

The Effects of Different Types and Patterns of Services on Successful Reunification

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Introduction

In recent decades, state and federal child welfare legislation has shifted from emphasizing family preservation to emphasizing children's need for timely permanence. However, the responsibility of child welfare agencies to provide reunification services remains. Implicit in this responsibility is the assumption that such services are effective. This assumption gains even more importance since passage of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, which required shorter timelines for reunification and focuses on quickly moving children to adoptive homes when reunification fails to occur in a timely fashion.

Research on reunification services is quite limited. In terms of *types of services*, types of services recommended by the child welfare worker and ordered by the dependency court judge can include concrete, educational, clinical, and comprehensive services. Within these broad categories, services can focus on parenting skills training, substance abuse treatment, domestic violence treatment, and mental health treatment. In terms of *utilization of services*, it is generally thought that greater levels of participation in services results in greater exposure to the intervention, thereby increasing the likelihood of positive changes. However, little is known about what factors might be associated with utilization; some studies have found parental problems such as substance abuse, domestic violence, and mental health problems to be associated with a lack of compliance with services. In terms of *service effectiveness*, some research has found specific service approaches to be associated with improved outcomes. For example, a parenting education program called "The Incredible Years" has been found to improve parenting skills; motivational interviewing has been linked to greater likelihood of engagement in substance abuse services; and women participating in a program called the Community Advocacy Project were found to have a reduced likelihood of re-experiencing domestic violence. However, few of these studies focus on specific child welfare populations, and fewer still consider the effects of services on reunification.

In addition to the general lack of research on the topic, much of the research that does exist on reunification focuses on child characteristics, though it is the parents' circumstances and actions that are - or should be - driving reunification decisions made by agencies. In addition, prior research has tended to consider the outcomes of reunification and re-entry separately; this approach combines successful reunifications and unsuccessful reunifications in examining associated factors, and hence may be obscuring important aspects of the true phenomenon of interest (successful reunification). Finally, studies rarely consider the relationship between parent characteristics and service effectiveness; services may be more or less effective for parents with certain characteristics.

Given the shorter timeframes and serious consequences of failing to reunify quickly, there is a need for studies that can shed light on factors associated with both parental utilization of services, as well as the effectiveness of services in aiding parents to successfully reunify with their children. With this in mind, the following research questions were addressed in this study:

Regarding reunification services ordered:

1. What reunification services are ordered to parents whose children are removed from their care, and do there appear to be distinct patterns to the way these services are ordered?
2. How do types or patterns of reunification services ordered differ by parental characteristics?

Regarding utilization of reunification services:

3. How does parents' utilization of services differ by type of service ordered?
4. How does parents' utilization of services differ by parental characteristics?

Regarding effectiveness of reunification services:

5. How does parents' utilization of services affect the likelihood of successful reunification?
6. How do parental characteristics affect the likelihood of successful reunification?
7. Is there an interaction between the type of service and parental characteristics? That is, are certain reunification services more or less effective for parents with particular characteristics?

Research Design and Methods

This quantitative study used a retrospective longitudinal design. Two different samples were used: one an original dataset collected in Santa Clara for this study, and the second a dataset from an earlier study with similar variables. The primary sample (the SC dataset) was a sample of 200 children randomly drawn from the population of children entering foster care in Santa Clara county in 2004 for which at least one parent received services. The second dataset was created in 2001 for the Child Welfare Reforms Study conducted at the University of California at Berkeley (the CWR dataset). The CWR data set consists of 1155 families from six CA counties whose children entered care between 6/1/93 and 5/31/94, and between 6/1/98 and 12/31/00. (For more information on sampling, instrumentation, and procedures regarding this dataset, see D'Andrade (2008)).

Originally we planned to combine the samples to allow for greater statistical power. However, changes were made to the data collection instrument to improve measures of variables for the SC study, and there were substantial differences in the foster care entry time periods of the two samples. Therefore, we determined it would not be appropriate to merge the samples, and instead ran separate analysis on the two datasets for most questions.

For the SC dataset, data collection was done by the Principal Investigator and four student research assistants. Data came from court reports written by supervising social workers and stored in case files. Court reports hold information on case and client characteristics, services ordered and utilized, and client outcomes. Because court reports are written every six months or more frequently, they allow for a longitudinal understanding of case events. County personnel pulled files and made them available to researchers. Researchers reviewed court reports using a data collection instrument. As described in the full report, reliability was tested and determined to be at acceptable levels prior to any data collection starting. A human subjects protocol was approved by the SJSU Internal Institutional Review Board. Agency authorization and judicial court approval was also attained prior to data collection. Analysis Univariate statistics described parental characteristics, service types and patterns, and service utilization. Bivariate analyses were used to answer research questions 1-4. Multivariate analyses were used to explore questions 5-7, regarding factors influencing successful reunification.

Results

Results reported here focus on the SC dataset due to the improved measures and more detailed accounting of services available in that dataset. Analyses on the CWR dataset found similar results for most analyses. Both analyses are detailed in the full report.

Reunification services ordered:

- Six specific services are ordered to a majority of parents: Basic parenting; Substance abuse assessment; Drug testing; 12-Step program attendance; Individual counseling; and Visitation.
- Most parents are ordered numerous services. In SC, the average number of services ordered was 7. About half of parents were ordered to receive between 7 and 9 services. Several of these services required attendance at least twice a week.
- Four patterns of services ordered were identified:
 1. Parenting (P) and counseling (C) services only
 2. Substance abuse (SA) treatment services, with or without P and C
 3. Domestic violence (DV) services, with or without P and C
 4. Both DV and SA treatment services, with or without P and C

The most commonly used pattern was Pattern 2; the next most commonly used was Pattern 4.

How types of reunification services ordered differ by parental characteristics:

- Parents with certain characteristics were ordered to receive more services. *Mothers, English language speakers, and custodial parents* were ordered to receive more services than fathers, speakers of other languages, and non-custodial parents respectively. Parents with problems of

substance abuse, domestic violence and mental health were ordered to receive more services than parents without those problems; parents with substance abuse problems were ordered the most services.

- Different service types were more likely to be ordered for parents with certain characteristics. *Substance abuse treatment* was more likely to be ordered for parents with current substance abuse issues and maltreatment type of neglect, and less likely to be ordered for Asian parents. *Domestic violence treatment* was more likely to be ordered for parents with domestic violence problems. *Counseling services* were more likely to be ordered for mothers, custodial parents, parents with mental health problems, and parents with maltreatment type of neglect.

How parents' utilization of services differed by type of service and parental characteristics:

- Utilization varied by service type. Services with higher utilization rates included advanced parenting classes, substance abuse assessment, psychological evaluation, medication monitoring, and family therapy. Services with lower utilization rates included batterer's domestic violence programs, and drug testing.
- Utilization varied by certain parental characteristics. Parents with current problems of substance abuse and domestic violence had lower utilization of services than parents without those problems. Older parents had higher utilization of services than younger parents. There were no differences in utilization by ethnicity.

How parents' utilization of services and characteristics affect the likelihood of successful reunification:

- Parental problems decreased the likelihood of reunification. Parents with problems of substance abuse and domestic violence who did not fully utilize services were much less likely to reunify than parents who did not have problems of substance abuse and domestic violence.
- Utilization of services matched to problems increased the likelihood of reunification. Parents with problems of substance abuse and domestic violence who did fully utilize services targeted at those problems were much more likely to reunify than parents who had the same problems but who did not fully utilize services.

Interaction between type of service and parental characteristics:

- The benefits of counseling services differ for parents with and without substance abuse problems. Utilization of counseling services increased the likelihood of reunification for parents without substance abuse problems, but had a less strong effect (essentially no effect) for parents with substance abuse problems.

Discussion

Most parents are ordered to receive a substantial number of reunification services, including several that require attendance a number of times weekly. For parents with multiple problems to be addressed, the service burden is even higher. While it is logical that parents with more problems would require more treatment, it also seems logical that parents with multiple problems would be more challenged by a higher service burden than other parents. In particular, parents with substance abuse problems have the highest service burden of any parents. In this study, counseling services did not have a strong beneficial effect on reunification for parents with substance abuse issues as it did for parents without these issues. Requiring substance-abusing parents to attend counseling services simultaneously to a program of other services such as substance abuse treatment, orientation, and parenting classes may complicate their reunification processes without providing substantial benefit.

Parents struggling with the issue of domestic violence appear to have particular difficulty utilizing services. Batterer's treatment programs had low utilization rates, and parents with the problem of domestic violence overall had lower utilization scores. Some aspect of the phenomenon of domestic violence may cause particular challenges for participating in services. Once parents with current domestic violence issues do utilize services, their likelihood of reunification increases, but parents struggling with this issue may require additional attention and supports to maintain involvement in services. Further research into how domestic violence hinders reunification processes is called for.

Utilization scores were higher for those services parents attend only once, such as orientation, assessment, and psychological evaluations. These one-time, well-utilized appointments may be critical moments at which engagement and involvement in other services can be coordinated and encouraged. As parents with the serious problems of substance abuse and domestic violence can greatly increase the likelihood of reunification by utilizing services, these initial service appointments could potentially be important avenues for engaging parents and facilitating reunification.

Study limitations include: rough measures of client problems and characteristics due to the data source; the timing of services not taken into consideration; the non-experimental design in assessing service effectiveness; and the lack of independence in the observations for bivariate analyses, resulting in an artificial reduction of error terms.

Policy and Practice Implications

Several findings from this study suggest certain policy or practice adjustments that might benefit parent clients of child welfare agencies.

- Rates at which parents utilized different kinds of services varied. Agencies may want to consider tracking this aspect of services, and/or incorporating client participation as an outcome measure in service providers' contracts.
- Parents struggling with domestic violence had more difficulty utilizing services than other parents. Agencies may wish to review current practice in this area and make adjustments to better coordinate with service providers and provide enhanced supports to these parents so that they maintain involvement in services.
- Most parents were ordered to receive numerous services. Social workers should carefully construct case plans that are realistic and feasible for clients, taking into account the number and frequency of services, as well as client's resources (time, transportation, finances, and capabilities).
- Parents who received services targeted at their problems were more likely to reunify than parents with the same problems who did not receive such services. This suggests that careful assessment and service planning in the early stages of a parent's involvement, resulting in accurate identification of problems and targeting of services, can increase the likelihood of reunification.

Counseling services were less effective for parents with substance abuse issues than for parents without substance abuse issues. For parents who need both counseling and substance abuse treatment, improved collaboration between counseling service providers, substance abuse service providers, and child welfare case managers could avoid conflicting requirements that might contribute to increased difficulties in utilization of services and ultimately, reunification.