. The following analyses are conducted at the level of license status spell rather than child level.

Child demographic information: gender and race information was taken directly from the administrative data. The age of the children was computed by subtracting the date of birth from the start date of each license status spell (LSS). Geographic location of the placement was coded as Cook (a combination of the three Cook administrative regions), Northern, Central, or Southern.

Number of foster children placed with the same foster care provider was computed at the start of each license status spell. The total number of other children in the placement was then divided into siblings and non-siblings.

Child age range for each LSS was computed by calculating the difference between the oldest and youngest child in the home. This range was then dichotomized into two groups: 5 or more years versus less than 5 years.

Fiscal year of the start of each license status spell was used to assess the extent to which the risk of child maltreatment in care has changed over time.

Analytic Approach

The data was analyzed using Cox's Proportional Hazard regression procedure to examine the relationship between the risk of an indicated child maltreatment report and the license status of kinship placements and non-kinship placements controlling for a number of other variables. Because the unit of analysis was the license status spell (a period of time that a child-provider pair spent under a given license status) some child-provider pairs had more than one entry.

Results

Table 1 displays the sample profile for kin versus non-kin license status spells. Percentages within each variable should add up to 100% (down the column). Kinship and non-kinship license status spells (LSS) differed on several variables. Kin license spells were much more likely to be unlicensed than non-kin: 22% versus 96%, respectively. There is a slightly higher proportion of African American children in kinship care placements (60%) versus non-kin placements (53%). Only a very small percentage of kin LSS (less than 5%) include other unrelated wards, while 43% non-kin placements do. Kin LSS are more likely than non-kin LSS to contain larger sibling groups (2 or more siblings together): 31.5% versus 15.1%, respectively.

Table 1: Sample Characteristics by Placement Type of License Status Spells		
	Kinship (n=47,760)	Non-Kinship (n=60,730)
License status		
Licensed	21.73%	96.02%
Unlicensed	78.27%	3.98%
Child Gender		
Female	50.37%	49.79%
Male	49.63%	50.21%
Child Race		
Black	59.74%	52.69%
Latino	5.65%	6.18%
White	32.15%	37.99%
Other	2.46%	3.13%
Child Age		
0 to 2	34.15%	34.26%
3 to 5	18.85%	18.09%
6 to 8	21.20%	20.06%
9 to 11	12.54%	11.89%
12 to 14	11.00%	12.11%
15 to 17	8.12%	9.18%
Age range plus 5 years	23.14%	27.61%
# Unrelated wards		
None	95.37%	56.51%
One	2.88%	21.72%
Two	1.10%	12.13%
Three	.45%	5.93%
Four	.17%	2.64%
Five plus	.04%	1.06%
# Number of siblings		
None	37.09%	51.88%

One	31.38%	32.98%
Two	17.91%	11.70%
Three	8.36%	2.71%
Four	3.49%	.55%
Five plus	1.77%	.18%
Region of State		
Cook regions	48.44%	38.42%
North region	16.03%	18.68%
Central region	24.84%	29.14%
Southern region	10.70%	13.76%
FY		
1998	9.53%	7.85%
1999	10.32%	11.10%
2000	8.86%	11.04%
2001	9.42%	11.70%
2002	10.19%	11.06%
2003	10.97%	10.73%
2004	10.07%	10.12%
2005	10.42%	9.77%
2006	9.83%	8.67%
2007	10.39%	7.95%

Cox's Proportional Hazard regression analysis was performed to examine how each of the variables influenced the likelihood for maltreatment within a given LSS. The results of the regression analysis are presented in Table 2. The second column of the table includes the regression coefficient, which provides an indication of the extent to which a category differs from the comparison category for each variable (for example, male versus female). The extent to which a regression coefficient deviates from zero in either direction indicates the size of the difference between a given category and its comparison categories for each variable. A star marks coefficients that reached statistical significance. The third column in the table is the percent difference in the rate of risk for

maltreatment between the two groups being compared (negative values mean lower risk, positive values mean higher risk).

Table 2: Cox Regression Model Predicting Risk of Maltreatment in Care by Placement Type and License Status		
Variable	Parameter Estimate	Percent difference in rates %
Gender		
Female	0.01669	1.7%
Male (comparison)		
Race/Ethnicity		
Black	-0.21689*	-19.5%
Latino	-0.18722	-17.1%
Other	0.15805	17.1%
White (comparison)		
Child's Age		
Age 0 to 2	0.53412*	70.6%
Age 3 to 5	0.39695*	48.7%
Age 6 to 8	0.16017*	17.4%
Age 9 to 11	0.04294	4.4%
Age 12 to 14	-0.31739*	-27.2%
Age 15 to 17 (comparison)		
Over 5 year difference	0.05739	5.9%
# Unrelated children		
One unrelated	0.12241	13%
Two unrelated	0.20284	22.5%
Three unrelated	0.14513	15.6%
Four unrelated	0.13872	14.9%
Five unrelated	0.33675	40%
Zero unrelated (comparison)		
# of Siblings		
One sibling	0.30852*	36.1%
Two siblings	0.25993*	29.7%
Three siblings	0.4103*	50.7%

Four siblings	0.60909*	83.9%
Five siblings	0.18687	20.5%
Zero siblings (comparison)		
FY start		
FY98	0.62421*	86.7%
FY99	0.62299*	86.4%
FY00	0.55735*	74.6%
FY01	0.54424*	72.3%
FY02	0.22229	24.9%
FY03	0.35246*	42.3%
FY04	0.24733	28.1%
FY05	0.10027	10.5%
FY06	0.12993	13.9%
FY07 (comparison)		
Geographic Region		
Northern region	0.75052*	111.8%
Central region	0.91198*	148.9%
Southern region	1.12856*	209.1%
Cook regions (comparison)		
Type/license status		
Licensed Kin	-0.39137*	-32.4%
Unlicensed Kin	0.12994*	13.9%
Unlicensed Non-Kin	-0.345	-29.2%
Licensed Non-Kin (comparison)		

*p.<.05

% computed using the following formula: $100 \times (\text{EXP}(\text{Coeff}) - 1)$

Several child characteristics were significantly related to risk of maltreatment in care: African American children were at a significantly lower risk than white children, and younger children were at higher risk than older children. In addition, the number of siblings in the home was related to the risk of maltreatment in care: children in placements with one to four siblings placed together were at a higher risk when compared to those without siblings.

The significant relationship between fiscal year of the first LSS and risk of maltreatment indicates that in general, placements have become less risky over time. In addition, children outside of the Cook regions, especially those in the Southern region, are at significantly higher risk of maltreatment than those that live within the Cook regions.

Even after taking into account the effect of each of these variables, the effects of license status and placement type remain significant in predicting maltreatment in care. Unlicensed kinship LSS are at a 14% higher risk of an indicated maltreatment report compared to non-kin licensed foster care spells. However, children in kinship licensed spells are 33% less likely to experience maltreatment in care compared to licensed non-kin foster care spells.

Discussion and Next Steps

There are some obvious limitations to the current analyses that limit what can be said about the results. One major issue with the data is the fact the incident date is not available. Thus all that can be said is that a report that was indicated was made during a particular time without a way to determine when the incident took place. This is a rather critical concern when the safety of children in care during specific periods of time is being considered. Another limitation of the data is the inability to examine the characteristics of care providers, which is limited by the lack of information on unlicensed kin providers in the administrative database. Despite these limitations, the current findings suggest areas that deserve further exploration in order to better assure the safety of children in care.

The different levels of risk for children in kinship placement depending on the license status of the provider may account for the overall lower risk of maltreatment for children in kinship care that has been observed for a number of years prior to 2006. The fact remains that at any point in time the majority of children in kinship care are with unlicensed providers. However, because in the current context the unit of analysis was the license status spell or period that a particular provider-child pair was under a given license status it must be recognized that the unlicensed period for relatives, as a category, is likely to be very diverse.

It seems reasonable to expect that those kinship placements that start out as unlicensed but eventually become licensed might be different than those that do not. One way to think about it might be to consider that some relatives are initially licensable and over time, through training and other adjustments, fulfilled the requirements to become licensed. Other kinship providers may not be licensable from the beginning and may lack the interest or the resources to move into compliance with the licensing guidelines. Given this diversity, if it was possible to identify those providers that maybe licensable before one would expect those unlicensed spells that lead to a licensed period will have a lower risk of indicated maltreatment compared to those that remained unlicensed.

In order to explore the extent to which there may be some unlicensed spells that might be characterized as licensable, a new category of unlicensed kinship spells was created. Unlicensed kinship spells that either led to a licensed spell (same provider-child pair) or were preceded by a licensed period were separated from the rest, and the Cox’s regression procedure was re-run with this new category (see Table 3). The level of risk for this category (pre- or post-licensed unlicensed kin) is similar to the licensed kinship spells. In addition, the remaining unlicensed kin status spells look now riskier compared to both licensed kinship and non-kinship placements. The rest of the variables included in the model did not change in any significant way from the results presented in Table 2, thus are not repeated here.

Variable	Parameter Estimate	Percent difference in rates %
Licensed Kin	-0.35572*	-29.9%
Pre or Post-Licensed Unlicensed Kin	-0.69853*	-50.3%
Unlicensed Kin	0.26296*	30.1%
Unlicensed Non Kin	-0.33586	-28.5%
Licensed Non Kin is the comparison group		

One troublesome reality remains the fact that the majority of kinship placements are unlicensed. What is not clear and cannot be assessed with the data available is whether there is an additional portion of the unlicensed kin providers that are potentially licensable. It would be extremely useful to see whether there is data to determine some of the reason that so many of the kinship providers remained unlicensed. Having more information about the providers might help to better target resources and incentives to help those providers interested and able to do so move toward licensing.

Any effort to encourage more kinship care providers to become licensed will require a closer examination of the procedure currently in place to identify and evaluate the suitability of relatives to serve as foster parents at the point of initial placement. In the ideal situation it would be advantageous to determine the “licensability” of potential kinship providers at the time that the need for such a placement arises. In reality, it is likely that if pre-placement evaluation of relatives includes a license-ability test this may have some other potentially negative consequences. Some of the negative consequences might be: prolonging the process for the evaluation of relatives to serve as foster parents; reducing the pool of potential relatives who can serve as foster parents; and, consequently, could lead to fewer children being placed with relatives. One possible indicator of the size of the potential loss of relative foster parents could be found by looking at current relative providers that qualified to become foster parent because of some type of exemption being made from placement requirements that apply to non-kinship providers other than the license itself.