Relative Stability? Examining the Role of Placement with Relatives and Race/Ethnicity in Predicting Foster Care Placement Stability

Jeeyeon Hong

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Committee:

Emiko A. Tajima

Jane J. Lee

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University of Washington

Abstract

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Jeeyeon Hong

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Emiko A. Tajima

School of Social Work

Scholarship on child welfare has found placement instability to be a major risk for foster youths' later development and well-being. However, there have been mixed findings regarding the effect of placement type (relative or non-relative foster homes) on placement instability. Further, little is understood about how the child's race/ethnicity shapes this relationship. To fill this knowledge gap, the present study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How does placement stability rate differ between children in relative care versus non-relative care? (2) How does placement stability rate differ across foster children's race/ethnicity? (3) How does the placement type interact with the relationship between child's race/ethnicity and stability rate? This study used nationally representative data from the 2018 Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS). T-test and logistic regression results confirm that both placement type and child's race/ethnicity are significant predictors of placement instability. Furthermore,

significant interaction effects between the child's race/ethnicity and placement type were found. These findings suggest that stability rate significantly differs by child's different racial/ethnic group membership as well as the type of placement setting. We also found that placement with relatives is a significant moderator in the relationship between child's race/ethnicity and placement stability. Future research should further examine the relationship between child′s race/ethnicity, placement with relatives, and placement stability to inform culturally relevant child welfare practices.

Relative Stability?

Nationally, the number and rate of children and youth in foster care have steadily increased over the past four years. Data from the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) showed that a total of 437,283 children were in the foster care system as of 2018, which is approximately a five percent increase from 2014 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019). From 2014 to 2018, the rates of children who were in foster care rose from 5.6 to 5.9 per every 1,000 U.S. children (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019)[1]. At the state level, 39 states have seen an increase in the rate of children and youth in foster care as of 2017 (Williams & Sepulveda, 2019). With this rise, the child welfare service system is charged with an important task: to provide a stable and nurturing environment for out-of-home children (Casey Family Programs, 2018). Unfortunately, not all children experience stability during their stay in care. A report submitted to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) revealed that no more than 40 percent of states were able to meet the federal goal of having two or less placements for children in foster care (Jones, Rittner, & Affronti, 2016). Similarly, a longitudinal study revealed that over 30 percent of foster care alumni reported more than 10 placement changes and a majority had at least one placement move (Pecora et al., 2005).

Often referred to as "placement disruption," placement moves can damage a child's well-being in many ways, regardless of whether the child is in kinship or non-kinship placement. Placement moves result in cumulative changes in the child's surroundings, such as primary caretaker, school, and neighborhood, damage bonds to parents, threaten the loss of remaining social ties with significant others and involve additional stress to develop relationships with new

[1] Source: Foster care rates are calculated using the federal Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) and data from the U.S. Census Bureau. AFCARS represents the federal fiscal year 2018 reporting period (October 1st, 2017 through September 30th, 2018). Data from U.S. Census Bureau is from 2018 and is publicly available at the Kids Count Data Center.

caregivers (Strijker, Knorth, & Knot-Dickscheit, 2008). In the long run, lack of stability may decrease perceived child welfare agency helpfulness and compound children's sense of feeling rejected which, in turn, may hinder their opportunities and capacity to build meaningful relationships with others (Garcia, O'Brien, Kim, Pecora, Harachi, & Aisenberg, 2015; Unrau, Seita, & Putney, 2008). In some cases, this can develop into long-term difficulties as children learn to distrust foster parents, caseworkers and the foster care system, which may pose a significant challenge when adjusting to a new environment and may exacerbate the risk of future placement instability (Crum, 2010; Harden, 2004; Newton, Litrownik, & Landsverk, 2000; Webster, Barth, & Needell, 2000). Empirically, it has been shown that a history of multiple placement moves is a significant predictor of future placement instability (Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens, & Doreleijers, 2007; Smith, Stormshak, Chamberlain, & Whaley, 2001; Staff, & Fein, 1995).

As a result of such accumulated stress, experiencing multiple placements is widely known to be associated with increased risk for later behavioral and emotional challenges (Garland, Hough, McCabe, Yeh, Wood, & Aarons, 2001; Landsverk, Garland, & Leslie, 2002; Pears & Fisher, 2005). Compared to other children, youth with foster care experience face higher risk of mental health challenges ranging from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depressive symptoms, sociophobia, and substance abuse to extended insomnia (Brown, Courtney, & McMillen, 2015; Fusco & Kulkarni, 2018; Munson & McMillen, 2010; Narendorf, & McMillen, 2010; Pecora et al., 2005). A nationwide study revealed that about 54.4 percent of foster care alumni were suffering from more than two types of the above-noted symptoms (Pecora et al., 2005). Considering the added trauma and stress associated with placement moves, frequent placement moves are commonly identified as a leading contributor to these symptoms by foster

youth and their caregivers, child welfare professionals, and school teachers (Sullivan, Jones, & Mathiesen, 2010; Zetlin, Weinberg, & Shea, 2010). A consistent finding was identified in a quantitative research study that sampled a wide age range of foster youth (Jones & Wells, 2008). This study found that increased numbers of placement moves exacerbated externalizing and internalizing problems even for children who previously had not exhibited such problems.

Placement instability also predicts delayed permanency outcomes for children in care. Defined as achieving legal stability, permanency is mainly achieved through family reunification, adoption or guardianship (Koh & Testa, 2008; Konijin et al., 2019). While some placement transitions may be inevitable in the process of finding permanent homes and a better fit for a child, too many transitions have left many children drifting in the system - often ending up with children running away or returning for a longer stay in foster care (Children's Bureau, 2016b). Children with multiple placement moves also have a higher probability of re-entering care, having longer stays in foster care, and having a higher likelihood of being removed from their family multiple times (Courtney, Piliavin, & Wright, 1997). When comparing permanency outcomes, children with multiple placement moves were less likely to be reunified, adopted or obtain guardianship compared to those who experienced fewer placement moves (Children's Bureau, 2004).

Improving placement stability is fundamental to support child well-being and reduce these negative impacts. Given that children removed from their homes are more vulnerable to trauma, providing a stable home is of paramount importance to help prevent any additional trauma and promote healthy child development. Much of the prior research in this area has focused on identifying predictors for placement instability in several domains - child characteristics, foster (resource) family characteristics, and placement settings. Comparing the

stability of relative placement versus non-relative placement has received considerable attention from the child welfare research community. Numerous research findings point to the benefits of placement with relatives in reducing placement instability (Beeman, Kim, & Bullerdick, 2000; Koh, Rolock, Cross, & Eblen-Manning, 2014; Konijin et al., 2019; Winokur, Holtan, & Batchelder, 2018). Guided by this evidence, and because it is perceived as a suitable setting to support the goal of family reunification and permanency, child welfare policies have preferred placement with relatives (kin) over non-kinship foster homes (Gleeson, 1999; Scannapieco & Hegar, 1999).

Nonetheless, what needs further investigation at this point is to understand the many differences between the characteristics of children in kinship care settings versus those in non-kinship settings – including factors such as age, race/ethnicity, disability, and reason for entering foster care (Beeman et al., 2000; Berrick, Barth, & Needell, 1994; Grogan-Kaylor, 2000) and to further understand the factors associated with these differences. Although a number of studies have shown individual and separate associations between placement stability and characteristics of the child, foster family or placement type variables, investigation of interaction effects amongst these variables has been lacking. The present study focuses on interaction effects between child's race/ethnicity and placement with relatives based on previous literature, which has found links between child's race/ethnicity and likelihood of placement with relatives (Beeman et al., 2000; Grogan-Kaylor, 2000; Keller, Wetherbee, Le Prohn, Payne, Sim, & Lamont, 2001; Shore, Sim, Le Prohn, & Keller, 2002; Smith, & Devore, 2004). Identifying interaction effects may help identify which placement settings are more stable for children of different race/ethnicities. Findings from this analysis may serve as a catalyst for exploring cultural differences in experiencing and adjusting to placement with relatives across different

racial/ethnic groups and help build evidence on how to provide culturally relevant services for children in care.

The goal of this study is to answer the following research questions: (1) How do placement stability rates differ between children in relative care versus non-relative care? (2) How do placement stability rates differ across the race/ethnicity of foster children? (3) How does the placement type interact with the relationship between children's race/ethnicity and stability rate?

Background

Placement type (relative vs. non-relative foster home) and placement stability

There have been substantial, yet mixed findings regarding the correlation between placement with relatives and placement stability. A plethora of research has shown that children in kinship care are more likely to experience stability (Beeman et al., 2000; Koh et al., 2014; Konijin et al., 2019; Winokur et al., 2018) or fewer previous placements (Gaddis, 2011; Lernihan & Kelly, 2006) compared to those in non-kinship care. This relationship was found even when controlling for other demographic and placement characteristics, such as child's age, race/ethnicity, or the licensure of the placement (Chamberlain, Price, Reid, Landsverk, Fisher, & Stoolmiller, 2006; Hurlburt, Chamberlain, DeGarmo, Zhang, & Price, 2010; Winokur, Crawford, Longobardi, & Valentine, 2008). To account for this advantage, many scholars apply the concept of kin altruism – the belief that kinship care providers might have psychologically stronger bonds and attachments to the child due to their relatedness (Font, 2015; Testa, 2001). Furthermore, through familiarity of the nurturing environment with regard to race/ethnicity, cultural heritage and locality (Berrick et al., 1994; Testa & Slack, 2002; Testa, 2001), placement with relatives can help maintain connection to familial tradition and heritage as well as schools or other

surroundings that might be protective against placement instability. With regard to child-caregiver relationships, children's familiarity with caregivers and caregivers' greater understanding of the child may provide additional benefits in building secure attachments and relationships.

On the flip side, however, advantages of relative care might present their own drawbacks as well. For instance, close connections with the birth family may also threaten the safety of the child given that the literature has identified higher rates of placement ending caused by violation of state standard of care or unauthorized contact with biological parents in relative care (Sattler, Font, & Gershoff, 2018; Terling-Watt, 2001). For some relative caregivers, maladaptive parenting behaviors might exist intergenerationally and placement with relatives could further traumatize the child (Kim, 2009; McCloskey, & Bailey, 2000; Terling-Watt, 2001). Other familial stressors that are associated with placement breakdown include contact with biological parents, financial strains, or health issues of caregivers (Terling-Watt, 2001). Research has shown that relative caregivers often share characteristics that are commonly found in system-involved families, such as low socio-economic status, unemployment, and limited education (Dubowitz, Feigelman, Harrington, Starr, Zuravin, & Sawyer, 1994; Berrick et al., 1994; Terling-Watt, 2001).

Another line of research investigating the benefit of relative placements with regard to placement stability suggests that the benefits might be overstated, and that other factors may actually account for increased stability. Although kinship placement can be stable for initial periods (Koh & Testa, 2008), this difference in placement stability has been found to be minimal in the long-term (Pabustan-Claar, 2007; Testa, 2001). Some scholars posit that a large proportion of the variance in placement stability can be explained by child welfare policy preferences for

kinship care. For example, it is common for child welfare agencies to promote placement moves to relative care in an attempt to accomplish child welfare goals such as permanency and family reunification, or to place children with their siblings (Cross, Koh, Rolock, & Eblen-Manning, 2013; Font, 2015; Hartnett, Falconnier, Leathers, & Testa, 1999; Pabustan-Claar, 2007; Theodore, Koh, Rolock, & Eblen-Manning, 2013). Another explanation is the possible role of child-related factors. For example, child characteristics such as gender, age, race/ethnicity, or disability status have a significant association with placement instability, and these factors may influence findings regarding stability (Font, 2015). Font explains that children generally tend to enter non-relative care when kinship placements are not available. Not having reliable relatives might imply having less familial protective factors and greater likelihood of the presence of more intense and intergenerational transmitted abusive relationships, all of which compound future risk of placement instability (Font, 2015). Since placement type was not a significant predictor of stability rate for the high-risk subgroup of children (Font, 2015), investigation of the relationship between placement type and placement stability must carefully control for these child-related variables.

Other factors associated with placement instability

Diverse child factors have been studied in relation to placement stability; child's age, gender, and disability status frequently appear to be significantly correlated. For example, many studies have shown a strong positive association between age and higher risk of placement instability (James, 2004; Smith et al., 2001; Steen & Harlow, 2012). One study found that age was not a significant factor when child behavioral problems were taken into consideration (Newton et al., 2000), but the literature is generally consistent in finding that, with age, it is increasingly challenging to locate stable placements. Another factor that has been found to be

associated with placement instability is the child's gender. Specifically, a considerable body of research supports the finding that females are at greater risk of experiencing more placement moves than male counterparts (Smith et al., 2001; UC Davis Extension Center for Human Services, 2008) while only one study indicated male adolescents were at greater risk (Webster et al., 2000). Lastly, a child having a disability or behavioral problems has been documented across multiple studies as being one of the strongest predictors of increased placement instability (Lindhiem & Dozier, 2007; Newtown et al., 2000; Pardeck, 1984; Redding, Fried, & Britner, 2000; Stone & Stone, 1983).

Children's race and/or ethnicity in child welfare research

A sizable body of child welfare research related to children's race/ethnicity has focused on the overrepresentation of children of color, especially American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN), African American, and Latinx children and youth in the foster care system (Casey Family Programs, 2010; Foster, Hillemeier, & Bai, 2011; Hill, 2008; Kahn & Hansen, 2017; Knott & Donovan, 2010; Kohl, 2007; Lu, Landsverk, Ellis-Macleod, Newton, Ganger, & Johnson, 2004; McRoy, 2014; Needell, Brookhart, & Lee, 2003; Putnam-Hornstein, Needell, King, & Johnson-Motoyama, 2013). While the racial disproportionality rate of Hispanic children was similar to that of Whites in 2015, the ratio of African American and AI/AN children in the foster care system were 1.7 times and 2.6 times, respectively, greater than the rate among the U.S. general child population (Ganasarajah, Siegel, & Sickmund, 2017).

Even after controlling for child characteristics, caregiver factors, household characteristics, and removal reasons, African American children have a 44% higher odds of entering foster care compared to White children (Knott & Donovan, 2010). Similarly, AI/AN children's overrepresentation in out-of-home placement has been well documented in both state-

level and nationwide studies (Bussey & Lucero, 2013; Children's Bureau, 2016a; Farrow, Notkin, Derezotes, & Miller, 2010; Ganasarajah et al., 2017; Lawler, LaPlante, Giger, & Norris, 2012). In particular, a report from the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges highlighted that the disproportionality rate for AI/AN children has risen substantially from 1.5 to 2.7 during the 2000 to 2015 period (Ganasarajah et al., 2017).

Differing explanations exist regarding the cause of such racial differences. Several studies attribute the differential rates to the likelihood that these racial and ethnic groups also have unstable housing, lower socio-economic status, and higher caretaker substance abuse, young maternal age, single parenthood, and poor child health (Maloney, Jiang, Putnam-Hornstein, Dalton, & Vaithianathan, 2017; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2013), all of which are known to disproportionately affect African American and AI/AN families (Kahn & Hansen, 2017). In contrast, other scholars point to possible implicit racial bias by child welfare professionals in the decision-making process, as suggested by significantly higher rates of child abuse substantiation and child removal for African American families despite their overall lower risk in safety assessment scores (Dettlaff, Rivaux, Baumann, Fluke, Rycraft, & James, 2011; Rivaux et al., 2008).

Another notable finding with regard to the child's race/ethnicity is its association with placement type. A robust body of research suggests that there are significantly more children of color in kinship placement (Berrick et al., 1994; Grogan-Kaylor, 2000; Keller et al., 2001; Shore et al., 2002). Specifically, compared to White infants, Native American and African American infants are 1.69 times and 1.60 times, respectively, more likely to be placed with their kin or relatives (Beeman et al., 2000). Supported by research, this can be explained through African and Native Americans' cultural and ancestral connections with families of origin or tribal

communities (Assim, 2013; Bachan, 2014; Dahl, 2009; Eloundou-Enyegue & Shapiro, 2004; Ince, 2010; Lachaud, LeGrand, & Kobiané, 2016; Moran, Fleming, Somervell, & Manson, 1999; Roby, 2011). Unlike western countries where formal child welfare services are the norm, many African countries rely on informal kinship care by relatives, rather than that arranged by the state or authorities (Assim, 2013; Roby, 2011; Ince, 2010). Placement with relatives or with the tribal community is a historical cultural norm for American Indians as well (Attneave, 1969; Cross, 1986; Lawler et al., 2012; National Indian Child Welfare Association, n.d; Red Horse, 1997). African American and American Indian children's strong sense of racial identity also underscores the importance of family and culture in their lives (Moran et al., 1999; Summersett-Ringgold, Jordan, Kisiel, Sax, & McClelland, 2018).

While considerable research attention is focused on the overrepresentation and placement patterns of foster children of color, less is understood about racial/ethnic differences and placement stability. In conducting our literature review, we found mixed results on this topic. Most research indicates there is no significant correlation between race/ethnicity and placement stability rate (Connell, Vanderploeg, Flaspohler, Katz, Saudners, & Tebes, 2006; Garcia, Pecora, Harachi, & Aisenberg, 2012; James, 2004; Steen & Harlow, 2012; Wulczyn, Kogan, & Harden, 2003). Even if studies do show some effects, they do not show a strong or consistent relationship (Zinn, DeCoursey, Goerge, & Courtney, 2006). In some studies, African American children and other children of color were found to experience greater placement stability than did White children (Pardeck, 1984; Webster et al., 2000; White et al., 2008). In contrast to these findings, one study found that African American children experience about two and half times more placement moves than White children, based on a national sample (Leathers, 2006). Conflicting findings were reported with regard to comparisons across different groups of children of color as

well. For example, while Zinn and colleagues (2006) revealed that Hispanic children experience slightly more moves than African American children, a more recent study found higher placement moves for African American children compared to Hispanic children (Summersett-Ringgold et al., 2018). In all of the above analyses, findings regarding American Indian children are unavailable, as these children have been included in the "other" race category or are excluded due to their small number.

Relationship between child's race/ethnicity, placement type, and placement instability

With an overall lack of research on placement instability and children's race/ethnicity, little is known about interaction effects with child's ethnicity and placement type in shaping placement stability. Foster and others (2011) and Iteld (2011) are among very few studies which analyzed different predictors for placement instability by racial group. They both found that being placed with kin had stronger protective effects for African American children compared to other children. For instance, African American children in kinship care reported lower levels of externalizing behavior than White youth in kinship care (Iteld, 2011), which is notable because of the positive correlation between externalizing behavior problems and placement instability (Foster et al., 2011). However, different results were found with regard to permanency outcomes. African American children had less likelihood of family reunification and adoption when they were placed in kinship care setting than children of other races (Gaddis, 2011).

Methods

Data

The data used in these analyses are an extract from the 2018 Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) from the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect. As a national case-level data which state and tribal child welfare agencies are mandated

to collect and report annually, AFCARS provides comprehensive data on demographic characteristics of the foster child, foster family and birth family. It also contains permanency outcome variables, including removal and discharge, number of placement changes, case goals and case outcomes. To create our data extract, we selected the following variables directly related to the research questions, namely: 'current placement type', 'derived child's race/ethnicity', 'age at the latest removal', 'child gender' and 'child disability'.

Out of a total of 687,402 cases reported during the period between January 1st, 2018 and December 31st, 2018, only those placed with relatives or in non-relative foster family homes were drawn for the final sample (*N*=462,143), so that we could focus on a comparison of relative and non-relative foster home settings. Therefore, data regarding children in pre-adoptive homes, group homes, institutions, supervised independent living, runaway children, and children in trial home visits were excluded. In addition, excluding such temporary living conditions can contribute to more accurate representation of risk by preventing possible inflation of overall risk (Usher, Randolph, & Gogan, 1999).

Measurement

Placement instability. While placement instability is often studied together with other permanency outcomes, such as adoption, guardianship, and reunification, this study focuses solely on placement stability. Placement stability relates to the number of placement moves during a child's stay in foster care, regardless of where the child ultimately ends up – whether returned home, adopted, in long-term foster care, etc. (Font, 2015). In other words, when the child moves from one foster home to another, a new placement results. Placement changes can take place for a variety of reasons. A child may runaway or refuse to stay in care, or birthparents might prematurely withdraw the consent for a given placement. There might be mismatch between the caregivers and

child in care in which caregivers lack the preparation to respond to a child's special needs (Sattler et al., 2018). In some cases, a child welfare agency might initiate a placement change to promote long-term permanency and family reunification through a move to live with siblings or with extended family members (Theodore et al., 2013). Due to the limitations of the current dataset, we were not able to include all these factors. Instead, we measured placement stability by examining the current setting and the number of placements the child has ever had. For our measure, the prior placement moves did not count temporary living situations such as runaway cases, trial home visits, respite care, hospitalization or visitation with family members.

Following suit with previous literature, the variable measuring the number of placement moves was dichotomized, divided between those who have experienced one or two placement moves versus three or more (Hartnett et al., 1999; Rice et al., 2017; Webster et al., 2000). The rationale for this operationalization is that three or more moves is commonly regarded as a threshold for defining placement instability (Murphy, Van Zyl, Collins-Camargo, & Sullivan, 2012; Osmond, & Tilbury, 2012; Unrau, Chambers, Seita, & Putney, 2008). This is based on a recognition that children in care may go through one or two moves before being placed in a stable setting (Hartnett et al., 1999; Webster et al., 2000).

Placement type. The variable "current placement setting" was used to measure the placement setting type – namely whether the child is placed with relatives or in a non-relative foster family. In our AFCARS dataset, the variable placement setting refers to the place that the child is currently living in at the point of data collection.

Child's race/ethnicity. The measure for the child's race/ethnicity was derived from the variables for race and Hispanic ethnicity. If Hispanic ethnicity was reported, the child was categorized as "Hispanic", regardless of the race(s) chosen. If more than one race was chosen,

then the child was described as “multiracial”. We used all of the original categories of this variable, including: Non-Hispanic (NH) White, NH African American, Hispanic, NH American Indian/Alaska Native, NH Asian, NH Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and more than one race. In this dataset, the race/ethnicity variable is mutually exclusive, meaning that each child is identified with a single racial/ethnic category.

Child’s age. We used child's age measured on the date of the most recent removal. The age was computed from the child’s birth date, as reported in the system. As a cutoff point to define adolescence, we chose age 10 or older, following the global definition from the World Health Organization (WHO) (World Health Organization, n.d.).

Child’s gender. In the AFCARS data, the variable for child’s gender consists only of male or female.

Child’s clinically diagnosed disability. This variable is a dichotomous variable which indicates whether the case included a healthcare professional’s diagnosis that the child had a mental, physical, or emotional disability.

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses proceeded in four steps. First, chi-square analyses and t-tests were conducted to test the association between placement type and the number of placement moves. Prior to conducting cross tabulations, the number of placement moves was dichotomized; children with less than three placement moves versus three or more. Next, to test if placement stability rate differed significantly across different races/ethnicities of the child, chi-square analyses and logistic regressions were conducted. In the logistic regression model, we controlled for the effects of the other variables (placement type, child’s gender, age, and diagnosed clinical disability), as each of these has been found to be a significant predictor of placement stability based on the literature. All

of the above stated variables were recoded into dummy variables: placement type (relative foster home=1, non-relative foster home=0), child's gender (male=1, female=0), child's age (10 or older =1, younger than 10=0), diagnosed clinical disability (with diagnosed disability=1, no disability or undetermined=0). Seven dummy variables were created for race/ethnicity. As a result, five variables including placement type, race/ethnicity, age, gender, and disability were used in the logistic regression model. A summary of variable coding can be found in Table 1. Lastly, to explore interaction effects related to the number of placement moves, an interaction term (placement type*race/ethnicity) was added to the logistic regression model. All analyses were conducted using SPSS.

Table 1
Study variables and definitions

Function	Variables	Definition
Dependent variable	Number of placement moves	Three or more = 1; Fewer than three = 0
Independent variables	Race/Ethnicity	Seven dummy variables: White; African American; American Indian/Alaska Native; Asian; Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander; Multiracial; and Hispanic
	Current placement setting	Relative foster home = 1 Non-relative foster home = 0
Control variables	Age at the latest removal/foster care entry	10+ (adolescents) = 1 0-9 (children) = 0
	Child sex	Male = 1 ; Female = 0
	Clinically diagnosed disability	Yes = 1 ; No or undetermined = 0

Results

Table 2 outlines basic demographic information regarding the individuals included in our analyses. The number of foster children in relative foster homes (43.8%) was comparatively similar to the number in non-relative foster homes (56.2%). The study sample was also almost

equally divided between males (50.6%) and females (49.4%). With regards to race/ethnicity, 44% of the children were non-Hispanic White, followed by African American (22.3%), Hispanic (21.2%), more than one races (7.2%), American Indian/Alaska Native (2.4%), Asian (0.5%), and Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander (0.3%). The number of placement moves averaged 2.37 among individuals in the sample, showing a wide range from 1 to 99. For the dichotomized subgroups of this variable, the averages for the "less than three moves" and "three or more moves" groups were 1.36 and 4.95, respectively. The majority of children (71.9%) experienced fewer than 3 moves during their stay in care. In terms of age at most recent removal/entry to foster care, the mean was age 5.6 years, ranging from 0 to 20. Approximately half of the participants (49.9%) belonged to the age category "birth to four," while adolescents (age 10 or older) represented about 25%, as did children- ages 5 through 9. Further details on sample demographics can be found in Tables 2 and 3.

Table 2
Descriptive analysis

Participant Characteristics	*N*	%
Total foster children	458122	100
Gender		
Male	231751	50.6
Female	226310	49.4
Current placement setting		
Relative foster home	200812	43.8
Non-relative foster home	257310	56.2
Derived race/ethnicity		
Non-Hispanic (NH), White	201640	44.0
NH, African American	102216	22.3
NH, American Indian/Alaska Native	11028	2.4
NH, Asian	2458	0.5
NH, Hawaiian/ Other Pacific Islander	1240	0.3
NH, More than One Race	33062	7.2
Hispanic (Any Race)	97112	21.2
Number of placement moves		
Less than 3	329536	71.9
3 or more	128492	28.1
Age at the most recent removal/entry into foster care		
0-4 (young children)	228606	49.9
5-9 (children)	118459	25.9
10+ (adolescent)	111057	24.2
Child's diagnosed clinical disability		
Yes	80770	17.6
No	297839	65.0
Not determined	58120	12.7

Table 3
Descriptive analysis : Continuous variable

Characteristics	Min	Max	*M*	Std
Number of placement moves	1	99	2.37	2.65
Fewer than three placement moves	0	2	1.36	0.48
Three or more placement moves	3	99	4.95	3.90
Age at most recent removal/entry into foster care	0	20	5.58	4.97

Research Question 1: How do the number of placement moves differ between children in relative care versus non-relative care?

Relative Stability?

Table 4 shows that children in non-relative care faced greater likelihood of experiencing a higher number of placement moves (34.4%) compared to those taken care of by relatives (19.9%), X^2 (1, N = 458028) = 11740.9, p = .000 . Results of an independent samples t-test further confirmed the comparatively stabilizing effect of kinship placement (Table 5). Notably, children in relative care experienced significantly fewer placement moves (M = 1.92, SD = 1.77) than those in non-relative care (M = 2.71, SD = 3.13), t (458026) = -100.77, p = .000, with the equality of variances assumed.

Table 4
Child's race/ethnicity, placement type and number of placement moves : Frequencies and chi-square results

Current placement type	Number of placement moves				Total	
	Fewer than three		Three or more			
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
Non-relative foster home	168757	65.6	88522	34.4	257279	56.2
Relative foster home	160779	80.1	39970	19.9	200749	43.8
Chi-square test	$X^2(1)=11740.9,\ p<.001$					

Table 5
t-test results comparing number of placement moves by placement type

Placement type	*N*	Mean	Std. Deviation	*t*	*df*
Relative foster home	200749	1.92	1.77	-100.77***	458026
Non-relative foster home	257279	2.71	3.13		

Research Question 2: How do placement instability rates differ across foster children's race/ethnicity?

Results from chi-square analyses revealed that significant differences exist in the number of placement moves across different racial and ethnic groups. Consistent with previous literature, African American (32.6%) and American Indian/Alaska Native (32.5%) children had greater rates of placement moves compared to children of other race/ethnicities, X^2 (7) = 2111.18, p = .000

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(Table 6). The chi-square result indicates that there is a significant difference across races/ethnicities overall, but does not show whether differences between particular race/ethnicities are statistically significant, therefore logistic regression analyses were conducted to explore differences between particular groups. To explore and compare differences across each of the racial/ethnic groups, we ran seven logistic regressions, each time excluding a different dummy variable to represent the reference group, so we could contrast each racial/ethnic group with each of the other groups. In this paper, we show the results by race/ethnicity in comparison to the two largest groups, namely White children (44%) and African American children (22.3%) as the reference groups.

Table 6
Child's race/ethnicity and number of placement moves: Frequencies and chi-square results

Race/ethnicity	Number of Placement Moves				Total	
	Less than three		Three or more			
	n	%	*n*	%	*n*	%
White	149336	74.1	52260	25.9	201596	44.0
African American	68882	67.4	33318	32.6	102200	22.3
American Indian/Alaska Native	7440	67.5	3585	32.5	11025	2.4
Asian	1897	77.2	559	22.8	2456	0.5
Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander	922	74.4	318	25.6	1240	0.3
More than one race	23476	71.0	9580	29.0	33056	7.2
Hispanic	69926	72.0	27168	28.0	97094	21.2
Chi-square test	$X^2(7)=2111.18$, p <.001, n=458028					

Odds ratio results revealed that the number of placements was significantly different for all racial/ethnic groups in comparison to White children, except for Hawaiian/Pacific Islander children, when controlling for placement type, child's age, gender and disability (Table 7). Compared to White children, African American children were 39% more likely (OR=1.39) to have frequent placement moves and AI/AN children were 57% more likely (OR=1.57). Asian children were 24% less likely to have frequent moves than White children (OR=0.76). The odds of having

frequent placement moves for Hispanic and multiracial children were also significantly higher compared to their White counterparts, (OR=1.13 and 1.17, respectively). In terms of control variables, the likelihood of experiencing 3+ placement moves was significantly higher for males (OR=1.05), older children (OR=1.47) and children with a disability (OR=1.87) and lower for children in relative home settings (OR=0.49).

Table 7

Logistic regression analysis of number of placement moves by child race/ethnicity (Reference group: White)

Variables	B	S.E	Wald	*p*	OR
Constant	-1.00	.01	18862.40	***	0.37
Placement type (non-relative)					
Relative foster home	-.72	.01	9971.87	***	0.49
Child's race/ethnicity (White)					
African American	.33	.01	1415.89	***	1.39
American Indian/Alaska Native	.45	.02	405.73	***	1.57
Asian	-.28	.05	28.6	***	0.76
Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	.04	.07	.28		1.04
Multiracial	.16	.01	135.04	***	1.17
Hispanic	.12	.01	173.91	***	1.13
Child's age (0-9)					
Adolescent (10+)	.38	.01	2413.10	***	1.47
Child's gender (female)					
Male	.05	.01	49.53	***	1.05
Diagnosed clinical disability (no disability)					
With disability	.63	.01	5656.51	***	1.87

NOTES: Reference categories are in parentheses
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

When African American children were the reference group, significant differences were found for every racial group, including Hawaiian/Pacific Islander children (Table 8). American Indian/Alaska Native children had the highest odds of experiencing frequent placement moves, namely 18% more likely than African American children (OR=1.18), $p<.000$. Asian children were

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43% less likely to experience placement move in comparison to African American children (OR=0.57), $p<.000$. This rate was followed by the odds for White (OR=0.77), Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (OR=0.78), Hispanic (OR=0.85), and multiracial children (OR=0.89), $p<.000$. Odds ratio results were identical for the covariate/control variables (Table 7), as this regression model is the same as the previous model, but with a different reference group for the race/ethnicity variable.

Table 8

Logistic regression analysis of number of placement moves by child race/ethnicity (Reference group: African American)

Variables	B	S.E	Wald	*p*	OR
Constant	-.72	.01	7167.85	***	0.49
Placement type (non-relative)					
Relative foster home	-.72	.01	9997.29	***	0.49
Child's race/ethnicity (African American)					
White	-.27	.01	947.53	***	0.77
American Indian/Alaska Native	.17	.02	55.44	***	1.18
Asian	-.56	.05	115.54	***	0.57
Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	-.24	.07	12.78	***	0.78
Multiracial	-.12	.01	71.84	***	0.89
Hispanic	-.16	.01	249.30	***	0.85
Child's age (0-9)					
Adolescent (10+)	.38	.01	2430.72	***	1.47
Child's gender (female)					
Male	.05	.01	49.57	***	1.05
Diagnosed clinical disability (no disability)					
With disability	.63	.01	5700.22	***	1.87

NOTES: Reference categories are in parentheses
$*p < 0.05$, $**p< 0.01$, $***p< 0.001$

Research Question 3: How does the placement type interact with child's race/ethnicity in predicting number of placement moves?

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Based on the results of our logistic regression analyses and on previous literature which found an interaction effect between placement type and race (Iteld, 2011), we tested the interaction effect with additional logistic regression analyses, including an interaction term (placement type*race/ethnicity). The full regression model (Table 9) revealed significant interaction effects between placement type and all race/ethnicity predictor variables other than Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, controlling for all other variables. This analysis of interaction effect indicates that placement type is significant moderator of the relationship between race/ethnicity and number of placement moves. In other words, the way that race/ethnicity is related to number of placement moves differs depending on placement setting.

Table 9

Logistic regression analysis of number of placement moves with interaction terms

Variables	B	S.E	Wald	*p*	OR
Constant	-.97	.008	14908.97	***	.38
Placement type (non-relative)					
Relative foster home	-.77	.011	4813.37	***	.46
Child's race/ethnicity (White)			783.76	***	
African American	.28	.01	630.77	***	1.32
American Indian/Alaska Native	.36	.03	155.98	***	1.44
Asian	-.40	.06	41.22	***	0.67
Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	.05	.09	0.28		1.05
Multiracial	.10	.02	33.81	***	1.10
Hispanic	.09	.01	60.66	***	1.09
Child's age (0-9)					
Adolescent (+10)	.38	.01	2325.47	***	1.46
Child's gender (female)					
Male	.05	.01	47.87	***	1.05
Diagnosed clinical disability (no disability)					
With disability	.63	.01	5604.61	***	1.87
Interaction race/ethnicity*placement type			65.90	***	
African American*relative	.11	.02	37.68	***	1.12
American Indian/Alaska Native*relative	.18	.05	16.63	***	1.20
Asian*relative	.35	.11	10.44	**	1.42

Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander*relative	-.05	.14	0.14		0.95
Multiracial*relative	.13	.03	21.46	***	1.14
Hispanic*relative	.05	.02	5.94	*	1.05

NOTES: Reference categories are in parentheses
*$p < 0.05$, **$p < 0.01$, ***$p < 0.001$

Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine factors predicting placement stability among children and youth in foster care. We examined the role of individual-level factors and interaction effects of placement type and child's race/ethnicity in predicting placement instability. By using national AFCARS administrative child welfare data, this study included a large sample of foster children in the system, and offers strong representativeness and generalizability. The availability of clear measures of child demographic variables in the dataset also contributed to measurement validity in the study, and the rigor of our analyses was enhanced by controlling for other potentially confounding variables (i.e. age, gender, disability) that might influence placement instability.

In the current study, we found the average number of placement moves that a foster child experienced was 2.37. This figure is consistent with other study findings that foster youth experience on average three placement changes (James, 2004; Usher et al., 1999). Congruent with trends found in previous research, children experienced significantly fewer placement movements when they are in relative care (Beeman et al., 2000; Connell et al., 2006; Koh et al., 2014; Konijin et al., 2019; Webster et al., 2000; Winokur et al., 2018). Children in relative care experienced on average 1.92 placement moves compared to 2.71 for children in non-relative care, approximately one more move. The odds ratio results further confirmed the comparative stability of relative care; children in relative care were only half as likely to experience frequent

placement moves, even when other child-related characteristics (i.e. age, gender and disability) were taken into account. One possible explanation could be kinship care's well-documented benefits of providing a familiar environment as well as the ability to preserve existing connections with birth parents, schools and neighborhoods (Testa & Slack, 2002; Testa, 2001). Such continuity of social support might have played a role in promoting stability for the child and alleviating trauma related to removal from home or repeated moves. As mentioned previously, some portion of these moves might have been initiated by child welfare organizational policy and practices, such as prioritizing placement with relatives. Since the dataset available only measured current placement episode, further studies tracking specific reasons for placement changes should be conducted to confirm this finding.

Child's race/ethnicity was significantly associated with placement stability. Our results indicated American Indian/Alaska Native and African American children are at higher risk for placement instability, controlling for placement type. This is inconsistent with previous literature findings that showed no significant correlation with child's race and ethnicity (Connell et al., 2006; Garcia et al., 2012; James, 2004; Steen, & Harlow, 2012; Wulczyn et al., 2003) or that White children are more prone to placement instability than children of color (Pardeck, 1984; Webster et al., 2000; White et al., 2008). In the studies listed above however, only Connell and colleagues (2006), Webster and colleges (2000) controlled for placement type. Nonetheless, as they both focused on state level only, more studies with nationally representative samples and that control for placement type are needed to further verify this finding.

The significance of the finding that American Indian children were at highest risk for placement instability can be partly understood as related to the differing cultural understandings of "permanency". As specified by the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act, U. S. child welfare

perspectives view long-term foster care as inappropriate for achieving permanency (such as through adoption, family reunification, or legal guardianship) for the child in care, thus should be discouraged for the child's well-being (Lawler et al., 2012). Conversely, for AI/AN communities, strongly grounded in interdependent relationships with family, tribal community, and spiritual connections, longer term foster care placements in informal care environments may be perceived as culturally appropriate ways of providing permanent and stable homes for AI/AN children, regardless of legal requirements for permanency (Morrison, Fox, Cross, & Paul, 2010; Quash-Ma, Stockard, Johnson-Shelton, & Crowley, 2010). As Tribes have jurisdiction over AI/AN children in care, and tribal communities are important participants in child welfare system court proceedings as ensured by the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA), extended periods in care in culturally relevant environments might be more common options for American Indian/AN children than exiting foster care through adoption or family reunification (Lawler et al., 2012; National Indian Child Welfare Association, n.d.). If this is the case, the increased number of placement changes observed in the present study might have been merely result of longer stays in foster care and steps taken to seek a better placement fit for the child. Longer stays in foster care might also account for this study's finding that African American children higher rates of placement instability, as the literature has documented African American children's disproportionately longer stay in care (Barth, 1997; Courtney, 1994; Wulczyn et al., 2000).

Alternatively, racial differences in placement instability can be related to a lack of culturally appropriate and responsive foster homes for children. In a recent study that analyzed specific reasons for placement instability, placements of African American children were at higher risk of placement mismatch disruption or substandard care than placements of White or Hispanic children (Sattler et al., 2018). We did not include foster parent characteristics in our

analysis, but placement instability may be partly attributable to racial or cultural mismatch between children and their foster parents. Despite the Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 mandating States to recruit a diverse pool of foster caregivers, there has been constant concern that the cultural background of foster parents do not meet the needs of children in care (Sattler et al., 2018). Particularly, considering that children have better developmental outcomes and increased placement stability when matched with caregivers on race/ethnicity (Garland, Landsverk, & Lau, 2003; Zinn et al., 2006), more efforts should be placed to recruit diverse foster homes to minimize placement instability caused by mismatch.

Aiming to provide new evidence on placement instability, this study examined interaction effects of race/ethnicity and placement with relatives or non-relatives. Data from this study suggest that the placement stability of all racial/ethnic groups but Native Hawaiians/Other Pacific Islanders have a significant interaction effect with placement type. Interestingly, the racial groups who are at increased risk of placement instability relative to White children (i.e. African American, American Indian and multiracial children) also showed significant interaction effects with placement type.

Our discovery that African American children's placement stability was significantly moderated by placement type can be partially explained by cultural values of coping with adversity. For example, study that comprised mostly of African American children revealed that community and family strengths were even more significant protective factors than were individual-level strengths, like coping strategies or interpersonal skills (Summersett-Ringgold et al., 2018). Considering these findings, staying with a loving family, having a good quality of interaction and supports from school, or having a sense of belonging to school and community may be particularly important, above and beyond the contribution of their own individual

strengths for African American children. The protective effects of relatives for African American children are supported empirically as well; the rates of placement instability and externalizing problem are significantly diminished when they are placed in relative care settings compared to non-relative care (Foster et al., 2011; Iteld, 2011).

The significant interaction effect with placement type among African Americans can also be understood partially by the behavioral service needs of African American children in non-relative care. For example, a nationally representative study discovered that African American children received significantly fewer mental health services than White children in care (Leslie, Hurlburt, Landsverk, Barth, & Slymen, 2004). As child behavioral needs have been cited as the most frequent reason for placement instability in non-relative foster home (Hartnett et al., 1999), lack of access to mental health service and a caregiver's inability to adequately address the child's needs might have influenced the number of placement changes in the present study.

In addition to having a higher rate of placement instability than other racial/ethnic groups, the AI/AN group in the current study also showed significant interaction effects with placement type. Amongst scarce research on this topic, Mutchler and colleagues (2007) studied in depth the topic of grandparents providing care for their AI/AN children. The authors found that AI/AN grandparents are more likely to be responsible for taking care of their grandchildren, have membership with a specific tribe, and more likely to live in rural area than non AI/AN grandparent caregivers. They also reported great pride in passing on their family culture and traditions while being able to keep children in their care (Cross, Day, & Byers, 2010; Henderson, Dinh, Morgan, & Lewis, 2015; Kopera-Frye, 2009; Mooradian, Cross, & Stutzky, 2007). However, AI/AN relative caregivers were vulnerable to an array of stressors that might affect their caregiving capacity. Common stressors included financial concerns, lack of ability to

address behavioral challenge or developmental disabilities of children, and chronic health issues of their own (Cross et al., 2010; Mooradian et al., 2007). The combination of stressors and protective factors related to relative care among AI/AN populations might help explain the differential impact of placement with relatives on placement instability identified in the current study.

Another critical factor to consider is the context of historical trauma of forced child removal that both Native American and African American communities have experienced and that continues to reverberate to current day (Gutman, 1976; Smith & Devore, 2004). One qualitative study with AI/AN grandparent caregivers revealed that they were reluctant to receive services form non-tribal governments due to their individual and historical trauma (Cross et al., 2010; Mooradian et al., 2007). By placing children with relative caregivers who are part of the family with pre-existing emotional relationships, relative care might be an effective way to reduce trauma of removal from home as well as minimize any stigma attached to being placed out-of-home for the child (Lovett & Xue, 2018; Messing, 2006). How relative care is perceived within both of these communities may help explain the differential patterns found in the data.

In explaining findings related to the higher placement instability rate for the multiracial group in comparison to children of other race/ethnicity, we note that a number of American Indian children might have been included in this category due to their often being multiracial (Moran et al., 1999). As multiracial children compose nearly 9% of the total sample, further information on breakdown for this group is necessary for more accurate interpretation of our findings.

Limitations

We confronted several methodological limitations in conducting this study. As

mentioned previously, a narrow range of information was available from this administrative database, which posed challenges for our analyses. Although we assume in this study that all placement moves would be detrimental, we could not present further information on specific reasons for placement instability, whether it is initiated by caregivers, the child, or child welfare agency due to limited information (Theodore et al., 2013). The only data available for placement type was current episode so our analysis could not examine the types of previous placements longitudinally either. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of the data for this study limited us in that it may over-represent children from different entry cohorts or children who stayed longer in the system (Usher et al., 1999). As length of care was not computed in our analysis, this might pose challenge in our interpretation of the results. Further, administrative data might not be suitable for analyzing patterns and rates for American Indian communities. It is highly likely that informal kinship care arrangements, such as placement with members of a child's tribe or other AI/AN families might be missing in the government data system. The distinction of placement type by relatedness might be too narrow for AI/AN communities given wider definition of kinship and ICWA policy regarding preference for placement with the Tribe or other AI/AN families.

Implications

Despite limitations, the present study has significant implications for child welfare research and practice. Researchers interested in better understanding racial and ethnic disproportionality in permanency outcomes, including placement stability need to take into account the role that placement with relatives plays for different racial/ethnic groups. What are the perceptions of African American or AI/AN children on their experiences in relative or non-relative foster home placements? Are there differences in family structure, cultural values across

different children's race/ethnicity which can help explain the interaction effects? How would relative or non-relative foster parents, and social workers perceive placement instability? Answers to these questions will help advance our understanding of racial differences in placement instability and further explain the etiology of these variations.

Although this study does not offer direct clinical guidance for practitioners, these questions might be also good for practitioners to pose in the service and treatment planning process. Of particular concern is our finding regarding significantly higher rates of placement instability for children of color, especially for African American and American Indian/Alaska Native children. Addressing this racial disparity in placement instability might call for distinct service approaches for each racial/ethnic group to better meet their needs and provide more stable placement settings. Practitioners might also need to consider how to develop culturally relevant and informed practices in permanency planning to address racial disproportionality in placement stability.

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